



REPORT

The Collections of the Central Museum of Khövsgöl Province and a case study of the Darkhad wooden cradle

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This report outlines the institutional history, collection policies, and diverse holdings of the Central Museum of Khövsgöl Province. Established in 1949 as a school-based cabinet, the museum has grown to preserve over 4,000 archaeological, historical, and ethnographic objects. Highlighting unique items from the Neolithic period to the modern era, the article culminates in a detailed ethnographic case study of the traditional wooden cradle, or bööv, used by the Darkhad people of northern Mongolia.

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Introduction

This article has two primary goals: first, to outline the historical background, institutional development, and diverse collections of the Central Museum of Khövsgöl Province; and second, to present a detailed ethnographic case study of a specific object within its holdings – the traditional wooden cradle, or *bööv*, of the Darkhad people.

The first section provides a comprehensive overview of the museum's history since its inception in 1949, highlighting its collection statistics, educational programs, and selected exhibits spanning from the Neolithic era to the late nineteenth century. The second section examines the material culture of child-rearing in northern Mongolia, focusing on the construction, measurements, and symbolic significance of the Darkhad wooden cradle. By comparing this object with infant care items from other regional ethnic groups – such as the Ööld, Bayad, Dörvöd, and Tsaatan – this study illustrates how nomadic lifestyles and extreme climates shaped the design and preservation of childcare objects. Together, these sections underscore the vital role of regional museums in documenting and promoting both the material and intangible cultural heritage of Mongolia's diverse ethnic populations.

The Central Museum of Khövsgöl Province: History and Collections

The Central Museum of Khövsgöl Province was established in 1949 by a resolution of the Sixth Conference of the Provincial Party Committee. It began as a modest 'Local Studies Cabinet' housed in the teachers' room of Buren soum Primary School, initially containing around 18 exhibits. In 1953, it was formally renamed the 'Local Studies Cabinet', and on 5 October 1967, it expanded and reorganized into the 'Local Studies Museum' by order of the Minister of Culture of the Mongolian People's Republic. From 1987 to 1993, a zoological section operated alongside the institution under the name 'Museum-Zoo'. Between 1994 and 2021, it functioned as the 'Khövsgöl Province Local Studies Museum' before receiving its current name, the 'Central Museum of Khövsgöl Province', in 2022 by resolution of the Citizens' Representative Assembly.

Since its founding, the museum has been dedicated to the documentation, collection, preservation, study, promotion, and public education of the region's his-

torical, cultural, and natural heritage. Today, it houses over 4,000 objects covering regional history, ethnography, religion, archaeology, art, and natural heritage. With a dedicated staff of 14, it stands as a leading institution in Khövsgöl's cultural sector.

Approximately 40 percent of the total collection is displayed across three permanent exhibition halls. Guided by a consistent collection policy, the museum has enriched its holdings over the decades through targeted collection campaigns targeting local communities, institutions, and private individuals. In its early years, a designated 'Museum Activist' led efforts to acquire ancient books, scriptures, genealogical records (such as *Names That Have Passed Through the Mongolian Nobility*), traditional ethnic clothing, household tools, rare geological rock samples, and various historical and artistic objects. These items were initially displayed in the Buren soum Primary School teachers' room, accompanied by guided public explanations.

Currently, the Central Museum preserves 3,764 individual items across 1,910 entries, encompassing 4,476 total components within complete sets of exhibits ranging from antiquity to the modern era. In alignment with its mission and curatorial concept, the museum continues to expand its holdings with artifacts that embody the unique history, culture, and natural heritage of the Khövsgöl region.

The majority of the collection consists of items related to ethnography, history, religion, and the arts, forming the core of its exhibition themes. The charts below (figs. 1–2) illustrate the diversity of these collections, including the distribution of ethnographic artifacts across various ethnic groups.

