

Reconsidering the Role of Absentee Herd Owners: A View from Mongolia

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Since the privatization of livestock in 1992, rates of absentee ownership of livestock have increased sharply in Mongolia. Unlike other documented instances of absentee herding in pastoral societies, absentee herd ownership has few detrimental ecological or social impacts in Mongolia. Rather, the relationship between absentee herd owners and herders may be viewed as a revitalized institution, with links to customary patterns of urban-rural exchange, emerging to meet the needs of both herders and town-dwellers during the transition from a socialist planned economy to a free market economy. Absentee herding in Mongolia differs from absentee and contract herding accounts from Africa and the Middle East in its continuing emphasis on subsistence rather than speculative investment and accumulation. Other important distinctions include: (1) absentee owners and herders are usually kin or friends; (2) herders tend their own private herds in addition to absentee-owned animals; (3) few ethnic, caste, or class differences exist between herders and absentee herd owners; and (4) herders from all wealth strata tend absentee-owned animals. Policies to restrict or regulate absentee livestock ownership must be carefully considered in the Mongolian context, making clear distinctions between informal, mutually beneficial subsistence-driven arrangements among kin and friends, and more formal investment-driven contracts between businesses or investors and herders.

KEY WORDS: pastoralism; Mongolia; contract herding; absentee herding; economic transition; resource management.

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INTRODUCTION

The practice of herding absentee-owned livestock, referred to here as “absentee herding,”² has existed in Mongolia for many centuries, but has recently become widespread in the wake of the transition from collectivized livestock husbandry under a socialist command economy to independent, private husbandry under an emerging market economy. In the current social and economic context, absentee herding appears to be reemerging as an institution important to the survival of both full-time pastoralists and town-dwelling herd owners. In other parts of the world, where pastoralist populations have undergone transitions from subsistence to market economies, the commodification of livestock and labor have often led to diversification in herding objectives and strategies as town dwellers accumulate animals as a form of speculative investment and hire poor herders to tend them. The disparate interests of full-time herders and absentee herd owners, part-time pastoralists, and hired herders have led to increased rangeland degradation and exploitive labor practices. These documented cases understandably have led to a cautious attitude toward absentee herd ownership in Mongolia (PALD, 1993; Agriteam Canada, 1997). The objective of this case study is to describe the nature of absentee herd ownership in Mongolia, and determine whether there is an empirical basis for such concern. I argue that in Mongolia, there is little indication that high rates of absentee ownership have detrimental ecological or social effects. On the contrary, in many cases, the relationship between absentee owners and herders is of mutual benefit, with little of the asymmetry that characterizes the relationship between herd owners and herders in other documented cases. In the Mongolian context absentee herding, built on a longstanding subsistence ethic, is an effective response to economic transformation.

The literature on absentee herd ownership and contract herding, mostly based on research in African pastoral societies, has advanced the view that absentee or contract herding arrangements often foster resource management practices that accelerate rangeland degradation (Little, 1985; White, 1990; Shanmugaratnam *et al.*, 1992; Toulmin, 1992; Bayer and Waters-Bayer, 1995). Little (1985) suggested that changes in the pastoral economies of Africa were resulting in a changing relationship between herd owners and herders. He observed that herders with few or no livestock of their own were hired for wages to tend the livestock of wealthy investors who were not themselves pastoralists and who often lived in settlements. The

²Most of the literature refers to this practice as contract herding or hired herding. However, since Mongolian herders do not usually herd for wages and work without a defined contract, I have chosen to use the term “absentee herders,” to refer to people who herd absentee-owned livestock.

herd and pasture management incentives for contract herders and absentee owners differed from those of owner-herders. Since investors generally had alternative sources of income, they were unconcerned with the longterm sustainability of rangelands and had little incentive to control grazing or abide by customary grazing institutions. Toulmin (1992) reported that the desire of sedentary absentee herd owners to "keep an eye on" their stock, led to a decrease in the distance of pastoral migrations and consequently contributed to overuse and degradation of pastures near settlements. Similarly, Shanmugaratnam *et al.* (1992) stated that absentee owners in Mauritania preferred to keep their livestock as close as possible to their towns, and the ". . . concentration of herds in limited areas contributes to overgrazing and exacerbates land-use conflicts around towns." Degradation resulting from increases in contract herding occurs primarily in situations where the absentee owners are sedentary, and limit the mobility of their hired herders and herds. In one African case, however, pastures close to the settlements where absentee herd owners live were so degraded that cattle had to be herded by kin or hired herders at distant cattle camps (Ensminger, 1989). Not all herd owners that hire contract herders are sedentary, however, nor are they all absentee owners (Beck, 1980; Bradburd, 1980).

Almost all accounts of contract herding in Africa and the Middle East indicate that herding the livestock of others is an occupation for poor herders (Dupire cited in White, 1984; Beck, 1980; Bradburd, 1980; Little, 1985; Ensminger, 1989; White, 1990) who are often kept poor in the contract herding relationship through limited access to pasture resources, water (Beck, 1980) or breeding stock (Bradburd, 1980). Households that herd absentee-owned stock for pay may lose access to loan animals through traditional forms of exchange (White, 1990), and may be less motivated to participate in resource management institutions (Shanmugaratnam *et al.*, 1992). Absentee herding may also have negative effects on livestock productivity since animals kept in overused pastures must survive on forage of poor quality and low quantity, and contract herders may compete with absentee-owned calves and kids for milk (Toulmin, 1992).

In the case-study presented here, the nature of absentee herd owner-herder relationships in Mongolia is examined, with special attention to the resource management practices of Mongolian nomadic pastoralists who herd absentee-owned livestock. The paper has five sections. The first section provides an overview of the Mongolian pastoral economy and ecology, describing the environmental constraints to livestock production in Mongolia. The second section sets the stage for understanding the resource management implications of absentee herding during the period of transition to a market economy by summarizing patterns of seasonal migration, pasto-

ral land use regulation, and land tenure in the pre-revolutionary, collective, and post-privatization eras. The third section outlines the historical roots of absentee herding in Mongolia, showing that this form of livestock ownership is not new to Mongolia. The fourth section examines the relationship between absentee herd owners and herders in Mongolia today, highlighting the mutually beneficial aspects of absentee herding arrangements in the context of a transition economy. The fifth and final section considers the resource management implications of absentee herding in Mongolia, presenting evidence in support of the argument that in the study sites, absentee herding has no detectable negative impacts on resource management, and may help to foster desirable livestock distributions by helping herders access transportation and labor, while reducing disincentives to using remote pastures.

