

## ARTICLE

**Pastoral Khans: from Mongolian Steppe to African Savannah**

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**Abstract:** *The developing field of Mongolian International Studies offers a diverse range of research topics. A review of recent articles reflects an emphasis on geopolitics, particularly evolving relations with its superpower neighbours. Whilst state-to-state engagement with China and Russia predominates, regional countries (Japan, Korea) and the US and Europe are examined within the ‘Third Neighbour’ policy. Trade and economics are also studied, from Oyu Tolgoi and mining to the role of the IMF and international agencies. Currently lacking is a focus on human-driven engagement that reflects Mongolian livelihoods, spirituality and community environments. Such social and cultural dynamics are essential to both pastoral and rural livelihoods and to understanding the nation. In 2020–2022 international academic endeavours enabled Mongolian herder representatives to participate in a global drylands exchange network with dryland residents in thirteen countries. The process provided an exceptional opportunity to present Mongolian perspectives to pastoralists and academics from Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia. This grounded Mongolian livelihoods and situated rural dynamics in a global context. Here we report key engagements and findings as Mongolian herders shared lives and practices in the context of this international pastoral/drylands project. Moving beyond the political/economic rubric, as this project did, delivers a more representative and complete comprehension of Mongolia to the global international studies community.*

**Keywords:** *pastoralists, Covid-19, Mongolia, international studies, drylands, Africa*

### Introduction

*‘I have never been so happy to be Mongolian’*  
Co-author visiting Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 2013.  
Mongolia’s international story is

framed by Chinggis Khan, superpower  
neighbours, transition to democracy  
and now as ‘the richest country in the

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world per capita in mineral resources' (Davaasuren 2021). Whilst international studies perceptions of Mongolia focus on geo-politics and economics, the 'жинхэнэ монгол хүн' (true Mongolian) perspective of a nomadic nation and everyday pastoral lives is lacking in global discourse. Representations of the country are of politicians speaking at the United Nations, mineral abundance, athletes at the Olympics, 'Hoomi' throat singing and Chinggis Khan branding from airports and cities (ex-Ondurkhan) to vodka and cigarettes. Yet a more relevant, quotidian representation of pastoral lives and environments is neglected; this is where Mongolia uniquely situates itself in the global imaginary. Herders exemplify the enduring life of the steppe vis a vis African, Middle East and Central Asian localities, traditions and populations (Elliot and Mearns 2003; Galvin 2009; Sternberg and Chatty 2016). In this paper we aver that Mongolia has much to offer the international studies community that is not part of the contemporary official discourse. It is the beauty and intrigue of pastoral lives that feature in global conceptions of the country (e.g. films *Story of the Weeping Camel*; *Eagle Huntress*) rather than the Third Neighbour Policy or Oyu Tolgoi renegotiations. This paper captures Mongolian herder representations documented at an international scale through the collaborative work of dryland residents and academics funded by international universities.

Embracing pastoral phenomena is natural in the country identified as the Last Best Place (Economist 2002) and 'the nation in which pastoralism has thrived and where - if anywhere - it may

be expected to persist as an ecologically, economically, and socially sustainable way of life' (Fernandez-Gimenez 1999, p 316). This framing of herding is interpreted and defined by external perceptions and parameters. Like the Maasai in Africa (Roque de Pinho 2013) or the Bedouin in Arabia (Chatty 2006), the living, sympathetic image of herding has captured the 'spirit of place' for the country. This is encouraged by the official push for tourism, a government initiative, based on culture, pastoral livelihoods and environments. This version of internationalisation policy, with a planned one million tourists annually, positively presents herders to the world but may be over-optimistic (ADB 2019). For outreach to a global realm academic research, both Mongolian and international, has effectively contributed to knowledge and a sense of the country's uniqueness. This paper shares some of the recent research projects that highlight Mongolian international studies scholarship. As is often the case, ephemeral images and foreign perceptions of a country may differ from national agendas and domestic narratives and intent.

A review of Mongolia representation to and by the international studies community focuses on the exigencies of nationhood, constraints of location, pressures of landlocked politics, mineral exploitation, development challenges and vicissitudes of contemporary events and state relations from the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Covid-19 and the war in Ukraine. All are important topics, yet alone or in combination they present a limited, narrow picture of Mongolian lives to a global public. The emphasis is on state action,

policy implementation and economics categorised in numbers, frameworks and initiatives. The enduring and practical ‘Third Nation Policy’ (Bayasgalan 2021), wherein in Mongolia seeks strong, bilateral relations with proximate (Korea, Japan) and distant (India, US, Europe) states, represents efforts to balance the dominance of neighbours Russia and China (Campi 2018). In the limited attention and media space available for a young (since 1990), middle income country Mongolian studies’ presentation favours the exigencies of state craft over knowledge of the lives conducted therein.

