

Fluctuations in the value of horses in Mongolia before and after Socialism

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ABSTRACT

Mongolian stockmen herd five kinds of livestock: cows, horses, goats, sheep, and camels. Each kind has a different function. Furthermore, these functions vary depending on the social and environmental situation. Consequently, the value of animals for the Mongolian people has changed over time. Before the introduction of socialism, horses, for example, were used as a tool of transport and sold at markets, and thus they had a significant pragmatic value. With the appearance of motorbikes and cars, however, this pragmatic value has declined. On the other hand, the milk of horses (*kumis*), which has long been consumed among pastoralists, has retained its pragmatic value. Horses also have symbolic value. In earlier times, the ability to ride and hunt on horseback symbolized people's latent abilities as warriors. Currently, the possession of strong horses symbolizes both the capability of their owners as pastoralists and the social power of affluent people. Thus, although horses have continued to retain their symbolic value to signify human capability, the type of capability has changed over time.

Keywords: Value Theory, Mongolia, Pastoral Society, Horses, Livestock

INTRODUCTION

The concept of value has long been of interest in the humanities and social sciences from several perspectives. David Graeber, who has analyzed value theories in anthropology and sociology in the past, proposes that three large streams of thoughts converge in the present meaning of value:

1. "values" in the sociological sense: conceptions of what is ultimately good, proper, or desirable in human life.
2. "value" in the economic sense: the degree to which objects are desired, particularly, as measured by how much others are willing to give up to get them.
3. "value" in the linguistic sense, which goes back to the structural linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure (1966), and might be most simply glossed as "meaningful difference."

[Graeber 2001: 1-2]

In actual societies, these three meanings of value are intermingled. Therefore, an examination of the functions of value offers a useful approach to understanding this often complicated intermingling. For example, in the case of the relationship between animals and human beings in Mongolia, values can be divided into two categories, either pragmatic or symbolic, according to the function of each value. These two categories are related to the main three streams of meaning. The degree of the pragmatic value is measured by the degree to which livestock functions as a practical tool. An analysis of horses in Mongolia, along with other animals, delineates the dynamism and changing values of livestock.

Previous research on the value of animals in Mongolia focused either on the pragmatic or the symbolic aspects. Investigation into the pragmatic values was concentrated on ways that livestock management has changed over time (Nakamura 2003). For example, the types of livestock raised by pastoralists have changed in accordance with the rising prices of cashmere in the Ejina-Qi banner in Inner Mongolia. An illustration of the other type of research, the symbolic value of animals, is suggested in Konagaya's work (1994). Referring to the relationship between wild animals and human beings, she stated that wild animals are the most sacred of the Mongolian animals. Ortnast (2003) analyzed oral poems called "Irügel," or congratulations, sung in rituals for stallions. He pointed out that Mongolian people see importance in the spiritual meaning of horses as "friends" rather than the pragmatic value of the animals as livestock. His analysis demonstrates how horses add strength to rituals and festivals as symbols of power and wealth.

Although previous research has illustrated the symbolic value of animals in a variety of cases, the change of this symbolic value bears further investigation. In other words, symbolic value has been presumed to be stable from past to present. However, in reality, the natural and social environment of the pastoralists and their livestock has dramatically changed. In response, a shift of pragmatic value due to environmental change has also occurred (Komiya 2007 et al.).

The value of horses in Mongolia before and after socialism illustrates that the symbolic value shifts from one animal species to another over time and that the symbolic value which one animal has changes over time.

THE EASTERN PART OF THE MONGOLIAN PLAIN: A THRIVING AREA FOR RAISING HORSES

In the Mongolian Plain, located from the eastern part of the nation of Mongolia to the surrounding areas of the Shilingol banner in Inner Mongolia, raising horses is a major living. Although these areas span different countries, they share the same geographic characteristics and lie in the same plain.

Considering the current situation, the difference of nationality surely affects the lifestyles of the people. For example, in China, settlement of the pastoralists was carried out through national government policy (Humphrey & Sneath 1999). As a result, the number of pastoralists who settled in to raise livestock suitable to their area has increased. On the other hand, in the nation of Mongolia, the majority of pastoralists are still nomadic. These differences require that the two areas be investigated independently of each other; it would be inappropriate to mix them.

