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# Grey to Green: The Wolf as Culture and Profit in Mongolia and the Importance of Its Survival

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# **Grey to Green: The Wolf as Culture and Profit in Mongolia and the Importance of its Survival**



Report by Samuel LeGrys  
SIT Mongolia  
Fall 2009

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## **Abstract**

*“The king of this place could be Bear; it can capture and eat anything, even roe deer and moose. But I think sometimes Bear is eaten by Wolf, working as a pack. It means that Wolf is the king of the king” – Joogdernamjil, Dadal Hunter*

The grey wolf is a key figure in Mongolian culture, representing not only the male ancestor behind the bloodline of Chinggis Khaan, but also the messenger of heaven, sent to punish those who disrespect the spirit masters of the land. Countryside herders and UB businessmen alike honor the wolf as a spiritually powerful animal, but they also hate it for the damage it inflicts on their livestock. The wolf-Mongol relationship is like an unbalanced penny: both sides make the coin, but it always lands one way up. The economic side is simply too appealing to be passed up, as the wolf’s connection to heaven makes its body parts profitable as alternative medicine. It does not help that the grey dog has been attacking livestock more frequently, especially since with privatization and capitalism the herders’ welfare is directly connected to the strength of his herd. It is economically sound to hunt wolves in great numbers, and that is exactly what modern Mongolians are doing. However, this could have dire consequences for not just the wolf, but for the environment and the nation’s pride. Eliminating such a culturally important being from the steppe would be detrimental to the Mongolian population as a whole.

## **Introduction**

### **Previous Experience**

A creative writing major from Baltimore, Maryland is an unlikely candidate for environmental research in Mongolia. Yet, although wildlife is not a part of my formal study, it has been deeply significant to me personally for many years. As the son of two scuba divers, the nephew of a naturalist, and the student of a Montana wild man, I have noticed the fauna and flora around me since my first bug collection. Prior to studying wolves, I collected and raised insects native to Maryland and Virginia, dabbled with bird photography, and gotten my feet wet snorkeling.

Wolves have been interesting to me only recently. When choosing my study abroad program, I initially wanted to go to the Arctic Circle, settling on a program in Nunavut, the northernmost territory in Canada. Once there, I would live with Inuit people, studying their political grievances and their unique form of shamanism, which focuses on healing through touch. I soon discovered that wolves, though few in number throughout most of North America, maintained a relatively strong population in Nunavut. I decided to buy a book on the subject: *Never Cry Wolf* by Farley Mowat, a very extensive account of the biologist's time living in the field, studying wolves at point-blank in the 1950s. His findings were ground-breaking at the time. Initially sent out to prove that the wolves were responsible for the disappearance of the great herds of elk in Canada, he discovered that actually it was humans who were to blame for wiping out the

many thousands of deer. The wolves could rarely hunt the large elk; instead 95% of their diet came from mice, abundant in the tundra weeds. He also disproved the idea of the grey wolf as a killing machine, uncovering their true nature as more curious and social than murderous.

Soon after, I bought a book on wolf behavior. Reading it taught me about wolf communication, hunting tactics, breeding habits, and how to recognize their tracks. Besides Mowat's account and this guide to the animal, all resources analyzed for this report were read and reviewed during my time in Mongolia.

## **Objectives**

I understood quickly upon my arrival in Mongolia that the grey wolf, although enjoying a unique place in Mongolian culture, is hunted enthusiastically, almost hatefully. For my independent study, I wanted to profile the Mongolian relationship with the wolf, not only because I thought it was an interesting contradiction, but because I believed (and still do so) that many are misguided in their fear or loathing of the wolf. To accurately map the Mongolian sentiments towards this animal, I wanted to interview as many different kinds of people in as many different locations as possible. In addition, I wanted to go to areas with high numbers of wolves so I could interview herders and hunters who have a lot of experience with the animal.

My understanding of the wolf-man relationship in Mongolia was that it is very complicated and multi-dimensional. On one hand, the wolf is the Mongolian's most ancient ancestor (1 Secret History), and in the other, it is a

hated predator that hunts cattle, goats, and sheep – man’s food supply. I sought to describe the relationship by examining six components of the wolf in Mongolian culture: as a hunting target, as a predator of livestock, as a historical figure, as a subject of art and folklore, as an animal living in a suitable or unsuitable environment (measuring human impact on the wolf), and as a spiritual or religious figure. These were my targets; if I focused on these areas, then I thought I would have as complete a picture of the subject in the limited time I had to conduct my studies.

## **Hypothesis**

I already knew that the Mongolian-wolf relationship was one of extremes – respect on one end, hatred on the other. The wolf is held in great regard as a spiritually significant and lucky animal, yet it is killed ruthlessly and in alarming numbers. With this in mind, I predicted that the wolf is a powerful symbol, but is seen as more of a nuisance or pest to get rid of when it is actually seen in the flesh.

## **Methodology**

### **Dadal Strategies**

The trip to Dadal in the northeast was essential to my research. Since my topic details the wolf-*Mongolian* relationship, I needed to get as much of a variety in my sources as possible to ensure some degree of accuracy in my report (See “Reflections” on page 32). My nine-day excursion to Dadal, provided me with

informative interviews from the countryside, showed me clues about the animal I was researching, and gave me the chance to participate in a wolf hunt.

