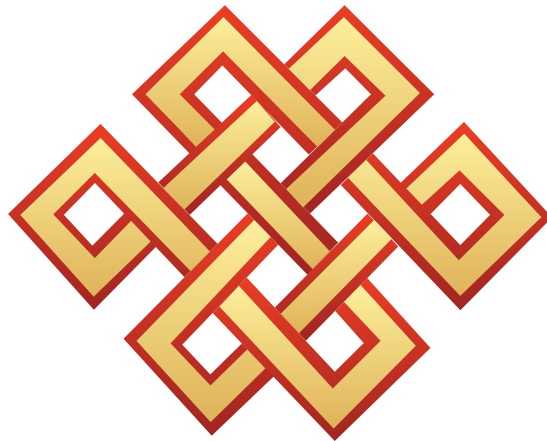




# 1st International Mongolia Humanities Forum

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# **Sacredness Under the Gaze: The Songbaling Ritual, the Tsam Dance, and the Modernist Predicament of Buddhism in Inner Mongolia**

**Saran Tuyaa Feng, University of California, Riverside**

The Songbaling ritual is a cyclical Dharma assembly in Mongolian and Tibetan Buddhism, culminating in the Tsam dance to exorcise evil and invoke blessings. Within China's Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) framework, regional elements like the Tsam dance are frequently reclassified as primitive folklore and religious dance art. This categorization dramatically reframes the ritual's religious associations, while the promotion of monastic spaces remains subject to contemporary state policy constraints.

This research is based on fieldwork conducted during the recent new year celebrations at a historically central Gelugpa monastery in urban Inner Mongolia. Once a pivotal node of local Buddhist authority, the monastery provides a crucial lens for this study. Through an ethnographic examination of the recent Songbaling ritual, this study explores the construction of Inner Mongolian Buddhist history and ritual praxis within the contemporary PRC.

It finds that, facing a rupture in transmission, this specific monastic community adheres to a local tradition, however fractured this may be, instead of adopting fuller ritual programs from other regional institutions. They maintain this stance even as other monasteries have gained policy support, secular status, and needed resources by employing transregional cultural pastiche to cater to modern visual demands. This paper uses the Songbaling ritual at this specific site as a case study to explore the shifting strategies of Inner Mongolian monasteries as they manage the peripheral impacts of the ICH discourse, state directives, definitions of appropriate public ritual praxis, and living local memories of tradition and rupture in the modern period.

# **The Sky Unseen, the Self in View: Shamanic Animism and Embodiment in the Contemporary Mongolian Art Exhibition Inner Me**

**Yunna J. Han, Columbia University**

This article examines *Inner Me* (2024), an installation-performance by contemporary Mongolic artist Bayanchuleet, as an embodied articulation of Mongolic shamanic animism under conditions of rapid social and cultural transformation. Across the steppe, Mongolic cosmology has long understood human life as inseparable from sky, earth, and ancestral presence, conceiving the world as composed of multiple coexisting realms in continuous interaction. While such relational assumptions persist within Mongolic ways of knowing, dominant narratives in contemporary China privilege linear models of development, progress, and artistic value. *Inner Me* confronts this tension through an immersive installation and live dance performance that stages the fragmentation experienced by young Mongols navigating between nomadic memory and urban modernity.

The installation is organized around the suspended roof ring (*toono*) of a Mongolic yurt, from which wires, mirrors, and fabric extend outward to form a dense spatial environment. Entering this structure with a shamanic drum, Bayanchuleet moves through the installation with gestures that oscillate between ritual rhythm and visible physical strain. His choreography transforms the installation from a symbolic setting into a relational field shaped by material forms, ancestral traces, and environmental conditions. Situating *Inner Me* as the culmination of the earlier works *Unseen Tenger* and *Looking for New Totem*, this article argues that the exhibition renders Mongolic shamanic animism perceptible as an embodied, spiral-temporal mode of relating in which ancestral presence remains palpable but no longer guarantees stable orientation.

# **Integrating Traditional Herding Knowledge into Education: Building Resilience and Preserving Mongolia's Pastoral Heritage in the Face of Climate Change**

**Anudari Bayanbileg, University of the Humanities of Mongolia**

This study examines the integration of traditional nomadic herding knowledge into Mongolia's secondary school curriculum as a deliberate strategy for producing culturally grounded, environmentally aware, and socially responsible citizens. Amid rapid urbanisation, social change, and increasing climate vulnerability, formal education in Mongolia has become increasingly disconnected from students' cultural and ecological realities, a gap with consequences not only for academic relevance, but for national identity.

