



COMMENTARY

Museums and Nomads

Special Section Introduction

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This editorial commentary introduces a special section on 'Museums and Nomads', exploring how museum collections and exhibitions represent Mongolian pastoral heritage. Contributions to this issue describe four prevalent modes of museum representation: historic sites displayed in situ, vitrine-based ethnographic typologies, patriotic dioramas, and state-sponsored commemorative spaces. Interrogating the taxonomic schemes that classify herding societies and inform such representations, we can explore how evolutionary frameworks, orientalist essentialization, and state-authorized heritage discourses have historically depoliticized nomadic agency or co-opted pastoral identity for political projects. Ultimately, micro-historical analyses of local material culture, such as the Darkhad cradle (bööv), can advance decolonial, participatory museological frameworks that position nomadic pastoralists as active agents.

Nomadic Studies 32 (2026). Published by the International Institute for the Study of Nomadic Civilizations under the auspices of UNESCO. This work is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International.
<https://doi.org/10.67086/nsj.32.38>

Museums and nomads

This issue of *Nomadic Studies* includes four research articles and two reports making up a special section on ‘Museums and Nomads’. Our contributors have attempted to address the questions: *What museum collections and exhibitions represent the cultural heritage of Mongolian nomadic peoples? And how is the category of ‘the nomad’ reflected in the way those collections came to be assembled and presented to the public?* Here, I explore some of the common themes across the articles in this section and suggest connections to broader questions about the nature of museums and their representations of ‘nomads’.

Our contributions in this issue cluster around three core themes concerning the intersection of nomadic heritage, museum practices, and state power. The first of these focuses on the *representational politics of museums* in relation to nomadic peoples and museum audiences. Dulam Bumochir addresses how colonial knowledge structures historically marginalized Mongolian pastoralists by labelling them as primitive, while Lisa Randisi examines the contemporary disconnect between static, text-heavy regional museum displays and the experiential, daily realities of herding communities, advocating for community-responsive outreach and participatory interpretation. Second, several of our authors critique *state-authorized heritage discourses and political narratives* within museum spaces. Gerelt Honichud and G. Galsanjamts compare the figure of Chinggis Khaan in Mongolian national museums, where he symbolizes sovereign statehood, with his representation in Chinese memorial complexes like the Ordos Mausoleum, where he is reframed as a hero of multi-ethnic state unity. Similarly, Dorjraa Purvei and Zulbaatar Gangaa analyse heritage politics in Xinjiang, showing how official state narratives celebrate Torghut migration as patriotic return while downplaying Khoshut autonomy, turning peripheral museums into contact zones where local communities negotiate identity and state-sanctioned frameworks. Third, several contributors emphasize the *institutional role of museums and collections in documenting and preserving cultural heritage*. Otgonsuren Dugarsuren uses primary archival documents to trace the history of the Choijin Lama Temple complex – from its imperial Qing naming and state oracle rituals through its destruction and conversion into a museum during the socialist purges. Complementing this documentary focus, collection reports by Tuultsetseg Ch. (National Museum of Mongolia) and Odmaa Mendbayar (Central Museum of Khövsgöl Province) illuminate ethnographic holdings ranging from early twenti-

eth-century monastic and aristocratic confiscations to localized material culture, such as the Darkhad wooden cradle (*bööv*). Together, these contributions demonstrate how museum collections and display strategies both reflect and challenge prevailing assumptions about nomadic societies.

