

Dzud and Thresholds of 'Property' in Mongolian Pastoralism

Daniel J Murphy¹

¹Department of Anthropology, University of Cincinnati
<murphdl@ucmail.uc.edu>

ABSTRACT

Property and its allocation are key elements of resilience within socio-ecological systems. This presentation compares ethnographic and survey data on shifting ideas of property from 2008 to similar data gathered in 2014 in a district of southern Khentii *aimag*. The data illustrate how these attitudes emerged, their underlying logics, and how they articulate with broader historical and political economic conditions. The findings raise concern that *dzud* events could serve as a possible trigger for formal legal transformations in land rights given the increased political rhetoric and calls for land privatization following *dzud* events. This paper argues that crossing such property thresholds would pose considerable problems for both rangelands and livelihoods and suggests some future avenues for strengthening pastoral systems.

Keywords: Property, mobility, politics, disaster, resilience

INTRODUCTION

Property and its allocation are key elements of resilience within socio-ecological systems (Folke, 2006). However, informal property arrangements often reflect not only highly adapted, habitual norms but also situational and context-specific logics that are dynamic responses to ecological conditions and, as such, they are mutable. This paper compares ethnographic and survey data on shifting ideas of property from 2008 to data gathered in 2014 in a district of southern Khentii *aimag*. The data reveal that ideas about property, particularly natural resources such as pasture and land, have undergone considerable and seemingly contradictory change.

In particular, attitudes concerning the allocation and recognition of more private recognition of claims to resources such as campsites and pasture have abruptly transformed from an unexpected embrace of privatization by many herders in 2008 to a near absence of such attitudes in 2014. These data, however, do not seem to reflect a trend away from private conceptions of rights to land but rather reflect a situational logic attuned to the specific context in which such data were collected. Positive attitudes toward private claims were witnessed in the immediate aftermath of a *dzud* event in 2008 while in 2014 the rejection of such private claims followed several 'good' years with minimal use of *otor* migrations.

These findings are somewhat ironic given that bad years are seen by scholars as justification for highly mobile resource use strategies and common property systems whereas more stable conditions would seem to support increased calls for recognition of private claims. Moreover, these findings also raise concerns that *dzud* events could serve

as a possible trigger for formal legal transformations in land rights given the increased political rhetoric and calls for land privatization following *dzud* events. This paper argues that crossing such property thresholds would pose considerable problems for both rangelands and livelihoods and suggests some future avenues for strengthening pastoral systems.

STUDY SITE AND METHODS

The data discussed in this paper were collected in Uguumur, a rural district in Bayankhutag *soum* just south of Undurkhaan (now Chingis) in southeast Khentii *aimag*. The data were gathered primarily over the course of two research periods: 15 months during the period of 2007-2008 and 6 weeks during the summer of 2014. However, ethnographic research by the author has been conducted in this district with the same households for a total of 30 months since 2003. Methods conducted in 2007-8 included a household survey of 68 herding households with in-depth follow-up interviews with 34 of them. Household survey questionnaires gathered data on livestock and other assets, household production and consumption, mobility practices and property distinctions, labor practices, and genealogical data. Interviews focused primarily on resource use decision-making, property practices, and local administration. In 2014, I returned to the district and re-surveyed 24 from the original 34 households and conducted in-depth follow-up interviews along with the original household questionnaire. Additional interviews were also conducted with various administrators, governors, and other officials in both research periods.

RESULTS

Household mobility in the context of hazardous events such as drought and *dzud* is a key risk management strategy that has severe implications for the continuation of a pastoral lifeway on the Mongolian steppe (Murphy, 2014a). In Uguumur, as livestock herding is the primary productive activity that households undertake the number, timing, distance, and location of migrations is critical and depends on variety factors including access to campsites. Campsites are primary resources that allow households to maintain access to other resources such as pasture, water, salt/soda deposits, and other essentials for a households' herds. Outside of the good-year annual round of seasonal campsites, households practice *otor* for autumn fattening and to avoid deleterious conditions that threaten the viability of their herds (Murphy, 2011). The ability to make such moves is underwritten and made possible by an institutional foundation including both formal and informal sources of entitlement. Entanglements of local custom, moral economies of use, right and recognition, administrative bodies, legal architectures, and various manifestations of non-governmental policy and practice formulate the institutional landscape that make mobility possible or not (see also Murphy, 2014b). However, wide variations in mobile practices and livestock mortality during 2008 *dzud* demonstrated the institutional inconsistencies, gaps, constraints, and barriers that limited mobility as an option and revealed a deep institutional uncertainty that continues to plague Mongolia's commons.

