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***Oboo* Sacred Monuments in Hulun Buir: Their Narratives and Contemporary Worship**

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Anyone traveling in Northern Asia will notice numerous stone heaps decorated with colorful flags on mountains and hills. Called *oboo*,¹ these holy monuments are worshipped by local people to ensure prosperity and protection against misfortune. In Hulun Buir (*Hulunbei'er* 呼伦贝尔), hundreds of *oboo* overlook the grasslands, marking the sacred landscape and the territorial boundaries between the various groups inhabiting the most multiethnic area of Northeast China's Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region. *Oboo* not only constitute important religious sites for local societies; they also offer a glimpse into the way these societies have organized their territory over decades.

Together with the accompanying photographs, this essay explores the *oboo* and their contemporary worship among the pastoral populations of Hulun Buir. The first two sections introduce the *oboo* both as a cult object and as support for local history. More precisely, they describe the diverse features and geographical locations of the *oboo*, highlighting the territorial anchorage of the local groups scattered across Hulun Buir. The latter parts are dedicated to the distinct stages of *oboo* worship, ranging from the annual renovation of the *oboo* to offerings, the role of the shaman or lama, and the “three manly games.”

A Sacred Monument of the Grasslands

Meaning “heap” or “pile” in Mongolian, an *oboo* (*aobao* 敖包 in Chinese) is a sacred shrine devoted to the worship of local deities. According to the emic conception, the natural landscape is inhabited by various kinds of entities credited with ritual efficiency. They may, for instance, dwell around a particular mountain, a riverbank, or an isolated tree. The deities comprise various master spirits of the land (*gazar-in ezen*), water/dragon divinities (*luus*), or shamanic ancestor spirits (*ongon*). Serving as a receptacle for these deities, the *oboo* site is always carefully chosen in accordance with the locality, its natural and supernatural features,

and the purpose of the ritual (photograph 1²).³ *Oboo* are traditionally built on elevated ground and in wild territory free of construction: the preference for a high position expresses the desire to overlook nature domesticated by man (photograph 2). High elevation may also be related to the practices of disposing of the dead on high ground and worshipping tall mountains and trees, and the belief that high places are the dwellings of local gods (Chuluu and Stuart 1995, 547).

In Hulun Buir, the size, shape, and materials of an *oboo* vary depending on the local area and the community that occupies it. Native people differentiate “big *oboo*” and “small *oboo*” according to their size, the number of worshippers, and, above all, the political authority in charge of the ritual. “Big *oboo*” worship is organized and financially supported by Hulun Buir prefecture or the banners,⁴ while small *oboo* worship is under the exclusive supervision of a clan or an ethnic group of the same locality. Indeed, through their size, height, and location, *oboo* are encoded in a timeless or abstract relation with political hierarchy (Evans and Humphrey 2003, 200).

The *oboo* usually looks like a circular mound of stones topped with willow branches and decorated with prayer flags and colored ribbons (photograph 3). Branches are conceived as favorable dwelling places for deities, while the prayer flags refer to the notion of collective good fortune. As with the door of the yurt, the traditional mobile dwelling used by pastoralists, the front of the *oboo* is always orientated southward. In mixed forest and grassland areas, *oboo* may be constructed entirely of trees, resulting in a specific shape (photograph 4). Trees with particular traits, especially those that grow alone, are seen as homes for deities and are worshipped together with the nearby *oboo*. Christopher Atwood explains that “*Oboo* associated with a strongly Buddhist cult are built in three stages and have twelve smaller heaps extending out in the cardinal directions around them, in imitation of the continents around the world mountain Sumeru of Buddhist cosmology” (2004, 414) (photograph 5). *Oboo* built to memorialize the sites of consequential events and eminent individuals in Mongol history may have specific features. The Dahur possess several *oboo* of this kind, such as the tombstone *oboo* and the memorial stone *oboo* (photographs 6 and 7), both of which have specific shapes.

Named after a clan, a mountain, or a hill, *oboo* are not only a fundamental component of Hulun Buir’s natural landscape, but also serve as territorial markers and as support for local history (see map 1).



Map 1. Hulun Buir. Drawn by Yola Gloaguen.

