

Spring 2011

The Mongolian Horse and Horseman

Elisabeth Yazdzik
SIT Study Abroad

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection

 Part of the [Family, Life Course, and Society Commons](#), [Place and Environment Commons](#), and the [Rural Sociology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Yazdzik, Elisabeth, "The Mongolian Horse and Horseman" (2011). *Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection*. 1068.
https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection/1068

This Unpublished Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the SIT Study Abroad at SIT Digital Collections. It has been accepted for inclusion in Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection by an authorized administrator of SIT Digital Collections. For more information, please contact digitalcollections@sit.edu.

The Mongolian Horse and Horseman

By Elisabeth Yazdzik

SIT SA Mongolia
Spring Semester 2011
Academic Director S.Ulzii-Jargal

This paper is dedicated to the staff of SIT Abroad, without whom I would never have had the language skills, or the courage, to venture into the field abroad. It is also dedicated to my Mongolian friends and family, who took me into their homes, taught me with endless patience, and above all showed me love, kindness, and the time of my life! Thank you!

Acknowledgements:

First of all, I would like to acknowledge Ulziihishig for the tremendous amount of support he provided me, in assuring I was safe, seeking out contacts, making endless phone calls on my behalf in Mongolian and English, and dealing with the Mongolian border patrol so that I could travel to Khuvsgul. Secondly, a big thank you to all the SIT staff; to Ganbagana and Baigal for being excellent language teachers, and answering a million and one obscure questions so I had the language skills to venture into the Mongolian countryside; to Ulzijiargal for assisting with the academic components of the program; to Cyrchmaa, Tugso, and all of the support staff for keeping me well fed, in good humor, and for providing my first insight into the wonderful hospitality of Mongolian culture. I would also like to acknowledge my Ulan Bataar host family, especially my mother, Onor, who opened not only her door to me but those of all of her relatives in Khuvsgul. Through her I met Rentsendavaa, an amazing, kind, and knowledgeable horseman, who, most importantly, was somehow always able to understand my Mongolian and help translate the words of his friends and relatives so I could easily understand them. Also, his son, Udaa-Bayer, who was the best guide and friend a girl could ask for, who took me horseback into the chilly mountains and talked to me of Mongolian horses the whole way there and back, and his son-in-law, Batsaikhan, who, if I knew him for a shorter time, was no less eager to help me. Lastly, I must send the warmest thanks and love to my dear friends Bat-Erdene and Sanchir, for being my first home-stay family in the countryside, and inspiring me, by virtue of their friendship, to learn Mongolian, to make friends, and to be brave and trusting at all times. My thanks go out to them for hosting me again this spring, for the gift of the beautiful leather bridle, and for the exceptional degree of support they provided me.

I am halfway through my ISP when I discard the sheet of questions written for me in Mongolian, and begin to ask what really matters.

“I would like to learn not just about the practices of Mongolian horsemanship, but about the culture.”

“Chinggis Khan took the entire world on horseback; America was unknown then, and he nearly conquered Europe. Because of this, the horse is sacred.

We do our working riding horses. We eat the horse’s meat. Our herding is done from horseback. Because of this, the horse is sacred”.

These are the words of Rentsendavaa, spoken to me as I conducted an interview with his friend, L. Davaa. None can deny the importance of the horse in Mongolian culture; it is omnipresent in song, in stories, and in art. And the historical significance of the Mongolian horse is also clear, for were it not for their skill as horsemen, so little a nation of warriors never would have taken the world as they did. The horse is also very significant in the present day lives of many Mongolians. Horses are used not only for transportation, but entertainment (in the form of racing,) and also for the myriad goods they yield (meat, *airag*, and horsehair ties for the *ger*, among others.) Yet despite this, and despite the fame of both the Mongolian horse and his horseman, all too little has been written about this famous duo. In particular, about the daily practices of the Mongolian horseman, and the cultural beliefs that influence his work.

A little about myself. I am an American student who, though not having been raised with horses, learned to ride at the age of 14. I now live with an aunt

who once worked as a Standardbred trainer. I have spent my summers engaged in various types of work with different breeds of horses, most passionately with Standardbred harness horses in the racing industry, and also have a riding horse of my own. I came to Mongolian not least of all for the opportunity to ride. My background with horses has been both an advantage and a disadvantage during the research phase of writing this paper.

On the one hand, a knowledge of horses has brought me some esteem, and a willingness for people to open up to me regarding how they care for their own animals. In particular, gaited horses are immensely popular in Mongolian, and the Standardbred being a pacing horse, my photos have won over many people. Since I am both a foreigner and a female (horses being somewhat the realm of men) this has been particularly important. On the other hand, my preconceptions have often led me to ask questions that were not culturally pertinent, bypassing topics that I later realized were actually critically important to understanding how Mongolians relate to and care for their horses.

My research was conducted in the field in three separate aimags, and with the exception of one interview, was conducted by myself, in Mongolian, without the aid of a translator. This was a conscious decision made based off of several factors, not limited to but including my singular experience working with a translator. My vocabulary was sufficient, with enough prodding, and repeating of questions, not to warrant the need for a translator. During my interview with the aid of a translator, I found myself having to explain concepts I was curious about by means of circumlocution. And a translator, unfamiliar with horses in

Mongolian and horse terms in English, worsened my credibility with the people I sought to interview.

Rather than having a question translated wrongly by someone not knowing any better, and thus look the fool, I instead plowed ahead on my own, which has both its upsides and downsides. I did, however, typically have the help of at least one Mongolian familiar enough with my speech patterns to understand and help communicate between myself and my informant, albeit in Mongolian.

