



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Nomads as audiences

What Mongolian herders want to see from museums and cultural programming

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Little attention has thus far been afforded to the topic of nomads as museum audiences. This paper explores the questions of what nomadic pastoralists in Mongolia want to see from their local museums, and how regional museums and their cultural programming can meaningfully engage with this target audience. Drawing on ten years of ethnographic fieldwork across three regions – Khövsgöl,Uvs, and Bulgan aimag – it examines local attitudes towards heritage, museums and archeology. Findings reveal a significant disconnect between what regional museums currently offer and what herding communities value: experiential, socially embedded encounters with material culture, and storytelling that resonates with their daily lives. Low numbers of museum visits reveal barriers to engagement: time constraints, inaccessible formats, as well as a lack of outreach and negative perceptions of museums as irrelevant repositories for redundant objects. Nevertheless, herders expressed

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strong interest in themes of traditional ecological knowledge, continuity and change, and inspirational stories of rural identity. This paper thus considers opportunities for data-informed, community-responsive changes to Mongolian regional museums: new narratives, participatory interpretation, and extramural engagement. By aligning with rural ways of knowing and local rhythms of life, regional museums have the potential to enhance their relevance and impact for nomadic-pastoralist audiences.

While critical analysis of museum portrayals of nomadic cultures, lifeways and identities is an emerging field, very little attention has been afforded to another meaning of ‘nomads in museums’: that is, members of nomadic cultural communities as museum visitors, current or prospective (Aikio, 2022; Dogra, 2023). This paper draws on ethnographic fieldwork conducted over ten years in three regions of rural Mongolia, to address the question of what nomadic pastoralists would actually like to see from museums and cultural programming.

Mongolian heritage professionals report low visitor figures and community engagement levels in the countryside; meanwhile, archeologists deplore a perceived lack of local interest in their activities, interlinked with persistent issues with vandalism and looting of archeological sites – the latter of which is often cited as one of the main threats to tangible cultural heritage in Mongolia (Bayarsaikhan, 2025; J. Clark, 2025).

This is in part explained by a persistent misunderstanding between archeologists and their rural audiences. Studies have shown that the vast majority of Mongolian heritage and museum professionals, who acquire their training in the city, consider the value of heritage as both intrinsic and intimately linked with personal notions of national identity. This understanding aligns with that of urban audiences, and by extension with national narratives around identity and Mongolia’s place on a global stage (Nichols, 2014; Randisi, 2016, forthcoming; Watterson, 2014). Rural communities, on the other hand, and in particular nomadic pastoralist communities, have very different attitudes towards both heritage and the perceived or expected role of museums as a cultural / community institution – owing, in part, to different worldviews, priorities and locally-constructed identities (Gunchinsuren et al., 2011; Randisi, 2016).

In order to become more relevant to their local audiences, in particular to nomadic pastoralists and their families, it is essential that Mongolian regional muse-

ums recognize these differences between urban and rural audiences. By considering the needs and interests of this target audience, museums at both *aimag* (province) and *soum* (district) level can make data-informed changes to their activities, and create added value to their local community (cf. Simon, 2016; Schreiber et al., 2023).

To this effect, this paper presents data collected in the context of ethnographic fieldwork on rural attitudes to heritage, archeology and museums in northern (Ulaan-Uul *soum*, Khövsgöl *aimag*), western (Züünkhangaï *soum*, Uvs *aimag*) and central Mongolia (Bayan-Agt *soum*, Bulgan *aimag*), between 2016 and 2025. The data, gathered through participant observation, semi-structured and unstructured interviews with herding households, was collected in partnership with long-standing archeology projects, for the purpose of improving future community engagement practice(s).¹ It is presented below in four sections: current prevalent attitudes towards museums, barriers to engagement and participation, reflections on content themes deemed most relevant by herding communities, and preferred formats for engagement.

Mongolian regional museums: a brief introduction

Regional museums in Mongolia were for the most part set up during the socialist period, between 1940 and 1970, as cabinets for local studies. They were founded with the purpose of educating rural communities and showcasing cultural artefacts, the natural wealth of the nation and the achievements of its people (Enkhnanan, 2025; Lang & Tsetsentsolmon, 2016). These museums are part of the country's regional infrastructure, mapping to administrative divisions of *aimag* (province) and *soum* (district). As such, they vary in size, though perhaps less in format. A typical regional museum usually contains a natural history display, with local fauna taxidermy and pressed plants, an ethnographic section with regional clothing mounted on mannequins and objects pertaining to traditional lifeways, and various displays of documents and photographs pertaining to local history².