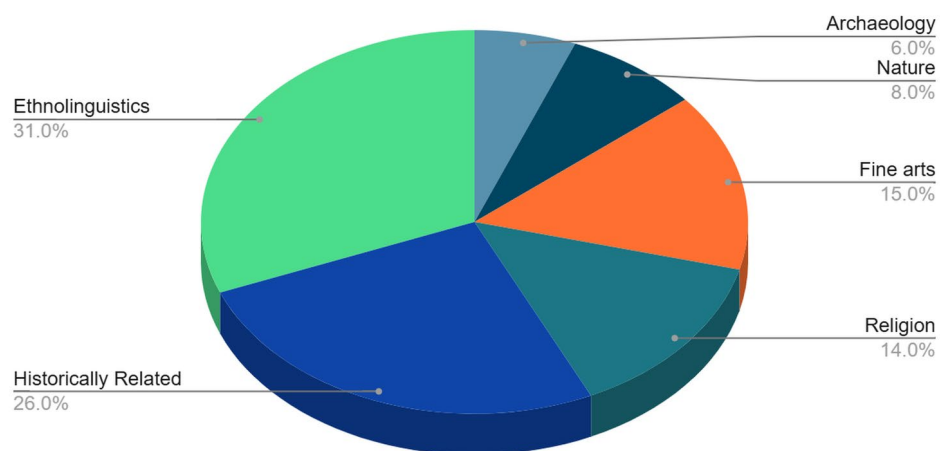


Figure 1. Distribution of museum collections by category

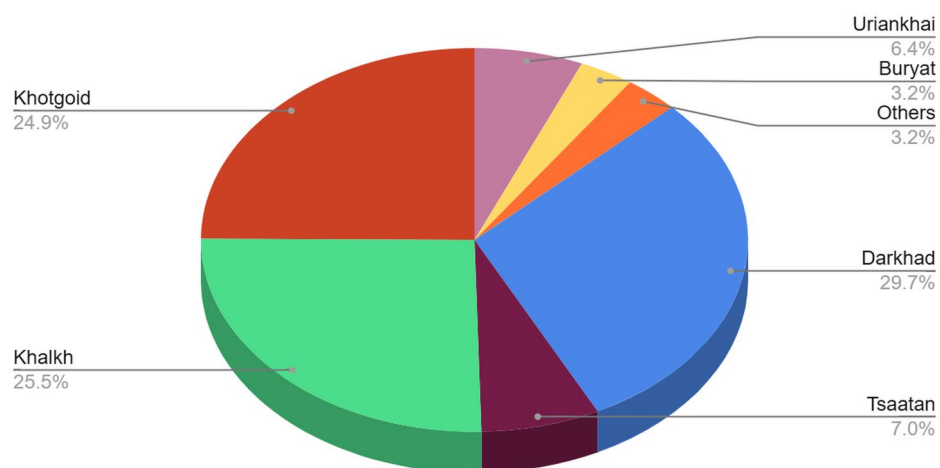


Figure 2. Distribution of ethnographic artifacts by ethnic group

Additionally, the museum manages the Cultural Heritage Registry and Information Database of Khövsgöl Province; the related numerical data can be viewed in Figure 3.

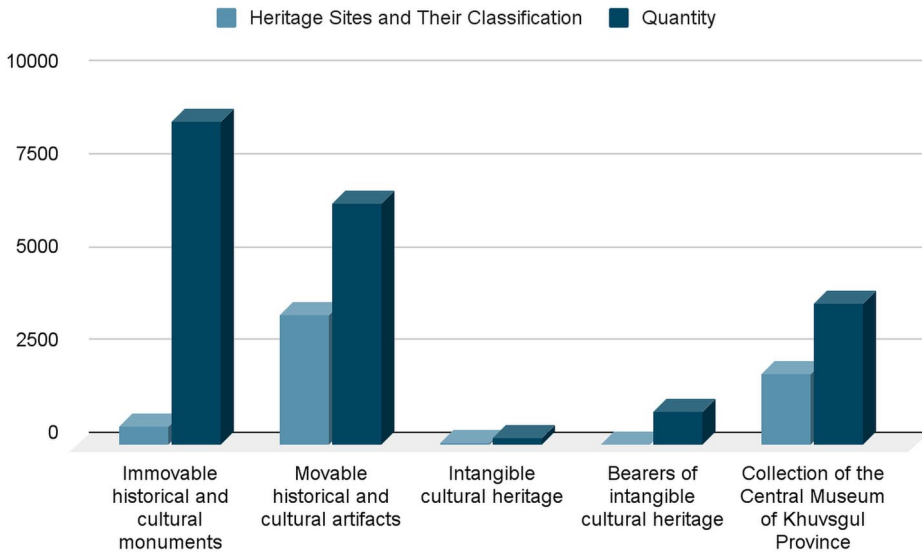


Figure 3. Cultural heritage registry data of Khövsgöl Province

The museum’s educational programs are tailored to a wide range of audiences, including preschool children, primary, secondary, and high school students, adults, seniors, foreign visitors, people with special needs, families, and university students. Offered in both in-person and outreach formats, these programs are designed to align with participants’ ages, cognitive development, and educational backgrounds.

What sets these programs apart is their integration of scientific and cognitive learning based directly on museum exhibits. They focus on raising awareness of cultural heritage and intangible values, promoting child protection within the cultural sector, and supporting universal cultural education and enlightenment. The annual average numbers of visitors, educational program participants, temporary exhibitions, and new acquisitions for the years 2023–2024 are presented below:

Collection Enrichment

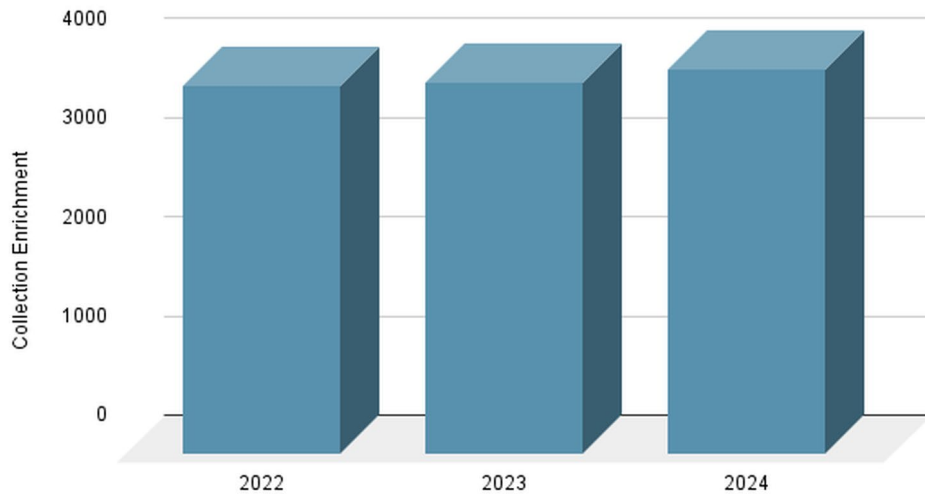


Figure 4. Average annual visitor statistics (2023–2024)

