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Challenging Life of the Nomadic Cashmere Goat Herder in the Gobi Desert of Mongolia

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To Laurie, whose love and support never wavered over time and miles.

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Abstract

Traveling throughout the Gobi Desert of Mongolia, living with nomadic cashmere goat herders, and helping them organize marketing cooperatives to get a fair price for their fantastic fiber gives me respect for these beautiful people, their determination, and an appreciation for their pride. They are now seeking a place of economic security while surrounded by voracious neighbors of China to the south and Russia to the north, not a situation that instills peace of mind. This is the story of my small role in living and working with them as they maneuver into the modern world after Soviet domination.

Key words

cashmere, Gobi Desert, herder, Mongolia, nomad, Ulaanbaatar, U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)

A note on terminology

AMAG	Also 'aymag', 21 provinces forming the first administrative subdivisions of the country; Ulaanbaatar is the 22nd province, separately governed.
CULL	To slaughter an animal to reduce herd size or to eliminate an undesirable genetic characteristic in that animal, such as weak bone structure, jaw overbite, or too much coarse hair.
CHANGE PEOPLE OR CHANGERS	Agents, or "changers", facilitate exchange between herders and processors in the fiber, hide, and meat markets in UB, extracting commissions in the transaction, according to some sources, predominantly Chinese.

DEL or DE'EL (děl)	Quilted winter garments, usually in dark blue or maroon, with a bright orange or yellow sash and extra-long sleeves that extend past the fingertips for warmth and to eliminate the need for gloves. Worn by both men and women.

Figure 1 Our consultant, Kris, is trying on a new deal or "de'el" that is being sown by Chuulunbaatar's wife, Udval, with the assistance of my colleague Alta.

DZUD OR ZUD	An extreme weather condition resulted in animal starvation and death. Some zud are called 'white' or snowy. In such cases, animals cannot find grass under the snow; some dzuds are due to extreme cold with a lack of snowfall and subzero temperatures resulting in draught the following spring.
HERDER	The first and most striking quality of Mongolian society, from the stories of Batsuh, Alta, Dr. Oyun, and others, is women's powerful role in sharing work, being educated, and keeping the country moving. The word "herder" is not "herdsman" because many of the herders and women and children."
MOBILE PASTORALISM	The pattern among rural cashmere goat, sheep, camel, and other domestic animal raisers in arid climates in which herders must constantly move herds to take advantage of better grazing opportunities, often connected with other related economic activities such as processing animal products, selling crafts, and bartering for staples.

Figure 2 Chuulunbaatar's son Batzorig, with goats searching for sparse grass in the arid desert

NOMADISM	The term refers to a wandering culture in which people and their animals constantly migrate to exploit grazing opportunities (mobile pastoralism) or trade opportunities. They secure goods when available and move them to markets as opportunities arise.

SUM	(Pronounced "soom") Administrative subdivisions of each province or "aimag" providing direct services. There are 331 sums in 21 aimags that comprise the country. A "sum center" is the commercial town or village of the sum.
UB	Abbreviation for Ulaanbaatar, the 22nd aimag administrative unit, comprises the capital city. Also, 'Ulan Bator'.

Contents

Preface/ Introduction

The New Millennium

I am entranced, feeling otherworldly, and delighted at having the good fortune to be here in Ulaanbaatar, the capital city of Mongolia.

Figure 3 Ulaanbaatar, capital of Mongolia with a statue of Genghis Khan

My title is Program Manager for Agriculture with Mercy Corps. Of course, I was excited when the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) asked me to join a team

already in the country that needed a specialist in cooperative marketing. That is my background, so here I am.

After the initial thrill of seeing goats grazing just outside the airport terminal, the self-doubts emerged: Do I honestly have anything to offer this ancient society of nomadic herders that they have not already figured out after thousands of years of survival in this brutally cold, arid climate and having built one of the largest empires in the history of the world?

I shall gladly impart anything useful I know. I believe in the principles of cooperative organization and that they are universal. We shall see.

Mongolia is an independent and democratic state, having emerged in 1990 from seventy years of Soviet domination. The Mongolian Empire was once the largest in the world, stretching from Eastern Europe to Central Asia to the east coast of Siberia and China. It is now an enclave of a proud culture, with over six thousand miles of unprotected borders with Russia to the north and China to the south, both countries with voracious appetites for expansion. As a rare democracy and free market economy of all the previous Soviet satellites, they are a natural ally of the United States, which has taken a focused interest in their survival.