I conducted my research with eight different individuals, as well as by observing various practices involving horses during my time in Mongolia, and occasionally snatching the quick fact regarding a pertinent subject from whoever was at hand, as the opportunities arose. Mongolian men generally love talking about their horses, so I had many such opportunities. I tried to sit down with each of the eight individuals and also transcribe a formal interview, but in the case of Udaa-Bayer, could not do so; I spent one day talking to him casually about horses while riding, horseback, to the Western Taiga, and the next day, having explained more fully the nature of my research, conducted a slightly more formal interview, again, however, from horseback. I prefaced all of my interviews with the statement that I was planning on writing a paper, and received oral consent from all parties involved that their names might be used.

With Bat-Erdene and Rentsendavaa, I conducted multiple interviews, so though I have formal interviews with each of them, I have several days' practical experience with each where they consciously took me under their wing and taught me what they knew on my subject. Sometimes I would ask questions and we

would sit down to a twenty or thirty minute discussion on the matter, an informal interview of sorts, and other times I was given a short reply that, nonetheless, I later would write down and which served to enhance my knowledge.

I also was lucky enough to bear eyewitness to many interesting practices involving horses, including a gelding. It is one thing to ask how something is done, and another thing entirely to see it done in the flesh. Should I wish to do further research on the subject, a full year in the field would be necessary, as many activities are seasonal; gelding in the spring, *airag* making and *Nadaam* occur in the summer, branding in the fall, and the Darkhad, at least, only ride their stallions for three short days in the winter. .

There are, in fact, many such regional differences in Mongolian horsemanship, and furthermore, a great deal of personal preference. When I asked many herders if they knew of regional differences in horses or horsemanship, I oftentimes received the answer that the horses themselves were different; mountainous regions had stronger horses, desert horses had bigger feet, like a camel's, etc. From person experience I can say that this is true, but more as well.

To begin with, there are a variety of different ethnic groups in Mongolia, the dominant one being the Khalkh at 81.5 percent of the population.¹ Khalkh horses and Mongolian horses were synonymous with the people I spoke to. However, I also met one relative of my host family, who mentioned owning a Barga stallion. And, when I was in Khuvsgul, I spent time with the Tsachin, or reindeer herders, and saw that they too owned horse herds. Lastly, the most significant ethnic minority I worked with were the Darkhad, also of Khuvsgul,

¹ *Nomadic Culture and Globalization Student Handbook*, p.30

who are famous for their powerful white horses that are well adapted to the mountains of their homeland. Half of my interviews were conducted with Darkhad horsemen, whose practices differ in multiple ways from that of the standard Khalkh horseman.

More than ethnic differences, however, there are also geographic differences to consider. Mongolians are a practical people and work with whatever resources are available. Thus the “standard” Mongolian hitching post, so described, of two wooden poles spaced several meters apart with a line tied in between, is hardly standard at all. In Galuut soum, Bayankhongor aimag, wood is scarce; horses are hitched to a single upright pole or, more often, the lead line wrapped around a heavy rock or boulder. In Khuvsigul, wood is plentiful and horses are worked in round pens, a practice I saw nowhere else on my travels. It is said that Mongolia is divided into horse and cow aimags, for in the mountainous north cattle prosper, but on the broad, open steppe of the East, you will find the room for great races, and thus racehorses, to have developed over the centuries. It comes as no surprise then that Hintii and Sukhbaatar aimags vie for the title of having the “best” horses if you should ask a Mongolian.

Lastly, there are the little differences which I, at least, seeing no other ground, chalk up to regionalisms. Minute differences in tack, and cultural beliefs and taboos regarding horses fall into this category. A whole paper alone could discuss these varied regional differences, but since I have neither the space nor the breadth of travel experience to do the subject justice, let it suffice to say that as useful as it is to speak of Mongolian horsemanship, it is from the start a very base

reduction. When there are multiple very distinct ways of handling a matter, I will seek to make note of that fact.

Of the horsemen I spoke to, most had herds numbering between 15 and 50 head of horses led by a stallion. Part of the qualifications of a good stallion are his ability to look after his large herd, and a particularly good one can manage 60 to 70 horses². It was also mentioned to me that some horseman have multiple stallions, and thus multiple herds. Rentsendavaa, for instance, had had two stallions before losing one to the *Zyd* this past winter, but since the subject seemed very painful for him I didn't press the matter further.

For contrast to these small herds, I spoke with Davaa, who had herded horses for his *negdel* between 1972-1993. He had chosen them freely, instead of any other variety of livestock, because he was a talented horseman. His herd under the *negdel* numbered between 400 and 1100 head of horses, in addition to which he kept a small private herd of 20 animals. Although his herd now numbers 50 animals, he says the end of the *negdels* was bad for him; he had made a steady salary of 300 tugrik a month (this was when the tugrik was very strong) and without that salary, life was much harder. Finding money for the necessities (tea, flour, sugar) was difficult these days. And his enormous herd had not been as difficult to manage as one would expect.

Work such as gelding (typically 20 horses a year) could be accomplished by him and another herder in one day. 50 horses were slaughtered for meat come winter to give to the *negdel*. And in the summer, of approximately 300 mares, he would milk the 50 most gentle to produce *airag*. He was also responsible for

² Informal interview with Bat-Erdene, 05/09/2011

minor veterinary care, although the *negdel* employed its own veterinarian. The *negdel* horses, besides being used for meat and milk, were used by *negdel* members to do work; they would take the number of horses they needed for several days and ride them under their own tack. Davaa was responsible for breeding and stallion selection, and also, for driving the herd to its winter pastures in Khatgal, a distance of about 200 km, with the assistance of 5-6 other *negdel* herders. Though I marveled at the amount of work, he said he always had other *negdel* members to help him when he required, and that such a large herd was perfectly manageable.