Educational program

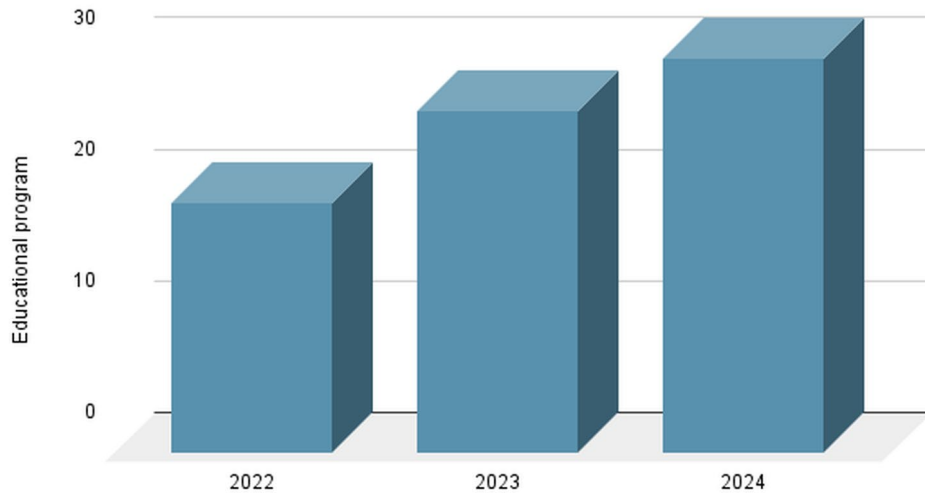


Figure 5. Annual educational program participation (2023–2024)

Exhibition figures

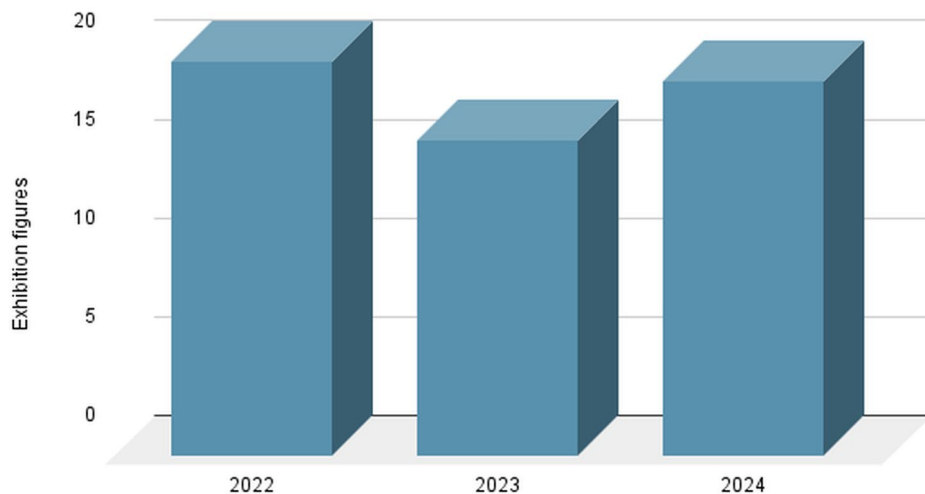


Figure 6. Temporary and travelling exhibition numbers (2023–2024)

Customer statistics

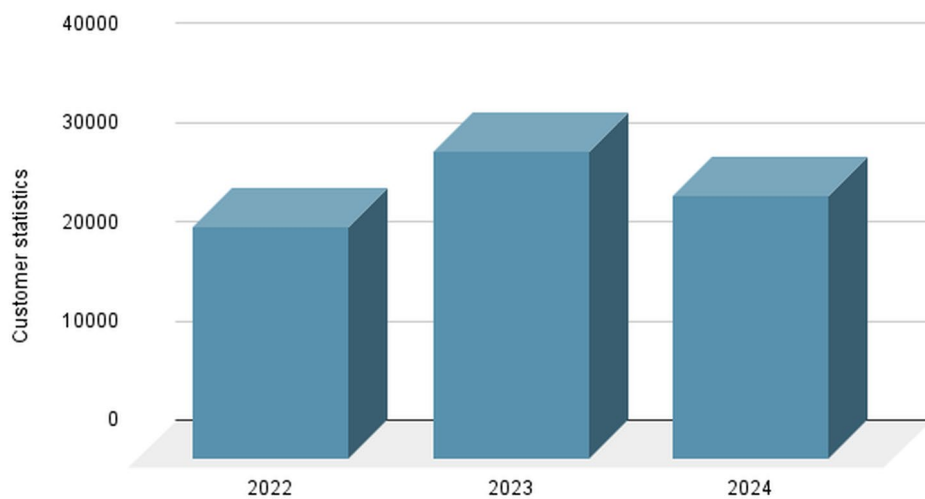


Figure 7. New exhibit acquisitions (2023–2024)

Featured Exhibits

Among the treasured collections of the Central Museum of Khövsgöl Province are several outstanding artifacts of profound historical and cultural significance. These include military flintlock rifles and swords from the era of Khotogoid Shadar Van B. Chingunjav, a leader in the national independence movement; ancient stone and bronze tools; ethnographic items; religious and shamanic objects; and valuable relics once belonging to Jalkhanz Khutagt Ch. Damdinbazar, a high Buddhist incarnation, such as a prayer wheel adorned with nine jewels, dharma symbols, and intricate wood carvings.

Also featured are rare ancient scriptures, a large collection of sacred texts, traditional writing instruments, ornaments and garments worn by Khalkh and Khotogoid women (including headpieces and *deels*), everyday utensils used by the Darkhad and Tsaatan ethnic groups, and the remains of a mammoth, including a tusk tip and molar teeth.



