



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Constructing and representing Chinggis Khaan in the museum contexts of Mongolia and China

Gerelt Honichud, International Institute for the Study of Nomadic Civilizations under the Auspices of UNESCO & G. Galsanjamts, Mongolian State University of Education

This article examines the construction and representation of Chinggis Khaan in museum contexts in Mongolia and China from an anthropological perspective. Museums are approached not merely as spaces for preserving historical artifacts but as dynamic institutions where memory politics, national imagination, and the intersection of culture and state power shape collective understandings of the past. In Mongolia, exhibitions at the National Museum of Mongolia present Chinggis Khaan as a national hero and a symbol of political legitimacy and unity, emphasizing continuity in national history. In contrast, the Chinggis Khaan Mausoleum in Ordos, Inner Mongolia, functions as a multi-scalar space, highlighting both the Chinese state's narrative of ethnic unity and the local Mongolian community's cul-

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.32.41>

tural heritage. The study demonstrates that the museum representation of Chinggis Khaan does not simply preserve historical memory but actively mediates contemporary political authority, cultural identity, and collective memory, revealing the museum as a powerful instrument in shaping national and regional consciousness.

In contemporary nation-states, museums are not merely spaces for preserving historical artifacts; they have evolved into institutions that organize cultural memory and reinterpret the past through ideological frameworks. From an anthropological perspective, museums can be understood as spaces that ‘manage negative forms of forgetting and reconstruct memory at an institutional level’ (Anderson, 1991; Bennett, 1995). Within these spaces, the ‘hero’ of a nation is not simply a historical figure but rather a symbol of national identity situated at the intersection of political and cultural imagination, serving as a nodal point for how a nation envisions itself. The practice of constructing a ‘national hero’ in museums emerges at the intersection of cultural contestation, state ideology, scholarly knowledge, and collective memory. Anthropologists describe this process as ‘memory politics’ (Gillis, 1994; Verdery, 1999). In other words, the representation of heroes in museums goes beyond simple interpretation of historical events; it also functions as a tool for asserting political authority and reinforcing cultural cohesion in contemporary society.

Consequently, the ways in which a ‘national hero’ is constructed and displayed within museum spaces reflect a nation’s imagination of itself, its organization of political power, and the structure of its cultural memory. For example, the representation of Chinggis Khaan in museums in China and Mongolia, while recounting the life of the same historical figure, expresses distinct national imaginaries. In China, he is often portrayed as a symbol of state unity, whereas in Mongolia, he is portrayed as a symbol of national origin and sovereignty. This article examines these dynamics, drawing on fieldwork conducted since 2014 in both China and Mongolia.

The Chinggis Khaan Mausoleum in Ordos: Representation of Chinggis Khaan

In China, and particularly across the memorial complexes in cities and prefectures of Inner Mongolia, representations of Chinggis Khaan are closely intertwined with

state ideology and national integration policies. Over the past decade, these representations have become a significant focus of anthropological research. Scholars have emphasized how Chinggis Khaan is incorporated into the notion of a ‘multi-ethnic unified state’ (*duo minzu yiti guojia*, 多民族一体国家) and recast as a ‘hero of national unity’. In her fieldwork in Hohhot and Ordos, Inner Mongolia, Ujeed (2018) observed that museums and memorial complexes depict Chinggis Khaan as a ‘great historical hero of China’, framing the Mongols as an integral part of the Chinese multi-ethnic nation. Simultaneously, however, local Mongol staff and interpreters often refer to him as ‘our Khan’, providing interpretations grounded in local ethnic perspectives. This interplay creates a museum space characterized by the intersection of politics and multiple cultural voices (Ujeed, 2018). Christopher Atwood (2004) analyzes the transformation of Chinggis Khaan’s image in Chinese historiography, demonstrating that from the 1950s to the 1970s, he was depicted in museums and textbooks as a foreign invader, while from the 1980s onward, he was increasingly represented as a heroic leader supporting Chinese unity. This shift reflects an ideological transition from socialist historical narratives to a discourse emphasizing state consolidation and unity. Beth Notar (2006) examines the use of Chinggis Khaan’s name and image in cultural tourism production, noting that sites such as the Ordos Chinggis Khaan Mausoleum and the ‘Chinggis Khaan Trail’ present him as a symbol of national unity and a connector across cultures – an example of cultural commodification. Similarly, Emily T. Yeh (2013) highlights that in China’s minority regions, representing Chinggis Khaan as part of China’s shared cultural heritage functions as a key element of state-building ideology.

