
Essays of a Peripheral Mind

Nei4 Meng2gu3, Zhong1 Guo2

By **K. M. Havstad**

There are over 500 million acres of grasslands in northern China. These rangelands extend along a west–east gradient from the Tarim Basin in north-west China across the Alasban and Mongolian Plateaus to northeastern China, a distance of over 3,000 miles. This is one of the world’s largest expanses of rangeland still predominately used for livestock grazing. This mid-latitude region is extremely arid on the west within the rain shadow of the Himalayas and the Tibet Plateau and semiarid to the east across the temperate expanses of eastern Inner Mongolia, an autonomous region within China. For a very readable overview of the grasslands of this region see: National Research Council, 1992, *Grasslands and Grassland Sciences in Northern China*, National Academy Press, 214 p. Much of this region is relatively sparsely populated with a few interspersed large urban centers that are rapidly developing in concert with China’s recent economic expansion. One urban example is the capital of Inner Mongolia, Hohhot (or Huhehot or Huhohaote), an industrialized city of ~1.6 million people (Fig. 1). Located about a one-hour flight northwest from Beijing, the capital of China, Hohhot is the site of the 2008 International Rangeland Congress (IRC) to be held June 29–July 5, 2008. Although Hohhot is a large city, this Congress location seems entirely appropriate given that over 20% of China’s grasslands occur within Inner Mongolia and are readily accessible from Hohhot by car, bus, or train. The IRC meeting, to be conducted for the first time in collaboration with the International Grassland Congress (see: <http://www.igc-irc2008.org/>), is expected to attract 2,000 participants.

Today, the western media seem to post a daily headline, or more, on some aspect of China. These headlines often are global concerns such as trade imbalances, disproportionate influences on world economies, food safety warnings, dismal laborer conditions, or flaring tensions in the Korean peninsula. However, it is also quite likely that these headlines will concern environmental issues with direct ties to natural resource management. For example, see Evan Osnos’ 2007 article from the Chicago Tribune on “China’s Great Grab” about impacts of China’s natural resource extractions at: www.chicagotribune.com/news/specials/chi-china-special,0,6789511.special. These issues have direct relevance to land management anywhere around the world. I’ve been fortunate to have traveled in China, and visited Hohhot, several times in recent years. These Asian rangelands are stunning, expansive, and globally important.

It is extremely difficult to develop useful and accurate assessments of China, especially in meaningful ways by a novice on China such as myself. I know that traveling in Asia I struggle to sort through impressions in order to place environmental issues within an appropriate context, much the same way I work to understand western US ecological settings within the larger context of US politics and culture. However, the context of western US environments and their management issues is quite familiar to me. This is not the case in China, and I know I need a better grasp of the context of this Asian setting before I can more fully understand their resource management issues. Without a thorough ability to make effective assessments about context, I’m left with an array of impressions that will have to suffice for now. There are 3 impressions that I find most useful.



Figure 1. Hohhot, the industrialized capital of Inner Mongolia and the host city for the 2008 first joint meetings of the International Rangeland Congress and the International Grassland Congress, is a rapidly growing city of approximately 1.6 million people that characterizes urban, modern-day northern China with its A) rampant new construction, B) intermingled diverse modes of transportation, and C) opportunistic enterprises including street corner bicycle repair "shops."

