

FALCO

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Ethnographic study of Altaic Kazakh falconers

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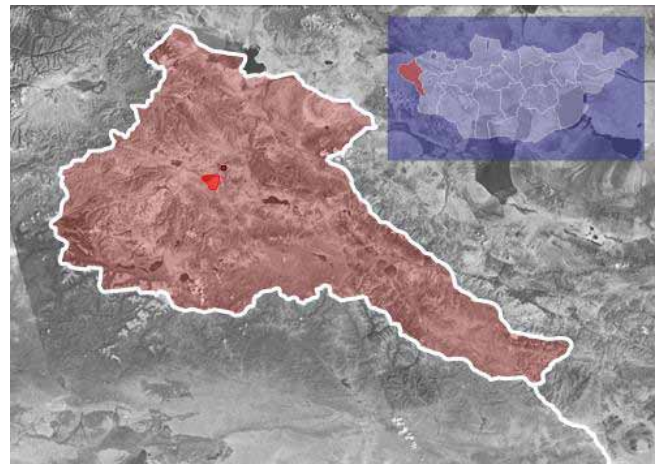
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Introduction

Classical falconry from horseback is well preserved in the Altaic Kazakh community in Bayan-Ulgii (Bayan-Ölgii/ Баян-Өлгий), western Mongolia (Map.1). In their way of falconry, only the female Golden Eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*) is tamed. Hunting takes place from horseback targeting the Red Fox (*Vulpes vulpes*) or Corsac Fox (*Vulpes corsac*). In this field of study, only a little information is available, including travel writings by Stephen J. Bodio (2001, 2003), whilst folk studies by K. Bikhmar (1994) together with my own research (Soma 2007, 2008, 2012a-c) give an insight into this traditional hunting. A Japanese TV program produced by NHK in 2006 called “A Winter Story of Golden Eagle and Me (Boku to Inuwashi no Huyu-Monogatari)” is an informative documentary about a local falconer’s livelihood. While UNESCO has inscribed “falconry” on ‘The Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity’ in 2010, a definitive description of Altaic Kazakh falconry and falconers has yet to be produced.

Purpose: To establish an academic and scientific basis for further studies and preservation, I carried out anthropological and ethno-zoological research from July 2011 with financial support from The Takanashi Foundation for Arts and Archaeology 2011/12 (founded by Marujin Holdings Company Ltd.). My current research extends until March 2014. One main ethnographic focus is to document the local arts and knowledge of eagle taming and hunting. There is an urgent necessity for documentation due to the disappearance of hunters and experienced elders. In addition, my study will include observation of “Human-Animal Interaction” and “Human-Animal Behaviour” in the process of raptor domestication by eagle hunters.

Method: This research belongs to the ‘classical style’ of ethnological research mostly based on live-in participant observations and semi-structural interviews at Sagsai (Carcaи) village in Bayan-Ulgii Province. In addition, my own experience in taming a Golden Eagle provides a deeper understanding in order that I may produce a holistic ethnographic description of Altaic Kazakh falconry.



Map 1. Bayan Ulgii Prefecture

This article gives a brief introduction with some results from previous research in 2011/12. I will point out the scope and future direction of work for the sustainable preservation of Kazakh eagle falconry in the Altai Regions.

Altaic Kazakh falconry

The Altaic Kazakh community is one of the biggest minority groups in Mongolia with a population of more than 86,000. The people came to stay here mainly from western China in the middle of 19th century (Diener 2009; Barcus & Werner 2010). As a consequence of detachment from other sedentary society, many Kazakh traditions have survived, not only falconry culture, but also homemade embroidery, felt carpet production, seasonal transhumance and horse-riding traditions. However, because of their position as a ‘minority group’ in Mongolia, the Kazakh’s rich intangible customs are not highly evaluated.

According to my basic anthropological survey (Soma 2012e), at least 28 falconers (24 families) were confirmed living in Sagsai and neighbouring winter pastures; 7 (6 families) were settled in the village centre and 21 (18 families) were pastoralists with seasonal transhumance in pastureland. Sagsai village is known for its number of falconers and their excellent techniques. Most of the tamed eagles are aged 2~5 years old. In accordance with the old convention, falconers have to release their eagles when they reach 5 years old.