Our ethnographic research conducted at the Ordos Mausoleum indicates that visitor engagement, local community participation, museum management, and cultural activities intersect in a field where memory, authority and cultural production are continuously negotiated. Visitor engagement is not limited to passive observation; visitors actively participate through ritualized behaviors such as lighting incense, offering prayers in the main hall, and engaging with multimedia displays that reconstruct narratives of Chinggis Khaan’s life. In some cases, visitors also follow guided storytelling sessions, where they are encouraged to interpret historical events through both official exhibitions and oral explanations provided by guides.



Figure 1. Ordos Mausoleum, Inner Mongolia, China. The Ordos Mausoleum presents Genghis Khaan within a sacralized and pan-Mongolian commemorative context. Its architectural design incorporates traditional Mongolian forms, colours and symbolic motifs, while the ceremonial space emphasizes reverence, ritual practice, and spiritual continuity. The site functions as a place of pilgrimage and cultural diplomacy, highlighting shared Mongolian heritage across political borders.

Local community participation is particularly evident in the role of Inner Mongolian staff and cultural interpreters, who often embed ethnic perspectives into their explanations. While official exhibition texts tend to frame Chinggis Khaan within a broader narrative of multi-ethnic state formation and historical unity, local interpreters frequently emphasize kinship ties, ancestral reverence, and the sacred dimension of Chinggis Khaan as a spiritual and cultural progenitor. This produces what can be described as a form of ‘anthropological negotiation’, where meaning is co-produced rather than fixed.

Museum management operates through a dual logic: on one hand, it maintains standardized state-sanctioned historical narratives and regulated exhibition texts; on the other, it promotes a heritage economy oriented towards tourism, spectacle and affective experience. This results in a curated environment where political his-

tory and cultural consumption are carefully balanced but not always fully harmonized. Cultural activities further extend this dynamic through ritual reenactments, commemorative performances, and staged ceremonies that reproduce forms of Mongolian cultural heritage within a controlled institutional setting. These activities transform historical memory into a performative and experiential medium. Importantly, instances of tension between local and state narratives do occur, although they are often subtle rather than openly confrontational. While exhibition panels may emphasize Chinggis Khaan as a figure of historical unification within a multi-ethnic empire, local guides may foreground genealogical continuity and sacred legitimacy rooted in Mongolian tradition. Rather than explicit contradiction, this results in parallel interpretive registers that coexist within the same institutional space.

Visitor responses to these dual narratives are varied. Some visitors privilege the official textual narrative as authoritative, while others find the local interpretive layer more culturally 'authentic' and emotionally resonant. Many visitors, however, navigate both registers simultaneously, treating the coexistence of multiple interpretations not as inconsistency, but as part of the richness of the museum experience. Thus, the depiction of Chinggis Khaan in Chinese museums extends beyond the representation of a historical hero; it is a cultural artifact reconstructed within ideological spaces as a symbol of multi-ethnic unity. At the same time, local Mongols continue to regard him as a symbol of their distinct heritage and sovereignty, demonstrating that museums function not only as exhibition spaces but also as arenas for anthropological negotiation between state narratives and local cultural voices. As previously mentioned, the Ordos Chinggis Khaan Mausoleum serves not only as a historical memorial but also as a multi-scalar anthropological and cultural space. The complex is designed to present Chinggis Khaan both as a hero of China's ethnic unity and as a symbol of Mongolian cultural heritage and pride (Ujeed, 2018). Exhibitions, sculptures, ceremonial grounds, and tourism routes work together to construct multi-layered interpretations of his persona.

