

SPOTLIGHT



Bixiriletu and his wife, Renqinbaorile, stand on their farmland in Angsu village.

PHOTOS BY SATARUPA BHATTACHARJYA AND LIN HONG / CHINA DAILY

By SATARUPA BHATTACHARJYA
in Ordos, Inner Mongolia
satarupa@chinadaily.com.cn

Vast stretches along Expressway 216, which connects urban Ordos to its rural Otag Front Banner, lie uninhabited. More animals than people can be found in this part of North China's Inner Mongolia autonomous region where trucks carrying coal are often the only vehicles on the highway.

Other than its coal reserves, which are among the world's largest, the region produces mutton, milk and wool. It has iron ore and rare earth, and among more modern industries, wind and solar power. Lately, it has gotten into data mining.

Local pastoral herders and officials in villages of the Otag Front Banner suggest that the modernization of livestock production and management is under way. At the same time, traditional lifestyles of the once nomadic people are changing.

The prefecture-level city of Ordos, located in the region's south, has an area of more than 85,000 square kilometers but a population size of just 2 million or so. With a dominant Han population, and around 11 percent Mongolian, the ethnic mix includes Manchu and Hui groups.

Ethnic Mongolians comprise 30 percent of the banner's population of 78,000, with the majority estimated to be involved in raising livestock and agricultural activities. The banner, which was established in 1980, has 68 villages and four towns.

More than 2 million domestic animals, mostly sheep, are raised each year, according to local government officials.

The outside world has long associated Inner Mongolia with images of wild horses running through the grasslands. But horse racing, the popular recreational sport in the region, appears to be more relevant to the tourism industry today than to society. The banner had 2,913 horses in

2016. In 1975, there were more than 2 million horses in the region.

The annual Naadam festival has kept Inner Mongolia's equestrian tradition alive.

A similar story is that of yurts, or the tent dwellings, which used to be made from a woolen fabric and wood. Many years ago, nomadic groups in the region would dismantle them and carry along the parts from place to place as they explored the steppe.

The present-day yurts in the banner, for instance, have concrete bases and serve as hotels in summer where visitors can experience Mongolian culture.

It is late afternoon in Tabantaolegai village when Wangchuge decides to survey the grounds on which his sheep are grazing. But instead of walking through sandy fields to gather the animals from different corners, he monitors them on a TV screen from inside a modern yurt.

