

**Mobility and the Origins of Mongolian Ethnography:  
Lobsangčoidan's *Understanding Mongolian Customs* (1918)**

Dorothea Heuschert-Laage

**Abstract**

*Lobsangčoidan (ca. 1875–1928) was a native from Front Qaračïn banner whose life was marked by the social and political upheavals of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. After travelling extensively in Eastern Mongolia in his capacity as a tax registrar, he passed the examination of the Lifanyuan and worked as a translator and Mongolian language instructor. In this capacity, he went to Japan in 1907 and stayed in Tokyo and Kyoto for altogether seven years. His famous work *Mongyol-un jang ayali-yin oyilaburi* (*Understanding Mongolian Customs*), an ethnographic study among the Mongols of Jirim, Josotu and Juu Uda leagues, was written after his return to China when he worked as a translator for the South Manchurian Railway Company. Over the course of his life, Lobsangčoidan crossed various boundaries and moved between different cultural worlds. The paper summarizes what is known about his life and how this relates to his literary and scientific achievements. It is argued that Lobsangčoidan's book greatly influenced Mongolian studies in China and provided a model for ethnographic inquiry that has been adopted by many subsequent scholars.*

The ethnographic account which is in the focus of this article was written exactly one hundred years ago, and is related to issues of mobility in several respects. Firstly, mobile lifestyle is defined as a key feature of Mongolian culture and pastoralism is argued to be an essential pillar of the Mongolian economy. Mobility was also a crucial factor in the biography of the author, Lobsangčoidan, who not only had travelled widely in Mongolian territories, but also spent several years in Beijing, Tokyo and Kyoto. His book is known under the Mongolian title *Mongyol-un jang ayali-yin oyilaburi*<sup>1</sup> (*Understanding Mongolian Customs*), and covers a wide range of phenomena as it includes sections on history, law and economics, as well as material culture, climate, vegetation, housing, clothes, weapons, medicine, folk tales, food, drink and burial practices.

In terms of reception, among Mongolian ethnographic literature *Understanding Mongolian customs* occupies a significant place. Lobsangčoidan wrote several different versions of this work, but in the decades following their completion, his manuscripts had been more or less forgotten. The first scholar to direct attention to the work of Lobsangčoidan was Walther Heissig, who came across a manuscript of the work in the library of the University of Foreign Languages in Tokyo and in

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<sup>1</sup> The suffix *-buri* designates a noun deriving from the verb *oyila-* “to understand”. Some scholars transliterate *üilebüri*. On the different titles of the preserved manuscripts Manduqu and Dulayan, *Lobsangčoyidan-u sudulul* (Ulañqada: Öbör Mongyol-un soyol-un keblel-ün qoriy-a, 2000), 124–139.

1968 published an article on *Understanding Mongolian Customs* in *Zentralasiatische Studien*.<sup>2</sup> However, at that time the resonance to Heissig's article and Lobsangčoidan's work was rather limited. This changed in the year 1981 when the Inner Mongolian scholar Dambijalsan published an edited volume of Lobsangčoidan's work.<sup>3</sup> His publication as well as its translation into Chinese, which was published in 1988<sup>4</sup> have attracted much attention especially among scholars in China and Japan. The wealth of publications over the last couple of decades has even led to complaints that there has been an "outbreak of Lobsangčoidan fever".<sup>5</sup>

Lobsangčoidan's account has not only become an object of research, but has also stimulated scholars to edit follow-up books. For example, a couple of years after Dambijalsan's edition of Lobsangčoidan's work, the Inner Mongolian publishing house published a series of monographs devoted to the customs (*jang ayali*) of various Mongolian communities in China. Even though the headings and sections under which information is arranged in these ethnographic accounts are not identical with those used in Lobsangčoidan's composition, the authors likewise use the term *jang ayali* in order to present lifestyle, food, dress, belief system and so on as the characteristics which mark out certain communities.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, Lobsangčoidan's work did not only become a model for scholarly inquiries, but was also important for the development of folklore studies as an academic discipline. Manduqu and Dulayan maintain that only after Dambijalsan's publication of *Understanding Mongolian Customs* in 1981, universities in Inner Mongolia and Beijing established courses on Mongolian folklore studies (*Mongyol jang üile-yin uqayan*) and encouraged students to go to the countryside during their holidays, where they were to live with herders and farmers in order to do research on daily practices and collect folk tales.<sup>7</sup> In sum, even though there is no indication that Lobsangčoidan himself tried to establish a kind of academic discipline, his work evolved into an icon of Mongolian folklore studies.

### ***Understanding Mongolian Customs* as "Native" Ethnography**

It is often argued that Lobsangčoidan drew inspiration for writing *Understanding Mongolian Customs* during his stay in Japan,<sup>8</sup> where as early as 1913 Kunio Yanagita

<sup>2</sup> Walther Heissig, "Lobsangčoidan's Darstellung des Ostmongolischen Brauchtums", *Zentralasiatische Studien* no. 2 (1968), 211–263.