Similarly, the performativity of economic and trade development declarations, data and documentation as well as major contexts and macro concepts are emphasised over everyday practices. We learn of Oyu Tolgoi as one of the world’s largest mines (Sternberg et al 2022), how Mongolia will be the next Qatar (Economist 2012) and China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) \$4.9 billion investment in Mongolia (Byambajav 2019) but not the aggregate implications for society, livelihoods and long-term viability. The IMF’s \$5.5 billion bailout is covered but the underlying causes and crises that generated the loan are little remarked in the literature (Seeberg 2019). Such approaches lead to a rather opaque, incomplete image of the country on the global stage. Pronouncements, à la BRI, are made with limited follow up conveyed to the intended audience. When the BRI is rebranded as the ‘Mongolian Economic Corridor’ little changes on the ground. In fact, if a Mongolian urban or rural dweller read and reviewed the claims and documentation presented outwardly, they

may be unlikely to recognise the country as their own.

Though neglected in formal debate from authorised chambers, in fact Mongolian customary livelihoods are well-featured in academic research, presented at United Nations fora and encouraged by the Mongolian diaspora across Asia, Europe and North America (Ahearn 2020; Chandarana et al. 2022). These alternate pillars of knowledge, whilst not state-driven, provide a rounded and inclusive version of Mongolia promulgated through diverse forms of international engagement. World Bank country reports, global English language bookstores, tourism literature and visual presentation features the smiling nomad, ger on the open steppe, children playing with baby animals and Nadaam celebrations over business and political messaging. Seemingly with little effort, this view pervades the international community whilst its vibrant democracy and advanced ICT (information communication technology) engagement is less remarked.

The inherent uniqueness and interest of steppe lives may not fit a government paradigm, yet it is well captured in imaginaries that come in contact with Mongolian essentials of herding lives, vast horizon, animals as income and customs and spirituality situated on the steppe. This is driven by external visitors coming to the country with portrayals through a foreign lens highlighting the intricacies and idiosyncrasies of a once ancient, now contemporary pastoral culture documented for outside consumption. The process perhaps culminated and is best exemplified in Julia Robert’s video series as a herder woman for a week in

2000 entitled 'Wild Horses of Mongolia' (<https://www.pbs.org/wnet/nature/wild-horses-of-mongolia-with-julia-roberts-the-spirit-of-mongolia/2891/>). The programme offered the popular, ephemeral global perception of Mongolia which contrasts with the pedestrian political and economic struggles a developing country encounters and the challenges a country faces at a national scale and scope.

Between what is official (state, policy), economic (trade, investment) and informal (personal, beliefs) exists space for a panoply of engagements that ground the Mongolian experience and context in a global agenda and context. Pastoralists, comprising to 30% of the

population, present Mongolia as both a guardian of tradition and at the forefront of rural modernisation (UN 2018; National Statistics Office 2020). Remote in northeast Asia, conveying local lives to a worldwide audience has been greatly enhanced by the internet and globalisation. With Asia's highest percentage of Facebook users, social media has become a natural means of communication. This has enabled rural residents to participate and situate themselves in national debates. It also opens an avenue for engagement beyond the border with similar communities. Here we identify and explore international herder interactions through the auspices of academic study.

### **Covid-19 Globalises Pastoralism**

Contributing to 'Mongolian-ness' and a Mongolian identity, a review of academic research presents an inclusive, wide-ranging investigation into the characteristics that draw together diverse topics from the essential – pastoralism, gender, development – to the integral – environment, natural hazards, water – and the sublime – spirituality, cultural practice and landscape aesthetics (e.g. ovoos, sacred mountains). Serendipitously, this continued external interest and attraction to Mongolia has spilled over into common themes in the everyday realm and experience. Nowhere is this better demonstrated than the timely investigation and sharing of pandemic practices from Mongolia pastoralists to external audiences and dryland dwellers in North America, Africa and Central Asia. The country's remarkable reaction and

control of Covid-19 in 2020 led to positive comparisons with nations in Africa and elsewhere in Asia (Sternberg et al. 2021; Roque de Pinho et al. 2023). Then the significant impact of variants, particularly Omicron, again featured Mongolia's struggle and adaptation to living with Covid-19. Key was rapid response research, auspiciously sponsored by foreign universities (Colorado<sup>1</sup>, Oxford<sup>2</sup>), that presented Mongolian pastoral engagement with the SARS-CoV-2 to the global community. Whilst government pandemic policy was deliberated, which vaccines to use (Chinese, Russian) evaluated, and mask requirements vacillated through to an incomplete border closure (Covid purportedly entered the country with truckers from Russia or mineworkers from China), words and deeds from pastoralist were being reported to the world.