Modes of representation: ‘Nomads’ in museums

Collections of nomadic heritage in museums have in some cases operated as metonyms for the supposed primitivism, pagan beliefs, or simple social development of mobile societies (Denton, 2014; Singh, 2013). The overall arrangement of exhibitions presented to visitors may imply a historical trajectory of culture change or evolution, leading from ‘traditional’ to ‘modern industrial’ cultural forms, as exemplified in the arrangement of early anthropological displays in the USA (Jenkins, 1994), Soviet Union (Anderson & Arzyutov, 2016; Hirsch, 2003) and China (Varutti, 2014). The idea of such a progression can be reinforced by simulated display contexts, such as dioramas, where domestic dwellings like the pastoralist’s yurt are ‘ossified’ and used as a canvas to represent a timeless, romanticized version of pastoral life that elides contemporary urban realities (Ferret, 2016). Alternatively, some exhibitions have projected a romanticized essentialization of the nomadic lifestyle, framing herders as symbols of unbounded freedom and fierce independence to satisfy the nostalgic yearnings of spectators seeking an antidote to the constraints of modern urban life (Myadar, 2011). Meanwhile, by categorizing herding societies by rigid tribal structures and isolating their material culture from modern technological or political changes, European and North American exhibitions have contributed to sustaining a conceptual boundary that depoliticizes nomadic agency and relegates mobile lifeways to a vanishing past (Conte, 2025; Denton, 2014; Ferret, 2016).

In the Chinese and Mongolian museums explored by the authors in this issue, we see four distinct modes of representation of nomadic Mongolian people and their heritage within public-facing displays. The first of these represents the category of historic buildings in Mongolia – including the Chojin Lama Temple, Bogd Khaan’s Winter Palace, and Erdene Zuu Monastery – which have been converted to museums that display items original to the site *in situ*, alongside works assembled from other sources. Second is the category of vitrine-based exhibits of ethnographic and archaeological artefacts, primarily organized by function and sub-categorized by cultural group, such as traditional clothing displayed on manne-

quins or groups of musical instruments; this is by far the most common form of representation in both local and national museums. Third are dioramas, primarily confined to Chinese ethnography museums, which represent nomadic family scenes framed by symbols of modernity and the Chinese state. Fourth is the category of commemorative spaces, in which the design of the museum itself is used to project political or spiritual narratives – for example, the National Museum of Mongolia uses a central monumental seated statue of Chinggis Khaan, national flags, traditional script, and elevated displays of the *Sulde* (state standard) to visually construct a narrative of continuous national sovereignty. These four modes of representation provide a framework for examining how museum spaces construct, negotiate, or challenge representations of nomadic heritage. In the following sections, I explore how these modes operate in practice, beginning with the origins of historical and ethnographic museums in Mongolia.

Interrogating collection origins

European and North American institutions are in possession of significant Inner Asian ethnographic and archaeological materials, collected primarily between the late nineteenth century and the mid-twentieth century through state-sponsored or privately funded expeditions (American Museum of Natural History, 2012; British Museum, 2020). Marc Aurel Stein, who conducted multiple expeditions to northwest China between 1890 and 1914, amassed thousands of Tibetan and Chinese manuscripts, silk paintings, and textiles from the Dunhuang Library Cave; these were subsequently distributed among the British Museum, the British Library and the Victoria and Albert Museum (British Museum, 2020; IDP, 2010). Concurrently, Swedish geographer Sven Hedin and ethnographer Gösta Montell acquired collections of Buddhist ritual implements, manuscripts and a temple yurt from Inner Mongolia, which are preserved in the Museum of Ethnography in Stockholm and the Jacques Marchais Museum in New York (Elikhina & Demenova, 2020; Foundation, 2015; Linné, 1935). In Austria, Hans Leder collected more than four thousand Buddhist figures, sacred books and domestic belongings between 1892 and 1905, which are now divided among central European institutions including the Weltmuseum Wien and the Néprajzi Múzeum in Budapest (Lang, 2018). Danish expeditions led by Ole Olufsen in the 1890s and Henning Haslund-Christensen in the 1930s collected everyday nomadic equipment, including tent frames, woollen felt carpets, jewellery and costumes, while Halfdan Siiger added household utensils

and wooden ancestor figurines during the 1947 expedition (Johnsen, 2016). In North America, the American Museum of Natural History established its Division of Anthropology in 1873, collecting Siberian artefacts during the 1897–1902 Jesup North Pacific Expedition under Franz Boas, which was later supplemented by Clark Wissler’s collections of Plains herder artefacts and Roy Chapman Andrews’ excavations of Gobi paleontological specimens (American Museum of Natural History, 2012; Lkhagvasuren, 2016).