However, the survival challenges are complex, environmental, political, and economic. The people possess significant natural resources, spectacular animals, and the world's finest cashmere fiber and are endowed with determination and ingenuity. They rejected Soviet collectivism and were curious about how to

participate in the world of international trade, or they would not be so open and receptive to the overtures of USAID. From what I learned about the country before arriving, the foundation of experiences and values will be compatible with ideas of cooperating in a free market instead of a demand economy.

This is the story of the struggle to survive in one of the harshest physical environments in the world. How an entire country shares the "commons" to their mutual benefit is a model for the world.

This book emerged from my field notes, and subsequent interviews with Mongolian friends and colleagues committed to the autonomy and development of their country. As I traveled the Gobi Desert with my Mongolian colleagues, I kept daily notes because I knew something unique and irreplaceable was happening. This transition from Soviet collectivism to independent cooperation in the whole country was an experiment not easily duplicated in world history. The country communally owns all the land. No private property, fences, or "No Trespassing" signs exist.

In the early spring, the herders get together and demarcate the general areas where each family will circulate with their animals, looking for grass but moving so as not to overgraze or run into each other.

The facilitator of this venture and the organization I worked for is Mercy Corps International, a major nonprofit provider of services to USAID. The title 'Gobi Initiative' is the trade name for our specific project. We were funded by a $24 million five-year grant from USAID. Mercy Corps applied for the grant competitively

against several other service and academic organizations. I was initially a team member organized by Professor Judith Gillespie, a friend and colleague from graduate school at the University of Minnesota and then at the State University of New York, Albany. I am indebted to her original invitation and my introduction to Mongolia.

Our proposal was a serious contender for the grant and was one of three finalists. In preparing the application, our group was awarded $15,000 to travel to Mongolia, meet people, visit various development organizations, and travel in the countryside, talking with herder families who might eventually be interested in participating in our program if we were successful. Our team was putting our application together in Mongolia for about a month. The USAID staff said that they always reserve the right to keep people interested in international development in mind. They may contact individual team members to join a successful applicant later if an individual has a skill that the contracting team needs. That is what happened in my case.

After returning from Mongolia and preparing the final application, I was contacted by the group that was ultimately successful: Mercy Corps and the Gobi Initiative. They asked if I was still interested in working in Mongolia and, if so, if I would interview for an opening they had on their staff. The work would be in agricultural development, specifically in the formation of marketing and production cooperatives, which is an area in which I have professional expertise. I was thrilled, having long since abandoned the initial excitement of going to such a remote

and unfamiliar setting. I accepted, interviewed, and left for the Mercy Corps headquarters in Portland and then to the capital of Mongolia, Ulaanbaatar, one month later. (I will frequently use the abbreviation "UB" for Ulaanbaatar because that is what most Mongolians use in conversation). I put all my personal belongings in storage, closed up the housing development and property management contracts I had in Minneapolis, packed one huge duffle bag, and sold some stuff.

The most challenging part of leaving, however exciting, was telling a beautiful lady with whom I had just fallen in love that I cherished our new and blooming relationship but that I was going to Mongolia, maybe for as long as five years! She had two teenage sons, a house, a dog, and a teaching career, so she was not likely to join me. I assured her she could visit. Somehow, it did not grab her like it did me. But don't fear. It is not forsaken. She will reappear at the end of the story and periodically in the middle. She was more than supportive and turned out to be an amazing correspondent on the new medium of email that I was soon to master. Our fledgling relationship somehow flourished through electronic communications. She is now my wife.

I arrived in UB in the fall of 1999, nine short years into independence, and the country was struggling with a bitterly cold winter, followed by summer drought and burning hot temperatures. In the Gobi Desert, this weather cycle called a dzud in Mongolian, produces very little grass. To the herders, it means the death of millions of animals.

Figure 4 On brutally cold winter nights, a young herder brings newborns into the family ger at night to keep them warm.

The organization I joined, the 'Gobi Initiative', worked with nomadic cashmere goat and camel herders in the Gobi Desert. I more than fell in love with the solemnity and dignity of the people, the integral connection among humans, animals, the land, and nature in surviving one of the harshest environments on earth, and the rare privilege of living within one of the oldest and once most powerful civilizations in human history.

