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## Afterthoughts: Nature, Culture, and Shamanism in Inner Mongolia, PRC

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***Afterthoughts: Nature, Culture, Music, and Shamanism in Inner Mongolia, PRC***  
**Hao Huang<sup>1</sup>**

**Introduction**

The autonomous region of Inner Mongolia in northern China encompasses nearly half a million square miles and is inhabited by about twenty five million people. It is a narrow strip of land that stretches 1500 miles from west to east, and 1000 miles north to south, bordering both Mongolia and Russia. Indigenous Mongolians make up about 18 per cent of the population, which is predominantly Han Chinese. Although three quarters of the Mongolian population live in cities, the grasslands endure as symbols of traditional Mongolian values. Yurts (*gers* in Mongolian language), traditionally made of felt cloth over a wooden framework, persist as nostalgic icons of nomadic Mongolian lifestyle. The advantage of *gers* was that they could be conveniently packed and transported when it was time for nomadic families to move to fresh pastures. This allowed Mongolian herders to move before their animals consumed all the grass in one location, so that pastureland would have opportunities to renew itself. Such responsible ecological stewardship of the land was not only practical, but was also spiritually motivated, as there is an established Mongolian belief that natural elements such as grass, water and rocks contain spirits. The natural environment of the Mongolian grasslands is not a blank slate: nomadic pastoralists believe that violations of nature, such as pulling up grass by the roots, will incite retaliatory action from the spirits of the locality.<sup>2</sup>

Mongols in Inner Mongolia cannot be grouped under a single homogenous identity; they form a confederation of tribal clans, including the Buryat, Daur, Evenk, and Oroqen. However, these Mongolian peoples share a history, a language and a culture. Indigenous culture in Mongolia is fundamentally connected to their environment because the steppe grasslands have been managed as pastureland for well over two millennia. The grasslands as they exist now are not phenomena of “pristine nature,” but are products of long-standing practices of nomadic pastoralism. Currently, the areas of grassland degradation generally coincide with the regions where the cultural practices of mobile pastoralism have been undermined.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Caroline Humphrey, Marina Mongush and B. Telenged, “Attitudes to Nature in *Mongolia and Tuva: A Preliminary Report in Nomadic peoples*, 33 (1993), 52.

<sup>3</sup> Caroline Humphrey, David Andrews Sneath, *The End of Nomadism?: Society, State, and the Environment in Inner Asia*. (Duke University Press, 1999), 3.

Our EnviroLab Asia group was fortunate to have the opportunity to visit the Hulunbuir grasslands, located at the western foot of the Greater Xing'anling Mountains, near China's border with Russia and Mongolia. Natural grassland occupies 80% of the whole area. The area is home to Hulun Lake, one of China's largest freshwater lakes. The biodiversity found in the Hulunbuir grasslands is extraordinary. More than twenty varieties of grass are found there, that contribute to providing habitat that supports dozens of mammalian species and hundreds of different kinds of birds.



Fig. 1. the Hulunbuir grasslands; photo by Hao Huang (7.20.19)

### **Nature and the Environment**

The Euro-American concept of “the environment” has no direct equivalent in the Mongolian language. As Humphrey and Sneath (1999) have noted, the Mongolian term *baigal*, often translated as “nature,” is closely related to *baidal* (“state of being,” “the way things are”). In contrast to a static Western romantic notion of “nature” which human beings seek to control, *baigal* speaks and listens actively through its various land deities (*gazryn ezen*) and mountain or river spirits (*Ius savdag*).<sup>4</sup> Objects in *baigal* possess an essence akin to “spirit,” incarnated in ritual contexts as *ezin* (“master”). Laurent Legrain has proposed that for Mongolians, “[n]ature (*baigal*), which includes several different and legitimate ways of being (human beings, animals, stones, rivers and so on), is conceived as a collection of energies which influence each other mutually.”<sup>5</sup> A Mongolian nomad has asserted, “You must never cut trees or grass, that is a sin in the tradition of our ancestors. In August I cut grass for hay, but that is necessary

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<sup>4</sup> Humphrey and Sneath, 1999, 2.

