

# Contemporary Falconry in Altai-Kazakh in Western Mongolia

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### ABSTRACT

A classical form of 'eagle falconry' is still practiced in the Altai-Kazakh community of Bayan-Ölgii (Баян-Өлгий) Prefecture in western Mongolia. Their form of falconry is unique in that they use female golden eagles, they hunt on horseback and foxes are the main prey. This makes it different from any other type of falconry in Asia or Europe and for this reason it is regarded as a form of intangible cultural heritage. However, little is known about the specific cultural context in which this activity is practiced and no serious scientific research has hitherto been conducted into it. The author carried out anthropological research in the Altai-Kazakh community from July 2011 to January 2012 with financial support from the Takanashi Foundation for Arts and Archaeology. This research was based on close observation of the hunters, interviews, and the author's own experience of taming a golden eagle at Sagsai (Сарсай) Village. The findings support the view that this type of falconry is indeed a unique form of intangible cultural heritage. In addition, the fact that the practice of hunting foxes with eagles has declined in recent years, suggests that we should now take action to safeguard the practice and preserve it for the future. This paper reports the preliminary results of research undertaken in the summer of 2011.

### Keywords

Altai Mountains, animal-herding economy, Bayan-Ölgii, ecology, ethnic identity, ethnic minority, golden eagle, heritage sociology, transhumance, human-animal interaction, Sagsai, zoo-anthropology, Mongolia

## 1. Introduction: falconers and falconry in Altai-Kazakh

Asian falconry, which has been practiced for centuries in highland and mountain areas, is mostly disappearing and is generally only kept alive by a few falconers as sport and entertainment for the privileged few. However, in the Altai-Kazakh community (a minority group in western Mongolia) falconry is still widely practiced as a form of hunting by nearly four hundred falconers (plate 1). In Altai-Kazakh falconry, falconers (or 'eaglers') use only female golden eagles (*Aquila chrysaetos daphanea*) (plate 2). No other falconers use this species. The tradition of taming eagles makes it possible for the Altai-Kazakh falconers to hunt for medium-sized animals such as red foxes, corsac foxes and even grey wolves. The falconers always hunt on horseback which makes it easier to get around in mountainous terrain.

The practice of falconry was inscribed on *The Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity* as a living human heritage in 2010 [UNESCO 2010a, 2010b]. Mongolian/Altai-Kazakh falconry is also listed in the document but as a separate division. However, the specific technique of looking after eagles

and hunting with them, and the socio-cultural background to the practice, have been little studied and remain little understood. And more seriously, plans for preserving and safeguarding this unique activity have not yet been developed.

Therefore, with financial support from the Takanashi Foundation for Arts and Archaeology, ethnographic research into the practice was carried out at Sagsai (Carcaй) Village in Bayan-Ölgii Prefecture in Mongolia between the 29th of July, 2011 and the 26th of January, 2012. The research was based mainly on ecological anthropology and heritage sociology. Most of the empirical analysis and statistical data were obtained through close observation of the hunters, interviews with the Altai-Kazakh falconers and the author's own experience of looking after a golden eagle, including daily feeding and training with a lure on horseback.

The distinctive cultural qualities of Altai-Kazakh eagle falconry and of the falconers' world gradually became clear throughout the summer of 2011. This paper presents the preliminary results of that research.



**Plate 1**  
An Altai-Kazakh falconer, 2011. Photo: Takuya Soma.



**Plate 2**  
Tame golden eagles, 2011. Photo: Takuya Soma.

## 2. The distinctive qualities of Altai-Kazakh falconry

### (1) Golden eagles in the Altai Mountains

Falconry using tame golden eagles is known only in Altai-Kazakh and Tianshan-Kyrgyz. However, the practice of actually hunting with golden eagles has almost disappeared in Kyrgyz society [Soma 2007]. It has only survived in the Altai-Kazakh community in western Mongolia.

In Europe and Japan, from the middle ages to the present day, falconers have preferred to use falcons or hawks. However, the Altai-Kazakh falconers use huge female golden eagles. An adult female eagle can be 66-90 cms in height and weigh between five and seven kilos with a wing span which can reach 180-234 cms [Gombobaatar and Usukhjargal, 2011: 54-55] (plate 2). The eagles in this area are ten percent larger than other species of golden eagle and are said to be the biggest in the world. Female eagles are much bigger than males and are therefore stronger and better at hunting large animals, which is why the Altai-Kazakh falconers tame only females for hunting purposes.

