

MANAGEMENT AND EVALUATION OF LIVESTOCK UNDER SOCIALIST COLLECTIVIZATION IN MONGOLIA

KAZATO Mari

Graduate School of Asian and African Area Studies, Kyoto University, Kyoto 606-8501, Japan

E-mail: kazato@jambo.africa.kyoto-u.ac.jp

In socialist Mongolia, animal husbandry was collectivized from the second half of the 1950s until the end of 1990. Under this system, domestic animals were divided into “public animals,” belonging to animal husbandry cooperatives or state farms, and “private animals,” owned by individual herders. Although most animals that herders cared for were public animals that were looked after under contract, herders continued to manage small numbers of their own animals, even under the socialist regime.

The value of domestic animals under collectivization has already been discussed from an economics standpoint. In contrast, this paper focuses on the cultural meanings of animals. While herders regarded animals as commodities, they also had behavioral and cognitive interactions with them. In the process of these interactions, animals developed a significance transcending economic value. By examining differences between the ways herders managed and treated public and private animals, this paper aims to show that domestic animals under the regime of collectivization could be “singularized” [Kopytoff 1986] and attain multiple meanings.

Research was conducted in Deren District, Dundgov’ Prefecture, from June to August 2001. Data revealed that, as part of the management system of public animals, the cooperative changed the combination of herders and animals every year and, consequently, a herder looked after different animals each year. In contrast, herders would closely watch their private animals for a period of several years. This meant that herders had full knowledge of the growth process of each individual animal, as well as the animals’ genealogical relationships. Consequently, herders accumulated a great deal of information concerning each individual’s birth, growth and death and its familial patterns associated with their private animals. In addition, the author was indelibly impressed by the fact that when herders referred to a past animal or animal family, it reminded them of their own past and their family histories.

In general, while public animals were collectively recognized as belonging to several categories, private animals were perceived as individual beings. Furthermore, although public animals were definitely regarded as commodities, private animals were sometimes “singularized.” These differences between public and private animals arose from the duration of animal-human transactions. Herders always lived with their private animals; the animals therefore became part of their lives. Thus, private animals assumed multiple meanings, which included being seen as domestic consumption goods, as gifts, as symbols to evoke past memories, and as commodities.

Keywords: Collectivization, Commodity, Domestic animal, Individual recognition, Mongolia

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