From an anthropological perspective, the Mausoleum exemplifies practices of memory politics (Verdery, 1999), whereby the representation of Chinggis Khaan preserves historical narratives while simultaneously legitimizing contemporary political authority through cultural symbolism. Official ceremonies and tourism events held at the site illustrate how Chinggis Khaan is recreated not only as a historical hero but as a symbol of political unity. Furthermore, the Mausoleum embodies a multi-centered anthropological space. Local Mongolian oral traditions,

cultural pride, and community voices are embedded within museum exhibits, interpretive materials, and sculptures, creating a space that expresses both state narratives and local cultural memory. This multi-layered character allows visitors to engage simultaneously with the historical hero and the cultural landscape of the region, reinforcing both national pride and local cohesion (Atwood, 2004; Notar, 2006). Visitors do not merely internalize historical narratives; they actively experience the hero and the symbolic unity of the people through ceremonial and participatory practices. In sum, the Ordos Chinggis Khaan Mausoleum is a museum artifact that illustrates the dynamic interplay between historical heroism and cultural symbolism. It simultaneously reflects museum practices, memory politics, and the integration of local culture, while also serving as an institutional mechanism that aligns the Chinese state's narrative of multi-ethnic unity with the rich cultural heritage of the local Mongol population.

The Representation of Chinggis Khaan in Mongolian Museums: An Anthropological Space of National History

In Mongolia, the depiction and interpretation of Chinggis Khaan in museums and memorial sites markedly differ from those in China. Within the context of a sovereign state, Chinggis Khaan is presented as a central figure of national history and a source of state legitimacy, reconstructed not only as a symbol of political authority but also as a cultural emblem of internal cohesion. In Mongolian state ideology and historical discourse, Chinggis Khaan embodies the political and cultural origins of the nation and serves as the historical progenitor of modern Mongolia's national continuity (Baasanjav, 2019; Kaplonski, 2004). Consequently, museum exhibitions, visual representations, and spatial organization reflect historically grounded, state-oriented narratives of national authority. For example, at the National Museum of Mongolia in Ulaanbaatar and the 'Chinggis Khaan Kheree' complex near Erdenesant, Töv Province, Chinggis Khaan is portrayed as a unifier of the people and a foundational source of national revival (Munkh-Erdene, 2011). The layout of exhibition halls is often themed around state formation, linking Chinggis Khaan to the continuity of Mongolian state traditions.



Figure 2. Hall of Chinggis Khaan at the National Museum of Mongolia, Ulaanbaatar. The monumental seated statue of Chinggis Khaan serves as the centrepiece. Framed by Mongolian script, traditional decorative motifs, and national flags, the setting constructs a narrative of state-

hood, historical continuity, and national identity. The monumental scale and modern museum architecture elevate Chinggis Khaan as a foundational symbol of the Mongolian nation.

From an anthropological perspective, the representation of Chinggis Khaan in Mongolian museums creates a mythic space of national statehood (Kaplonski, 2004). Within this space, historical documents, archeological artifacts, oral traditions, and state symbols are conceptually integrated but also spatially organized through curatorial design. In institutions such as the National Museum of Mongolia and the Chinggis Khaan Museum in Ulaanbaatar, Bronze Age artifacts and imperial-era objects are arranged in a chronological yet politically oriented sequence that emphasizes continuity between early nomadic polities and the modern nation-state. The placement of the *Sulde* (the imperial standard) in elevated or centrally positioned display areas functions as a visual anchor of sovereignty, symbolically linking military power with sacred authority. Similarly, the organization of the ‘Statehood’ hall constructs a linear spatial narrative in which visitors move through successive stages of Mongolian political history, from early khanates to the formation of the Mongol Empire and its contemporary national reinterpretation. Oral traditions are incorporated through multimedia installations and interpretive panels, translating intangible heritage into an institutionalized historical narrative and stabilizing oral memory within a state-curated framework.