### (2) The process of training golden eagles

It usually takes about forty-five days to train an eaglet, though some experienced falconers may take as little as thirty days. At first the eaglets are kept hooded and fed daily on the perch by their owner. Sheep and goat meat are the preferred foods but the captive eaglets may also be fed on mouse, rabbit, fish or even dog. As the eaglet gets used to her owner he gradually accustoms her to perching on his right wrist to feed. The eaglet is also taught not to be afraid of horses by perching next to one. Both creatures fear each other and young horses have to be taught to accept the presence of an eagle on their backs. The close season for hunting with eagles runs from March to September, so training eagles to hunt does not begin until September. Inexperienced falconers will be helped to train their first eagles by their father or an experienced falconer. In the past, training an eagle was an initiation rite through which boys became men.

### (3) Falconry on horseback

Hunting with eagles in the Altai Mountains is always conducted on horseback (plates 1 and 3) because that makes it easier to traverse the mountainous terrain and reach the prime hunting spots - Altai-Kazakh falconers

always search for foxes and other animals from the top of mountain ridges from which they can survey vast tracts of land. The eagles are also very heavy and it would be almost impossible to carry one for any length of time on foot over rough country. Owning a horse is therefore of critical importance for falconers in the Altai Mountains.

One of the reasons for the decline of Kyrgyz falconry may be that these days fewer local falconers own horses [Soma 2008]. The traditional practice of transhumance (driving herds of sheep and goats to summer pasture up in the mountains) is gradually disappearing as the region becomes more urban, and this means fewer people need horses. If a falconer does not possess a horse, he will be forced to hunt in his immediate neighbourhood where there are other inhabitants and not much wild prey. Hunting with eagles would certainly not have survived for hundreds of years if the hunters had had no access to

horses. The reduction in the number of herds of sheep and goats also means there are fewer newborn kids and lambs available, and traditionally these were the meat on which eaglets were raised.

#### **(4) Perching on the right wrist**

In Altai-Kazakh falconry, eagles perch on their owners' right wrists because riders in that region usually hold their horse's reins in the left hand.

This technique is known only in India, Russia, ancient Turkey and Persia, and it is totally unknown in Japan, China and Europe. It may be a relic of a classical form of falconry that has been preserved by the Altai-Kazakh falconers. Presumably, when falconry techniques began to spread beyond nomadic societies, non-nomadic falconers started to tame falcons and hawks and carry them on their left which was more convenient and perfectly possible when they did not have reins to hold.



**Plate 3**  
A falconer wearing traditional dress, on horseback with his eagle, 2006.  
Photo: Takuya Soma.

### (5) Hunting as a team

In Altai-Kazakh falconry the main prey is the red fox (plate 4). Fox hunting is not usually carried out by a single falconer, rather they usually hunt in teams with sometimes as many as five falconers or more in a team.

Hunting with eagles is highly organised and involves co-ordination between falconers and beaters. To begin with the falconer (or falconers) go up to a mountain ridge from where they can see over a large stretch of land and are able to scan the landscape for prey (plate 5). When they have sighted something, one or two beaters gallop towards it over the foothills making as much noise as possible to frighten the foxes out from under the rocks where they are hiding. When the falconers see the foxes running they let loose an eagle.

If the first attack fails, a second eagle is released. If that attack is also unsuccessful, then a third eagle will be let loose and so on. Thus the hunt is a joint enterprise and because there are several eagles flying it is less likely to fail.

### (6) The technique of capturing and releasing golden eagles

Local people believe that young eagles leave their nests around the 20th of July, so Altai-Kazakh falconers mostly capture the *eyas* (eaglets) directly from their eyries (nests) in May and June. This means that the *eyas* learn to fly while in captivity. Five years later, the tamed eagles are released into the wild as the rules of Altai-Kazakh falconry dictate. This tradition means that they should be able find mates and breed. A five year-old eagle, which has by then reached sexual maturity, is thus called *ana*, which means 'mother' in Kazakh.