Consideration of the earlier pastoralists, between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, however, is a different matter. During this era, national borders were different from now, and there was no difference in the style of pastoralism between Inner Mongolia and Mongolia. Furthermore, during these earlier times, the number of people who crossed national borders was much larger than it is now, as there were many Chinese merchants who conducted their business in the area which corresponds to the current Eastern part of the nation of Mongolia. Consequently, during this era, the Eastern part of the nation of Mongolia and some parts of Inner Mongolia could reasonably be analyzed together.



MAP 1. Fieldwork Area Map

Much of Mongolia is located on a plateau, where the average altitude is 1580 meters. The area higher than the average altitude covers 40 percent of the whole country, and the area higher than 1000 meters above sea level occupies more than 80 percent (Morinaga 2008: 28). Eastern Mongolia is a relatively low, flat area. Garshar in the Henti prefecture, in Eastern Mongolia is a hilly area with elevations between 1000 and 1500 meters above sea level.

According to the Institute of Meteorology and Hydrology, the average annual temperature of Eastern Mongolia ranges between -0.9 and 1.5 degrees Celsius. July is the warmest season; the average temperature in the plateau ranges from 20 to 24 degrees Celsius. January is the coldest season; the temperature varies between -19.1 and -23.7 degrees Celsius. The monthly average rainfall is 188 to 399 millimeters. Ninety percent of the rain falls between April and November, also the season when the grass grows, making this area geographically suitable for raising horses.

Pastoral life can be described in the following terms. According to informants, the average stockman raises 360 goats, 275 sheep, 200 horses, 16 cows and 16 camels. The goats are indigenous, not cashmere goats. Most income derives from the marketing of wools and livestock. In a family, men engage in pasturage, while women milk cows and sheep. Men help with the milking of horses. The people migrate with their animals from one pasture to another three times per year. Each pasture is about 20 kilometers distant from the other. For migration, places close to water are best. The people enclose pastures in summer, but dismantle them for the winter. Although they do not prepare hay for horses, they purchase and store 25 kilograms of hay for cows, sheep, and goats.

Figure 1 shows the change in numbers of camels, horses, and cows since 1990 in Mongolia. The dramatic reduction of horses and cows results from drought and snow disaster since the year 2000. The number of cows is almost equal to that of horses. After 1960, a large number of national collective farms were established throughout the area with assistance from the Soviets. Forty-five large-scale mechanized dairy farms had been built by 1990. However, many of these farms were later

privatized after the introduction of a market economy; as a result, most of them had to shut down due to lack of funds and foreign technicians (Komiya 2007: 36). Lately, however, in response to the demand for dairy products and in order to avoid further natural disasters, intensive livestock agriculture among independent farmers has been growing rapidly. In general, a small farm includes 10 to 20 cows. The number of farms of this type increased to 400 by 2006 (Komiya 2007: 36), illustrating the high pragmatic value of cows.

On the other hand, horses seem to have a different value from that of cows even when their numbers are similar. As Map 2 shows, horses are raised extensively in the Eastern part of the Mongolian plain for diverse purposes. For example, people may make alcohol from horse milk (*kumis*) in the summer. People also use the horses for transport. However, horses are not necessar-

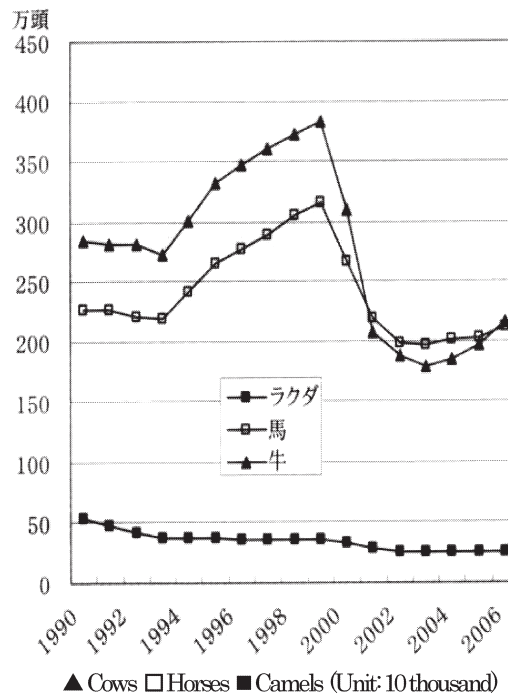
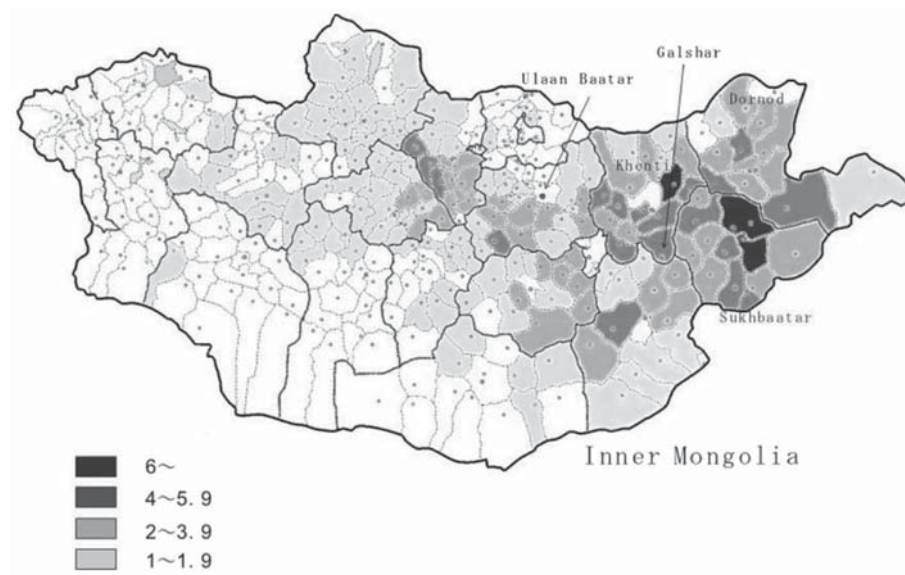