Assessed in visual semiotic terms, these spatial arrangements encode ideological meaning through exhibition architecture, object hierarchy, and visitor movement. The elevation of key symbols such as the *Sulde*, the centralized positioning of imperial imagery, and the hierarchical sequencing of historical periods collectively produce a visual grammar of statehood, in which political authority is naturalized through spatial experience rather than explicit textual explanations. Exhibitions and interpretive texts frequently depict Chinggis Khaan as a symbol of courage, unity and statecraft, embedding discourses of national pride and political trust. The integration of his image with state emblems, currency and ceremonial events transforms museums into arenas fostering national psychological cohesion and collective identification with the state (Baasanjav, 2019).

Alongside this official representation, local museums and cultural centres often reinterpret Chinggis Khaan at the level of provincial, clan, or community pride, producing multi-centered historical spaces (Kaplonski, 2004; Sneath, 2010). Therefore, in Mongolian museums, Chinggis Khaan simultaneously functions as a state-

sanctioned central figure of national history and as a living embodiment of local cultural voices, reflecting both official narratives and community-level interpretations. In this sense, the representation of Chinggis Khaan in Mongolian museums constitutes a multi-layered ethnographic space. Compared with Chinese museums, where his image is more strongly embedded in narratives of multi-ethnic unity and state consolidation, Mongolian museums emphasize sovereignty, historical continuity, and cultural intimacy with the national past. This contrast illustrates how museum spaces produce divergent political and cultural constructions of the same historical figure – one oriented towards multi-ethnic state integration, and the other towards national sovereignty and cultural heritage.

Similarly to the Chinese case, where representations of Chinggis Khaan shifted from a ‘foreign invader’ in the 1950s to a ‘unifying national hero’ from the 1980s onward, the Mongolian trajectory after 1990 influenced shifts in the interpretive framework. Following the collapse of the socialist system, Mongolian museums and state cultural institutions underwent a significant reconfiguration of historical narratives, increasingly repositioning Chinggis Khaan as the foundational figure of national sovereignty, cultural revival, and historical continuity. This post-socialist shift involved not only a reinterpretation of historical discourse but also the reorganization of museum practices, exhibition themes, and heritage policies in ways that foregrounded pre-socialist imperial history and national identity formation.

In this context, the development of the new Chinggis Khaan Museum in Ulaanbaatar represents a particularly important institutional milestone. Established as a flagship national museum, it consolidates archeological artifacts, historical documents, and curated visual materials into a unified narrative framework centered on the Mongol Empire and its legacy. Its exhibition design emphasizes a chronological and thematic reconstruction of Mongolian statehood, positioning Chinggis Khaan as both a historical actor and a symbol of enduring national identity. The museum thus reflects the broader post-1990 transformation of Mongolian historiography and heritage production, in which the figure of Chinggis Khaan has become central to the articulation of sovereignty, cultural pride, and national historical continuity.

Conclusion

The practice of constructing and exhibiting the figure of Chinggis Khaan in Chinese and Mongolian museum contexts, while representing the same historical in-

dividual, operates within two distinct cultural, political and anthropological spaces. This process of representation transforms museums from mere repositories of historical artifacts into dynamic spaces of memory politics, where national imagination, cultural production, and political power intersect.

In Chinese museums, Chinggis Khaan is predominantly constructed in accordance with the ideology of a 'hero of multi-ethnic unity' and as part of the cultural heritage of all Chinese peoples (Atwood, 2004; Notar, 2006; Ujeed, 2018). Museum displays, interpretive texts, paintings, sculptures and tourism products collectively depict him as a symbol of national unity, reinforcing the cohesion of China's multi-ethnic state. This representation functions not only to preserve a heroic historical figure but also to legitimize contemporary political authority through cultural symbols and commemorative practices (Yeh, 2013). At the same time, the continued local reinterpretation of Chinggis Khaan by Mongolian staff and interpreters, who often refer to him as 'our lord', demonstrates that these museums are multivocal spaces, not solely instruments of state ideology. In contrast, in Mongolian museum contexts, the construction of Chinggis Khaan focuses on national ideology, historical heritage, and pride in sovereignty. He is portrayed as a national hero, the foundational figure of state tradition, and a symbol of the unity of the people. Exhibition design, spatial organization, and curatorial structure serve to reinforce historical narratives of statehood, cultural heritage, and national memory (Baasanjav, 2019; Kaplonski, 2004; Munkh-Erdene, 2011). Furthermore, in local museums and cultural centres, Chinggis Khaan is represented at the level of provincial, clan and community pride, expanding the museum into a living cultural and communal memory space (Sneath, 2010).