The Altai-Kazakh practice of hunting with eagles and horses is distinctive and unique, quite different from any other sort of falconry that is or has been practiced in Europe, America, Arabia or other parts of Asia.

## 3. Falconry as ethnic identity

Hunting with eagles on horseback is also an important part of Altai-Kazakh ethnic identity. In Bayan-



**Plate 4**  
An eagle with the fox it has just caught, 2011. Photo: Takuya Soma.



**Plate 5**  
Scanning the countryside for prey, 2011. Photo: Takuya Soma.

Ölgii city one can find numerous posters, images and advertisements showing golden eagles and this traditional form of hunting. In addition, the central element of the emblem of Bayan-Ölgii Prefecture is a golden eagle with outstretched wings. The golden eagle and the eagle-falconers are thus symbols of ethnic identity.

In September 2000, the Mongolian Eagle-Hunters' Association (MEA) and Bayan-Ölgii Prefecture introduced an annual event for falconers – the Golden Eagle Festival (plate 6). There is also another similar festival that has been held by a local travel company in Sagsai Village since 2002. Every year, more than fifty falconers on horseback come from all over the prefecture, with their eagles festively decorated for the occasion, and gather for this celebration. The event provides local falconers with a precious opportunity to get together and display their eagles to the public. Nowadays more than five hundred visitors come to see and participate in the event. It has become a heritage and eco-tourism attraction.

Even though cultural changes have been occurring in the area for the last decade, no-one has done any

serious, detailed academic research into the cultural phenomenon of eagle falconry. Consequently, the socio-cultural and environmental factors that caused this unique way of hunting to develop remain unknown. It also means that no plans or measures for safeguarding or preserving Altai-Kazakh falconry have yet been established.

On the one hand it might seem that the Golden Eagle Festival has had a positive effect. But the opposite is in fact the case because hunting with eagles has actually declined in recent years. Hunting with traps and shooting with guns - efficient modern ways of killing – seem to be replacing the practice of eagle falconry in western Mongolia. For instance, in the Sagsai region the author found that there were twenty-four eagle falconers. However, it turned out that only between two and four of them actually did any hunting.

In spite of the fact that eagle taming and training are still widely practiced in the Altai region, using eagles for fox hunting – the reason the practice developed in the first place - will be on the brink of extinction if academic research and systematic safeguarding actions are not

developed and implemented.

#### 4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the author would like to stress that the Altai-Kazakh practice of hunting foxes on horseback with eagles is without question a unique form of intangible cultural heritage embodying outstanding knowledge and unique techniques.

It must also be emphasised that Altai-Kazakh falconers have not only developed a distinctive form of falconry, they have also created an emotional bond with the eagles through the custom of capture and release which contributes to the propagation of the species in the wild. Tamed eagles are also less afraid of people and this enables them to co-exist happily with their human neighbours.

In addition, the ethno-social research the author did with Kyrgyz falconers in the region of Lake Issyk-kul made it clear that retaining the system of transhumance is of critical importance when it comes to preserving the tradition of hunting with eagles because it means the

local community will continue to need horses to herd their flocks in the mountains, and it means there will continue to be a supply of lambs and kids to feed the eaglets [Soma: 2008]. Altai-Kazakh falconry is part of a fragile balance between a social activity (transhumance), the survival of the golden eagle (ecology) and the preservation of the art of falconry (a human skill). If any one of those elements is lost, there will be no more hunting with eagles on horseback. The knowledge may survive but it will not be used for its original purpose.

The Altai-Kazakh practice of eagle falconry is a distinctive cultural form of intangible heritage, relating to animal husbandry and the interaction of man and beast. Further research will tell us more about the specific social and cultural meanings of this tradition and will enable us to develop a plan for safeguarding this unique aspect of Altai-Kazakh intangible cultural heritage. 🇰🇬



**Plate 6**  
The opening ceremony of the 2012 Golden Eagle Festival, 2012. Photo: Takuya Soma.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

- This research would not have been possible without the financial support of the Takanashi Foundation for Arts and Archaeology. I would like to express my deep gratitude to Executive Director Seizaburo Takanashi and to all the members in charge of this foundation.

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