



Jean-François Sabouret (dir.)

**The Asian side of the world**  
**Editorials on Asia and the Pacific 2002-2011**

CNRS Éditions

---

## The Mongolian nomads: an anthropological alternative?

Jacques Legrand

---

DOI: 10.4000/books.editions-cnrs.12717  
Publisher: CNRS Éditions  
Place of publication: CNRS Éditions  
Year of publication: 2012  
Published on OpenEdition Books: 20 August 2019  
Serie: Science politique  
Electronic ISBN: 9782271122223



<http://books.openedition.org>

### Electronic reference

LEGRAND, Jacques. *The Mongolian nomads: an anthropological alternative?* In: *The Asian side of the world: Editorials on Asia and the Pacific 2002-2011* [online]. Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2012 (generated 27 mars 2020). Available on the Internet: <<http://books.openedition.org/editions-cnrs/12717>>. ISBN: 9782271122223. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/books.editions-cnrs.12717>.

---

# The Mongolian nomads: an anthropological alternative?

*Jacques Legrand*  
*Institut national des langues et civilisation orientales*

NOVEMBER 2005

Mongolia is a myth of which it does not have the privilege of being. Its images rush into our heads, clashing and overlapping one another. Many of its certainties are no longer questioned, but accepted, one in particular, constant mobility, to the extent that today, the term “nomadism” is often rejected and replaced with “mobile farming”. Would this not involve taking the superfluous “-ism” out from our vocabulary even though this choice of term makes sense and conjures up the relevant images? Although the term, “mobility” was thought to convey the reality better, instead it only conveyed an appearance, a distorted reality of a sedentary world.

Nomadic pastoral farming and that of the Mongolians, being exemplary, is neither a case of wandering aimlessly nor does it involve following some supernatural impulse; it is the lifestyle of men and women trying to earn their livelihood by working, as is the case anywhere else. What may seem like a simple answer to extreme conditions, or even an escape from them, is an original, rich and complex strategy, in its techniques as well as in its values.

In his quest for survival in the steppes of northern Asia, mankind took destiny into his own hands making an infinite number of compromises between himself and nature, and himself and his fellow men.

The steppe itself is a vast backdrop, stretching from the Black Sea to the Pacific Ocean, whose northern and southern boundaries merge into tundra or deserts. Between the two, forests and prairies line the view, in a highly continental climate, particularly known for its constant unpredictability and irregularities. The changes are frequent, violent. This dry and cold climate yields only weak and irregular harvests. In addition, the heat and humidity levels fluctuate and are unpredictable: early drought

and late and deadly snowstorms, lasting up to weeks or days, are enough to throw a whole year's work off balance.

The Neolithic Era saw the practice of agriculture, farming and even fishing while the Bronze Age evolved towards pastoral farming. In order to create a balance between the energy consumed and the energy coming from work, farming provided a flexible and efficient solution.

Weak and fluctuating agricultural yields affected the upkeep of land. What is important is to maintain a vast rural land on which herds can cope with the air pressure. Cattle, on the other hand, can be spread out and be moved elsewhere to graze, and to escape from the ever-threatening disasters. As a source of various produce, cattle are also and most of all, perhaps, protective buffers capable of withstanding disasters.

While agrarian and sedentary cultures believe in the concept of accumulation, nomadic farmers have put into place a method of dispersal that alternates between grazing seasons and seasons for setting up camp, using their various types of livestock to feed their needs. From region to region, the form and size of nomadisation are different, but nomadic mobility allows for the spreading out to meet their needs, as well as those of their herd, on the condition that there are enough resources. These alternations, and the diversity that comes with it, enables man to escape from the dangers of new migrations. Paradoxically, nomadic mobility – dispersal – meaning that one does not have to leave a familiar area, is shaped by constant domestication.

This pastoral farming, which depends on the resources that water gives it, is a system mainly made up of small groups of people who live like the herds themselves. They are spread out over the lands that these groups control.

The repeating of annual cycles, the use of the same sites in winter may be nothing but a fantasy. Within days, herds of animals could be killed by continued drought, a series of storms, famine, disease and predators. Even prosperity questions the stability of these lands, which have seen an increasing need of water and food for livestock.

