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THE MANY FACES OF NOMADISM AMONG THE REINDEER EWENKI

Uses of Land, Mobility, and Exchange Networks

Aurore Dumont

In the aftermath of the 2003 Reindeer Ewenki resettlement, the Chinese media reported extensively on “the last reindeer nomads of China.” At first the media covered news about the move of the Ewenki and their reindeer from old Aoluguya to a new settlement near the city of Genhe. Later the media continued to follow the story as the reindeer fell ill due to lack of appropriate fodder and the herders returned to the forest. Was this a case of failed sedentarization? Did the Reindeer Ewenki succeed in maintaining their nomadic lifestyle? Responses to these questions must recognize that “nomadism” has many faces among the Reindeer Ewenki. Though they continue to move between the settlement and their camps in the taiga, the herders’ present situation is ambivalent as they try to adapt reindeer husbandry to state development, modernization policies, and expectations of the benefits of sedentarization.

Spatial mobility is essential for nomads, as numerous studies on the importance of flexibility and adaptation in herd management strategies, social organization, land tenure, and interactions with outsiders have shown (Humphrey and Sneath 1999; Khazanov [1983] 1994, 1998; Stammer 2007). Based on fieldwork conducted between 2008 and 2011, this chapter will analyze how the Ewenki of Aoluguya maintain and adapt their reindeer herding practices to the current Chinese context. I argue that despite state interventions to change the course of their traditional herding,¹ the Ewenki have adopted flexible strategies to adapt to changing conditions. Giving special attention to variations over space and time, the first section takes a look back at the period before Communism and collectivism to better understand the Chinese state’s political and ecological land use. The second section highlights the continuities, changes, and substitutions that shape Ewenki herders’ simultaneously nomadic and settled way of life. Taking into account the reindeer herders’ cultural and social practices and more specifically

their “mobility” for different purposes, I explore how the herders themselves rearrange their social and spatial organization in the nomadic camp. The final part focuses on informal economic networks established between Ewenki herders and Han Chinese people from small towns.

State conceptions of land use and reindeer herding

While conducting fieldwork among Reindeer Ewenki clans of Manchuria in the early 1930s, the anthropologist Ethel J. Lindgren (1938: 609)² noted that the surface area of their nomadic pastures was about 7,000 km². Reindeer Ewenki were then moving in a large territory covering the northern Daxing’anling Mountains along the Amur (Chinese: Heilongjiang) and Argun (E’erguna) rivers on the Sino-Russian border. Known by the places where they once traded with Russian partners (called *andak*),³ they fell into three distinct groups: the Mohe, the Qiqian, and the Dubova (Neimenggu Zizhiqu Bianji Zu 1986: 209).⁴ Incidentally, these barter exchanges were designated by the Russian verb *andačit*, “to barter” (Kaigorodov 1968: 124). The trade in game with the Russians allowed the Ewenki to maintain the mobile lifestyle dictated by their domestic economy, moving in small groups according to seasonal hunting and herding activities.

In winter, the high season for hunting, the nomads pitched their tents wherever game animals were abundant, whereas in summer their movements sought fresh pasture for the herd. Like other reindeer herders of northern Eurasia, the Ewenki usually kept small herds of domesticated reindeer and used them for milking, riding, and carrying loads. Ingold (1980: 24–25) has contrasted this “milch pastoralism” to the tundra’s “carnivorous pastoralism,” which keeps animals for meat production. Herding and hunting activities satisfied almost all the needs of the nomads, who used animal products for food, clothing, and housing. The taiga, as provider of reindeer forage and good hunting game, had symbolic as well as instrumental value (Fondahl 1998: 3).

In the twentieth century, state policies became a crucial consideration in identifying elements of change and continuity in nomadic peoples’ traditional economy. Over the past decades, “modernization” has become an acute and still unsolved problem for pastoralists, whether they live in the Middle East, Central and Inner Asia, or the far North (Khazanov 1998: 8). How, then, should the concept of “modernization” be understood in the Chinese context? Dedicating his chapter to the modernization process among the Kirghiz pastoralists of Xinjiang, Kreutzmann stated that “from a viewpoint of modernization theory,



Figure 4.1. Reindeer at camp, January 2009, Galaya. Photograph by Aurore Dumont.

classifications apply that highlight the backwardness of peripheral societies, their outmoded economic strategies and their adherence to traditional behavioural patterns" (2012: 110). Regarding the Reindeer Ewenki, the state's approaches toward "modernization" have shifted over time. Whereas collectivization policy followed "the Soviet project of abandoning 'nomadism as a way of life' in favor of 'nomadism as a way of production'" (Habeck 2005: 141), recent environmental policies are based on the belief that China's grasslands are suffering pasture degradation due to livestock overgrazing.⁵ Whether the multiple relocations of the Reindeer Ewenki settlements between 1957 and 2003 were guided by political, economic or ecological reasons, they are meaningful in explaining the state's conception of modernization.