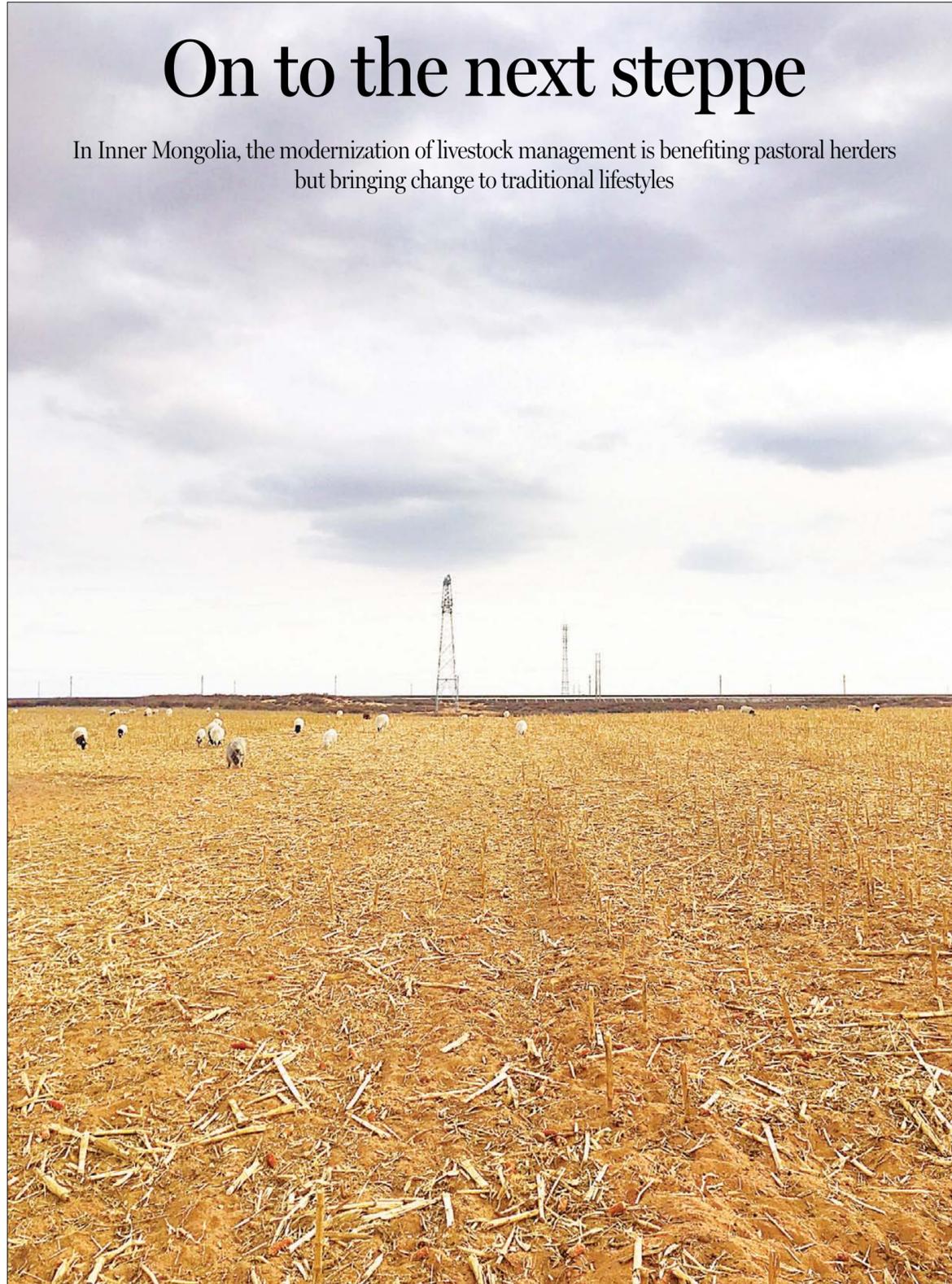
The herder, who runs a family business that raises sheep for meat and wool, said he sells an average of 300 sheep a year.



From left: A TV screen shows the movement of sheep in Tabantaolegai village, Otag Front Banner, in North China's Inner Mongolia autonomous region; Resident Wangchuge watches his sheep, which he can also monitor on the same screen from his modern yurt; Bixiriletu, a fellow herder from Angsu village in the banner, checks his cell phone to remotely view his sheep that are grazing in the village.

On to the next steppe

In Inner Mongolia, the modernization of livestock management is benefiting pastoral herders but bringing change to traditional lifestyles



A video camera he has placed on the roof of his house provides him with real-time surveillance of animal movements on his large plot of land.

"Traditional methods of raising sheep have disappeared (in his village)," said Wangchuge, 41, as he sliced salted mutton, a Mongolian delicacy. "The use of technology has helped reduce both labor and time."

He owns six cows as well, but mainly for milk.

This village in the Otag Front Banner has 175 permanent resident families, many of whom keep sheep and grow corn and a variety of rice.

Wangchuge said he has set up drinking water tanks for his sheep that automatically adjust temperatures. He is keen to develop an earmark but does not specify if it would be digital.

"After a sheep is born and earmarked, we will be able to keep daily logs on its intake of grass and water. This will make consumers feel safe about buying the meat," he said.

The banner is among 33 such administrative subdivisions in Inner Mongolia where livestock production is a major economic activity.

"We are trying to develop modern animal husbandry and agriculture that are both eco-friendly and profitable," a senior local official said, adding that the industries generated 2.2 billion yuan (\$350 million) in 2016.

