

## Fulfilling Quotas through “Theft”: Livestock as a Manipulable Resource in Late Socialist Mongolia

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### Abstract

This paper examines livestock theft in socialist Mongolia (1924–1992), particularly during the late socialist period from the 1960s to the 1980s. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Kharkhorin soum, Övörkhangaï Province, between 2016 and 2024, including participant observation and interviews with elderly pastoralists, the study explores how herders experienced collectivization, state quotas, and informal livestock exchange. Historical materials, literary works, and socialist-era publications are also analyzed. The paper proposes the concept of “positive dispossession,” distinct from Marshall Sahlins’ (1972) notion of negative reciprocity. While livestock theft generally implies criminal appropriation, Mongolian pastoral society also contained forms of mutually understood livestock taking embedded within reciprocal social relations. Such practices can be traced to the late Qing period through narratives of the “shiliin sain er” (good men of the plains), figures remembered for redistributing livestock from wealthy elites to poorer herders. Under socialism, herders belonging to collectives (negdel) were required to fulfill state production quotas despite ecological crises such as drought (gan) and severe winter disasters (zud). In response, pastoralists concealed livestock from state inspection and registration and relied on informal networks, including sain er, to obtain livestock necessary for survival and quota fulfillment. The paper argues that stolen livestock functioned as manipulable resources within informal systems of reciprocity and mutual adjustment.

**Keywords:** People’s Republic of Mongolia, socialism, livestock exchange, positive dispossession, livestock thievery and reciprocity, pastoral society, Sain er.

### Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to clarify the actual nature of “livestock thievery” in Mongolia during the socialist period (1924–1992) by applying my own concept of positive dispossession, which differs significantly from Marshall Sahlins’s concept of negative reciprocity (Sahlins 1972). I argue that, in order to meet normative expectations, pastoralists belonging to the negdel the socialist pastoral cooperatives often compensated for shortages by “stealing” livestock with the tacit consent of their so-called “victims.” I conceptualize this practice as positive dispossession.

Here, I would like to examine the role of “sain er” (good men), livestock thieves active during Mongolia’s socialist era who stole and redistributed livestock within pastoral society.

The distinction between socially tolerated appropriation and illegitimate theft was constituted not simply through the act of taking itself, but through the social relations and spatial proximity within which livestock circulated. When livestock moved within networks of mutual recognition among neighboring herders, such acts could function as mechanisms of reciprocal adjustment, including practices intended to conceal livestock from state inspection and registration. In these contexts, the temporary appropriation of animals enabled herders to negotiate state-imposed quotas and economic insecurity, thereby functioning less as criminal theft than as an informal mode of redistribution. By contrast, livestock taken from distant *negdels* or socially unfamiliar regions fell outside such reciprocal frameworks and were therefore recognized as genuinely stolen property, particularly because such losses could produce quota shortfalls and financial sanctions for the affected collectives. As is well known, Mongolia is a pastoral country with a population of approximately 3.35 million people (2020) and 67 million head of livestock (2020) (NSOM 2021). The site of my fieldwork is Kharkhorin Soum in Övörkhangaï Province, Mongolia. In this section, I discuss the findings from interviews conducted in the area, together with relevant literature.

The author has conducted intermittent fieldwork on livestock exchange in Kharkhorin Soum, Övörkhangaï Province his home region between 2016 and 2018 during his master's program, and again between 2021 and 2026 during his doctoral program. Livestock are a means of production for pastoralists, just as land is for farmers. Because of this dual nature of livestock as both a means of production and a product, the number of livestock is considered by nomads to be a clear indicator of wealth and poverty (Koki 1985: 121). In other words, the more livestock an individual owns, the richer he or she is considered to be by the nomads. Thus, the nomad's goal is to increase their "living property/means of production" in the form of livestock. On the other hand, because this property/means of production is alive, various problems arise. For example, the livestock may be attacked by wild wolves while grazing. Separately, it is not uncommon for animals to be lost in the mix with other households' livestock herds during day grazing. In addition, depending on the season, a huge number of livestock can die as a result of seasonal *gan* (drought) or *zud* (cold) strikes. In addition to changes in livestock caused by natural conditions, livestock numbers may also increase or decrease as a result of human activities. One example is livestock theft among nomadic pastoralists. As the term suggests, "livestock thieves" are generally understood as people who steal livestock belonging to others and appropriate them as their own. However, in Mongolian pastoral society there have also been particular situations in which livestock circulated through forms of mutually understood or tacitly accepted appropriation among herders (Baljinnyam 2018: 2–13). Importantly, this did not characterize all forms of livestock theft. Rather, such practices emerged only under specific social conditions, especially within

networks of reciprocal relations among pastoralists. In many other cases, livestock theft was clearly regarded as criminal and illegitimate.

In other words, among acquaintances or neighboring herders, when pastoralist A took livestock from pastoralist B, the act could sometimes be understood not as "theft" but as *avakh* ("to take"). In such situations, the person whose livestock had been taken recognized that he himself might later take livestock in return when facing hardship. These practices were embedded within reciprocal social relations among pastoralists and did not necessarily imply permanent dispossession.

Nevertheless, socially recognized "righteous bandits" became particularly visible during the final years of the Qing dynasty, when economic disparities between aristocrats and ordinary pastoralists intensified and many herders fell into debt relationships with Han Chinese merchants. It was in this historical context that the *shiliin sain er* ("good men of the plains") emerged as figures remembered for taking livestock from nobles and wealthy households and redistributing animals to poorer pastoralists (Oidov 2013: 1–15).

In this paper, I examine cases of livestock thieves as "righteous bandits" during the socialist era. Under socialism, these figures were referred to simply as "*sain er*" (good men), without the term "*shiliin*" (of the plains) found in the earlier expression *shiliin sain er* ("good men of the plains"). Why were such figures needed during a socialist period officially characterized by relative social equality and stability? This paper explores the role of the *sain er* in helping pastoralists negotiate the pressures of state-imposed production norms and quotas under collectivized pastoralism.