OVERVIEW OF MONGOLIAN PASTORAL ECONOMY AND ECOLOGY

Mongolia is a land-locked country 1.56 million km² in size with a population of 2.5 million people. Most of the country is grassland that falls into three major ecological zones: the mountain-steppe, steppe, and desert-steppe. Some 390,000 Mongolians are livestock herders and half of the nation's population depends directly or indirectly on the pastoral economy for its livelihood. Livestock husbandry accounts for over 30% of Mongolia's gross domestic product (Mongolian Business Development Agency and Tacis, 1996). Herders rely on their animals for subsistence, garnering most of their calories from meat and dairy products; using wool, hair, and hides for domestic purposes; burning dung for fuel; and employing horses, cattle, and camels for transportation. The Mongolian pastoral economy is not a strictly subsistence economy, however. Herders sell or barter a significant portion of their livestock products, especially wool, hair, cashmere, and hides, as well as live animals, and in some areas dairy products, exchanging these items for additional foodstuffs (primarily flour, rice, tea, and sugar), cloth, clothing, household implements, and occasionally luxury items such as televisions, gasoline generators and motorcycles.

This study was conducted in Jinst and Bayan Ovoo Sums (districts) in Bayankhongor Aimag (province), approximately 700 km west-southwest of the country's capital, Ulaanbaatar (Fig. 1). Jinst Sum (5002 km²) is located in the desert-steppe ecological zone, and Bayan-Ovoo Sum (3,213 km²) encompasses steppe and mountain-steppe ecosystems. Together, the two *sums* span an hourglass-shaped swath of land from the southern slopes of the Khangai Mountains to the summit of Ikh Bogd Mountain, the highest

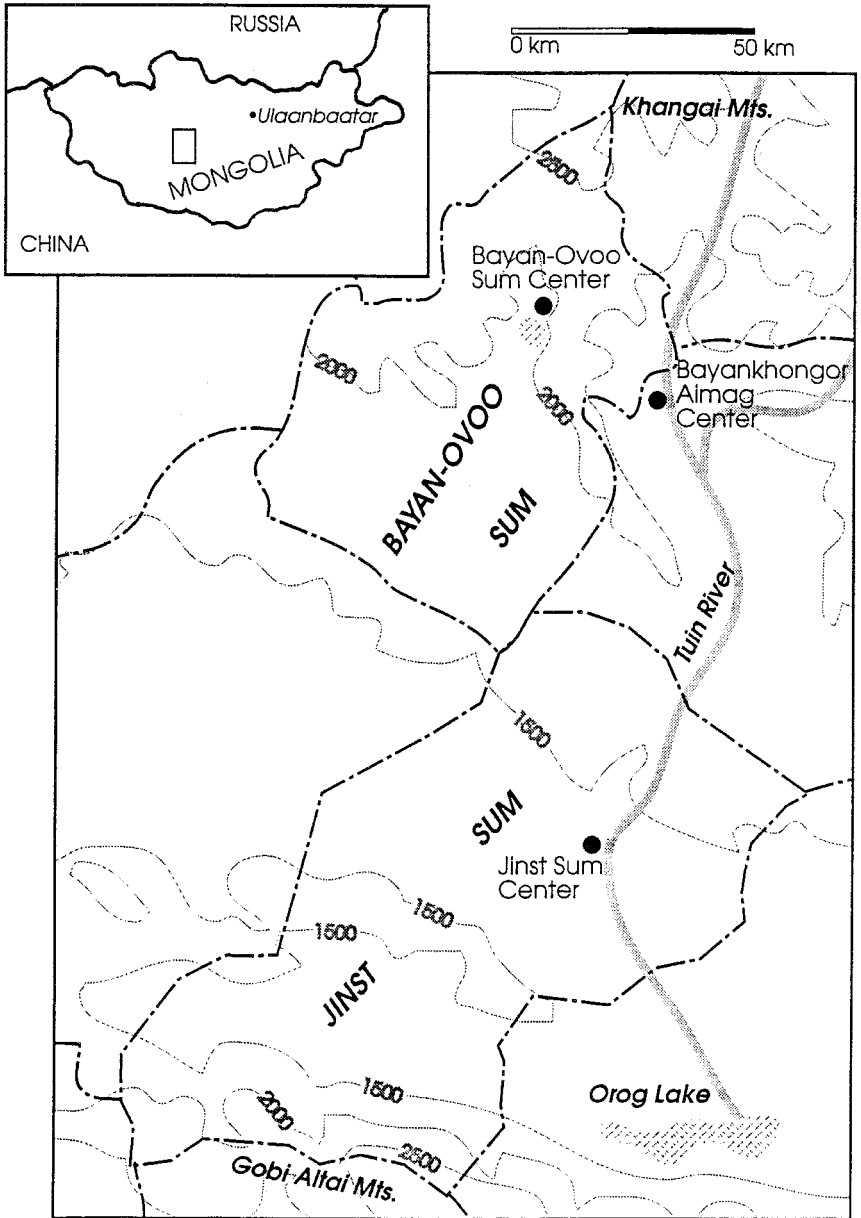


Fig. 1. Map of study area.

peak in the Gobi Altai range (3957 m). This region is known as the Valley of the Lakes, for several large freshwater and slightly salty lakes formed by runoff from the Khangai Mountains. The climate and vegetation of the three ecological zones in the study area are summarized in Table I.

The combination of cold temperatures, low precipitation, and high winds (upwards of 100 km/hr in the desert-steppe) make spring the most difficult season for livestock raising in Mongolia. In addition to the predictable challenges of spring weather, extreme winter storms periodically affect much of Mongolia (Templer *et al.*, 1993). Any situation that renders forage unavailable to livestock is called a *dzuud* in Mongolian, but the term is most frequently used for blizzards or extreme freezes. According to local officials, *dzuuds* occurred in at least some part of the study area in 1968, 1984–1985, 1988, and 1992–1993. Droughts are frequent in the desert-steppe, but have a less dramatic impact on livestock, since herders are usually able to move to better pasture. *Dzuud* often immobilizes herds, weakening and starving them.

Table I. Climate and Vegetation Characteristics of the Desert-Steppe, Steppe and Mountain-Steppe Ecological Zones in Jinst and Bayan-Ovoo Sums, Bayankhongor Aimag

	Dessert-steppe	Steppe	Mountain-steppe
Mean annual precipitation ^a	95 mm	200 mm	230 mm
Mean January temperature	-18°C	-18°C	-25°C
Mean July temperature	21°C	16°C	13°C
Elevation	1380 m	2000 m	2200–2800 m
Dominant plant species ^b	grasses: <i>Stipa gobica</i> , <i>S. glareosa</i> forbs: <i>Artemisia xerophytica</i> , <i>Allium polyrrhizum</i> , <i>A. mongolicum</i> shrubs: <i>Caragana spp.</i> , <i>Artemisia spp.</i>	grasse: <i>Stipa krylovii</i> , <i>Clistogenes squarrosa</i> , <i>Agropyron cristatum</i> forbs: <i>Cymbaria dahurica</i> , <i>Thermopsis dahurica</i> , <i>Oxytropis spp.</i> shrubs: <i>Caragana spp.</i>	grasses: <i>Festuca lenensis</i> , <i>Koeleria macrantha</i> , <i>Poa attenuata</i> forbs: <i>Artemisia frigida</i> , <i>Leontopodium ochroleucrum</i> , <i>Oxytropis spp.</i>
Typical dry yield of pastures ^c	50–250 kg/ha	300–400 kg/ha	500–800 kg/ha
Average protein content of pastures ^d	5.8%	4.0%	4.4%

^aSource for climate data: Hydrometeorological Institute, Ministry of Nature and the Environment.