¹ Data collected independently by the author while in the field with the Western Mongolia Archeology Project (now Mongolian Pastoralist Archaeologies project) and with the Northern Mongolia Archeology Project (now Nomad Science). While these collaborations did not directly influence the scope of the research, results from this study are now informing the projects' public engagement activities.

² For photographs of Mongolian regional museums, see (Lang, 2016, pp. 98–137).

Archeological displays usually consist of photographs and/or replicas, as artefacts from excavations are sent back to Ulaanbaatar. Older displays tend to have little in the way of interpretation – objects without object labels are not an uncommon sight – while text-heavy wall panels, often more recent additions, follow academic lines of enquiry rather than audience-centred interpretation plans.

Local museums and cultural centres continue to be state-funded via the *aimag* budget system, under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture, Sport and Tourism. As governmental funding for arts and culture was drastically reduced following the Democratic Revolution, museums have come to increasingly rely on foreign investment to supplement local revenues, for project funding and capacity-building (Enkhnanan, 2025; Rossabi, 2005). Recent state investments in heritage have focused primarily on national museums, and in particular the new Chinggis Khaan National Museum (opened 2022), as platforms to showcase national narratives of nomadism, imperial power, religious tolerance and historic ties with the wider world. Regional museums, as products of the socialist era, remain separate from this branding exercise, instead fostering stories of local knowledge and local pride. Despite interest from staff in updating displays and modes of engagement, local museums continue to face systemic underfunding, affecting curatorial practice and restricting abilities for change (Charleux & Saunier, 2025, p. 10).

A further barrier to change lies in the lack of existing audience data. Visitor data collected by Mongolian museums does not take non-visitors into account. Leisure studies in Mongolia is a similarly underdeveloped field; existing studies on arts and culture participation have focused chiefly on urban contexts (e.g., O’Gorman & Thompson, 2007; Ulziibadrakh & Szakály, 2024). It is hoped that this study will encourage further research on the topic and inspire practical change.

The current state of museum engagement among Mongolian herders

Frequency of museum visits

In all three regions, community members of all ages and education levels were aware of the existence of a local museum – most people simply did not visit, although most people knew at least one person who had.

To help us quantify the frequency of museum visits, the 2016 pilot study conducted in the Darkhad Valley, in Khövsgöl, interviewed members of twelve no-

The vast majority of people who had been to a museum recalled superficial impressions of being in an interesting space, but could not recall what they had learned or comment on the narrative of the museum. Rather, museums were seen by most as repositories for material culture: visitors commented on the objects but never on how they were displayed. This understanding of the museum space affected their expectations, and consequently the experience of the museum: one participant, for example, expressed disappointment with there not being ‘enough things’ in the local *soum* museum; others expected to see artefacts from recent archaeological excavations displayed, rather than written findings on wall panels.

Participants who had never visited were under the impression that their local museum was in essence a repository for ‘useless’ old things, rather than a place for learning and storytelling. One interviewee, for instance, recounted how their family’s artefacts were taken by the local museum staff but expressed little interest in visiting the museum to see how these items were presented:

The museum in Ulaan-Uul has many old things from my family. I didn’t donate them, I just left them [behind]. Useless things, I thought. Local people came and took them. (CS1)

Nevertheless, one type of museum feature stood out for its popularity among herders: natural history displays. Many cited material relating to the animal world as having left a lasting impression:

I thought the dinosaur bones were interesting because they were so huge. (CS5)

There were many interesting things like animals, but I’m not interested in why they’re in the museum. (CS7)

There were many things in the State Central Museum, I was intimidated by the [taxidermy] bears. But at the time I was very young and not very interested. (CS8)

This aligns withUvs *Aimag* Museum staff's observation that the animal taxidermy gallery was their most popular display with the general public (Tsedenbal, pers. comm., 31 May 2025).

Barriers to participation

Criticism commonly levelled at archeologists working across western and central Mongolia relates to research findings: while people are generally aware that excavations have taken place in their area, nobody in the local community ever seems to know what the results were, or where to find them. This experience was largely shared by herders interviewed as part of this project, despite detailed information on the Western Mongolia Archeology Project's research process and findings being permanently displayed on information panels in the local museum in Züünkhangai. This situation is illustrative of a key, two-pronged problem with museum access in rural Mongolia: for many people, these museums are both physically and culturally difficult to engage with.

Members of herding communities in Uvs, Khövsgöl and Bulgan provinces consistently cited two main barriers to engagement with regional museums: time constraints, and issues related to how the information is presented in these spaces – in other words, the formats in which the information is conveyed was seen as problematic.