Since I had very little time to conduct my research, I targeted people who had frequent contact with wolves. The forested area of Dadal was perfect with many hunters and many herders who had a lot of experience with the animals. My reasoning was that these would be the most knowledgeable people on the subject, and I believe I was right. I was rewarded every day in Dadal with new and important information. By the end of the trip I had gathered thirteen interviews, most of which were very relevant and very long, the longest being a two and a half hour visit to Zuiduidavga, the 45<sup>th</sup> Mongolian to receive the “Champion Hunter” award from the central government.

I found it easy to concentrate on my work in Dadal, because signs of wolves were everywhere. Besides the talk of eaten livestock, there were the tracks in the snow and of course, the dead animals on the back of trucks. One night, I was offered to join in on a wolf hunt. I readily agreed, imagining the methods I heard from my interviews: men fanning through the woods, scaring the wolves towards the hunter waiting for them on the other side of the forest. The actual affair was much less honorable. A man shined a spotlight out the window while a hunter sat in the back seat with me and his gun, ready to shoot anything we saw in the spotlight. We never left the car. Still, this was a very good experience for me, as I saw first-hand what classical hunters like Zuiduidavga were talking about: the new generation of killers.



It should also be noted that I stopped in Mongolmort for about 24 hours on the way to Dadal. This town boasted a similar environment as my final destination, so I was able to get an interview relevant to my project. I would have gotten more if my timing was a little better; all of the hunters were scouring the nearby mountain range for wild boar to kill.

Why did I choose to go to the countryside? My project is illustrating the Mongolian-wolf relationship, and although the central city boasts almost half of the entire country's population, it is governed by much different interests than in the countryside. Obviously a city is different than rural pastureland, but the entire mentality is different. A common complaint is that people in the city are forgetting the environment as they embrace faster cars and designer clothes. They do not live in nature anymore, whereas the herders in Dadal are immersed in it. Plus, an ethnic subgroup, the Buryats, are very prominent in Dadal, giving me a little more variance in my interviews than I would have gotten if I stayed in Ulaanbaatar.

### **UB Strategies**

After my trip to Dadal, I had a wealth of hunter and herder interviews at my disposal. However, I had nothing to compare these results to, no input from professors, wildlife researchers, or artists. Luckily, I knew how to find them. I set-up a meeting with my advisor, Odonchimeg, from the Wildlife Conservation Society, and told her exactly what I needed. She gave me a list of contacts knowledgeable on environmental issues, including Badam from the Ministry of

the Environment and Gombobaatar from NUM. I also got in touch with Odgerel, the financial director of the Mongolian Arts Council. She gave me a catalogue on a painter's work on wolves, directions to a local art studio, and then agreed to answer some questions herself. Besides the sources these two gave me, I had a list of names I marked down from before the ISP period started. I sent an email to every person on this list (eight individuals), working under the philosophy that the more people I contacted the more help I would receive. This turned out to be true: five of the eight responded back with useful information, with one, Katie Scharf, sending me her full reports on wildlife trade in the East. Sadly, they were draft copies and I was told not to cite anything, only to use them for guidance.

My main philosophy through all of this was to get the greatest variety of sources I could while still maintaining relevancy to my ISP proposal. I felt like this was my only hope at having any measure of correctness in my paper, and I think it worked out quite well.

### **Obstacles Encountered**

I cannot emphasize enough how small of a window I was working in. A month is a very limited space to fully understand even one small aspect of a culture as rich and in transition as Mongolia's. This was further amplified by the fact that because of H1N1, public transportation in and out of Ulaanbaatar was shut down. This meant that my movement was realistically restricted to one place outside of Ulaanbaatar, considering that it is a 12-hour drive to areas with high

wolf concentrations. The two-week ban on public transportation was applied six hours before I was due to depart for the countryside, delaying my trip for three days. Although this might not sound like a lot of time, those three days were without interviews, bags had to be unpacked and repacked, and supplies had to be replaced. I tried to make the most out of this down-time by researching sources online.

Since a wildlife project values my personal interests, I brought a fair load of bias to the table. I did not know what to expect during the ISP time, but I did start the whole process thinking that hunters were the enemy. On a train ride back to the city from East Gobi, I found myself suddenly in an interview with a guide for foreign hunters. After he answered my questions, he said that I was very unprofessional and he wouldn't give me his name. As small of a moment as this might have been, it stuck with me for the entire trip to Dadal. I made sure during the drive that my new questions were satisfactory and clear of any indicators that I was picking sides. In the end, it worked out well, and I came to appreciate the sobering comment I got from "Mr. Unprofessional."

## **Acknowledgements**

First and foremost, I would like to thank Gabagana for being my teacher, translator, and my friend. I dragged him over 200 kilometers away from his family to the -29 degrees Fahrenheit cold of the northern forests, subjected him to interviews where hunters simply talked over him when he wanted to translate, and

forced him to explore the woods with me instead of enjoying his free time. This report simply would not have been possible without his hard work and character.

I would also like to thank Nathan Wenzel. My trip to Dadal would have been much different without his guidance, his company, and his almas research to lighten the mood.

I am so pleased to know Odonchimeg and the people at WCS. Although I met with them during the final days of my research, the contacts and information they gave to me were invaluable.