^bSource: Fernandez-Gimenez, 1997.

^cSource: Purev, 1990.

^dSource: Tserendolam, 1990.

In 1993, 3481 people making up 858 households lived in Bayan-Ovoo Sum. Of these, 798 households owned livestock, and 571 were considered to be full-time herding households. Jinst Sum supported 2412 people in 560 households. All 560 households owned livestock, and 450 of them were considered full-time herding households (Bayankhongor Aimag Statistics). In each *sum*, 100–200 people live in the *sum* center, a small settlement that is the administrative headquarters of the district, or in *bag* centers, tiny settlements that during the socialist era were the smallest administrative and production divisions of the collectives.

Mongolian nomadic pastoralists herd five types of livestock: cattle (including both *Bos taurus*, European cattle, and *Bos gruniens*, the Tibetan yak), camels, horses, sheep, and goats. Most households prefer to own some of each type of livestock. The distribution of yaks and yak-cow hybrids is confined to the cooler mountain-steppe, while camels are found predominantly in the desert-steppe and steppe zones. Sheep and horses are proportionally more abundant in the steppe and mountain-steppe, while goat herds are relatively larger in the desert-steppe. Herders prefer a diversity of animal species because of the variety of products and services a diverse herd provides, and because milk production and birthing of different species are staggered. Calculated in Mongolian sheep forage units (sfu), Jinst Sum had 154,198 livestock in 1994 and Bayan-Ovoo Sum had 114,105 livestock at the end of 1993, for stocking densities of 3.2 ha/sfu in Jinst and 2.8 ha/sfu in Bayan-Ovoo. (One sfu is the amount of dry forage needed to feed an average Mongolian sheep for 1 year, approximately 365 kg. The equivalencies for other species are: one camel = 5 sfu, one horse = 7 sfu, one cow = 6 sfu, one goat = 0.9 sfu (Danagro, 1992).) Local livestock census records for the interval of 1954–1994 show fluctuating populations in both *sums*. The major declines in livestock populations during this 40-year period are accounted for by climatic disasters (*dzuud*), which act as density independent limits on livestock populations (Fernandez-Gimenez, 1997). Annual forage bottlenecks in winter and spring, when herders rely entirely on standing dry forage (and in the mountain-steppe, cut wild hay), are a more regular and predictable constraint on herd productivity.

SEASONAL MOVEMENTS, PASTORAL LAND-USE REGULATION, AND LAND TENURE

The temporal and spatial variability of Mongolian steppe ecosystems gives rise to the nomadic strategy used for over 700 years by Mongol pastoralists. Mongolian herders clearly articulate the ecological reasons for their mobile lifestyle and generally resist changes such as pasture privatiza-

tion, which they perceive would limit their flexibility and mobility (Fernandez-Gimenez, 1997). Patterns of seasonal nomadic movement have undergone several major changes during the twentieth century as a result of the changing Mongolian political economy. However, the ecological constraints on livestock production, and herders' basic strategies for coping with these constraints have persisted.

Interviews and participant observation conducted in 1993–1995 revealed that herders subscribe to two basic norms of pasture use. First, most herders set aside a certain area of pasture for use in winter and spring, when there is no green growing forage. This reserve area should not be grazed during other times of year by the customary user or other herders, and rights to reserve pastures adhere to the customary occupant of the adjacent winter or spring campsite. Second, access to local pastures is never denied to outsiders who have suffered a climatic disaster (drought or *dzuud*), even if there is not adequate forage to go around. The implicit understanding is that the disaster-struck community would reciprocate should the circumstances be reversed.

Throughout Mongolia's history formal and informal regulatory institutions have existed, often in tandem, to enforce these basic norms. These mechanisms have included *de jure* and *de facto* property regimes as well as systems of pastoral land-use regulation. An understanding of these institutions, and their relationship to absentee herding, is necessary to appreciate the implications of herder-absentee herd owner relations in the present. Key points include: (1) the role of large herd owners, such as monasteries in the pre-revolutionary era and the collectives in the socialist era, in regulating land use and allocating pasture, and (2) the role of collectives in providing the means of production to herders, namely labor and transportation, as well as other types of supports and subsidies. As the later sections will show, absentee herding today has arisen in part to compensate for the loss of the infrastructure collectives provided.

In pre-revolutionary times (before 1921), Mongolia was divided into approximately 100 territories or *khoshuun*, controlled by secular hereditary princes or high-ranking Tibetan Buddhist lamas. The secular or lay ecclesiastic subjects of the ruling entity were charged with herding the livestock of the ruling noble or monastery under the close watch of appointed local agents. Thus the timing and location of seasonal movements within a territory were directed from above. Under this system, the majority of herders in what is now Bayankhongor Aimag made extensive seasonal migrations, spending the winter in the Gobi (desert-steppe) region, and migrating 100–200 km north to the verdant Khangai Mountain pastures in the summer (Simukov 1935; Batnasan 1972). Pasture land within each *khoshuun* was likewise allocated by the ruling noble or lama. Within a seasonal use area,

informal institutions governed the allocation of pasture based on customary use of traditional winter camps and pastures and the "first come, first served" rule of the steppe (Riasanovsky, 1965). Some communities imposed their own sanctions on herders who violated norms, for example, by grazing winter pastures in summer (Pozdneyev, 1892).

The formation and consolidation of livestock collectives in 1960 marked a major change in the economic and social structure of livestock production in Mongolia, and in the associated patterns of resource use. By 1960, the process of organizing herders into collectives (which began in the 1940s) was complete. By this time, virtually all herders in Mongolia belonged to herding collectives, and tended collective-owned livestock in exchange for a regular salary and benefits. Herding households were allowed to own a limited number of private livestock for their own use. The customary kin-based herding camps (*khotail*) composed of 2–12 households were dismantled and 1–2 household production units called *suur* were instated. In principle, the households in a *suur* were not to be closely related, but this rule was often overlooked. Children were sent away to school and livestock husbandry became professionalized with the formal training of production specialists, veterinarians, and veterinary paraprofessionals.

By 1960, territorial organization had also changed, and the former 100 or so *khoshuun* were abolished in favor of some 300 *sums* organized into 18 *aimags* or provinces. *Sums* were further subdivided into administrative-territorial subdistricts called *brigades*. *Sum* and *brigade* administrators allocated pasture and campsites, often following pre-existing customary patterns of tenure. However, the invasive and all-pervading influence of the collective in production activities likely weakened the multiple links among and within local herding groups which previously functioned to maintain customary tenure and land-use institutions (Mearns, 1996).