Although livestock theft involves the taking of another person's property, anthropologists such as Marshall Sahlins (1972), through his concept of "negative reciprocity," have interpreted theft as a form of exchange. Sahlins distinguished negative reciprocity from "pure giving" or "generalized reciprocity," forms of exchange characterized by generous and unilateral giving (Sahlins 1972). In this sense, the practices of livestock thieves may appear to reflect a form of negative reciprocity. However, when the taking is mutually understood or tacitly accepted as highlighted in this paper it cannot simply be regarded as "negative," but rather as a kind of informal exchange relationship. Therefore, this paper proposes the concept of "positive dispossession," in which acts of taking from one another function as a mode of gift exchange.

At the same time, in Mongolia there were also cases in which livestock were taken from distant and unfamiliar regions. Among herders, such acts of taking livestock from remote areas were clearly recognized as theft and understood to be illegal. Thus, while this paper demonstrates that some forms of livestock theft could, under certain circumstances, be mutually tolerated or socially embedded within reciprocal relations, such an interpretation depended heavily on the social relationships between

herders. Not all livestock theft in Mongolia can be understood through the framework of "positive dispossession."

Regarding informal exchange in rural society (kolkhozes) during the socialist era, British social anthropologist Caroline Humphrey (1983) discusses in detail the case of a kolkhoz called "Karl Marx Farm" in the Buryat Republic of Southern Siberia. She called the surplus that was on an obligatory delivery plan (quota) and not recovered for reproduction "manipulable resources." Because of the absence of a "market" in socialist societies, the system of exchange for these surplus goods was expressed in terms of quantities of commodities, not money. These surplus goods were goods that could be used as instruments of political bargaining. Humphrey argues that these "manipulable resources" were the source of informal social relations under the socialist system (Humphrey 1983).

It is likely that it was the cadres of the kolkhozes who manipulated the manipulable resources that Humphrey discussed. The possibility that such transactions existed in pastoral cooperatives (negdels), the Mongolian equivalent of kolkhozes, and in state farms (sangiin aj akhui), the Mongolian equivalent of kolkhozes, is undeniable. On the other hand, what was done when the ordinary pastoralists who were not cadres and who made up the negdel were unable to meet their norms? The answer to this question may have been the existence of the bandits known as "sain er".

In this paper, I would like to clarify the reality of livestock thievery as a mutual exchange of livestock among pastoralists based on information obtained through interviews in Kharkhorin Soum, Övörkhangaï Province, Mongolia, using "reciprocity" as a key word. It should be noted that the livestock thieves interviewed by the author during the "socialist period" were mainly from the 1970s and 1980s, i.e., the latter part of Mongolia's socialist period (1924-1992). Section 1 provides an overview of the study site. Section 2 briefly reviews the history of pastoral production organizations during the socialist period. Section 3 examines the practice of concealing livestock from state inspection and registration under socialism. Section 4 analyzes representations of the *sain er* during the socialist era (1924-1992) and, based on ethnographic field data, examines the actual activities and social role of these livestock thieves. Finally, the conclusion discusses the implications of these practices for understanding reciprocity, informal exchange, and pastoral survival under socialism.

## **Methodology**

In this study, I conducted a total of six periods of field research in Kharkhorin district, located in central Mongolia and also my hometown. Fieldwork was carried out intermittently between 2015 and 2017 during my master's program, amounting to 165 days of participant observation and semi-structured interviews. During my doctoral research, I conducted an additional seven months (212 days) of fieldwork between 2022 and 2024. In total, I interviewed more than one hundred individuals.

The research combined participant observation, oral history collection, and archival analysis. Participant observation was conducted through extended stays in herding households, participation in everyday pastoral activities, and attendance at local social gatherings and administrative meetings. Interviews were carried out primarily in Mongolian and consisted of semi-structured and life-history interviews focusing on experiences of socialism, livestock management, collective labor, hidden livestock practices, and livestock theft. Interviewees included current and former herders, former negdel members, retired negdel administrators, state farm employees, local officials, and elderly residents who had direct experience of the socialist period. I selected these individuals through snowball sampling and long-term community relationships in order to obtain diverse perspectives on pastoral practices, socialist administration, and informal economic adjustments. In addition to ethnographic fieldwork, I consulted archival and documentary materials related to socialist livestock management and rural administration. These included Mongolian-language legal documents such as the 1960 Constitution of the Mongolian People's Republic, proceedings of the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party congresses, local administrative records, audit reports concerning livestock management and embezzlement (*shamshigduulakh*), and published historical materials on negdel organization and socialist pastoral production.

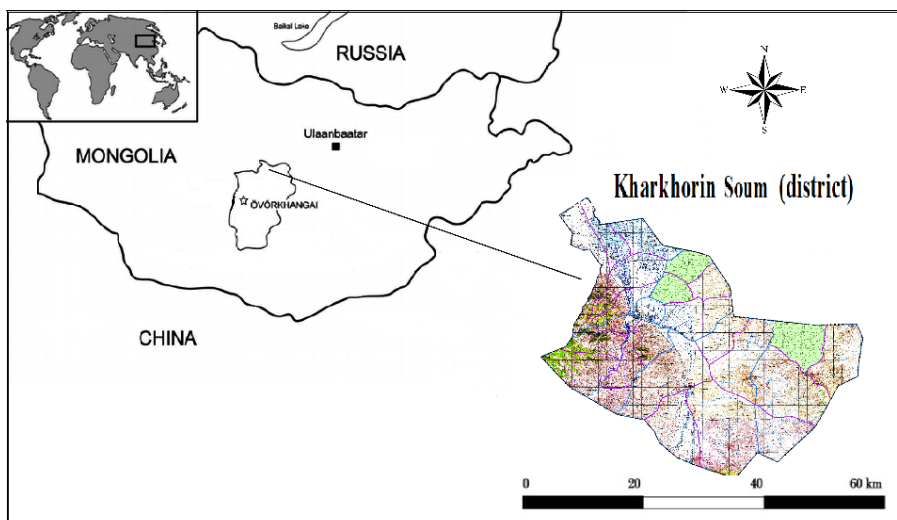


Figure 1. Location of Övörkhangai Province and Kharkhorin Soum in Mongolia. Map created by the author.

