



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Shared pasts, divergent histories

Representing Torghuts and Khoshuts in museums in China

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Since the 1980s, China has experienced an unprecedented 'heritage boom', generating extensive scholarly interest in museums, tourism, and the politics of cultural representation. While much of this literature has examined the production of ethnic diversity and minority heritage, less attention has been paid to recent shifts in official historical narratives and their implications for heritage practices in Xinjiang. Drawing on long-term ethnographic fieldwork conducted since 2015 in museums, tourism sites, and community heritage spaces in the Bayangol Mongol Autonomous Prefecture, this article examines the representation of two Oirat Mongol groups: the Torghuts and the Khoshuts. Although these communities share closely intertwined historical trajectories, they occupy markedly different positions within contemporary heritage narratives. Employing the concept of Authorised Heritage Discourse, the

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article argues that museums and heritage sites in contemporary China increasingly function as mechanisms for incorporating minority histories into narratives of national unity.

Museums play a critical role in the production and presentation of cultural heritage. Beyond serving as repositories of objects and knowledge, they actively shape public understandings of history by selecting, organizing and interpreting the past. They provide spaces in which visitors encounter particular narratives of identity, memory and belonging. This role has become especially significant in the context of heritage tourism, where cultural attractions contribute to local economic development while simultaneously communicating broader political and social values. Since the 1980s, China has experienced strong growth in heritage tourism, and ethnic minority regions have become important sites within this process, as local governments increasingly mobilize heritage to promote distinctive identities while contributing to broader projects of national integration.

This article examines the representation of two Mongolian groups – the Torghuts and the Khoshuts – in museums and heritage sites in the Bayangol Mongol Autonomous Prefecture of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. Mongols constitute one of China's fifty-five officially recognized ethnic minorities. In Xinjiang, they are commonly referred to as Oirat or Western Mongols and comprise several subgroups, including the Torghuts, Khoshuts, Durbets and Öölds. Although the Torghuts and Khoshuts share closely connected historical trajectories and currently coexist within the same administrative region, they occupy markedly different positions within official historical narratives. The Torghuts are prominently represented through narratives surrounding their eastward migration from the Volga region in 1771, which is framed as a patriotic return to the Chinese motherland under Qing rule. By contrast, the Khoshuts, who migrated alongside the Torghuts, receive considerably less visibility within migration narratives and are instead incorporated into a *longue durée* account of Chinese territorial continuity.

This article employs a thematic comparison across multiple heritage sites. It examines how the histories of the Torghuts and Khoshuts are represented differently in museums, tourism spaces, and community heritage initiatives, and considers what these contrasting representations reveal about broader processes of heritage-making in contemporary China. Our main argument is that museums and heritage sites in contemporary China form a central component of state-led historical nar-

ration. While many studies have demonstrated the scope for local communities, civil society organizations, and individual actors to engage creatively with heritage-making in diverse ways across different groups and stakeholders (Fraser, 2020, 2022; Maags & Svensson, 2018), our findings highlight the continuing significance of state frameworks in shaping the boundaries of legitimate historical representation. More specifically, the article identifies three interconnected scales through which heritage narratives are produced and reproduced: central state discourse, particularly following the publication of the 2019 white paper *Historical Matters Concerning Xinjiang*; county-level museums and tourism institutions that adapt and implement these narratives; and community-level heritage initiatives through which local actors selectively engage with authorized forms of recognition.

The analysis draws primarily upon Smith's (2006) concept of Authorized Heritage Discourse (AHD), which emphasizes how particular interpretations of the past become institutionalized and legitimized while others are marginalized or silenced. As Smith argues, the emergence of modern heritage discourse within nineteenth-century nationalism has closely linked heritage to the construction of national identity. Hence, heritage often privileges narratives that reinforce national belonging while obscuring subnational diversity and alternative understandings of the past (Smith, 2006, p. 30). In the Chinese context, as many studies have demonstrated, heritage-making is fundamentally tied to the political authority of the state. This article demonstrates how the historical trajectories of the Torghuts and Khoshuts are incorporated into broader narratives of Chinese nation-building, in which both groups are represented as exemplary contributors to ethnic unity and national development. At the same time, we engage with Clifford's (1997) conceptualization of museums as 'contact zones' and Beardslee's (2016) notion of 'heritage middlemen'. However, unlike museum frameworks centered on contact zones that emphasize overt contestation and resistance, this case reveals a more complex process of selective alignment. Local actors actively participate in heritage production and seek recognition through officially sanctioned frameworks, while state institutions rely upon local cultural knowledge and participation to legitimize their narratives.