<sup>5</sup> Laurent Legrain, “Confrontation on the Ivd River, or, How Does Music Act in Social Life?” in *Inner Asia*, 11 (2009), 337.

for our livestock. I use only dead wood and never cut living trees. (Herder, *Uv Simag*, Mongolia, 1992).”<sup>6</sup>

The spiritual energies that dwell in the land were listed by our Mongolian informants as *nutgiin tengger* (spirit of the homeland), *gazryn ezen* (master of the land), *uul usni ezen* (master of mountains and waters) *hangaiin delhi* (spirits of the mountain-steppes) and *lus savdag* (water and land spirits). Human beings may think of themselves as *ezen*, or legal “owners” of a place, but this “ownership” involves a sort of custodial relationship with the local spirits, who are acknowledged as supernatural masters.<sup>7</sup> And after all, temporary human residents, who come and go with each generation, are in the position of supplicants to the spirits who remain as the permanent masters of that which they preside over. The indigenous Mongolian understanding of belonging and place generates a sense of aesthetic propriety in all aspects of life. Even holding a bucket of sheep milk requires a proper way of being done in order to maintain harmony with the surrounding world. If things in nature are poorly treated, or a disrespectful attitude is demonstrated towards them, their spirit “owners” will retaliate.

*Baigal* is best explained as an all-inclusive reality that is “independent of human volition (but including human existence).”<sup>8</sup> It is rooted in the belief that all things are fundamentally connected. Relations between humans and humans, humans and spirits, as well as between spirits, are negotiated with a sense of a shared social network. Maintaining balance in “nature” is achieved by actions that not only produce, but also serve to receive fortune and prosperity (*buyan hishig*) for all beings of the land. Traditional Mongolian concepts of “nature” incorporate an understanding of human and non-human (i.e. spirits) interaction, “where the realm of the social does not end with human beings; rather it knows no ending.”<sup>9</sup>

Human beings can seek to influence the spirit “owners” of a place by means of propitiatory rituals, but the forces of nature surpass all human understanding and lie beyond human control. For these reasons, many pastoralists demonstrate a great care when engaging with *baigal*, not only in quotidian matters, but with music as well. Ethnomusicologist Theodore Levin has related the words of the Tuvan *xöömeizhi* (master throat singer) Tolya Kuular, “If you are calm inside, your singing will calm the spirit. If you’re angry or plotting against someone, it will arouse the spirit. A bad person

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<sup>6</sup> C. Humphrey, 1993, 51.

<sup>7</sup> D. Sneath, “Mongolia in the ‘Age of the Market’: pastoral land use and the development discourse” in *Markets and moralities: Ethnographies of postsocialism*, eds. C. Humphrey, R. Mandel, (Berg Publishers, 2002), 197.

<sup>8</sup> Caroline Humphrey, *Shamans And Elders: Experience, Knowledge, and Power among the Daur Mongols* (*Oxford Studies in Social and Cultural Anthropology*). (Oxford University Press, 1996), 99.

<sup>9</sup> Morten A. Pedersen, “Totemism, Animism and North Asian Indigenous Ontologies” in *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 7:3 (2001), 415.

shouldn't sing."<sup>10</sup> In other words, music must be handled very carefully because of its potential emotional impact on the master-spirits.

The Mongolian music scholar Enebish Jambal has shared:

The Mongolian people have many chances to be close to nature and to know its rules, cycles, and beauty. Herders spend most of their days looking after their herds in the open natural environment. When they get up in the morning, they look near and far and then organize their days' work according to their sense about the weather and direction of the winds. In the evening, when they go to sleep, they can determine not only the month's work, but even the year's work, by the movements and locations of the stars and planets. There is a Mongolian proverb that say [*sic*], 'if you sleep late, you will hear something; if you get up early you will see something.'<sup>11</sup>

Such understanding of nature blurs the boundaries between self and all existence, individual and birth-place, human society and nature or even the cosmos. As Dillon (2009) has opined, "[M]eaning and context emerge from people's interactions with their environment"<sup>12</sup> The surrounding world unfolds as people move, make, or know in it.



