

Owen Lattimore interviewed by Caroline Humphrey, 21st May 1983 – Part 1

[The original videotape was damaged so that the quality of the film is poor. For a small section there is no image but the sound continues throughout.]

0:00:05 Asked whether he sees himself as an historian, anthropologist or geographer finds it a difficult question to answer. Never went to university so no label, personally thinks that history and geography are two governing themes; became interested in Mongolia by accident; at nineteen, not able to go to university, went to China where I had spent part of my childhood, joined up with a British firm; bored by treaty ports such as Tianjin and Shanghai; specialized in learning Chinese; peculiarity of Unequal Treaties was that foreigners lived in concessions in the Treaty Ports where Chinese only admitted on sufferance; couldn't open branch offices in the interior; in 1920's China in turmoil of civil wars which foreigners couldn't control through 'gunboat diplomacy'; I specialized in making trips into the interior to deal with problems that had come up with our Chinese agents, usually in the form of an illegal tax being levied by the local war lord; then went up by rail to edge of Inner Mongolia, to Rail Head; there had caravans coming in from Mongolia, Xinjiang (Chinese Turkistan), and Tibet; fascinating to see camels coming into the rail freight-yards delivering goods; problem of how to get the wool we had contracted for through lines to Tianjin so it could be shipped to Liverpool, Boston, Philadelphia etc.; I managed to get the cargo through; tried to persuade boss that we as were dealing in a blind market, didn't know the interior, dealing with agents, I should take a year's leave and investigate the interior; refused as times too troubled; resigned to go on my own; by then I had met and married my wife; I went up by caravan to Xinjiang; sent radio message to her and she came via Siberia and Soviet Turkestan by rail; met at the Chinese border and travelled by Karakorum route down into Ladakh, Kashmir, India and then home

0:06:24 Spent a year of formal academic training in the division of anthropology at Harvard; not interested in a diploma but wanted to get acquainted with what social scientists were interested in and their methods; then went back to China and spent a year in Manchuria; decided to learn Mongol; spent a winter in Peking with very good Mongol teacher, learning both spoken and written language; following Spring went up to Inner Mongolia and found a marvellous chap with whom I travelled year after year; he was from the Altai, the extreme west of Outer Mongolia; he knew no Chinese or Russian, only Mongol; I bought four camels and we rode off, each man leading a loaded camel, sometimes camping alone, sometimes alongside Mongol camp; at the end had broken the problem of communicating in Mongolian

0:08:53 Nature of the caravans; a project I am working on now; silk route leading from Great Wall of China, through Chinese and Russian Turkestan, finally reaching the Mediterranean; everybody knows it existed, nobody knows how it was done; I am the only European or American who has actually lived that life; I know the practical

problems; how much weight does a camel carry, what is the length of a day's march depending on terrain, what are the problems of herding and keeping animals in good condition; now writing for 'Scientific American' a paper on long-haul caravans

0:10:18 In 1920's not only bringing down wool but vast quantities of sheep's intestines to be sold to Europe and America for sausage skins; from Xinkiang we brought down cotton; during 1860's newly industrializing Russia cut off from its supplies of American cotton due to the Civil War; they got some American cotton seed and distributed it in Central Asia and by the 1920's were growing a good quality, long staple cotton; after the First World War, for some years we could bring cotton down to Rail Head to Tianjin, then ship from Shanghai; undercutting American cotton; going back the camels carried cloth, metal-ware, cigarettes etc.; we dealt through our Chinese agent in Tianjin; he had connections with an agent-merchant at Rail Head; agent-merchant would hire camels from a caravan owning firm; headman of the caravan like a ship's captain, his number two is like the purser and the camel pullers are like the crew; as on a ship a whole set of conventions to learn; convention that no camel puller should be asked to pull more than 18 camels; a caravan over 180 would become too unwieldy with problems of grazing

0:14:40 Money very complicated; in certain parts of the interior still using uncoined billets of silver, also silver dollars and Chinese paper dollars, some issued by the Government and some by provincial governments; gambling on the rate of exchange part of the art of doing trade; in Mongolia the whole responsibility was on the shoulders of the head of the caravan, with the exception that a member of the family of the caravan owning firm travelled with it; similar to supercargo on ship; when caravan reached its destination, the "captain" handed over to the "supercargo" who dealt with the disposal of the cargo; he would deal with a local merchant who was in touch with traders who travelled among the Mongols, bartering, buying and selling