### **Herders as Researchers: ‘We have our milk and meat, what more do we need?’<sup>3</sup>**

Several Mongolian herders in Bulgan, Khentei and Bayanhongor Aimags participated as co-researchers on the project. As local researchers they discussed Covid-19 issues and impacts within their community and then contributed weekly and monthly updates and assessment of Covid impact in their home regions. Organised by the lead Mongolian researcher, reports from the field started in November of 2020 and then expanded in 2021 to incorporate more sites and herder households. These reports and updates continued through Spring 2022. In this way the study identified herders’ engagement and spirit of cooperation in dealing with the pandemic. Though a difficult time, herders maintained a generally positive approach which is reflected in their comments.

*‘Prioritise the nation’s safety and citizen’s health’*

Female herder, 52

*‘Managed work without panic or serious challenges to our lives’*

Male herder, 52

*‘We have our meat and milk, what more do we need’*

Male herder, 52

Investigation found that herders were reliable guardians of public health with the nature of the lifestyle conducive to responsible behaviour, such as social distancing, caring for vulnerable community members, rapid dissemination of health department directives and natural adaptive strategies to cope with Covid-19 restrictions (home schooling via internet, remote markets, self-sufficiency) (Sternberg et al. 2021). The co-researchers’

findings stressed:

1. Mongolia as an organised herding society
2. Clear interaction and support between government and citizens
3. Effective uptake and use of ICTs as modes of communication and engagement
4. Education levels that enabled herders to adapt and master complex conditions
5. Self-managing ability of herders, with government assistance (child and cashmere support, vaccine roll-out, clear health communication) to manage and mitigate a great livelihood threat.
6. Cohesive social support between rural and urban populations
7. Comparability to and leadership amongst pastoral societies in Africa and Asia.

Whilst herders managed adversity, a major challenge was to maintain livelihood income sources. With visits to soum centres restricted and travel to the capital Ulaan Baatar prohibited, income opportunities were greatly reduced. Further, calls from middle men, who customarily came to households to buy cashmere and livestock, were no longer permitted. This directly affected the ability to earn a living. Two government programmes were reported that played an important mitigating role. These were support payments to families for each child and cashmere subsidies to bolster falling prices. Both transfers put money into herder bank accounts and enabled most to meet basic everyday

expenses.

The co-researchers were able to share the Mongolian experience with a trans-continental audience through ICT, particularly Zoom meetings and Facebook. Rapid dissemination through weekly project presentations meant dryland dwellers and researchers in Europe, Africa, Asia and America had almost real-time updates on changing conditions in the Mongolian countryside. Different than prevalent discourse presented by the government, the surprise effectiveness of herding practices and strategies showed an original face of Mongolia to the world. Stepping outside the country, this conveyed a new perspective that is missing in debates usually focused on geopolitics.

This engagement is where parallels and differences in experience could be drawn. Some facets were shared with African herders: there was a clear appreciation for

traditional herding knowledge and skills that encouraged flexibility and adaptability to the new conditions and threats. The return of school children to family gers enabled them to experience herding practices and constituted an opportunity for elders to pass on knowledge to the younger generations. The natural state of herding on the steppes sees households separated by kilometres for optimal pasture use for livestock; this was suitable to fit pandemic parameters. Facemasks were taken up, including by herders on horseback. Concentration at wells was reduced through alternating watering times for animals. Information was shared through the herder grapevine, through individual meetings or by mobile phone. Migration and mobility could continue as this is a solitary household pursuit to locate fresh pasture.

### **Mongolian Pastoralists' Contribution to International Studies**

This pastoral snapshot of Mongolian herding was most effectively communicated to an international audience at the 'Pastoralist to Pastoralist International Virtual Forum on Covid-19'<sup>4</sup> in April, 2021. Bringing together pastoralists for a 3-hour Zoom conversation showed the solidarity amongst herders as they discussed the pandemic and the key issues driving herding in different pandemic contexts and continents. With participants from Tanzania, Kenya, Kyrgyzstan and Mongolia and researchers from the US, Europe, Asia and Africa. Here the strength of Mongolian herding was reflected in its vitality and relevance to an appropriate international community

and fora. The workshop started with regional presentations, then comparing and contrasting key themes from pastoral and researcher perspectives. Then, most importantly, came direct discussion between all herders (through translation). The crux of debate was on how herding is practiced, unique nation-specific attributes (snow, markets, conflict) and government policy and emoluments for pastoralists. The engagement and shared interest and vision was remarkable, despite constraints of the short time, need for translators, weak wi-fi connections and crossing time zones were unavoidable constraints of the programme.