Fig. 2: sunset in the Hulunbuir grasslands; Photo by Hao Huang (7.21.19)

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<sup>10</sup> Levin, Theodore, with Valentina Suzukei. *Where Rivers and Mountains Sing: Sound, Music, and Nomadism in Tuva and Beyond*. (Indiana University Press, 2006), 28.

<sup>11</sup> Fitzhugh, William W., Bayarsaikhan, J., and Marsh, Peter K., eds.. *The Deer Stone Project: Anthropological Studies in Northern Mongolia 2002-2004*. (Smithsonian Libraries Arctic Center, 2004), 18.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Dillon, Luis Lobo-Guerrero, "The Biopolitical Imaginary of Species-being" in *Theory, Culture & Society*, 26: 1 (2009), 23.

## History and Culture

We enjoyed several informative discussions with a leading Mongolian scholar, President Songlin Meng of the Center for Inner Mongolian Studies in Hulilbuir (he was enthusiastic about our Envirolab Asia research project of studying the relationship between traditional Mongolian cultural practices/history with environmentalism). Dr. Meng made interesting claims about a story in the *Secret History of the Mongols* about one of Genghis Khan's ancestors fighting and dying to prevent rival tribes from tearing out and eating grassroots from the grasslands. < President Meng also proposed that ancient Mongolian funerary practices such as sky burial or depositing a body in a slit in the ground without digging up the turf were motivated by environmental concerns, to avoid disturbing steppe grass roots, since they are so delicate ecologically. During our visit to the grasslands, we noticed that minor surface disturbances can trigger desertification.

There is an interesting story about the [Solon] Evenki living in Hulunbuir that is recorded in the *Secret History of the Mongols*. The mother of the great unifier of the Mongols, Genghis Khan, Hoelun, was a member of "Olgnu" clan of the *Qonggirad* Evenki tribe. "Olgnu" derives from the name of a river bed located in the Second Songhua River's basin.<sup>13</sup> During our 2019 Envirolab Asia visit, Uren Sende, an Evenki indigenous music scholar, told us that Evenkis continue to call rivers in their homeland "mother." Following this remark, a Mongolian Buriat informant stated that the Buriat identify rivers as the "arteries" of Mongolian life. This presents parallel pan-Mongolian concepts of how rivers are essential to the welfare of people and animals living in the grasslands. These similes relate to statements from Mongolian elders who have spoken of the history of *Khöömei* (a popular style of Tuvan throat singing), that was once referred to as "the Melody of the River" or as sounds "taken" from the Altai Mountains' waters. There is a specific legend that *Khöömei* began with imitating the beautiful sounds [*chimee*] of the River Liv's waterfall. Later, *Khöömei* was performed by singers to please the spirits of the local mountains and waters.

Music occupies a preeminent role in nomadic culture. For example, one of the first musical ethnographers of Mongolia, Sven Hedin remarked on the "boundless land of grass... fascinating beauty and unfathomable mysticism" of a performance by a flutist named *Banche*.<sup>14</sup> Hedin invoked the power of sound mimesis: "[t]he murmur of the water round a trunk that had got stuck in the river bottom, the splashing round the feet

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<sup>13</sup> Wure'ertu, tr. Aurore Dumont, "Evenki migrations in early times and their relationship with rivers" in Human-environment relationships in Siberia and Northeast China in Knowledge, rituals, mobility and politics among the Tungus peoples, followed by Varia, *Études mongoles & sibériennes, centrasiatiques & tibétaines*, 49 (2018), 7.

<sup>14</sup> Sven Hedin, Sven. "Preface" in *The Music of the Mongols: Part I, Eastern Mongolia*, ed. Hedin, Haslund-Christensen, Grønbech, Emsheimer. (Tryckeri Aktiebolaget Thule, 1943), 9.

of the camels when they found a shallow place and went out into the water, the rustling of the evening breeze in the tree-tops—all these sounds were recorded by the flute.”<sup>15</sup>

Sadly, during our recent EnviroLab Asia visit to Inner Mongolia, we witnessed the heavy pollution in the Hailar river caused by industrial waste that was so severe that no fish could survive in those waters, and furthermore the river water could not be used for livestock, because their milk and meat would have been tainted by drinking it. Even in the grasslands, all potable water is derived from wells, which has impacted nomadic lifestyles. The difficulties involved in finding access to safe water have forced many semi-nomadic Mongolians to be more sedentary, settling down in one place to draw water from private wells. This change of lifestyle has led to a change in cultural attitudes, so that the multi-generational reverence of specific sacred trees and places that were considered forbidden spots in village memory have been neglected; when urbanization began to occur, these traditional injunctions lost their potency.