The relationship between museums and tourism can further be understood through Bulag's (2012) concept of 'seeing like a minority'. Bulag argues that state-sponsored tourism encourages ethnic minority subjects to identify with the broader Chinese nation through carefully curated experiences in central China and witnessing technological advancement through which national belonging is built.

This, he suggests, differs from the role of the state in a Foucauldian understanding, where the state seeks to remain unseen. Extending this insight, our analysis demonstrates how museums and heritage sites in peripheral regions invite visitors to encounter state history through minority experiences. The contrast between Torghut and Khoshut representations also complicates earlier studies of ethnic tourism in southwest China, which have emphasized processes of internal orientalism and the commodification of minority difference (Oakes, 1999; Schein, 2000). In contemporary Xinjiang, minority heritage is increasingly mobilized not as a marker of exotic cultural difference but as evidence of historical loyalty, territorial belonging, and national unity. At the same time, existing scholarship on Xinjiang has understandably focused on questions of state governance. Comparatively less attention has been paid to museums, heritage and tourism as sites in which narratives of national belonging are produced, circulated and negotiated. By focusing on the representation of Oirat Mongol communities, this article contributes to a growing body of research on the cultural politics of heritage in contemporary Xinjiang.

The fieldwork upon which this paper is based was carried out among Torghut and Khoshut Mongolian communities in Xinjiang starting in 2015. This fieldwork has included annual visits during summer and winter periods, extensive interviews, documentation of cultural heritage practices, participant observation at rituals (Zulbaatar & Purvei, 2021) and cultural performances, and repeated visits to museums and heritage sites. Particular attention has been paid to changes in museum exhibitions, the addition of new objects and displays, and the official interpretations accompanying them.

The article proceeds in three parts. The first section examines the representation of the Torghuts' eastward migration in museums and tourism sites, where narratives of mobility and suffering are reframed as stories of patriotic return. The second section analyzes the Khoshut County Museum, demonstrating how Khoshut history is incorporated into a *longue durée* narrative of Chinese territorial continuity. The third section turns to the resettlement village of Narin Kheer, exploring how local actors engage with, reinterpret and reproduce authorized heritage discourses through community-led cultural initiatives.

Torghuts and Their Eastward Migration under State Historical Narrative

Since the 1980s, China has experienced an unprecedented ‘heritage boom’ (Fraser, 2020; Maags & Svensson, 2018), and the process of heritagization has also contributed to the revitalization and reconfiguration of minority cultures. Across minority regions, administrative units at multiple levels – including provinces, counties (or banners), and even villages – have sought to cultivate distinctive cultural identities in order to attract tourism and stimulate local economic development. Xinjiang, in the northwest of China, with its landscape of grasslands, mountains and deserts, exemplifies this trend, recording approximately 300 million tourist visits in 2024 (Kaiyan, 2025). Within this broader tourism economy, narratives of ethnic history and nomadic heritage have become increasingly important cultural resources. Bayanbulag Grassland, one of China’s most renowned high-altitude pastures, has emerged as a major summer destination for domestic tourists. During peak tourist season, visitors purchase tickets and travel on official tour buses through designated scenic areas, where professionally trained guides introduce visitors to both the landscape and the history of the ‘Torghuts’ eastward migration to China and their nomadic way of life. The following account summarizes the standard tour narrative:

In the winter of 1771, facing repeated aggression from Tsarist Russia, the Torghuts embarked upon a mass migration back to their ancestral homeland, Xinjiang. Enduring extreme weather and vast distances while violently pursued by Russian forces, the Torghuts eventually returned to the “warm heart” of the Chinese nation. However, their population declined dramatically during the journey, falling from an estimated 170,000 to approximately 60,000. By the time they arrived in Yili, the administrative centre of Xinjiang at that time, the Qing government benevolently provided substantial aid in livestock and grain while allocating extensive pasturelands to support their recovery and resettlement. Ever since, the Torghuts have lived a nomadic life on these grasslands.