The study employs a mixed-methods approach combining curriculum analysis with an initial teacher survey across diverse regions and school levels, followed by focus group interviews currently underway. Preliminary survey data suggests considerable openness among teachers toward integrating traditional knowledge into formal schooling, though actual classroom implementation remains limited. Systemic constraints including limited curriculum flexibility, insufficient instructional materials, and limited teaching time appear to account for much of this gap between attitude and practice.

Drawing on constructivist, culturally responsive, and curriculum theory frameworks, the study argues that traditional herding knowledge, embodying ecological intelligence, adaptive practices, and core cultural values, can be effectively woven into existing subjects. International examples inform this argument, demonstrating both how indigenous and traditional knowledge systems can be recognised as legitimate knowledge across the curriculum, and how national values can be systematically embedded to shape graduate identity and character.

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The study hypothesises that a structured approach to integrating nomadic knowledge supported by policy reform and appropriate teaching materials can help Mongolia's education system produce graduates who are not only academically capable, but rooted in who they are.

# **The Gür khan title: Examining enthronement of Gür khans**

**Purevdorj Bolor-Erdene,  
National University of Mongolia**

This paper discusses a political history of the Inner Asia, particularly examines the role and significance of the gür khan title in 12th and early 13th century. The gür khan is a title that had been utilised among khans and aristocracies of the Inner Asia such as gür khan Jamuqa, Gürkhan of the Qara Khitai and Gürkhan of the Kereyid, recorded in the Secret History of the Mongols. Both Jamuqa and Gürkhan of Qara Khitai were clearly illustrated how they got the title gür khan according to the Liao Shi and the Secret History of the Mongols. Nevertheless, there is a mysterious person who is named Ong Khan's uncle or the Gürkhan of Kereyid. It is quite curious how Gürkhan of the Kereyid (in other words Ong Khan's uncle) possessed the same title as Jamuqa, and also Yelü Dashi the founder of the Qara Khitai empire.

This paper pursues to inquire how did Gürkhan of the Kereyid get the same title with Jamuqa and emperors of the Qara Khitai. Furthermore, this study argues that the gür khan titles of Ong Khan's uncle, Jamuqa and Yelü Dashi related to the political ambition amongst Inner Asian nobilities in the pre-Chinggisid realm.

# **Mongolian History, Literature, and Society: Intersections of Memory, Identity, and Transformation**

**Geet Govind Shukl, National University of Mongolia**

This paper explores the dynamic interconnections between Mongolian history, literature, and society, emphasizing how cultural expression both shapes and reflects social transformation. Mongolia's historical trajectory—from the formation of the Mongol Empire in the thirteenth century through Qing incorporation, socialist state formation, and post-1990 democratic transition—has produced layered identities and evolving social structures. These transformations are preserved and reinterpreted through a diverse literary tradition encompassing oral epics, historical chronicles, Buddhist texts, and modern literary works.

Central to this study is the role of literature as a medium of cultural memory and identity construction. Foundational texts such as *The Secret History of the Mongols*, along with enduring oral traditions, encode social values, political ideologies, and historical consciousness. The paper examines how these narratives have been adapted across periods of religious influence and socialist realism, highlighting shifts in themes, genres, and linguistic forms. Particular attention is given to the transition from oral to written traditions and the impact of state ideology on literary production during the twentieth century.

The paper also situates literary developments within the broader context of Mongolian society, characterized by its nomadic heritage, pastoral economy, and kinship-based organization. It argues that despite rapid urbanization and globalization, key cultural principles—such as ecological awareness, mobility, and communal ethics—continue to inform both social practices and literary representation.

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By integrating historical analysis with literary and sociocultural perspectives, this research demonstrates how Mongolian identity is continuously negotiated through the interplay of past and present. The study contributes to broader discussions in East Asian studies, comparative literature, and anthropology by highlighting Mongolia as a critical site for understanding the resilience and transformation of cultural traditions in a globalized world.

# Gifts on the Frontier: Tuva between the Soviet Union and Mongolia

**Ertine Doptan, HSE University**

In 1944, the Tuvan People's Republic was formally integrated into the Soviet Union. Prior to this, the region had been an area of influence and intense competition between the Soviet Union and Mongolia. Through the prism of gift theory, the author analyzes Tuva as having received substantial "aid-gifts" from both entities. These gifts, often excessive and strategically deployed, functioned as tools of political capture and rivalry, each attempting to secure Tuvan allegiance.

