

# THE RELEVANCE OF OWEN LATTIMORE'S WRITINGS FOR NOMADIC PASTORALISM RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT IN INNER ASIA

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## Abstract

Nomadic pastoral systems in Inner Asia are facing sweeping changes. Designing new development models for the sustainable utilization of rangelands requires a better understanding of nomadic pastoral systems. Owen Lattimore's writings, based on his experiences in Inner Asia in the 1920s and 1930s, are a valuable resource for those interested in nomads and pastoral development in Inner Asia. The paper introduces some of Lattimore's work to illustrate their relevance to today's pastoral development challenges. Despite being written 70 years ago, Lattimore's texts are still useful for understanding traditional livestock management practices and provide valuable insight for the sustainable development of the pastoral areas of Inner Asia.

**Keywords:** development, Inner Asia, Lattimore, nomads, Mongols, rangelands

Nomads continue to fascinate us. Moving across the grasslands with their animals, their home a tent, nomads evoke freedom. Their world cherishes mobility and the liberty to roam in search of grass and water. Nomads are constantly exposed to the elements of nature – rain, snowstorms and drought; they take these events for granted and face them with remarkable equanimity. Values that humankind admires – courage, integrity, generosity – are principles instinctive to nomads. Nomads also have an intimate knowledge of their environment and an amazing ability to handle animals – a skill rare among most people today.

Nomads offer a rare perspective on life. Their world operates on a rhythm completely different from the one to which we are accustomed. Nomads' lives are finely tuned to the growth of grass, the births of animals and the seasonal movement of their herds. Like many people living close to nature, nomads have developed a close connection to the land and the livestock that nurture them. For thousands of years they survived by raising animals. However, nomads did not merely eke out a living; they created a unique culture and were part of remarkable civilizations. Despite these admirable traits and skills, nomads are facing serious threats throughout the world (Miller 2008).

In Inner Asia, nomadic pastoral systems are undergoing sweeping changes (Humphrey and Sneath 1999, Sheehy et al. 2006b, Zhang 2006). From the steppes

of Mongolia to the alpine meadows and cold deserts of the Tibetan Plateau in Western China, pastoralists are facing unprecedented transformations to traditional livestock and grazing management practices. A better understanding of nomadic pastoral systems in Inner Asia is necessary in order to assist nomads to develop new models for the sustainable utilization of rangeland resources (Zhang et al. 2007).

Owen Lattimore's observations of nomads from the 1920s and 1930s provide valuable information for those interested in nomadic pastoral societies and pastoral development, not only in Mongolia, but throughout Inner Asia. In this paper we introduce some of Lattimore's writings to show how they are still relevant today to those seeking to understand nomadic pastoral systems better. We also point out how Lattimore's texts can be used to help develop new models for livestock management in pastoral areas that build on nomads' indigenous knowledge and traditional practices.

Rangeland ecosystems in Inner Asia are complex, not only in the ways that physical forces shape the landscape, but also in the ways that socio-economic, political and institutional forces interact and impact the people who use the rangeland resources. Sustainable pastoral development requires an examination of all the forces affecting the rangelands. Despite the extent and importance of rangelands in Inner Asia, rangeland ecosystem dynamics are still poorly understood. Many questions concerning how rangeland vegetation functions, and the effect of both domestic and wild herbivores on vegetation remain unanswered (Sheehy et al. 2006a).

Within the world of the steppe there are many types of migration cycle, governed partly by geography and partly by social specialization in the use of different animals. There are groups that move over considerable distances and others that move only a few miles in the course of a year. Some nomads have a pastoral range which includes both rich and poor grazing, while some never leave the arid-steppe or remain entirely in good meadow country. There is an intricate relationship between the kind of pasture that predominates, the frequency of moving camp, the distance travelled from one grazing ground to the next, and the climate and soil. (Lattimore 1962[1940]: 73)

Scientific knowledge of rangeland ecosystems is vital to understanding pastoral systems in Inner Asia, but range management and pastoral development are more than just a science. They are also an art. Pastoral development specialists require the talents and perception to detect subtle changes in rangeland vegetation that have taken place in the past and how different uses are currently affecting the rangelands. This 'feel' for the rangeland ecosystem can only be achieved by spending considerable time in such areas looking and listening (Miller 1998). Owen Lattimore had an exceptional ability to develop this special 'feel' for the

pastoral landscape and his unique understanding of the steppe environment is reflected in his writing:

The country was of a poor soil, sandy and coarse, through which the rains of summer drain quickly away. The commonest growth was a low desert plant with a leafage faintly like a miniature evergreen frond. The caravan men call it either *chien-ts'ao* – soda grass – or *hsien-ts'ao* – salt grass. It is good for camels if they do not have to go too long without water, and donkeys can stick for a while; but it is poor stuff for ponies. The roots burn quickly with a bright hot flame, sometimes turning blue because of the salt impregnation. The plant is one of many which travellers call by the Tibetan name of *burtsa*. (Lattimore 1995[1929]: 101)

It takes the sweet grass of rocky hills to bring out the best in Mongol breeds of pony. Those of sandy districts are not only coarse in build, but have wide, spongy hoofs very different from the clean, hard hoofs and springy pasterns of the hill ponies. (Lattimore 2006[1941]: 131)

Researchers and pastoral development specialists interested in Inner Asian nomadic societies today can benefit from Lattimore's observations about the pastoral landscape. For students interested in studying nomadic pastoral systems and wanting to become astute observers of nomads, it would behoove them to spend less time in front of their computers and more time out in the steppes looking and listening like Lattimore did early on in his career.

The lie of the land is one of the best things to talk about with all kinds of Mongols. By doing this you can learn many things about nomadism that are genuinely 'functional' – more than dry fact and abstract theory. 'Dominant' is not really the right word to describe the influence which the lie of the land has on the life of the Mongols. 'Pervasive' is better. While the site of a monastery or the placing of an *obo* may be in part a poetic expression of the way in which the life of Mongols conforms to the land, just to be a Mongol means to conform to these imprecise but non-the-less valid rules. They have to do with things that are real and utilitarian, like the relation of exposure to drainage and pasture and the relation of lines of movement to areas of pasture ... If you are an apt herdsman, with the right 'feel' for what your cattle need, it is likely to be because you have also the right feel for the lie of the land. (Lattimore 2006[1941]: 215–216)

One of the reasons why Owen Lattimore was able to develop this 'feel for the lie of the land' was his ability to communicate in both Chinese and Mongol with the people he travelled with and with the nomads he met. This, along with his inquisitiveness, acute faculties of perception and his patient listening, enabled

him to be more than a mere traveller across the steppes of Mongolia (although he is also now noted for being a great travel writer). Lattimore's writings are tuned to the nuances of behaviour among Chinese and Mongol caravan life and demonstrate his insightful and instinctively well-developed abilities to observe and communicate in telling the story of the areas he travelled through (Kalvias 2002). His son, David Lattimore, in the introduction to the 1995 edition of *The Desert Road to Turkestan* (first published in 1929), noted,

Owen's method was different. Reaching his destination alone, often by mule cart, he would put up in the compound of the local firm that dealt with Arnold's, spreading his bed roll on the heated brick sleeping platform that he shared with managers, clerks, and [an] apprentice who roomed and ate in company quarters. There, over Mah-Jong and tea, quizzing no one but just listening, he would pick up the local gossip he needed to brief himself for successful negotiations the following day. (In his later career Owen despised social scientists who travelled in the bush with questionnaires; his prescription for finding out what was worth knowing was to sit by the campfire and listen.) These troubleshooting tours up-country were a valuable apprenticeship for Owen's later low-budget, largely native-style travels in Inner Asia. (Lattimore 1995: xiv-xv)

Owen Lattimore obviously enjoyed his travels in Inner Asia, despite the physical hardships. While travelling with a camel caravan in 1926 from Hohhot (in what is now Inner Mongolia) to Qitai in Xinjiang, on his first major journey in Inner Asia, he wrote:

I had been getting used to breaking camp at any time of the night, eating anything that came handy, and sleeping where I could lie down. It was the right approach, and I liked that dawn. I liked the clean chill that came with the light better than the damp chill of a makeshift camp. I liked the live smell of earth that comes after rain; the almost English delicacy of coloring on the rain-washed hills, the scrubby growth on their flanks, and the scarves of mist trailing from them. (Lattimore 1995[1929]: 77)

Perhaps, if greater numbers of scientists and pastoral development specialists working in Inner Asia today would spend more time in the steppes with nomads 'eating anything that came handy' and sleeping wherever they 'could lie down' our appreciation for and understanding of nomads and their way of life would be better than it is.