Time constraints

First and foremost, the daily schedule of adults in herding communities, as it currently exists in Mongolia, does not allow for leisurely visits to their nearest museum during the daytime. Herders interviewed frequently reported not having any leisure time, often reacting with amusement to the question, 'What do you do in your free time?' Many shared anecdotes about working from dawn until dusk, emphasizing that the growing trend for women and children to move to the city resulted in increased responsibilities towards their animals and, in turn, affected their ability to take time away from the herds.

Herders don't have enough time, and have more important things to do with their life than history. (ZK24-15)

A herder doesn't really have free time – we're always caring for the animals. In the summer, I wake up early in the morning, herd animals, and then go to sleep. In the winter, I do the same, but with less daylight. (KY25-02)

I have no free time. I work 4am to 10pm days. I do all the herding myself with no help. (KY25-06)

When events considered particularly noteworthy were happening in the town centre, where possible, families took it in shifts to tend to the animals to allow each other to take part. A 16-year-old boy told us:

I'm excited about the 100-year anniversary [of Züünkhangai], but I won't watch the festival. I'm going to herd so that my parents can go watch the festival. (ZK24-16)

Given these limitations, museum operation or staffing hours become another barrier to access; taking time out of a busy schedule to visit a museum becomes all the more difficult to justify when prospective audiences do not perceive the experience as having any easily articulatable value.

In light of these limitations, another approach could be for museums to tailor their content to younger visitors with more leisure time. No participant interviewed reported ever visiting their local museum as part of school activities, and indeed none of the current or retired schoolteachers interviewed in Uvs, Khövsgöl and Bulgan reported organized school visits ever taking place as part of history curriculum provision. This corroborates recent findings from a study on heritage education provision in Mongolian schools, which found that, while the curriculum encourages site visits as part of history lessons, teachers report significant barriers to implementing this goal in both capital and provincial schools (Hommel et al., 2025) – barriers financial and operational, but also a lack of resources to guide the planning of these visits.

Catering to younger age groups could also help circumvent barriers to museum participation in another way: children are likelier to share what they have learned with their parents, bringing stories of their museum experiences into the family sphere, and potentially encouraging future participation. As one herding household suggested:

Archeologists should tell children about their research findings, and work with schools. When the children learn something at school, then they can tell us. (KY25-05)

Unappealing interpretation formats

In addition to this, herding communities expressed a disconnect between their preferred way of learning and the way museums convey information (rather than their content itself).

On the one hand, the authoritative voice of museums, generally relayed in writing on wall panels and labels, was seen as sterile and impersonal, in contrast with people's trusted networks of knowledge production: Mongolia has a long-standing oral tradition, where knowledge and stories are shared socially and intergenerationally. Mongolian regional museums were, for the most part, set up during the socialist period, following twentieth-century principles of science and education laid out by Soviet museums and governmental guidelines (Lang & Tsetsentsolmon, 2020; Lang & Tsetsentsolmon, 2016). In most cases, the themes and engagement styles of regional museums have changed little since then. This can be jarring for some prospective visitors: *'We're a culture with an oral tradition – you need to give lectures, to talk to people!'* (ZK25-02). As a result, participants interviewed were reluctant to engage at all with museums' written interpretation and institutional voice. Several participants, in fact, expressed dismay at a feeling that their oral tradition was being lost – they saw the way heritage professionals currently operate in rural communities as a missed opportunity to revive/revitalize this tradition, by sharing research findings or resources with elders and entrusting them with spreading this knowledge in their communities.

On the other hand, members of rural communities showed a strong preference for experiential learning and hands-on experiences. This was perceived to be incompatible with static museum displays in which objects in cases cannot be handled. Additional criticism levelled at heritage professionals was to do with the systematic transfer of archeological artefacts uncovered during excavations to museums in Ulaanbaatar: *'Your project has been excavating here for ten years – what do you have to show for it? Where can we see the objects?'* (ZK25-02). When considered in the context of hands-on learning, this established system of finds distribution can be understood as a significant barrier to engagement with, and learning from, archeology.

Museum content: themes of interest for impactful storytelling

Regional museums in Mongolia tend to cover three themes: national history, of which archeology is considered a sub-discipline; ethnography; and local natural history (Lang & Tsetsentsolmon, 2016). Regular updates to displays have yet to convey the interdisciplinarity of contemporary research, where archeology, anthropology and sociology merge to create meaning out of heritage in the present (e.g., Houle et al., 2022; Reading et al., 2016). Indeed, while natural history displays continue to be popular with local visitors, expressions of the official, national narrative about the past, focused on royalty, empire and historic ties with the wider world – in museums, schools and textbooks – is met with dismissiveness and derision by rural audiences who feel it lacks relevance to their daily lives: *‘All I remember is Chinggis Minggis!’* (CS5, Randisi, forthcoming).