A brief summary of the economic and political situation shows how, over time, the most influential events affected the Reindeer Ewenki, who have tried to conform to different kinds of environments. As understood by authorities, the task of "modernization" is implemented in phases, the first of which is sedentarization. In 1957 the first Ewenki "ethnic township" (*minzu xiang*) was created in Qiqian. However, around 1965 the prospect of a full-scale Sino-Russian conflict motivated the authorities to resettle the Ewenki away from the banks of the Argun

River to a newly built village named Aoluguya. Wooden houses were built, and their residents enjoyed modern amenities such as a school, medical and shopping services, and marketing assistance in selling hunting products. Some residents were employed in the local administration as teachers or administrators, but many went on with their life of hunting and herding.

In the 1960s, recognizing reindeer antlers' economic potential as raw material for Chinese medicine, the government initiated measures to turn the formerly small-scale reindeer herding into a more intensive reindeer-breeding business. Every year the antlers were sold to the government for work points. As in the former USSR, the "production nomadism" (or "nomadism as a way of production") introduced as a key model for reindeer herding reduced the care of the reindeer to a tool of production and isolated it from its social base (Vitebsky 1990: 348). From the 1960s on, the traditional hunting grounds and grazing land of the Reindeer Ewenki became a major attraction for the forestry, which led to the immigration of many workers, followed by the construction of small towns, roads, and railways in the middle of the forest.⁶ This corroborates Aubin's (1974: 86) description of sedentary Han Chinese people who regard nomadic territory as fallow land that should be farmed or put to other uses. Despite these experiments, many reindeer herders embraced the possibility of continuing reindeer herding and hunting in the taiga under the Chinese authorities, as the sale of antlers was still a lucrative business. However, the growing appropriation of land by the forestry authorities has resulted in a pressure on the land and a reduction of reindeer pastures.

The reforms of the 1980s introduced the Household Contract Responsibility System in pasture areas. The system integrated people, livestock, and grasslands, and redefined herders' rights and responsibilities (Wu and Du 2008: 17). In Aoluguya, the reindeer were redistributed among herding families; however, the antler industry remains under state control to date. Beach (2012: 123) has called this a "system of partitioned rights and multiple holders" in which milk accrues to herders while antler crops are controlled by government authorities, although profits are shared in part with the herders.

In the mid 1980s, reform policies greatly promoted livestock businesses in the grasslands, ignoring the carrying capacity of the pastures. A decade later, restoration of damaged grasslands became a political priority, leading to the launch of large-scale projects aimed at "ecological restoration." In 1996, the state adopted the policy of Two Rights and One System, which Wu and Du (2008: 18) summarized as "demarcating pastures, forbidding free nomadism, adopting settled residences and

controlling livestock stocking rates.” Two years later it was succeeded by the Converting Pasture to Grasslands (*Tuimu huancao*) program, aimed at moving herding families away from the grasslands. Emily Yeh (2005: 9) has judiciously proposed the term “green governmentality” to describe ecological restoration programs meant to improve the conditions of nature and population by introducing new environmental logics.⁷

Finally, to realize modernization, the central state pursued the strategic goal of reducing regional economic disparities between the Han-populated eastern areas and the “underdeveloped” western region,⁸ through a campaign to Open Up the West (*Xibu da kaifa*).⁹ Prohibiting hunting was part of this process, and in 2003 the Aoluguya local government undertook to resettle the Ewenki and their reindeer via “ecological migration” (*shengtai yimin*) to a new Aoluguya township near Genhe city, 250 km to the south. The herders, the authorities, and the media saw this measure as a major event because it was intended to end reindeer herding in the forest. At the resettlement site, however, many reindeer died from lack of lichen, their principal food source, and the herders had to return to their remote camps.

The failure of this aspect of the resettlement put both the authorities and the herders in an uncomfortable situation. Herders who have chosen to continue living from animal husbandry cannot ignore the call of the taiga, which offers pastures that the settlement area lacks. They therefore must move between the new village where they are supposed to be settled, and the camps where they herd reindeer. Local authorities meanwhile have to deal with what they call “settling but not living” (*ding er bu ju*). In this context of “failed resettlement,” the notion of adaptive mobility and adaptation has become a key challenge and perhaps also an example of the contradiction between economic development and environmental conservation.

The settled sphere and the status of herders

The 2003 resettlement also shed light on the confused situation prevailing in the herders’ village. A brief look at the Aoluguya ethnic township provides an interesting overview of the complexity of the herding engagement in the community. Xie (2005, 2010) has pointed out the problem of “hunter status” (*liemin shenfēn*)¹⁰ and the distribution of housing following the resettlement. Ewenki “hunters” are priority recipients of houses in the new settlement, and hunters, whether they possess reindeer or not, do not have salaries or jobs.¹¹ The state’s conceptualiza-

tion of “hunter” is constructed on the basis of opposing categories and functions as part of a system of hierarchical dualism: Han/minority, city dwellers/village residents, hunters/workers. But this classificatory device does not reflect the viewpoint of those so labeled. For the Ewenki, the term *liemin* has a certain meaning and value and reveals one’s mastery of herding and hunting skills. As Xie (2005: 104, 2010: 128) noted, it is quite illogical to assign hunter status to people who do not speak the Ewenki language and are unfamiliar with either hunting techniques or herding skills, while others who are counted among the best hunters but also have salaries and jobs are deprived of the status.

