

The Struggle for Water in the Heihe River Basin:

Towards Understanding the Social Dimension

KONAGAYA, Yuki

National Museum of Ethnology, Japan

I am one of the core members of the Oasis Project, and I lead the team of anthropologists and sociologists in this project. We have divided the Heihe river basin into three areas: upper, middle and lower, and the area of middle reaches are divided into two areas conceptually. One is the old oasis area and the other is a newly exploited area in much more arid zone. Our members have studied each of these areas and have tried to understand how the local people live and how they rely on the natural resources. We have focused on water which is limited in this area and is a source for many conflicts. The following four reports will provide details on the relationship between ecological aspects and the human activities, but here I would like to say something about the social dimension.

I went to the Ejina banner for the first time in 2000, before the start of this project. And since that I have been there 4 times and interviewed some old men and women. My colleague Mrs. Sarangerel has transcribed these interviews and we have just translated into Japanese 9 old women's interviews. I hope to reconstruct the history of this area by using these texts.

In general the study of life-history is focused on the individual cases. And it is more important to analyze how things are narrated rather than how they have happened. In such a research, it is usual for the researcher to stay stoic and not to add or cut any words. However, we must recognize that life histories also contain valuable information which is unavailable in written sources. Since task is to reconstruct the history of this region, especially the history of the natural environment of this region, I want to make some general observations based on these individual texts.

1) Tribal identities of the informants

4 of the 9 women are Khalkha. Khalkha is one of the Mongolian tribes and live in central area of the Republic of Mongolia. 3 were born in 1921, 1930 and 1940, respectively, in what was then called the Mongolian People's Republic (MPR). And the fourth was born in the Ejina banner of Inner Mongolia in 1936 into a family who had

migrated from the MPR.

I do not know the exact figure of the Khalkha Mongols in the Ejina banner. I can only say that many descendants of the Khalkha are living in this area. Many people have moved south to escape the communist revolution in Outer Mongolia in 1921. Most fled the MPR to the south in 1937 and 1938 when a great purge was conducted against Buddhist monks and the wealthy families. Until 1945 when the border was closed, people were relatively free to come and go between the MPR and Inner Mongolia. The Ejina banner area is strategically very important in the present as in the past two thousand years.

The rest of the informants are Torgut, a Mongolian tribe now dispersed in several countries: the Volga region of the Russian Federation, the western provinces of the Republic of Mongolia, and the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of China.

2) The Landscape of Childhood

Our interview materials contain a lot of information about the landscape of the region as remembered by these women when they were children. This remembered landscape constitutes a moral and political commentary on the ecological change in the region.

2-1) *Reed*

Many women talked about the reed grew near the bank of rivers and lakes. The height of the reed was nearly 3 meters, enough to hide a man riding camel. People used to hear the sound of the bells tied on the camels but could not see them. Today, there is not much reed left, which is a clear indicator that the natural environment has changed.

2-2) *Fishes in the memory*

Old women loved to talk about fishes. When they were children, they used to play near rivers or lakes. And they were taught by elders not to play with fishes. After their conversion to Tibetan Buddhism, Mongols admire fish as the symbol of knowledge, for it has no eyelid and never closes its eyes. So the death of fishes because of the lack of water is interpreted as the death of knowledge and the death of their culture.

2-3) *Trees in the landscape*

Most of these old women have not much knowledge about plants and talked little. But one woman was able to mention 17 kinds of plants and to give explanation about their characteristics and how to use them for human and animals. Almost all of the old women interviewed made a reference to two kinds of trees, *jigd* and *tuurai*. *Jigd* is a kind of the oleaster and *tuurai* is a kind of poplar and is famous in this arid zone.

The distribution of these trees is now different from the old time. In the old days *jigd* trees grew mostly along the west river called the Moron, and less along the east river called the Ejina. We can now see a lot of planted *jigd* trees along the east river. The Mongolian word Moron means a big and wide river. So it is natural that trees which like water grow much more along the big river.

In these old green belts there were still many birds singing including many kinds of owl, just only in memories.

2-4) *Special tree in the landscape*

Nowadays the main kind of vegetation in this banner is the tamarisk called *sohai* in Mongolian. It is abundant, and the local knowledge about this plant is wide spread. People would say, for example, it “in a year twice comes into flower”, or “after the rain camel eats the flower to death” etc. They told us that this plant has spread wider and wider recently.

In Mongolian language *sobai* means being infertile, and the name of the tree *sohai* sounds like *sobai*, implying infertility of the land.

3) Old and New Migration

The Ejina banner is famous for its military site as it has been for over 2000 years, as mentioned above. In the 1950s people were forced to move into towns or farms to make room for military base. So when the old people were asked to talk about their old days in the northern, lower region, they would often talk about their memories of the southern upper region.

Nowadays, people migrate within the banner, too but for different reasons. They evacuate their pastures to grow trees or let the grassland to rejuvenate. This new practice is called “environmental migration” which is a government policy to make people move willingly or unwillingly for the reservation of natural resources including the mining resources.

About this new policy we had held two international symposia in Beijing, and we have published two books in Japanese and in Chinese. You will hear more about these in the following reports.

4) The Cultural Revolution

The Cultural Revolution was carried out all over China, through with uneven intensity from region to region. One of the regions severely affected is Ejina. Many Khalka Mongols were suspected to be spies of the MPR. And the Torgut Mongols, descendants of the returnees from the Volga region in the 18th century, were as accused

of being separatists. So in this region almost all of the Mongols became the lowest class of indeed enemies. Every old women and men, regardless of their class status, would tell you about their miserable suffering during this hysterical period.

Thus, the change in the social environment in the banner has been more dramatic and severe than that in the natural environment. Revolution in ancient China meant only dynastic change, which usually left the social structure intact. Although the Cultural Revolution was intended to carry out social revolution overthrowing the upper class, in Inner Mongolia it became a revolution against the ethnic Mongols.

5) Adoption

Interviewing old Mongolian women about child rearing was a difficult experience. In our interviews, adoption transpired as an important practice in the region. Each of the 9 old women has experienced some form of adoption. In one case, a woman lost her first baby but she later adopted 2 children. And her husband was the adopted son of a rich man. In another case, a woman's mother was adopted by her uncle. One of her 8 children was given to her sister who was in turn also adopted.

In a society in which there is inadequate medical service and social welfare, people often invest in children as a safety network. Adoption may thus be understood as an effective system of redistributing human capital, a way to build a tight social network. In this region, we can see many old women live happily with real and/or adopted children and grandchildren.

6) Conclusion

As discussed above, in the span of one's life, people experience changes in both social and natural environments. If in the past social environment was adapted to the natural environment, in modern times, the social change brought about by government policies is often rapid and its effect so strong that people are busy to fight with the change. Under such circumstances, people usually have no time or feel at loss as how to respond to the change in natural environment. This is why understanding the social dimension is essential to researching the natural environment.