The seasonal movements of a household were confined to the *sum*, and often remained within the bounds of a single *brigade*. Most *brigades* and many *sums* contained only one ecological zone, and far less variety in habitat and forage resources than was available to herders in the pre-collective and pre-revolutionary periods. Seasonal migrations continued on a four-times yearly basis with occasional rapid, longer migrations of a subset of the household and herd. The timing and location of all movements were regulated by the collective administration with consultation from herders. The collectives also provided truck and tractor transportation for household moves, which supplanted traditional modes of transport such as camel caravans and yak carts. Overall, the scope and distance of moves in the collective period was much reduced in comparison with the pre-collective and pre-revolutionary eras. The reduced distance of seasonal moves and

diversity of forage resources were compensated for somewhat by occasional enforced long-distance moves, vertical movements along local elevational gradients, development of wells and water tanks to make use of waterless pastures, and subsidized supplemental feed supplies shipped in from other parts of Mongolia.

In 1992, following Mongolia's first democratic elections in 1990 and the liberalization of the economy, the economic and social structure of herding changed again, dramatically. Herding collectives were dismantled and most state-owned livestock were privatized. Herders became, once again, entirely responsible for their own herd management decisions. By the same token, they were forced to shoulder production risks individually and bear the total cost of inputs such as supplementary feed. Widespread unemployment in settlements and urban centers, combined with the opportunity to acquire livestock through privatization, led many sedentary town-dwellers to take up a herding livelihood, leading to an influx of "new" herders in the countryside. Many people who remained employed and resided in settlements also received animals through privatization or purchased them afterwards.

With the dismantling of collectives, the formal regulatory institutions that governed pasture use were dissolved, as well as the infrastructure the collectives provided. Although some veterinary services were still available, they came at a price to herders. Free mechanized transportation was no longer available, and most herders resorted to traditional transport such as camels and yaks, or hired private trucks to move their camps. The auxiliary labor provided by collectives for nomadic moves, hay-cutting, and other tasks, was no longer provided. Emergency fodder supplies dwindled and subsidized feed was no longer available in many areas.

With a few exceptions, the scope of seasonal migrations has decreased even further since privatization, for a number of reasons. Access to transportation and labor are major constraints to movement. In addition, many herders are reluctant to move far from the *sum* center, usually the only place where schools, medical help, telephone communication and shops are available. Lack of transportation makes moving livestock and livestock products to market difficult, so herders prefer to remain close to settlements and main roads, where it is more likely that they can deliver their goods themselves or encounter itinerant traders with whom to do business.

The lack of formal regulatory institutions to govern pasture use, coupled with the weakening (during the collective era) of customary institutions for allocating pasture and enforcing pasture use norms (Mearns, 1996), high urban-rural migration, and the clustering of herders near roads and settlements has led to confusion over rights to pasture. Newer and poorer herders often rely on associations with wealthier or more established kin

or acquaintances with strong hereditary pasture rights to gain access to pasture and campsites. Although pasture is still technically *de jure* state property used in common by local herders, and privatization of pastureland is unconstitutional (Mongolian Constitution, 1992), shelters located at winter and spring campsites were privatized during decollectivization and are the private property of their owners. These visible markers of ownership on the landscape have resulted in the conversion of the underlying campsites to quasi-private property and strengthen claims to adjacent winter and spring pastures. Shelters are also vulnerable to vandalism and theft, however, so herders are often reluctant to move away during the off-season, resulting in out-of-season grazing of reserve pastures. As herders fail to move, the former distinction between well-defined rights to winter/spring pastures, and the quasi open-access status of summer/autumn pastures is conflated, and customary patterns of seasonal land-use break down. "Improper" grazing practices have increased, such as grazing winter and spring reserve pastures out of season, and trespassing on the customary campsites and pastures of other herding camps. A vicious cycle of declining mobility and increasingly unsustainable grazing practices had emerged in Jinst and Bayan-Ovoo Sums by 1994–1995. To address the emerging conflicts over pasture use and promote sustainable husbandry the Mongolian legislature passed a land law in 1994 that allows for leasing of pasture to individuals and "economic entities," while mandating that leasing conform with traditional patterns of seasonal migration and pasture deferment. The pasture leasing provisions have yet to be implemented, however, and debate continues over the appropriate strategy for implementation (Agriteam Canada, 1997).

ABSENTEE HERDING IN MONGOLIA

This section provides historical evidence for the existence of absentee herding in Mongolia more than a century ago, and describes the varying forms that absentee herding arrangements have taken over the decades. Despite the differences among quasi-feudal, collective, and informal absentee herding arrangements, a subsistence ethic, such as has been documented in many peasant societies (Scott, 1976), underlies and unifies most forms of absenteeism observed in Mongolia's past. Further, even when potentially coercive or exploitive systems of herd ownership and management were in place, as in the collective and pre-revolutionary eras, informal absentee herding arrangements nearly always coexisted with them.

Pre-Revolutionary Era

Absentee herding in various forms existed well before the Mongolian Revolution of 1921. The herding of noble and monastery livestock by secular and ecclesiastical subjects mentioned above is but one example. Likewise, free commoners were required to perform services for the state, including tending imperial flocks and the herds used by the state-run relay postal system. In most of these situations, herders did not receive a cash salary for their services, but were allowed to use a portion of the products from the absentee stock for their own consumption or trade, to keep half of any income generated by work done by absentee-owned animals (such as caravan trade), and/or to keep a percentage of the offspring. In some instances, herders of absentee-owned stock were exempted from other taxation or *corvée* requirements.

In some areas of the country, paid herding took place. The Russian traveler Pozdneyev (1892) recounts that in Uliastai in the northwest of Mongolia, the scarce pasture was allocated to government herds. City residents who owned livestock paid set cash fees for each type of animal to herders who grazed them in more distant areas. Pozdneyev also encountered local herders who were paid to tend the herds of Chinese merchants operating in what was then Manchu-controlled³ Mongolia.

Now great herds of camels are pastured here, belonging to the Chinese bankers of the Ta-shen k'uei firm. According to the accounts of the Mingat accompanying us, this pasturage which we saw, however, is not the only one owned by this firm, for there are similar herds in other places. For the supervision of the herds here there is one Chinese who is an agent for the firm, while the keeping and care of the animals is entrusted to the local inhabitants The herd is put in the hands of five or six heads of households, each of which receives for his labor five teas a month. The community is made responsible by mutual guarantees for the loss of camels. (Pozdneyev, 1892, p. 226)

During the pre-revolutionary era, the herders contracted to tend the animals of secular and ecclesiastical nobles were usually skilled and wealthy in their own right. Pozdneyev writes, "The livestock is not maintained by the monastery treasury in its separate herds, but is distributed to the care of various rich Mongols, from fifty to one hundred head per individual." Simukov (1935) made a similar observation, "{Monastery} livestock was not distributed to both the poor and the rich. In the movements, the poor drifted behind the rich, participating in the grazing of monastery livestock only as an element employed by the households which were charged with grazing."

³From 1691 to 1911 outer Mongolia was a colonial territory of China under Manchu (Qing Dynasty), rule.