Boldbataar, professor at the Institute of Science and Technology, was my last interview and by far one of the most useful. His English could be better and my Mongolian is dreadful, but somehow we managed. His article, "Spiritual Strings," cemented my thesis on the wolf as it relates to Mongolian culture.

Thank you, Gombobataar from NUM, for taking multiple hours out of your evening to meet with a foreign student who wanted to talk about birds and ended up discussing forms of wolves.

I am also thankful for Britt Van whose charming personality and dedication to her project made it easy to stay up past my bed time working on mine.

I greatly appreciate Ulzi-bagsh, Baatar, Ulzi-Akh, Baigal, and the rest of the SIT staff for guiding me through my experience in Mongolia. Also, best regards to Sorma, whose amazing cooking makes it very difficult to leave for home.

Finally, I want to thank my generous family for supporting me on my adventure. I am lucky to have such incredible individuals in my life as my mother, my father, Tammy, and Rick. We will have a lot to catch up on when I return.

## **The Report: Grey to Gold**

The wolf is more than just an animal to Mongolians; it is very meaningful as a cultural symbol of heaven, judgment, and even luck. Yet, despite its significance, the wolf is despised as an enemy of livestock and hunted enthusiastically across the entire country. One month ago, I decided to explore this Mongolian-wolf relationship, simply because it did not make sense. What I found was a long history of respect and superstition, a new way of hunting, and a grim future for both the wolves and the environment they help protect.

### **Cultural Significance: “We are People of the Wolf”**

Old texts say that Poland was founded by a man who watched a great eagle land on a hilltop. He turned to his brothers and exclaimed, “It is here where I will build my kingdom.” Truthfully, it is not uncommon for people to link their creation to animals in nature. The Mongols connect their past to the wolf.

*The Secret History of the Mongols* describes the time of Chinggis Khaan, from approximately 1162 to 1227 AD, when one man united the various nomadic tribes of the Asian steppe under a single banner, creating the modern Mongolian nation-state. *The Secret History* begins with Chinggis’ lineage, stating that the ancient ancestors of his blood line were a blue wolf, “his destiny from Heaven

above,” and a fallow doe (1). This is significant in many ways. First, the fact that the wolf is blue, the same color as the Eternal Sky, means that he is spiritually important, as Shamanism is most concerned with spirits and Heaven, the empty sky (Odgerel). Second, the wolf’s marriage to the “fallow doe” is a major symbol, especially as their children are the Borjigin Mongols, Chinggis Khaan’s clan. Deer are traditionally associated with feminine power, which comes from the Earth. Since the wolf comes from heaven, the source of masculine power, his marriage to the doe is the wedding of Earth and Sky, masculinity and femininity (Boldbaatar). The Borjigin Mongols, therefore, are made of both Heaven and Earth. Last, connecting wolves with Chinggis Khaan is significant, because he is undoubtedly the most celebrated person among the Mongolian people. Anything surrounding the topic of the Great Khaan is important and depicted as heavenly. The Mongolian interpretation of the wolf happens to be both.

This association of wolves and Chinggis Khaan is further amplified after examining the name of his clan: Borjigin. The majority of scholars on the subject agree that the root, “bor,” is related to “buri” a common term for “wolf” in the earliest forms of both Mongolic and Turkic (Spiritual Strings 339). The second syllable is related with “white” in modern Mongolian, which Boldbaatar, historian and archeologist at Mongolia’s Institute of Science and Technology, says is very significant. He writes in “Spiritual Springs,” a report on the history of the use of wolves as symbols in Mongolian culture, “White was the color of heavenly and divine origin, and hence, of the Mongolian aristocracy” (340). On the surface, this second syllable might not seem to relate to wolves, but as the blue ancestor of the

Borjigin clan represented to some extent the Eternal Blue Sky, so do the grey wolves in Mongolian history, art, and folklore.

In an article titled “The Problem of Living with Wildness,” Mary Midgley, a professor at the University of Newcastle, identifies a trend of early humans’ response to nature, particularly to its “large inhabitants” (180). She begins by discussing the very real, physical threat animals like wolves, bears, moose, wild boars and others posed to mankind, but then moves on to the more complicated: “Wild creatures have always been seen as powerful symbols, vessels filled with disturbing meaning... They are mysterious, and mystery can always mean danger” (180). Fear of the unknown is inherent in human nature, so how did early men and women combat this emotion? What enabled them to venture outdoors for food and water when they had heard strange howls the night before? Professor Midgley provides a very plausible answer: they took away the “apartness” of these creatures by identifying with them, giving them roles in their belief system. She writes, “Totemism is a systematic attempt to defuse the psychic dangers presented by otherness” (180). The wolf is one animal that posed a psychological threat to early Mongols, and then was given a unique place within the culture as a reaction. More specifically, the wolf has a key role in shamanism.