The *Oboo*: Support for Local and Oral History

Situated on the Russo-Mongolian border, Hulun Buir is home to the various Tungus and Mongol peoples who settled in the area between the mid-eighteenth century and the 1930s. This mosaic of groups, today labeled as “ethnic minorities” (*shaoshu minzu* 少数民族), is officially made up of the Mongols, the Dahur, and the Evenki.⁵ However, the Chinese classification system does not reflect the far more complex self-appellation and ethnic diversity that characterizes these groups (see table 1). In this respect, the *oboo* are a valuable resource for appreciating autochthonous reality. In Hulun Buir, there are as many *oboo* as clans and “ethnic” groups. By mapping the spatial distribution of the *oboo* in the area, one can get an accurate overview of the territorial and clan configuration of local societies. Every *oboo* has its own particular features and possesses its own story, revealing the historical or political circumstances under which a group of people settled in a given locality and marked it as its own upon arrival by erecting a cairn. An *oboo* may cease to exist, or it may be rebuilt

in its original place or another location in accordance with migration waves and (re)settlement.

Table 1. Local Groups in Hulun Buir.

Ethnonym	Official classification	Date of arrival in Hulun Buir	Clan <i>oboo</i>	Current place of residence
Buryat	Mongol (<i>Menggu zu</i> 蒙古族)	1918– 1930s	x	Evenki Autonomous Banner
Old Barga	Mongol	1732	√	Old Barga Banner
New Barga	Mongol	1734	√	New Barga Right and Left Banners
Olot	Mongol	1732	√	Evenki Autonomous Banner
Dahur	Dahur (<i>Dawo'er zu</i> 达斡尔族)	1732	√	Evenki Autonomous Banner
Solon	Evenki (<i>Ewenke zu</i> 鄂温克族)	1732	√	Evenki Autonomous Banner
Khamnigan	Evenki	1918– 1930s	x	Old Barga Banner

People refer to their sacred constructions either by their names or simply as “our *oboo*” (*manai oboo*). But what does “our *oboo*” mean precisely for local people? Among the myriad “small *oboo*” distributed on the Hulun Buir grasslands, most are worshipped either by members of the same clan or by an ethnic group inhabiting a common locality. To put it differently, while some groups possess clan *oboo* (*khala-yin oboo*),⁶ others do not, or, more

precisely, did but have “lost” them. In a cultural area where clanship forms the core of indigenous social organization, the “loss” of clan *oboo* is an unusual situation resulting from successive cross-border movements during times of political turmoil. For example, after Buryat and Khamnigan (a Tungus people) refugees fled from Russia to Hulun Buir in the 1920s following the October Revolution, they started building new *oboo* that reflected the new territorial administrative groupings assigned by the Hulun Buir local court (*yamen*). Indeed, “people of the same clan were organized into administrative units following their order of arrival rather than into clans” (Hürelbaatar 2000, 84), while they simultaneously lost the clan *oboo* they used to worship in Russia.⁷ On the other hand, to this day, the former Qing bannermen (Old and New Barga, Olot, Dahur, and Solon) who had been under the rule of the Manchu Eight Banners System hold numerous clan *oboo* that they have been worshipping since their resettlement in Hulun Buir in the mid-eighteenth century.

After the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1911, Hulun Buir found itself in an unstable situation: Outer Mongolia proclaimed its independence, while the October Revolution pushed numerous refugees to flee to China. “Hulun Buir was inhabited by a diverse native population whose unity could not be underwritten by common history or ethnic markers such as language” (Atwood 2005, 6). However, most of Hulun Buir’s residents shared a similar pastoral economy based on the “five muzzles”⁸ form of herding and were competing for pasturelands. Not only does erecting an *oboo* serve as a territorial marker connecting men to their collective territory, it also materializes the legitimacy of land use, as illustrated by the Buryat case. In 1922, the Buryat were allotted 1,000 square meters of pastureland for fifty years on territory occupied by the Olot, who were less numerous due to a plague that had occurred in 1910 (NZEY and HEY 2007, 174). The Olot had to cede the biggest part of their pastures to the wealthy Buryat, who, in turn, gradually established several *oboo* on their new territory.