Following the same reasoning, some Chinese scholars have attempted to categorize the Ewenki into different groups according to social position and the extent of mobility in reindeer herding after resettlement. Qi (2006: 100) differentiated three types of people in the village: nomads (*yidong weizhu*), who have a traditional lifestyle and whose income comes from the sale of reindeer antlers; the seminomadic (*banyidong bandingju*), who have a modern lifestyle and whose income comes from salaries; and sedentary people (*dingju*) dependent on state funds. However, this classification fails to account for the complexity of the realities in the field. Although a large share of Ewenki do not possess reindeer, many are still directly involved in reindeer herding or engaged in a combination of reindeer herding and service sector activities, and even “sedentary people” who have salaries and apartments in Genhe may possess reindeer and engage in herding them. This illustrates the difficulty of settling on an analytical framework for studying changes in nomadic pastoralism and especially processes of sedentarization. Do the Reindeer Ewenki exhibit nomadic populations’ general tendency to adopt a sedentary lifestyle and gradually give up “pastoral values”? Taking this point further, I analyze the strategies of Reindeer Ewenki engaged in reindeer herding.

The nomadic sphere: Rearranging social and spatial organization in the camps

The concept of nomadism remains controversial in the social sciences. While some definitions include all the communities whose primary resources extraction strategy—animal husbandry, foraging, trade, or services—is based on recurrent physical mobility, others prefer to restrict the term’s usage to communities whose economy is based primarily on mobile herding (Rao and Casimir 2003: 5). Nomadism, commonly related to pastoralism as a cultural system with a characteristic ecol-

ogy, involves highly mobile arrangements, and technologies and material culture adapted to mobility and movement of the group and its herds over socially recognized routes in annual cycles. Nomadism is a strategy that permits or enhances access to resources, implying a common set of ecological and economic practices. The notion of mobility is essential, since it answers the need for seasonal movements. Here the term mobility refers not only to seasonal migrations but also to the logic of adaptation and rearrangement followed by people involved in forest reindeer herding. The reindeer-herding economy depends on ecological knowledge of marked seasonality and mobility to maintain a regular supply of food for the herd.

Nomadism in its traditional form has been reduced in importance or transformed into sedentarized livestock breeding or stabling of animal stocks in Central Asia and Mongolia. Khazanov ([1983] 1994: 27) considered mobile pastoralism in its nomadic form dying, if not already completely dead. These changes have convinced many authors to rethink concepts of nomadism. Referring to the Nentsy reindeer herders of Russia, Stammeler (2007: 23) used the term “lifestyle nomadism” both to define a mode of family migration and to describe something encompassing the conceptions of the Nentsy nomads, whose “real lifestyle” revolves around constant movements on particular routes. For Humphrey and Sneath (1999: 1–2), nomadism has disappeared virtually everywhere in Inner Asia, although mobility remains a central pastoral technique. Thus, both prefer the term mobile pastoralism to nomadism because it does not evoke the associations outsiders make about nomads as a category—free and egalitarian, a wandering type of movement, warlike tribes, and so on.

Among the diverse types of reindeer herding distinguishable along ecological, geographical, and cultural lines, taiga reindeer herding is considered to have the weakest economic future (Stammeler 2007: 53). Ethnic groups who used reindeer mainly for transport and milking have seen herding for transport purposes dwindle (Stammeler 2007: 69). In Russia, where snowmobiles have replaced animals, the number of domestic reindeer declined sharply after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Many authors thus consider domestic reindeer herding to be on the edge of extinction. In China, vehicles have replaced reindeer for transportation, with similar consequences. The mobile pastoral economy, dependent on a mobile way of life and the maintenance of herds year-round in the forest, has changed and diminished.

So when is the nomadic life over or “lost”? Does it even make sense to compare a certain way of life with an imagined ideal or “traditional” form of nomadism? As the reindeer becomes an ethnic tool and

a tourist attraction, how should we understand the reindeer herding management of the Ewenki today? This mobile economy requires the organization of closely related families and individuals who, year-round or for part of the year, herd together and help and support each other. Thus, many Ewenki divide their time between residence in the settlement and regular stays in the nomadic camp (*liemin dian*).¹²

Rotation between the village and the camps

Seasonal herding determines the size of the community in a nomadic camp. From October to February the main activities consist of looking after reindeer and hunting, which has been banned since 2003. The herders regularly denounce the suppression of firearms, a restriction that deprives them of an essential part of their economy even as it tends also to restrain the symbolic value of hunting, which is a kind of regulation between men and spirits.¹³ Despite the ban, hunting is still practiced without firearms: alone or with one or two others, men commonly track and trap small animals such as rabbits and Eurasian red squirrels (*Sciurus vulgaris*).