<sup>3</sup> Lobsangčoyidan, *Mongyol-un jang ayali-yin oyilaburi*, (Kökeqota: Öbör Mongyol-un arad-un keblel-ün qoriy-a, 1981).

<sup>4</sup> Luobusangquedan, *Menggu fengsu jian*, (Shenyang: Liaoning minzu chubanshe, 1988).

<sup>5</sup> Jun Xiao, "Guanyu Luobusangquedan zhuanxie <Menggu fensu jian> dongji de yi kaocha", *Meng Zang xiankuang shuangyuebao* 15, no. 6 (2006): 50.

<sup>6</sup> Manduqu, *Lobsangčoyidan-u*, 248–249.

<sup>7</sup> Manduqu, *Lobsangčoyidan-u*, 250, 257.

<sup>8</sup> Sereng, *Lobsangčoyidan*, (Kökeqota: Öbör Mongyol-un arad-un keblel-ün qoriy-a, 2014), 17; Yin Se, "Menggu fengsu jian' de minsuxue jiazhi", *Zhongyang minzu xueyuan xuebao* 1 (1992): 72; Manduqu, *Lobsangčoyidan-u*, 200–201.

(1875–1962) and Toshio Takaki (1876–1922) had founded a journal *Native Place Studies* (Kyôdo Kenkyû). Recently, it has been stressed that according to Yanagita and Takaki, experience in the field and namely travel was seen as a primary mode of knowledge acquisition.<sup>9</sup> This article investigates how Lobsangçoidan tied in with this focus on travelling and mobility and in what way his work stands for a specific “Mongolian” research approach. These questions are closely related to debates on “native” ethnology and the contributions of researchers working in their home communities. By accepting “native” ethnography as a particular form of knowledge production, we assume that the accounts of “native” researchers emerge under distinctive conditions and their observations are based on a specific authority which distinguishes them from the writings of other authors. As early as 1993 Kirin Narayan critically examined the attribute “native” with regard to anthropological research. She pointed out the aspect of multiple identities and emphasized that other factors such as education, gender or social class may prevail over ethnic belonging.<sup>10</sup> More recently, the question of what actually is “native” ethnography and how it differs from “non-native” ethnography has been raised by Abdelmajid Hannoum, who stresses that this issue has not received the attention it deserves.<sup>11</sup> As colonial power relationships are still operative in the production of anthropological knowledge and debates are still structured around opposing paradigms such as “here” and “there” or “self” and “other”, Hannoum concludes that anthropological research requires a “double belonging”.<sup>12</sup> However, while Hannoum investigates the role of the “native” ethnographer with regard to Morocco and Algeria, especially in Japan the concept of “native” research is understood differently. At this point, a remark on terminology is in order. In Japan, the formation of a discipline of *minzokugaku*, usually translated as native ethnology / folklore studies,<sup>13</sup> goes back to the late nineteenth century and is marked by the search for Japan’s distinct, national culture. *Minzokugaku*, however, can be rendered by different characters, making the Japanese term somewhat ambiguous, in that it can mean both, a study of popular customs and a study of a group of people identifying with each other on the basis of common ancestry, language or history.<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, Takami Kuwayama reminds his readers to distinguish between two “*minzokugaku*’s”, Japanese anthropology and folklore studies.<sup>15</sup> Elsewhere, however, he stresses that in

<sup>9</sup> Alan Christy, *A discipline on Foot: Inventing Japanese Native Ethnography, 1910–1945*. (Lanham Md. et al.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012), 45–47.

<sup>10</sup> Narayan, Kirin, “How Native Is a ‘Native’ Anthropologist?,” *American Anthropologist* 95, no. 3 (1993): 671–686.

<sup>11</sup> Abdelmajid Hannoum, “The (Re)Turn of the Native: Ethnography, Anthropology, and Nativism,” in *The anthropologist and the native: essays for Gananath Obeyesekere*, ed. H.L. Seneviratne (London: Anthem Press, 2011), 424. <https://doi.org/10.7135/UPO9780857289919.020>.

<sup>12</sup> Hannoum, “The (Re)Turn of the Native,” 423.

<sup>13</sup> These translations for *minzokugaku* are suggested by Gerald Figal, “Review”, *Journal of Asian Studies* 76, no. 1 (2017): 226.

<sup>14</sup> For discussions on this term see Christy, *A discipline*, 6.

<sup>15</sup> Takami Kuwayama, “Japanese Anthropology and Folklore Studies”, in *Theories and Methods in Japanese Studies: Current State and Future Developments. Papers in Honor of Josef Kreiner*, ed. Hans Dieter Ölschleger (Bonn: V&R unipress, 2008), 31, 36.

