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Introduction

Bayarbat Tugsbuyan, Maria-Katharina Lang, Baatarnaran Tsetsentsolmon

This special issue brings together a collection of articles presented at the Second International Mongolian Studies Symposium, Vienna: Current Research and Practices in Anthropology, Art & Archaeology in Mongolia and Beyond, held in Vienna at the Austrian Academy of Sciences from 25 to 26 November 2024. The symposium was generously supported by the Institute of Mongolian Studies of the National University of Mongolia, the National Council for Mongolian Studies, the Embassy of Mongolia in Austria, the Institute for Social Anthropology and the International Relations Office of the Austrian Academy of Sciences.

The symposium took place in the Postsparkasse building, designed by Otto Wagner. It followed the first symposium's aim, which was to create a space for inter- and transdisciplinary exchange in Mongolian Studies. It brought together scholars and practitioners working in anthropology, archaeology, and art. Its aim was not only to present current research results, but also to discuss how knowledge is created and transformed in various fields, such as religious institutions, cultural policies, academic institutes, and art.

A key methodological approach shared across many presentations was that the research is never produced from a completely neutral or "outside" position, as Haraway (1988) famously described it as a "god trick", arguing that academia is heavily blinded by the illusion of seeing "everything from nowhere". On the contrary, during this symposium, presenters were explicitly aware of their positionalities and situated themselves in their research. Many of the articles show the reflexive writing, being clear about one's position and its relations with their research, i.e., whether on a dig, in religious and civic networks, or within heritage bureaucracies. The symposium itself reflected this methodological spirit, where a supportive and safe atmosphere was created, and multilingual exchanges were made as described by Cecilia Conte in the Epilogue.

This special issue, therefore, does not simply document or present current research in Mongolia or Mongolian Studies; it reflects a broader shift within the field toward reflexive, relational, and inter-and transdisciplinary approaches. Rather than treating Mongolia as an object of study from an external point of view, the contributions expand the situated knowledge production with locals and untangle the complex political, environmental, and cultural transformations in Mongolia.

This special issue can be divided into several thematic parts: (1) field practices, reflexivity, and academic community, (2) immaterialities and archaeological evidence, and (3) the transformations of "tradition" in contemporary Mongolia. We briefly introduce each contribution and point to some of their intersections.

Field Practices, Reflexivity, and Academic Community

Several contributions in this issue analysed how land and traditional and external knowledge intersect in Mongolia, particularly in contexts where research and extraction reshape landscapes of Mongolia and socio-cultural relations.

Ariell Ahearn argues that Mongolia's rapid expansion of mining (especially in the Gobi) is displacing mobile herders, and that the way mining projects map land and "affected households" often makes herders misrecognised and misrepresented. She shows how resettlement plans typically plot only fixed points like registered winter camps and use arbitrary distance buffers, which ignore nomadic, seasonal, multi-site land use (pastures, wells, sacred sites, etc.) and can exclude people from compensation. She asks whether these mapping practices are a form of spatial injustice, because they impose a sedentary, property-based view of land rights onto nomadic livelihoods and thereby underestimate harm.

Maria - Katharina Lang and Baatarnaran Tsetsentsolmon ask how the intrusion into Mongolian soil, which is considered taboo, is perceived from different perspectives, for example, by mobile herders, Buddhists, Shamans, drivers, archaeologists, and social anthropologists. Drawing on three examples from different research projects and based on collaborative fieldwork, they develop an ethnography of digging by highlighting the effects, human and more-than-human reactions, or resistance to the extraction of mineral resources and archaeological excavations. They argue that any form of digging the ground is seen as an intrusion that might provoke the wrath of local spirits and is deeply interwoven with the sacred landscape.

Cecilia Conte's article "Being-in-the-field: Ethnographic Observations on Archaeological Fieldwork in Central Mongolia" is based on two fieldwork seasons in the Upper Orkhon Valley, on the border between Arkhangai and Övörkhangai. An interesting key focus is her inside/outside positioning. Conte describes working as "an archaeologist

studying other archaeologists in Mongolia," simultaneously "insider and outsider", and uses field notes to give a sense of being-in-the-field. Furthermore, in a complementary article, Conte's reflective piece "Reflections on (Academic) Community" turns from the excavation to the symposium itself and to Mongolian Studies as a lived scholarly world.

Taken together, Ariell Ahearn, Maria-Katharina Lang, Baatarnaran Tsetsentsolmon, and Cecilia Conte each explore how landscapes in Mongolia are not only sites of economic extraction or archaeological research fields, but also a space where people's livelihoods, cultural traditions, and lifeways are represented, understood, and intervened in. Furthermore, they highlight how engagements with land, whether through mapping, digging, or excavation, are always embedded in broader social, cosmological, and institutional contexts.