The collection of Mongolian ethnographic materials at the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of Natural History consists of objects compiled over more than a century by diverse researchers, diplomats and private donors (Smithsonian Institution, n.d.). An early portion of the collection was acquired during the late nineteenth century by the diplomat William Woodville Rockhill, who gathered domestic utensils, textiles and everyday equipment from Eastern Mongolia, including hammered brass tea kettles, wooden pails, woollen blankets and leather boots. Additional early acquisitions include baked clay votive offerings (*tsalsa*) stamped with Buddhist deities like Drolma and Jambyang, collected near Urga in 1900 by Charles W. Barnaby, alongside a seventeenth-century bronze mortuary tablet obtained through an exchange with Kendrick Scofield in 1923. Later donations from the mid-twentieth century, such as those from the estates of John O. La Gorce and Colonel J. E. McCammon in the early 1960s, further expanded the collections with military equipment, arrow cases, composite bows and traditional orange fur felt hats. Modern additions continue to reflect the ongoing contemporary material culture of Mongolia, featuring items such as denim jeans, children’s printed knit shirts, and modern commercial beer coasters collected during late-twentieth-century field research, including items assembled for the exhibition ‘Modern Mongolia: Reclaiming Genghis Khan’ displayed at the Penn Museum and National Museum of Natural History in 2002 (Sabloff, 2002).

In Mongolia, the composition of modern museum collections is directly rooted in twentieth-century political transformations, state confiscations, and systematic ethnographic field campaigns following the People’s Revolution. In November 1921, the People’s Government directed the newly established Institute of Sutras and Scripts to collect historical, cultural, and ethnographic materials from rural provinces (Lkhagvasuren, 2016). This collection campaign was subsequently augmented by state confiscations of aristocratic and monastic property between 1925 and 1930 (Chigsem, 2016; Lang & Tsetsentsolmon, 2020). During this period, the state transferred property belonging to the eighth Bogd Khaan and other high-

ranking figures to the central museum repository (Lkhagvasuren, 2016; Watterson, 2014). For instance, in 1931, the State Confiscation Commission transferred forty properties of the incarnate lama and former prime minister Zalkhanz Khutagt Ch. Damdinbazar to the Museum of Revolution, including silk jackets and Tibetan brocade vests (Chigsem, 2016). Throughout the mid-twentieth century, this central collection was expanded through targeted ethnographic expeditions led by researchers who gathered Oirad, Khalkh, Barga and Dariganga ethnic costumes, which today constitute the majority of the National Museum of Mongolia's clothing collections (Chigsem, 2016). Concurrently, local administrations worked to establish 'local studies cabinets', such as the regional museum founded in Arkhangai Province in 1949, by gathering natural and cultural artefacts from rural residents (Lang, 2018).

Contemporary scholars have traced the shifting ideological functions and representational strategies of these ethnographic and archaeological collections. Under the socialist regime, ethnographic objects were integrated into Soviet-style didactics designed to promote class struggle and state progress, often reinterpreting religious and nomadic items as either artistic masterpieces or tools of historical exploitation (Lang & Tsetsentsolmon, 2020; Lkhagvasuren, 2016; Watterson, 2014). Within Mongolia's National Museum, ethnographic displays emphasized the secular intellectual and aesthetic achievements of the nomadic Mongols. In the 1970s, the museum thus encompassed a series of three ethnography halls displaying national costume and ornaments (including puzzles and games) alongside the three national sports; the history of saddles and other objects representing daily life; and finally Mongolian agriculture. This final hall was structured with the aim to 'clearly prove that from earliest times the Mongols have been farmers as well as cattle-raisers' (Dorjuren, 1971) – suggesting that the Mongols could indeed be classed as a 'civilization' (cf. Bumochir Dulam, this issue).