Fig. 3: Horses crossing the Hailar river; Photo by Hao Huang (7.18.19)

It is no small miracle that today some Mongolian folk long songs are still being sung that preserve vestiges of the ancient belief that the sun and the moon are the primary source of life on earth. This is rooted in the traditional Mongolian concept that all forms have two aspects, *Arga*<sup>16</sup> and *Bilig*. Therefore, two apparently opposite forces may actually be complementary, interconnected, and interdependent in the natural world. For example, the binary of the sun as *Arga* and the moon as *Bilig* finds parallels in male and female, father and mother, hard and soft. After all, “as early as in the III century B.C,

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<sup>15</sup> Levin and Suzukej, 2006, 11.

<sup>16</sup> Similar to Chinese concept of Yin Yang; in Tibetan as tav-shiirav; in Sanskrit as upaya-prajdnha.

the leader of Xiongnu, the ancestors of Mongols, had been worshipping the sun in the morning and the moon in the evening .”<sup>17</sup>

### **Traditional Mongolian Music**

Traditionally, Mongols have divided the cosmos into two domains – the tangible (visible) and the intangible (invisible). Therefore, all physical objects in nature have their metaphysical counterparts, and these deities are the inspiration and the audience for Mongolian music. To this day, different Mongolian clans in Inner Mongolia maintain their own specific oral traditions such as myths, legends, tales, odes, benedictions, traditional songs and music, expressed in the form of sacrifices and incantations, mantras and prayers during ritual worship of local sacred mountains and waters. Despite that cultural diversity, a common musical practice is shared by these groups: making music that depicts the sounds of blowing wind, streams of water and other natural sounds, performed with the same techniques for using the mouth, nose, lips, teeth, palate, larynx and chest cavity.<sup>18</sup>

Conversely, the master-spirits and *baigal* itself reciprocate by giving musical talent to some lucky human individuals. Levin has recorded many statements demonstrating a conception of musical talent as a form of gift exchange with *baigal*. The renowned *Khoomei* Sengedorj asserts, “[l]istening to the mountain sing is how humans first got the idea to sing *höömii* [*Khöömei*].”<sup>19</sup> Levin also writes, “To coexist peacefully with...spirit-masters and gain access to the natural resources under their protection, humans have to make offerings, offer praise, and show respect. Sound and song provide a means of doing all three, albeit in different ways.”<sup>20</sup> Music represents a particularly communicative medium for engaging *baigal*.

Mongolians believe that music has evolved from nature and that humans and music are intrinsically linked with one another. Therefore, natural sounds in music not only invoke spiritual power, but also tap into the power of human emotions. In this way, musical sounds express the coexistence of all beings in nature. In the past, Mongolian nomads were keenly aware of their dependence on natural resources and ultimately began to worship them. This appreciation of the energy that emanates from mountains and waters, stone mounds, hills and grasslands still exists. Traditionally, Mongolians believed that cosmic energy is derived from two different sources, the animate and the inanimate. For example, one kind of energy emanates from mountains, water, stones and trees, while another kind is generated by the bodies of humans and animals. Ancient Mongolian legends and myths demonstrate an understanding that human body energy was directly connected to the energy of earth, universe, sun and the moon.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> G. Sukhbaatar, “Mongolian ancestors” in *Shinjlekh Ukhaani Akademiin medee*, 74 (1980), 123-124.

<sup>18</sup> E. Luvsannorov, “The music and nature connections within Mongolian tradition” (unpublished paper), 2.

<sup>19</sup> Levin and Suzukei, 39.

<sup>20</sup> Levin and Suzukei, 23.

<sup>21</sup> Luvsannorov, 4.