Applying historical and ethnographic methodologies, the study details the gradual but important shift of Tuva from the Mongolian sphere into the Soviet realm. In this research, TAR (Tuvan Arat Republic) period archival documents from the National Archive of Tuva as well as various historical research regarding Mongolian-Tuvan-Soviet connections are examined to produce a narrative of competition for the cultural influence in early socialist states such as Tuva and showing peculiarities of developmental gifts from two imperial contexts.

The concept of "waste," as defined by Georges Bataille, is employed to explain how certain developmental gifts succeeded or failed based on their excessive and (un)reciprocated nature. Ultimately, the Soviet gifts proved more effective, integrating Tuva into a specific modernist trajectory and placing it within a temporal framework of development, from a feudal society to a socialist one.

# **A Study on Nomadic Cultures and Their Influence on Inner Asian Civilizations: A Case Study on Mongolian Civilization**

**Ranveer Singh Solanki,  
Jawaharlal Nehru Univeristy New Delhi**

The peoples of the Inner Asian area are still the link that logically connected using nomads concept rather weakly explored but significant and often unique role in the history, the culture, and civilizations of mankind. In Inner Asia and other regions of the Old World nomads have played important roles in creating different empires, political systems and in the exchange of cultures since the ancient age of the Scythians and the Xiongnu until the Mongols and Turkic peoples. These early societies whom was mostly nomadic, has impact the political, economy, and society of civilizations due to their mobility, flexibility and military strength as compared to that of settled societies.

This paper will review the roles of nomads to the formation and decline of Inner Asian societies will be discussed in relation to the several arenas including political, commerce, religion, arts and social structures. Ultimately, using historical data and current historiosophical readings, the work is intended to reveal the position of the nomadic peoples in the creation of the history of Inner Asia, and their imprint in the present.

The nomadic as Inner Asian cultures have always held a significant role in the process contributing to formation of the region's politics economy and culture. First and foremost, nomads never fit the conventional definition of state rubrics because states are sedentary formations, but nomads' versatility, mobility, and elasticity have enabled them to affect, and at times swamp, states. Inner Asia that includes the areas of the present day Mongolia, China, some parts of Central Asia, and others has been hub of some of the greatest famous and highly influential nomadic civilizations.

**cont.**

To this list some historians added the Scythians, Xiongnu and the Turks, Huns and Mongols, Turkic people who at the interface with their neighbors did shape the course of world history.

Due to the fact that many nomadic societies have been considered politically inferior to their sedentary counterparts for centuries, and the fact that nomads have been usually seen either as disturbing factors or conquerors in history, this history has mostly been ignored or written off by academic historiography. Nonetheless, in recent years new scholarly approaches have emerged which suggested that nomads were not only agents of devastation and destruction but also builders of empires and overall world cultures and civilizational exchange. For instance, the Mongol Empire reached from Pacific Ocean to Europe, which stimulated one of the richest interpenetrations in history between both eastern and the western civilizations. Likewise, while the Scythians and Xiongnu are known primarily as adversaries of China and other civilized societies they played a crucial role as far-ranging mediators in the exchange of goods and ideas

# **From the audience up: Developing a model for public archaeology and heritage engagement in Mongolia**

**Lisa Randisi, University College London**

In the post-Soviet era, Mongolia has forged a national identity grounded in narratives of nomadism, empire, and historic ties with Asia and the wider world. Despite significant investments in heritage projects and growing media attention, tensions persist between heritage professionals and local communities. Meanwhile, rural areas, seen as the “anchors” for these cultural narratives, are faced with threat from the climate crisis, rapid urbanisation, reliance on extractive industries, and civic and social disillusionment.

The heritage sector can make significant contributions to addressing these challenges. Explicitly framing heritage research and practice as socially relevant to contemporary priorities can lead to impactful collaborations. This paper argues that people-centred heritage practices, taking local community priorities as a starting point, can open up new possibilities at the intersection of cultural heritage, community engagement and social impact.

To date, very little data on heritage audiences in Mongolia has been published.

To establish a frame of reference for understanding these audiences – an essential first step –, this paper presents the results of a comparative study of public attitudes to the narratives of the past encountered across the Mongolian urban/rural divide. It argues that urban and rural communities make up two, very different audiences: one after a symbol of communal identity, the other looking to connect with heritage on a personal or practical level.

Drawing on participatory action research and co-production methodologies, this paper reflects on how learnings from this study are now being built into public engagement practices in Uvs, Khövsgöl and Bulgan for a more impactful, locally relevant public archaeology in Mongolia.