A few years after the foundation of the People’s Republic of China, the ethnic and administrative boundaries of Hulun Buir were redrawn by the new regime, bringing about a disconcerting “ethno-territorial” framework. From that time onward, the Buryat—part of the “Mongol minority”—became residents of the “Evenki Autonomous Banner” allotted to the Evenki. When merged into the “Evenki minority,” the Khamnigan started to inhabit the new “Evenki *Sum*” situated in the Old Barga Banner. Toma, a retired ninety-year-old Khamnigan lama, remembers how the Bayan Delger Oboo (“Prospering and Flourishing *Oboo*”) was relocated several times (photograph 8). After their arrival in Hulun Buir in the 1920s, the

Khamnigan newcomers settled in Khongkhur, where Pashka, a rich herdsman who eventually became a *zangi* (Manchu: chief of a *sum*), founded the first Khamnigan *oboo* on Chinese territory. In the late 1920s, following the growing number of Khamnigan, Pashka decided to settle his community 90 kilometers away in a new place called Kholoson Bolag, where the *oboo* was rebuilt. Finally, in the 1950s, the Bayan Delger Oboo was again reformed in the new “Evenki *Sum*,” in which several clan *oboo* worshipped by the Old Barga people were scattered.

Such narratives are not rare in the area. They often feature distinguished (mythic or not) founders, such as rich herders, high-ranking officers, or powerful clan shamans whose souls were transformed into deities, mastering the *oboo* cairn site together with other entities. As Christopher Evans and Caroline Humphrey remark for the Urad Mongols, the date and circumstances of the construction of an *oboo* may be forgotten, misremembered, or entirely reformulated in mythic guise (2003, 195). If in the 1980s people were busy rebuilding their *oboo*, since the mid-2000s they have been more concerned with restoring their *oboo*'s story. Elders, intellectuals, and other influential people in the communities have started to piece oral legends together with historical data. This trend has undoubtedly gained strength with the national Intangible Cultural Heritage program, which actively promotes the preservation of ethnic minorities' “traditional culture.”⁹

In Hulun Buir, among the clan *oboo* worshippers who consider themselves the descendants of bannermen, many oral stories tell how a notable ancestor erected a clan *oboo* upon his arrival in the Hulun Buir grasslands between the mid-eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century. Yal Khavan is one of the largest clans of the Solon people. In 2015, three members compiled the story of their clan and its *oboo*. The foundation of this particular *oboo* can be traced back to 1732, when the officer Khilkhiet reached Hulun Buir with his seven sons after serving in successful military campaigns. Two years later, Khilkhiet built an *oboo* in Edug Oron for his family. Today, the Yal Khavan clan consists of twelve generations, two hundred families, and one thousand persons, all of whom worship the Edug Oron Oboo (photograph 9) (Batudelger, Qaserdeni, and Jorigsöröng 2015, 2). Although *oboo* are not generally places for human burial (Evans and Humphrey 2003, 199), the Dahur possess a “tombstone *oboo*” (*kharan oboo* in Dahur) that eventually became one of their ethnic markers (photograph 10). Worshipped by the Dentkhe lineage of the Aola clan, it is believed to have been erected in 1802 in memory of Fanchabu (范察布), a high-ranking officer from the Aola clan (Ali 2007, 7).

Whether administrative group *oboo* or clan *oboo*, all of these monuments arose in relationship to different timelines, memories, and datable events, reflecting the special connection that links people to their sacred cairn and territory. Even the systematic destruction of *oboo* cairns during the Cultural Revolution did not put an end to people's memory and sense of belonging to their native place. Following the reform era from the mid-1980s onward, locals began to look for their *oboo*'s location and start building them again.

***Oboo* Worship in Contemporary Hulun Buir**

As in Russia and Mongolia, the revival of religious practices after a long period of repression in Hulun Buir provided new opportunities for native populations to express their cultural traditions. Over the past three decades, *oboo* worship has been a central ritual celebration that structures the summer season in Hulun Buir. The elders who engaged in *oboo* worship before the Cultural Revolution see only minor changes between past and contemporary rituals. However, the content of today's worship is considered more sophisticated, given the addition of new elements and functions.