0:17:20 There were practically no Mongol merchants at that time; a caravan man, like a sailor, would know the route; discussed journey round campfire; reckoned time by camel watering and urinating; there were several great houses of the Hudson Bay type in Mongolia, also smaller Chinese firms which were resident there who traded with the big houses; in the 1920's they set up Mongolian state trading to get rid of Chinese firms; several arrangements, one called Mongolian Central Cooperative and for some years the Mongols had a contract with a German firm which had offices in China and Mongolia; they brought goods from Europe, through Mongolia into China, as well as Mongolian wool, cattle etc.

0:22:12 On my first long journey I was travelling with Chinese caravan and could only communicate in Chinese; learnt the lore of the caravan but ordinary caravan man couldn't communicate with native peoples; [thunder, pause] that was why I decided to learn Mongol [repeat of above]; in 1930's Inner Mongolia going through terrible time; Chinese railways had reached right up to the edge of Inner Mongolia and Chinese settlers were flooding in; Mongols being driven out, partly at the point of the bayonet, partly by bribery; Inner Mongolia divided up into Banners, principalities, and Chinese would bribe the princeling to sell land; ordinary Mongols resented this as traditionally the prince was ruler of the people but not the owner of the land; the land was the collective property of the people of the Banner; most of the Mongols were living in felt tents; in some areas, for winter quarters, they would have mud brick huts; in some

areas they had settled down and taken to agriculture; these people suffered when Chinese came with troops and threw them out saying they were nomads and had no right to squat on the land; Mongols who had lost the tradition of herding would be thrown out on the Steppe; if they resisted they were called bandits

0:27:56 Normally several families would camp together so they could rotate the work; pastoral Nomadism not a primitive form of society but sophisticated and complex, and governed by several forms of rotation; you have to move the herds according to season; rotate use of pasture by different animals; can graze sheep on pasture where cattle have just been moved off but not vice versa as sheep crop grass so closely that cows can't get at what is left; a form of cooperation existed among the Mongols before collectivisation; two or three families would camp together and distribute responsibility for types of animal between them; important for collectivisation as people have already learnt principle of responsibility for other people's property

0:31:00 Buddhism at this time was still strong; side by side with principalities there were monasteries; monasteries owned land and had serfs, like princes, and owned herds; exploited the people; leads to a phenomenon where pious people are bitterly anti-clerical; need to distinguish between anti-religious and anti-clerical

0:33:11 In Outer Mongolia refer to an early meeting where Lenin met a deputation of Mongol leaders; Lenin told them that under Mongolian conditions they did not have to adhere to the Marxist view of history; said they were in the feudal stage of evolution but could reach socialism without passing through the capitalist stage; that they should begin with cooperatives and these should develop into true collectives; in cooperative, retained ownership of property in livestock, but handled it as a member of a cooperative; final stage was that livestock became property of collective and former members of the cooperative became members of the collective; their own old form of cooperation made it easier for Mongols to accept the collective mode than it did for peasants; for a period in the 1920's the leaders tried to go too fast and forced people to cooperate; in Inner Mongolia when I first went in the early 1930's there were thousands of refugees from the revolution in Outer Mongolia (The People's Republic of Mongolia); while I was there the Peoples Republic began to prosper, and refugees returned

0:38:23 The role of women of the nomads has always been better than among the settled peasants because of need of manpower; even women do some of the herding; as they do some of the productive work as well as domestic they get some of the outlook of a producer; women were less subordinate; in a Mongolian tent in the 1930's if the male head of household was out, the woman took responsibility for hospitality; always offered tea with milk, could talk freely; protocol – a women's side and men's side of tent; back of tent furthest from the door is the place of honour for a guest; fire in the middle of tent with grate round it; should not throw things in it or knock out pipe on the grate as desecrating god of fire; guests would sleep on left hand side of entrance against the back