Nomadic farming spread out into small groups also means that these groups remain weak, at the mercy of even minute changes in the balance of power between neighbours. If the value of the lands fluctuates too much, no one would want to buy them. This was settled by deciding that the owner would be the person who had first occupied these lands.

This settlement, however, is dependent on the strength of the person who owns the land. Nomadic dispersal, being the most ecologically and technically optimal, has, however, its own share of uncertainties. Faced with much competition and tension, it is reaching out for complex social strategies. Confronted by this weakness, alliances have been established,

renewed and become complicated. Those who inherit their independence do so when they enter adulthood.

Some of these alliances are therefore built on kinship and marriage, others on neighbourhood and mutual interest solidarities. Power, far from focusing on a large volume of gathered resources, relies on the art of controlling and leading these relationship networks, which, starting from each one of the spread out households, end up on the outskirts of the nomadic world. From time to time, with tensions becoming worse, the only solution is to reform larger defensive groups, which, however, cannot last: increasing the number of people, but also herds in a small space, would be suicidal. There are, nevertheless, critical moments in the creation of social order. It is here that lineages impose their rule and assert their legitimacy. This aristocracy, however, is not a caste or an order; anyone who belongs to this society is first and foremost a farmer and a nomad.

Every now and then, an overpowering sensation, targeting yet another goal – the wish to be dispersed – gives rise to a more ambitious venture. It is thus the price we pay for the misuse of terms when speaking of a nomadic “empire”, or one of these “steppe empires”, which have followed one another for nearly two millennia at the heart of Central Asia. These empires are, however, based on a fundamental contradiction: having emerged from the need to regulate the nomad pastoral society that was spreading out, and respecting its conditions, they hoped to find the resources and means for their own survival. The weak and irregular income left over from pastoral farming savings could not cover the continual and extended maintenance of state institutions such as an administration, army, imperial court, etc. In addition, many companies have a short life and return immediately to the steppe when their goal is reached.

The key to this dilemma is that nomadic societies and cultures are far from self-sufficient. The outside world is very much present in the life of the steppe, and its neighbours are aware of this. Trade was established with fur and animals, especially horses, and exchanged for cloth, luxurious items, even cereals, but also titles of nobility or honor, which sparked a controversy in nomad politics. Trading was no longer enough, or became disrupted, and instead there were raids and invasion. To go a step further, in the history of China that was often divided between the north and south, a particular place belongs to the Chinese dynasties once again, but which nonetheless echoes this complex coexistence and confrontation. From the end of the Antiquity period until the middle of modern times, from the northern Wei “Tuoba” dynasty (386-534), which had helped introduce Buddhism to northern China, until the Qing Manchu Empire (1644-1912), through to the Kitan Liao (916-1125) and the Yuan Mongols (1279-1368), China has experienced long periods during which it had focused more on

integration than on neighbourly relations; a fact that should be portrayed in its relationship with the nomad society.

In the forests and lands owned by the nomads, there is also a historical opening that ties them to their tradition, that with the sedentary people, which does not seem that long ago.

This history is filled with various paradoxes, one of the most striking being this “power of weakness”, which founded the analysis of the biggest achievements in the entire nomadic history on the fact that small homes were spreading out and were sensitive to minute changes. Moreover, it highlights various symmetries that make up a society and a culture based on promoting an anthropological alternative based on the concept of accumulation provided by sedentary land cultures and their inheritors. Represented as a primitive “barbarian” state for a long time, nomadic pastoral farming is still too broadly developed and defined by what it “lacks” and by its “deficiencies” and “gaps” compared to a “normal” and “universal” order of human development, whose prototype is provided by the sedentary, agrarian, agro-industrial then urban and industrial societies’ model, and from now on, the most advanced “post-industrial” one. For such a vision, other models of human activity and organisation only highlight their inadequacies. Yet, although it is now more modern than ever to put forward a major scientific ambition of interpreting reality, this vision cannot be truncated, cut off from what would remain inexorably rejected or left in that which is bizarre, exotic or atypical. Nomadic pastoral farming is like a vast laboratory from this point of view, a widely open site. It is up to the specialists of the various relevant disciplines to combine their efforts more than ever before.