The following sections give an outline of "small *oboo*" rituals according to data collected during several worship ceremonies held by the Buryat, the Solon, the Old Barga, and the Dahur. Although worship differs from one group to another, most notably in terms of the deities and the religious specialists, the organizational structures are analogous.

Preamble to Worship

Oboo worship (*obooin-i takhilg-a*) is usually conducted throughout June, a season of renewal characterized by newborns in the herds, the first milking, and the growth of the grass after the first rains of May. The precise date of the ritual is determined by the lama or shaman in accordance with the astrological calendar. However, "big *oboo*" and clan *oboo* rituals are observed on fixed dates.¹⁰ In Hulun Buir, the *oboo* rituals commence every year on the third day of the fifth lunar month with worship of the Amban Oboo ("State Counselor *Oboo*"), the most prestigious "big *oboo*" in terms of the symbolic political hierarchy.¹¹ From this date onward, the other *oboo* celebrations start, ending with the final worship of the Bogda Uul Oboo ("Holy Mountain *Oboo*") on the third day of the seventh lunar month. The same ordering rule applies for "small *oboo*": among the several Buryat *oboo*, the Bayan Khan Oboo ("Prosperous Khan *Oboo*") is always worshipped first, since it is thought to be the first cairn erected on Chinese territory. However, the order may be changed to fit specific ritual

purposes. Hence, in June 2017, in order to bring rain to pasturelands affected by months of severe drought, the lamas decided to worship the Erdeni Uul Oboo (“Precious Mountain Oboo”) first because of its powerful water divinities (*luus*).

The *luus* are invoked on the fifth day of the fifth lunar month, while clan *oboo* worship is held either on the fifth day of the fifth lunar month or on the thirteenth day of the fifth lunar month. The fifth day of the fifth lunar month also corresponds to the Chinese Double Fifth Festival (*duanwujie* 端午节), which celebrates the dragon and its association with water and rain. While the choice of a similar date for both celebrations is related to Chinese influence,¹² it also perfectly fits the *luus*’ function, to propitiate dragon and water divinities.

“Small *oboo*” worship requires strict organization a few weeks before the ritual. The main duty is the collection of money to buy offerings (mainly food and drinks) and prizes for the games’ winners and to cover the lama’s or shaman’s remuneration. The amount collected differs from one community to another. The “administrative group *oboo*” are financially supported by the *sum* authorities. Among the Buryat, each year a *sum* designates two *gachaa* (villages) and grants them a specific amount of money for organizing the festivities. In 2017, two *gachaa* of the Shinekhen East *Sum* were allotted a total amount of 80,000 yuan (approximately US\$12,000) for worship of the Bayan Khan Oboo. Each household gives an additional contribution, mainly in the form of money and sheep. The worship of a clan *oboo* works in the same way, but the expenses are entirely supported by the clan members, who are asked to contribute within their financial means. While there is no minimum amount, people always give at least 100 yuan (US\$15) per household. Since the 1980s, the *oboo* leader (*obooin-i darga*)—a respected and knowledgeable elder appointed to this role for a period of three years—formally organizes the worship (including money collection).

Oboo Renovation: A Man’s Affair

After dark on the day before the ritual, or before sunrise on the day of the ritual, the *oboo* must be renovated. The renovation consists of replacing the willow branches (*borgas*) and the prayer flags of the previous year with new ones (photograph 11). In the same way that nature goes through a cycle of renewal—providing green grass, calves, and milk—the *oboo* need to be renewed by the actions of men. Each man places a freshly cut willow branch around the central wooden pole and may add prayer flags, making the *oboo* seem as if it is blossoming with colors, thereby blending in with the surrounding environment. Females are

excluded from participating in the renovation work, although in some cases small ritual trees made of willows are erected specially for women (photograph 12). In addition, women are neither allowed to reach the upper site of the *oboo* nor to climb to those few *oboo* built on very high ground.¹³ Informants do not give any specific reason for this prohibition, believing that it is simply a traditional rule everyone should follow. David Sneath, who attended an *oboo* worship among the Barga in the late 1980s, regards “the exclusion of women as an expression of the principles that order Mongolian social life, reinforcing the role that adult men play within the community, as well as expressing notions of pollution” (1991, 63). Likewise, men perform various activities—adding a willow branch, inscribing their names on a clan tree or on a stone, playing virile games—that symbolically ensure the perpetuation of the male-based group or patrilineal clan.