Property Practices, 2008

In this institutional fog, data gathered in 2008 demonstrate that new conceptualizations about property, access, and rights to resource and the practices surrounding them have come to the fore (see Table 1). Many of these rights, whether ownership, possession, or use rights, are rooted in various articulations of 'mastery' – a Mongolia formulation of the relationship between persons in relation to things. Mastery implies both a right of possession and a custodial responsibility (Sneath, 2001) and as such expresses elements of inalienability. However, mastery cannot be exchanged as it is rooted in

individual persons and reflective of their capacity. Nevertheless, mastery can be inherited through descent, kin, and ethnic affiliation (depending on scale), attained through practical experience and engagement with a resource and its spiritual counterparts, or bestowed on a person through spiritual or political favor. Mastery must also be evidenced and justified in recognizable ways. In some ways, current possession leases map onto these practices but in other ways by codifying 'right' through legal bodies such leases displace the social determinants of mastery resulting in a kind of dispossession (see Murphy, 2014 for elaboration).

Understanding mastery is key to understanding the range of practices observed and witnessed in 2008 including gifting for use of campsites, donations, rents, exchange of bribes, and ultimate sales (see Table 2 for a compilation of data from questionnaires and interviews). This spectrum of exchange implies a range of distinct understandings about rights to things and those that are exchangeable (for similar transformations in albor see Murphy, 2015). Gifts for instance balance reciprocal relations. Donations are made to appear as 'freely given'. Rents exchange use rights but of rights of possession or ownership. Bribes include elements of all three and sales, in contrast to the others, positions rights to campsites as alienable – a key element to privatization. Given that such practices and ideas are novel or, in some sense, re-emerging in Mongolia, such observations, and participant responses, give the impression that ideas about rights to land are increasingly becoming more individuated (See Murphy, 2011 for a description of bribery and corruption surrounding winter otor contracting in 2007).

Table 1. Diversity of rights, claims, and justifications compiled in 2008. The distinctions described here are necessary simplifications.

Right (<i>erx</i>)	Key Resources	Claims	Justification
Ownership (<i>umchlux</i>)	<i>Ger</i> , corrale (<i>xashaa</i> , <i>saravch</i> , etc)	Individual right	Possession, Documentation
Possession (<i>ezemshix</i>)	Campsites, livestock, wells, hayfield	Descent and kin ties, legal recognition	<i>Buuts</i> , collective memory, documentation, <i>tamga</i> (markings/tags)
Use (<i>ashiglax</i>)	Campsites, pasture, public wells, soda	Ethnic, Chinggis Khan, moral economy of steppe	Mongol identity, documentation, collective memory, moral right, citizenship

Table 2. Various forms of exchange for rights to campsites and other key resources during 2008.

Exchange term	Mongolian term	
Gift	<i>beleg</i>	Reciprocity. Considered <i>talaxalt</i> or thankfulness
Donation	<i>xandiv</i>	
Rent (or wage)	<i>turees</i> or <i>xuls</i>	Exchange with <i>ezen</i> for temporary use right
Bribe	<i>xaxuuli</i>	Exchange with official for temporary use right
Sale	<i>xudaldaq</i>	Alienable exchange of ownership or possession rights (and use rights)

Interviews with local administrators and governors and case studies of dispute confirm this. Case studies reveal that notions of mastery which stress individual right are privileged as a means to settle dispute. Moreover, the possession leasing program further codifies and cements these ideas in practice so that flexible access to campsites

and pasture is mediated through the institution of leasing rather than through the social relations that produce customary notions of mastery. In short, in 2008 it appeared that practices and ideas surrounding rights to resources, though still highly uncertain and debated, was becoming increasingly neoliberalized such that rights are inherent not to the social relations that form them but in the individual self.