Nomadic pastoralism in Inner Asia has a long history. For thousands of years there had been a remarkable interplay between pastoral tribes on the steppes and settled peoples in the oases in the deserts and in the more fertile areas on the margins of the steppe that could support the growing of crops. Lattimore's *Inner*



**Figure 1:** *Mongol Camel Caravan in Kunlun Mountains, Qinghai Province, China. Photo: Dan Miller*

*Asian Frontiers of China*, first published in 1940, was one of the first books really to critically examine the rise of nomadism on the steppes and the interactions between nomads and settled peoples. Despite being written almost 70 years ago, this book is still required reading in many university courses dealing with Inner Asia (Barnett 2008). There are great differences between pastoral regions in Inner Asia in terms of integration with the market economy and in the degree to which the production system has been transformed from nomadic to semi-nomadic or sedentary. Nomads cannot be understood without an awareness of their long pastoral history and their interactions with others. Throughout the centuries, nomads have always made adjustments in their lives, both as rangeland conditions changed and as relationships with other nomads, farmers and rulers evolved over time. Owen Lattimore was aware of these dynamic interactions:

No one can travel long among the Mongols without becoming almost as much engrossed with their turbulent past as with the survivals of ancient nomad technique by which they live today. We, in our simple-minded, sentimental, twentieth-century, unrealistic way think of Mongols as wanderers and warriors. Why then these walls and cities in a land that seems the natural domain of the shepherd and the horseman? These are problems that can best be studied from the back of a camel and in the tents of the people, traversing the wide landscape, learning a little of the subtle differences in environment and something of what they mean to a Mongol

who lives in one banner or another. Goats and sheep and cattle, horses and camels are themselves members of tribes, having their own preferences in the way of water and grass and soil, summer coolness and winter shelter. To combine your different kinds of livestock in the proportions that are best suited to the pastures of your own banner is an art and at the same time a professional economic requirement. A good Mongol can tell at once whether a camel comes from a *nutak*, a homeland or orbit of migration, that is a little too hot in summer for the preference of a camel, or whether a cow was bred in high alpine pastures, on a wide, rather sandy plain or in the deep green pasture of a well-watered valley. (Lattimore 2006[1941]: 116)

Livestock are a critical component of nomadic pastoral systems. Livestock will be the primary source of livelihood for many people residing in the steppes of Inner Asia for years to come. As such, information on the nomads' livestock is important not only for understanding the pastoral systems, but also for developing more sustainable pastoral development programmes. Nomads possess a great body of knowledge about the animals they herd for a living. Usually, it is not the nomadic herder that dictates the series of events that comprise pastoral livestock herding, but the herder using this knowledge to interpret signals from the animal(s) and thereby formulate an action plan to meet the needs and desires of the animal(s). Owen Lattimore knew this and much of the information he provides in his writings is still appropriate for understanding pastoral livestock production today:

Sheep and camels do not do well on wet pastures; a lime soil is best for horses and a saline soil for camels. Goats and sheep crop the pasture more closely than other animals, therefore they can graze where cattle and horses have already passed; but cattle and horses cannot feed on a pasture where sheep and goats have recently been feeding. All these details of technique affect the degree of specialization in sheep, camels, horned cattle, yaks, and the hunting of wild game, which in turn modifies the degree of military aptitude of different tribes, especially under the bow and arrow standard of warfare. (Lattimore 1962[1940]: 73–74)

In the breeding of sheep, the stock which are handled in the largest numbers, there is one interesting custom. Rams are frequently made to wear a kind of apron of felt, hanging under the belly. While he is wearing this the ram cannot successfully mount the ewe. By removing the apron at intervals of say ten days in the breeding season, allowing the ram a day or two of liberty, and then putting the apron on for the next ten days, it can be assured that the lambing season will be spread out. Most of the lambs will be dropped in batches, about ten days apart, and therefore the risk of loss in spring storms is much less. (Lattimore 2006[1941]: 195)

Mobility is central to nomadic pastoral production practices in Inner Asia. Livestock mobility and flexible use of rangeland were strategic elements of traditional pastoralism and the key to survival in a harsh environment. The flexibility of traditional nomadic pastoralism (which emphasized multi-species herds, complex herd structures and regular movement of livestock, and linkages with agricultural communities) developed as a rational response to the unpredictability of the steppe ecosystem (Miller 2002). Traditional pastoral management systems were designed around the movement of herds to various pastures during different seasons of the year and the tracking of favourable forage conditions. Livestock are regularly moved between pastures to maintain rangeland condition and animal productivity. Rotation of livestock between different ranges also takes advantage of topography and climatic factors to make the best use of the rangeland. Herders do not randomly move across the landscape; rather, their movements are often well prescribed by complex social organizations and are highly regulated. Owen Lattimore recognized seventy years ago that nomads do not just wander aimlessly over the steppes:

Few people realize that herding needs rotation of pastures just as much as farming needs rotation of crops. Overgrazing of sheep and goats is especially bad, because their sharp hoofs cut the surface and expose the soil, leading to wind erosion. On top of this there is the damage done as pastures gradually grow 'stale'. According to the Mongols, no pasture ought to be grazed year after year by the same kind of stock – sheep for instance. A pasture ought either to be rested altogether from time to time or grazed by some other kinds of stock, like cows or horses. If it gets no rest or change the steady accumulation of the urine and dung of the same kind of animal ceases to be fertilizing and becomes 'poisonous'; the feed becomes less nourishing for all animals, and as they lose vitality the danger of epidemics increases. (Lattimore 2006[1941]: 165)

Nomadism depends on a balance between winter pasture and summer pasture. There should also be sheltered stretches where the grass comes up a little earlier in spring, just when the herds are weakest after the winter and just before and just after the lambs and calves and colts are born; shelter and new grass make all the difference between heavy loss and a gladdening increase. Then there should be a move to the most lush grazing of the year, with plenty of water, so that all the stock can put on flesh and fat. After that again, as the winter comes back, there is a need of both shelter and exposure: shelter from storm, but access to exposed stretches where the snow is blown off and the herds can get at the grass. (Lattimore 2006[1941]: 164)

Since the very beginning of nomadic pastoralism in Inner Asia, linkages between nomadic societies and agricultural communities have been common. Movement of goods and supplies between nomads and agriculturalists were



**Figure 2:** *Tibetan Nomad Yak Herd Moving to Summer Pastures, Aba, Sichuan Province, China. Photo: Dan Miller*

carried on animals, with camels the primary beast of burden in many areas. Trade, often long-distance trade, has been common for thousands of years. Owen Lattimore's first extensive foray into Inner Asia was with a caravan of camels in 1926 when he covered over 1,500 miles during a four-and-a-half month long trip. This journey along an ancient caravan trail not only allowed Lattimore to become familiar with the Mongolian landscape and the ways of caravan life, but also offered the opportunity for him to learn about the Mongol nomadic way of life.

Over hundreds of years, nomads in Inner Asia acquired intricate ecological knowledge about the environment and the animals they herded. This body of information, often termed indigenous knowledge or traditional ecological knowledge, reflects generations of acute observation, experimentation and adaptation by nomads to a harsh environment (Fernandez-Gimenez 2000). Because they are skilled, experienced, proficient, expert, able, adept and masterful, nomads in Inner Asia should be considered as 'professional' range managers, despite their lack of a college degree and, in many cases, being illiterate. Eighty years ago, Owen Lattimore recognized the value of this knowledge the nomads possess of the steppe and the livestock:

This Mongol also said that 'certain old men' – the younger men nowadays are not up to it – can 'recognize' the smell of the earth of a road or region when travelling at night. Such an old man will dismount, take up a handful



of earth, sniff at it and say: 'No, this is not our road; we should go in that other direction.' Stories like this are the natural outgrowth of a real skill. More than once I have had a man dismount at night, feel the ground and say: 'We are all right', or: 'Bear away to the north', or whatever it might be. This can be done when a man already knows the country well; he knows where the paths are in relation to patches of different kinds of soil and vegetation. (Lattimore 2006[1941]: 139)

Mongolia has a long tradition of raising livestock (Bruun 2006, Sneath 2000). This has resulted in an extraordinary amount of indigenous knowledge about the rangeland environment and livestock, some of it accumulated over centuries. Indigenous knowledge systems of nomads are cumulative, representing generations of experience herding livestock, careful observations and trial-and-error experiments. Indigenous knowledge systems are also dynamic as new information is constantly being added (Miller 2002). Herders, development specialists and policy-makers can use this indigenous knowledge, along with new scientific information, to make better decisions about managing rangelands and livestock (Li et al. 2007).

Mongolia's long pastoral history has resulted in many animal husbandry strategies and practices being well-adapted to local environmental conditions. Many of these practices are still valid today. There is also an assortment of traditional institutions (*khot ail*, *neg nutgiinkhan*, *neg jalgynkhan*, etc.) for managing rangelands and livestock that in many cases are still viable and have even been revitalized as herders realized the need to begin to work together again with the demise of state-sponsored institutions. These traditional institutions can provide an invaluable base for herders as they work to build new and more dynamic organizations for addressing pressing issues related to grazing land tenure, labour, credit, production inputs (veterinary medicines, supplementary feed, equipment, technology, information) and marketing (Miller and Sheehy 2004).