Kharkhorin Soum in Uvurkhangai Province, the subject of this paper, was the site of Karakorum, the capital city built by the Ögöde Khan, the second Khan of the Mongol Empire. Karakorum (Kharkhorin in modern Mongolian) means "black sand and gravel." Present-day Kharkhorin Soum,

of Övörkhangai Province is located in the center of Mongolia, approximately 365 kilometers from the capital Ulaanbaatar. The county is located on the eastern edge of the Khangai Mountains in Mongolia, with the Orkhon River flowing north of the county center. The county center has a hospital, a government office, a bank, and three twelve-year elementary, middle, and high schools. There are also many stores in the Kharkhorin market. People living in the county center work and live in public facilities such as the city hall, hospital, and schools. People living in the county center may also own livestock. They "consign" their livestock to herders who are related to them and manage them. In addition, county center residents are entitled by law to land rights of up to 0.07 hectares for personal use, where they build fixed houses and grow food for their families (cabbage, potatoes, carrots, etc.). Some still grow grains and other crops, as on state farms during the socialist era. Compared to other counties in Mongolia, the soum has a relatively large population. The district courts that have jurisdiction over several counties in the region are also located in Kharkhorin Soum. The predecessor of Kharkhorin Soum was the Kharkhorin Soum State Farm (Sangin Aji Ahui), which was established during the socialist era by Government Decision No. 256 on April 13, 1956 (Bügd Nairamdakh Mongol Ard Ulsyn Sain Saidyn Zövlölin Togtool 1956). It was established as a state farm to strategically produce wheat in Mongolia, a pastoral society and the area still contains wheat fields from the socialist era. The area is also unique in that its provincial affiliation shifted from Arkhangai to Övörkhangai in December 1957 (Enkhbat & Ganbat et al. 2013: 11-15).

The state farm in Kharkhorin Soum covered an area of 233,000 hectares, including 30,000 hectares of farmland, 194,000 hectares of pastureland, and 9,000 hectares of forests and rivers. In 1956, the population was approximately 8,000, of whom around 1,000 lived in the soum center. The farm's primary activity was agriculture, with 28,000 hectares under cultivation, including 18,000 hectares devoted to grain production, mainly wheat. Approximately 11,000 tons of grain were delivered annually to the state (Konagaya and Chuluun 2013: 75-76). Experts worked according to five-year plans, reporting their activities at meetings of Party departments, committees, and soum councils, where their work was regularly evaluated. The farm's production goals were publicly declared and implemented as part of efforts to improve labor organization and socialist work relations (Konagaya and Chuluun 2013: 75-76).

### **Production Organization during the Socialist Period**

In 1911, Mongolia declared its independence from the Qing Dynasty, although China only recognised Mongolia as an autonomous region. In 1924, under Soviet influence, it became the "People's Republic of Mongolia," the world's second socialist country. Mongolian pastoral society then underwent a radical change in 1927. The government confiscated the property and livestock of feudal lords, imposed heavy taxes on temples, and

promoted the collectivization of pastoralists. Historian Morris Rossabi suggests that the collectivization policy initiated in the 1920s failed in the 1930s (Rossabi 2005). The failure of the extreme collectivization policy led to a wave of opposition to Soviet intervention and calls to abolish the far-left policy across Mongolia (Bawden 1968: 301-318). In addition, the number of livestock, the source of Mongolia's wealth, was drastically reduced. In 1941, a national conference of outstanding pastoralists (*Ulsyn sain malchdin zövölgöön*) was held under the leadership of the Mongolian state. At this conference, it was declared that the number of livestock in Mongolia as a whole should be increased. In addition, the taxation of households with private livestock was to be strengthened, and meat, fleeces, and milk were to be compulsorily provided to the state. As a result of these strict taxation policies, the total number of livestock in Mongolia did not increase.

On the contrary, livestock numbers declined sharply from 2,705,000 in 1941 to approximately 2,000,000 in 1945, and this stagnation continued until 1948 (Lonjid 2017: 66-145). This decrease was caused by multiple factors associated with the wartime socialist economy. During World War II, Mongolia supplied large quantities of meat, wool, hides, and livestock to the Soviet Union in support of the war effort, placing heavy pressure on pastoral production (Orkhon 2016: 5-8). At the same time, increased state procurement quotas, intensified collectivization policies, and ecological hardships such as drought and severe winters contributed to substantial livestock mortality and declining herd reproduction rates (Lonjid 2017: 66-145). In 1948, the third National Conference of Outstanding Pastoralists was held again to discuss a plan to increase the number of livestock. As a result, it was decided to implement a five-year long-term plan for socialist construction starting that year. The first five-year plan was to be implemented between 1948 and 1952, the second five-year plan from 1953 until 1957, a three-year plan from 1958 until 1960, and a third five-year plan between 1961 and 1965. This five-year plan was, in fact, in place until late 1980. The plan began with an increase in the number of livestock, and focused on the spread of farms, collectivization, industrial construction, and socio-cultural development (Shirendev et.al. 1969: 534-53).

Mongolian pastoral society has long been based on household-based livestock management. In the late 1950s, livestock production through pastoralism was carried out under the government's collectivization policy when pastoralist cooperatives (*negdel*) and state farms (*sangin aj akhui*) were established under the socialist planned economy. Many livestock and lands that had been occupied by individuals, royalty and aristocracy, and Tibetan Buddhist temples became publicly owned (Tserendorj 1969: 130-146). In other words, the nomads were transformed into "workers" responsible for caring for the *Negdel's* livestock. Despite the name "pastoral cooperatives," pastoral production was in effect conducted under a government-led collectivization policy. According to the policy of the People's Republic of Mongolia at that time, livestock owned by pastoral

cooperatives were broadly classified into "common livestock" (khamtraliin mal) and "privately owned livestock" (aminii mal). In pastoral cooperatives (negdels), livestock was subject to the common ownership of the negdel. (Delgerjargal2023: 72-78)

Private ownership of livestock was limited to pastoralists who were members of the negdel, and the number of livestock varied by region. In the khangai (forest steppe) regions, a household could own up to 50 head of livestock, a third of which were large livestock (cattle, horses, and camels). The increase of private livestock beyond a certain number was restricted by law (Koki 1985: 127-128).

