



Embodying the past: ethics, conservation discourse, and ancient monuments in rural Mongolia

Joseph Bristley, University of Cambridge¹

INTRODUCTION

Mongolia's countryside, notably the steppe belt running across this vast country's centre, is dotted with archaeological monuments from Mongolia's 'deep past' (Humphrey 1992). Notable examples include grave complexes (*khirgisüür*) built during the Bronze age, human-shaped gravestones (*khün chuluu*) erected during the early medieval Türeg state period (A.D. 552 – 744), and the ruins of various ancient cities (*balgas*). Such objects and sites are relatively well-researched by archaeologists and historians (Delgerjargal and Batsüren 2017; Shirendev and Natsagdorj 1966). But the significance of historical monuments for modern-day inhabitants of Mongolia has only recently started to receive more detailed attention from social anthropologists (Lang and Baatarnaran 2020). This paper builds on research carried out near the Orkhon Valley Cultural Landscape - an area with "a tradition of nomadic pastoralism stretching back at least three millennia"

¹ Joseph Bristley is Research Associate at the Mongolia & Inner Asia Studies Unit, University of Cambridge; and affiliated Researcher at the Institute of Mongolian Studies, National University of Mongolia.

Nomadic Studies, Issue 31: Nomads, Ethics, and Intercultural Dialogue. © Copyright 2024. This work is licensed under [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/). Published by the International Institute for the Study of Nomadic Civilizations under the auspices of UNESCO.

(UNESCO 2004: 9) that has been inscribed under the UNESCO World Heritage Convention since 2004² - to explore how localised ethical practices of safe-guarding historical sites intersect with wider forms of discourse about national cultural heritage and the need to protect it (Sneath 2018). The ethnographic focus of this paper is on rural Mongolia's Erdene district.³ This is an area of steppe, dotted with some patches of birch and larch forest, whose dominant livelihood is the subsistence herding of mixed flocks of horses, cows, sheep, and goats. This paper draws attention to the ethical dimensions of practices that keep ancient sites safe using 'tricks' (*ᠵᠠᠯ*). These centre on convincing people that ancient burial sites are haunted by dangerous spirits, who can harm those who violate these places, their aim being to protect cultural heritage and the wider environment for the future.

TRACES OF THE PAST

Travel across the central Mongolian steppe, and one will notice curious things along the road: mounds of various sizes, from one to several metres in diameter and covered with stones. Some mounds sit by themselves underneath small clusters of stones and rocks. Others are vast structures standing at the centre of mortuary complexes surrounded by similarly constructed, but smaller, concentric stone circles. These complexes are *᠊ᠪᠢᠷᠢᠭᠢᠰᠢᠭᠦᠷ*, burial mounds built millennia ago by the ancient inhabitants of this region. They may sit majestically on high land overlooking great rivers. Other *᠊ᠪᠢᠷᠢᠭᠢᠰᠢᠭᠦᠷ*, in contrast, now absorbed into district centre villages, serve as little more than roundabouts for traffic in local networks of unpaved lanes. They may share the same locations as *ᠳᠣᠷ᠋ᠪᠠᠯᠢᠨ ᠪᠤᠯᠰᠤ*, ancient graves formed in a rectangular shape and marked at their four corners by taller stones. Some of these sites may also be adjacent to, or include, deer stones (*ᠪᠤᠭᠠᠨ ᠊ᠪᠣᠰᠬᠣᠳᠤ*). These monoliths - sometimes several metres in height - are covered with abstract engravings of deer with large eyes, long snouts, and extravagantly branching antlers. Also adorned with other decorations including representations of the sun and various linear designs, deer stones are widely found across central Mongolia and

² Orkhon Valley Cultural Landscape: <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1081/> [Accessed 31 July 2023]

³ The name of this place and the person cited in this paper are anonymised..

farther afield (Törbat *et al.* 2021). Ancient burial sites like these have been the subject of extensive scholarly research since joint Soviet-Mongolian expeditions were carried out after the Second World War. But they are often viewed by local people as closed ‘things’, of which little is known. Even the time periods in which they were made are often unclear. But ancient burial sites are also locations for speculating about the past, as places that contain the bones of great lords and their horses, and where valuable things like gold may be hidden away for centuries.

PROTECTION THROUGH TRICKERY

For Bat, a former local official in Erdene, ancient archaeological sites like these are things that require protection from those who may otherwise plunder them. The remote locations of many ancient sites, and the gold they may contain, have led to the pillaging of ancient graves in central Mongolia. The enclosure within the walls of the relatively nearby Baibalik, for example – the ruins of an Uigur city located near the banks of the great river Selenge – is dotted with holes that have all the hallmarks of illegal excavations. Some monuments, notably *khün chuluu*, can be protected from cattle by fences constructed around them. But, from Bat’s point of view, the use of tricks can keep people away too. This is by convincing potential robbers that such sites are haunted by spirits that can harm those who violate ancient graves. As he reflected about people who may be tempted to rob ancient burial sites, “we Mongolians say [to people like this] ‘these places are haunted by devils and the like, and cursed by local spirits’”. Ethnographic and historical research in Mongolia have produced extensive taxonomies of spirits thought by many to live in the landscape: “*eliye*-ghosts and local deities, *ongyod* [ancestral spirits], *ada* [demons] and the like” (Bawden 1994: 103). Many in Erdene believe in the existence of similar beings. A road linking Erdene’s district centre to the countryside, and which runs close to a local cemetery, is said to be a place where travellers can hear disembodied, ghostly voices calling out their names. Certain pastures are known as *güideltei gazar*, ‘running places’ of local spirits that are dangerous for humans and livestock, and so unsuitable as grazing land. But for Bat, such perspectives on the existence of spirits are not just descriptions of the world as it is. They also have an ‘instrumental’ value (Weber 1978 [1922]) and can be mobilised to deter people from