Figure 8. Polished green jade stone axe

This polished green jade stone axe represents a remarkable example of early craftsmanship. One side of the axe is meticulously ground and polished, while the

other remains slightly concave with visible tool marks and scratches. The smooth surface and bevelled side edges reflect the technological innovation of the Neolithic era, when polishing and grinding stone tools became standard practice in weapon making.

- **Material:** Natural green jade
- **Period:** Neolithic Era (8000–3000 BCE)
- **Source location:** Elsteiin Am, Burentogtokh, Khövsgöl Province
- **Dimensions:** Length: 13 cm, Width: 5 cm



Figure 9. Stone ladle

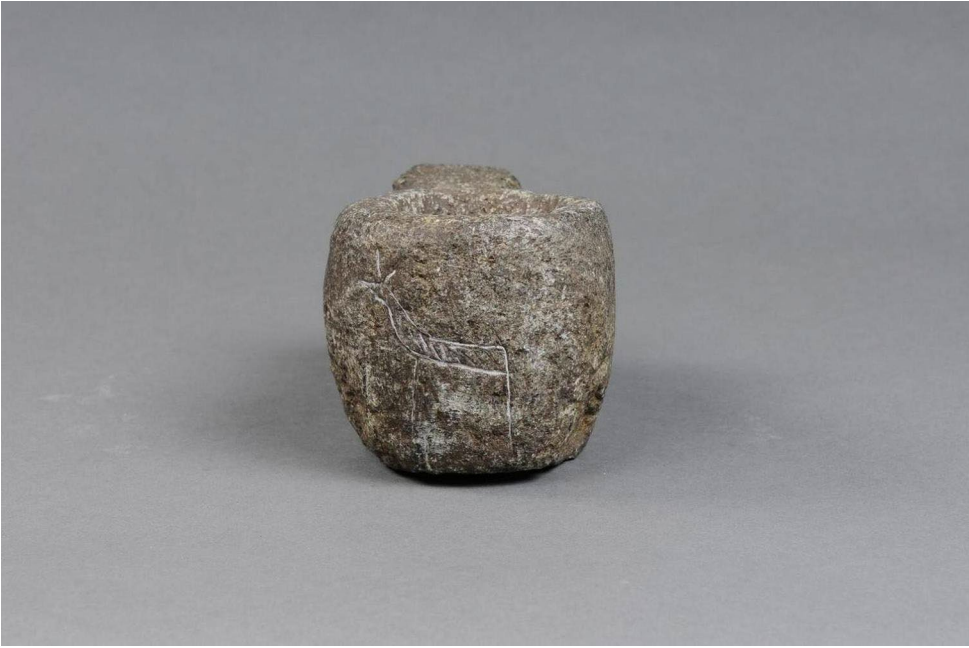


Figure 10. Alternate view of stone ladle

This ladle is carved from soft grey stone, deeply hollowed in the centre, and features an integrated handle. The vessel has a flat base and thick walls, carefully polished to smooth out surface irregularities. A small depression is carved into the handle, likely to improve grip. The rim is plain and undecorated, but an animal figure scratched with a sharp object is visible on the side. Minor signs of wear are evident on the surface, indicating regular historical usage.

- **Date:** Undated
- **Source location:** Shine-Ider soum, Khövsgöl Province
- **Material:** Stone
- **Dimensions:** Length: 18 cm, Height: 11 cm, Rim Diameter: 7 cm



Figure 11. Bronze sickle featuring a reclining deer design

This beautifully crafted bronze ornament depicts a reclining deer. The smaller branches of the antlers curve forward, while the main antlers follow the contour of the deer's back in a decorative flourish. The rump is detailed with fine parallel lines, and the hind legs are tucked under the forelegs in a natural resting posture. A loop or hook on the back suggests it was once affixed to another object, possibly for decorative or ritual purposes.

- **Date:** Early Iron Age (7th–3rd century BCE)
- **Source location:** Khankh soum, Khövsgöl Province
- **Material:** Bronze
- **Dimensions:** Length: 6.5 cm, Width: 4 cm

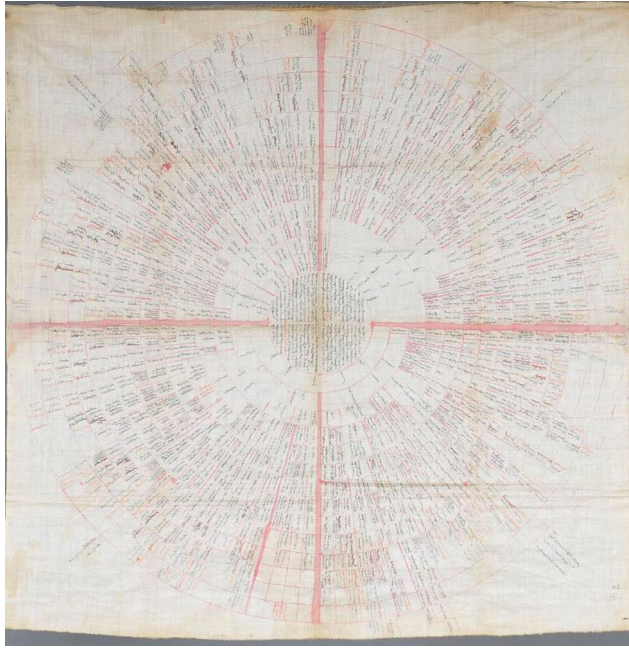


Figure 12. Circular genealogical chart of the royal lineage (1897–1899)

This genealogical chart, rendered in black and red ink on white cloth, features a circular, sunbeam-like layout. The centre traces the royal lineage from Genghis Khan to the seven sons of Gersenze, while the outer ring records the names of provinces and the number of Ööld *khoshuu* (tribal divisions). The succession lines of noble Taij clans and their branches are clearly distinguished using red ink.