Ritual Gestures and Actions

On the day of the ritual, brightly dressed worshippers gather at the *oboo* site early in the morning. Wearing the *deel* (Mongolian long dress) is an implicit norm for anyone taking part in *oboo* worship and other significant celebrations, such as marriage ceremonies, sport games, or visits to monasteries. In addition, traditional dresses represent ethnic markers between groups: each has an identifiable costume with its own fabric, form, and way of tying the belt (photographs 13 and 14). Although everybody can, in principle, take part in *oboo* worship, attendance at “small *oboo*” celebrations is restricted according to ethnic and clan belonging. Breaking this rule may be interpreted as an act of defiance, especially in areas where ethnic tensions are high. Furthermore, as most worship is held on similar dates, people are naturally inclined to go to their own *oboo*. In case a group or a clan possesses more than one *oboo*, people prefer to go to the closest one.

After arriving at the site, worshippers start honoring the *oboo* with various ritual gestures. Men go to the upper part of the *oboo* to tie ceremonial scarves (*khadag*) and colored ribbons to the branches (photograph 15), while the *oboo* leader and women prepare the main offerings to be placed on the southern side of the *oboo*. When the altar and incense for purifying the deities are ready, the lama starts reading the prayers (or the shaman starts performing) for a couple of hours. Throughout the ritual, participants feed the *oboo* deities with food and drink while circumambulating clockwise three times around the cairn and kowtowing (photographs 16, 17, and 18). Indeed, “for Mongols circumambulation is an act of respect shown by the bodily movement” (Davaa-Ochir 2008, 53). Among the Buryat, after

the prayer, the main lama circles around the cairn on horseback to worship the land deities (photograph 19). The worship ends with the gathering of worshippers for the “act of calling the essence of the fortune, *dallaga*” (Davaa-Ochir 2008, 53). Under the guidance of the lama, worshippers simultaneously take the offerings they brought in their hands and perform a clockwise circular movement, saying “*khurai khurai*,” which means “to reach, to collect” (photograph 20). Men mime the act of receiving favors from the deities by unbuttoning the upper part of their clothes. Around midday, at the end of the ritual, people may share some offerings of food on the *oboo* site or at the games area.

Offerings

Characterized by their abundance and variety, offerings are the most visible features in *oboo* worship (photograph 21). Indeed, one must be generous with the deities in order to benefit from their protection and favor. The notion of reciprocity—giving in order to get something in return—established between worshippers and natural forces during *oboo* worship has been well documented in Mongolian and Siberian areas.¹⁴ For pastoralists whose economy depends on the climate and natural resources, securing the protective powers of the entities believed to control nature is of crucial importance. Thus, making the deities rejoice with copious offerings and prayers is expected to symbolically ensure the welfare of the community, good pastures, abundant rain, and the fertility of flocks.

The *oboo* is to be surrounded by diverse food and beverage offerings, which naturally reflect what people like to eat and drink: dumplings, cakes, yogurts, candies, dry cheese, mutton meat, fruits, milk, milk tea, and alcohol (photograph 22). One elder remembers that when he was young, the main offerings consisted of only fresh milk and meat. Today, the tendency to bring ready-made food (plastic bags of milk are bought in supermarkets) is very common, with many convenience stores providing cheap and good-quality products. But there is one offering that always comes directly from the community’s own supplies: the sheep. The sheep is killed before the ritual and properly boiled in water. Its head—or, more rarely, the entire carcass—is placed in front of the *oboo* as a delightful offering (photograph 23). After the ritual, some of the bones are left on the *oboo* site; the rest of the meat and other offerings are collectively eaten by worshippers (photograph 24). Among the “five muzzles,” the sheep is most favored as a sacrifice because it is attributed with ritual significance. The hind legs of sheep, used in knucklebone games, are a symbol of fertility, the continuation of

life, and pastoral happiness (Kabzińska-Stawarz 1991, 19). Furthermore, sheep are the most extensively herded animal, so their sacrificial use does not affect the size of herds.