Mongolian long songs and *Khöömei* are praise songs of mountains, rivers, and other manifestations of nature. The most common rhythm found in Mongolian music is the instrumental rendition of the sound of a galloping horse. Some Mongolian tales explain that the long song originated from human imitations of a wolf's howl.

“The Mongolians are a people of music, and Mongolian folk long-song is the music closest to nature. It never needs any applause; it was born in grasslands, rivers and mountains. It is a product of nature; it was sung for cows and goats pasturing on grasslands, birds flying in the sky and horses running on the grassland. Human beings and nature are one.”

La-Su-Rong, Mongolian long-song singer, 2006.<sup>22</sup>



Fig. 4: traditional *Khöömei* singer; WikiCommons (accessed 2.21.20)

Frustratingly, all music informants I contacted in Hulunbuir told me that there are no Mongolian songs, traditional or otherwise, that literally promote environmentalism. Some Rock bands seem to be moving in that direction, but presently there are no popular songs about this topic. The only relevant song mentioned to me by Evenki ethnomusicologist Ureltu was a traditional Evenki folksong about a mother deer that teaches hunters not to hunt pregnant deer. This is surely a warning to responsibly sustain deer populations, but it also articulates a ritual prohibition, akin to the traditional Mongolian ban on bathing or washing objects in rivers, lakes, other bodies of water. What does not conform to the rules of aesthetic propriety is forbidden.

Intriguingly, Evenki reindeer herders do not kill their reindeer for meat. They value them as animals that provide humans with milk and transport in return for being fed.

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<sup>22</sup> The Mongolian Folk Long-Song (2008)

[https://www.windmusic.com.tw/en/pro\\_detail.asp?PDT\\_NO=TCD-1029](https://www.windmusic.com.tw/en/pro_detail.asp?PDT_NO=TCD-1029) (accessed 3.6.2020)

Reindeer also played sacred roles, especially during herders' burials where they were occasionally buried along with the masters to help them ride up to heaven. This speaks to an intimate bond between herders and reindeer that radically differs from that of a farmer and his livestock. Lin Hang, a professor at Hangzhou Normal University, proposes

I would call them friends. Normally, the herders would know each reindeer and even have names for them. They would call them every morning, walk with them, and watch them eat. It was a very close relationship between animals and human beings that were sharing the same environment and resources.<sup>23</sup>

## Shamanism

It has been proposed that the word Shaman derives from the Evenki/Tungusic-Manchurian word *šaman/šamán*, meaning “those who know.” It has now come to designate a social functionary who attains ecstasy through trance, with the help of guardian spirits, for the purpose of negotiating with the supernatural on behalf of his or her own community.<sup>24</sup> Mongolian shamanistic practices occasionally address ecological issues: a drought ritual continues to be practiced, and sometimes it is collectively performed (villagers or even other shamans join in the chanting and ritual), which is unusual for a nomadic culture that values autonomous identity and individual practices (shamans all sing uniquely personal melodies/chants). President Meng spoke about powerful shamanic rituals practiced on behalf of villages to ward off impending natural catastrophes from massive lightning and thunderstorms that can set grasslands on fire.

Most shamanic rituals pertain to curing illnesses; shamans often intercede between living Mongolians and ancestral deities, who get angry when neglected or disrespected. One way to disrespect them is to waste or pollute natural resources that they've bequeathed to descendants. Many Mongolians not only feel a personal commitment to maintain ecological balance of their tribal lands, they fear the wrath that will ensue if they don't propitiate ancestral spirits by taking care of their environment. The big takeaway was that traditional Mongolian worldviews often involve sharing landscape with animist spirits identified not only with animals, but rivers, lakes, trees, hills/mountains and grasslands. Shamans help to conceptualize and negotiate this complex network of ritual interrelationships, some of which relate to ecological practices. For example, Evenki reindeer herders feel a strong spiritual resonance with the forest that they inhabit and believe that spirits are present everywhere in nature; they rely on their shamans to commune with these spirits to ward off calamity.