The chart includes the names of approximately 900 individuals, noting their titles, ranks, official positions, and clan affiliations before or after each name. This document serves as a rare and comprehensive historical record of aristocratic descent and governance during the late nineteenth century.

- **Date:** 1897–1899
- **Source location:** Buren soum, Khövsgöl Province
- **Material:** Cloth, ink
- **Dimensions:** 71 cm × 71 cm

Case Study: Traditional Wooden Cradles for Infants among the Darkhad People

Since ancient times, the northern region of Khövsgöl – encompassing the contemporary districts (soums) of Tsagaannuur, RENCHINKHUMBE, KHANKH, ULAAN-UUL, and BAYANZÜRKH – has been inhabited by tribes and clans engaged in hunting and animal husbandry. Today, the area is primarily home to the Darkhad and Uriankhai peoples, who have developed unique material and spiritual cultures adapted to the harsh conditions of the northern taiga and steppe. The ethnographic collections in the Khövsgöl Province Museum span a broad spectrum of these objects, with a particular emphasis on those connected to the nomadic lifestyle.

Cradles used by various ethnic groups reflect not only childcare practices but also broader aspects of material culture, including housing, clothing, and protective gear. Examining these items allows researchers to understand how different ethnic groups have influenced one another culturally while highlighting their unique structural evolutions over time. Mongolians have long believed that the stability of the family and the peaceful upbringing of children are essential to the prosperity of both the household and the state. Consequently, the customs, traditions, and material objects associated with family and child-rearing remain core subjects of ethnographic research.

The charts below display the distribution of items within the museum's collection related to children and childcare:

Total 3711 items

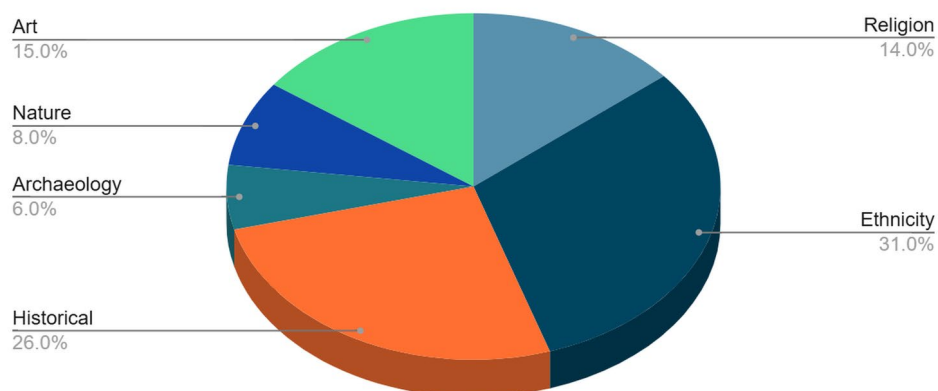


Figure 13. Distribution of child-related items by category

Total 31 items

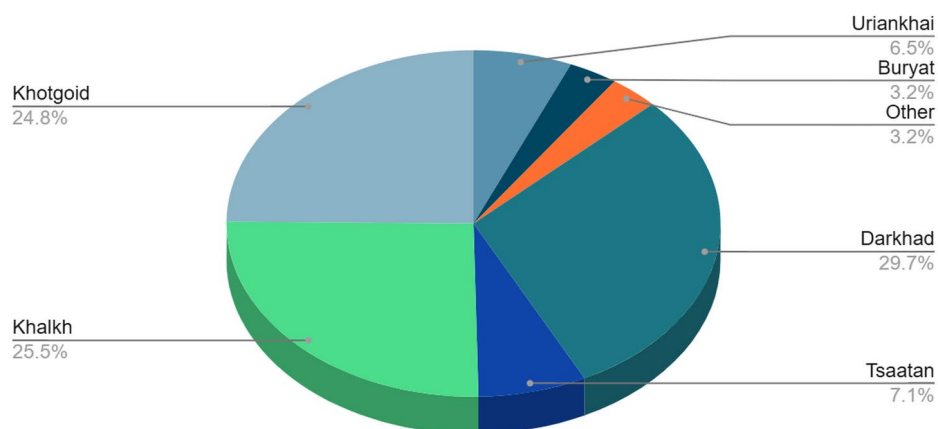


Figure 14. Detailed breakdown of children's items

Children's exhibits

Total 30

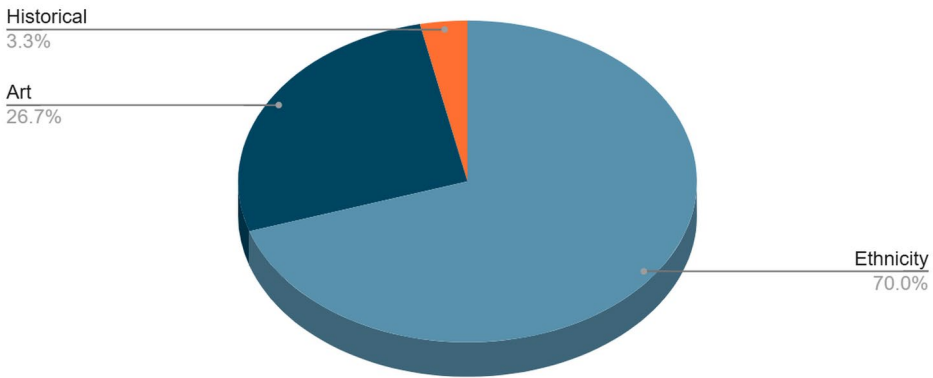


Figure 15. Proportion of children's items in the total collection

According to these data, exhibits related to children make up only 0.8 percent of the total collection, consisting of just 30 items. This scarcity highlights the pressing need to collect and conduct further research on regional child-related artifacts.