FIG. 1. The Transition of Camels, Horses and Cows since 1990 (Komiya 2007: 38)



MAP 2. Distribution of Horses in Mongolia 2002

ily considered to be livestock with high pragmatic value. Pastoralists enjoy *kumis* in their homes rather than selling it to others and thus earn no income from it. Furthermore, horses used for transport have been gradually replaced by cars or motorbikes. Consequently, the pragmatic role which horses play is not so large as that of cows.

THE MEANING OF HORSES BEFORE THE INTRODUCTION OF SOCIALISM

Horses as Products Mongolian pastoralists esteemed horses as commodities and items of trade in this area up until the early 20th century and the introduction of socialism. During this time, traveling merchants engaged in active trade with pastoralists. There was a group of merchants, with its center in Guihua District (the current Huhhot), who thrived in the area corresponding to the current Mongolia and the Xingjiang Uighur Autonomous Region. Although some of livestock products which merchants in the group collected in the Mongolian Plain were consumed in and around Guihua District, most of them were sold in Beijing and Tianjin.

Guihua District was well known in the region as a trading market for sheep and horses (Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference 1984: 134). At the end of the Ching dynasty (1616–1912), merchants around Huhhot collected about 800,000 sheep and 100,000 horses, mainly from outlying areas of Huhhot, particularly the area now known as Mongolia. Sheep and horses from Outer Mongolia accounted for 70 to 80 percent of all sheep and horses for sale; and those from Inner Mongolia, 20 to 30 percent (Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference 1984: 134–136). According to Kondo, no record could be found showing transport of livestock from the Xingjiang Uighur Autonomous Region by way of Huhhot. Therefore, livestock brought to Huhhot must have been from Outer and Inner Mongolia (Kondo 1995: 77). Considering the contemporary social situation at the time, horses for transport, such as military horses, were most likely to have been exchanged. The Ching dynasty also set up several farms in the Mongolian plain, and pastoralists in the region paid a third of their herds to the government (Lattimore 1941–1942: 25). Because of their use as transport and use as payment to the government, horses enjoyed a high pragmatic value at that time. Especially, horses for merchandise plausibly had value in the economic sense described in Graeber's theory. The use of horses as transport is also close to the economic sense of value.

Horses in Hunting Up until the early 20th century, hunting played an important role for all Mongolians, and the horse was an essential tool for hunting. In Mongolia, where there are many types of hunting, the scale of hunting varies from an individual level to a large group level. Hunting methods also vary from simple traps, in which people sow beans soaked in alcohol, for example, to capture drunken pheasants, to hunting which makes use of horses to catch bigger animals. In the latter type of hunting, people generally hunt as a group of 4 or 5 people on horseback. Bringing tents with them, they would sometimes hunt for many months in a single session (Joseph 1941: 43).

Hunting with horses can be divided into two categories: hunting as a secondary occupation or hunting as military exercise. In the latter period of the Ching dynasty,

hunting as a military exercise came close to being competition. Hunting as a secondary occupation for pastoralists seems to have prevailed in Mongolia before the collectivization of agriculture. During those times, in the area close to mountains, two thirds of all food was derived from hunting. It was a way of obtaining animal protein without necessitating the killing of livestock (Yoshida 2004: 33)¹.