He did not want to be identified by name as he was speaking on behalf of his team.

An ecological concern has been the degradation of the grasslands, partly due to overgrazing. In 2013, the region launched some protection measures and since has tried to restrict active grazing to nine months in a year.

Bixiriletu, a 40-year-old resident of Angsu, another village in the Otag Front Banner, grew up watching his parents herd their sheep to grasslands far from home. In recent years, he had to wake up nightly to check on his animals.

Now, he has the tools — a camera and a smartphone.

Bixiriletu worked at a coal mine in the banner for much of his adult life. In 2012, he watched a TV program on the artificial insemination of sheep. He said this gave him the idea of visiting a breeding facility in Ulanqab, which is also located in the region's south.



US tech giant Apple is reportedly looking to set up a cloud hub in the city, its second in China after the southwestern province of Guizhou.

"The (sperm) donors are foreign," Bixiriletu said of the meat-producing Dorper, the South African hybrid sheep that was developed for arid conditions similar to Ordos.

The mixing of foreign and local breeds, he said, has meant shorter waiting periods.

"It takes from six to seven months for the local sheep to be ready for an abattoir, but for the hybrids, it's from four to five months."

Some 200 families reside in Angsu. In the 1990s, Mengkebayaer, who is from the same village, was a musician with a Mongolian folk troupe in Dalian in Northeast China's Liaoning province. He got married and returned to Inner Mongolia in 2000, when his village did not have electricity.

His siblings gave him 40 sheep to start his livestock business, and soon he saw profits roll in, he said.

Mengkebayaer's parents settled down in Angsu in the 1940s, in the same decade the autonomous region came into being.

"When I got married, I couldn't have imagined that my village would have electricity. Then we got it, then we got roads, and now online connectivity," said Mengkebayaer, 44. The first light-bulbs were lit in Angsu in 2006.

He makes about 400,000 yuan a year from his various businesses that include livestock, dairy items, corn and rice, and tourism.

"Irrigation can be controlled remotely," he said of the overhead water pipes fitted on farmlands in the banner.

He aims to register a trademark to sell his products online. Meanwhile, he plays the *shudraga*, a Mongolian instrument, when he gets the time.

More than a decade ago, Angsu also witnessed the arrival of sowing machines. The village's Party chief, Suyalaqiqige, was among the early adopters, who used the machines to plant corn and rice. She was a traditional sheep herder in her teens.

While modernization of livestock management and agriculture may have made her life easier, it has led to the loss of human interaction, such as conversations with fellow herders when watching over their sheep. Nonetheless, the old way of grazing was time-consuming.

Sitting in her house underneath a portrait of Genghis Khan, the founder of the Mongol Empire and the most revered figure in the ethnic Mongolian community in China, Suyalaqiqige said the biggest change in her village has been the mechanization of agriculture.

A delegate to the Ordos People's Congress since 2013, her role includes helping local herders get better access to public services and promoting government policy. But despite her village's strides in modernization, she recognizes some challenges that remain.

"There are asphalt roads connecting villages (in the larger area) but not all herders' families. If this is solved, it would be more convenient for them to travel and sell their products outside," Suyalaqiqige, 51, said, speaking through a Mongolian translator.

Many villagers hire trucks to transport goods to markets, and buyers sometimes come to the village.

Other than infrastructure and transport requirements, protecting the grasslands is a top priority.

Local herders have started to divide plots for their sheep to graze, and the emphasis is on quality breeds, so that the numbers can be reduced, Suyalaqiqige said.

Many herders in the Otag Front Banner come from families that once led nomadic lives.

Now, even as the newer generations welcome changes in their work and lifestyles, they will likely continue to pursue their cultural traditions.

Lin Hong contributed to this story.



From left: Mengkebayaer, a herder and businessman from Angsu village, roasts corn in a traditional wok in early March; Modern yurts used for tourism in summer in rural Ordos; Suyalaqiqige, Party chief of Angsu village.