One impression is based on language. Chinese is actually a family of many spoken dialects, including 2 main forms of Chinese, Cantonese and Mandarin. Though there are many dialects, and Cantonese is a popular form of Chinese, about 95% of Chinese people speak Mandarin, the official language of China. It is, of course, a language based on characters, or *hanzi*. I am not sure how many characters exist in the Chinese language, maybe 50,000 or more. Each character is unique, and each has its own sound and tone. Some characters have even been simplified from their traditional form to be more easily drawn and recognized. You do not need to be able to read 50,000 characters to understand Chinese. It might take 2,000 to understand rudiments of conversation, and 3,000 to be able to read a newspaper. Reading a detailed book can require 20,000 or more. Training for basic conversational skills in Mandarin requires over 2,000 hours of classroom instruction, but learning Chinese is probably a life-long endeavor. Irrespective of the time required or difficulty, learning even one Chinese character for a non-Mandarin speaker is greatly assisted by the use of pinyin, the use of the English alphabet to spell out the sounds of a Chinese character. For example, the word "China" in pinyin is "zhong guo," the English spelling of the sound of each of the two characters (中国) that comprise the word "China." Chinese, though, is a tonal language. So, it is not just the pinyin sounds "zhong guo" that characterize the word "China," but also the fact that "zhong" is pronounced with the flat tone (the first tone represented by the #1) and "guo" is pronounced with an ascending tone, the second (#2) of 4 tones that characterize Mandarin. The other tone sounds are one that both descends and then ascends (tone #3), and a descending tone (#4). There are characters in Chinese that are neutral (without tone), but these are few. Hence, the title of this essay is in Mandarin, and is the pinyin spelling, with tone numbers, for "Inner Mongolia" (Nei4 Meng2gu3), "China" (Zhong1 Guo2). This language impression though goes beyond intricacies of the language and its difficulty for non-Chinese. It includes 3 basic statistics: over 20% of the world's population speaks Chinese, over 300 million Chinese youth are learning English, and fewer than 50,000 US youth are learning to speak Chinese. Our future abilities to understand each other and the context of our environmental issues as determined by language will not be equivalent between the English-speaking world and the Chinese-speaking world. The Chinese will likely become more globally adept.

A different impression is of general human landscapes in China. It is assumed that China is ubiquitously densely populated, but that seems true for only 2 of these 3 landscapes. One landscape is the urban setting that is probably most familiar, at least through commonly communicated visual images. These visuals are key Chinese cities with their trademark images such as Tiananmen Square in Beijing, the financial districts of Hong Kong, and the expansive shopping malls of Singapore. A second landscape is the densely populated rural landscape of south China. Interestingly, this

is the region that actually has seen tremendous population growth over the past half century from over 400 million people to now well over 700 million people. Although it is densely populated, it includes large, intensively farmed regions. A third landscape is the relatively sparsely populated rangelands of northern China. For example, Inner Mongolia is about the combined size of California, Oregon, Washington, and Arizona, but with 23 million people, it has about 45% of the population of these 4 western US states. There are cities such as Hohhot with large urban populations (Hohhot would be the fifth largest city in the United States by population), but much of Inner Mongolia maintains a distinctively rural and pastoral nature with a relatively low population density (Fig. 2).

A third impression, more pertinent to the rangelands of this third human landscape, emerges from the history of Inner Mongolia. There is often confusion in the western world—a world in which many of us are quite geographically challenged beyond our own borders—in recognizing that Mongolia and Inner Mongolia are 2 different countries. In the early 13th century, when Temujin, a great grandson of Kabul Khan, was given the title Chinggis Khan, ruler of the Mongolian Steppe, there was only one Mongolia (see David Sneath’s book “Changing Inner Mongolia” published in 2000 by Oxford University Press for a historical overview of this region). For the next 200+ years Chinggis Khan and his descendants ruled an empire that extended across Persia and into central Europe. This empire expanded and contracted with the succession of deaths and realignments within the ruling families. The Mongolian conquest of Asia subsided with the rise of the Chinese Ming Dynasty in the 15th century. By the mid 17th century the Chinese Qing Dynasty established control over China but recognized and rewarded the descendants of Chinggis Khan while incorporating Mongolian culture into China. During this period Mongolia was organized into an Inner region that could be controlled by the government in Beijing, and an Outer region ruled by military governors. This division was formally recognized in the early 20th century by Russia, which shares thousands of miles of common border with Outer Mongolia (or, simply, Mongolia), and later recognized by China in the mid-20th century. Mongolia actually celebrated its 800th anniversary in 2006. Part of this third impression is simply that I am unfamiliar with the full set of implications resulting from a cultural history of this length and complexity. But it is more than that. It has been recorded that nearly 800 years ago Chinggis Khan remarked “So long as we do not tear the holy skin of the golden land, and do not change the natural appearance of the vast grasslands, then the grassland is the best natural garden without any human imprint” (see: Zhang et al. 2007. Mongolian nomadic culture and ecological culture. *Ecological Economics* 62: 19–26). I work with a research group that prides itself on continuing a long (95 years in 2007) history of recorded observations at our location. Obviously, we are just getting started.

