


Introduction

Where the borders of Mongolia, Kazakhstan, Russia and China meet lie the Altai Mountains. Deep in the mountains on the Mongolian side there are lush, green pine forests, canyons, glaciers, snowfields and dark green, almost black, alpine lakes whose icy sheets only begin to thaw in summer. Here in the high pasture, a few Kazakh families take their herds of sheep, goats, horses, yaks and camels to graze in the warm summer months. In winter, they move down to the valleys and towns where most people live.

When I met Adilbek and Elnara and their children, they had only just come back from their summer place further up the valley. They had taken down their felt-covered yurt, with its large round crown, seventy roof poles and large lattice walls, and packed it all away in a small storehouse next to their winter house. Their winter house lay snugly in the valley, next door to a cousin's house and just metres from a clear stream that stretched its silver fingers across the green valley floor. This book is the story of my encounter with Adilbek and Elnara and their family and of our year together in the little house by the stream, along with stories of four generations of this Kazakh family.

Structure of the Book

The book alternates between my experiences of living in western Mongolia and stories about the family members and the historical context of the events that shaped their lives. In this sense, there are two parallel storylines that feed and shed light upon each other. The book begins and ends with events in the recent past. It gradually delves deeper into the past, following first the parents' generation, and then the grandparents and great-

grandparents' generations, contextualizing these individual lives within the broader history of the region. In the final two parts of the book we return to events of the recent past.

Part I of the book tells the story of the flight of Adilbek and Elnara's daughter, Ainagyl, with her 1-year-old son, from her husband, with whom she lived deep in the countryside. The chapters in Part I go on to describe my first encounters and time with the family and to introduce the family members.

Part II introduces the father, Adilbek, who worked for the local collective during the state-socialist period. It describes his youth and education in the Mongolian capital Ulaanbaatar, his marriage to Elnara and the birth of their first child. It also begins to tell the stories of their children growing up in the 1980s and 1990s, the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the macroeconomic crisis that affected the wider region.

Part III looks at the decisions of two of Adilbek and Elnara's children about their future. In this context, it describes how, in the 1990s, thousands of Mongolia's Kazakhs decided to 'return' to the recently independent Republic of Kazakhstan. This part continues the story of Ainagyl and looks at issues around being a young woman in Bayan-Ölgii, and at the position of the daughter-in-law within the social hierarchy of her husband's home (marriage is virilocal) and the choices that were open to Ainagyl.

Part IV begins with my encounter with Elnara's older brother and his stories about the family's past. Here the book delves deeper into the past to look at the historical circumstances that brought tens of thousands of Kazakhs to seek refuge in western Mongolia. This section of the book introduces the grandparents' and great-grandparents' generations. It sketches the historical background of the position of the Kazakhs, who from the 1600s came under increasing pressure from a Western Mongol Confederation and later from Russian expansion into Central Asia.¹ Part IV ends with the story of the great-grandfather, Khairat, who in 1916 was drafted for military service in the Russian army during the First World War.

Part IV also takes up issues of alcoholism, violence, loyalty to family, the practicalities of conducting fieldwork in the depths of winter and popular notions of Inner and Central Asian peoples as 'unchanged by modernity' or 'without history'.

Part V continues the story of the great-grandfather, Khairat, who fled into Chinese warlord-ruled Xinjiang and later into western Mongolia. The story of the great-grandfather is set in the context of the changing historic status of western Mongolia and the power struggles in this region between the Soviet Union and China. It also describes early-twentieth-century Mongolia (Khairat's new homeland), the political and social upheaval of the late 1930s and Khairat's eventual death during Mongolia's

political purges. This part concludes by considering the tragic consequences of collectivization campaigns in Kazakhstan from 1928, the failure of the first Mongolian campaign and the creation of Bayan-Ölgii province.

Part V also continues the stories of Adilbek and Elnara's children. It tells the story of one of their sons' experiences of studying in a neighbouring, predominantly Mongolian province, and that of another son's decision to emigrate to Kazakhstan and join relatives. Finally, it describes a visit to the local mosque and the friendly administrations of the local imam, whose own grandfather perished in the purges of the 1930s.

Part VI looks at some of the difficulties faced by the children who moved to Kazakhstan, and returns to the birth of Adilbek and Elnara's first child and the ways that adoption affected the family. In so doing, it looks at the role and responsibilities of the youngest son. Part VI also explores the practice of bride kidnapping through the story of the experiences of a close cousin. It continues the story of the eldest daughter with her visit to London. Finally, it describes Elnara's journey to Kazakhstan for her son's wake.

Part VII draws the different storylines to a close. It ties the story of the parents' generation together with the story of the eldest daughter's visit to London, her marriage and finally her mother's long journey to her wedding. Due to the shortness of the chapters in the book notes sections can be found at the end of each part.

The personal stories that form the core of this book have come out of my fieldwork, and in contextualizing these stories, I have drawn on secondary historical sources, primarily in English, to give the reader a sense of the confederations, empires and peoples and their shifting roles in the historical, geopolitical and societal events that have shaped this region. The book is not intended as a comprehensive historical study, nor is it an anthropological study focused on a period of time in the recent past. Rather, by focusing on individual people's lives across generations, the intention is to give a sense of the scale of the historic changes that have shaped this region by tracing these from parents' to their children's and grandchildren's generations.

The book is based on anthropological fieldwork, and combines ethnographic, personal and historical perspectives. It does not aim to engage with theoretical debates within anthropology. It is my hope that a wide readership will be able to relate to the issues brought up in the book, regardless of background, discipline or area of specialization, and that the stories of family members going back four generations will bring to life the human side of the fascinating and turbulent history of this area. By including ethnographic, historical and personal perspectives, the book tries to capture and convey what it means to experience a very different social world as an

anthropologist and to grasp some of its complexity. For this reason, the book is not chronologically structured, but follows the path of discovery that I embarked upon through fieldwork and my subsequent relationship with the family. I have also endeavoured to show what everyday life was like in this remote Mongolian region and to relate with honesty and, I hope, humour some of the difficulties of conducting anthropological fieldwork, and of accommodating an anthropologist who is conducting fieldwork. Most of all, I hope to show the things that connected us across linguistic, cultural, religious and historical differences.

Note

1. I use the term 'Central Asia' to refer to the region popularly known as the 'Stans', that is, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. This vast region gradually came under Russian influence and colonial rule and eventually became part of the Soviet Union. I refer to 'Inner Asia' as regions that were incorporated by the Manchu into their empire, that is, Outer and Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, Tibet and 'Manchuria'. (See Atwood, 'Is There Such a Thing' for a discussion of the many and changing definitions of 'Central' and 'Inner Asia').