In this way today's herders are like

pastoral khans – leading the sharing of knowledge from Mongolia to Africa and beyond. This hopeful action shares customary practices with other dryland communities and conveys the national culture and legacy to foreign audiences previously beyond the reach of steppe residents. The comparison affirms awareness of regional originality, a traditional yet viably modern way of living and a leading role for pastoralists communicated far afield. In doing so the global debate is enriched, engagement with the country is expanded and perception becomes better grounded in lived lives and reality.

The paper has documented an existing role for herders' contribution to Mongolia's

international expression and imaginaries. The importance of pastoralism cannot be exaggerated; herding comprises ~30% of livelihoods and many multiples of the jobs in mining, which is just 4% (UN 2018). Though mining receives most attention economically and drives exports, it is less prominent in citizens' daily lives. Thus, the international presentation of Mongolia as a mining nation may poorly represent residents' material experience. In fact, Mongolia has the second-highest percentage of pastoralists of any country, behind only South Sudan. Our research works to present the face of 'lived Mongolia' to the international studies community.

### **Academic Contribution to Mongolian International Studies**

In fact, much is missed in scholarly discourse dominated by geo-politics, economics, mining and the pandemic. The paper authors, few in number, represent significant global focus and interaction with Mongolia that is not accounted for in standard country development fora characterising and attempting to represent one Mongolia. The diverse investigations reflect the wide-ranging potential interaction Mongolia offers the global community. Perhaps surprisingly, this starts with the Portuguese-funded project '*Mystical Nature: A comparative study of religious-environmental dynamics among Inner Asian, African and North American dryland communities*', based at ISCTE-Lisbon University Institute and the University of Oxford, taking place in Mongolia, Kenya and Mozambique. The research examines how changing

spirituality and religion – particularly Buddhism and Shamanism in Mongolia – interacts with environmental belief and land use behaviours (Bristley and Tumen-Ochir 2021; Bumochir 2014). This is compared with evolving dynamics in Christianity and shifts in land tenure and land use in eastern Africa. Their religious transition, from farming, livestock and burial practices to gender roles, shifts in land use and sustainability, can then be reflected vis-à-vis Mongolian practices of spirituality and relations with the environment.

The Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS) and the United Kingdom Research and Innovation's (UKRI) Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) are funding the 'Post-Pandemic Societies in Inner Asia' project that has commenced research in

Mongolia. Contemporary and focused on post-Covid-19 recovery, Japanese and British academics with Mongolian and Kyrgyz partners emphasise pastoralism and rural community dynamics as social transition is documented in Bayanhongor, Bulgan, Dundgov, Tov and Hovd Aimags. Such work commenced in August, 2022 with an East Asian summer school at the National University of Mongolia to internationalise research and publications. This stresses early career researchers as they present grounded knowledge by in-country scholars that gives Mongolian voice to findings, knowledge and insight on the country. Based at the University of Oxford, UK and Kagoshima University, Meiji University and Rakuno Gakuen University in Japan, the research exemplifies the internationalisation of Mongolian academics in the fields of geography, anthropology, environment, language and development studies. Further, Mongolian professors will co-lead the University of Central Asia's Naryn campus summer school in 2023 in Kyrgyzstan.

Such research endeavours reflect prior and ongoing engagement between Mongolian and foreign scholars. Key to this paper was funding from the United States' National Science Foundation-funded Social Science Extreme Events Research Network '*COVID-19 in African, Asian and North American Drylands Working Group*' at the University of Colorado, US. This served as formative research for the *Research & Public Policy Partnership Scheme*, a partnership between the University of Oxford and the UK Civil Service Policy Profession. This in turn was instigated as part of the

UK Global Challenges Research Fund – ESRC '*Gobi Framework – Inclusive Societies in Mongolia and Kyrgyzstan*'. All of these projects then contributed data and knowledge to the European Union's COST-Action '*Drylands Facing Change*' funding programme inclusive of Mongolia, now manifest in the book *Drylands Facing Change: Interventions, Investments and Identities*<sup>5</sup>.