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<sup>23</sup> Matthew Walsh, Daniel Holmes, Wu Huiyuan and Li You, “Melting Away” in *Sixth Tone*, (2018) <https://interaction.sixthtone.com/feature/2018/Melting-Away/index.html>

<sup>24</sup> Ake Hulkrantz, “A Definition of Shamanism” in *Temenos - Nordic Journal of Comparative Religion*, .9 (1973), 25.

We enjoyed the privilege to meet with revered elder shaman Hude of Manzhouli for over two hours, during which time he graciously responded to our questions and performed some shamanic singing/chanting for us. He shared insights into shamanic practice – it is usually performed for healing purposes, but sometimes operates on a more cosmic scale, maintaining a balance between creative and destructive forces, often manifested by ancestral spirits, both good and bad. He has kept busy propitiating the spirits who are angry at greedy descendants who have spoiled/desecrated lands that were family legacies. Most importantly, animism is central to a shamanic belief system – and that means that nature is alive with spirits, which must be recognized and respected. Nature is not simply a resource to be exploited – humans share it with other important beings.



Fig. 5: Hude Shaman; Photo by Hao Huang (7.20.19)

## **Rituals**

To understand Mongolians' commitment to ritual performances and the importance vested in them, we will investigate the social and pragmatic elements of these practices. Rituals involve individuals in a social network composed not only of human beings with other human beings, and human beings and animals, but also with the myriad spirits

that inhabit the natural world. This encourages interrelationships and the feelings of belonging to a particular spiritual group hierarchy. The purpose of ritual offerings to *Ovoos* is embedded in the maintenance of a reciprocal and beneficial relation with the “masters of the land” (*gazryn ezed*).

The word *Ovoo* means “heap” or “pile”<sup>25</sup> The related word *Ovooloh* means to “heap up,” which connects with basic Mongolian values of centering (*tövlöj*), and of the hierarchical superiority of height (*deed*). *Ovoos* are often placed on mountain peaks, ridges, or on the slopes and hills and mountains. A large number of *Ovoos* are located at or close to sacred mineral springs (*rashaany ovoo*), at the source of springs (*bulgiin ovoo*) or alongside lakes, ponds or rivers (*lusyn tahilgatai ovoo*) where water spirits reside.<sup>26</sup> *Ovoos* are also positioned beneath or close to a lone or oddly shaped tree, near a special rock, or close to sacred and venerated places.

Attending to the various “rules of nature” (*baigaliin yos*) and making offerings to the spirits of the land (*gazryn ezed*) at *Ovoos* is pivotal to maintaining balance and the welfare of all beings in the local area. The *ezen*, spirits of the land, must be appeased to ensure the prosperity and health of people, animals and good relations between people and the land. *Ovoo* offerings provide a powerful public opportunity to affirm this relationship.

Caroline Humphrey once asked the Daur Mongol Urgunge Onon about the idea of “balance” in the universe. He replied that: “The balance of diversity in the world is not an idea [...] it is a fact.”<sup>27</sup> And the herder Semjee pointed out that “Herders’ lives, the pastures and the welfare of the animals are all based on this balance. The Mongolian nomadic way of life depends on this.”<sup>28</sup> In light of the challenges that herders face today, staging an *Ovoo* offering is seen by many as necessary in order to avoid further imbalance in “nature” (*baigal*) – an imbalance that may cause disasters that will make their lives as pastoral herders more precarious.

The herder Simjee provides a powerful summation:

We cannot put society’s interest (*niigmiin sonirhol*) above “nature” (*baigal*). Our Mongolian nomadic way of life rests on balance (*tentsver*). But now it is difficult to keep the balance because society is becoming more and more urbanised. If the state of imbalance continues as it is, we will have ecological calamities [...] so

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<sup>25</sup> Christopher Evans & Caroline Humphrey, “History, Timelessness and the Monumental: the Oboos of the Mergen Environs, Inner Mongolia” in *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*, 13:2 (2003), 196.

<sup>26</sup> Davaa-Ochir, Ganzorig, “Oboo worship : the worship of earth and water divinities in Mongolia,” master’s thesis (2008), University of Oslo, 57.

<sup>27</sup> C. Humphrey (1996), 363.