Socialist Collective Era

With the formation of socialist herding collectives, herders of all socio-economic strata gave up their flocks to the state and were allotted single-species herds of collective-owned animals to herd for a regular salary. Thus, during the 30 years of collectivized livestock production, all herders tended animals that were not their personal property for pay. This situation hardly fits with the mainstream conception of absentee herding, particularly since the collective administration was intimately involved in the management of herds. More typical absentee herding took place “under the table” during the collective era. Interviews in Jinst and Bayan-Ovoo Sums revealed that many state and collective employees with nonherding jobs owned livestock during the collective period. Usually these animals were mingled with the private herds of relatives employed as herders for the collective.

Privatization 1992–Present

Currently, there are three main types of absentee herd owners in Mongolia: (1) town-dwelling households; (2) institutional owners such as local governments, monasteries, and companies; and (3) other herders. Following livestock privatization in 1992, many town-dwellers acquired animals either through privatization or purchase. Some of these people became full-time herders and moved to the countryside. Others continued to work at other jobs and administrative posts, or were too old or disabled to take up herding. Some of these households became part-time herders, continuing to live in or near the settlement and herding their flocks nearby. Others sought the assistance of kin and acquaintances in the countryside to look after their livestock. These households make up the majority of absentee herd owners in the study sites. In addition, some of the collectives were reconstituted as limited companies and retained a portion of their livestock holdings, making arrangements with local herders to care for them. *Sum* administrations, schools, hospitals, and monasteries (no longer forbidden and experiencing a renaissance of sorts) often own small herds of animals to help meet their expenses, which are placed with local herders for care. For example, the administration of Jinst Sum possessed horse and camel herds which were used as transportation for *sum* staff in carrying out functions that require travel to the countryside, and were placed with two different herders who received a salary for their services. In a few cases, herders exchange livestock among themselves, herding each others’ animals. This happens most often when one household is charged with herding the breeding males of other households in the neighborhood, in

order to keep them from covering females out of season. In some cases, two households with access to different pasture resources suitable for different species of livestock will exchange animals to better match herd compositions to available forage resources.

In sum, absentee herding of various types has existed for over a century in Mongolia. Though the quasi-feudal relations between nobility and herders in the pre-revolutionary era may seem to have little in common with the relations of herders and herd owners today, an ethic of subsistence (Scott, 1976) underlies both. Nobility, monasteries, and the collective were responsible for providing a minimal livelihood for all herders. In the pre-revolutionary and collective eras, there were few herders without kin in monasteries or villages, and no villagers without herding kin. The strong sense that a pastoral subsistence livelihood is the birthright of every Mongol persists today, and contributes to the current trend of urban–rural migration. Subsistence may be obtained by herding one’s own animals, by having someone else herd one’s animals (an absentee owner–herder relationship), or through gifts of meat and milk from one’s herding kin. The reciprocal relations between town and countryside implied by the subsistence ethic are mirrored in many herder–herder interactions, including the norm, described earlier, of allowing outsiders access to reserve pastures in times of drought or *dzuud*.

ABSENTEE HERD OWNERS AND HERDERS IN POST-SOCIALIST MONGOLIA

The data presented in this section and the next were acquired during 17 months of fieldwork in Jinst and Bayan-Ovoo Sums in 1994–1995. Participant observation, interviews, and a household survey of a stratified, random sample of herding households in the two *sums* were used to examine the relationships among absentee owners, herders, and herders’ resource management behavior.

The sample in each *sum* was drawn from the official list of households in a particular *bag*, or subdistrict: Jinst Sum’s second *bag* (total population 113 households), and Bayan-Ovoo Sum’s third *bag* (total population 224 households). The lists were stratified by household wealth, based on 3–4 local herders’ independent rankings of the well-being of all the households in their *bag* (Grandin, 1988; Fernandez-Gimenez, 1997). Well-being criteria elicited from herders included the size and composition of the household’s livestock holdings; other sources of income (salaries, pensions, etc.); the ratio of household members to livestock; high status belongings such as vehicles, televisions, and generators; and the health, social position, and

status of the household head and members. Single female-headed households were often perceived to be poorer than their livestock holdings alone would suggest, while herders of important local social status were often perceived to be wealthier than their holdings would indicate. Households in each *bag* were then subjectively divided into four wealth strata based on the averaged scores of the informants' rankings. Random selection of households from the four wealth strata resulted in excellent geographic distribution of the surveyed households, including households camped close to settlements, as well as those in remote areas of the *sum*.

Prevalence of Absentee Herding

Absentee herding was extremely common in the study area. Forty-four percent of the 102 herding households surveyed tended livestock not owned by household members or other members of the herding camp. Absentee herding was more prevalent in Bayan-Ovoo Sum's third *bag*, which lies within 30 km of the *aimag* center, than in Jinst Sum's second *bag*, located 100 km south of the *aimag* center. In Bayan-Ovoo, 52% of the households surveyed (23 of 44 households) herded absentee stock, while in Jinst 38% of households (22 of 58) tended absentee animals. Absentee-owned animals accounted for 23% of the stock herded by households in the Bayan-Ovoo sample and 12% of stock herded by households in the Jinst sample. A recent survey of 108 households in three other Mongolian *aimags* (Tuv, Gobi Altai, and Zavhan) found that on average 31% (range: 25–35%) of households herded absentee-owned stock (Agriteam Canada, 1997).

Absentee Herd Owners and Herds

The majority of absentee owners were kin or acquaintances of the herders surveyed, primarily close kin such as parents, children, or siblings (Table II). A small number of households tended livestock for a local government, company, or monastery. One household herded the breeding bucks (male sheep) of other households in their valley, in order to keep these animals segregated from herds out of breeding season. In exchange, their own breeding females, lambs, and yearlings were distributed to other households. Several households herded livestock belonging to more than one absentee owner.

The species composition of absentee-owned herds largely reflects the overall composition of local herds (Table III). The major differences in the

Table II. Owners of Absentee-Owned Livestock

Relationship to herder	Jinst		Bayan-Ovoo		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Parents, children, siblings, in-laws	9	41	15	65	24	53
Other kin, friends, acquaintances	11	50	4	17	15	33
Other herders	0	0	1	4	1	2
Sum government	1	5	0	0	1	2
Company	0	0	1	4	1	2
Monastery	0	0	1	4	1	2
Unidentified	1	5	1	4	2	4

composition of the absentee-owned herd are the greater proportion of goats in Jinst, and the greater proportion of cattle in Bayan-Ovoo. In Bayan-Ovoo, the absentee-owned herd also included a smaller proportion of sheep. The differences in the proportions of these species in absentee-owned and herder-owned herds were statistically significant ($p < 0.05$), but it is not clear that they are significant in terms of their impact on pastoral resources. The larger proportion of goats likely reflects the overall trend throughout Mongolia, and especially in Bayankhongor Aimag, towards increased investment in this cashmere-producing species.