During the winter season, eight people at most share the encampment. In spring, reindeer cows give birth to calves. Throughout the summer, the reindeer come back to the encampment every day to benefit from the “smoky fire” (*maoyan*) that protects them from insects. The *maoyan* is made under a construction of vertical jointed poles called *sêrukan* (see Figure 1.1.). Summer is the time for milking and gathering different kinds of mushrooms, berries, and pinecones (*songshuta*). This is also when the reindeer antlers are cut.

Thus, from April to August all the nomadic tents are full of people sharing activities divided by gender. Men manage the herds, plan and execute migration strategies, hunt, cut wood, and sell hunting products; while women make food, look after the reindeer, and do the milking. Traditionally, several nuclear families gathered in the same encampment, but today these rules are less respected and members of a camp choose to be together according to affinity. Sometimes a herder leaves a camp to herd alone or with other families in another camp, mainly because of a disagreement.

According to the Aoluguya local authorities’ records, fifteen herd owners are responsible for a total of eight hundred reindeer, which suggests that the reindeer herds owned by Ewenki households are actually very limited. A herd owner is often confronted with obstacles (e.g., children’s needs, or an activity in the village) that create a need to involve

relatives in herd management at the camp. Thus reindeer herding families must decide who will work with the reindeer and who will stay in the village. The settlement of Aoluguya is an indispensable space in Ewenki life. It is an administrative and reindeer herding headquarters, a marketing outlet, and a connecting point in visiting relatives. However, the village lacks essential economic and social infrastructure such as a food store, market, school, hospital and so on. The reindeer herders thus have to travel 4.5 km from the village to Genhe. Bus service is unavailable. Except for a few herders who possess a driver's license, they use bikes or motorcycles in summer and pay for taxi service during the rest of the year.

Herding used to be a family occupation, but young women and children are now largely absent. Women need to be with their children, who attend school in Genhe.¹⁴ Thus women's traditional competences and responsibilities in the camp (cooking, repairing clothes, tending animals) have become men's tasks. A herder who needs to tend to other matters can usually get a family member to take care of the animals. Many unmarried men who do not possess reindeer also stay in camps working as herders. In return, they receive food and sometimes reindeer. A stay in the camp can be as short as a few hours or as long as two months. The herders' mobility depends on different factors. The great distance between Aoluguya and the different camps tends to encourage herders to form social networks of people whose services they can rely upon. Herders and their relatives or friends make the trip to camp to deliver fresh supplies and food, help with hunting and herding, participate in the move to a new campsite, or visit friends and relatives. Then they go back to Aoluguya, where they sell hunting products, buy fresh supplies for the camp, or visit friends and relatives. The organizational framework of the camp changes according to individual needs and seasonal activities, as described in the two following examples.

The first camp is composed of a couple—A (f.) and B (m.)—who own approximately thirty reindeer. A single man, C, the cousin of B, stays regularly in the camp to take part in hunting and herding. Thus, these three people periodically share the same tent. A and B have children, so when they leave the camp, D, the brother of A, comes to help C.

In the second camp are the couple E (f.) and F (m.), who have one child and own around thirty reindeer, and a widowed man, G, who inherited ten reindeer from his wife. As in the first camp, they all share one tent. During summer and winter vacations (July/August and January/February), the members of the nuclear family are together, while G, who has another activity in town, is absent. As soon as the vacation is over, E and her child return to the village, while G joins F in the camp.

In the examples above, we can see a rotation among individuals at the camp. In the first case, A and B regularly take turns with C and D, while in the second case, E and G join F successively. This kind of organization is typical of a “small camp,” where a few people share the same tent. In bigger camps, which can have up to three tents, the mobility and presence of people in the camp is more complex. Herd owners who have jobs come a few times a year, especially in the summer. Their relatives work in the camp and take care of the herd. The members of a camp herd their livestock jointly, often in rotation and with other members. The local government applies the same logic of housing distribution in the village to the tents in encampments: one must have reindeer and be part of a nuclear family to obtain a tent. A single man who herds reindeer has to share a tent with relatives. Local authorities register all Ewenki households as residing in settled houses in Aoluguya and mostly ignore who goes to the camp and who comes back. Thus their records reflect administrative rather than residential reality.

Mapping the taiga: A reduced but flexible mobility

Various factors mediate the relationships Reindeer Ewenki maintain with their herding areas and how they deal with alternative uses of land and resources. It is essential to choose the optimal herding areas while simultaneously respecting the government’s restrictions and divisions of the forest. Understanding different ways of mapping the land and notions of territoriality are thus crucial aspects of herd management and mobility. Whereas the Ewenki see the forest as pasture and hunting grounds with specific migration routes, the forest authorities understand the taiga in terms of strictly delimited territories used for industrial purposes. Even when the herders’ movements follow established “routes” allotted to them, they pay special attention to the general environmental conditions and the quality of pastures.

The taiga abounds with valuable natural resources, attracting many seasonal Han workers who arrive on trucks in the morning and leave in the evening. These continual daily journeys are made possible by the parceling of the forest. The taiga is divided by big roads (*gonglu*) radiating from every township, along with “lanes”¹⁵ that go deeper into the forest. A forestry map (*linye ditu*) (see Figure 4.2) depicts this careful mapping and division.