In the case of the typical, private herd, however, things are different. Twenty to thirty animals is considered an average herd, I have surmised after asking many people the size of the herd and whether it is large or not. Pre-*negdel*, I learned from Rentsendavaa during my interview with Davaa, people had only 10-20 horses at most, and fewer animals in general; they were poor. I spoke to Batsaikhan, age 27, who had married 5 years before, about where his herd came from. He was given his horses at marriage, half from their father's herd and half from his father in law's herd. Typically each side gives between 10 and 15 horses, including a stallion. Since there are two stallions, one may be sold or they both may be traded. The new horseman has no choice in which horses he receives but can trade or sell to get what he wants.

I asked Batsaikhan if he was nervous when he started herding on his own. "No." He'd been riding since he was 6 years old, racing horses at *Nadaam*, etc. He said he was a middling horseman, neither poor nor great. I asked him what he

would do if a problem arose with his herd. He said call a vet, when Sisgee, his mother in law, chimed in—“ask an elder.” This seems to be the typical attitude towards many issues in Mongolia, and others I had interviewed have said the same thing, be it regarding veterinary care or behavioral flaws in the horse.

Batsaikhan’s confidence in his own ability to manage on his herd (with the help of others when needed, of course) is characteristic of Mongolian horsemen that I have observed. Americans busy their time with trainers, veterinarians, and all sorts of books on how to solve flaw x or problem y. Mongolian horse books do exist—Rentsendavaa consults a book called “Khordan Mornii Oyaa Zaasel,” for instance, on certain veterinary matters, but in general communal wisdom is called upon. Oftentimes I will overhear snippets of a conversation between two people on horse problems they have or the virtues (or vices) of new breeds being introduced to Mongolian or similar topics. Getting formalizing knowledge on how to train or care for a Mongolia horse is another matter.

People seemed to think it strange when I explained to them what I was researching, and oftentimes demurred that they knew little on the subject,³ and wouldn’t I rather talk to someone else? Eventually I got around the issue by saying I didn’t want to learn anything special. What I wanted to know was what, if I were their son, they would teach me so that I would be knowledgeable about horses. When, after a week of learning, I asked Rentsendavaa if he had taught me enough, I had to clarify. “What does a good Mongolian horseman need to know?” I asked. First, if a given horse will be a good horse, just by looking at it. Second, if a horse is ill, by looking at it. And third, how to take care of a sick horse.

³ Interviews with Monk-Erdene 5/11/2011 and Udaa-Bayer, 5/18/2011

And chiefly, one learns these things through experience. This is how Mongolian children learn; they are thrown on a horse from the minute they are old enough to ride, in some cases with the aid of a parent, and if no one is around to teach them, then without⁴ and they ride. Branding, gelding, pulling horses from the herd-as I have seen, these are communal activities in which everyone participates, and in doing, learns. At around the age of ten the horsemen I spoke to learned how to make tack from their fathers. And, learning for a Mongolian horseman, is a lifelong process. Udaa-Bayer, at 25, was still learning his father's considerable veterinary skills.

Thus, Batsaikhan's comfort with the great responsibility he assumed, and likewise with Amgalansuren and Bat-Erdene, themselves new to the career of a horseman. Viewing knowledge as something to be gained incrementally and experientially, and growing up living and breathing horses, and surrounded by knowledgeable elders, the Mongolian horseman's confidence comes naturally. I began to understand further how my barrage of questions, all seeking to learn a lifetime's worth of oftentimes obvious knowledge (what do Mongolian horses eat being the most ludicrous question I would ask) would seem bizarre.

I would also venture that there exists another reason for the Mongolian horseman's confidence. Though even 20 horses sounds like a daunting number to be responsible for, to an American owner, Mongolian horsemanship is much less intensive. The stallion protects his herd against wolves and predators, and unlike other Mongolian livestock, the horse is neither driven to water nor to fresh pastures daily.

⁴ Informal talk with Udaa-Bayer, 5/19/2011

At the barn where I work in American, I am responsible for anywhere between 9 and 11 racehorses, plus two riding horses. My work takes me from 5:30 A.M. and finishes in the neighborhood of 11 A.M. I feed, muck stalls, turn the horses out, bring the horses in, water them, bathe them, make fresh feed, etc., etc. And this is only the minute part of horse care which I myself have a hand in. Breeding, training, and veterinary care are all intensive and time consuming processes.

This isn't to decry the labor of the Mongolian horseman and laud my own. Mongolian horsemen are stronger than I, excellent riders, and hard workers. But there is a distinct difference in attitude between the two. Mongolian horses are work horses, and my riding horse is a pleasure animal, with all the attention lavished on it of a pet, a realization I struggled to put my finger on because, as an American, I do still view the horse as livestock. It took one specific issue to make me see past my own blindness. Oftentimes I would be asked about the food Americans eat, or some question regarding horse slaughter, or how we deal with old or injured horses in America, and it came down to one response: horse slaughter is illegal. So in the popular mindset, perhaps, the horse qualifies as livestock, and certainly given that it lives in a barn and not in our homes this is logical on one level. But in practice, with the level of care we provide, and the way we personify our animals with names, give them toys, and deem their slaughter cruel—they are pets. Or, in the case of very expensive competition horses, assets and status symbols.