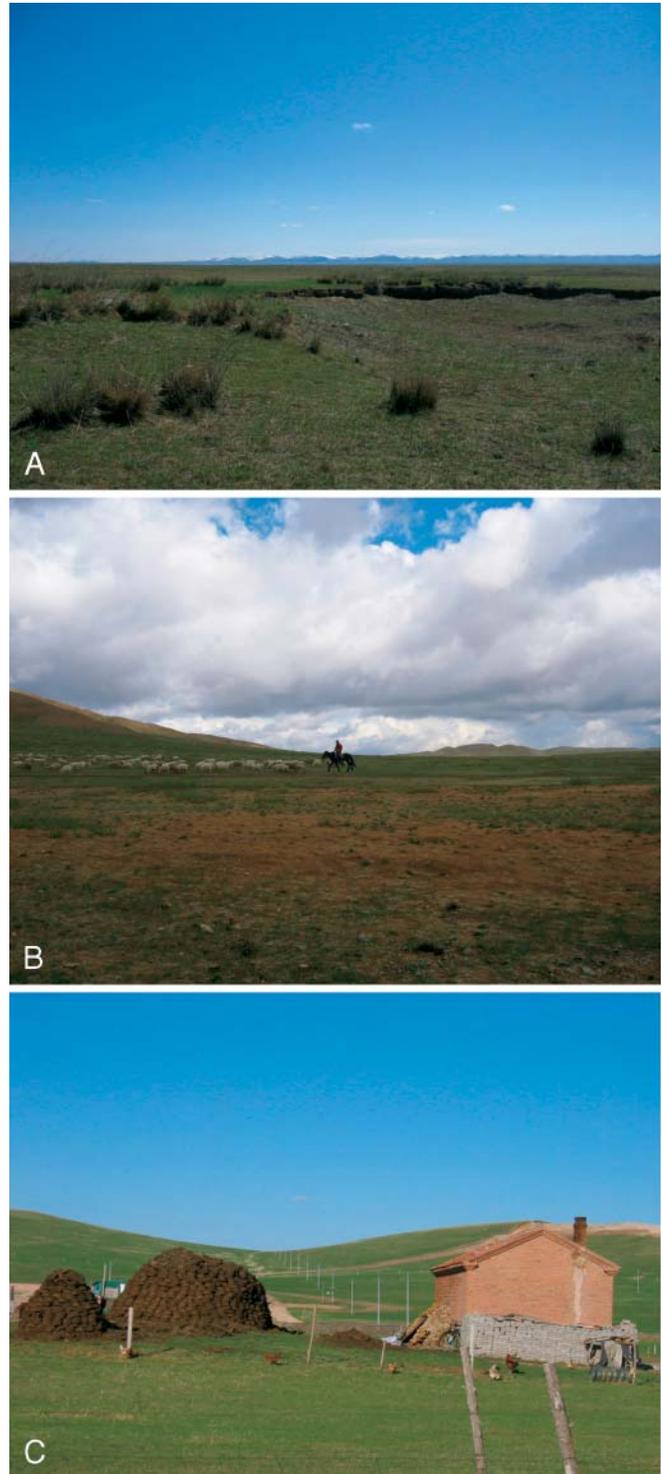


Figure 2. Rural Inner Mongolia, despite a complex history of rulers and governments over the past 8 centuries, has remained A) pastoral with B) an indigenous herder lifestyle that C) relies on opportunistic energy sources.

Collectively, these impressions don’t put me in a position to place an appropriate context based in culture, politics, and history around these Chinese rangelands and their management. They do, though, create a tremendous appreciation for

what can be learned especially given that Inner Mongolia has remained linked to its pastoral roots, and continues to support an indigenous herder lifestyle. It might very well be that these rangelands have been degraded in recent decades, and face serious problems with global consequences (see Olnos's article, or see: Bedunah et al. 2006. Rangeland of Central Asia. USDA, USFS, Proceedings RMRS-P-39). Although these historical, political, social, cultural, and economic settings in Asia might be quite different from that with which I am familiar, the rangeland landscapes are familiar, and the relevant scientific concepts and management principles of my experiences have some applications.

More importantly, my concepts and principles have an opportunity through interactions in Inner Mongolia to be expanded and revised from lessons that others have drawn from 8+ centuries of recorded experiences. It would help, though, if I could at the least understand even a few basics of their language.

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