As Yeh (2005: 16) has also noticed, creating boundaries to demarcate administrative entities like national parks and state forests expands state power by establishing greater control over both the resources and

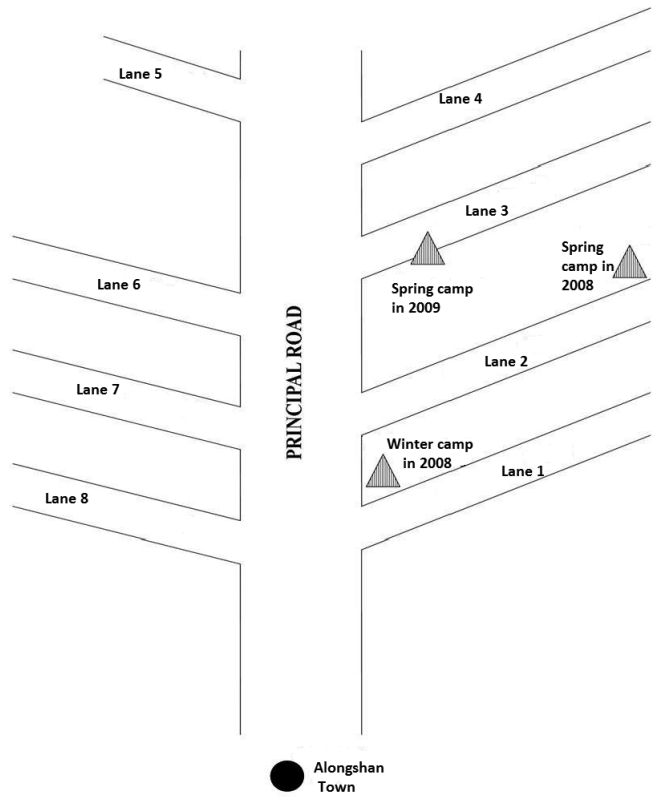


Figure 4.2. Division of the forest landscape in the Alongshan area. Created by Aurore Dumont.

the people who use them. Thus, mobility requires a specific work organization over space and time. Herders have to move with these demarcated areas in mind, respecting the frontiers and restrictions set by the forestry authorities. Their continuous movement across the taiga is no longer an act of free choice, as herders find themselves caught between state-imposed policies and nomadic life in the taiga.

Seven Reindeer Ewenki camps lie between Genhe city and Alongshan town, from south to north on the railway line that connects Genhe city to Mangui. The camp closest to Aoluguya is 30 km away, while the farthest is more than 250 km distant. A road links each camp to a township or forest station (*linchang*) at a distance of 15–80 km. Very often a herding camp is situated along a lane, or even deeper in the forest.

Before 2003, provincial frontiers and environmental legislation had drastically reduced the territory available for migration. Lavrillier (2011)

noted Siberian Evenki reindeer herders' capacity for and knowledge about discovering new territories while traveling around 1,000 km per year. In winter they shifted camp "every 20 or 30 days, moving 40–80 km to the next site," whereas in summer they moved shorter distances more frequently, "for example 5–20 km every 3 to 10 days" (Lavrillier 2011: 217). Aoluguya Reindeer Ewenki movements are nowhere near such distances, annually moving only 15–20 km. The local government plays a central role in managing their herding activities. The policy of "modernizing" the camps was also implemented for the comfort of the herders. The first step was to replace the traditional cone-shaped tent of the Reindeer Ewenki (Ewenki: *palatka* or *djiu*)¹⁶ with the modern ridge tent (Chinese: *zhangpeng*).¹⁷

Where the traditional tent remains, it bears a touristic value. Certain other items have been introduced outside and inside the nomads' tent. A solar panel may allow TV reception, and shelves, tables, and wooden beds have become part of the interior of the tent (Figure 4.3). These heavy objects make it difficult to move everything on the backs of reindeer, and each of the two to four annual migrations requires a specific organization. The biggest devices, such as the solar panel and wooden

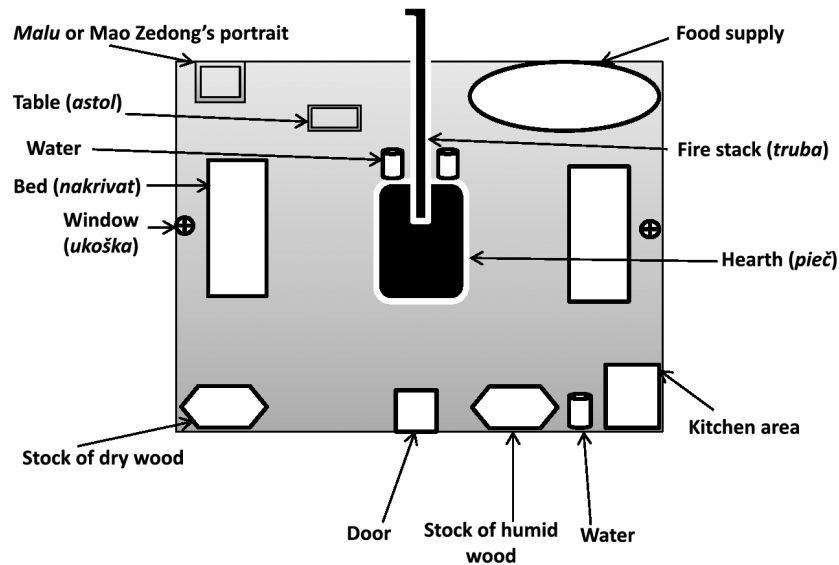


Figure 4.3. Interior of the tent. Created by Aurore Dumont.