It shouldn't be surprising then that in this context of neoliberalization and disaster, I also found considerably more support for various kinds of privatization than I imagined prior to arriving at the field (see Figure 1). Given that 31 percent of sample households favored campsite privatization and 28% percent favored pasture privtization, it seemed evident that notions of rights were clearly moving towards individual, private conceptions 'mastery' as alienable. Such a move towards privatization would render a tectonic shift in pasture management, resetting the very basis of pastoral livestock production in Mongolian. It is also interesting because hazardous conditions like those presented by *dzud* are typically those cited by scholars of pastoralism and in common property sysmtes more broadly, as being fundamental to the rationale for maintain flexible property regimes.

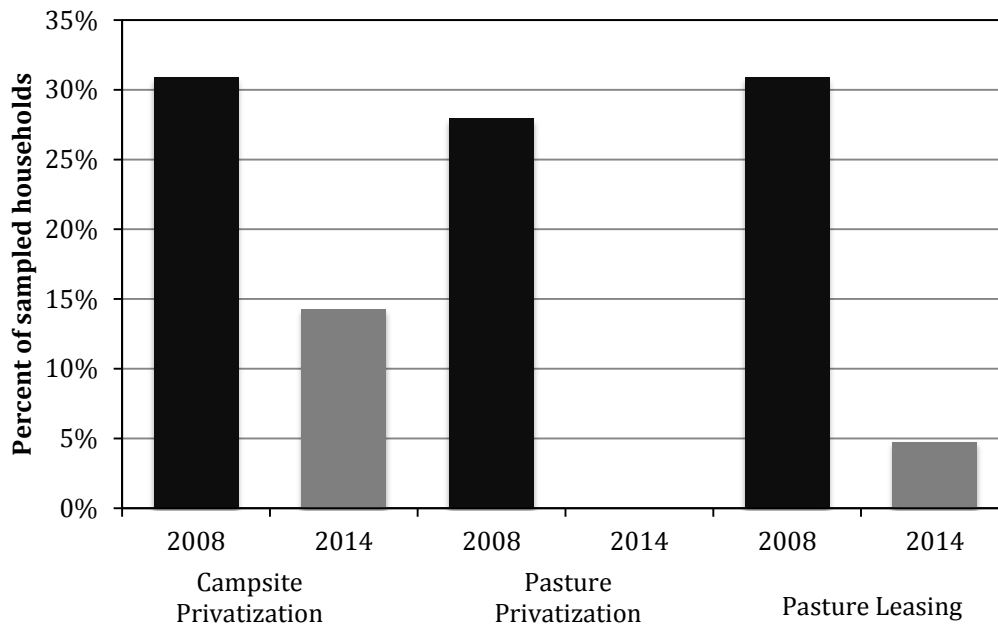


Figure 1. Comparison of 2008 and 2014 household sample in support of privatization and leasing

Property Practices, 2014

Upon return to Uguumur I found that in 2014, such interest in privatization has largely abated. Only 14 percent of the sample responded that campsites should be privatized and no responses reflected a desire to privatize pasture (a 17% and 28% drop respectively). In fact, there was also a significant drop in the number of responses preferring expansion of the possession lease system to pastures (26% drop). Beyond these shifts, the diverse array of other conceptualizations of right and claim seem to remain in tact. Herders still talk of campsites sales and bribery but much less so than in 2008 and arguments and disputes over pasture continue. Overall I found that though district households seem split on the value of campsite possession leases, responses predominantly support the idea that key resources should be left in the hands of the state as *turiin umch*. And though there still appears to be tension between a notion of relative

open access and more entrenched forms of exclusive ‘mastery’ over campsites, I continue to hear the same refrain regarding the possibility of pasture privatization, “*dain bolnoo*” or “there will be war”.

This simultaneous retreat from privatization and entrenchment of forms of mastery open to exchange present an interesting contrast to 2008 because the years since the *dzud* have been comparatively hazard free with sufficient pasture growth and a lack of drought or *dzud* conditions in Uguumur and Bayankhtuag. This preference for flexibility is ironic given that private notions of property are typically linked to such stable conditions.