Building on these projects, Mongolia was selected to participate in Bayreuth University's '*Mobilities and Socialities: COVID-19 in the Drylands of Africa and Beyond*'<sup>6</sup>. Based in Bayreuth, Germany and funded by its Africa Multiple Cluster of Excellence, the programme investigated how the COVID-19 pandemic added uncertainty to the lives of people in global drylands. Rural residents already face challenges - from climate change, political instability and food insecurity to marginality and land conflicts. The project gave voice to communities living with environmental and social variability as they respond and recover from the pandemic. Pastoral representatives from Mongolia and thirteen other countries joined in the effort, culminating in a comprehensive in-person conference for pastoral representatives in the Maasai Mara, Narok County, Kenya in October, 2022. Here was the face of Mongolian pastoralism in an international context. Commencing with the presentation of Mongolian *aarul* and *aartz* (dried curd), gifts were then followed by the exchange of ideas on pastoralists' unique cultures in their most natural forum – amongst the world's herder representatives.

The more than US\$1 million in funding that authors have received for these projects represent the potent face of pastoral Mongolia to international studies.



This moves the conception of herders as a peripheral artefact in scholarship on Mongolia to the forefront of foreign research and engagement. External academic projects abound, yet receive limited recognition in the country. The different projects' findings transmit an image of Mongolia and its pastoralists that goes beyond national stereotypes. Questions arise as to how the appeal of pastoral research has been neglected in the domestic debate and official dialogue and what the horizon of herding investigation holds in store as an academic strength to be expanded. Several other researchers from Europe, Japan, China and North America have ongoing research in Mongolia. This paper emphasises the herders' contribution to knowledge production as co-researchers as well as reflecting external interest in pastoralism. The herder agenda and perspective and open research environment draws academics to the broad and diverse topic; this portrays the transformation of a traditional vocation into a viable and contemporary livelihood.

Pandemic urgency drove pastoralists to answer the question 'how does Covid-19 impact mobile herders?' The

intense focus brought Mongolia into collaboration in unexpected ways with African, Middle Eastern and Central Asian acquaintances and new *confères*. Organised through academics, its clear direction outlived the pandemic, thus encouraging herder reflection on Covid-19. Afterwards they return to the customary values and endemic challenges. A profusion of vital and intense concerns entreats further study in Mongolia. Pastoral education (Ahearn and Bumochir 2016), rural to urban migration (Terbish et al. 2021), mining-community conflict (Sternberg et al. 2021) and Dagvadorj et al.'s (2022) work on the country's health emergency preparedness are but examples. Like pastoralists and Covid-19, such investigations are removed from the strife of policy, borders and economics. The work here may capture herders' endearing style; even this may mask the complexity of a pastoral society in transition. But for researchers, government officials, business people and the herders themselves, research reflects how each knows their part of what being 'ЖИНХЭНЭ МОНГОЛ ХҮН' means.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Research & Public Policy Partnership Scheme, a partnership between the University of Oxford and the UK Civil Service Policy Profession (2009-RPPPS-553).

<sup>2</sup> COVID-19 in African and Asian Drylands Working Group'. US National Science Foundation-Social Science Extreme Events Research Network/ CONVERGE facility working group, Natural Hazards Center - University of Colorado - Boulder, US <https://converge.colorado.edu/working->

[groups/covid-19-in-african-asian-and-north-american-drylands/](https://converge.colorado.edu/working-groups/covid-19-in-african-asian-and-north-american-drylands/)

<sup>3</sup> Male herder, 52

<sup>4</sup> Sternberg, T., Roque de Pinho, J. and Kronenburg, A., 2021. Pastoralist-to-Pastoralist Discussion on Covid-19 Featuring Pastoralists From Kenya, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia & Tanzania. International Virtual Forum on Covid-19. April 19, 2021. <https://www.waunet.org/iaaes/comm/cnp/blog/pastoralist-to-pastoralist-international-virtual-form-on-covid->

- 19-featuring-pastoralists-from-kenya-kyrgyzstan-mongolia-tanzania/
- <sup>5</sup> Drylands Facing Change: Interventions, Investments and Identities. 2022. Edited by Kronenburg Garcia, A. et al. Routledge, Abingdon.
- <sup>6</sup> Mobilities and Socialities: COVID-19 in the Drylands. Africa Multiple Cluster of Excellence. Bayreuth University, Germany. <https://www.africamultiple.uni-bayreuth.de/en/Research/1research-sections/mobilities/Covid-19/index.html>

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