Note: The interior arrangement may take several forms or change according to family. The sleeping area, the food supply, and the table can be moved around inside the tent. Russian words commonly used by Ewenki are bracketed.

beds, are moved by car while herders lead the reindeer on foot to the new camp. If the new camp is far away, the reindeer are transported by truck. However, the ever growing use of motor vehicles to carry materials, people, and at times reindeer has made the Ewenki and their herds less mobile than in the past. In Siberia too, Anderson (2006: 91) noticed the current lack of reindeer trained for saddle riding among Ewenki herders, concluding that the conditions of post-socialist herding do not leave time for a high culture of domestication.

Despite the continuous interaction between sedentarization policies and herding practices, I prefer to perceive the Ewenki as mobile reindeer herders rather than “fully sedentarized” or “fully nomadic” people. Spatial links tying Reindeer Ewenki to urban areas are visible in the configuration of three major movements: between Aoluguya and Genhe city; between Aoluguya and the nomadic camps, and between the small towns and the nomadic camps. Although the nomadic territory of the Reindeer Ewenki has been reduced, their mobility is very strong, a fact easily explained by the absolute necessity of moving between all the places where they are connected. The geographical distance between the camps and urban spaces ranges from 15 km to more than 250 km. In this specific context, mobility requires knowledge of contacts and connections outside one’s local area.

After the resettlement of 2003, many Han people who once worked in the old Aoluguya township were left unemployed. Some of them became taxi drivers and conduct regular transportation services, sometimes daily, between Genhe and the camps. In some cases, people can take the train from Genhe to the railway station nearest to their camp. Although the train ride covers part of the journey, the distance between the nearest small town and the camp is rarely less than 15 km. Here as well, taxi drivers are crucial. Han people from the town are paid to take herders into the lanes of the taiga up to their camp. When herders stay in the camp a long time, they also contact taxi drivers for food. The connection with the town provides the Reindeer Ewenki with the resources of an informal economy based on relationships between Ewenki in the camps and Ewenki in the settlement, and between Ewenki in the camps and Han Chinese people of the small towns.

Informal economies: Hunting game and reindeer as media of exchange

Until the 2003 resettlement, hunting was widely practiced by Ewenki. Game supplied food, wild animal parts used as materials, and high-

value commodities for trade. The Chinese law for nature conservation and protection of endangered species made hunting illegal¹⁸ and subjected hunters to penalties. Nonetheless, limited, clandestine hunting continues among Ewenki herders, providing an interesting framework for analysis of informal exchanges. Reindeer herding and hunting connects the Ewenki with their neighbors, geographically and economically. Khazanov (1998: 9) pointed to written sources demonstrating that nomads acquire a substantial part of their material culture from sedentary peoples, as well as other aspects of culture, and even ideologies. Regular contacts for barter trade between Reindeer Ewenki and their Russian *andak* partners were well documented by Lindgren (1938) and Yong (1991) in the 1930s and 1940s. Both stressed that these reciprocal exchanges were crucial for both sides, as Ewenki relied on Russian products (sugar, tea, flour, cotton, gunpowder, etc.) and the hunters' game was indispensable to the Russian fur market. At this time, the practice of hunting maintained a subsistence economy and afforded specific commodities.

Although the reindeer herders receive local government funding, their economic situation remains fragile due to the high rate of unemployment, the low price of reindeer antler, and the obligation to move constantly between the camp and the settlement, which requires money. Thus Reindeer Ewenki rely on their traditional domestic economy to improve their economic prospects.¹⁹ Known as good hunters and the only reindeer herders of China, the Ewenki have opportunity to create "valuable networks."

In the context of recent governmental restrictions, hunting is practiced for two main purposes. The first concerns the herders' community consumption, while the second is within the scope of informal exchanges.²⁰ The latter comprise transactions and networks articulating many exchange logics, from monetary trade and sharing to services. I argue that this complex network of social relationships between the Ewenki and their Han partners is driven by external demand (the chance to obtain "forbidden goods"), favors, and monetary income. The reindeer herders hunt several types of game, primarily deer and small game. Each type of game corresponds to values and symbols ranging from qualities of taste to ritual functions and market value.