Maria-Katharina Lang (2018; 2020) has applied the concept of 'museumification' to the establishment of museum collections in Mongolia, illustrating how sacred domestic objects once venerated at the household altar (*keboimor*) in nomadic yurts were confiscated, catalogued and converted into secular museum exhibits, thereby severing the physical and spiritual bonds between believers and their ancestral heritage. Lang cites specific examples of this institutional friction, such as the restriction of authentic ritual worship of the protector deity Gombo Guru at the Erdene Zuu Monastery Museum, and the physical conversion of the Dsaya Gegeen Monastery in Arkhangai Province into a regional studies archive (Lang,

2018). In a similar vein, Sally Watterson (2009, 2014) has critiqued the contemporary role of ethnographic displays in Ulaanbaatar, particularly within the National Museum of Mongolia's Traditional Costume and Jewellery hall. Watterson argues that these displays are utilized to construct a simplified, romanticized narrative of 'true' Mongolian (*jinkhin Mongol*) identity that prioritizes pastoral nomadism and ancient steppe traditions. This representational strategy satisfies the expectations of international tourism and serves state-vouched national cohesion but excludes the modern, sedentary, and urbanized realities of contemporary Mongolian society. Chigsem (2016) likewise observes how the state categorized these costume collections into 'ordinary' and 'uniquely precious' items to demonstrate the technical and stylistic development of nomadic dress from the Kitan and Uighur empires to modern times. Lkhagvasuren (2016) notes the post-socialist structural shift that separated the ethnography, archaeology and 'precious' collections into distinct storage areas to facilitate professional preservation standards.

Ethnographic museums and patriotic dioramas in China

Scholarship on Chinese ethnographic and minority museums has examined how the state utilizes these institutions to construct a unified national identity under the framework of a multi-ethnic state (Denton, 2014; Varutti, 2011; Vickers, 2007). Displays in these museums regularly traditionalize non-Han ethnic groups, portraying their cultures as static, apolitical and inherently bound to the past (Brown & O'Brien, 2020; Varutti, 2011). This representational strategy separates material culture – such as costume, song and dance – from its spiritual and socio-political contexts (Denton, 2014; Varutti, 2011). By framing minority identities around colourful clothing and domestic practices, the displays establish a developmental hierarchy that contrasts minority traditionalism with Han modernity (Brown & O'Brien, 2020; Varutti, 2011; Vickers, 2007). Consequently, critical scholars have argued that Chinese institutions normalize a narrative of dependency, wherein nomadic and other minority populations are depicted as passive beneficiaries of state-led modernization and administrative protection rather than as active agents in their own history (Brown & O'Brien, 2020; Segura & Sekulova, 2024).

Brown & O'Brien (2020) have described how specific display strategies within regional museums demonstrate this tension between traditionalization and state integration. For example, the permanent ethnicity exhibition in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region Museum in Urumqi portrays nomadic groups, including

Kazakhs and Mongolians, using standardized mannequins wearing traditional garments in front of reconstructed yurts. These dioramas exclude any representation of urban settlements or modern livelihoods, presenting a timeless ethnicity that aligns with state-vouched narratives of rural backwardness. In the Hohhot Provincial Museum in Inner Mongolia, a space programme diorama depicts nomadic herders with their livestock and carts leaving the grasslands to make way for space exploration facilities. This diorama simultaneously ‘infantilizes’ the herders as children of the grassland and implies that nomadic lifestyles have no place within modern industrial space. Furthermore, the main entrance mural at the Hohhot museum maps a linear evolutionary trajectory where ancient nomadic practices are relegated to an early historical stage, whereas modern elements, such as wind turbines and high-speed trains, are depicted as entirely devoid of minority herders, reinforcing the conceptual division between ethnic tradition and modern progress.

The Museum and national discourse: Chinggis Khaan

Gerelt Honichud and G. Galsanjamts (this issue) compare the representation of Chinggis Khaan in the National Museum of Mongolia with his depiction at the Chinggis Khaan Mausoleum in Ordos, Inner Mongolia, describing how his image is constructed either to emphasize sovereign statehood and continuity in Mongolia or to promote multi-ethnic unity and state consolidation in China. Their analysis complements Sally Watterson’s (2014) earlier exploration of ‘traditional heroic display’ in the National Museum of Mongolia, which sees the figure of Chinggis Khaan deployed as a primary symbol to construct a unified national identity while marginalizing complex, difficult periods of the past.