The pastoralists were required to graze their communally owned livestock, subdivided by type, sex, and age, in units of "suuri" (production brigade), and to subsist on a basic labour wage paid for grazing the communally owned herd. In addition, they were paid a reward for the output of sheep's fleeces, hides, dairy products, etc., and received income from the 50 head of privately owned livestock.

During the negdel period (1956), based on the country's overall five-year economic plan, each year, each province, county, and negdel were allocated quotas and targets for livestock production, mainly for the common livestock of each county. These quotas were detailed for milk, meat, and wool production, as well as for livestock growth and loss control rates, and for competition among the various negdels over the percentage of quotas achieved (Sanjdorj 1978: 184-232). For this reason, each negdel imposed strict quotas on each pastoralist. The local people had to work hard to achieve the plans set for the negdels and state farms by the then People's Republic of Mongolia.

This form of livestock ownership remained unchanged from the 1950s until the 1990s. In addition, state-owned farms (sangiin aj akhui) owned "common livestock," although they were still organized as agricultural enterprises. Most livestock were "common livestock" (khamtraliin mal) and belonged to pastoral cooperatives (negdel) and state farms (sangiin aj akhui). In addition, the People's Republic of Mongolia at that time had a system in which the government set plans (norms), encouraged competition, and rewarded "labor heroes" (Konagaya 2013), thereby aligning society's goals with those of the individual.

## **To hide livestock**

With the completion of collectivization from the late 1950s onward, the notion of "socialist ownership" of livestock came to be strongly emphasized among herders. The 1960 Constitution of the Mongolian People's Republic stipulated that "all citizens of the Mongolian People's Republic bear the responsibility to protect socialist property—the foundation of the socialist system—as if it were the pupil of their eye (nudnii tsetsgii met khamgaalakh), and to increase it by all possible means and methods" (Bügd Nairamdakh Mongol Ard Ulsyn Ündsen Khuul 1960/89). In other words,

livestock was in principle regarded as "socialist" property owned by collective organizations such as negdels and state farms, and the fulfillment of legally assigned production quotas aimed at increasing livestock numbers was mandated by the constitution.

However, at the 14th Congress of the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party in 1961, it was declared that all workers should participate in systems of mutual surveillance in order to prevent violations against socialist property such as "theft" (khulgai) and "embezzlement" (shamshigduulakh). Nevertheless, incidents opposing socialist ownership, including theft and embezzlement, did not decline; rather, they increased (Tördalai 2020: 101–107).

In other words, while socialist ownership was legally enforced, various forms of violation continued to occur in practice. What kinds of "violations," then, actually took place? During my fieldwork, I encountered numerous cases in which herders during the socialist period secretly retained surplus livestock by "hiding" them and used them to adjust the fulfillment of production quotas. Here, I would like to clarify the realities of these practices through comparison with oral interview data.

In the first place, the practice of "hiding livestock" appears only rarely in official records and published literature. Only a small number of cases categorized as "embezzlement" (shamshigduulakh) are mentioned in audit reports and records of disciplinary actions by local administrations (Tajeb et al. 1980: 8–25).

However, ethnographic interview materials collected by Yuki Konagaya contain information related to the practice of "hiding livestock." According to these accounts, when surplus livestock emerged during the socialist period, herders often adjusted and managed them among themselves. Rinchingiin Minjuur, who was awarded the title of "Hero of Labor" in Mongolia, explained the situation to Konagaya as follows:

"The privately owned livestock of negdel members increased in number and became quite numerous. Households whose livestock increased would split into separate households and register livestock under those new households. If one household divided into two or three households, it became possible to possess 150 privately owned animals. Livestock would also be registered under the names of sons-in-law and daughters. In addition, livestock was registered under the names of siblings who owned fewer animals, so that by dividing and redistributing the registration, the number of privately owned livestock effectively increased. We did not prohibit this practice or pursue it very strictly. However, when the numbers became excessively large, people began to regard the negdel's livestock as a burden, failed to pay proper attention to them, and the negdel livestock suffered as a result. An increase in privately owned livestock also meant that they consumed large amounts of fodder intended for the negdel's herds, thereby reducing collective resources. Therefore, once livestock numbers increased beyond a certain point, they were collectivized again according to the regulations. Later, in Khangai, households were allowed to increase their holdings from fifty to a total of seventy-five head of livestock. Eventually the limit was raised to one hundred. Any livestock exceeding that number would be

collectivized. Such adjustments were carried out according to regulations adopted at the general assembly. In the Gerelt Zam negdel of Ikh Tamir district, this kind of collectivization was practiced. I personally implemented it to a small extent, though not very extensively. Members of the Ikh Tamir negdel generally adjusted matters among themselves, so the upper limits were rarely exceeded" (Konagaya 2003: 40).

Rinchingiin Minjuur's account suggests that surplus livestock did exist and that, once their numbers became excessive, they were re-collectivized. However, my own field research has revealed more concrete mechanisms through which such adjustments were carried out. Specifically, although surplus animals were officially treated either as privately "possessed" property or subject to re-collectivization, livestock retained by herders themselves were in practice differentiated into "hidden livestock" (darsan mal) and "life livestock" (aminii mal). Through this distinction, highly intricate adjustments were made in order to meet production quotas. The following case studies illustrate these practices.