Archival studies have demonstrated that the Qing state provided substantial aid to the exhausted Torghuts upon their arrival in Yili. It is equally well established that Qing authorities dispersed Torghut groups across five separate locations stretch-

ing over 1,000 kilometres from the northern to southern slopes of the Tianshan Mountains, partly to prevent consolidation of Torghut political power (Bello, 2018; Guo, 2007; Wu, 2013). Nevertheless, two commemorative essays by the Qianlong Emperor (1711–1799) – ‘*A Record of Torghuts’ Allegiance*’ and ‘*A Record of the Good Aid Given to the Torghut People*’ – serve as key material references in museum tour narratives. These texts are inscribed on stone steles, the former erected at the entrance of the Potala Palace in Chengde, the Qing summer capital, and the latter installed in Yili (Forêt, 2000; Millward, 1998). These imperial inscriptions function as authoritative evidence linking Torghut history to Qing imperial expansion and contemporary narratives of Chinese national unity. In this framing, the Torghuts’ suffering during migration, their allegiance, and the Qing state’s benevolence are woven into a broader narrative of ethnic solidarity and national integration. The Torghuts are thus presented as one of China’s most loyal minority groups, whose return symbolizes both the historical legitimacy of Qing rule in Xinjiang and the enduring unity of the Chinese nation. Combined with representations of nomadic culture and regional scenery, these narratives serve as prominent assets for Xinjiang’s expanding tourism industry.

This historical narrative is materialized explicitly in the county museum of Hejing, an administrative centre for Torghuts in the Bayangol Autonomous Prefecture. Formerly the Torghut Royal residence, the building has been renovated as both a county museum and an intangible cultural heritage site. Now known as the *Donggui* Museum – meaning ‘Return to the East’ – it has been designated a ‘Patriotic Education Base’ for Hejing County and a ‘National Defence Education Model Base’ for the Xinjiang Autonomous Region. According to the Hejing County Government website, the *Donggui* Museum’s primary mission is to promote the spirit of *Donggui* and foster patriotism through educational activities (Hejing County Government, 2025).

If Bayanbulag combines scenic landscapes with emotionally charged narratives of nomadic life, the *Donggui* Museum translates these themes into material and curatorial forms. Maps tracing the Torghuts’ migration from the Volga region to Yili are on display, combining Qing archival records with Torghut perspectives. Particular attention is devoted to the route taken by Torghut nobles to Chengde to pay tribute to the Qianlong Emperor. The exhibition portrays this meeting as a defining moment in Qing imperial history, symbolizing the completion of the emperor’s ‘ten great achievements’ (Terbish et al., 2022, p. 124). Banquets, receptions and gift exchanges between Torghuts and the Qing court are curated in detail:

while Torghuts offered fine horses and broadswords, the Qing court granted titles, ranks, stipends, silks and material aid according to noble hierarchies. Maps and documents detailing land allocations to the Torghuts and Khoshuts further reinforce the narrative of Qing benevolence. Notably, these curatorial strategies mirror exhibitions at major imperial heritage sites such as the Putuo Zongcheng Temple (Potala Temple) in Chengde.

Rather than merely preserving history, these museums and heritage sites actively produce a specific interpretation of the Torghuts' eastward migration. Through the selective display of artifacts, maps, imperial inscriptions, and spatial arrangements, they transform a complex history of migration, resettlement and imperial governance into a coherent story of voluntary return, ethnic loyalty, and national belonging.

Khoshut Museum as an Exemplar of State Historical Narrative

Like the Torghuts, the Khoshuts in Xinjiang participated in the 1771 eastward migration from the Volga region to Yili. Upon arrival, the Qing government recognized their losses and organized them under the *Bat Setkilt Dund Zamiin Chuulgan*, allocating pasturelands south of the Tianshan Mountains from Ushtal in the east to Zultus in the west, the Haidag River in the south, and Tüngiün Uul in the north. They were structured into four banners comprising eleven sums. Gendennorv was the Khoshut *noyan* at the time and was granted the title *Beil*, while his brothers received subordinate titles. Arrival records indicate that the Khoshut population consisted of approximately 1,150 households and 4,053 individuals (Guo, 2007; Lijie, 2009; Tuna & Bateer, 2014). It would be misleading, however, to assume that all individuals under Khoshut administration were ethnically Khoshut, as banner divisions frequently incorporated diverse groups. For instance, one of the eleven Khoshut *sums* was known as Tsaatan, whose descendants today largely identify as Torghuts in neighbouring Hejing County. Similarly, in Hoboksar, a northern Torghut centre, one of fourteen *sums* bears the name Khoshut, yet residents are generally known as Fourteen-*sum* Torghuts, with Khoshut identity largely absent in everyday practice.

