

BOOK REVIEWS

Natasha Fijn, *Living with the Herds: Human-Animal Coexistence in Mongolia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, Paperback Edition, 2017.

From its opening lines, this book promises a unique journey in its coverage of the lives of the peoples of the Mongolian steppe, and their herds. The author Natasha Fijn not only writes about their lives, she has lived alongside them in her research for this work. This review looks at the paperback version from 2017, with the first publication in 2011. Given the topic of this book, it is surprising it is not more prominent within scholarly circles. Her work considers not only the horses but the social milieu around which Mongolian herder life is centered. The promise of this work is set up from the very first glance at the book, with the cover showing a woman in partial profile gazing out at vast snowy landscape, with clusters of livestock moving forward into the distant horizon. The exploration into modern day nomadic community life is riveting. Written in the first person, the book provides an intimate experience as well as a robustly scholarly one.

Fijn explains that:

The horse-herd animal co-domestic relationship has a profound influence on Mongolian herding life. This can be illustrated by the multi-layered connection between human and horse, which has produced a reverence for the horse as a key symbol and constitutive participant in Mongolian society. Horses are therefore pivotal in all major contexts of the herding existences in social relationships; subsistence and mobility; artistic performance; competition in the form of horseracing; and in death, spirituality; and the after-life. A herder's whole cosmology and world view encompass other beings.¹

This is the premise for the book and its focus. An engaging and clear writing style is present throughout the book. Although it is academic literature, the writing flows in such a way that the reading is pleasurable and not laboured. The opening prologue provides an informative overview of the author's experience and journey into this research. She paints a vivid picture of the atmosphere and setting in which she finds herself, inviting the reader in with an intimate feel—as if the reader were there alongside her. The prologue provides an important but easily digested introduction to the region, its culture and the setting—all of which are key ingredients for

¹ Natasha Fijn, *Living with the Herds: Human-Animal Coexistence in Mongolia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, Paperback Edition, 2017), 242.

understanding the research which is to follow. This seamless contextualization vividly introduces the research.

Fijn's main focus is a reconsideration of the relationship of humans and domesticated animals. She argues that a Western view of this relationship and process is a limited one. Animals are cast as passive objects, who do not participate actively or reciprocate in the relationship. Rather, she sets out an alternative understanding, that the domestication of animals is a reciprocal relationship between humans and animals. She views animals as vested with agency and active part of the domestication process and relationship. Reading Fijn's detailed assessment and analysis highlights just how much the Western view is embedded in a taken-for-granted manner within much scholarship and very rarely explicitly explained. Fijn challenges this Western view throughout her work—indeed, this is the central core of this book. As she is studying and living in a non-Western culture this discussion also opens up the discussion on cultural views of animals and how they fit within and shape the human community around them.

Fijn recounts the domestication of not only horses, but also of the sheep, cattle and goats that make up the herds of the Mongolian community that she is studying. As she points out, the idea of domestication is embedded with many other concepts and questions: "The subject of animal domestication brings out a complex mix of moralities: those of care and control; training and manipulation; domination and subjugation; and mastery and paternalism."² She provides an insightful discussion that demonstrates the effect of religious views on the relationship between animals and humans. This again vividly demonstrates the way in which cultural views contribute to the way in which animals are seen within a community.

Each chapter of the book is carefully organized, with an informative introduction leading into the detailed analytical discussion, and a conclusion at the end which neatly summarizes the discussion points of the chapter. In this way, it is easy to navigate a chapter, and decide to read in full, or to absorb the introduction and conclusion rather than a full read of the chapter depending on the interest of the reader. The information capsules make the book highly navigable and readable—which is an important feature given the breadth of its coverage.

Chapters cover a broad range of themes. The book opens with a discussion of the concept of nomadic pastoralism and details of the Mongolian herder community's social structure, social values, and way of viewing the world. The place of person and herd animal within these is given rich detail, with the unique way in which each kind of herd animal—horse, cattle, sheep and goats—take up a place in the life of the community.