### **Oral Histories on Livestock Thief**

Mr. D, 62 years old male nomadic herder who lives 25 km south of Kharkhorin soum center in Övörkhangai Province, was born and raised in a herding household in what is now the southwestern part of Kharkhorin district. By the time he became aware of his surroundings, pastoral collectives (negdel) and state farms (sangiin aj akhui) had already been established in Mongolia. At that time (author's note: the late 1960s), his father and mother managed a flock of 500–600 ewes belonging to the Kharkhorin state farm. His parents fulfilled the production quotas for meat. In addition, women in households responsible for managing sheep flocks were also obliged, from summer to autumn, to milk mares belonging to the state farm and produce fermented mare's milk (airag). He explained:

In 1980, I married Ms. Ts, who managed a herd of cattle for the pastoral collective 'Enkhtaiwan Negdel' in neighboring Khujirt district. There, I was responsible for milking the negdel's cows. When we married, my parents divided part of their property and gave us two cows with calves, one mare with a foal, and thirty sheep. In addition, they gave us a saddle decorated with silver ornaments, gold earrings, and two deel (traditional robes). However, at that time, according to state regulations, the privately owned livestock of a single household was limited to fifty head (twelve cattle, five horses, and thirty-three sheep). For this reason, herders tried by various means to 'hide livestock' (mal darakh). They also exchanged livestock for other livestock, or exchanged goods for livestock, and later converted them back into livestock to distribute as property when their children married. At that time, hiding livestock was extremely common. The method worked like this: every year at the end of December, the state conducted inspections to confirm livestock numbers. In preparation for this, herders counted their animals and hid any excess livestock in forests or mountain valleys. In reality, herders lived off these hidden animals. Hidden livestock could also be given to herders who had failed to fulfill their quotas. Among herders, such exchanges were an open secret. These exchanges even included livestock thieves.

After all, there has long been a saying: 'As long as there is livestock, there will also be thieves' (Mal baikhad khulgai baidag yum daa)."<sup>1</sup>

Mr. Go, a 71 years old at the center of Kharkhorin district explains that:

"I am the second son in a family of eight, and I am now seventy-one years old. The socialist period was not so much a good era as it was a harsh one. There were production quotas for various products such as wool, meat, and milk. I heard that conditions were especially severe in my father's time. Our family lived on the fifty head of livestock that the state officially recognized as 'life livestock' (aminii mal). However, if herders possessed more than fifty animals, they would be confiscated by the state, so herders used various methods to hide livestock. It was necessary to conceal livestock from the livestock inspections" (laughs). "Because most herders engaged in such practices, they were not often discovered, although livestock could also be taken (stolen) under those circumstances. In that sort of situation, it could not be helped. On the other hand, if there were suspicions of a large discrepancy in livestock numbers, the negdel director would sometimes ride out on horseback to search for them. Looking back now, those hidden animals helped us in many different situations. For example, when production quotas could not be fulfilled, those animals truly became 'rescue livestock' (avraliin mal)."<sup>2</sup>

Mr. Pu, 78 years old approximately 17 km east of the center of Kharkhorin district also explains that:

"To be honest, I also used to 'hide livestock.' Since all herders did the same thing, I do not think livestock numbers in Mongolia at that time were accurate. Among the inspectors from the negdel or the state farms (sangiin аж ахуй), there was probably no one who truly grasped the actual number of animals. Sometimes livestock that had already been counted once would be counted again a few minutes later. We are all originally nomads, but among us there are people who 'have an eye for livestock' (mald нүдtei khün). Such people become herders. On the other hand, there are also people who 'lack an eye for livestock' (mald нүдтgüi khün). Someone who cannot properly recognize livestock could never become a herder. That is why it was easy for those who knew livestock well to conceal animals from inspectors. For example, an inspector might record a stallion standing right in front of him as a mare because he failed to notice the difference after a herder intentionally counted it that way. Of course, there were occasionally people whose hidden livestock were discovered. In such cases, the livestock would be confiscated and fines imposed. Recently, more young people say they will become herders if they cannot continue their schooling. But if they cannot even remember what they learned at school, how could they possibly remember a thousand head of livestock? And what happens when one's animals become mixed together with a neighbor's herd? If someone cannot even recognize their own livestock, there is no way they could distinguish another person's animals."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> March 14, 2024, at the center of Kharkhorin district.

<sup>2</sup> Interview conducted on March 7, 2024.

<sup>3</sup> Interview conducted on August 21, 2022.

As indicated in the account of the negdel leader Rinchingiin Minjuur, once the children of a household married and established independent households, it became possible for what had originally been a single family to possess up to 150 head of "life livestock" (aminii mal) across two or three households. However, it remained unclear how negdel herders actually managed their livelihoods before their children formally separated into independent households.

As demonstrated in Cases Mr. D, Mr. Go, and Mr. Pu, it would have been extremely difficult for a herding household, for example, a family of seven including parents and children to survive solely on fifty head of "life livestock" and the wages paid by the negdel (approximately 250–300 tögrög). Yet when production quotas appeared unlikely to be fulfilled, herders were able to utilize both their "life livestock" and their "hidden livestock" as a form of "hidden collective property" for meeting quota obligations.

Moreover, in his testimony regarding the nationalization of excess livestock, Minjuur stated that "members of the negdel adjusted matters among themselves, so the upper limits were rarely exceeded." What is important here is precisely the fact that members "adjusted matters among themselves." In other words, it is more natural to assume that negdel leaders were aware of the practice of "hiding livestock" described in Cases. At the same time, because hidden livestock did not appear in official state livestock statistics, such animals could also be stolen without leaving any formal trace. From these observations, it can be argued that during the socialist period the herders' "hidden collective property" functioned as a kind of "manipulable resource from below." Humphrey's discussion of "manipulable resources" in the case of Soviet Buryatia (Humphrey 1998: 195–227) referred primarily to resources used by the heads of *kolkhozy* and *sovkhozy* in order to facilitate the exercise of their authority. By contrast, the "hidden livestock" discussed in this chapter constituted not a resource controlled by administrators, but rather a means through which ordinary herders belonging to the negdel mutually adjusted shortages when state-imposed production quotas could not be met. Although both cases concern Mongolic socialist societies, this difference suggests a major contrast between Soviet and Mongolian forms of socialist adjustment.

Furthermore, during the socialist period in Mongolia, regardless of whether livestock were officially recognized by the negdel as "life livestock" or existed as "hidden livestock," when animals were taken by others, such acts appear to have been socially understood as a tolerated form of "livestock theft." In the following section, I examine the figure of the socialist-era "livestock thief," namely the *sain-er* ("good men"), through several ethnographic cases.