The story of the indomitable Mongol is not well known in other parts of the world. This is because their resources are in the crosshairs of resource-hungry countries on their immediate northern (Siberian Russia) and southern (China) borders and are already being exploited, either directly by mining companies or indirectly by investment from every other developed country.

The Mongolia Society at Indiana University published a factual account of my work[1], but that article did not capture the emotive connection to the people. I continued to stay in touch with my friends and contacts in Mongolia. In the winter of 2009, news accounts described the disappearance of hundreds of streams and lakes in southern Mongolia and the devastation of pastoral life caused by overgrazing. Louisa Lim of National Public Radio[2] recently presented a week-long account of life in Mongolia in which she described how some herders in Ömnögovi' aimag in the southeast Gobi Desert are being forced to give up herding because of competition for grazing land from the mining interests. Some of these herders have tried gold mining independently but have been run off by mining company security guards. The mining process also uses significant amounts of water, causing the depletion of the already scarce streams and lakes critical to herding. In the December 8, 2009 Business of Green section of *The New York Times*, Sarah J. Wachter[3] describes the "unraveling of pastoralism", in which overgrazing contributes to the destruction of the fragile grazing land in the Gobi. This phenomenon started with the *dzud* in 1999 and continues today. We may watch the end of a culture as independent nomadic families move with their animals, sharing less and less productive land with other herders in a random pattern of searching and pasturing. No other place on earth organizes animal husbandry this way.

As I write these notes and reflections more formally, I know this book's timing is appropriate. When I recently heard about President Putin staging a "friendly visit" to Mongolia, I could sense the wolf at the door. My attention spikes, and friends say I need

to write about the place because it is a mystery to most people. We need to pay attention. Just ask the Ukrainians.

It was time, I decided, to contact my former colleague Alta.

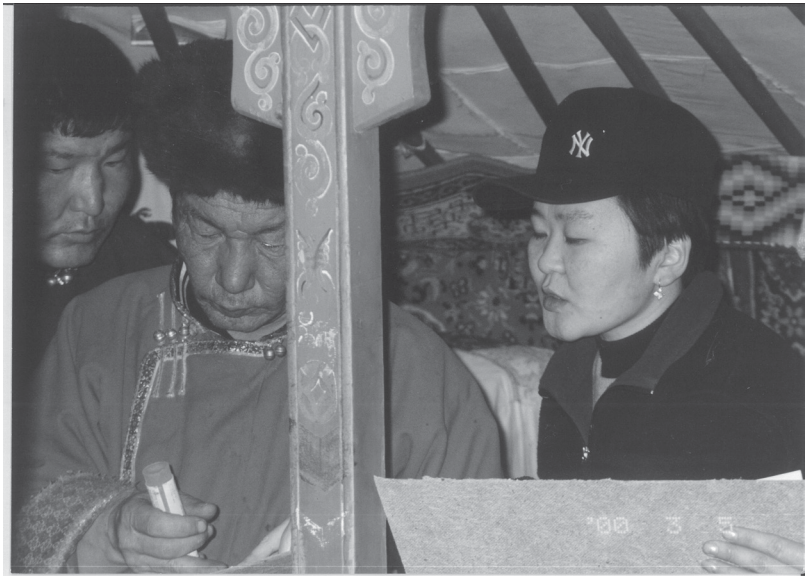

Figure 5 Batzorig (first son), Chuulunbaatar, and Alta checking herd inventory.

I called Mrs. B. Altantsetseg (Alta), my co-program Director for Agriculture at the Gobi Initiative, to ask about her assessment of the dzud and recent accounts I had heard of the devastation of European and Canadian mining operations in the Gobi.

She answered her cell phone while in the hospital, pregnant and with high blood pressure.

"Alta, I didn't know you were in the hospital. I don't have to talk to you now. Why did you answer the phone?"

"Why not? I can talk," she said. "Just because I am in the hospital with high blood pressure and about to give birth any minute doesn't mean I can't talk."