Structure and Design of the Infant Cradle (*Bööv*)

Among the Darkhad people, the traditional wooden cradle is called a *bööv*. This term is believed to originate from the soothing lullabies sung to infants, such as '*böövön böövön*', when lulling them to sleep. Furthermore, the word *bööv* may sharing etymological roots with the central Khalkha term *büüvei* (Cyrillic: БҮҮВЭЙ), specifically from the root *büüv*.

According to the *General Inventory* ledger of the Central Museum of Khövsgöl Province, the following data are recorded regarding this featured wooden cradle:

- **Item registration number:** Ü. ... (private number)
- **Exhibit name:** *Infant's bööv*
- **Dimensions:** Length: 125 cm; Width: 45 cm
- **Materials:** Wood, fabric, rawhide, sheep's wool

- **Crafted by:** Dulam
- **Used by:** Unknown
- **Condition:** Wood is detached; fabric canopy is torn and worn
- **Description:** Recorded as a wooden infant cradle with a dark blue cotton canopy (*meelkhi*), intended for a baby to lie in.



Figure 16. Infant Bööv (Side View)

The traditional *bööv* has a rectangular-shaped railing with a footboard at the base, known as the *öshiglövör* (kickboard). At the head of the cradle, an arch frame (*tsamkbag*) made from slender willow branches is attached, over which a canopy (*örkh* or *maikhavch*) – a warm covering made of felt and fabric – is draped. Fine rawhide straps (*kbets*) are tied to the ends of the canopy and fastened to the cradle's railing using looped hide attachments, serving as securing elements.

Technical measurements

- **Railing:** 67 cm (length), 36 cm (width), 14 cm (height)
- **Arch frame (*tsamkbag*):** 93 cm (length)

- **Footboard (*öshiglövör*):** 36 cm × 15 cm
- **Canopy (*maikhavch*):** 70 cm (length)
- **Facial cover (*örkh*):** 32 cm (length)
- **Rawhide straps (*khets*):** 63 cm (length)
- **Railing loops:** Spaced 13–17 cm apart, each measuring approximately 18 cm in length.

This specific *bööv* was crafted in 1905 by a woman named Dulam in a locality called *Sharga* in Renchinlkhümbe soum. It was used and preserved within the family until 1949, and in 1965, it was donated to the museum by Gürbadam, a resident of Renchinlkhümbe soum.

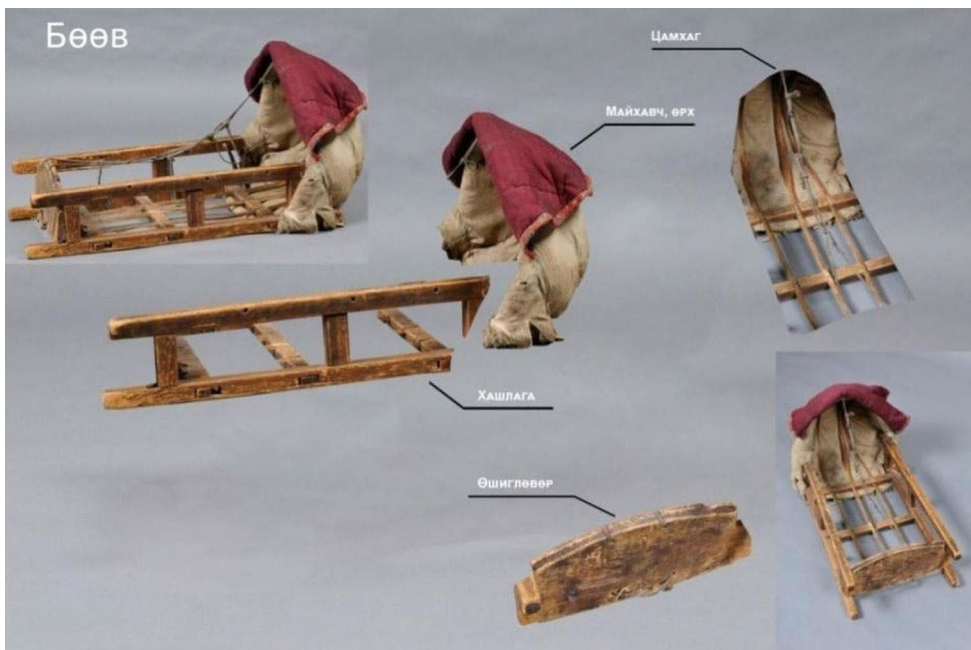


Figure 17. Component parts of the Darkhad infant Bööv

Traditionally, Mongolians have crafted infant cradles or swaddles (*ölgii* or *mantsui*) using sheepskin, felt, wool, wood, larch bark, cotton, and fabric. These materials were chosen based on the local economy and natural environment, ensuring that children were raised in a manner well-suited to the climate.