In both *sums*, over 70% of the households that kept absentee livestock herded multiple species of absentee-owned animals, most commonly sheep and goats. The number of absentee-owned animals herded by a given

Table III. Composition of Absentee-Owned and Herder-Owned Herds for a Sample of 102 Households in Two *Sum*s^a

	Camels		Horses		Cattle		Sheep		Goats		Total
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	
Herder-owned											
Jinst	378	3	760	6	138	1	3492	28	7885	62*	12,653
Bayan-Ovoo	31	1	319	7	504	11*	2903	66*	634	14	4,391
Absentee-owned											
Jinst	53	3	47	3	3	.2	425	25	1163	69*	1,691
Bayan-Ovoo	0	0	100	8	231	17*	763	57*	234	18	1,328

^aIn Jinst (desert-steppe) $n = 58$ households. In Bayan-Ovoo (mountain-steppe), $n = 44$ households.

*Indicates significant differences in the proportion of animals of this species in absentee-owned and herder-owned herds ($p < 0.05$).

household ranged widely (Table IV). Among households with absentee-owned stock, the number of absentee-owned animals of certain species was relatively high: 58 goats per household in Jinst Sum, and 42 sheep per household in Bayan-Ovoo Sum.

The Characteristics of Absentee Herders

Unlike most cases reported in the literature (White, 1984, Little 1985, Toulmin, 1992), herders of absentee-owned livestock in Mongolia seldom differ from herd owners in ethnicity, class, or caste. In the pooled sample of both *sums*, there were no differences among wealth groups in the number of absentee herders. In Bayan-Ovoo Sum, however, 90% of herders in the wealthiest group herded absentee-owned stock, while 50% or fewer herders in the other groups did. In Jinst Sum, 50% of herders in the wealthiest group herded absentee animals, while fewer than 50% of herders in the other groups did. Agriteam Canada (1997) reported similar results, with most absentee stock herded by the wealthiest herders, and few or no stock placed with poor herders. The preferential allocation of absentee-owned animals to well-to-do households is consistent with the history of absentee herding in Mongolia, but contrasts with the situation in many pastoral societies, where absentee herding is often an occupation of last resort (Dupire, cited in White, 1984). Absentee herders did not differ from those without absentee stock in their herding experience. Just as many "new" herders (with recently acquired private livestock) tended absentee animals as did herders who had belonged to the collective. The sex of the household head also made no difference in whether or not the household herded absentee-owned stock.

Table IV. Number of Absentee-Owned Stock per Absentee-Herder Household by Species ($n = 102$)

Species	Jinst			Bayan-Ovoo		
	No. of hh	Range	Mean	No. of hh	Range	Mean
Camels	3	1-50	17.67	0	0	0
Horses	4	7-26	11.75	9	1-40	11.11
Cattle	1	3	3	18	2-50	12.83
Sheep	16	1-50	26.56	13	10-100	42.39
Goats	20	10-200	58.15	17	5-50	18.00

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ABSENTEE HERD OWNERS AND HERDERS

Although absentee owners are most often kin or friends of the herders, and a regular salary is seldom paid for herding services, this type of exchange is not conceptualized by Mongolian herders as a “loan” of animals. (Except for the loan of draught and riding animals, there is little evidence of animal lending as a redistribution mechanism among Mongolian pastoralists.) I encountered no instances of formal contractual arrangements among owners and herders specifying the length of time animals would be herded or terms of compensation. However, herders usually receive some type of remuneration for their services. Because of the value of cashmere and camel’s wool, absentee owners generally keep most of the profits from the sale of these products. Herders may use some or all of the milk from absentee animals, although absentee cattle owners often milk their own animals in the summer or take a share of prepared dairy products from the herding household. Typical forms of payment for herding include gifts of cloth, clothing, tobacco, sugar, and household implements; assistance in procuring transportation for nomadic moves; assistance in dealing with local government bureaucracies (for example, picking up and delivering state pension checks); boarding the school-age children of herders in town during the school year; and providing labor to the herding household during key production times such as summer milking and hay-cutting, spring cashmere combing, and seasonal nomadic movements. Town-dwelling absentee owners can also sometimes provide assistance during climatic disasters by helping herders secure permission to use distant pastures and assisting them in moving stock and household. Significantly, all of these forms of compensation, whether goods, services, or labor, fill functions that would have been provided by the collective before privatization, or assist herders in coping with institutional obstacles to a secure livelihood that have arisen as a result of the economic chaos following privatization. As I argue in the following section, a similar claim may be made about the nature of absentee owners’ investment in livestock, which in most cases in the present economic context constitutes a basic subsistence resource for town dwellers rather than a speculative investment.

Such rural–urban exchanges are not altogether new in Mongolia. In the Mongol custom of *idesh*, for example, the nomadic kin of sedentary Mongols send gifts of meat and milk to towns for their relatives, receiving gifts and services in exchange.⁴ According to Potkanski and Szykiewicz

⁴This custom persists today as well, to the extent that I once found myself paying an exorbitant extra baggage charge to carry an entire frozen sheep carcass back to Ulaanbaatar from Jinst as a gift from local nomads to my Mongolian research colleagues in the city.

(1993), the custom of *idesh* emerged in Mongolia in the 1930s due to a failure in economic policy that resulted in a shortage of goods in the countryside. Later, with increasing urbanization and the inefficient centrally-planned distribution system, urban dwellers suffered chronic shortages of milk and meat products, while difficulties in acquiring consumer goods persisted in the countryside. *Idesh* exchanges most often took place between close kin, and in some regions the meat usually came from animals to which the recipients had inheritance rights (if the donors were their parents) (Potkanski and Szykiewicz, 1993). However, even in cases where there is no inheritance to draw from, herders assert their kinship obligation to provide for their urban relatives.

The participation of absentee owners in herd management decisions varies greatly. Institutional owners, particularly local governments, may wield significant influence on where herds are pastured and for how long, as well as breeding practices, especially for drought animals. On the other hand, owners who live far away, for example in the distant *aimag* capital, may have little to do with most herding decisions. Owners in closer proximity, such as those in the *sum* center, or who are instrumental in arranging for transportation, may have a strong influence on herding patterns, especially seasonal movements. Absentee owners generally make their own decisions on the sale or slaughter of their animals, and even relatively distant owners usually visit the camp where their animals are tended once or twice a year to retrieve the animals, meat, or other products they plan to consume or sell, and to deliver gifts and goods to the herders. In sum, absentee owners may influence seasonal movements, culling and breeding decisions, but are usually not involved in planning daily grazing movements.