“Shamanism” is a sweeping term that is often applied to any non-mainstream, indigenous practice that has spiritual components, but for the sake of consequence, it will be defined in this report as the traditional belief system in Mongolia. Within shamanism, then, is tengerism, which is worship of heaven. “Tenger” in Mongolian literally means “sky.” In shamanism, it is a potent

concept, “the primary cause of all things in the nature of society... and the sole representation of the supernatural masculine power in the entire Universe” (Bira 1). There are two things to note here: first, the masculinity linked to the sky and second, the connection between heaven and society. Should not the spiritual realm and the earthly realm be divided? In a sense they are, but there is a bridge, and that is where the wolf finds its role in the belief system. As the highest-ranking species in the local food chain, the animal is in the “focal position” of the religion, “connecting the divine world with the mortal one, and the natural realm with the social one” (Spiritual Strings 341). Just like the marriage of the blue sky and the earthly feminine, the wolf is both a heavenly spirit and a physical animal.

Even more interesting is how the wolf performs in this role. In the past, natural disasters, including illnesses and animal attacks, were believed to be the wrath of heaven (Spiritual Strings 337). Because of the wolf’s key position within shamanism and since bad weather usually meant loss of livestock, the grey animal became the sky’s messenger, the bringer of destruction. A good example is that of the Yarhai tree, a sacred flora that herders sometimes cut down for horse whips, angering the spirits. In Delgerkhaan, one person commented, “The spirit of the mountains where these trees grow will send a wolf to punish people (by eating their sheep)... we call the lama to calm the spirits in this case (Batsakhaan). In this instance, the wolf is the punishment. By chopping down the important tree, herders like Batsakhaan put their herds in danger of attack. Likewise, “Dayan deerkhui duudlaga,” a shaman prayer, reads “Coming with the arch of the hump-backed wolf/ Coming with the fangs of the mottled wolf;/ My terrible, mighty



sky” (Spiritual Strings 337-8). It is clear here as well that the wolf directly brings retribution, the damage being in its bite and its swiftness, rather than being a theoretical entity whose responsibilities are carried out only in the spirit realm. In short, the animal’s significance to shamanism is extensive, as the wolf fulfills a key role between the spirit world and the physical world, turning spiritual anger into physical retribution.

The wolf’s connection to both heaven and justice has given it an almost supernatural quality among people in the Mongolian countryside. One of the most talked about characteristics is the animal’s intelligence or cleverness, which is often claimed to be paranormally able. The most outrageous story actually made it to the national newspaper with many Mongols insisting that it is true. According to an eyewitness from the Gobi region, a female wolf lost her legs in a metal trap and her mate stole a camel, put her on top, and led her around for many days. The pack animal had no choice, but to obey the wolves, as it was being pulled by the lead-line through its nose (Ariunbaatar). Similarly is the hunting story of the female wolf that also lost her limbs in a trap. The hunters followed her tracks, hopeful for an easy kill, but they found two wolves supporting the injured female with a stick carried between them like a crutch (Gabagana). When asked how these stories could be remotely plausible, an interviewee responded, “Wolves are very smart, they can do whatever they want” (Ariunbaatar).

Perhaps the most significant stories are those about a wolf’s sixth sense or unnatural capability to *know*. An expert on the topic, Zuiduidavga, who killed more than 100 wolves during his hunting career, insists that they always rush the

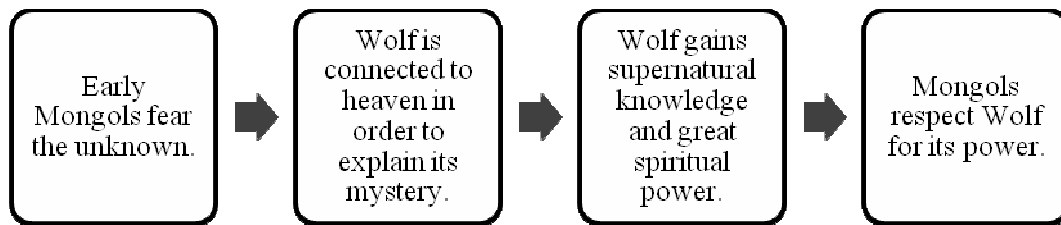
weak hunter if trapped, because that is their best chance to escape (“First Visit”). Additionally, Bohbileg, a local inspector in Dadal, described how wolves are not afraid of non-hunters, especially women or children. He recalled a time when his friend was out chopping wood and suddenly found himself face-to-face with a pair of wolves. They were not afraid of him, because they knew he was not a hunter.

It is difficult not to raise an eye at these tales; short of asking people itself, how could a wild animal possess such intimate knowledge of the humans who live nearby? Even if wolves were somehow living long enough to associate certain smells or qualities with the hunting profession, such a concept is highly implausible. The key is to evaluate these stories for their symbolic meaning rather than their physical or literal meaning. The wolf is more than just an animal in Mongolian culture. The stories of it doing remarkable things – unthinkable in the way we understand these animals physically – are not lies, but rather representations of its supernatural side. The wolf is believed to be a bridge between the spirit world and the physical one, or at the very least connected to heaven. It makes sense then, why a Mongolian would insist a story is true even though the animal is performing on more than just a physical or earthly level.