From an anthropological perspective, these two contexts reveal how museums construct heroic figures through a dynamic synthesis of intersecting factors. Museums embed political ideology into their exhibitions, displays, and memorial structures to foster state unity and reinforce national pride. Simultaneously, they draw upon cultural memory by curating historical heroes and commemorative artifacts that reflect and shape collective consciousness. This process is further enriched by incorporating local and national multi-centred histories, which integrate oral traditions, regional pride, and diverse cultural voices alongside conventional narratives. Finally, these representations are grounded in scholarly knowledge and expertise, synthesizing multidisciplinary insights from archaeology, history, anthropology, and museology to validate and contextualize the heroic narrative.

Thus, the figure of Chinggis Khaan in museums functions not merely as a record of historical events but as a powerful institutional creation that shapes contemporary social and political imagination. The contrasts between Chinese and Mongolian museums illustrate differences not only in display and interpretation but also in the structure of state authority, national memory, public perception of heroic figures, and the creation of multi-centered anthropological spaces. Ultimately, constructing the figure of Chinggis Khaan in museum contexts represents a complex process at the intersection of historical narrative, political ideology, cultural practice, oral tradition, and collective memory. This process animates the national hero, securing his place in the cultural and political imagination of the people while reflecting the dynamic interplay of state ideology, symbolic heritage, contested meanings, and multi-centered representation across Mongolia and China.

References

- Anderson, B. (1991). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (Rev. ed.). Verso.
- Atwood, C. P. (2004). Chinggis Khaan ba Khyatadyn dursamjiin uls tor. In M. Rossabi (Ed.), *Genghis Khaan ba Mongolyn ezent guren* (pp. 243–256). Oxford University Press.
- Baasanjav, U. (2019). *Mongolyn undesnii bakharkhal ba Chinggis Khaany duriin uls toriin khelberjilt*. Institute of History; Archaeology, Mongolian Academy of Sciences.
- Bennett, T. (1995). *The birth of the museum: History, theory, politics*. Routledge.
- Gillis, J. R. (Ed.). (1994). *Commemorations: The politics of national identity*. Princeton University Press.
- Kaplonski, C. (2004). *Truth, history and politics in Mongolia: The memory of heroes*. RoutledgeCurzon.
- Munkh-Erdene, L. (2011). *Toriin ulamjal ba undestnii orshikhuin uzel Mongold*. Admon.
- Notar, B. (2006). *Khusel temuulliin shiljit: Ayalal ba ortsin uyin Khyatadyn niitiin sool*. University of Hawaii Press.
- Sneath, D. (2010). Political mobilization and the construction of collective identity in Mongolia. *Central Asian Survey*, 29(3), 251–267.
- Ujeed, U. (2018). *Chinggis Khaany durslel: Ov soolyn uildverlel ba Ovor Mongol dakh ugsaatny uls tor* [PhD thesis]. University of Washington.

- Verdery, K. (1999). *The political lives of dead bodies: Reburial and postsocialist change*. Columbia University Press.
- Yeh, E. T. (2013). Khyatadyn undestnii khiliin bus dakh kharyaallyn uls tor. In T. S. Mullaney, J. B. Leibold, S. Gros, & E. T. Yeh (Eds.), *Khan undestniig shineer buteesn ni: Khyatadyn ugfaatny sudlalyn shuumjlel* (pp. 294–314). University of California Press.