DISCUSSION

In 2008, it appeared that the logic of the commons in Uguumur and in Khentii more broadly was under threat. Yet, by 2014, the commons as a key element in mitigation and management of risk seemed to re-assert itself. The corresponding dramatic drop in support of privatization (and its allies), albeit with the continuation of the variety of increasingly more individualized notions of rights to things more broadly, raises a number of key questions. Why has support for privatization dwindled and how does this affect the interpretation of events in 2008?

The relatively easy answer for these questions is that possession leasing, which was relatively new in 2008 (started in 2006), has reduced institutional uncertainty by supporting a particular subset of notions concerning rights to campsites, particularly those that support more individuated notions of mastery. However, there is still considerable debate about leasing (see quote above) and legitimacy of various property practices. Moreover, case studies of disputes and exchanges demonstrate that herders in Uguumur still find current institutional arrangements to be lacking and reflect continuing precariousness and uncertainty.

Though the impact of leasing is not negligible, other dynamics I propose are also afoot. In particular, I argue that these findings are understandable if we consider them within what Little (2012) calls the “emotional ecologies of risk mitigation”. In the context of Uguumur in 2008, such institutional uncertainty in the face of hazards shortens temporal horizons for perceiving risks, planning for responses, and ultimately making and executing necessary decisions. Consequently, the institutional uncertainty produced by histories of decentralization, the atomization of household risk management, and amplified by disaster, becomes materially forceful and plays on the anxieties and fears manifest in pastoral survival. As such, in 2008, herders were simply willing to consider other pathways, as drastic as privatization, given what they were in the midst of confronting. By 2014, though, the experience of *dzud* had begun to fade from memory and more deeply entrenched logics eclipse the ‘thinkability’ of such as drastic measures.

IMPLICATIONS

This interpretation is important for a number of reasons. Most studies of pastoral mobility are synchronic in nature and rely on what anthropologists call the “ethnographic moment”. This is highly problematic for the study of pastoral social-ecological systems because the temporal logics of common property systems, much like their spatial logics, operate at the macro-scale but the actors and social relations that make up such systems are practiced at the micro-scale. As such, property must be understood to reflect critical but mutable situational logics as well as shifts in political constellations of institutions and actors. Moreover, understanding that the emotional ecologies of risk mitigation, shaped by the exposures and sensitivities created by the atomization of risk, the unequal distribution of wealth, and institutional uncertainty, play a role in property politics has significant implications for the future resilience of pastoral socio-ecologies. If disaster amplifies institutional anxiety to such a degree as it did in Uguumur in 2008, then the potential for such future events poses the possibility that pastoralism in Uguumur might cross a critical threshold. In this sense, *dzud* has the potential to trigger political

transformations of property towards a revolutionary form of “shock therapy” in land management not seen since the early 1990s.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Financial support for the research period of 2007-2008 was provided by the National Science Foundation (Dissertation Improvement Grant 0719863), Wenner Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, Institute for International Education Fulbright Program, Lambda Alpha National Honor Society and the University of Kentucky. Research support for 2014 was provided by the Charles Phelps Taft Researcher Center at the University of Cincinnati.

REFERENCES

- Folke C. (2006). Resilience: The Emergence of a Perspective for Social-Ecological Systems Analyses. *Global Environmental Change*, 16(3), 253-267.
- Little PC. (2012). Another Angle on Pollution Experience: Toward an Anthropology of the Emotional Ecology of Risk. *Ethos*, 40(4), 431-452.
- Murphy D. (2011). *Going on Otor: 'Natural' Disaster, Mobility and the Political Ecology of Vulnerability in Uguumur, Mongolia*. Doctoral Dissertation, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY.
- Murphy D. (2014a). Booms and Busts: Asset Dynamics, 'Natural' Disaster, and the Politics of Excess in Rural Mongolia. *Economic Anthropology*, 1(1), 104-123.
- Murphy D. (2014b). Ecology of Rule: Governance, Territorial Authority, and the Environment in Rural Mongolia. *Anthropological Quarterly*, 87(3), 759-792.
- Murphy D. (2015). From Kin to Contract: Labor, Work, and the Production of Authority in Mongolia. *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 42(2), 397-424.
- Sneath D. (2001). Notions of rights over land and the history of Mongolian pastoralism. *Inner Asia*, 3(1), 41-59.