A great example of this existence in both worlds is the importance of not referring to a wolf by its name. Before a hunt, if someone says the word “chon” (“wolf” in Mongolian), then the next day, the hunters will come home empty-handed, as the wolves were alerted of the danger (Zuiduidavga, “First Visit”). Some hunters go to great lengths to avoid spoiling their pursuit, using secret

signals like horse rolled in an envelope to notify the other men of the next day's plans (Choy Suuren). Herders are also afraid of saying the word, "chon," because of the belief that the wolf will come to the place of whoever says its name (Spiritual Strings 336). At face-value, this practice seems little more than superstition, but the truth is deeper than that, because names are a very important part of respecting the wolf. According to Professor Boldbataar, a belief that started in early Mongolia and continues to today is that an animal's spiritual power is tied directly to its name (Spiritual Strings 336). It is very common to hear "Grey Dog" instead of "wolf." Referring to the being by a derogatory name, such as "Naughty One" or "One with the Big Mouth," is dangerous: if heard by the wolf, the wrath of both heaven and earth will be brought down upon the speaker, most likely in the form of his or her livestock getting eaten (Spiritual Strings 336). Instead, people usually praise the animal as "Lord of the Khangai" (Earth) or as "Divine Dog," "Blue Dog of Heaven," etc. These names will honor the wolf and not anger the spirits that it serves (Spiritual Strings 336). This belief has created hundreds of names for the wolf, as Mongols do not want to anger the creature or alert it of their intentions.

There are many side-effects to linking the wolf with heaven, not the least of them being the Mongols' respect. The creature's role as a messenger from the spirit world is a seat of incredible power, and both herders and hunters developed ways to honor it. Even today, people in Mongolia admire the wolf's intelligence and supernatural qualities. It is clear that the wolf's position in Mongolian culture is multi-faceted because it has undergone stages throughout its development.



In modern Mongolia, the wolf is honored for its position of authority between the two dimensions, heaven and earth. However, this is not the Mongolian-wolf relationship in its entirety – instead just one aspect of a much more complex and often contradictory whole.

### **The Wolf and Economy**

The wolf in Mongolia is firmly connected to heaven and therefore holds much spiritual power; just seeing one in the wild increases an individual's divine fortune. Professor Boldbataar shares the example of his grandmother's funeral in *Spiritual Strings*. The people in mourning saw a wolf in the distance, and exclaimed, "Our grandmother is truly a noble person. The heavens, the earth, and the spirits respect her" (335). Yet, as lucky as it is to spot a wolf, it is luckier to kill one. There is a saying amongst the Mongols that to see the wolf means you are its equal, but to kill the wolf means you are its master (Badam). Boldbataar explains it as "a 'contest' between the human and the wolf on whose fortune is more accepted by the divine powers, [which] reflects the human desire to constantly increase the divinity of his fortune" (334). The implications of this principle are powerful, simply because it is a culture-wide theory. Everyone I interviewed for "Grey to Green," from Ulaanbaatar residents to herders and

hunters from the countryside, was familiar with this saying. Yet, there are many more reasons than this to hunt the wolf. Perhaps most persuasively, it is in a Mongolian's economic interest to kill the animal.

Every part of the wolf is worth something as a trade item. According to the World Bank and WCS publication, *Silent Steppe*, the wolf trade is thriving both inside Mongolia and with its southern neighbor, China. Wolf fur is considered to be one of the warmest available, and its pelts can sell for over \$150 USD in the domestic market and for \$250 USD in Chinese border towns (*Silent Steppe* 99-100). Although this is the single most profitable item, the meat, bones, and organs are all useful for their supposedly medicinal qualities, altogether worth as much as \$200 USD (*Silent Steppe* 100). Even the teeth can be sold as souvenirs to tourists, the State Department Store pricing them anywhere from 7,500 to 25,000 tugrug (approximately \$5 to 20 USD).

Stories of the wolf's medicinal properties rival the outlandishness of the tales regarding its intelligence. Choy Suuren, a professional hunter in Delgerkhaan, praised wolf brain for its ability to heal and prevent mental illness. One simply has to "put it all over his head" to gain the medicinal benefits. The ankle bones are also particularly useful as a remedy for unusual illness. There is a tale in Dadal of a man who could not urinate, and after many days of punishment, he gathered his family and said "Nothing can help me, I must die." Zuiduidavga, the famous hunter from the area, was present at this gathering, and he asked all of the men for their wolf ankle bones. He then boiled the bones in water to make a tonic that the sick man eagerly drank. Thirty minutes later, according to the story,

the man peed, and until his death, he thanked Zuiduidavga for saving his life (Zuiduidavga, “Second Visit”). Like the stories of the wolf as a super-intelligent being, these uses for wolf parts are not grounded in science. Instead, the ideas behind using the wolf as traditional medicine are most likely rooted in the wolf being a heavenly animal. However, “wolf medicine” among Mongols may not be as customary as first thought. Boldbaatar, a professor of history and archeology, agrees that some medicinal associations have been in Mongolian culture for centuries. Eating wolf meat to solve lung problems, as well as consuming the stomach to relieve digestive issues or pains, are two examples of traditional medicine that survived as folk knowledge until modern times. Conversely, the professor said the use of all the organs was most definitely the result of Chinese or Korean influence. He insisted that few ancient Mongols would use the wolf as medicine. This relatively new development then, has spurred on a significant part of the domestic market. Today, the bones, tongue, kidney, and spleen, all of which Boldbaatar suggests have no history with Mongolian medicine, are sold as “traditional” remedies to other Mongolians for a total profit of up to \$50 USD (Silent Steppe 100).