Horse keeping in America is expensive, whereas in Mongolia it is virtually free, depending on how one chooses to manage one's herd. The Mongolian horse is a practical asset to its owner, a source of food, transportation, and income. The American horse is a financial drain, and even in the case of the race horse, the trainer, who gains his wages through working with the horse, is a different individual than the owner, to whom it is a pretty, but expensive, asset. The two mindsets for care, I believe, arise from this difference. At first I struggled to come to terms with what I felt to be biological imperatives of the horse, and how Mongolians seemed to do below what I felt was minimal to maintain soundness and health, but then I realized I needed to adjust my mindset, since in reality most horses in Mongolia seem to be no worse off than most horses in America.

The same behavior I would decry as irresponsible in America—large, unhandled herds multiplying at will, lack of hoof care, riding from a very young age, riding without proper training by horse and rider, etc. strike me very differently here in Mongolia. The horse is a beloved and respected creature, and treated as sacred. I don't see herds of emaciated, lame horses, or animals that have become aggressive with pain or mistrust of humans. The Mongolian horse is a sturdy creature, and needs less in the way of hoof and other care than the pampered breeds we keep stateside. Also, he has free roam of nature and thus, unlike our animals kept behind fences, if the grazing is poor can roam as he pleases and thus has no need of hay or other fodder. In the case of *Zyd*, yes, animals die, but on asking how old the Mongolian horse lives to be, I was told anywhere from 20 to 40, which is the same range as our American horses. On

livestock, one expends the necessary recourses to make sure they are in a condition to profit the owner. Without knowing, I, and other American horse owners, exceed that, because we subconsciously view the horse as a pet. This isn't to say that the Mongolian horse is less loved. Amgalansuren used the phrase "beloved stallion," more times than I could count during our interview. But the relationship between horse and horseman is different in Mongolia than America, and typically more relaxed.

There *are* certain Mongolian horses on whom great effort and resources are expended, namely on racehorses. A talented trainer puts in a month of hard work, waking up in the middle of the night, to adhere his horse to a strict dietary and exercise regime in a process known as "sweating out." Udaa-Bayer and other talented trainers who have made a name for themselves will be able to sell horses that they have trained at a high price. Whereas a typical Mongolian horse will sell for somewhere in the neighborhood of 300,000 tugrik, Udaa-Bayer had just sold several horses, the cheapest of which went for 1 million.

It is racehorses, typically, to whom supplements, injections, and special feed are given. Of the people I spoke to, Amgalansuren claimed to give his horses no additional feed or supplements whatsoever. The Mongolian horse eats grass, I was told. Bat-Erdene gave nothing to his herd but kept his riding horses on a winter diet of hay. This seemed a matter of convenience, as he could ride the same horse without having to rotate through the herd, as I will explain in depth later. Others gave oats, and assorted vitamins, and even, I was told, of injections. In Khuvsgul I was told *hochir*, a type of salt, was often given, and in

MungunMorit on the road our car stopped at a *ger* where a whole herd of horses was grazing right outside. Usually the herd is some distance from the *ger*, unless they are about to pull horses from it. When I asked why they were so close to home I was told by Sanchir the horses were tired (the Mongolian euphemism for near death following a rough winter) and were thus being given salt.

Monkh-Erdene actually gives all of his horses oats as well as supplements: some sort of saline substance, “шүүг,” and something called “кэвэг.” Due to thieves and wolves he only has a herd of two geldings and two mares right now. Nyamgavaa, an older herder who seemed to me an excellent horseman, also gives vitamins (A and C) and Ivomec, a dewormer, which really surprised me. The bottle he showed me was in Bat-Erdene’s *ger*, which implies to me that Bat-Erdene also uses dewormer. In contrast, Rentsendavaa actually pulled a worm from the anus of a horse we were gelding and showed it to me. His perspective was that such a worm was bad, but the worms which lived in the stomach were healthy. Thus one can see what a wide range of attitudes and practices there are when it comes to the feeding and oral medication of the Mongolian horse. At the same time, the American scoop of grain and the steady supply of hay seem completely foreign. “The Mongolian Horse loses about 30 percent of its weight in the winter and spring with is regained in the summer and autumn.”⁵ However, some starve to death during and after the winter.

This was one facet of Mongolian horsemanship I struggled to come to terms with. Starvation and exposure are preventable causes of death in livestock. I felt uncomfortable prying into the matter in depth since a snow *Zyd* had occurred

⁵ B. Bayarsaikhan, *Traveling by Mongolian horses*, p. 102

this past winter. Many people's large livestock were killed, and the loss of those horses was clearly painful. I did see that animals which were emaciated received a higher standard of care to help them recover. For instance, in MungunMorit there was a mare tether by the *ger* with her young foal because she was too skinny to be with the herd. Udaa-Bayer also told me how horses are used differently by season. A fall horse was fat and could be ridden on long journeys. As he described it, it had grass in its belly. A spring horse had water in its belly and was unsuitable for such intense exertion.⁶ But barring these distinctions, when it comes to maintaining the weight of a Mongolian horse, nature is allowed to take her course.

Nature also reigns supreme when it comes to grooming and hoof care. Horses in the countryside, at least, go unshod and the feet untrimmed. The Mongolian horse is never bathed except by the rain, I was told.⁷ When I asked what horse equipment people owned, a brush and a wooden sweat scraper for after racing were usually present. The sweat scraper Bat-Erdene owned was elaborately carved with four mythical beasts which served as emblems of luck, I was told.