## **Representations of the "Sain er" during the Socialist Era (1924–1992)**

In the early twentieth century, Mongolia underwent socialist transformation under the influence of the Soviet Union, leading to the establishment of the Mongolian People's Republic (1924–1992). During the socialist period, the *shiliin sain er* ("righteous bandits" or "good men of the steppe") were represented as heroic figures resisting political authority and exploitative Han Chinese merchants. Among them, *Toroi Bandi Nanzad* (*Toroi bandi Nanzad*) became one of the most famous figures depicted in novels, plays, songs, and oral narratives concerning the *shiliin sain er*. Stories and songs about *Toroi Bandi* circulated widely throughout Mongolia, and in 1999 a commemorative stone statue was erected in his honor in *Sükhbaatar Province* in eastern Mongolia (Photo 1).

In the pastoral societies of the Mongolian plateau, stories of the *shiliin sain er* ("good men of the steppe") have long circulated as narratives of righteous livestock thieves. During the Qing period, these figures were said to have stolen livestock from nobles, wealthy households, and Han Chinese merchants, and redistributed animals to poorer pastoralists. As the expression *shiliin sain er* suggests, they were not remembered simply as criminals, but as morally ambiguous figures admired by ordinary herders.



Photo 1. Stone statue commemorating *Toroi bandi Nanzad*, 2019. Photograph by the author.

The emergence of such figures needs to be understood in relation to the historical conditions of Qing rule. Mongolian pastoralists were

increasingly incorporated into systems of taxation, debt, military service, and imperial livestock administration. In Dariganga, for example, local herders were responsible for tending livestock belonging to the Qing emperors (Oidov 2013: 1–15). Under such conditions, livestock was not only an economic resource but also an object of political extraction. Therefore, taking livestock from nobles, merchants, or imperial herds could be remembered as an act of moral correction rather than mere theft.

This memory was later reworked during the socialist period. Socialist literature, theatre, and film represented figures such as Toroi Bandi Nanzad as heroic men who resisted feudal lords and exploitative merchants. In this way, the older image of the *shiliin sain er* was incorporated into socialist narratives of class struggle and redistribution. However, the actual role of livestock thieves under socialism changed significantly. They no longer stole primarily from nobles or aristocrats. Instead, some *sain er* operated within informal pastoral networks, obtaining livestock for herders who struggled to meet state-imposed production quotas.

This transformation is crucial. Under socialism, livestock officially belonged to *negdels* and state farms, and herders were required to fulfill production targets. At the same time, pastoralists often concealed livestock from state inspection and registration in order to avoid confiscation and to maintain animals outside official accounting systems. In this context, the *sain er* did not simply reproduce the Qing-period model of stealing from the rich and giving to the poor. Rather, they became intermediaries in informal systems of livestock circulation, helping herders negotiate the pressures of socialist quotas, ecological uncertainty, and collective property regimes. Thus, the continuity between the Qing-period *shiliin sain er* and the socialist-era *sain er* lies not in identical practices, but in the moral logic attached to livestock taking. In both cases, theft could be socially reinterpreted when it was seen as correcting an imbalance: between rich and poor in the Qing period, and between state demands and pastoral survival under socialism.

With the arrival of the twentieth century, Mongolia entered the socialist era, and narratives surrounding the *shiliin sain er* continued to circulate among pastoralists. However, under socialism the figure of the livestock thief appears to have changed in important ways. Rather than redistributing stolen animals freely to the poor, some socialist-era *shiliin sain er* sold livestock through informal networks and black-market exchange. At the same time, pastoralists themselves frequently attempted to conceal livestock from state inspection and registration in order to avoid confiscation and to maintain animals outside official socialist accounting systems.

For example, according to the herder Mr. SA.....local residents in Kharkhorin soum, Övörkhangaï Province, where I conducted fieldwork, spoke about a man named Dorj (pseudonym), who was active as a livestock thief between approximately 1980 and 1990, during the final decade of

socialism. According to interviewees, Dorj stole livestock near his home region and transported the animals over long distances to provinces such as Dornod, Dundgobi, Töv, and Ömnögovi, where he sold them. Some local accounts even claimed that, because of his constant movement across the steppe, he had no permanent ger and at times lived in mountain caves, although the accuracy of these stories remains uncertain.



Photo 2. Dorj living in a cave in the mountains during seasonal herding, 2017.  
Photograph by the author.

Importantly, local people in Kharkhorin did not necessarily describe Dorj simply as a criminal. Rather, he was often remembered as a morally ambiguous figure resembling the older image of the *shiliin sain er*. This does not mean that his activities were considered legal or fully virtuous. From the perspective of the socialist state, livestock theft, private livestock trade, and attempts to conceal livestock from state inspection and registration were all illegal practices. However, among pastoralists, moral evaluations of theft depended heavily on social relationships and spatial distance. Stealing livestock from one's own neighbors or local *negdel* members—people with whom one maintained direct reciprocal relations—was considered socially destructive and morally unacceptable. By contrast, taking livestock from distant or socially unfamiliar regions could be interpreted differently, because the act did not directly violate local networks of reciprocity and mutual obligation.

In this sense, Dorj's reputation as a "righteous bandit" did not derive from redistribution in the egalitarian sense of giving livestock away for free. Rather, it reflected a pastoral moral logic in which the legitimacy of appropriation depended less on formal legality than on the social proximity between those involved. The continued appearance of *shiliin sain er* stories in literary magazines and novels published under socialist censorship

further suggests that the figure retained symbolic value within Mongolian society, even under a socialist regime officially opposed to private accumulation, informal exchange, and theft.

### **Overview of Interviews Conducted**

From August 2016 to July 2017, I conducted interviews with elderly herders in Kharkhorin soum. These individuals had been active pastoralists during the socialist period and were therefore able to provide detailed insights into livestock theft, hidden livestock practices, and informal systems of redistribution during that time. The following section presents four interviews conducted during the course of this research.