disturbing sensitive places like the burial mounds of Erdene's steppe. Generic haunting accounts about generic ancient sites, Bat said, were formulated by people who lived in the past. Although coming into being in this way, the origins of these tricky stories are unknown by many who come to believe in them. Such accounts lack specific authors and clear temporal origins, something that gives them a gloss of power and authority. But they can potentially be expanded to take on chronological specificity, encompassing the biographies of people in the present who, having been foolish enough to damage various prohibited sites, have suffered for it. In this respect, tricks are seen as a potentially effective way to deter people from damaging archaeological sites that ought to remain *in situ* into the time of future generations.

ETHICAL REFLECTIONS

How, then, are we to consider such tricks from an ethical point of view? Writing on the conduct of an ethical life, philosopher Bernard Williams wrote that it "is going to contain restraints on such things as killing, injury, and lying, but those restraints can take very different forms" (Williams 1985, 153). Ethnography carried out elsewhere in the world reveals dim views of forms of trickery associated with taking advantage of the naïve and vulnerable for anti-social, or even criminal, reasons (Carey 2017: 104). From Williams' perspective, it shows a lack of 'restraint' that causes harm to others. The tricks described by Bat have a different ethical framing, however. On one hand, claims about hauntings by harmful spirits are obfuscations, instrumentalising widely held beliefs in local spirits to trick people away from damaging ancient burial sites. Despite what appears on the surface – a warning against behaviour that can attract spiritual vengeance – such accounts are ultimately confected. Their agentive power lies in the fact they do not advance literal truth-claims about the world, but are tricks whose obfuscation can achieve certain ends. On the other hand, though, such tricks do not involve telling outright lies. This is largely because no-one could claim with any certainty that such places *do not* have spirits around them. For many in Erdene, the countryside is populated by anonymous, invisible beings that exist in impossible-to-quantify numbers. For all his reflections on trickery, Bat does not deny the existence of such spirit beings. For all anyone knows, spirits may indeed be at ancient burial sites, as they are along Erdene's

haunted roads or in pasturelands criss-crossed by ‘running tracks’. What appears to be at work here, from an ethical point of view, is an intersecting set of perspectives in which confected accounts of haunting deployed on one scale of social life – here, engagement (or otherwise) with ancient burial sites – does the greater ethical work of protecting these things for future generations: as important aspects of Mongolia’s patrimony and cultural heritage. Like the Utilitarian idea of the ‘greater good’, trickery of the type described by Bat ensures the preservation of important ancient sites. In this respect, it does not have the negative ethical evaluation that trickery has elsewhere in the ethnographic literature on Mongolia, where it is associated with antisociality and bad character traits (Højer 2019: 21). Instead, it has a particular ethical direction that is valued for the good work it can do.

REFERENCES

- Bawden, Charles. 1994. ‘The Supernatural Element in Sickness and Death according to Mongol Tradition, Part I and II.’ In *Confronting the Supernatural: Mongolian Traditional Ways and Means. Collected Papers*. Harrassowitz Verlag: Wiesbaden.
- Carey, Matthew. 2017. *Mistrust: An Ethnographic Theory*. Chicago: Hau Books.
- Delgerjargal, P. and Batsüren, B. 2017. *Türeg, Uigur. Mongolyn Ertnii Tүүкh. Dөтгөөр Bot* [Turks, Uighurs. Mongolia’s Early History. Fourth Volume]. Ulaanbaatar: Soyombo Printing.
- Højer, Lars. 2019. *The Anti-Social Contract. Injurious Talk and Dangerous Exchanges in Northern Mongolia*. Oxford and London: Berghahn Books.
- Humphrey, Caroline. 1992. ‘The Moral Authority of the Past in Post-Socialist Mongolia’. *Religion, State and Society* 20(3-4): 375-389.
- Lang, Maria-Katharina and Baataranar, Tsetsentsolmon. 2020. ‘Artefact Transfers: Displacing, Representing and (Re-)Valuing Objects in Mongolia’. *Inner Asia* 22: 255-276.
- Shirendev, B. and Natsagdorj, Sh. 1966. *Bүгд Найрамдах Mongol Ард Улсын Түүкх. Төргүүн Bot*. *Nen ertness XVII зуун* [History of the Mongolian People’s Republic. Volume 1. From the earliest times to the seventeenth century]. Ulaanbaatar: Ulsyn Kheveleliin Khereg Erkhlekh Khoroo.

NOMADIC STUDIES 31: Nomads, Ethics, and Intercultural Dialogue

- Sneath, David. 2018. *Mongolia Remade: Post-socialist national culture, political economy and cosmopolitics*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Törbat, Ts., Tseveendorj, D., Gantulga J., Bayarkhüü, N., Batsükh, D., Batbold, N., Iderkhangai, T., Enkhbayar, G., and Ömirbek, B. 2021. *Mongol Ba Büs Nutgiin Bagan Khöshöönii Soyol* [Deer Stone Culture of Mongolia and Neighbouring Regions]. Ulaanbaatar: Admon Print LLC.
- UNESCO. 2003. 'Orkhon Valley (Mongolia) No 1081 Rev.'. 7-14.
- Weber, Max. 1978 [1922]. *Economy and Society. An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (Trans. E. Fischhoff, *et al.*). Berkely: University of California Press.
- Williams, Bernard. 1985. *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press