She was working for the Millennium Challenge Fund, a multi-million-dollar development account set up by the government of Mongolia and funded by the United States. "The mining is good for jobs and investment but could harm the herders. They take grassland and water," she said. "Herders are doing many different types of businesses besides herding. The nomadic way of life will change," she said, "first because it should, but also because it is being pushed out. Some things must go ahead."

"Are we looking at the end of nomadism in Mongolia?" I asked Alta.

"The grass is disappearing—too many animals. The only way to control it is for cooperatives of herders to lease large sections of land and limit their membership. Then they will prosper," she said. "The herders have to control the land themselves. Cooperatives can decide how many herders can use the land. The government can't do that, only the herders. If we lease land to herder coops, they can protect their investment in drilling wells and setting fences," she said. That last word, fences, was a word I never expected to hear from her.

I interpreted her to mean that the nomadic life might be finished but that cashmere goats and herding can survive, only in a different form.

On October 6, 2009, the Prime Minister of Mongolia signed a development agreement with Ivanhoe Mines Mongolia, Inc. for extensive mining rights in the South Gobi. The agreement was made possible when the Mongolian Parliament removed a windfall profits tax on mining operations. As compensation to the people of the country, Dr. S. Oyun, a new member of the Mongolian Parliament and a former geologist for the international mining company Rio Tinto is one of the major investors

in the mining operations, inserted a provision into the development agreement for Mongolia to own 34per cent of Ivanhoe Mines Mongolia, Inc. to protect the people's interests.

The lives of these herders and of the last nomadic civilization on earth are changing rapidly, irrevocably, either in the direction of cooperative growth or toward possible extinction. The people of Mongolia sit on top of great wealth, a wealth they may never see, buried just below the surface of the sand in the Gobi Desert. Their country is in the shape of a walnut wedged between the giant nutcracker of Siberian Russia and North China, with Canadian, English, and Australian mining interests digging like fury before the nut cracks.

The people in this narrative are ready to talk and want to, with one exception. On November 13, 2008, *The New York Times* reported: "U.S. Aid Worker Slain in Pakistan."[4] Stephen Vance was our Chief of Party at the Gobi Initiative and my immediate supervisor. He was assassinated by Islamic terrorists in Peshawar, Pakistan, where he was working for the Foundation for Cooperative Housing International on a USAID contract. He was trying to create economic opportunities through small business development when he was ambushed on his way to work. While still in UB, he had married a Mongolian woman with five children, who now live in the U.S. I am stunned and saddened by his tragic death.

Alta is the Peri-Urban Property Rights Director at the Millennium Challenge Account. She is working on land-lease arrangements with herder cooperatives. This work concluded in 2013. The term "peri-urban" is roughly equivalent to suburban or even exurban,

describing new settlements on the far outskirts of an urban area. In Ulaanbaatar, it means that herders are moving to the outer edges of the city, bringing their families, living quarters called "gers" or the more familiar Russian word "yurts", and some animals. Alta is trying to help them with cooperative arrangements so that several herders can work together to raise animals and take goods to the markets in UB.

An inspiration for this book comes from Dr. S. Oyun (or in some spellings, Oyuun), founder of the Civic Will Party and, more recently, leader of the Democratic Party of Mongolia and a Member of Parliament. She is also a supporter of the Women's Information and Research Center and the Gender Center for Sustainable Development. She is the sister of S. Zorig, who in 1998 was nominated by the Democratic Party as their candidate for Prime Minister. He had campaigned vigorously for independence from Soviet rule and for transparency in government. He opposed the secret deals that were being negotiated with Russian mining interests. A few hours after his nomination in 1998, he was assassinated. Dr. S. Oyun was a geologist in Cambridge, England, working for Rio Tinto, an international mining company based in London, which is now interested in investing in Ivanhoe Mines. She returned to Mongolia to run for her brother's seat in Parliament and is now a successful politician. She advocates for women's interests in all spheres of economic life, including herding and job creation through mining. She understands the conflicts facing the country and is available for an interview.

Finally, endless ideas and mental energy come from an old acquaintance from when I worked at the Gobi Initiative, a

wonderfully committed person named Maidar. He and Alta, among many others I interviewed, represent the thoughtful future. Maidar is not very interested in the potential riches of mining operations. The future lies in the creation of Mongolian businesses that collaborate with herders, business people in UB, and government officials who are willing and able to help build new forms of cooperative enterprises.