As to mane care, the horse's mane carries great significance in Mongolia, and how it is cut varies from region to region. Universally, the stallion's mane is left uncut; the longer and shaggier his mane, the more potent his ability to protect his herd. On other horses it is cropped close to the neck with a pair of scissors. A small section of mane is left long, right above the withers among all horses. The mane is not cut during the winter, for the warmth of the horse. The Darkhad cut

⁶ Udaa-Bayer, 5/19/2011

⁷ Interview with Amgalan-Bataar, 4/12/2011

the forelock but not, interestingly, the bridle path. I read that the tail is left uncut, but at the gelding I witnessed the very tip of the tail of all the horses we gelded was cut. When I saw Amgalansuren cut his horses' mane, he told me to collect the hair; one mustn't throw it away ("khayakh boloogui", in Mongolian.) Every time I saw a horse's mane be cut it was the same thing; the hair was respectfully gathered up. Rentsendavaa even had a pile of horse hair in his *ger*. It was the tail of a horse that had died naturally during the winter, and he had gathered the hair to braid into a strong rope. Horse hair, he told me, is better than leather when it gets wet-you can simply shake the water right out of it.

Other parts of the horse's body also hold special significance. All across Mongolia, skulls of beloved horses are lain on *Ovoos*, stone mounds that are worshipped by Mongolians as part of the shamanic tradition, as signs of respect. Bat-Erdene also told me, as we tucked into a sheep's skull for lunch, that when the horse is killed for food its skull is left in the field, because of the horse's sanctity. Among the Darkhad, I saw the curious phenomenon of horse hooves and skulls, tied together in the trees. Rentsendavaa explained that the foot of man must never rest on the skull of the horse, so the bones are put up high. Also, that a deceased horses' spirit, if happy, will bring prosperity to it's owners herd. An unhappy spirit, in contrast, will cause the owner's herd to dwindle to nothing. Death during *Zyd* was not the mark of an angry ghost, however. Wolf attacks and the like were.

Given this high respect for the horse, I found it interesting, then, that Mongolians eat horsemeat. Actually, it is considered purer than other forms of

meat: “Because the horse does not get diseases that other livestock become sick of, [sic] such as tuberculosis and other inflammation diseases, its meat and milk are considered to be clean.”⁸ Amgalansuren did mention that beloved stallions were never slaughtered and eaten. In MungunMorit and in Khuvsgul, however, I found that to be untrue. When asked how old stallions, the most respect of all Mongolian horses, were treated, Amgalansuren said an old one should be allowed to live its days out, or perhaps, if it was unloved, to be sold (to a kill buyer for the meat, when I wondered who would buy it). In MungunMorit a more practical attitude prevailed: eat it. This practicality didn’t strike me as at odds with other Mongolian conceptions regarding the sacred. Mongolians will also eat the leftover offerings on the family shrine.

Culling of the stallion in one manner or another is incredibly important in the Mongolian herd; it is how breeding is controlled. There are significant regional differences in this, as well as a great deal of personal opinion. Among the Darkhad I spoke to, a new stallion is traded for from among neighboring herds every three years, to prevent inbreeding, since at two a filly becomes sexually mature. Elsewhere I was told that a stallion understands and will not breed with his own daughters. A stallion guards his herd until his old age, when the horseman begins to look for a new breeding prospect.

Selection of this prospect is done on a variety of grounds. As in America, color, conformation, disposition, speed, and lineage all vary, and different individuals esteem them in different order. Color and speed were the qualities which vied for the top spot in order of importance. Desirable color varies by area,

⁸ *Traveling by Mongolian horses*, p. 158

and if you travel across Mongolia you will see the horses change color with the landscape. Among the Darkhad, white is most desirable. Nyamgavaa, on the other hand, said white was the *least* desirable, preferring dun (“khongor”) or a dark color such as bay or black (“baraan”). Within the breed at large I have seen almost every color and marking, from leopard spots to manes with dorsal stripes.

As for confirmation, which a good American breeder places at the top of their list, Mongolians seemed surprised when I asked about it, and struggled to get at the concept. Certainly, size of the horse matters and this is a regional preference. Mountainous and cold regions have shorter horses, whereas the horses of the steppe are taller. Regardless of height, however, the Mongolian horse should have thick bones. A broad chest, thick legs, and a large barrel are all sought after. The head should be large, and a roman nose is desirable, not a dished one, because it is said that a roman nose helps the horse eat grass better.⁹ Lastly, I heard this from many different people: the horse, when walking, should have the footprints of its hind feet fall outside of, or on, the hoof prints of the forefeet. And the mane and hair of a horse is also important, because a large and hairy horse is seen, not only as a better stallion prospect, but as having a better chance against the cold. When discussing confirmation, the perpetual struggle against that omnipresent threat came up a lot. Mongolian horses have been bred to weather the difficult climate, which large, Western horses are incapable, I was told, are incapable of handling.

Though everyone I spoke to mentioned that a horse should be tall, they all also mentioned that this was limited by its ability to survive the winter. The

⁹ Interview with Monk-Erdene

Mongolian horse is strong enough to do the grueling work demanded of it, carrying large men who would never be mounted on such a small horse (averaging 150cm, although a precise measurement system for talking about horse height, such as ‘hands’ are used in the West, is unknown¹⁰) in America. This strength also applies to their ability as pack animals Darkhad horses, known for being particularly strong, can carry 150 kilograms in weight, with the strongest being able to pack 300 kilogram, but weighing only 250 kilograms, on average, itself.¹¹

All this serves as a rough guide for determining the physical quality of a horse. Many more considerations of confirmation go into breeding or purchasing a desirable mount in Mongolia, though not all people are perhaps well versed in verbalizing these specifics, though, as mentioned earlier, recognition of them on sight is part of what distinguishes an adept horseman.