# **Guardians of the Sacred North : Shamanic Ritual, Cultural Memory and Intangible Heritage among the Darkhad of Khövsgöl Province, Mongolia**

**Suchismita Ghoshal,  
Indira Gandhi National Open University**

This paper explores the relationship between ritual practice, cultural memory and intangible heritage among the 'Darkhad' community of Khövsgöl Province, whose shamanic traditions continue to shape spiritual life in northern Mongolia. Grounded in an animistic cosmology centred on ancestral spirits, sacred landscapes and ritual mediation, Darkhad shamanism represents one of the most enduring expressions of indigenous religious identity in Inner Asia. While Mongolian shamanism has often been studied through the lens of ecstatic experience or cosmological symbolism, this paper proposes a representation toward its role as a living repository of cultural memory and intangible heritage.

Drawing on existing anthropological and religious studies scholarship on Mongolian shamanism, the study examines how ritual practices, such as spirit invocation, healing ceremonies and offerings at sacred landscape sites, operate as embodied acts of remembrance that transmit collective knowledge across generations. Through these rituals, shamans act not only as mediators between human and spirit worlds but also as custodians of historical memory, ecological ethics and community identity. The paper further situates Darkhad ritual culture within broader conversations on heritage preservation, particularly those shaped by the frameworks of UNESCO and the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage.

By interpreting shamanic ritual as a living archive of cultural knowledge, this study argues that the spiritual practices of the Darkhad community illuminate how indigenous religious traditions preserve sacred geography, social memory and cosmological relationships with the natural world. Ultimately, the paper highlights the continuing relevance of Darkhad shamanism as both a religious tradition and a dynamic cultural heritage system within contemporary Mongolia.

# **Navigating Gendered Barriers and Leveraging Support in Conservation: A Comparative Case Study in South Korea and Mongolia**

**Nari Lee, University of Montana**

This research examines the impact of gender inequity on conservation efforts in South Korea and Mongolia, focusing on how patriarchal structures and gender norms create systemic barriers within the field. Mongolia and South Korea have contrasting ecological and socio-political contexts. Where Mongolia has low-density, climate-vulnerable pastoral systems, Korea is highly industrialized and densely populated.

However, both countries exhibit male-dominated leadership in conservation. Despite growing attention to gender in conservation, empirical research grounded in women's lived experiences remains limited in these contexts. This study employs qualitative ethnographic methods, including semi-structured interviews and photovoice, with 28 women professionals. It identifies six categories of systemic barriers that women face: formal and informal exclusion, gendered legitimacy and stereotypes, career constraints, cross-national and cultural dynamics, and intragender gatekeeping. These barriers reflect structural inequalities rather than individual limitations.

Despite these challenges, women actively employ strategies of resistance, such as managing gendered risk through boundary-setting, repositioning authority through professional identity work, and navigating institutional structures to sustain careers. The findings emphasize that accountability within institutions is essential for promoting gender equity in conservation, rather than relying solely on individual coping strategies. Additionally, it suggests that adopting gender-inclusive practices can enhance the effectiveness of conservation efforts by integrating diverse knowledge and approaches.

By highlighting women's voices in two distinct contexts, this research provides practical insights for policymakers and conservation organizations. It aims to strengthen institutional support, foster inclusive leadership, and improve equitable conservation practices.

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# **Asceticism & Wealth in the Manichaean Religion of the Old Uighur Khaganate**

**Jasmine Jimenez, Saint Louis University**

In this thesis, I aim to isolate the specific process which caused the economic and social changes to the Uighurs' kingdom and rule after its adoption of the Manichaean faith around 761 CE. Asking the following questions:

1.) What factor in the Uighur Kingdom's adoption of Manichaeism catalyzed this unprecedented and unique period of social and economic prosperity?

2.) What elements of the Manichaean religious order informed a re-centralization of political power, subsequent stratification of social classes, and other aspects of the Khaganate's distribution of resources?

In this thesis, I will identify and characterize the social and religious elements evident in these sources and their role in providing political and economic advantages to the Uighur Khaganate. I will primarily address the concepts of "the Elect", "hearers," monastic "law"; the role of missionaries and clerics as they participated in the imperial administration or interacted with royalty; and the differentiation of social classes as defined by Manichaean doctrines and beliefs. I will assess the extent to which Manichaean doctrine exerted influence over the social and economic development of this Khaganate's social structure and their rise in power on the Silk Road.