Both Ewenki and Han use rabbit, roe deer, and black grouse²¹ primarily as food, but their ways of doing so differ. The animal parts preferred by the Ewenki are commonly unwanted by the Han community. For example, the hunters appreciate the ears, blood, eyes, and liver of the roe deer. Consumption of certain parts, in their view, provides better hunting skills. Eating the animal's ears sharpens hearing; con-

suming the eyes improves one's sight. The deer meat is part of prestige dishes while the grouse is recognized by the Chinese for its nutritional qualities and taste.

The sable (*Martes zibellina*),²² Siberian weasel, and Eurasian red squirrel are hunted during the winter for their luxuriant furs. As hunted game, they fetch the highest market value and can also be a means of exchange and payment. After Ewenki community members take their share of game, the remainder has different "destinations." Most of the time, hunted game is sold to Han storekeepers and merchants of the small towns surrounding the camps. Then the "forbidden goods" end up in restaurant dishes such as "dragon bird soup" (*feilong tang*), whereas high-value animals like sable will probably be resold on any fur market. These goods are often assessed in terms of monetary value: a black grouse goes for ¥50;²³ a sable, ¥500–800. This "shadow trade" goes on mainly between Ewenki who are regularly present at the camps and Han people of the township—to which, as we have seen, every camp is linked. Apart from monetized transactions, another type of exchange, this one without financial compensation, occurs with forestry and township officials when valuable hunting game such as sable is "offered" in exchange for some "arrangement." This can be a better use of land, a blind eye toward discreet hunting, or loans of firearms—in brief, various bureaucratic or informal sanctions. This mutual exchange of reciprocal favors is clearly motivated by mutual service and assistance (see Figure 4.4).

Reindeer, whether dead or alive, are occasionally part of such exchanges. As a wild animal, the reindeer is protected by the state. Herded only in this part of China by a small population, it is also a high-value commodity. The local government takes part in herding decision-making and must be notified of any transaction or sale concerning reindeer. However, discreet transactions occur, mostly with people coming from the tourist industry. Reindeer may even be killed in some cases,²⁴ for example when they are affected by disease. In any case, the different parts of the animal are divided between the Ewenki portion and offerings to their partners. As for Ewenki personal consumption, some parts are shared between friends and relatives, and Ewenki women dry and soften the skins and use them to create traditional products such as bags. The finished handicrafts are offered or sold in the small shops of the village.

Both monetary and nonmonetary exchanges hinge on establishing a relationship (*guanxi*) and preserving companionship. The Chinese word *guanxi* literally means "relationship" between objects, forces, or persons (Yang 1994: 1).²⁵ Personal relationships are implicitly based on

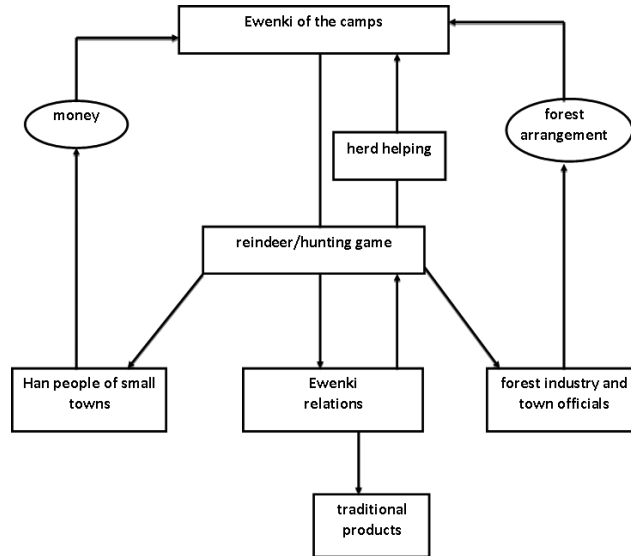


Figure 4.4. Reindeer and hunting game movements in networks. Created by Aurore Dumont.

mutual interest and benefit. Preparing to enter into *guanxi* involves establishing a basis of familiarity to shrink the barrier between insider and outsider. In the Ewenki case, once *guanxi* is established between the herder and a counterpart, either can ask a favor of the other, who is regarded as a friend (*pengyou*).

As Humphrey has shown in the case of Nepal, moral obligation means creating and preserving a sense of fairness and trust, with each side taking responsibility as a recipient of the satisfaction of each side (Humphrey 1992: 108). Maintaining trust is especially important in an informal economy context, where exchanges must be done discreetly. Such transactions take place in either the nomadic sphere (in the herders' camp) or the settled sphere (the township or city), according to the nature of the commodity. Herders are often more "mobile" in selling hunted game because they must frequently pass through a nearby town to buy food or make their way to Aoluguya. Meetings between the herders and their "friends" are occasions to share simple dinners or banquets that will strengthen confidence in the established relationship. Thus, each hunter has an "appointed friend" who is the preferred buyer of the hunted game. Friends are chosen with an eye to the benefits they offer as well as their capacity for mutual trust. Informal economic exchanges, arising not in a context of reciprocal dependence but rather

in a situation of “mutual agreement,” illuminate the ways Ewenki and their “friends” bypass laws and regulations.