Mr. BA, a 65 year old male nomadic herder who lives 15 km south of Kharkhorin soum center in Övörkhangaï Province, explained:

"I used to graze livestock (sheep and goats) on the Kharkhorin soum state farm in the 1980s. Those were good times, but the norms set from above were difficult. I was trying different ways to achieve that goal. Some of the herders were delivering their products with dog's soft hair instead of the cashmere prescribed by the norm. Because if they achieved that quota of wool or cashmere, they would receive a prize from the negdel, a congratulatory message, or some other reward."<sup>4</sup>

Another herder, Mr. O, 46 years old male herder who lives in a pastureland bordering Hashaat Soum in Arkhangai Province, 30 km north of Kharkhorin soum center in Övörkhangaï Province, recalled his observations as a young person during the socialist era:

"I was a child during the socialist era. At that time, my father was herding horses for the "Gerelt zam (Path of Light) Negdel" (pastoral cooperative) in the Arkhangai province. As far as I know, two female and two male horses were stolen from our herd in the spring of 1984. My father knew approximately who had stolen them and "traded" them to another person. However, he did not do anything about the suspected thief and left him alone. However, after the democratization in the early 1990s, I remember [the man] came to my house and told me the following over drinks with my father: "I had no choice but to take livestock from you, my friend. I was really sorry. You know I went to jail once for losing five large livestock (bod)," he said. He continued, "I got out of jail. I got out of prison and finally got a job herding horses in the Negdel again. But one day, a man who had been my enemy in prison came to my house and threatened to kill me if I didn't hand over the horses (to meet my norms). I had no choice but to take a horse from your herd and give it to him. You knew I took it! I took it from your herd and gave it to him. But my father told him, "I already knew what had happened. The man to whom you gave the horses delivered them to the negdel's livestock processing factory (makh beltgekh üildver). At that time, your enemy's brother was working there as an accountant. Because the factory was unable to meet the production quota imposed by higher authorities, he asked his brother to

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<sup>4</sup> Interviewed on August 12, 2016.

obtain additional livestock. So although you took livestock from me and handed them over to your enemy, in the end his brother delivered those animals to the negdel factory. The outcome was ultimately the same: livestock that had originally belonged to the negdel ended up returning to the negdel," O's father recalled.<sup>5</sup>

In other words, while mediating the act of "stealing," the exchange of the horse was a way of making the story add up to the achievement of socialist quotas. In other words, the Negdel's treasurer, through his brother, blackmailed a third party, to steal livestock from Mr. O's father. In the normal course of events, this is clearly a criminal wrongdoing. However, the thief had also been in prison before for "losing" livestock. Behind the scenes, we can see inside the Negdel, which apparently seeks to uphold its norms through informal livestock exchanges.

Mr. A, a 60-year-old male, who lives 25 km north of Kharkhorin soum center in Övörkhangaï Province, recalled:

"I was driving a herd of horses to a meat center in the Negdel. At that time, it was very difficult to meet the meat quota set by the Negdel. It was very difficult to meet the meat quota set by the Negdel because livestock would be stolen or die during herding. In those cases, we had to rely on acquaintances and relationships to get by. Sometimes, through secret negotiations with "thieves," we would deliver "buruu garyn mal" (livestock acquired by wrong means), that is, stolen livestock. After delivering the livestock to the meat center, we would earn more money, in addition to the wages and bounties we received. But it would be lost because we would pay the other party for the livestock we bought."<sup>6</sup>

To begin with, the meaning of the term "shiliin sain er" is "a righteous bandit" who takes livestock from remote areas and distributes it to the poor. Mongolians have long respected such a person. As a result, various stories about "shiliin sain er" have been created and popularised. In the following case, however, it seems that even a thief who does not necessarily share with the poor is still respected by the people.

Mrs. S, 65 years old, female, who lives in Kharkhorin Soum, Övörkhangaï Province, is the grandmother of the author. She worked at the Kharkhorin Soum State Farm during the socialist era. My grandmother told me the following story about "shiliin sain er," a famous bandit in the area at that time. She explains that:

In the 1940s and 1950s, two men, Ts. Batmunkh and Dembel Ochir, had both completed their military service and were returning to Kharakhorin Soum, Övörkhangaï Province, about 365 km from Ulaanbaatar. But there were no vehicles available, so they had to return on foot. On the way, they found a group of horses. So Demberel Ochir said, 'Let's steal this chestnut horse,' and caught it at night when it was sleeping. He caught another horse and gave it to Batmunkh and they were to return home on horseback." Interestingly, he later recounted that he

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<sup>5</sup> Interviewed August 16, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Interviewed on July 24, 2017.

had committed many acts of thievery with that chestnut horse. My grandmother's story continues. "Years later, Demberel Ochir told his own tale of "Heroic" thievery. A few years later, in which he stole 30 head of cattle from the Gobi Desert, about 200 kilometers from his hometown, without being found out. When you are moving a lot of livestock, they excrete during the journey, so you end up with a trail. Then there is a good chance that the police or the person from whom the cattle were taken will find them. But Dembdrel Ochir buried all the livestock excrement. He was able to bring in 30 head of cattle without leaving any behind, and without anyone seeing him. Except, instead of sharing his stolen herd of cattle with the local poor, he started selling them to the people."<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, this Demberel Ochir is still understood in Kharkhorin Soum today as a "shiliin sain er," or steppe bandit. Why have these socialist-era thieves selling livestock been so highly regarded? It was because they had to bring livestock from outside to fulfill their quota, even if they had to pay for it. Another important point is that information about livestock thieves is not hidden from women, as my grandmother, who is a woman, knows these stories.

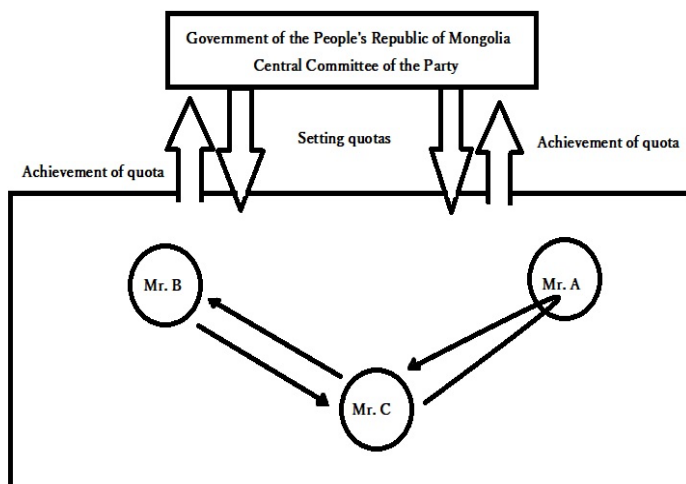


Figure.2 'Reciprocity' in the People's Republic of Mongolia. Created by the author.