Lastly, with regards to the quality of a horse, Mongolians consider the lineage of the horse, both of the dam and of the sire. Mongolian horses, however, have no papers, and, actually, no names. A horse’ pedigree is known in the area in which it resides. A prospective buyer must ask the locals, particularly elders, who are knowledgeable on such subjects, about the background of his horse. I was told that in the past many generations of a horse’ lineage were known. Nowadays, that information has been lost.¹²

Out of curiosity, I asked the horsemen to tell me of a famous horse in their area, and in Mongolian history. In America, certain horses are well known, for

¹⁰ Interview with Monk-Erdene

¹¹ Words of Rentsendavaa, Interview with Bat Saikhan

¹² Interview with Amgalan-Bataar

excelling in a discipline, or for being sires of a breed. Any serious devotee of Harness racing has heard the name *Messenger*, and this was a horse born in the 18th century. When conducting the research for this article, I discovered that even *Messenger*'s exact lineage itself could be traced. These are the advantages of breed registries. I was also surprised that no one could tell me of a famous historical horse, especially given the fame of Chinggis Khan and his reputation as a horseman, but upon picking my brain realized that I couldn't think of such a horse by name, either.

On the other hand, many people I talked to could remember more recently famous horses. Typically these horses had excelled in the local *Nadaam* races, and thus had gained fame. Though the Mongolian horse is unnamed, they were distinguished by color, marking, and feature, as well as by their trainer's name.

Then there are the less distinguished horses, of course, which must be gelded. Gelding is performed in the springtime. Horses are aged three or older, depending on the robustness of the horse. A horse gelded later will be *larger* but unrulier and perhaps lazy.¹³ Horses are pulled from the herd, and lain down in a field with their legs tied. An incision is made into the scrotal sack and the testicle pulled out. After the ligament which attaches it is cut, the vein is held with a wooden implement for the job, while the testicle is skewered on another implement and twisted until it separates from the body. Following the gelding I witness in Khuvsgul, a mixture of table salt and tobacco was put into the incision to staunch the wound. Elsewhere, the vein was cauterized. Afterwards, the testes were put onto a plate (another instance of nothing being wasted or thrown away)

¹³ Udaa-Bayer, 5/19/2011

and sampled raw by those present. They are believed to be good for the kidneys. Then they were taken back to the *ger* and sautéed with oil, salt, and a little onion. Everyone ate of them, men and women alike. This surprised me; in America eating animal testes, seen being imbued with virility, is a man's act.

Branding is also often, though not always, performed on Mongolian horses starting from when they are a yearling. Each horseman has his own iron brand which he purchases. According to "*Traveling by Mongolian Horse*" there are a variety of designs which are chosen from. Branding is managed in the same way as gelding, though it is done in the fall, for the health of the horse. Following branding, the host throws a mini *Nadaam* of his own and invites the surrounding community to celebrate. Gelding and branding are communal activities. During my interview with Monk-Erdene, Bat-Erdene was present. I asked who helped with these activities and Bat-Erdene chimed in that in Mongolia, whoever is around will help with whatever needs doing, that it's not a question. There is a great sense of camaraderie. If someone goes into town his neighbors herd his livestock without thinking twice of it. In Khuvsgul, following the gelding, I saw that Rentsendavaa and Davaa, having helped Batsaikhan with the gelding of his herd, each were given 500 tugrik in payment.

If gelding and branding are major rituals in the life of the young American horse, they are nothing next to the care and effort put into training it, which is a months long process involving slow and steady work put in on a daily basis. In Mongolia, things are rather different. Firstly, there are two separate ways in which a horse is schooled. Because mares are milked in Mongolia, there is the process of

tying the horse at line which is accomplished at the age of a year. This corresponds to the American practice of halter-breaking foals, only it serves a practical purpose as well.

The making of *airag* is of huge importance in Mongolia. It serves as a needed source of vitamins in the diet¹⁴, and in the olden days in summer Mongolians subsisted only upon dairy products including *airag*, although this practice is rapidly changing. Though I had not asked about *airag* production at all, Monk-Erdene insisted upon telling me, because it is a vital part of Mongolian horsemanship. Mares are milked 6 times a day, every 2 hours, during the summer (they foal at some point in the spring or summertime). This milk is churned in a bag (“beaten”) with a starter culture and because of its high sugar content ferments into a low-alcohol drink rapidly¹⁵. Onorsaikhan, my host mother, was telling me that the mixture must be beaten 6000 strokes. All participate, beating the bag whenever they have the chance. Mongolian mares are not typically broke to saddle if they are fertile, but Nyamgavaa told me his whole herd was trained. The mares, I asked, are broken? Of course, he said, to be milked. Thus, in a way I would never think, as Americans do not milk their mares, *airag* making results in training of both mare and foal.

After this schooling as a yearling, a Mongolian horse has either one year or two to wait until he is broken to ride. Those who ride two year olds specify that

¹⁴ Monk-Erdene

¹⁵ *Traveling by Mongolian Horse* p. 199

this must be done by someone light, for the sake of the horse' bones.¹⁶ Typically a horse is broken as a three-year old, or any point after when it would be needed by its owner. Needed, of course, is regional. In Galuut soum, a desert region, fresh horses were roped from the herd every 4th day. They were hobbled at night and watered with the herd during the day. In Khuvsgul I was told that horses were ridden for 10 to 15 days at a clip, depending on the quality of the horse. And in MungunMorit Bat-Erdene rode the same horse the whole time and would keep it on hay, also having one other horse which he would alternate into and out of the herd occasionally. Thus the number of broken horses a horseman might need would depend entirely upon how heavily he was using them and how often they would be rotated to and from the herd. According to Udaa-Bayer lazy horsemen might have a whole herd of unbroken horses. As to the breaking process, it is remarkable simple. Rope the horse, bridle and saddle it and ride directly until it is very tired and gives in. Then, begin to teach it to steer by seesawing on the rein. Some tie the horse apart from the herd for 2 days to tire it before breaking it to saddle.¹⁷ For a horse with vices, the cure is equally simple. A kicking horse should have its legs bound. A biting horse should be approached by grabbing firmly a hold of the bit. A bucking horse must be tired out.