According to records from World War I, hunting as competition existed as a way to train youngsters. From childhood, Mongolian boys learned to ride horses and to hunt, and thus they gained skills in shooting arrows from a horse (The Kanto Army 1916: 161). Historically, there were also several other kinds of hunting competitions. For instance, during the Ching dynasty, aristocrats in Mongolia were called by the emperor to participate in an annual event (The Kanto Army 1916: 161). Areas designated for hunting were then distributed to the aristocrats by the Emperor. Each aristocrat competed to hunt the most animals. Kings from every country in Mongolia brought their subjects, and the king himself led the hunting (Tamai 1931: 125).

Another type was hunting in a league. All or some of the banners in a league united to go hunting. This style, however declined rapidly in popularity, and only a few banners continued the practice (The Kanto Army 1916: 161). Hunting of a whole banner, however, was conducted on an annual basis. Led by the chief of a banner, soldiers united to hunt.

Hunting by herding groups was a kind of practice for hunting with the whole banner and hunting led by the Emperor. Soldiers of a couple of villages joined together and hunted between three and six times per year. In addition, the men in families went hunting and competed with one another in a show of skill. Sometimes a couple of houses got together and had a competition. They rode on horses, took along some dogs, and used rifles and poles (The Kanto Army 1916: 161).

In general, Mongolian people hunt gazelles, hares, wild sheep, and prairie dogs. The social position of the winners of the Emperor's hunt is still unclear and requires further research. However, considering that people certainly made an intense effort to prepare for the Emperor's hunt by hunting in herding groups and as individuals, it is at least possible to guess the social importance of the Emperor's hunt. Thus, before the introduction of socialism, Mongolian people considered hunting skills to be as important as the skill required to ride horses. Moreover, these skills signified the capability of the men as warriors among the Mongolians. In other words, they thought that the ability to ride horses was a good quality for humans to have. In this sense, value is considered to be of sociological import in Graeber's theory.

On the other hand, looking at the targets of the hunt offers another perspective to the value of horses. Hunting offers a way to supplement protein for pastoralists without requiring them to kill their livestock, a pragmatic value. At the same time, pastoralists use the bones of wild animals for rituals (Yang 2006: 516). According to Konagaya (1994), Mongolian pastoralists consider wild animals to be sacred, and in the animal hierarchy, wild animals rank higher than livestock². Using wild animals

¹ Horses were used to hunt other wild animals not from the same species. In comparison, generally speaking, northern reindeer herders use one animal species to hunt their own kind: using domestic reindeer for transport to hunt wild reindeer.

² I don't have any field data about wild animals, so this paper does not develop arguments about

as an offering, therefore, enhances the sacredness of rituals. An old manuscript about the Camel Fire Ritual says: "Wrap a rib of a white gazelle with a blue cloth and put it into fire. If you cannot get a bone of a white gazelle, you may use a rib of a goat or a rabbit" (Yang 2006: 516). A gazelle can be caught only by horseback hunting. Given that bones of the gazelle are seen as sacred, horses are construed as the agent that connects human beings to sacredness. In 2006, when hunting had already declined, the Camel Fire Ritual allowed the substitution of a rib of a cow or a rabbit for that of a gazelle, suggesting that an object of symbolic value possibly shifts over time.

VALUE OF HORSES AFTER SOCIALISM

Before socialism, the pastoralists used horses for transport; in contrast, nowadays the pastoralists in Mongolia mainly use trucks or motorbikes for transport. Although they make *kumis* throughout the summer, it is made for self-consumption, not for sale. Furthermore, being different from sheep or goats, castrated horses are not usually killed or sold for meat products. Consequently, the value of horses as merchandise in the economic sense has weakened over time. Despite this, many horses continue to be raised in Eastern Mongolia, so they must still retain some value.

Part of this value seems to lie in horse racing in Naadam, a traditional summer festival in Mongolia. There is a national Naadam and many local Naadams. People enjoy Mongolian sumo, archery, horse racing, and so on during this festival. Racehorses are of special interest to people in the Eastern part of Mongolia. In horse races, the horses run about 30 kilometers. Jockeys are children under the age of 4 or 5. For example, when I went to Suhbaatar Aimag, a mother who has two daughters said, "My elder daughter stayed away from horses, so she doesn't participate in horse races. I don't let her ride on horses now. My younger daughter likes horses very much, so she participated in horse races last time." Generally, when children get older, they retire from racing and begin to learn how to train horses.