Additional sources report that the wooden *bööv* was most often made by the child's father or another male family member. Soft yet durable woods such as

larch (*khusb*) or blackwood (*khar mod*) were typically selected, then sawed, planed, and polished. There was no requirement to craft it on a specific day, nor were decorative patterns used; the cradle retained the natural texture and appearance of the wood, with the primary consideration being that it remain lightweight and appropriate for the baby's size. Thin rawhide straps secured the components.

There are no known prescribed blessings or sayings associated with the making of the *bööv*. Within a *ger* (traditional yurt), the cradle was usually placed above the bed on the northern or eastern side, which are considered respectful positions. The inside of the *bööv* was never left empty; it always contained clothing or another soft item. It is considered taboo to place the cradle upside down or to orient the head toward the doorway. The various structural parts were tied together with finely looped rawhide strings, anchoring a fine wicker frame at the head and a solid wooden board at the feet.¹

The *bööv* accommodated an infant swaddled in a soft wrap. For sanitation, aged and dried sheep dung was placed in a pouch made of fabric or belt material, which acted as a diaper and was changed regularly. At times, shredded horsehair or mane was laid inside the cradle as a lining; alternatively, cowhide (*daakh*) served as padding. At the head section, a hollowed-out portion of tanned sheepskin swaddled the infant, while a square piece of softened leather with a hole cut at the back allowed urine to drain into absorbent felt and wool padding. The entire assembly was tied securely using leather straps.

Traditionally, cradles were constructed on *soft days* of the week, typically Monday or Friday. They were passed down to younger siblings, following the belief that if the firstborn child thrived in a cradle, subsequent siblings would also grow up healthy and protected from illness. However, if a child passed away, the cradle would be permanently retired and never reused.

A supporting rod (*aravch mod*) was placed underneath the cradle, and the entire unit was suspended from the roof poles (*um*) near the head of the bed on the left side of the *ger*. A small amulet or charm, also called a *bööv*, was hung from the ceiling lattice near the child's head for protective purposes (*Primary Ethnographic Field Materials of Mongolia*, 2011, p. 68).

¹ Mr. Badamyn Yadam (b. 1954), a herder from Kharmay bag, Tsagaannuur soum, Kövsgöl province; of the Darkhad ethnic group, Zoot lineage *Primary Ethnographic Field Materials of Mongolia* (2011), p. 68.

Cultural Practices and Comparative Ethnic Traditions

Ööld tradition

Among Ööld herding families, infants were swaddled in sheepskin placed on a flat wooden board. When travelling, particularly on horseback, the head of the swaddle was reinforced with a wooden or willow arch covered in felt. This structure shielded the child's face and body from potential injuries or falls during transit.

Bayad tradition

The Bayad people construct a wooden cradle covered with felt, topped with a protective layer of padding. According to custom, milk is first poured onto the felt and licked by a dog to bless the cradle. A person born in a compatible zodiac year then places the child inside. A bell is tied to the structure; boys receive an attached garnet stone, while girls receive a turquoise.

Additionally, a felt cut-out shaped like a fox is suspended to entertain the child and prevent them from being startled. Thorny *khargana* (Caragana shrub) branches are attached to ward off evil spirits, alongside hedgehog spines symbolizing protective sharpness. Finally, a strap woven from the hair of seven male camels is tied to the cradle, as the camel is considered a fierce animal capable of scaring away malevolent forces.

Dörvöd tradition

When a daughter marries, it is customary for her family to prepare a cradle covering made from three lambskins sewn into a rectangular shape, lined with fabric, and finely stitched as part of her dowry. In the new household, this covering is kept between the mattress layers of the bed until the birth of the first child.

A wooden cradle is also traditionally constructed. Only those made entirely of wood are referred to specifically as *ölgii*. There also exists a variant called *khavsan ölgii*, which is constructed by weaving softened wood or curved planks with willow both inside and out, creating a dome-like tower (*tsamkharaa*) from which toys are suspended to entertain the infant (*Primary Ethnographic Field Materials of Mongolia*, 2011).

The Tsaatan people peel birch bark and stitch the pieces together to form the body of the cradle, framing it with fine willow branches and binding the edges. At the head, a thin willow rod is bent into an arch, secured, and covered with hide or animal skin. A fine leather strap suspends the cradle freely from the roof poles (*um*) of a yurt or teepee (*urts*).

The *bööv* was constructed so that it would sway naturally when gently moved, helping to soothe a crying baby. In earlier times when textiles were scarce, a layer of plant sheaths (such as *tayan*) was placed under the infant. These durable, oval-shaped bark cradles – reinforced with split willow twigs and curved corners – are still represented in the Khövsgöl Province Museum, and carved variants remain in use among the Tsaatan today.

Infant Cradles in Other Museums

Cradles and swaddling gear are preserved in various regional museums across Mongolia, reflecting the practical methods historical nomads developed to protect their infants:

- **Infant cradle (*bööv*, Darkhad):** Preserved in the Local History Room of Ulaan-Uul soum, Khövsgöl Province, this cradle is made of blackwood and willow with leather fittings and a cotton-covered canopy. It was crafted by S. Luvsangonchig in the 1940s and later used by D. Batmunkh.
- **Cradle (*ööj*, Khalkh):** Preserved in the Local History Room of Mandakh soum, Dornogovi Province, this square-shaped cradle is made from compressed willow wood and decorated with multicolored fabrics.
- **Swinging cradle (*büüveilegch*, Buryat):** Preserved in the Local History Room of Mungunmorit soum, Töv Province, this square-framed wooden cradle is reinforced with tanned hide and features a leather suspension strap.
- **Cradle (Sukhbaatar Province):** Held at the Sukhbaatar Provincial Museum, this rectangular cradle features a cloth base and a central diaper woven from animal hair. It is adorned with suspended amulets made of bone, stone, wood, and coral.

