

Iron Winter [12A]

2025 Australia/Mongolia 89 mins

UK released	Not on general UK release
Director	Kasimir Burgess
Screenplay	Ed Cavanough; Enebish Sengemugaa
Cinematography	Benjamin Bryan
Music	Luke Altmann
Cast	(As themselves): Chadraa Barsbold; Dondogsuren Batbold; Chadraa Dondogsuren

Last year, Mongolia suffered a severe ‘iron winter’, bringing extreme cold, heavy snow and thick ice. For the country’s traditional herders it proved catastrophic, with over seven million animals killed and thousands of people impoverished and displaced. This sensitive documentary studies this humanitarian crisis through the experiences of two young herders tasked with safeguarding 1,000 horses over four months, effectively highlighting both the beauty and the brutality of a nomadic lifestyle increasingly under threat

Herding may be in Batbold’s blood, but it is not necessarily a path he wishes to follow. Like many young Mongolians, this 20-something feels the pull of the city, of a more comfortable and connected existence. Nevertheless, he and his friend Tsagana agree to undertake the arduous task of overseeing the winter migration of the community’s horses, to find new sources of food for the animals and give home pastures a chance to recuperate – an ancient tradition that has died out in recent years.

Director Kasimir Burgess (*Franklin, The Leunig Fragments*) has travelled a long way from his native Australia to make the film, having been approached by journalist Edward Cavanough and producers Ben Golotta and Morgan Wright to take on this subject. Yet, filming with the herders for six weeks — and, later, editing alongside Kenny Ang — he finds and follows the rhythms of both the family (introduced to the filmmakers by Mongolian documentarian and co-producer Enebish Sengemugaa) and the extreme environment in which they live. Batbold and Tsagana take their responsibilities seriously,

dutifully following instructions on how to handle the horses and construct the ‘ger’ (yurt) in which they will live. But Batbold finds it difficult to let go of outside distractions and fully absorb himself in the herding ways. “I miss Facebook,” he laments. “Ideally we could live with horses and chat with girls.”

This tension between old and new, between moving forward and holding onto the past, is the crux of the film. Shooting through older, slightly distressed lenses, cinematographer Benjamin Bryan drinks in the glorious landscape of timeless mountains and endless horizons, using drone shots which capture the men and the horses like ants against this vast backdrop. A spare score from Luke Altmann pulls in traditional elements and ranges from gentle lament to more ominous rumblings as the winter really starts to bite, animals are lost and Batbold’s choices become increasingly difficult. This is a process of initiation for the young man, a baptism of fire that may end up pushing him in the opposite direction.

Throughout, the camera remains an intimate yet unobtrusive passenger on this journey, and Burgess is also careful not to romanticise proceedings. The film is clear that these herders are not simply on some great journey of personal discovery but are trying to make a living, to survive as they have for centuries, in the face of huge political and environmental change.

“It’s been a pure experience,” says Batbold as the horses are reunited with their owners and the community celebrates Lunar New Year. That’s certainly true of Iron Winter — even if the final destination of Batbold, and numerous others like him, remains unclear.

Nikki Bughan, *Screen Daily*, 10 April 2025 (abridged)

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