The characteristics of the three Eastern prefectures of Sukhbaatar, Khentii and Dornod illustrate the vital role of horses in the area. As indicated on Map 2, the per capita number of horses is more than four. This region has long been famous among Mongolians for good horses, thanks to a predominantly flat environment which produces high quality grass. At the same time, cultural aspects are also important for producing good horses. The following interview, conducted in 2004 in Galshar village in Khentii prefecture, exemplifies how highly pastoralists appreciate the value of their horses: "Galshar have collected and raised good horses since the 1960s. As a result, Galshar has become famous for producing good horses. Now, the term 'horses from Galshar' is a sort of brand." Clearly, the pastoralists have a strong desire to choose horses of good bloodlines. Thus, both environmental and cultural factors are necessary for a horse-raising area to thrive.

Interviews with racehorse trainers, known as *oyachi*, also expand the understanding of the cultural meanings of horses. The *oyachi* use many methods to strengthen their horses to win races. Winning a horse race depends 50 percent on the horse's ability, 30 percent on training, and 20 percent on the ability of the jockeys (Nozawa animal hierarchy any further. In the future, however, I intend to research this important topic.

1991: 82). Therefore, it is important to have a good eye for choosing good horses (Nozawa 1991: 82). Comments from an interview with a 66-year-old informant from the Khentii prefecture in 2004 show how eagerly people made an effort to get good horses 60 and 70 years earlier and how secretive the whole matter was:

In the generation of my grandfathers, people traveled to Sukhbaatar and Dornod to look for horses which had a good blood line³. They took many days to get there and brought horses back to Khentii prefecture. They exchanged a good female horse with 70 ponies. My grandfathers and my uncles were talking about where to go to buy horses and so on. Conversations about horses were held secretly behind a closed door of their yurt (*ger*) lest other people hear. Thus it was impossible for me to sit next to them and listen to their talk.

Since then, however, the way to choose horses has changed as demonstrated in the following interview of a 68-year-old *oyachi* in 2004:

Without a doubt, in my grandfather's generation, people possessed the skill and knowledge to choose horses. However, nowadays, people [here 'people' means *oyachi* in general, including the informant] cannot recognize good bloodlines of ponies. In other words, they do not have the skill to choose horses.

This suggests that the technique to choose horses has weakened. However, people still take good care to produce fast horses for Naadam.

We are careful of the amount and kinds of grass horses eat lest they get too heavy or too thin. Management of weight is the most difficult part, and it is important to control their exercise and nutrition before Naadam. Running horses increases their breathing capacity, while allowing them to drink salty water from a fountain helps them to gain weight with fat.

As the interview implies, there are many special ways to train horses, and the techniques are so valuable as to be kept secret even among relatives. Horses trained in these ways participate in races in Naadam. The *oyachi* clearly remembered in which races his horses achieved good results. "Horses of my relatives won all the prizes in the 1984 Naadam," said the *oyachi*. "My horse won a prize in last year's race." If ordinary people are asked, "Who is a famous *oyachi*?" they can think of several names without hesitation. This suggests that famous *oyachi* are well known not only among colleagues but also among local people.

Furthermore, the winning horses themselves are famous and attract many kinds of people to them:

A good horse of my own caught the eyes of a rich person in Ulan Bator who

³ Sukhbaatar and Dornod are between 300 and 500 kilometers from Khentii prefecture.

cheated us out of him later. This horse won the first prize in a national Naadam, which I saw on television. Recently, horses in Ulan Bator have been given steroids and nutrition supplements, and consequently, horse races in the national Naadam bear little resemblance to traditional races in which only natural strength of horses competed. The traditional essence of the races is in the local Naadams.

This account implies at least three things. First, buyers, who are generally affluent, are highly interested in good horses. Second, owners with racehorses in the national Naadam want to win, no matter what. Third, horse owners in pastoral regions take pride in training horses in the traditional ways, which do not rely on drugs or supplements.

Winning races in Naadam is extremely important. It brings owners celebrity and great honor. Politically and financially powerful people in urban areas pay attention to fast horses in the local Naadams and then buy them to achieve a victory in the national Naadam. Sometimes, they even cheat local people to get good horses.