Peculiarly, Ankle bones hold a unique place at the market. An item that only works for men, the wolf ankle bone is said to increase the wearer’s luck, protecting him against evil spirits and accidents (Zuiduidavga, “First Visit”). This belief most likely stems from the idea of heaven being masculine while earth is feminine. Since the wolf is connected to the Eternal Sky, it makes sense how objects from it could eventually be associated with masculine power. Wolf ankle

bones are supposed to be taken from a hunted wolf or stolen from another man, as it symbolizes the passing of spiritual energy (Badam), but despite this, they can be found for sale at many border towns and open-air markets.

Wolf meat is one of the two items that Boldbataar cleared as having roots far back to Mongols before Chinggis Khaan. It is said to help clear any ailments with the lungs if consumed (Choy Suuren). Similar to the ankle bones, it is for men only. Yet, there can be exceptions in times of need. Odgerel, financial director of the Art Council of Mongolia, experienced severe pneumonia when she was a little girl. When she did not recover after a long period of treatment, her mother began to get worried, so when her husband came home with a freshly killed wolf, she decided to break the rules. Odgerel was secretly fed wolf's meat at every meal for three days. Besides some dryness, she noticed no difference between her wolf huushuur and normal food. Remarkably, her health recovered, but the father never approved of Odgerel eating the wolf meat. He liked to tell her, "Good thing you didn't become a baby wolf!"

From an economic standpoint, the wolf is more than a potential money-maker on the fur or medicine market, it is a direct threat to livestock and therefore to the herder's wealth. Sheep and goats are relatively inexpensive to replace, but cattle are a different matter. A healthy cow that produces good milk could be worth as much as one million tugrug and even a cow that does not produce milk is valued at around five or six-hundred thousand tugrug (Hougorzull). In Dadal, wolf attacks on calves have become increasingly more common. Herder families living in a valley only ten kilometers from the soum center lost three to four cattle

this autumn alone, with one reporting over three million tugrug worth of damage in the past three months (Hougorzull). Over one hundred kilometers away in Mongolmort, people face the same problem, losing livestock to wolves that come out of the forests at night to feed. When one family was asked if they hunt, the father responded, “Of course, the wolves always attack my cattle” (Zukhbaatar). With so much money at stake, it is economically smart to protect one’s herd by hunting the wolves nearby or even by paying professionals to do the job.

A complete wolf can be worth around \$350 USD in the domestic market if all of its parts are sold, and in the Chinese market, this number is almost doubled (Silent Steppe 99-100). The animal’s high value as a trade item combined with the threat it poses to herders’ livestock, makes wolf hunting a very profitable business.

### **The Environmental Reality**

The state of the wolf in Mongolia is under heavy debate recently, as there are no research teams or official data on the actual population numbers. Much is left to speculation. When I asked the hunters I interviewed what they thought about the wolf population, 80 percent said the numbers were growing, while none of them said the numbers were falling. There are two main explanations behind their view: first, that attacks on livestock have become more and more common in recent years, and second, the belief that humans are doing less to keep the wolf population in check since the end of the Soviet era.



As I have already made clear, herders are losing livestock and significant amounts of money to wolves. Although they have always been in conflict with wolves, many agree that the attacks have gotten more frequent recently. In Mongolmort, Zukhbaatar had no problems, but then “one or two years ago, they started to attack our livestock.” One calf was eaten only a week before I arrived. A similar story comes from Baatar who has lived in Dadal his entire life. He told me, “Attacks on my livestock were uncommon, but since last year they have increased by a lot.” This statement is especially significant since he has spent his time from childhood to adulthood in the area and only very recently have the wolves begun to regularly hunt his animals. To Baatar and others like him, this is clear evidence of a sudden rise in wolf populations.

Mongols have other reasons to believe wolves are on the rise in the countryside, namely that the giant wolf-extermination programs during Soviet rule are no longer in effect. On specified days, hunters would team together and try to kill as many wolves as they could. Besides the traditional traps and firearms, poison was encouraged as a way to deal with the animals. The fierce assault on the species was due to the fact that livestock during the Communist time was government property and since wolves attacked domestic animals, they were officially enemies of the state (Badam). Perhaps most dramatic were the puppy campaigns, coordinated days in May when hunters and young men would attack wolf dens and steal as many puppies as they could find, effectively ending the next generation when it was only just brought into the world. Joogdernamjil remembers these large-scale hunting operations, “We campaigned against the

wolf during Communist time because it attacked animals and caused trouble. We could defend ourselves, but there are no campaigns now. These days, there are many wolves – the same number as how many cows [Mongols] have.”

Zukhbaatar agrees, “Before, people would go to the dens and pick up puppies. Nowadays, we don’t do that. That is why the population is increasing.” Both men not only participated in the campaigns, but they also seemed nostalgic of those days. Perhaps this is because under the new system of privatization, they feel the economic damage the wolves inflict on their herds directly. Every lost cattle is a huge cut in the salaries of all but the richest herders, and with the attacks happening more repeatedly, it is easy to understand if some want to resume the campaigns against the wolves that are emptying their wallets. However, I think these men are incorrect in their assertions about the wolf population in Mongolia. I want to make the argument for wolves decreasing in number.