In the 20th century, the social strata of the People's Republic of Mongolia were divided into two groups: the elite cadres of the People's Revolutionary Party, and the general populace. The government confiscated the livestock of the nobility and temples and redistributed them to the herders. In exchange, however, it began to set strict quotas. Under such circumstances, the herdsmen, who worked as laborers in the negdels and state farms, had to work hard to meet production targets. When they could not meet their quotas, the "sain er" were asked to steal livestock to balance

<sup>7</sup> Interviewed on August 3, 2017.

the pastoralists' books. In other words, as shown in (Figure 2), the Mongolian government sets strict quotas for herders on *negdels* and state farms.

On the other hand, if Mr. A failed to meet his quota, he might ask the *sain er* ("righteous bandit") to obtain the necessary livestock. In response, Mr. C, acting as a *sain er*, would take livestock from the surplus animals secretly maintained by Mr. B and sell them to Mr. A. Mr. A could then purchase the livestock and fulfill his state-imposed quota. Importantly, these "surplus" animals were often livestock concealed from state inspection and registration and therefore existed outside official socialist accounting systems. Because such livestock were not fully incorporated into state quota calculations, their transfer did not necessarily create an immediate quota deficiency for the original holder.

Conversely, if Mr. B later became unable to fulfill his own quota, he could request that Mr. C obtain livestock from others, including Mr. A, through similar informal exchanges. In this way, pastoralists maintained their livelihoods through reciprocal yet semi-clandestine circulation of livestock. Although these practices formally constituted theft under socialist law, within pastoral society they could function as a socially tolerated mechanism of mutual adjustment and survival. In other words, pastoralists maintained their survival by "stealing" each other's livestock and achieving their quotas through reciprocity.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has explored how livestock theft operated during the relatively stable socialist period in Mongolia through ethnographic cases from Kharkhorin *soum*, Övörkhangaï Province. While previous studies of "righteous banditry" have largely focused on resistance against aristocratic or colonial authority, this study demonstrates that livestock theft continued under socialism in a transformed form.

During the Qing period, nomadic pastoralists respected the *shiliin sain er* ("righteous thieves" or "good men of the steppe") for stealing livestock from nobles and wealthy households and redistributing animals to poorer pastoralists. Under socialism, however, the social role of such figures changed significantly. Rather than targeting aristocrats, socialist-era *sain er* were often asked to obtain livestock for herders who were unable to fulfill state-imposed production quotas.

The socialist state sought to collectivize pastoral property by confiscating livestock from nobles and wealthy households and reorganizing them as collective assets of the *negdel* and state farms. In ideological terms, this redistributive policy partially overlapped with the moral imagery historically associated with the *shiliin sain er*. From the late 1950s onward, however, with the completion of collectivization, pastoralists became wage-earning herders responsible for maintaining collectively owned livestock under systems of state planning and quota enforcement. These quotas were

imposed despite the ecological instability of pastoral life, including gan (drought) and zud (severe winter disaster), both of which could result in massive livestock mortality and make quota fulfillment impossible.

In such circumstances, herders developed informal mechanisms of adjustment. As this paper has shown, pastoralists frequently attempted to conceal livestock from state inspection and registration, thereby maintaining animals outside official socialist accounting systems. These hidden animals could circulate through reciprocal networks of exchange and redistribution. When a household risked failing to meet its quota, herders sometimes requested the assistance of *sain er*, who obtained livestock from surplus or concealed herds and redistributed or sold them through informal channels. In this sense, livestock theft during socialism cannot be understood solely as criminal activity, but must also be analyzed as part of a broader moral economy of pastoral survival.

Importantly, the distinction between socially tolerated appropriation and illegitimate theft depended heavily on social relations and spatial distance. Taking livestock from neighboring households within networks of reciprocity could function as a mutually understood form of adjustment. By contrast, livestock stolen from distant *negdels* or unfamiliar regions was generally recognized as genuinely criminal theft because it could produce quota deficiencies and financial sanctions for other collectives.

Unlike the earlier *shiliin sain er*, who were remembered as redistributors of wealth, socialist-era *sain er* often sold livestock rather than giving them away freely. Nevertheless, they continued to be remembered locally as "good men" because they helped ordinary pastoralists survive the pressures of socialist quota systems. Their moral legitimacy therefore derived not from legality, but from their embeddedness within local reciprocal relations and pastoral notions of fairness.

It is also significant that the word *shiliin* ("of the steppe/plain") gradually disappeared from the title. Historically, the *shiliin sain er* were imagined as mobile figures wandering the open steppe. By contrast, socialist-era livestock thieves often maintained ordinary occupations and semi-sedentary lives within collectivized society. The disappearance of *shiliin* symbolically reflects the broader transformation of Mongolian pastoral life under socialism and sedentarization policies.

As Caroline Humphrey and David Sneath (1999) have argued, state-imposed quotas and obligatory deliveries were not part of earlier nomadic pastoral practices. Socialist pastoralism introduced new forms of state regulation, fixed migration routes, and administrative control over production. Within this system, informal practices emerged as mechanisms through which pastoralists negotiated the contradictions between ecological uncertainty and state demands.

Humphrey's (1983) concept of "manipulable resources" referred to surplus resources in Soviet Buryatia that enabled informal social relations

under socialism. The present study suggests that, in Kharkhorin soum, hidden and stolen livestock similarly functioned as manipulable resources embedded within reciprocal social networks. Livestock thieves were therefore not always perceived negatively, but could instead be regarded as “sain er” (good men) who enabled pastoral households to survive periods of shortage and quota failure. From this perspective, the ethnographic evidence presented here suggests that Mongolian pastoralists maintained their communities through what this paper conceptualizes as “positive dispossession”: the reciprocal and socially mediated appropriation of livestock as a mechanism of mutual adjustment, redistribution, and survival under socialism.

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