



HUMANS, DOGS, AND OTHER BEINGS

*Myths, Stories, and History in
the Land of Genghis Khan*

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Introduction

Imagine waking up on an early autumn morning in the vast expanse of Mongolia, where the crisp sky stretches endlessly, and the air carries the earthy scent of the steppe. As dawn breaks, the first sounds to greet you are the soft rustling of livestock stirring from their slumber, accompanied by the cheerful barks of camp dogs. As the sun rises and warms the air, the day unfolds as it has for centuries. After a simple but hearty breakfast, the camp's inhabitants—children and elders alike—participate in the well-practiced routine of moving to new pastures. Here, humans and animals move together in an ancient ritual of survival, companionship, and mutual dependence—a rhythm that has echoed through countless generations. In these moments, time seems to slow, offering a chance to appreciate the profound connection between humans, their animals, and the environment.

Growing up in this world, I did not merely observe this relationship—I lived it. Animals were never just creatures to be tended or hunted; they were deeply interwoven into the very fabric of existence, shaping not only the Mongol way of life but also people's sense of identity, their place in the cosmos, and their worldviews. This book explores these connections, focusing on four animals: dogs, marmots, cats, and camels. These animals were chosen not only for their practical and symbolic roles in Mongol culture but also because each reveals unique insights into the broader human experience of living alongside animals.

Mongol culture offers a perspective on human-animal relationships that contrasts sharply with the increasingly fragmented view of modern industrialized societies. Where many contemporary cultures draw rigid boundaries between humans and animals, Mongol traditions blur these lines, ascribing agency and individuality to animals. Through their interactions with humans, each of the four animals discussed in this book provides a window into Mongol life, culture, and beliefs.

While this book centers on human-animal relationships in Mongolia, it is ultimately about the broader human experience. It explores how people find meaning, identity, and survival through their connections with animals, reminding us of our place in a fragile ecosystem shared with other species. Mongolia's nomadic lifestyle serves as a striking example of how humans and animals can coexist in mutual dependence, offering a stark contrast to the increasing detachment from nature in the modern world.

The book is structured into five chapters and an epilogue. The opening chapter introduces the overarching themes of culture and cosmology, laying a foundation for understanding Mongol perspectives on animals. Each subsequent chapter focuses on one of the four animals, examining their roles in cosmology, history, and modern life. Drawing from my personal experiences, research,¹ and oral histories, these chapters weave together mythology, practical knowledge, stories, and cultural memory to present a broader picture of Mongol life that reaches back to the thirteenth century.

This book is not only a semi-scholarly inquiry but also a personal journey. As a writer of Mongol origin, I offer interpretations of human-animal relationships through both the Mongol cultural lens and my own lived experiences. Some of the content regarding practices and beliefs in modern times is drawn directly from my life, and the narrative occasionally blends into personal memoir. This deliberate inclusion aims to illuminate not only my perspectives and worldviews but also the Mongolia I knew during my teenage years and early adulthood. Additionally, the book incorporates the experiences of some members of my extended family, whose stories you will encounter in the pages ahead.

By exploring human-animal relationships in Mongolia, I hope this book will shed light on the shared history and mutual dependence that define our existence. It is an invitation to rethink how we view and treat the animals around us—not as commodities or curiosities, but as co-inhabitants of a shared world. This exploration is not just about understanding the Mongol way of life but about reconnecting with the universal truth that humans are inextricably linked to the natural world we share.

1 Previously, I have published journal articles on animals in Mongolia, including the dog, the cat, and the marmot. See Terbish, 'The Mongolian dog as an intimate other'; Terbish, 'The cat as a mirror of Mongolian society: a good, bad, and ugly animal'; Fijn and Terbish, 'The survival of the marmot: hunting, cosmology and the plague in Mongolia'.