Concluding remarks

Despite the political and environmental pressures on the social and spatial behavior of the Reindeer Ewenki, they have somehow managed to keep their domestic economy, in a rearranged form. The importance of movement and interactions in their multiple dimensions shows the herders’ great flexibility in coping with new environments. Seen as a part of a complex interactive system, the lifestyle of the Ewenki reindeer herders in contemporary China is thus the product of a combination of many factors. However, the authorities regard their “nomadic way of life” more as an ethnic symbol than a traditional domestic economy. The government has come to recognize that reindeer herding is an economic sector that should be stimulated and developed to become a source of income as a tourist attraction. Thus, in the near future, the Ewenki will experience the effects of ethnic tourism, which can revive—or destroy—traditional values and practices. How do the Ewenki regard themselves in present-day China, and how do they interpret all these changes? They all agree that without reindeer, there would be no Ewenki people. The reindeer will long remain the ethnic symbol of the “last hunting tribe of China.”

Notes

1. “Traditional herding” refers to the pastoral practices of the pre-socialist period.
2. Ethel John Lindgren’s anthropological research focused mainly on the Reindeer Tungus of Manchuria (today’s Reindeer Ewenki) and shamanism, but she also attempted to produce a comprehensive, detailed record of the “Khingian Tungus”, today’s Oroqen ethnic minority (Chinese: Elunchun), the Solon (Suolun), Russian émigrés, Han Chinese, and Mongols. Lindgren visited all these groups in the course of three expeditions to northeastern Inner Mongolia between 1929 and 1932 (See Lindgren 1935, 1938, 1939).
3. Common to several Altaic languages, the term *andak* means “friend.”
4. Qiqian was previously named Ust-Urov in Russian. Dubova is today known as Shanghulin. The three groups were distinguished by their different hats: the Mohe group’s hat was made of elk skin; the Dubova’s was of red squirrel decorated with colorful material, and the Qiqian’s was made of red squirrel skin alone (Neimenggu Zizhiqu Bianji Zu 1986: 209).

5. Most of the nomadic populations that are affected by these policies in China are scattered in the Tibet, Xinjiang, Qinghai, and Inner Mongolia regions.
6. In Inner Mongolia, the Han Chinese population increased from 1.2 million in 1912 to 24.70 million in 2010.
7. On land degradation and Chinese discourse from the Inner Mongolian grasslands perspectives, see Williams (2002) and Merkle (2013).
8. The definition of “the western region” remains unclear. When the campaign began, the region included nine provincial-level jurisdictions, but in 2000 three other areas were added, including Inner Mongolia (Goodman 2004: 6).
9. Opening the western regions to tourism is one strategy of the Open Up the West campaign for economic development. This is particularly true for Inner Mongolia, promoted as “the cradle of Mongolian culture.” In Aoluguya, a large tourism project undertaken since 2008 has turned the village into a big “ethnic reindeer resort,” following the tourism and marketing model of the Sami people of northern Europe. The local government has provided the inhabitants with new Finnish-style houses, a modern museum, and recreational areas (see other chapters in this book).
10. “Herder” (*mumin*) and “hunter” (*liemin*) are state-constructed professional categories. Pastoralist Ewenki are in the first category, but the Reindeer Ewenki are in the second, the state having recognized reindeer herding as a productive activity secondary to the primary activity of hunting. However, although hunting was officially banned and has not been a subsistence activity for a long time, the reindeer herders are still labeled “hunters’ in the Chinese administrative nomenclature.
11. For a detailed analysis, see Xie in this volume.
12. *Liemin dian* literally means “hunters’ point.”
13. Hunting is a mediator between man and spirits among many hunter groups of the taiga. According to Hamayon (1990), sexual spirit partnerships, exchanges, and shamanic power were all born in the context of hunting rituals among the small nomadic groups of Siberia.
14. The old Aoluguya settlement had a school. Since the 2003 resettlement, all the children go to school in Genhe. The new village’s proximity to the city was a strong argument for the resettlement.
15. Depending on the administrative division, the lanes are called *huoxian* in Heilongjiang province, while in Inner Mongolia they are usually *chaxian* or *zhixian*.
16. While *palatka* refers only to the tent, the Ewenki term *djiu* means tent as well as household.
17. This is the type of tent used by loggers—Han workers who may stay in the taiga several weeks. The workers’ tent is commonly larger in size, housing ten to fifteen people.
18. The hunting ban included confiscation of hunting equipment.
19. This current situation has little in common with that of Siberia’s Evenki herders, who turned to barter for consumer goods among other things. About barter in post-socialist Russia among Evenki, see Ssorin-Chaikov (2000).

20. Here I refer to all activities that are officially banned by the state, including hunting, selling and buying game, and providing illegal services.
21. The Chinese commonly call this bird the “dragon bird” (*feilong*).
22. The sable’s nickname is “soft gold” (*ruan hangjin*) and its fur is one of the “three jewels of the Northeast” (*dongbei sanbao*), the other two being ginseng and deer antler.
23. ¥1 = US\$0.16.
24. In the past reindeer could be sacrificed for ritual purposes.
25. Some other authors translate *guanxi* as “personal connections” or “social networks” (Yan 1996).

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