Lama and Shaman

Lamaism spread over the Hulun Buir grasslands in the mid-eighteenth century, following the arrival of numerous New Barga Lamaists (Bo and Amin 2013, 161). Exposed to new faiths, the shamanist Dahur, Solon, and Old Barga have progressively adopted some lamaist practices without completely abandoning shamanism, thus producing a religious amalgamation where boundaries may not be strictly drawn. Both lamas and shamans were attacked during the anti-religious campaigns, leaving very few of either. The religious revival and the ensuing reconstruction of temples were associated with the emergence of a number of young lamas. On the other hand, shamans have emerged more gradually, especially over the last ten years. Today, Hulun Buir counts a dozen renowned shamans. Local people distinguish between a lama and a shaman mainly in terms of how they perform and become ritual specialists. While lamas go through a practical learning process involving reading practice in a religious structure, shamans are “elected” by the spirits and their knowledge comes from what their spirits (*ongon*) convey to them.

Both lamas and shamans can conduct an *oboo* ritual, choose a site for building a cairn, worship the *luus*, or lead *oboo* construction worship. People choose a shaman or a lama according to their customs, ethnic preference, and the availability of the specialist. Shamans and lamas may worship the same *oboo*, but not concomitantly. During the *Erdeni Uul Oboo* worship in 2017, a shaman who came to officiate for the first time was chased away by the lamas, since the simultaneous presence of distinct religious specialists was seen as potentially harmful to the deities.

If the aims of the lama and shaman are similar during an *oboo* ritual—invoking the local deities to take up their dwelling in the shrine—they act differently. The lama (or several lamas) recites Tibetan prayers (photograph 25), while the shaman, dressed in shamanic costume, performs with the help of his/her assistant and under the guidance of his/her spirits, drumming and moving his/her whole body (photograph 26). In June 2017, Merten clan members, whose former *oboo* near Hailar city was destroyed by the Japanese in 1942, decided to erect a clan *oboo* on a new site corresponding to their actual place of settlement. Worship during the erection of the *oboo* was led by one of the most famous Dahur shamans (Dahur: *yadgan*) of Hulun Buir, together with seven other young shamans (photograph 27).

Both lamas and shamans act as guides during worship, leading people in their ritual behavior. For example, during the Merten clan's *oboo* worship, the shaman decided the number of sheep to be offered and the time for clockwise walks around the *oboo*, and she called the members of the clan one by one to prostrate themselves before the spirits of the ancestors. If most people ignore the exact meaning of the ritual content and actions, what remains important for them is the ritual efficiency achieved by their proper behavior as worshippers. For instance, people say that the actions of the lamas and shamans have succeeded when changes in the weather occur, especially when it starts raining, which is considered a sign that the deities have accepted the offerings.

Closing Oboo Worship with Games

Oboo worship includes *oboo* worship games (*oboo takhilga-yin nair*) or *nadaam*,¹⁵ arranged several weeks in advance by the *oboo* leader and his team. Composed of horse racing, wrestling, and sometimes archery, the three competitions advertise men's virility and strength (Lacaze 2010). The games are held on a flat site where a banner, a tribune, and a yurt are set up a few kilometers away from the *oboo* cairn.

In order to protect the riders and their horses from excessive heat, the horse races are frequently organized early in the morning, prior to the *oboo* worship. In *oboo* games, horses are divided into age categories: two-year-old horses run 6,500, 7,500 and 10,000 meters, while horses more than two years old run 3,000, 5,000, 10,000, or 12,500 meters. While any man can take part in the race, regardless of his age, weight, and size (in contrast to the provincial-level competitions where the rules are stricter), the horse must belong to a local Mongol breed for reasons of equality (photographs 28 and 29). Wrestling is the most popular of the "three manly games," and it is the finale of the ritual day. The matches, supervised by coaches, are characterized by the absence of weight categories and time limits (photographs 30 and 31). In order to win, a wrestler must make his opponent fall or touch the ground. Archery attracts fewer people and is not always organized during the games (photograph 32). The contests conclude with prizes of money and sheep (photograph 33).