<sup>28</sup> Benedikte V. Lindskog, “Ritual offerings to ovoos among nomadic Halh herders of west-central Mongolia” in *Everyday religion among pastoralists of High and Inner Asia, suivi de Varia, Études mongoles & sibériennes, centrasiatiques & tibétaines*, 47 (2016), 27.

if we put our social interests above *baigal*, our *baigal* will be destroyed and our traditions will be lost. This is the big catastrophe. Everything must be on equal standing and that is why we must protect *baigal* and please *baigal* through *ovoo* offerings.<sup>29</sup>

An important starting point for understanding how offerings to *Ovoos* tie in with herders' perception of land, "nature" and the "masters of the land" (*gazryn ezed*) is to pay attention to how herders relate to other humans as well as non-humans. The ritual context of the *Ovoo* offering presents people of a "homeland" (*nutag*) a locus for re-establishing positive relationships with the *gazryn ezed* through a communal act. As the effects of climate change over the past two decades manifest in severe winter weather events (*zud*) that have killed off thousands of livestock, the *Ovoo* offering ritual play an even more crucial role in creating fellowship and solidarity among Mongolians in Inner Mongolia. Significantly, it represents a collective attempt to restore balance (*tentsver*) in "nature" so that people can enjoy prosperous lives.

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.



Fig. 6: *Ovoo*; Photo by Hao Huang (7.23.19)

## Conclusions

Upon reflecting on interactions with our Mongolian informants during our Envirolab Asia fieldwork, I feel the need to warn against facile essentialist claims that Mongolians are born environmentalists. It would be ludicrous to assert that all Mongolians are genetically disposed to be committed practitioners of ecological civilization (at one dinner the host questioned what that term meant), even though most Mongolians we met on our Envirolab Asia trip were advocates of protecting their environment. In my opinion, this derives from a nostalgic interpretation/invention of traditional values to recapture an imagined Mongolian historical past. Nevertheless, these Mongolian culturohistorical elements exist:

1. past nomadic practices that acknowledge dependence on natural resources as key to maintaining life: hunting, grazing, quality of water resources.

2. historical precedents featuring revered ancestors who took measures to protect the delicate grasslands ecology, even dying to defend it, and ensuing duties of descendants to conserve that legacy.
3. cultural practices such as shamanism and music that foreground the power of the elements of nature and the preciousness of local place as central to Mongolian identity and sacred/secular values.

Over recent decades, Inner Mongolia has endured both neo-classical economic and conservationist measures. The current economic model promoted by the Chinese central government involves “resettling” thousands of nomadic pastoralists into permanent accommodations under the guise of enforcing private ownership rights over land, and/or leasing of land to private individuals and agencies. This has been euphemistically named “ecological migration” by the PRC. According to government officials, this program provides new economic opportunities for nomads while protecting the environment from overgrazing and over-hunting. As mining and other industries intrude on the grasslands, the amount of land available for grazing decreases and grazing intensity increases. Desertification is blamed on migratory grazing. This is the way the PRC government absolves itself of responsibility for environmental degradation of the grasslands, deflecting attention away from its role as a partner of the timber, oil, mining industries and mass agriculture. In a token response, conservationist agencies have introduced national parks and protected areas where indigenous peoples’ hunting and migratory activities are banned. Instead, they promote a standard conservationist agenda through public education and publicity campaigns. Yet the ecology of the grasslands continues to degrade.

Traditionally, Mongolian nomadic herders practiced a culture of reciprocal exchange use of grasslands, and migratory grazing boundaries and movement patterns were flexible. However, social-institutional changes (collectivization and privatization) altered the traditional cooperative culture of Mongolian social organizations.<sup>30</sup> Current conditions in Inner Mongolia suggest that the major threat to the steppe environment is not overgrazing as practiced by feckless indigenous herders, but the unintended consequences of outsiders’ programs that ignore or assume the inadequacy of indigenous Mongolian cultural and socio-ecological knowledge.

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<sup>30</sup> Jun Wang, Daniel Brown, Arun Agrawal, “Sustainable governance of the Mongolian grasslands: comparing ecological and social-institutional changes in the context of climate change in Mongolia and Inner Mongolia, China” in *Global environmental Change*, 23:6 (2013), 1680.