Today, Khoshut County falls under the administrative jurisdiction of the Bayangol Mongol Autonomous Prefecture, holding equal administrative status with neighbouring Hejing County. Geographically, it encompasses desert terrain, oases and the southern foothills of the Tianshan Mountains. Unlike their Torghut

neighbours who predominantly graze livestock on the Bayanbulag grasslands, many Khoshuts in this region raise camels in the Gobi and engage in crop cultivation around settled communities. The county's population is ethnically diverse, with Mongols constituting a small minority alongside Han, Uyghur and Hui majorities. Administrative restructuring during the 1970s, specifically the creation of Bosten Lake (Bostnuur) County from portions of Khoshut and Yanqi counties, further divided the Khoshut population. According to the 2020 census, approximately 6,600 Mongols reside in Khoshut County out of a total population of 60,000, with over half living in rural areas; Bosten Lake County includes approximately 4,000 Mongols out of 58,000. In comparison, the Mongolian population in Hejing County stands at approximately 30,900 (Bureau of Statistics of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, 2020).

Given this demographic context, the cultural landscape of Khoshut County differs markedly from Hejing County, where Mongolian cultural markers remain highly visible. The main streets of Khoshut County are dominated by vehicle repair garages and industrial businesses, reflecting the local mineral extraction economy and the S314 national highway corridor. In the town centre, visitors encounter a large public park housing the Khoshut County Museum. Beyond the park lies a commercial street containing a small number of Mongolian businesses, including a silversmith, a tailor, and a shop owned by Baatar that serves as a cultural hub for the local Mongolian community. In addition to selling traditional goods sourced from Inner Mongolia, the shop provides Mongolian-language typing, design and printing services, as well as periodicals published in Urumqi such as *Örin Tsolmon* and *Hel ba Orchuulaga*. Despite these local initiatives, Mongolian cultural visibility in the county centre remains limited, with fewer than ten Mongolian-owned businesses operating during our fieldwork and no active Buddhist monasteries. This relative absence of visible ethnic markers contrasts with many minority regions in China where symbolic architecture and public monuments define autonomous jurisdictions (Bulag, 2016; Oakes, 1998; Schein, 2000).

Against this backdrop, the Khoshut County Museum serves as the principal institutional space representing local history and culture. Opened in 2013, the museum incorporates local history into an overarching narrative of Chinese historical continuity, drawing directly upon themes articulated in the 2019 white paper *Historical Matters Concerning Xinjiang* (Geneva China-Mission, 2021). This contrasts with the *Donggui* Museum in Hejing County, which centres on the 1771 migration. The exhibition is organized chronologically into five sections: (1) Early Period, (2)

Han and Tang Dynasties, (3) Song, Yuan and Ming Dynasties, (4) Qing Dynasty, and (5) Modern Era.

The exhibition opens with archeological artifacts excavated within Khoshut County, including millstones, pottery, bronze items, adobe structures, and agricultural tools dating back approximately 3,500 years. These objects are presented as evidence of longstanding cultural links between Xinjiang and central China. Ancient texts describing western regions, such as the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* (*Shanhai Jing*) and the *Tale of King Mu, Son of Heaven* (*Mu Tianzi Zhuan*), are similarly highlighted to argue for historical integration into the Chinese cultural sphere.

Such interpretations remain subject to academic debate, particularly regarding the geographical referents of ancient texts and whether accounts of remote lands reflect historical geography or cosmological mythology. As Frank Dikötter observes regarding early textual descriptions of peripheral regions:

Spirits and monstrous beasts roamed the edges of the world beyond the great Wilderness: they were half-man, half-animal; the spirit Yingzhao had a human face and the body of a horse. There were tribes of one-eyed people and three-headed barbarians (Dikötter, 1992, pp. 6, 12).