As celebrations with play and sport dimensions, the games are moments for rejoicing and amusement. The use of games during summertime religious ceremonies is based on an expected ritual effect: "the nomads play to make sure the year will be good, the cattle numerous, and the yurt strong" (Hamayon 2012, 150). Furthermore, the games have the communicative function of telling the spirits that humans are happy (Kabzińska-Stawarz

1991, 84). The aim of the games is similar to the aim pursued during *oboo* worship: establishing reciprocity with the deities to obtain protection and favors. Paying nature and its powerful hosts a tribute in the form of recreational games symbolically ensures the perpetuation of the group and the renewal of the environment.

In the 1950s, when the *oboo* ritual was purged, the *naadam* was carefully adapted to the new political ideology, producing heroes who distinguished themselves in various national sports and competitions for the new socialist “multi-ethnic Chinese nation.” Since the 1950s, national and provincial *naadam* have been held annually in every administrative entity (banner, *sum*), and new entertainments have been introduced (female wrestling, choreographed shamanic dances, and children’s songs). Even today, the political dimension of sport remains institutionalized. For example, in 2012, festivities were held to honor the eighteenth Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, while in 2017 they celebrated the seventieth anniversary of the foundation of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region. Such *naadam* also officially stand as a symbol of Mongolian “traditional custom,” although adjacent independent Mongolia claims to be the sole heir to Mongolian culture.

This photo essay provides a preliminary sketch of *oboo* narratives and their contemporary worship in Hulun Buir, a multi-ethnic border area in Inner Mongolia. *Oboo* not only shed light on interrelations between ritual practices and people’s connection to their native and sacred places, but also are a strong vector of national, ethnic, and cultural affirmations for both local societies and political authorities, which adjust the content of the celebrations to fit political ideology. Today, nothing seems capable of stopping the growing popularity of *oboo*: new sacred cairns are being (re)constructed every year. It is a safe bet that we will need to further investigate these religious festivities, which constitute an inseparable part of social life in this part of China and elsewhere in Northern Asia.

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Notes

- 1 In order to offer an easier reading experience, Mongol terms are rendered according to the closest oral pronunciation of the original word.
- 2 All photographs referenced in this essay can be found online in issue 24 of *Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review* (<https://cross-currents.berkeley.edu/e-journal/issue-24>).
- 3 Nowadays, *oboo* sites are chosen by a lama or shaman.

- 4 The Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region has its own administrative division, which is organized as follows: the banners are placed under the leadership of Hulun Buir prefecture. Banners are further subdivided into several *sum* and the *sum* into *gachaa*, the smallest administrative unit.
- 5 The majority of the population in the Hulun Buir area are Han Chinese, who have been migrating in waves since the 1960s.
- 6 In the area, the Manchu term *khala* instead of the Mongolian *obug* is used to refer to “clan.” However, in recent years, publications in Mongolian dealing with the Mongols of Hulun Buir use the term *obug* more frequently.
- 7 The loss of clan *oboo* in favor of administrative group *oboo* also occurred in other areas. For instance, among the Tuvan people of southern Siberia, *oboo* worship has had an administrative and territorial character since the end of the nineteenth century (Djakonova 1977, 96).
- 8 The “five muzzles” refer to the cow, camel, horse, sheep, and goat.
- 9 In 2006, the *oboo* were inscribed on the Chinese national list of Intangible Cultural Heritage. However, this applies only to the “big *oboo*.”
- 10 One exception is the Bayan Delger Oboo, which is worshipped by the Khamnigan (part of the “Evenki ethnic minority”) annually on June 18, in order to match the date of the official Evenki national celebration called *Sebin jie* 瑟宾节.
- 11 Overlooking Hailar city, the administrative center of Hulun Buir, the Amban Oboo was constructed by a Dahur State counselor (*amban*) at the beginning of the twentieth century, according to most locals.
- 12 During the festival, the Chinese who have settled in Hulun Buir buy live fish that they put back into the rivers. The Mongols and Tungus have also adopted this custom.
- 13 Women are, however, tolerated on “big *oboo*,” which have been promoted as tourist attractions.
- 14 See, for instance, Humphrey and Onon (1996), Davaa-Ochir (2008), Lindskog (2016), Sneath (1991), and Tatár (1973).
- 15 The “three manly games” are commonly known as *naadam*. *Naadam* correspond to big festivities organized on a large scale, while the term *nair* refer to more solemn feasts such as *oboo* worship.

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