Along similar lines, the establishment of the Chinggis Khaan National Museum in Ulaanbaatar has recently emerged as a focal point for scholarly investigations into the intersection of heritage preservation, state-led nationalism, and international relations. Originating from a Mongolian Government resolution on 3 July 2019, under the patronage of President Ukhnaagiin Khurelsukh, the museum was conceived to serve as a world-class research and cultural centre. Construction of the facility began in 2020 and the museum opened to the public on 11 October 2022 (Nasanbayar et al., 2026; Sampildondov et al., 2023). A central purpose of the museum is to preserve and display the history and culture of nomadic states – specifically from the Hunnu, Khitan and Mongol Empire periods – through its collections of approximately 12,000 exhibited objects, ninety-two per cent of

which are original artefacts (Nasanbayar et al., 2026). Pedagogically, the institution aims to provide accurate historical knowledge to local youth, addressing what some scholars observe as a partial loss of traditional cultural memory under rapid urbanization (Sampildondov et al., 2023). The architectural design of the Chinggis Khaan Museum blends contemporary structural methods with traditional nomadic iconography: the building features a dome symbolizing a nomadic yurt, walls decorated with the emblems of ancient tribes, a six-metre golden falcon representing the lineage of Chinggis Khaan on the roof, and symbolic depictions of five great khans on the facade (Sampildondov et al., 2023). This architectural integration of nomadic symbols into Ulaanbaatar's urban core serves to visually anchor modern Mongolian democracy in an ancient, continuous lineage of nomadic statehood spanning from the Xiongnu era to the Mongol Empire (Sampildondov et al., 2023; Szmyt, 2021).

Nasanbayar et al. (2026), applying Sacha Priewe's framework on the international work of museums, has traced how the museum's extensive loan programmes, travelling exhibitions and academic collaborations – such as a high-profile exhibition in Nantes, France – operate as 'museum diplomacy' to ease bilateral tensions and construct a modern, sovereign national brand. The museum functions as an asset in Mongolia's soft power strategy and foreign policy, utilizing museum diplomacy to host foreign heads of state, foster transnational academic collaborations, and sponsor travelling exhibitions. Nasanbayar argues that by positioning itself as a global hub for Mongolian studies and co-hosting events like the International Congress of Mongolists, the museum leverages the historical concept of Pax Mongolica to project a state image centered on administration, religious freedom, and safety throughout the former empire. This state-backed project has further been interpreted as a classical model of decolonization in contemporary museology. As anthropologist Uradyn E. Bulag has suggested, the museum represents a counter-narrative to Western encyclopedic institutions because its massive collection was built without a single plundered or looted artefact from foreign territories, demonstrating a clean break from colonial-era acquisition practices (Sundev, 2025).

This sovereign and decolonial framing stands in sharp contrast to the scholarly discourse surrounding the Chinggis Khaan Museum and Mausoleum in Ordos, Inner Mongolia, within the People's Republic of China. Scholars analysing the Ordos institution have described it as a site of state-directed 'museumification' and 'sinicization through historicization', where the Chinese state strategically co-

opts the figure of Chinggis Khaan to legitimize its own multi-ethnic state-building project (Denton, 2014; Segura & Sekulova, 2024; Vickers, 2007). In this context, the state narrative attempts to strip the Mongol leader of his distinct geopolitical and political autonomy, reframing him as a ‘Chinese’ historical figure who unified the grassland civilization under the umbrella of Chinese dynastic history (Segura & Sekulova, 2024; Vickers, 2007). The museum thus functions as a mechanism of depoliticization and cultural containment – where authentic nomadic practices are relegated to a sanitized ‘essential pastness’ or marketed as exotic commodities for Han Chinese tourism – while nevertheless provoking local resistance and counter-narratives that contest the state’s historical reconstruction project (Denton, 2014; Segura & Sekulova, 2024). The scholarly literature reveals a profound geographic and ideological division: while the Ulaanbaatar museum is framed as an assertion of post-socialist sovereignty, decolonization and national self-determination, the Ordos museum is critiqued as an instrument of minority assimilation, territorial claim and imperial integration.