Nomads throughout Inner Asia have a rich vocabulary describing the landscape and the animals they raise for a living. Some of their methods for categorizing features of the landscape may appear puzzling to outsiders unfamiliar with the nomads' culture and language, yet they are often foremost in the minds of the nomads and greatly influence nomads' beliefs and actions. Owen Lattimore provides interesting insight into some of these traditional beliefs:

Another very interesting thing about nomad life is the balance between the specific and the vague. In the Mongol vocabulary, for instance, the age, color, and individual characteristics of a horse or a camel or any other animal can be told with the most minute precision. There is also such an accurate terminology for different kinds of hills, ridges, plains, lakes, pools, streams and springs that you can get directions taking you across many miles of vague country without a mistake. On the other hand it is quite

difficult to get a precise place name. A hill or a spring may have several names, of which some are descriptive and others honorific or propitiatory. The ‘real’ name is likely to be taboo, so that if you ever hear it at all you are more likely to hear when you are far away than when you are near it.

Why such taboos? Well, to begin with, if you are at a certain place you are obviously in some ways dependent on that place – for a safe camp, for good pasture and so on. It is better, therefore, to talk about that place vaguely in a ‘respectful’ way than exactly in a ‘familiar’ way. Even more important, perhaps, is the fact that, being a nomad you do not want to be tied to any one place even by verbal associations. It is true that neither the Mongols nor any nomads are unlimited wanderers; you move, but within a framework which is partly the social frame of your tribe and partly the geographical frame of your tribe’s territory. The fact that you are a herder means that you yearn always for fluidity of movement. The Mongols, as nomads, call themselves *nutel ulus*, moving people. To a nomad the inherent quality of nomadism, as nearly as I can understand it, is freedom of movement. Therefore, if you belong to a ‘powerful’ tribe you do not think of this power in terms of the number of square miles that the tribe owns but in terms of linear miles of movement permitted to you. (Lattimore 2006[1941]: 186–188)

Anyone who has spent time in Mongolia is familiar with an *obo* (cairn) and their special significance in the landscape. Similarly, in Tibetan areas of China, the landscape has a sacred geography to which nomads adhere. Traditional beliefs, folklore and religious customs also influence nomads’ perception of the steppe landscape and affect their behaviour. Owen Lattimore was aware of these beliefs:

We were already in the Mao Mingan hoshun, having passed the obo that divides from the range of the ‘Lark’ Mongols. This is the way of Mongol boundaries; they set up an obo or cairn in the high evident place and say, ‘From here to the next obo, away there in the hills, along the ridge of these hills here between, is the boundary between us and you.’ They divide themselves by watersheds and not by valleys, because what they require is the delimitation of grazing grounds. (Lattimore 1995[1929]: 73)

Livestock production under pastoral systems on the steppes of Inner Asia is increasing in complexity as the production system is forced to respond to new paradigms. An incomplete understanding of how to respond to new paradigms is affecting interactions between humans, livestock and production resources throughout the livestock production system. If livestock production is to remain an economically viable and environmentally sustainable enterprise, an accurate and realistic understanding of livestock production interactions on the steppes is critical in effectively adapting livestock production to new paradigms (Sheehy et al. 2006a).



**Figure 3:** *Mongol Riders and Camels.* Photo: Dan Miller

In adapting to the new paradigms of competition for land and vegetation resources, external forces rather than local environmental forces increasingly shape herders' lives and livestock production practices. Because of the necessity to accommodate economic development and market economics to survive as pastoral herders, the herder must be innovative in the use of management and production strategies. However, the pastoral herder already possesses the understanding and set of skills needed to survive in the modern world since those same skills and understanding are required on a daily basis in nomadic pastoralism (Sheehy et al. 2006b).

Sustainable development of the pastoral areas of Inner Asia requires a better understanding of the complex nature of the rangelands, greater appreciation for nomads and their way of life, and consideration of new information and ideas emerging about rangeland ecosystems and pastoral production systems. Paying more attention to the existing knowledge that nomads have can create more respect for nomads and their way of life and foster partnerships for resolving pastoral development issues. Range and livestock development can no longer ignore local circumstances, local technologies and local knowledge systems. Traditional pastoral production practices have been tried and tested. In many cases, they are still very effective and are based on preserving and building on the patterns and processes of the rangeland ecosystem.

In this paper, we have provided examples of Owen Lattimore's writings to illustrate his comprehensive understanding of nomads and the steppe environment in Inner Asia, particularly Mongolia. Despite being rather 'long-in-

the-tooth' (to borrow a herdsman's term for being old), we contend that much of Lattimore's work still provides valuable information and historical insight into nomadic pastoral systems. Like fine wine or whiskey that mellows and gets better as it ages, Owen Lattimore's writings from 70 and 80 years ago still resonate with enthusiasm, heartiness and empathy for the nomads. They are also full of the vitality that is the essence of nomads' lives on the steppes of Inner Asia.

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