Throughout my 300 day “homestay” with a falconer family at their Buteu Winter Pasture in Sagsai (R-5 Bag), the actual life and custom of falconers gradually revealed itself.

Brief introduction to local eagle falconry : the Sagsai case

Ancient origin of falconry tradition

The place where falconry first originated is still unclear. On analysis of archaeological evidence and petroglyphs from 1,000 BC, one origin might be in the Altai or Tianshan Mountains (Soma 2012b). A figure of horse mounted falconers was depicted in a bronze buckle from the 3rd century BC found in northeastern China. Later, more concrete images of horse-riding falconers were described on a rock in the west of the Lake Issyk-Kul (Kyrgyzstan) from the 7th century. Hunting with tamed raptors on horseback was undoubtedly practiced no later than the 3rd century BC in North Asia. There is enough evidence to assert a centuries-long tradition and historical depth of falconry culture not only in Altaic Kazakh but also in human history.

Eagle taming with minimum effort

In summertime, from March to September, a master falconer is often absent from home and cannot care for and feed his Golden Eagle (Soma 2012d), so his wife or children roughly put a lump of meat around the eagle's foot instead. This is a unique method of care and taming in falconry. European and Japanese ways of raptor-taming require very strict procedures and modes of feeding and training; many falconry management methods were stated in "De Arte Venandi cum Avibus (The Art of Falconry)" and "The Boke of Saint Albans".

However, this minimum effort for his eagle enables the master falconer to concentrate on animal herding and related work in summer, which is especially important for pastoralist falconers. Furthermore, unlike medieval Europe and Japan, there are no social restrictions regulating eagle possession. In this sense, every local could become an eagle owner and it's relatively easily to find and own one.

Animal herding and the falconry tradition

Transhumance (nomadic) subsistence livestock herding is considered a decisive ecological basis for preservation of falconry tradition (Soma 2012c,d). This "nomadism" and its annual animal reproduction provide food for tamed eagles. It also reduces a burden for horse ownership expenditure. One tamed eagle normally consumes about 60~70 kg of flesh in a year. This amount represents 3~5 local Kazakh sheep (or goats). Further, when hunting, falconers need to climb mountains on horseback to access hunting points. The average running distance in a day reaches about 20 km. Therefore, both sheep (for diet) and horse (for mobility) are inseparable from management of local falconry. It means that the collapse of an animal husbandry ecosystem will lead to the disappearance of eagle falconry.

Decline of actual hunters

In contrast to emotional attachment on falconry as an ethnic identity, falconry culture itself is no longer



"The Golden Eagle Festival" in 2012



"The Golden Eagle Festival" in 2012

anchored in actual hunting activities, unlike its previous original context. Nevertheless, there are nearly 30 falconers in Sagsai village and pasturelands, but the actual practice of hunting is just carried out by 4~5 of them. The others become demonstrative 'eagle-owners' for tourists. Many of the falconers consequently have no hunting experience. Such a decline of hunting practice derives from complex reasons like the expansion of trap-hunting or gun-shooting. The recent decrease of wild foxes also reduces catching rates from falconry nowadays. At the same time, winter hunting is extreme, time consuming and hard work even for locals. Beaters, who are used to flush foxes for eagles, tend to avoid this burden and not to go together. This kind of "decontextualization" of falconry culture is one of the unstoppable concerns now endangering Altaic Kazakh falconry.