Immaterialities and Archaeological Evidence

Archaeology increasingly provides inter- and trans-disciplinary approaches to academia by offering collaborations not only with archaeologists but also with historians, anthropologists, etc. Through such collaboration, the interdependent parts of knowledge from different disciplines are brought "into harmonious relationships through strategies such as relating part and whole or the particular and the general", thereby creating a synthesis of approaches (Nilsson Stutz 2018; Stember 1991). In this special issue, Ulambayar Erdenebat, Christina Franken, Hendrik Rohland, Mendbazar Oyuntulga and Bat-Ochir Dejidmaa publish collaborative research results that explore Mongolia's historical material culture.

Ulambayar Erdenebat analyses the extent to which rare and recently uncovered collections of Mongolian textiles and garments from the Khitan Empire period (10th-12th centuries) can be related to the clothing styles of early Mongolian groups such as the Kerait and Naiman.

He also shows the appreciation of the material culture and clothing style, which was naturally adapted to the ways of life and pastoral economy of the Mongolian groups and had a wide-ranging influence on neighbouring groups and sedentary peoples, who esteemed and adopted the Mongolian clothing styles.

Together with Erdenebat, in their contribution, Christina Franken, Hendrik Rohland, Mendbazar Oyuntulga and Bat-Ochir Dejidmaa present an initial study of their collaboration on the well as part of the complex citadel of Karabalgasun (Ordu Baliq), the historic capital of the Uyghurs in the Orkhon Valley, by combining archaeological, historical, and conservation perspectives. The multidisciplinary conservation project succeeded for the first time in preserving waterlogged wooden artefacts for further detailed research. Outstanding artefacts and finds such as jade books and the skeleton of a traded gyrfalcon illustrate the importance of Karabalgasun as a node for trade and diplomatic relations within the network of the historic Silk Roads.

Tradition, Transformation, and the Politics of Culture

Frank Ruda (2017) argues that when everything is described as political, the concept of politics risks becoming so broad that it turns into an empty chaos. In such cases, the slogan "everything is political" can function ideologically, allowing people to invoke politics without clarifying what kinds of political processes, conflicts, or interests are actually at stake (Ruda, 2017). This social phenomenon is also evident in Mongolian art and the wider cultural field, where topics, such as nomadic culture, the revival of Buddhism, or the Mongolian script, are frequently framed as political or decolonial approaches. However, this raises an important question: what kind of issues or tensions lead these cultural phenomena to be articulated in political terms? The contributions in this section address this question by examining the dynamics behind these debates and by analysing how cultural, historical, and social transformations in Mongolia shape the ways in which "the political" is understood. In doing so, they move beyond the surface-level claim that everything is political and instead explore the specific contexts and perspectives through which political meanings are produced.

Bumbayar Bavuudorj examines the Buddhist revival after the 1990 democratic revolution. The article stays close to his fieldwork engagement in Ulaanbaatar, such as attending Buddhist classes and participating in activities across multiple centres, including the Jebtsundamba Khutugt Centre, Avydiin Oron. Using "old" and "new" Buddhism as analytical tools, the paper shows how practitioners negotiate what counts as "authentic, authoritative, or modern" in a religious field shaped by "national heritage" and transnational networks.

Furthermore, Baatarnaran Tsetsentsolmon and Bayarbat Tugsbuyan's article shares the same question as Bumbayar, asking critically how everyday practices of nomadic lifeways become institutionalised and performed as "authentic" intangible cultural heritage. The paper is especially detailed on how heritage policies in Mongolia produce hierarchies of cultural legitimacy and transform traditions into "measurable" and "performable" commodified objects.

Finally, Unubaatar Irmuun expands this special issue into artistic research through the conceptual art project Words No Longer Words. The paper shows how language is transformed into material, image, and critique. The discussion stays close to (artistic) practice: cutting, erasing, stamping, collage, rice paper, ink, and paint.

Shared Threads

One common commitment stands out across the contributions. Knowledge is treated not as something produced from a distance, but something made through relations with people, materials, and places. The research papers highlight how "tradition" and "modernity", "current practices" and "future practices" are not opposite dichotomies but continuously co-created and negotiated side by side. Archaeological studies intersect with contemporary museum and cultural politics, religious revival unfolds within transnational networks, nomadic lifeways convert as both heritage and commodity, and Mongolian script expresses both language and art.

This volume contributes to Mongolian Studies, not only by adding new insights, but by strengthening a Mongolian Studies that values responsibility, liability, collaboration, openness, diversity, and equality.

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