Nevertheless, herding communities recognize the importance of heritage, and the potential of learning from the ancient past to inform future decision-making. Three themes emerge as talking points for relevant, inspiring and inspirational storytelling:

Traditional ecological knowledge and skills

Traditional ecological knowledge perceived to have been lost in socialist times – herding skills, knowledge of medicinal plants, and other information that can inform a balanced relationship between humans and the natural world – was repeatedly cited by herders as their number one topic of interest. This is motivated in part by a sense of identity defined by daily activities and roles within the community – one is first and foremost a herder, a horse trainer, a carpenter – and in part by escalating concerns over a changing climate, whereby nomadic pastoralists are forced to adapt their herding strategies to an increasingly dry environment (Batdelger et al., 2025).

Unbeknownst to their target audience, an increasing number of archeological research projects are tackling these very questions, studying how pastoralists in the region have been adapting to a changing climate over tens of thousands of years (Honeychurch, 2010; Houle et al., 2022). Yet little of this information thus far has made it into museum displays and other resources, that instead have focused on stories of emerging statehood and social hierarchy dictated on a national scale by the national curriculum and heritage professionals’ interests.

The daily life of people in the past

As part of this research, members of herding households in western and central provinces were asked two questions intended to stimulate creative conversation around museum displays and historic interpretations: ‘If you were a museum curator for a day, what theme would you choose to focus a display on?’, and ‘If you had the chance to meet someone from the distant past, what would you ask them?’

Replies showed a clear slant towards stories of daily lives on the steppe, often through the lens of continuity and change. The most commonly cited theme was to do with horses and animal husbandry traditions, closely followed by representations of herding life past and present – interviewees were particularly inspired by the prospect of taking ownership over portrayals of Mongolian nomadic lifeways and showcasing the realities of their daily lives to a broader audience. Younger participants – often teenage girls – sought out inspirational stories, and were particularly interested in the daily lives of historic women, an underrepresented topic in regional museums.

Participants of all ages keenly felt a lack of representation of local stories in museums and history education provision:

When children are at school, they need to learn more local history, more about local sites and traditions. Then they can learn about other countries. (KY25-05)

Some older participants were concerned that this lack of positive representation was in part responsible for the mass migration of young people to the cities and the accelerating loss of traditional ways of life.

Continuity and change

Mongolian archeologists note that local visitors to archeological sites frequently show limited interest in conventional archeological narratives (Batsuren Byambadorj, pers. comm., 10 June 2024). Instead, their interest is more readily sparked by perceived continuities between past practices and contemporary folk traditions – for example, the as yet unexplained parallels between the prehistoric burial of horse heads under small stone mounds satellite to Late Bronze Age cenotaphs, or

kebirigsuurs, and the contemporary ritual placing of prized horse skulls on these same mounds (cf. Houle et al., 2026). Interestingly, Mongolian museum professionals are not immune to these points of cultural resonance – when asked as part of a 2016 study about their ideal museum exhibition, Mongolian heritage professionals expressed great enthusiasm for displays highlighting such continuities, such as the evolution of traditional clothing or communication methods through time (Randisi, 2016). Nevertheless, such thematic approaches remain largely absent from Mongolian museum displays at both regional and national levels, which continue to follow a predominantly chronological structure.

The above themes could serve as guiding threads to develop new, visitor-centred strategies, including revised core messages for museum displays and learning objectives for engagement activities.

Experimenting with new formats for engagement

In her playbook *Playing with the Past*, Kate Clark makes the distinction between access and participation, and between active and passive engagement, in very simple terms: ‘The first is where you visit a site or museum (or website) and the second is where you play an active role in doing something’ (2019, p. 72). This is a helpful frame of reference for understanding different audiences’ preferred ways of engaging with museums and material culture.

In the context of museums, Mongolian herding communities’ preference for hands-on and experiential learning (‘learning by doing’) – in other words, active engagement – could translate into engagement with material culture, for instance through handling collections and object-based learning (Kador, 2025), which proactively encourages audiences to take part in the process of critical and creative thinking required to interpret museum objects.