Meaning and contexts in the local museum

Whereas major national and international institutions frequently organize nomadic collections around sweeping historical epochs or broad cultural typologies, provincial and community-level museums offer an alternative, micro-historical lens focused on localized ecological adaptation and domestic material culture. Odmaa Mendbayar (this issue) traces the institutional development of the Central Museum of Khövsgöl Province and presents an ethnographic study of the Darkhad wooden cradle (*bööv*). Characterized by its rectangular railing, willow branch arch frame (*tsamkha*), and organic component materials, the *bööv* represents a specialized solution to mobile infant care tailored to the sub-Arctic taiga-steppe transition zone of northern Mongolia. When contrasted with broader North Asian ethnographic materials, such as the material culture and ritual systems analysed across the neighbouring borderlands of Southern Siberia, the *bööv* displays notable functional and protective parallels, particularly in its suspension mechanisms and the integration of localized guardian charms (*khüükhdiin sakbil*) designed to safeguard the infant’s spiritual well-being (Hoppál, 2003).

The cradle in the Khövsgöl Museum provides a useful example of how an object in a small, local museum can generate meanings in much wider comparative contexts. This particular cradle figures, along with others, in an ethno-historical

study of traditional Mongolian cradles by Erdenechuluun (2026). Drawing on twentieth-century ethnographic fieldwork, national heritage surveys, and oral histories collected across Mongolia's five geographic regions, Erdenechuluun highlights two distinct types of knowledge related to cradles: the technical knowledge regarding material selection and ecological adaptation, and the 'cosmological knowledge' embedded in ritual practices and taboos associated with the cradle's construction and use. Technical knowledge encompasses regional construction methods, such as the hollow-log, woven and framed cradle types, alongside practical innovations like the willow wood spout system designed to maintain dryness. Cosmological knowledge, meanwhile, encompasses associations of the cradle's structural components as a microcosm of the yurt and the wider universe – where the canopy represents the roof ring, the body and bands represent the walls, and the pegs represent the door – positioning the child within a culturally structured space safeguarded by protective amulets and fire rituals. This attention to cultural meaning evokes the recent scholarship on *tikinaagans* – a type of cradle used by Indigenous people in North America – that are currently housed in museums around the world, inviting us to think about the affective meanings, connection to ancestral knowledge, and relational contexts of cradles as objects involved in child care (Krpmotich & Somerville, 2016; MacNeil et al., 2020; Nahwegahbow, 2017).

Conclusion: Reframing Nomadic Heritage

The contributions to this special issue demonstrate that museums can be seen as active arenas where the meanings of 'nomadic heritage' are continuously negotiated, contested and reframed. Across national, regional and international institutions, representations of nomadic peoples have long been shaped by evolutionary taxonomies, colonial exoticization and state-sanctioned historical narratives. In national contexts such as Ulaanbaatar and Ordos, or in the ethnographic galleries of European and Chinese museums, nomadic heritage has frequently been mobilized to serve overarching political projects – whether asserting post-socialist sovereignty, projecting state-led multi-ethnic unity or contrasting minority traditionalism with urban modernity.

At the same time, the research and reports presented here highlight emerging counter-narratives and museological alternatives. By interrogating the historical provenance of collections – tracing objects through monastic confiscations, state-directed field campaigns and international expeditions – scholars expose the ideo-

logical frameworks that converted sacred domestic belongings into secular exhibits. Crucially, as shown in community-oriented studies of regional museums and micro-historical analyses of domestic material culture such as the Darkhad cradle (*böör*), local museums provide critical spaces for preserving micro-regional adaptations and living cultural practices. As promised by the recommendations from Randisi (this issue), future museum scholarship and practice must continue to prioritize participatory interpretation, collaborative community engagement, and decolonial frameworks that recognize nomadic herders not as relics of a vanishing past, but as active participants in contemporary society.

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