The Han Dynasty section highlights the establishment of the Protectorate of the Western Regions (*Xiyu Duhufu*) in 60 BC as the formal incorporation of the region into Chinese territory. Subsequent sections on the Tang, Song, Yuan and Ming dynasties reinforce narratives of continuous political and trade ties via the Silk Road. The Qing period display focuses on imperial administration, the appointment of superintendents in Karashahr, and the 1771 settlement of the Khoshuts as milestones in regional development. Economic, agricultural and cultural developments are framed as collective achievements of all ethnic groups.

Two displays are particularly notable. The first showcases recognized Mongolian intangible cultural heritage items (86 items and 256 inheritors listed locally and provincially at the time of fieldwork). The second display presents a scene of interethnic unity: a Mongolian yurt surrounded by figures of Uyghur, Mongol and Hui dancers alongside local residents conversing with state officials. The final section covers the 1950s and commemorates the development of China's nuclear weapons testing facility in Khoshut County during the 1960s, framing these events as key steps towards regional modernization and national defence. Throughout the

exhibition, visitors are presented with a narrative of continuous political and territorial integration linking Xinjiang to Chinese dynastic history. In contrast to Torghut narratives centered on migration and return, the Khoshut County Museum downplays the 1771 migration, embedding Khoshut history into a *longue durée* account of Chinese state formation.

A Khoshut Resettlement Village: Narin Kheer

While Khoshuts occupy a peripheral position in county museum displays, their cultural identity is actively articulated in community spaces such as Narin Kheer, a state-planned resettlement village. As noted in local records, Narin Kheer's history is closely tied to national defence and development initiatives. The community underwent seven rounds of relocation between 1960 and 1989 due to proximity to the nuclear testing site. Following the cessation of military testing, some herders returned to mountain pastures before being relocated again in 2007 under national ecological restoration and poverty alleviation programs. This final resettlement moved residents to 3,700 *mu* (approximately 609 acres) of lowland settlement. Reconstruction was funded by RMB 5 million from military support funds and RMB 1.5 million from the central government's 'minority theme village' initiative, constructing new housing and a central cultural park. Unlike the county museum, Narin Kheer allows local residents to actively shape representations of their own heritage.

Younger Khoshuts have played an active role as 'heritage middlemen' (Beardslee, 2016), selecting historical elements that align with official frameworks while highlighting local identity across three main themes. First, villagers emphasize their Chinggisid lineage, tracing Khoshut ancestry to Khabhtu Khasar, younger brother of Genghis Khan. This lineage is visually commemorated in the theme park through wolf and elk sculptures referencing traditional origin narratives. Second, Narin Kheer highlights the legacy of Clear Script (*Tod Üsüg*), created in the seventeenth century by the Khoshut scholar Zaya Pandita. Designated an official *Tod Üsüg* heritage village by prefectural authorities, Narin Kheer features a 16.48-metre central monument designed by local artist Nima (symbolizing the year 1648 when the script was created) set on a 3.7-metre base representing the 370 years elapsed at construction. Inscriptions describe the alphabet's origins and trace the 1771 migration routes of the Torghuts and Khoshuts. Third, local narratives ex-

tend Khoshut historical memory back to the thirteenth-century Mongol Empire rather than focusing solely on eighteenth-century Qing migration.

Unlike the county museum's emphasis on Chinese territorial continuity, Narin Kheer foregrounds specifically Khoshut and Mongolian heritage symbols. Rather than contesting state narratives, the community utilizes official funding and heritage programs to secure recognition and resources, demonstrating a process of selective alignment.

Conclusion

This article has examined how the histories of the Torghuts and Khoshuts are represented across museums, tourism sites, and community initiatives in the Bayangol Mongol Autonomous Prefecture. Although sharing intertwined historical trajectories, including the 1771 migration from the Volga, the two groups occupy distinct positions within official heritage discourses. Torghut history is framed around mobility, suffering and patriotic return, providing a prominent moral exemplar of loyalty. Khoshut history is largely integrated into a *longue durée* narrative of Chinese state continuity at the county level, while local community spaces such as Narin Kheer emphasize Chinggisid genealogy and *Tod Üsüg* literacy.

These representations illustrate that heritage production in contemporary China operates across national, county and community scales. Rather than reflecting simple state imposition or local resistance, the relationship between state institutions and local actors functions through selective alignment. Extending James Clifford's concept of museums as 'contact zones', this study shows how local communities engage official heritage frameworks to preserve identity and secure resources within contemporary state structures.

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