Potential "coexistence" with Golden Eagles

Kazakh falconers and Golden Eagles might have been in a cycle of coexistence through local tradition and the 'capture and release custom' (Soma 2012d). Falconers normally capture eaglets from the eyrie directly. A captured nestling is called "Kolbala", and a trapped young bird is called "Juz" in Kazakh. It is the local belief that Kolbala is stronger than Juz. Nest capturing may

contribute to a reduction in the mortality rate due to the feeding and care provided by the falconer. Furthermore, removal of one chick reduces siblicide mortality in the nest and may be another positive effect on productivity. Through the process of 'manning', eagles will acquire a 'non-humanphobic' nature even after they are returned to the wild when 5 years old. Released eagles will not be too afraid of human activities. Through surveys in nest distribution, eagle's eyries are seen everywhere in the mountains and can even be found just behind a pastoralist's winter house and nearby. As a result, it may help to share living spheres with humans. The hunting skills developed by a falconer's eagle may contribute to efficient feeding and breeding for the next generation. It is still theoretical but probable that taming, training and manning of wild Golden Eagles with local Kazakh's rule might have some positive effects on the propagation of eagles.

Modern concepts of falconry in symbolism and identity

Fox-fur for ethnic clothes

Traditional fox-hunting has more symbolic connotations rather than a practical utility in Kazakh communities. One of the significances is that fox-fur is exceptionally important to make Kazakh ethnic clothes. Fox-fur

is an essential material for making ethnic clothes to represent Kazakh masculinity. This also gives ethnic symbolism to eagle falconry. For example, "Pushpak Tomak (fox's leg-fur hat)" is the most symbolic element in Kazakh masculinity. The hat brims are ornamented with 16~25 fox's leg-furs and its hem is also piped by Eurasian Beaver (*Castor fiber*) pelt. In the traditional sense, only front leg-furs are chosen for use. Some elder Kazakhs never use rear leg-furs because of their poor condition due to daily running and jumping. To make one hat requires 8~12 foxes only using leg material. Besides, "Tulk Tomak (fox-fur hut)" is important during extremely cold winters.

The Golden Eagle festival for external utility

One of the biggest ethnic events "The Golden Eagle Festival" was established in 2000 in Bayan-Ulgii city (the Aimag Festival) by local travel companies, the Bayan Ulgii Province and the Mongolian Eagle Hunters' Association (MEA). The Sagsai Festival began in 2002 in Sagsai Village. The events undoubtedly contribute to preserve the eagle-ownership tradition. Both these festivals now assemble 40~50 dressed-up falconers and attract more than 300 overseas tourists every year. These two events have grown to be one of the most fruitful cultural events not only in Bayan-Ulgii Province, but in western Mongolia (The Aimag Festival was enlisted in the National Festival of Mongolia; Soma and Battulga In Press).

However, the events no longer involve many local residents, especially the Aimag Festival. The opening ceremony takes place 15 km from Ulgii city and not so many locals are able to join except those who sell souvenirs and local foods (15~20 families) to tourists. The main aim of the festival is tourism and entertaining foreign travellers. The festivals are clearly functioning for external representation while leaving internal emotions behind.

Ethnic representation with images of falconers

For the past decade, some local falconers and the MEA have tried to establish a firm Kazakh

ethnic representation at the Golden Eagle Festival and in its images of falconers. Falconer motifs are seen everywhere in the Ulgii city such as on advertisements, posters, gates of a park, the emblem of the Province and even on a label of local made vodka.

However, their handling and direction of cultural discourse is not really based on scientific and academic criteria. Altaic Kazakhs have some misinterpretation that simple eagle ownership and establishment of The Golden Eagle Festival will give enough contribution to keep their own distinctiveness as a form of intangible cultural heritage. However, falconry culture depends on a transhumant animal husbandry lifestyle. Besides, participation in eagle-taming and fox-hunting used to be an initiation to Kazakh's adulthood. A loss of hunting leads to the practice becoming only a cultural



A skilled falconer in hunting operation



A 5 year-old tamed Golden Eagle

demonstration based on a template of “heritage-like” structure. Altaic Kazakh falconry has apparently reached a transitional point where it can survive as “a living cultural heritage” and only exist as an attractive re-enactment of a lost way of life”.

Conclusion

It is necessary for falconry to be a “living heritage” for future preservation. In connection to my research results and scope of study, this project needs to focus more on the interaction between transhumant animal herding and eagle falconry. As a further study, foundational knowledge about Altaic Kazakh falconry will lead to a deeper understanding of sustainability and preservation for the future.

I would like to ask all readers for sincere advice and opinions on my project.

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