It is for the herders I worked with at the Gobi Initiative – Chuulunbaatar, Dembereldorj, and Tömör – Alta and her family, and Maidar; as well as in memory of Stephen Vance that I write this book.

All of the opinions and interpretations in this manuscript are solely those of the author and are not intended to reflect the positions of the Government of Mongolia, the United States Agency for International Development, or the U.S. Department of State. Any inaccuracies are entirely the fault of the author, who, nonetheless, is deeply indebted to the people of Mongolia, the staff of the Gobi Initiative, and all the non-governmental organizations working to promote civil society and a healthy economy in Mongolia, which remains a free, independent and democratic state.

The book is richer by far because of the thoughtful contributions of "Alta, my colleague at the Gobi Initiative, who is the key character in the book; Degi Tserendamba, a key collaborator and research assistant who recently graduated from the University of Minnesota and is now with the Mongolian National Psychological Association in U.B., Tserenchunt Legden and her

daughter Delgerjargal Uvsh; and my constant inspiration, Maidar, all of whom contributed in their own way to this project.

As carefully as possible, I kept track of the people referenced in my notes and tried to ensure correct spelling and affiliations. I apologize for any mistakes. Titles and organizational affiliations have undoubtedly changed since my initial contact. The information I collected through interviews and conversations is accurate to the best of my ability as a participant observer. A list of people cited in the book is in an appendix at the end.

I am indebted to Dr. Brian Baumann at Indiana University for his meticulous historical and linguistic editing; to The Mongolia Society at Indiana University and to Susie Drost, Executive Director, for continued advice and support; and to Marsha Stelzer, Kirsten Neuhaus, and Prof. Judith Gillespie.

For the germination of my notes into a book, I want to give special thanks to the writers' group of Spooner, Wisconsin: Eva Apelqvist, Judith Barisonzi, Joel Friederich, Bob Hasman, Kevin McMullin, and Denise Meister, all of whom provided encouragement and criticism of the best kind. I also extend my gratitude to colleagues and students at Wisconsin Indianhead Technical College, Rice Lake, and the College of Educational and Professional Studies, Department of Teacher Education, University of Wisconsin, River Falls who have provided useful comments and suggestions on the text.

Learning objectives

- Learn the values and operating principles needed for a country that was a satellite of the Soviet Union to emerge as a successful, independent, and democratic state;
- Define nomadism and give specific examples of how it is still a functioning system of agricultural and economic life in Mongolia;
- Use a center-periphery graphic model, to gain an understanding of how products and goods flow through the country and where the markets are located;
- Understand how the country can function when private farmers, businesses, or local units of government neither own nor control any land;
- Define and document three major obstacles to the integration of Mongolia into the modern world.

1
Where the cashmere trail begins: Search the Gobi Desert for the herder Chuulunbaatar's winter ger settlement and find nomads

Figure 6 Dusk in the Gobi

We are not lost, but we do not know where we are. The horizon and sky become the same curved plane in the Gobi Desert, so that your feet are on the same surface as the blank, white, cloudless sky, where your eyes search for a focal point, finding none. The 1,700 km of paved road dissipates into wider and wider ruts, then into meandering camel tracks and gullies crisscrossing old tire tracks from previous caravans.

An old trail can be a quarter of a mile wide and branch into two or three directions, seeming to search for a destination. In the Gobi Desert, families, their animals, and their domiciles, called gers (or the more familiar 'yurts' in Russian), are in constant motion.

The Gobi is just a word for dozens of plateaus and valleys in southern Mongolia between the Altai Mountains to the north and the Tibetan Plateau to the south, stretching eastward to the North China Plain. It can be brutally hot or penetratingly cold. Traveling today in the winter, the average low is 40°F below zero, while the average summer high is 113°F. In winter the way the wind feels on your skin is -60°F.

At the top of a mountain pass, our driver pulls the Land Rover to the side of the road and stops. He hops out and hurries over the ridge and out of sight to relieve himself.

Alta gets out of the Land Rover, stretches, and looks into the distance without focusing on anything.

It is how Mongolians look at the horizon and beyond , off the world's end. Alta is my Mongolian counterpart at the Gobi Initiative. We are co-Program Directors for Agriculture, a program run by Mercy Corps International, focusing on civil society and agricultural development in Mongolia. A third member of