- **Ööjin (Dundgovi Provincial Museum):** Known as the *ööjin* (or *Zava Damdin's cradle*), this rectangular wood and leather cradle dates back to the 1870s.
- **Khentii Provincial Museum cradle:** This cradle is composed of a felt covering, sheepskin, woolen cloth, bone, and wood. When crafting these items, symbolic meanings were highly valued: wood from elm, willow, or ash trees growing on the sunrise side (symbolizing abundant roots and fertility) was chosen. The frame was made of elm, the exterior braided from palm wood, and auspicious motifs like the sun, moon, and happiness symbols were carved into the surface. Small protective or playful ornaments – such as bows and arrows, axes, mirrors, and felt fox figures – were attached.

While these cradle ornaments (*teeg*) once hung from the arch to amuse the child and aid in sensory development alongside traditional diapers and teething aids, traditionally crafted infant care items have become rare and are no longer commonly used today.

Traditional Diapers, Pacifiers and Protective Charms

Traditional diapers

One traditional method involved a square piece of felt spread with ash and a layer of finely shredded foal hair, over which a cloth was placed to swaddle the infant. Alternatively, dried mare's dung was pounded, lightly roasted in a pot, and placed inside a sewn cloth pouch beneath the swaddle. This effectively absorbed moisture and kept the baby dry for extended periods. The assembly was then placed on the cradle platform and suspended from the yurt's roof poles via a hinge system, allowing the mother to rock the baby while managing household chores. The use of horse dung ash and tail hair under the swaddle prevented wetness discomfort, reducing infant crying.

Traditional pacifiers

For infant feeding, a traditional Mongolian pacifier was created by boiling a sheep's tail, removing the skin from one side, and shaping it to resemble a human nipple for the infant to suckle (Batjargal, 2015, p. 86).

Custom dictates that the knucklebone (*shagai*) of a sheep slaughtered for the child's birth be tied to the cradle. Miniaturized weapons (axes, swords), ladle handles, silver coins, and symbols of wild animals like wolves and foxes were also attached as protective measures.

Among the Darkhad, a specific charm called the *khüükhdiin sakehil* (child's guardian charm) was sewn onto clothing or hung near the sleeping area (usually the northeast side of the ger). This charm was crafted from two crossed deer knucklebones, a miniature digging tool, a small container for dug food, a needle with thread, and a doll wearing a squirrel-fur cap with embroidered features and coral eyes. This mythic charm reflects ancient hunter-gatherer livelihoods, making it of significant ethnographic interest (Badamkhatun & Perlee, 1965, p. 178).

Additionally, a rawhide string called the *hets* was tied from the top of the canopy to the footrest to shield the infant from the elements. Knots were tied along the *hets* to track the child's age (one knot for age one, two knots for age two, etc.), allowing visitors to immediately know the child's age without asking.

Discussion

Pediatric research indicates that when an infant lies flat on their back, body weight is distributed evenly across the occiput, sacrum, and heels, allowing developing bones to remain in a relaxed, unloaded state. Traditional wooden cradles (*ölgi*) and swaddling devices (*bööv*) effectively achieve this while serving multiple vital functions: protecting the infant from injury during rugged nomadic migrations, providing a secure resting place inside the *ger*, maintaining warmth, and offering rhythmic rocking alongside sensory stimulation.

A closer study of the Darkhad *bööv* shows that newborn childcare items reflect the material, spiritual, and environmental adaptation of the ethnic groups inhabiting northern Mongolia. They provide deep ethnographic insight into family lineages, domestic customs, regional climates, and local economic practices. Furthermore, archival evidence suggests that until the mid-twentieth century, the majority of Mongolian households utilized similarly constructed wooden cradles.

As illustrated in the folk song *Ekhiiin ach* ('Mother's Grace'):

Odmaa Mendbayar

From wood called *öröl*, My father carved my cradle. In the cold of winter nights, My mother rose to nurse me...

These lines highlight the traditional paternal role in crafting these structures. It was customary to gather suitable timber (such as pine, cedar, birch, and willow) during the spring months of May and June. This wood was seasoned and stored specifically for constructing household items like the *bööv*. Ultimately, this research aims to serve as a baseline reference for those investigating the domestic material culture, childhood rituals, and traditional child-rearing practices of Darkhad communities.

Conclusion

This article has documented the institutional history, collection policies, and diverse holdings of the Central Museum of Khövsgöl Province, culminating in an ethnographic study of the traditional Darkhad wooden cradle (*bööv*). Established in 1949 as a primary school cabinet with only 18 exhibits, the museum has evolved into a prominent cultural institution housing over 4,000 items spanning from the Neolithic era to the modern period. Its collections cover Khövsgöl's archaeology, ethnography, art, religion, and natural heritage – featuring unique artifacts such as ancient jade axes, bronze sickles, independence-movement weaponry, Buddhist relics of Jalkhanz Khutagt Ch. Damdinbazar, and mammoth remains.

Crucially, the technical and cultural analysis of the Darkhad *bööv* demonstrates how nomadic lifestyles, regional ethnic interactions, and extreme sub-Arctic climates directly dictated the functional design, material selection, and physical preservation of childcare objects. For researchers, these resources offer valuable, localized evidence of domestic and familial life that is often marginalized in broader historiographies, allowing scholars to explore the critical intersection of tangible materials and intangible beliefs in Mongolia.



Figure 18. Infant Bööv (General View)

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