Before there were any official numbers on the wolf populations in North America, it was believed that there were large numbers of them, as many as an entire pack per twenty square miles, demolishing the herds of caribou in Canada (Mowat). When researchers were sent north to prove what everyone thought was common knowledge, they found an entirely different situation: one pack of wolves inhabited territory between 300 and 1,000 square miles, not twenty, (International Wolf Center) and most ironically, wolves were not responsible for the sudden drop in caribou numbers, people were (Mowat). I believe Mongolia is in a similar position; with no official statistics, people are grossly over-estimating the wolf populations in the forests and steppe.

Despite the lack of information on wolves in Mongolia, the minds behind *Silent Steppe* believe that the current level of hunting is unsustainable, and their assertions are not founded on assumption. The researchers reached this conclusion by cross-referencing the data they gathered on the total harvest volume with an estimate on the maximum amount of wolves Mongolia could support. If the highest population density for wolves ever recorded was sustained across the entire country, then Mongolia would have less than 157,000 individuals (Silent Steppe 98). Based on their data, the World Bank and WCS scholars suggest that the country's maximum capacity for wolves is somewhere between 50,000 and 100,000 with the actual population being significantly lower (100). These figures are even more dramatic when compared with the current hunting levels. For the year that they conducted their investigation, the researchers determined that at least 20,000 to 30,000 wolves were taken by Mongolian hunters (100). One market in 2004 even claimed to have sold 50,000 wolf pelts that year alone, although this was most certainly exaggerated (100). This study was only conducted during a twelve-month period, but even taking the lower value as an average, 20,000 wolves killed a year is one-fifth of the estimated maximum population and nearly half of the probable population. There is no way that wolves can maintain a steady population in Mongolia, much less increase their numbers, when in the best case scenario, one out of every five individuals finds itself hanging in a market or trading hands in pieces at a Chinese border town. But then why the more frequent attacks on herders' livestock?

This phenomenon is easily explained. There may not be any official studies on the wolf population in Mongolia, but its natural prey is well-documented. The red deer, Siberian marmot, and gazelle have suffered devastating losses in the past few years. Red deer have declined from the official count of 130,000 individuals in 1986 to between 8,000 and 10,000 in 2004 – a 92 percent drop in just 18 years (Silent Steppe 1). From 1990 to 2002, the Siberian marmot declined 75 percent from about 20 million to 5 million animals (Batbold). Gazelles are also experiencing a negative population trend, as they are being taken by hunters at 300% the sustainable rate of 60,000 animals a year (Silent Steppe 126). Obviously, such striking declines in the prey populations will profoundly affect the wolves and their ability to survive in their former numbers. With less wild prey available each year, they will undoubtedly turn to the increasing numbers of domestic livestock for sustenance. With the wolf's target species declining as much as 92 percent in less than 20 years in the case of the red deer, it is no wonder herders' animals have come under more attacks recently, not because there are more wolves, but because wolves have less options for nourishment.

I went to Dadal with these numbers, but the hunters assured me I was wrong. "The wolf still has natural prey," said Zuiduidavga, "it will somehow find its food" ("Second Visit"). Yet, back in Ulaanbaatar, Badam, an inspector from the Ministry of the Environment, is baffled by the reaction I got in the countryside. "I just don't understand why Dadal hunters say the numbers have increased. Since 1900, wildlife populations have decreased 80%. If there is no

food, predators like the wolf will not survive.” When I mentioned that many herders linked the more frequent attacks on their livestock to increased numbers of wolves, the government employee shook his head, “They are not related. That is four or five wolves just going around herd to herd.”

The truth of the matter is that it is more complicated than simple population decline. According to Professor Gombobataar of the Biology department at the National University of Mongolia (NUM), there are two forms of grey wolves in the country: the forest wolf and the steppe wolf. The forest dweller is stockier and lower to the ground with dark fur. It is more adapted for a wooded habitat, hunting mainly marmots and young roe and red deer. The steppe form is light in color with long legs, as it needs to be faster than the gazelle it hunts. With the increased popularity of hunting by Land Cruiser or Jeep, steppe wolves are in danger as they are easily chased down in the flat terrain that has nowhere to hide. Across the steppe, wolves are disappearing very quickly, while in the forest form can only be hunted when it leaves the cover of the trees (Gombobataar). If this trend continues, then the steppe type will be nearly if not completely gone while the forest wolf remains. If there is any possibility of grey wolves increasing in number in Mongolia, then it could only be with the dark form in the forested areas, which make-up only 9.2% of the total land mass of the country (Odonchimeg Lecture). That could be another explanation for the herders’ claims of a population increase, as Dadal is classified as a forest-steppe area. Regardless, I stick with the more probable option. The stories of animals being attacked less than 100 meters from the herder’s ger (Bohbileg) sound more like an act of

desperation than an increase in numbers. In addition, the loss of natural prey is simply too considerable to ignore. If there was a wolf population boom in the forest near Dadal, then it would have to survive on more than two or three calves from a handful of families.