0:42:14 Vainshtein 'Nomad of South Siberia', argues that in areas closer to China a less diversified economy but in remote areas much more artisan production; true; princely and commoner life in 1930's; generally speaking, princely families better off; by the end of the nineteenth century there were some poor princes and wealthy

commoners; cases of poor princes working for wealthy commoners; among noble families generally more conscious upper-class behaviour; 'U' and 'non-U' modes of speech; I was careful to learn the old ceremonial forms of greeting; at collectivisation know of one family that had hired help with animals who evaded collectivisation for a while; when collectives took hold and began to prosper found their hired herdsmen were going off to join the collectives; finally asked to join a collective and were initially rejected for lack of herdsmen though later accepted; have met some of that family since and doing very well in the collective

0:46:18 Early leaders of the collectives; in the early years of the Mongolian revolution, different for Europe or China as no real Mongolian intelligentsia; early leaders all came from lower levels of the lower class; Mongols turned to the Russians for advice and example; the Comintern still very strong and sent advisors into Mongolia from various countries, not just Russians; relations between Mongols and Russians and Chinese was very different; hostile towards the Chinese over unfair trade; Chinese resented having been ruled by people they thought of as barbarians; when Russians first appeared in the late 1500's a different kind of people; it was becoming a great nation; recruited Mongols into the Tsarist forces; [screen goes blank here but voices continue] Buryats more diversified than Mongols proper; Buryat cultivators provided the grain and built the houses at Irkutsk; in a nineteenth century account suggested that the Russians gave the Buryat a superior plough, but the Buryat used the plough more skilfully and productively than the Russian peasant

0:52:20 At the time of the Revolution several thousand Russians in Urga (Ulam Bator); after the Russo-Japanese War and the abortive 1905 Revolution, all sorts of Russian refugees arrived in Mongolia; much debate within Russian community and Russian-speaking Mongols learnt their politics there; with the growth of Russian influence and trade interpreters were needed; Russians set up a school for interpreters in Urga; princes didn't want to send sons so sent serfs, thus first tentative intelligentsia were sons of serfs; princes wouldn't even send their sons to the new military school when Mongolia decided to form a national army; Sukhebator, regarded as father of the revolution, son of a serf who had run away from Northern Mongolia to Urga; father traced and threatened with repatriation but agreed to send his son, Sukhebator, instead of one of the sons of the noble family of the principality; there he learnt Russian

0:56:41 Russian presence among Cossacks on northern border; soon after the Russian occupation of Buryatia, Buryat-Cossack regiments were formed; had both Russian and Buryat officers; Buryats never integrated into the empire of Chingghis Khan or his successors; even today a Mongol man will marry a Buryat girl, but a Mongol girl rarely willing to marry a Buryat; similar pattern with marriages to Russians; in south Russia there was an historical pattern that continued through periods of Russian expansion; ebb and flow of power; periods of Turkik rulers of subject Slavs followed by the opposite so relations between people were not ethnic as in colonial societies, but class relationships; even today among Russians people will boast of the fact that they have Tartar blood

1:00:48 Since first visits there has been a curious pattern of great changes combined with strong continuity; in the countryside in encampments you encounter the old modes of politeness, courtesy, hospitality to guests, etc.; in new urban complexes such

as Ulaanbaatar, find young Mongols can ride a motorbike much better than they can ride a horse; rapid urbanization brings problems; through Mongolia as a whole there are problems of manpower shortage; area under-populated; when families move to the town both parents can get jobs and life easier, but rising juvenile delinquency; bilingual in Kazakhian and Mongol, but not being Mongolized, absorbed into the Mongol people; State has rehabilitation centre outside Ulaanbaatar for delinquents; Mongols have always been heavy drinkers, but don't think there are as many alcoholics as among the Russians; mare's milk can be fermented to about the strength of beer, and this can be distilled and redistilled

1:06:00 In Mongolia today not only Mongols but Kazakh's living in the far west; most important minority in Mongolia numbering about 5%; in Manchu days treated as aliens; had no hereditary princes and not allotted territory of their own; contributed to their becoming the most celebrated horse thieves in Mongolia; since the revolution they have been allocated territory in the north-west corner of Mongolia and have prospered; enterprising and intelligent