This approach may well speak to rural audiences for another reason: their strong preference in participation rather than simple access. In her experimental studies of Mongolian material culture and ways of knowing, Hermione Spriggs highlights how ‘contrary to a “naturalistic view of the landscape as a neutral, external backdrop to human activities’ (Ingold, 2000, p. 189), the Mongolian *taskscape* is a space for participation and interaction’ (Spriggs, 2016, p. 413) – an environment which is not just a setting but is in itself composed of multi-directional interactions. This view extends to museum spaces, which are expected to be dynamic, interactive and experiential. This suggests that experiments in par-

ticipatory engagement, which foregrounds multivocality and play (cf. Simon, 2010; Rodley, 2025), are likely to find an enthusiastic audience in rural Mongolian museums.

It has been suggested that the decline of cultural centres in post-socialist Mongolia, brought about by funding cuts following the Democratic Revolution in 1990, has left a gap in rural community provision for facilitated social spaces (Marsh, 2006). There is scope for regional museums to increase their relevance by actively fulfilling this role, in light of rural audiences' preference for social, inter-generational learning (as also noted by other studies, e.g., Yembuu, 2021). Mongolian nomadic pastoralists, and rural audiences more broadly, are likelier to trust information from respected members of their communities (elders, parents, teachers) than from outsiders or the impersonal, 'authoritative' voices of museums (Randisi, forthcoming). By acknowledging these existing networks of knowledge transmission, regional museums could become spaces for oral transmission, and for facilitated encounters between local voices of authority, heritage professionals and material culture. This would allow them to maximize their impact as community-led learning spaces.

Thinking outside the box

If the physical space of the museum in and of itself remains a barrier to participation for nomadic pastoralist audiences, museums as institutions can play an important role in rural communities by bringing engagement activities outside their four walls – through events and site visits.

Creative workarounds to time constraints might also include engineering museum encounters in places that people already visit as part of their regular, busy schedules, such as shops or community centres. Nomadic residents in the valleys around the town of Züünkhangai, Uvs repeatedly said they had no free time to dedicate to museum visits; despite this, a shopkeeper in town relayed a story challenging this perception:

When I set up the Korean corndog buffet in my shop, people came from all over this area to try it. Young herders spread the word among themselves, through WhatsApp and things like that. I even had people coming from the next soum over! (ZK25-01)

Creating novel museum encounters in unexpected spaces, in places already frequented by target audiences, is an option worth exploring. Such encounters could include, for example, displays in *soum* centre shops; Cultural Centres on local festival dates could also have dedicated space for object encounters, where residents from the local area could be invited to bring in material that resonates with them as a springboard for community conversations around heritage and social memory (cf. Dries, 2019; Boom et al., 2019; Marín-Aguilera, 2026 for examples of this in other countries). Crucially, this type of activity is both achievable with few resources and sustainable without continued project funding.

Finally, a new dimension of extramural engagement is increasingly open to Mongolian regional museums and their audiences: the internet. As data coverage in rural areas continues to increase (Gankhuyag et al., 2024), more and more herders report getting their news from online sources, with the most common one cited by participants of this study being Facebook.

Conclusion

In the three regions of Mongolia highlighted in this case study, what nomadic pastoralists want to see from cultural programming is very different from what museums currently offer. In other words, regional museums are failing to meaningfully engage with nomadic communities.

In essence, these target audiences are interested in interacting with material culture, and in being told stories relevant to their lives in formats that are resonant and accessible. In order to better serve the needs and interests of these audiences, regional museums in Mongolia must consider adapting not only their content but also their approach to interpretation and modes of operation. Rather than passive observation, people want opportunities for social, embodied interactions – both with objects and with narratives that reflect their own lived experiences. These suggested changes are in line with contemporary shifts in how museums are being redefined and reimagined in the twenty-first century, as spaces for transformation and exchange (Achiam et al., 2021; Watson, 2007).

Herders expressed interest in themes such as the application of traditional and historical knowledge to support better futures for rural communities, inspirational stories of local representation for young people, and explorations of continuity and change. Furthermore, widespread dissatisfaction with conventionally static displays can be considered a valuable opportunity for regional museums to exper-

iment with more interactive, participatory approaches to engagement. Finally, by embedding their activities more fully within the rhythms and practices of nomadic life, museums can reduce barriers to access and foster deeper, more reciprocal relationships with pastoralist communities.

Ultimately, by making data-informed and community-responsive changes, Mongolian regional museums, at both *aimag* (province) and *soum* (district) level, have an opportunity to significantly enhance their relevance and impact for local nomadic audiences. In doing so, they have the potential to contribute meaningfully to community cohesion, heritage engagement and preservation, and inspiring future generations.

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