Another dimension of the additional labor often provided by absentee herd owners is the "apprenticeship" of absentee herd-owners' children to absentee herders. I observed several cases in which a child of an absentee herd owner was placed permanently with a herder's household. Usually the children are teenagers, between 13 and 17 years old, and often they are the herder's kin—a grandchild or nephew, for example. These children, who grew up in towns, were designated by their urban parents to become the herders of the family. They were placed in a herding household to provide additional labor as part of the exchange for herding absentee-owned stock, and in the process learned to be competent herders themselves, eventually capable of managing the family's herd on their own. Similar apprenticeships sometimes occur when unemployed town youths join a herding camp and work for their board, learning herding skills. In these cases herding absentee-owned stock is not part of the exchange. Like the absentee herding situations, however, there is no set contract or formal payment in return for the young man's labor, and the youth is free to leave at any time. These informal labor exchanges, whether or not they involve

absentee-owned stock, are often crucial to the herding household in overcoming seasonal labor deficits. Despite the significant constraint on household production imposed by labor shortfalls, herding households almost never hire help for wages. Indeed, herders were distinctly ill at ease with the concept of hired labor, perhaps due to the connotations of wage labor under socialist ideology. Goldstein and Beall (1994) reported similar attitudes toward hired help among herders in Hovd Aimag.

The Nature of Livestock Investment

What is the nature of private absentee owners' investment in livestock in contemporary Mongolia? First, in an era of uncertain urban food supplies and food prices, livestock represent a subsistence resource and safety net. Government pricing policies early in the privatization process discouraged herders from selling animals, leading to food shortages in urban areas (Griffin, 1995). When price restrictions were lifted, the high cost of meat rendered this staple of the Mongolian diet unaffordable for many urban Mongols. Although the supply improved with time, major constraints to marketing live animals and perishable livestock products persist (Edström, 1993), making urban access to meat and milk uncertain. Under these conditions, private ownership of livestock by town and city residents makes a great deal of sense. Town dwellers who rely on their herds for subsistence are dependent on social ties with their rural kin and friends to procure pasture, water, and protection for their animals.

Second, in view of recent inflation and currency instability, animals are a capital investment that is more likely to hold or increase its value than cash in a savings account, if such accounts were available to Mongols outside of major urban centers. The long history of livestock as the dominant form of wealth available to Mongols makes livestock a logical place to invest surplus, even for urban Mongols. Although livestock production is certainly not without risk, the physical threats to animals are well understood by Mongols, and thus livestock may be perceived as a more secure investment than shares in a newly privatized manufacturing or service enterprise, for example. Livestock are a relatively safe investment in terms of price fluctuations as well. Almost no purchased inputs are required beyond the animals themselves and the labor to herd them, and the demand for meat, milk, hides, and hair is unlikely to diminish in the foreseeable future. The loosening and/or removal of government price controls on meat and dairy products makes investment in animals attractive, as does the healthy cashmere market. Third and finally, livestock ownership has obvious cultural significance, and many Mongols, regardless of their residence or

occupation, like to own some animals simply because it is the proper Mongolian thing to do.

Of these three reasons that nonherders invest in livestock, the first and third are most compelling, especially at the level of *sum* and *aimag* center residents. Many urban and town residents depend heavily on small absentee-owned flocks for their basic food supply, and sometimes a little additional cash from the sale of cashmere. Large-scale investment by absentee owners is rare, but this may change in the future, particularly if the cashmere market continues its present trajectory and alternative investment opportunities remain scarce.

RESOURCE MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS OF ABSENTEE HERDING IN MONGOLIA

The resource management impacts of absentee herding include its direct effects on nomadic mobility and consequent spatial and temporal distribution of herds; effects on tenure relations, which indirectly influence livestock distribution; and effects on herd size and composition. In this section I address each of these concerns in turn.

The recent changes in economic structures in Mongolia have led many herders to use pastures close to settlements and roads in order to have access to schools, clinics, and markets. This is especially true of town dwellers who keep their own livestock, herding them on the fringes of the settlement. The placement of absentee-owned stock with full-time herders may alleviate the overuse of pastures near settlements in several ways. First, the full-time herders, while they may stay closer to settlements than they would have during the collective era, use more distant pastures than town residents who herd their own stock. Second, absentee owners often provide transportation and/or labor for nomadic moves, potentially facilitating the use of better and more distant pastures, and preventing overuse of other pastures. Third, by providing services such as boarding school-aged children, collecting pension checks, securing medical assistance for herders, and bringing them gifts of essential shop goods, absentee owners also help to reduce herders' need to live in close proximity to a settlement. A survey of herding households revealed that households with and without absentee animals did not differ significantly in the average distance moved between camps, and households with absentee animals moved more often (in Jinst) and used more campsites (in Bayan-Ovoo) within the 2-year study period (Table V). Absentee herders and other herding households also did not differ significantly in their access to transportation or labor, although absentee herders in Jinst made a greater proportion of their nomadic movements

Table V. Mobility of Households with and Without Absentee-Owned Stock in Jinst and Bayan-Ovoo Sums

	Jinst		Bayan-Ovoo	
	With (<i>n</i> = 22)	Without (<i>n</i> = 36)	With (<i>n</i> = 23)	Without (<i>n</i> = 20)
Average number of moves per year				
Mean	3.8**	2.9**	3.7	3.4
SEM	.3	.3	.2	.3
Range	1.5–5.5	0–6	2.5–5.5	2–8
Number of different camps				
Mean	4.5	7.0	5.1*	4.2*
SEM	.4	.3	.3	.3
Range	2–10	1–8	3–8	2–7
Average distance moved between camps (km)				
Mean	13.0	17.0	14.0	10.0
SEM	1.5	2.1	2.2	2.6
Range	5–30	0–49	1–51	.25–51
Sum of distances moved in 24 months 1993–1994				
Mean	91.0	110.0	93.0	70.4
SEM	11.4	15.0	11.9	18.1
Range	15–216	0–390	6–203	.5–228

*Indicates means differ with the significance $p < 0.10$.

**Indicates $p < 0.05$.

with camels. These results suggest that in terms of its effects on nomadic mobility, absentee herd ownership is at worst benign and at best facilitates efficient pasture use.

It is unclear whether absentee-owned herds have any overt effect on tenure relations in Jinst and Bayan-Ovoo. One might speculate that the increase in herd size represented by absentee stock over a household's base herd might increase competition for campsites and pasture among households. However, herders are generally well-aware of the limits of potential herd size for their household given resource and labor constraints (Fernandez-Gimenez, 1997), and thus households that already have many animals and relatively few working members are less likely to accept absentee animals (Potkanski and Szykiewicz, 1993). Similarly, individual household herd size may be less important to resource competition than the size of *khot ail* (herding encampments composed of 2–12 households) herds, since the animals in a given *khot ail* are almost always pooled into one herd for grazing purposes.⁵

⁵Livestock ownership remains vested in specific households and their individual members. Other husbandry decisions, such as offtake and marketing of products, are made by each household independently, although households often cooperate on major tasks such as shearing, haying, etc., and may market their products jointly.

The evidence from the survey conducted in Jinst and Bayan-Ovoo is ambiguous. Households with and without absentee-owned stock claimed similar sources of rights to pastures. Households with and without absentee-owned stock also did not differ in the frequency with which they experienced trespassing on their campsites or reserve pastures. However, in Bayan-Ovoo, where winter campsites are in short supply due to the influx of new herders, absentee herders had less access to shelters, which suggests that their rights to winter pastures are also less secure, possibly contributing to out-of-season grazing or trespassing. In contrast, in Jinst Sum, absentee herders were more likely to reserve winter and spring pastures, a traditional practice important to herd productivity and sustainable grazing management, suggesting that their rights were relatively secure.