Why is it so important to possess strong horses? Why do people persist in breeding strong horses? Cultural background seemingly plays a large role in such desire. In his 1992 book, *A Heart of Equestrian People*, Wanibuchi explains: "Mongolians have long lived their pastoral lives with horses. Their love for horses is much deeper than we can ever imagine. Horses are their pride as equestrian people. Horses are their peace" (Wanibuchi 1992: 26).

If people were to walk on foot—without horses—through the fields, they would likely be considered beggars. Horses have not only a pragmatic value but also symbolic features (Wanibuchi 1992: 26). The existence of horses exemplifies the Mongolian identity as horse-riding people.

According to Konagaya, there is a Mongolian saying that "...good horses, symbolize human capability" (2005: 222). Thus, people's determination to raise horses in the traditional way and their hatred for the use of growth-enhancing drugs may be seen as a show of pride in which Mongolians equate their skill for training horses in the traditional ways to their ability as pastoralists. Here the high symbolic value of horses is evident.

According to Graeber's theory, having skill to raise strong horses without drugs corresponds to sociological values. In addition, the value of possessing "strong horses" or "good horses" corresponds to values in a linguistic sense.

CONCLUSION

An examination of the animals, primarily the horse, in Mongolia reveals dynamism and changes in the various values of animals. Hunted wild animals, like gazelles, have pragmatic value as a source of supplemental protein for pastoralists and as food and products to be sold to people in Mongolia, China, and other countries. As hunting has declined of late, the pragmatic value of wild animals is consequently declining, too. As well as the pragmatic value, these animals also have a symbolic value, as their bones are used for rituals to signify sacredness. Because of the decline of hunting, pastoralists have recently begun to substitute bones of livestock for those

of hunted wild animals. Consequently, the symbolic value which wild animals hold is shifting to livestock. This tendency illustrates the possibility of positional change of a value from one kind of animals to another.

On the other hand, analysis of the functions of horses in Mongolia reveals another type of change of values. Before the introduction of socialism, horses were objects of trade as livestock for transport, and thus they had a significant pragmatic value. Due to the appearance of motorbikes and cars, however, this pragmatic value has declined. The milk of horses (*kumis*), which has long been consumed among pastoralists, has retained its pragmatic value. Horses also have symbolic value. Before, the ability to ride and hunt on horseback symbolized people's latent abilities as warriors. Currently, possession of strong horses symbolizes both the capability of their owners as pastoralists and the social power of affluent people. Thus, although horses do and did have symbolic value to signify human capability, the type of capability has changed over time. However, it is still unclear whether horses had value as a "symbol of human capability" in the era of socialism. There is the possibility, of course, that the symbolic value disappeared and was then re-constructed in the post-Socialist era.⁴ Furthermore, horses have another symbolic value, which is to connect people to sacred wild animals. The symbolic value of horses is thus diverse.

Based on analysis of values of animals in Mongolia from the viewpoint of their functions, it is possible to make a closer evaluation of their values in relation to Graeber's systematic value theory: (1) values in the sociological sense; (2) value in the economic sense; and (3) value in this linguistic sense.

The current pastoralists gain protein mostly from their own livestock. In this respect, the pragmatic value can be considered to be applicable to value in the economic sense.

However, looking at the pragmatic value of horses for transport, value in the economic sense and values in the sociological sense coexist. Quoting Clyde Kluckhohn, Graeber distinguishes the economic sense of value from the sociological sense of values as the following: The former is the degree of the objects which are desired, and the latter is the degree of the objects which are desirable. Desirable, in this case, describes something which is not only desired but also ought to be desired in a culture (Graeber 2001: 2-4, 25-26). Horses for transport, which are objects that are desired as useful tools, are traded between pastoralists. Simultaneously, the horses are objects which are desirable in the sense that ideal pastoralists ought to be able to raise strong horses, ride them well, and possess them as their symbol. The latter value is so significant that even after the role of transport has declined, horses used in Naadam are still highly esteemed.

Furthermore, as the saying about the possession of a strong horse reminds us, the value of horses is also related to values in the linguistic sense". That is, in Mongolia, the notion of possessing good horses in describing a person has a "meaningful difference" from possessing other animals. The value of horses is a multilayered structure of the three senses of values with continuous change of its content over time.

In conclusion, the actual functions of animals in relation to human beings in Mon-

⁴ Value of horses during the era of socialism offers rich potential for further research.

golia cannot be separated from the three senses of value of Graeber's theory. Since each category is intermingled and flexibly changeable, the actual condition of values from only one perspective of the three is inappropriate. The relationship between animals and human beings is explained more fully by the dynamism of various values which include the positional and internal change of their functions.

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