The difference between the information I received in Ulaanbaatar versus in the countryside is significant but understandable. The professors, NGO workers, and government employees like Badam are looking at the situation from a removed perspective. Meanwhile, the herders and hunters in Dadal, Mongolmort, and elsewhere are losing *their* animals and *their* money to grey wolves. Emotions must play a greater role in their thought processes, making ideas like the wolf population rising in spite of rapid prey decline and unsustainable harvesting by hunters seem like more plausible explanations of what is to them a frustrating situation. The Red List of Animals in Mongolia records the grey wolf as “near threatened” (Clark).

### **Food for Thought: the Wolf’s Importance to Mongolia**

Despite all of its cultural significance, herders find the wolf a terrible pest and in hard economic times, the \$300 USD or more that a single adult wolf can bring in through the animal trade is more than a welcoming invitation to pick up a gun. Yet, there was a ban on hunting wolves in the steppe from 2007 through 2009, a proclaimed order from the Ministry of the Environment, the first time any type of regulation on the animal has been administered since the turn to democracy in 1990. Why is it important to save the wolf?

Its key role in tengerism as a messenger of heaven aside, the grey wolf has an important job within the Mongolian ecosystem. It is a natural cleaner, keeping the environment strong by eating the sick members of the herds of both wild and domestic animals (Joogdernamjil). This is profound, because besides keeping the groups of gazelle and deer strong in the wild, the wolf directly benefits Mongolians. There are 50 million domestic animals in Mongolia and many of them get ill each year. When the sick ones die, the wolves eat the carcasses, keeping the disease from spreading to the rest of the herd and also from reaching the herder (Badam). No research has been done to determine how important this task is, but the fact that the wolf has adapted over millions of years to fulfill this role means that it is necessary. Even the hunters who kill the wolf acknowledge this concept: “The wolf is essential to nature,” Zuiduidavga told me gravely, “If we lose it, even human beings will not exist” (“First Visit”).

The popular book, *Wolf Totem* by Jiang Rong, illustrates the importance of wolves to the grasslands of Inner Mongolia. The story is based on the author’s own experiences in the area, and it contains parts on not only the wolf’s job as a cleaner of the sick and the old, but its ability to keep the numbers of the grazing animals under control and therefore saving the grasslands from over-use and eventual desertification. At the novel’s climax, the Chinese take control of Inner Mongolia and kill all of the wolves. When the narrator returns some time later, the land he once knew was transformed into a dustbowl, the giant herds of animals no longer checked by the grey creature that kept balance over the grasslands. *Wolf Totem* reached many millions of readers across the globe, but despite its

influence, how accurate are the ideas inside? It takes many factors to turn lush grassland into a desert, but I think it is very believable that the loss of the wolf had an immediate effect on the populations of the wild and domestic herds in the area, which is definitely one of the greatest contributing factors to desertification in Mongolia.

Another warning comes from painter Wu Ri Jin who depicts the wolf bringing apocalypse to the “uncontrolled civilization” (Ba Li). His art portrays opulent dwellings and huge skyscrapers as symbols of corporate greed and “mankind’s ugliness,” while the wolf howls in the center of it all, representing the dying, natural foundation that sustains mankind (Ba Li). The message is clear, if humans turn their back on their beginnings and forget to protect nature from their own self-indulgence, then they will face a sad and rapid destruction themselves.

Even if endangerment or death of the wolves in Mongolia does not bring such cataclysmic fates as deserts or pestilence, it will be a blow to the nation’s culture and to its pride. The wolf has been set in Mongolian tradition and belief since before it was united as a nation, losing it would spell a profound message: Mongols so caught up in the desire to get rich that they not only neglected their environment, but they forgot their past. Perhaps most devastating is that the Mongols would have destroyed their own ancestor, the father of the line of Chinggis Khaan, the blue messenger of the Eternal Sky.

The annihilation of the wolf across Mongolia is not simply the destruction of an animal, it has deep roots in both culture and in maintaining the environment that will be torn out, leaving Mongolia in crisis. Strides need to be taken to ensure



that the nation does not face the barren ultimatum in *Wolf Totem* or Wu Ri Jin's artwork. The wolf is the messenger of heaven, the source of masculine power, the cleaner of nature, and the ancestor of Chinggis Khaan. Killing the grey dog means killing the very identity of the Mongols. On that day, dust will blow from desert pastures and up will raise the lonely cry of a doe, searching for its lost mate. It will call and call, but for the first time, there will be no reply.

### **Reflections: Why this Paper is Not Good Enough**

No matter how many interviews I conducted or sources I read, a month is still a month. I had to come to terms with the fact that I would only be scratching the surface of my subject. Although I am very satisfied with what I have accomplished this semester, I cannot help but feel that the relationship I am trying to uncover is much more layered and complex than I realize. Still, it is easy to see where I would pick up again if I sought to continue my work. I had to leave many contacts unanswered simply because there was not enough time. One of my teachers, Ariunbaatar, has a brother who owns a gun store in Ulaanbaatar. That would be a huge resource for this project. I could interview the owner, ask about his customers, and use that as a jumping-off point to study the hunter-wolf relationship on a deeper level. I gathered information on hunting tactics, firearms, and superstitions on this trip, but most of that information could not be applied to the rest of my thesis. With more time, I could focus on the individual sub-groups within Mongolia and map their specific relationships with the wolf, getting a fuller, complex picture, which is closer to the reality of the situation. For working

within one month, I did the best I could do, but it is like the summary on the back of a book: not complete.

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