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Herding on the Steppe:

A Study Abroad Experience in Mongolia

[RICHARD BIGGIO-GOTTSCLICH]

The vast open steppe of Mongolia zoomed by as my father and I raced across on a motorcycle toward our Ger for the first time. It was the beginning of a great adventure among the Dugarjav family of Delgerkhaan. I lived, herded, and learned among the community of herders who called this steppe their home. My countryside adventure spanned two weeks in September and October during my four months of traveling Mongolia. Studying abroad with the School for International Training in fall of 2017 allowed me to immerse in Mongolian culture. Since oral communication was difficult, I learned by doing how to herd and help my family and neighbors. Mongolian culture changed my life by enriching it with herding and learning by doing.

During my travels, I engaged in many activities of labor and exploration that expanded my study abroad experience. During the first ride to my home Ger we stopped by an animal pen where four other herders were, and I immediately jumped into working with the goats and sheep. I followed my father, Zulzaga, around and he would point out a sheep, or goat which I would have to chase and grab, either by its leg or skin, and wrestle it toward a door to an internal room. We then sent the animals to graze upon the open steppe. The steppe was a large dry grassland owned by the government with only a few wooden public pens and the nomads' Ger tents. Many families' herds had grouped together so we had to divide them up by family color. Typically, a day would only require four to six hours of individual working out of 12 workable hours during the day. But when you had finished these working hours you didn't just sit around; instead this time was used to visit neighbors, see how they were, and help them herd their animals. I lived in a family with my mother and father in a small Ger. They had children, but they went to school in the Aimag center and did not live with us. My Mongolian and my parents' English were both very weak, making complex spoken communication difficult, so *instead we* used gestures as they taught me more Mongolian. I helped my father to prepare goat and sheep meat. My job was to hold the legs at the knee and

mold the body to his needs. My father demonstrated his skill by finishing his work without spilling a drop of blood on the ground.

One of the major events that occurred among the steppe families was a horse branding ceremony. My family and two others went to the



Fig. 1. My host parents during my homestay. I am wearing a traditional Mongolian Deel.

horses' Ger to brand horses that day. Our family brand had three circles over a line. The ceremony was taken very seriously and took many men to wrestle and hold the animal as one heated the brand and applied it. After the work, the horses were let free, and the brands dipped in *arrig* (fermented horse milk), then *arrig* was offered to branders to drink before a night of celebration. My adventure on the steppe was mainly with my family but SIT also brought me to the town.

Working with SIT in Delgerhaan Soum offered cultural immersion in the countryside. We visited the Soum center to visit the school and teach English to middle schoolers. I was teaching eighth graders about the words for family. I started off with a family tree project, but the students ended up copying mine. I realized that they are learning English, just like I was learning Mongolian, so I found that I needed to change tactics. This helped me to slow down and focus on giving the example of the family tree to each table. By the end of the experience I was able to teach them “mother” and “father” by saying the Mongolian Ээж (Ed-ge), meaning mother, and then in English, “mother,” and working slowly doing the same with аав (Aav) for father. The students all seemed to love that I was an American. All the students wanted a picture with me after class, so it seemed like I was a celebrity. This was similar to my experiences with nomads who all seemed very interested in me and America, and many wanted to try me in Mongolian wrestling. Though I could never beat their wrestling skills, I still impressed them by surviving well.

SIT also brought us students to an important historical and religious

site: a local *ovoo*, which is a large rock structure forming a circle with several smaller pillars surrounding it connected to the large center by banner of flags. Our teacher, Ouyuka, explained that these were created when soldiers stacked rocks for war and then removed them on the return if they



Fig. 2. Upon a hillside that oversees the steppe, the Mongolian Ovoo with sacred blue fabric.

survived. This meant the dead were memorialized, and borders were marked in a dual political meaning. We also visited and climbed in the mountains and saw the expanse of the steppe in all directions. These peaks were so close, but also far from my position on the steppe allowing me to put the distance traveled into perspective. My reflection in the Mongolian countryside also lead to an interview with my host father on oral tradition.

My father and I shared an interview on his family and life as a herder involving politics and the environment. This strengthened our bond and improved our understanding of each other by our communication translated by Ouyuka. We started talking about family history and how it was recorded, and he answered that he knew his lineage about three generations back and told me a story about his great grandmother who was an important figure in the community but he wasn't sure exactly what. He was the only one of five children who continued to herd while the others moved to cities like UlaanBaatar. When he was done herding his son would take over. He had started in his own herd at the age of 21 with a little over 100 animals, while his current herd had over 700 goats and sheep. His children started to help him with the work when they turned six years old. He also educated me on when animals were sold, butchered, and gave birth, each happening at a precise time. Animals were sold early in fall, would get pregnant in October/November and birthing happened in the spring. He said that the most important thing to know about herding was "*Mam yxoom*" (the philosophy of herding). He said that there were many

new families and animals entering the land and it was causing stress on the land. Despite this, there were no coordinated projects in the area or attempts to educate herders on the effects of overgrazing. He did believe that politicians were doing things to help herders, but he was unable to name these efforts. One of the most touching experiences came during my ending interview when I asked if he had any questions or comments for me. He remarked on what a good son I was, and how it was so nice to have someone to help him with the work. This was really touching to me, and my eyes were a bit watery. Interviewing facilitated a good way of learning and after my interview my father told me I would learn by doing.

Learning by doing was the philosophy that I followed while herding in the field. My first method of grabbing the sheep by their wool worked, but it was tiring and still allowed the sheep a large range of movement. Observing the herders, who grabbed the sheep by the hind leg and dragged them to the desired location, I discovered imitating this that it was far more effective as the sheep could not struggle. As my father and I herded in the field, I began to learn how the sheep and goats would move and how to flank them to force them in the desired direction. I used this learning method to break through the cultural iceberg and learn about what occurs in a horse branding ceremony and how everyone plays a special part. Some of this learning is like what my father expressed during interviews: that you eventually understand it but cannot communicate it. You can do it and learn from that, but there is no other way to achieve this knowledge from a human or book.

As the van arrived at my family Ger to take me away the contrast in life was clear one last time as we made tearful hugs goodbye. I was unsure if I would ever have the fortune of seeing them again, but my memories of our work reassure me of a place in my heart and mind where I can find them again and remember the steppe. Through herding I felt my connection, experience, and knowledge grow remarkably fast. This has created stories that will last a lifetime and have strengthened me into being a more resilient person, able to understand different cultures. Remember to learn by doing!