

基調講演

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Mongolian “culture” and the methods of social anthropology

要旨

How do social anthropologists deal with generalization? As a comparative enterprise, anthropology supposes generalization: thus, in theory, any ethnography mostly carried out with just a few families (thanks to the fetishized method of “participant observation”) is supposed to offer a contribution to the understanding of human ways. As already noted by several authors (like Harry G. West or Graham Jones), yet in a slightly different perspective, it is perhaps not by chance that magic is one of the first topics broached by the discipline at the end of the 19th century. At the core of ethnography and of the anthropological comparatist method lies an almost magical ability, a power to bridge the gap between the extreme particular and the extreme general, between life with a few humans and the knowledge of mankind.

Meanwhile, the method of social anthropology implies an intermediary level, which complicates things rather than simplify them, as it involves another process of generalization embedded in the first one. Drawing on my own ethnography in the Northwestern province of Uvs in Mongolia, I will reflect on the process by which something can be said about “Mongolia” or the “Mongols” on the basis of participant observation carried out in one particular region. Ethnographers must walk a delicate line between their deconstruction of vernacular (e.g. nationalist) essentializations of culture on the one hand (that is the Mongolianness, or Mongoliannesses, claimed by Mongols), and the necessities of their own profession, on the other hand, which suppose they can say something about “Mongolians” at a certain level of generality. This is what French anthropologists call “ethnologie”, as opposed to both “ethnographie” and “anthropologie”; its methods and felicity conditions are far from transparent.

While discussing these two embedded processes of generalization, and taking inspiration from Mongolian ethnography, I will introduce the figure of the “skillful person” (mergen hūn), whose talent is to propitiously navigate an heterogenous cosmos by associating its elements in a “correct” (zōv) way. Thinking through “magic” on the one hand, and “skill” on the other, may be a good way to take another look – a view from the standpoint of Mongolian world-making practices – at the methods of social anthropology.