I am of two minds on this rough training. Many Mongolian horses are less tame than American ones and more liable to kick a careless horseman, I have observed. But they are also *less* dangerous in other regards. At a gathering, many

¹⁶ Udaa-Bayer specified children around the ages of 11 or 12. Amgalan-Bataar suggested much younger children, but also was the only person I spoke to who said he trains yearlings to ride, because they are too young and weak to buck!

¹⁷ Interview with Nyamgavaa

horses will be tied closely together with no ill effects. Likewise, Mongolians seem unperturbed about riding unknown horses very close to each other, a practice we avoid in America lest the horse buck, bite, spook, or kick. When I visited Bat-Erdene, he had recently fallen from a very wild and poorly schooled horse. He had bruises and cuts on his face and was taking injections for an injury to his leg. After falling, he said, he had lain in bed for three days. Horse injuries are, however, all too common in America as well. Would careful schooling have avoided this problem? My own horse, well schooled, still tends towards the wild side, and bucks and rears terribly. The best remedy I have found for this is consistent, daily work, and this is something the Mongolian horse receives in abundance.

Other than training, Westerners are fond of solving the problems of a difficult horse by a change in tack. Either a new saddle should be fitted (perhaps there is a pain issue?) or a stronger bit used, or some such similar solution. The Mongolian horse is ridden virtually under the same tack regardless, and I will describe it at some length, since it is a crucial part of Mongolian horsemanship.

The Mongolian bridle is made of a length of leather, yak leather being preferred in regions where the yak is to be found. It is typically a single piece of leather which is knotted together at various junctures to form a solid piece which may or may not have a forehead band or nose strap. The more elaborate and expensive bridles are wrapped in silver, with decorative metal pieces at all of the junctures, and are beautiful works of art. In addition to the reins, which are knotted together and held in one hand to neck reign, there is an additional line of

about a meter, which is used by the horseman for a variety of purposes. Loosely coiled, it is held in hand along with the reins, and is used like a whip on the rump to spur the horse forward. Or it is used to strike and frighten cattle that are being driven onwards. It is also used to tether the horse. Some Mongolian horsemen ride only in a bridle, in which case this line is attached to the cheek piece, but other areas both a bridle and halter are used, in which case it attaches to the halter.

The Mongolian bit is a snaffle bit, and very simple in design, being thicker for a gentler horse and thinner for a wilder one. The cheek piece is either round or a bar, with the bar reserved for more unruly horses. These minor changes are the only differences in tack that are made regarding the needs of different horses.

The Mongolian saddle consists of a wooden frame, which varies in shape in a variety of styles, although typically with a high pommel, covered in cloth, and two long side panels of leather, oftentimes stamped with a decorative design. It has small leather ties at its four corners for the purpose of tying packed goods to. Its stirrups are large round disks upon which almost the whole foot rests, toe down, heel up, and tied together when the rider has limited ability. Most distinctive is the fact that the Mongolian saddle is hard. It also has a varying number of beautiful metal pieces, about the size of a silver dollar, but raised, the first two of which (if there are more than two) are placed under thigh of the rider, right, at least, when I ride, where my muscle grips the saddle. This is difficult to get used to, although Bat-Erdene, when I asked, told me because his leg muscles are firm, he doesn't notice it. In Khuvsgul I noticed that Batsaikhan,

Rentsendavaa, and Davaa all rode with Russian saddles. I was told the Mongolian saddle is hard and difficult for an older person to ride in. But elsewhere, from what I have seen, the Mongolian saddle remains popular.

The other pieces of tack used frequently by the Mongolian horseman are the tashoor, or a small braided leather crop, the uurga, and the lasso. The uurga and lasso are used for herding and pulling horses from the herd. Among the Darkhad, with their round pens, only a lasso is needed. Elsewhere, both are used, with the uurga being the tool I most saw employed. A special horse in each herd is the one from whose back the roping is done, and the non-Darkhad I spoke to all had such a horse. The uurga is a long wooden stick with a loop of leather at its end. Its leather end is slipped over the head of the animal being roped, and the uurga horse stops deep as the other animal struggles to free itself. In the case of a horse, a second person then goes and halts it while it is thus caught.