One chapter is devoted entirely to the horse, Chapter 7, "In the Land of the Horse." This chapter is divided into two parts, "The Horse in Mongolia's Past," and "The *Naadam*." *Naadam* translates into "festival or celebration."³ The second part of the chapter is focused on "horseracing because this is a distinguishing element that separates the horse's role from other co-domestic ungulates in Mongolia."⁴ Fijn

² Fijn: *Living with Herds*, 129.

³ Fijn, *Living with Herds*, xii.

⁴ Fijn, *Living with Herds*, 160.

describes the races as a test of endurance rather than speed.⁵ She links the desired traits of equine “stamina and endurance”⁶ for racing success to practical factors, as “important for surviving the extreme winter temperatures...; for the use of the horse as a means of mobility over large distances; and in the historic role of the horse in warfare.”⁷ Little sense is given of a community grappling with the effects wrought by the 21st century.

An interesting contrast is provided in a book chapter by Robin Irvine in part of a larger edited collection.⁸ Irvine’s chapter provides information on Mongolian herders living with their horses and other herd animals, as does Fijn’s work. But Irvine presents a very different picture than that of Fijn, even though both base their work on field studies done relatively close in time. Fijn’s field work was done in 2005 and Spring 2007⁹ while Irvine’s was done in 2011.¹⁰

Irvine’s chapter discusses a community in flux. Activities with horses have changed from the rhythms of nomadic pastoralism to include a focus on horse-racing.¹¹ As he explains, prizes include “medals, rugs, flat-screen televisions, even motorbikes.”¹² These items of the 21st century are a powerful lure to become involved in racing horses.¹³ This means that that a different kind of horse is appealing—horses that run more swiftly than the traditional gaited horse of the Mongolian.¹⁴ This results in a change to the horses in the herds, and the addition of horses that are cross-bred.¹⁵

There is little indication of why there is such a difference in the view offered by Fijn and Irvine. Their field work was done in a relatively close time frame, and both authors spent time with the Mongolian herder community. Both also identify horse-racing as a key feature of the community culture but contextualize it in very different ways. Fijn has a consistent message about the deeply ingrained patterns over time, without a discussion of the conundrums presented by the 21st century. On the other hand, Irvine notes both tradition and modernity at work together, explaining that “the commoditization and cross-breeding of race-horses sat alongside the valorization of gaited horses and the deployment of horses as mediators with spiritual masters of the land.”¹⁶

Fijn’s richly detailed work provides information on how the horse contributes to the construction of society, of meaning, of abstractions in human life—and how the

⁵ Fijn, *Living with Herds*, 165.

⁶ Fijn, *Living with Herds*, 165.

⁷ Fijn, *Living with Herds*, 165.

⁸ Robin Irvine, “How Horses Matter in Eastern Mongolia: Cross-Breeding, Gaited Horses and Relationship with the Land on the 21st Century Steppe” in *The Relational Horse: How Frameworks of Communication, Care, Politics and Power Reveal and Conceal Equine Selves*, eds Gala Argent and Jeannette Vaught (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 177-196.

⁹ Fijn, *Living with Herds*, xix.

¹⁰ Irvine, “Horses,” 180.

¹¹ Irvine, “Horses,” 189-191.

¹² Irvine, “Horses,” 187.

¹³ Irvine, “Horses,” 187.

¹⁴ Irvine, “Horses,” 189-191.

¹⁵ Irvine, “Horses,” 189-191.

¹⁶ Irvine, “Horses,” 177.

horse can form the center of community life and identity. Irvine's work also reveals how traditions and practices can change due to outside influences. There may be a nostalgic temptation to think of the Mongolian life with herds as immutable and unchangeable, and in some way this is the message that underlies Fijn's work. But that of Irvine is in vivid contrast, showing how although the community remains horse-centered, traditions are being influenced by attractive 21st century offerings.

A sense of how a horse-centered community is living in the 21st century can be gained from a combined reading of the studies of Fijn and Irvine. Together they provide a compelling tapestry of Mongolian life with horses in the present-day, and are well worth the read.

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