The ambiguity of the situation in Jinst and Bayan-Ovoo contrasts with the more clear-cut negative impacts of absentee herding on tenure relations and pastoral land use described by Little (1985) and reported in Mongolia in Altanbulag Sum, Tuv Aimag (Agriteam Canada, 1997). Altanbulag, which lies on the outskirts of Mongolia's most populous city, Ulaanbaatar, has a high proportion of absentee herders, many of whom herd stock owned by private individuals and institutions in Ulaanbaatar, rather than kin. Often both the herder and the herd owners are outsiders to the *sum*. The local government has imposed a permitting fee on absentee-owned herds, which goes into the local budget. In Altanbulag, absentee herding by outsiders has led to conflicts over pasture and campsites and has placed local herders native to the *sum* in opposition to local government, which benefits from the fees imposed and has thus far failed to expel outsider absentee herders despite complaints from native herders (Agriteam Canada, 1997). Although the situation in Altanbulag is serious, it appears to be the exception rather than the rule in Mongolia, and is due to the proximity of the capital city.

In Jinst and Bayan-Ovoo, changes in household herd size due to absentee-owned animals do not appear to have a negative impact on resource management. As mentioned above, herders base management decisions, including whether or not to take on absentee animals, on the availability of pasture, water, and labor as well as their household demand for subsistence and market products from livestock. Thus, it is unlikely that herders would take on more animals than they have the resources to support. Further, alterations in individual household herds are balanced by the size of *khot ail* herds. Since absentee-owned animals in most cases originated from the same collective herd as the herder's own private stock, they are not usually increasing local stocking rates by importing animals from elsewhere.

The composition of absentee-owned herds also deserves attention. As I reported earlier, the only noticeable difference in the species balance of

absentee and herder-owned herds was the slightly greater proportion of goats in the absentee-owned herds in both *sums*, as well as the greater proportion of cattle in absentee-owned herds in Bayan-Ovoo. Goats in Mongolia do not merit the same negative environmental reputation that they have obtained in other parts of the globe. In perennial grass-dominated ecosystems such as the mountain-steppe, steppe, and desert-steppe, goats consume a greater proportion of browse (shrubs and woody plants) and forbs in their diets than most of the other Mongolian livestock (with the exception of camels), helping to balance grazing pressure among a variety of plant growth forms, rather than concentrating on the grass component. Mongolian goats are also more vulnerable to *dzuud* (winter storm) mortality than other species, which may help to limit their populations, especially in eco-regions such as the mountain-steppe to which they are poorly adapted. While this is not good news for stock owners who overspecialize in goats, from an ecological perspective storms do a good job of limiting herd growth. Although data on the age and sex distribution of absentee herds in Jinst and Bayan-Ovoo were not available, if they follow the nationwide trend for all herds toward a greater proportion of adult males in the herd (for higher cashmere yield in goats) (Agriteam Canada, 1997), this may also ultimately have the ecologically beneficial side-effect of slowing the growth-rate of herds, as well as the economically negative impact of increasing producers' risk in the event of environmental disaster.

In sum, it appears that absentee herding has few identifiable negative consequences for resource management in Jinst and Bayan-Ovoo, and may have some benefits. Through their relationships with the absentee owners, herders access transportation, labor, and services that assist them in using more distant pastures or at least more different campsites and pasture areas within the yearly cycle of transhumance. Placing stock owned by town-dwellers with full-time herders helps to avoid overuse of pastures near settlements. In Jinst, absentee herders are more likely to reserve winter and spring pastures in the customary way, upholding historically sustainable grazing practices. The potentially detrimental influences on tenure relations have so far been limited to areas in the immediate vicinity of Ulaanbaatar.

CONCLUSIONS

While problems of declining nomadic mobility and increasing out-of-season use of reserve pastures continue in both study sites, it does not appear that absentee ownership of livestock contributes to this cycle of degradation. Rather, absentee herding agreements are one of several types of social relationships that herders now draw on to access transportation,

labor, markets, and other services previously supplied by the collective, helping to mitigate the severity of the social and economic impacts of structural changes on herding households. Similarly, the grim conditions in urban areas and towns have forced many town dwellers to depend for subsistence on their absentee-owned animals and the herding assistance of rural kin. The resulting relationship between absentee herd owners and herders constitutes a relatively balanced and symmetrical exchange, rather than an asymmetrical, exploitive one. The kin or friendship relationship between herders and herd owners and the fact that absentee herds are primarily a subsistence resource are two likely explanations for this outcome. There are several additional reasons why the Mongolian situation differs from the cases in the pastoralist literature which have fostered a negative view of absentee herd ownership. First, herders of absentee-owned stock almost always own and herd their own private livestock as well. This means that they take their own herd's interests into account in making herding decisions, rather than exclusively considering the welfare of absentee-owned stock, and may be less likely to differ in interest with the owners of absentee-owned animals. Second, there are virtually no ethnic, class, or caste differences between herders and absentee owners in Mongolia. Third, herders of all wealth strata herd absentee livestock, although in some areas a greater proportion of wealthy households herd livestock for others. Finally, absentee herding has a place in Mongolia's history, and is not merely a recent phenomenon arising from the commodification of livestock and labor during the transition to a market economy. Rather, it is a continuing expression, in a somewhat new form, of a subsistence ethic that has permeated herder-herd owner and town-country relations for centuries.

In conclusion, absentee herding in Mongolia may be viewed as a revitalized institution growing out of several older customary practices (*idesh* and pre-revolutionary absentee herding traditions) to serve new sets of needs on the part of both herders and herd owners. In the context of privatization and the transition to a market economy, absentee herding appears to have significant benefits for herders and herd owners alike, with at best positive and at worst benign impacts on resource management practices and the environment, at least in truly rural areas. The potentially beneficial functions of absentee herding in any given Mongolian locale should be carefully evaluated before policies to restrict absenteeism, which might interfere with these functions, are implemented. However, absentee herding is sufficiently widespread in Mongolia that policies on pastoral land use and land tenure, livestock taxation, and agricultural labor should explicitly consider the ramifications of absentee herd ownership and contract herding. Specifically, distinctions will need to be clarified between the informal exchanges among kin and friends that currently constitute the majority of absentee herding

arrangements, and formal contracts between investors, businesses or government entities, and hired herders.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This research was supported by the National Geographic Society's Committee for Exploration and Research, the International Research and Exchanges Board, the University of California, and a National Science Foundation Graduate Fellowship. The author thanks Jeremy Swift for inspiration; B. Batbuyan for field assistance; and Lynn Huntsinger, Ken Bauer, Devin Odell, and three anonymous reviewers for their extensive and helpful comments.

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