As with everything else related to the horse, horse tack is imbued with symbolism. To give someone a tashoor is forbidden, as it will sever a friendship. To exchange bridles, on the other hand, is a deep and committed sign of friendship. Bat-Erdene received a silver bridle worth over 400,000 tugrik from his friend when he was 12 years old, and gave him one in return. I was deeply honored when he, upon explaining the ritual, then proceeded to give me a simpler leather one he had made himself. The bridle has other symbolic significance; it is also hung from the *tono* of the *ger*, to protect it against bad storms. Lastly, when one enters the *ger*, the horse tack is always located in one of two locations. Either it is in the back of the *ger*, to the right of the altar, for this is a place of honor for

the sacred horse, or, when space doesn't permit, as in a smaller *ger* used for frequent moves, it is located to the left of the door. Rentsendavaa wouldn't explain the reason, saying he was a bad horseman for putting in there!¹⁸

The Mongolian horseman is capable of making all of his tack himself, buying only the metal parts of the bridle and the saddle wood (because it is very complicated to make) from the town. Except for certain instances where a vet may be called for, he is thus completely independent in his ability to manage his horses, though a community of people also exists to help him at every step where additional hands are needed to complete a chore, or the wisdom of an elder's knowledge called for. From the birthing of new foals to the slaughter of aged horses, and at every stage in their life in between, the Mongolian horseman has the knowledge and skills to manage his herd. There are also individuals with uncommon talent in one area, such as race trainers, tack makers, or those experienced at horse healing. But all each Mongolian horseman exhibits a degree of self reliance that the average American horseman, I would say, does not.

In America, we speak of great horse trainers, or of good farriers. We mention someone is a talented rider, and often they are riding a high quality mount bred by someone who specializes in that. It is a much more complex, specialized system, but for sheer breadth of talent as a horseman, from my time spent among Mongolian horseman, I would say their reputation as the best horseman of the world is undoubtedly deserved. The only English language volume on the art of Mongolian horsemanship, *Traveling by Mongolian Horse*, is a step towards sharing the practices of the Mongolian horseman with the world,

¹⁸ Interview with Batsaikhan

but it is only a small start. It is poorly translated, to begin with, and its scope does not cover the full range of topics which would be of interest to someone seeking to learn, step by step, the fundamentals of Mongolian horsemanship. Hopefully this paper has illuminated some of the most basic of Mongolian horsemanship fundamentals, and the culture surrounding them. Mongolian horse culture is changing as rapidly as the rest of its culture, under the increased influence of technology and the west.

The herders I spoke to still practiced traditional methods, and denied that life had changed since the days of their grandfathers. Then I mentioned the advent of the car, and motorcycle, which are becoming ubiquitous in the countryside. Certainly, this has changed transportation. It has also changed the work day in areas where horses were used to haul water. But most distressingly, some herders are beginning to use the motorcycle to herd, a fact that all I spoke to lamented. With hope, though, horsemanship will remain as culturally vitally in the coming years as it has been historically.

I end this paper with an anecdote. When I was talking with Bat-Erdene and Sanchir during my second visit with them, they asked if I remembered the day we met. As our host families awaited to meet us, the students were having a horse safety course and practicing riding. When I got on the horse, without knowing any better, Bat-Erdene looked over and told Sanchir that I was a good rider. He hoped I was the student his family would get. As luck would have it, I was their assigned student, and our relationship now transcends that, to one of close friendship. Hearing them relate this tale to me, months later, warmed my

heart. To be recognized as a good rider by people who are renowned throughout history for their horses is a great compliment. It also speaks volumes that a love and a knowledge of horses commends one's character to the Mongolian.

Hopefully Mongolians themselves preserve this love and knowledge. Their traditional methods, the very ones detailed here, are the reason a tiny nation rose to such great heights of power. It has been seen in history before: the Mongolian horse and his rider can conquer the world.

Glossary of terms, in English and Mongolian:

Airag: a lightly alcoholic beverage of fermented mare's milk

Gaited: a horse who paces, a gait where the horses legs move two at a time, similar to a trot, but where the laterally rather than diagonally opposed legs move together

Gelding: Castration of a horse

Ger: The portable housing structure widely used in Mongolia and other parts of Central Asia

Nadaam: a festival celebrated in the summer, during which competitions of manhood, racing, shooting with a bow and arrow, and wrestling, are held

Negdel: the herder's collectives which managed state owned livestock under Socialism

Uurga: The tool employed by Mongolian horsemen as a lasso, consisting of a long wooden stick with a leather loop at the end large enough to place over a horse's head

Tack: The saddle, bridle, and other gear under which a horse is worked

Yearling: a foal of one year

Zyd: the term for the periodic winters that occur in Mongolia which are abnormally harsh and cause livestock devastation

References:

1. D. Batsaikhan. Formal Interview, Khuvsgul Aimag, Rentsenlum Sum, 5/20/2011
2. D. Davaa, Formal Interview, Khuvsgul Aimag, Erinchinlum Sum, 5/22/2011
3. S. Rentsendavaa, Formal Interview, Khuvsgul Aimag, Erinchinlum Sum, 5/22/2011 (morning)
4. S.Rentsendavaa, Formal Interview, Khuvsgul Aimag, Erinchinlum Sum, 5/22/2011 (evening)
5. R. Udaa-Bayer, Informal interview, Khuvsgul Aimag, Tsaganoor Sum, 5/18/2011
6. R. Udaa-Bayer, Informal interview, Khuvsgul Aimag, Tsaganoor Sum, 5/19/2011
7. L.Bat-Erdene, Formal Interview, Tov Aimag, MungunMorit Sum, 5/09/2011
8. L.Bat-Erdene, Formal Interview, Tov Aimag, MungunMorit Sum, 5/10/2011
9. G. Monk-Erdene, Formal Interview, Tov Aimag, MungunMorit Sum, 5/11/2011
10. D. Nyamgavaa, Formal Interview, Tov Aimag, MungunMorit Sum, 5/12/2011
11. T. Amgalansuren, Formal Interview, Galuut soum, Bayankhongor, 4/12/2012
12. B. Bayarsakhain, *Traveling by Mongolian Horse*, Interpress Co., Ltd, Ulaanbaatar, Mongolian, 2005
13. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/mg.html>
14. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Standardbred>
15. *Nomadic Culture and Globalization Student Handbook*