Japan anthropology and folklore studies developed as twin disciplines and cannot be clearly separated from each other<sup>16</sup> and it is this dual background which made him entitle his book *Native Anthropology: The Japanese Challenge to Western Academic Hegemony*. Kuwayama argues that “native” academic production is defined by several aspects, such as the author’s point of reference being her “own culture” and her writing in her mother tongue for a domestic audience. Another aspect that Kuwayama brings to the fore concerns the “native” researchers’ identity and interests, which may be affected by the way the community under study is represented.<sup>17</sup>

At this point, I would like to come back to Lobsangčoidan and the agreement that the compilation of *Mongyol-un jang ayali-yin oyilaburi* was inspired by ideas of the Japanese folklore movement. Evidence for this is usually based on the way Lobsangčoidan classifies ethnographic data and works towards defining Mongols as an ethnic/national community. As Kuwayama maintains, however, Japanese research traditions are marked by a particular research approach, which “involves[s] natives as active agents”. How do the criteria defined by Kuwayama fit for Lobsangčoidan and his role as a “native” Mongolian ethnographer? In this context, it is necessary to take a closer look at Lobsangčoidan’s life history and his literary output.

### Lobsangčoidan’s Biography and Work

Basically, all we know about Lobsangčoidan’s life is included in his afterword to *Understanding Mongolian Customs* where he relates that he came from a poor family in Kharacın left banner. At the early age of seventeen he was entrusted with an office in the local administration, but his entry into adulthood was overshadowed by an outbreak of violence targeting the Mongolian population, which in 1891 devastated Josotu league and the Southern part of the Juu Uda league.<sup>18</sup> This was a formative experience for Lobsangčoidan, who in the subsequent famine lost his parents and refers to the year 1891 as the time when “he came to his senses” (*minu bey-e sergügsen*).<sup>19</sup> After he was uprooted by the loss of his family, Lobsangčoidan left his home banner and worked as a tax registrar in neighboring Jirim league. According to his own account, it was in 1897, when he was in his early twenties, that he made the decision to become a lama. On the way to Baruyun Juu (Lhasa), he paused in Beijing intending to earn some money for his further trip. However, after

<sup>16</sup> Kuwayama, *Native Anthropology: The Japanese Challenge to Western Academic Hegemony*, (Melbourne, Vic.: Trans Pacific Press, 2004), 151n4.

<sup>17</sup> Takami Kuwayama, *Native Anthropology*, 19. He nevertheless concedes that in this respect the difference between “native” and “non-native” approaches is a question of degree only.

<sup>18</sup> For the Jindandao pogrom see Christopher Atwood, *Encyclopedia of Mongolia and the Mongol Empire* (New York: Facts on File, 2004), 280 and Borjigin, Burensain, “The Complex Structure of Ethnic Conflict in the Frontier: Through the Debates around the ‘Jindandao Incident’ in 1891,” *Inner Asia* 6, no. 1 (2004), 41–60. For the pogrom one could more specifically cite Borjigin, Burensain. 2004. “The Complex Structure of Ethnic Conflict in the Frontier: Through the Debates around the ‘Jindandao Incident’ in 1891.” *Inner Asia* 6: 41–60.

<sup>19</sup> Lobsangčoyidan, *Mongyol-un jang ayali-yin oyilaburi*, 366, Manduqu, *Lobsangčoyidan-u sudulul*, 29.

taking up residence in the Yonghe monastery in Beijing, he started to study there. Fluent in Manchu, Mongolian and Chinese since his childhood, in 1902 he passed the exam of the Lifanyuan becoming a “Master of four languages.” Subsequently, Lobsangčoidan worked as an instructor for Mongolian language, first in Beijing at a school affiliated to the Ministry of Education and then several years in Japan at the University for Foreign Languages in Tokyo (1907–11) and at the school of the Nishi Honganji Temple in Kyoto (1912–1914). After his return to China in late 1914, he took on a position at the South Manchurian Railway Company. It was in this time that he began to work on his famous book.

While in the decades following Dambijalsan’s publication, *Understanding Mongolian Customs* was primarily read as a cultural testimony, in recent years the political dimension of Lobsangčoidan’s work has been brought to the fore. In the archives of the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Xiao Jun found evidence that Lobsangčoidan was engaged in the Mongolian independence movement. In between his posts in Tokyo and Kyoto, Lobsangčoidan returned to China where in 1911 he witnessed the fall of the Qing-dynasty and tried to convince members of the Inner Mongolian nobility to act in concert with the government of the Jibzundamba Khutugtu.<sup>20</sup> According to Xiao Jun, when Lobsangčoidan returned to China again in late 1914, he had to learn that the majority of the Inner Mongolian nobility had come to an arrangement with the government of Yuan Shikai (1859–1916) and the Kyakhta Trilateral Treaty of June 1915 made a pan-Mongolian solution impossible. For this reason, his criticism of Mongolian authorities, both the nobility and Buddhist dignitaries, who in his eyes were responsible for the vulnerable position of Mongols in China, can be explained with his disillusionment with the political developments.

Research on *Understanding Mongolian Customs* is complicated by the fact that Lobsangčoidan was working on his book for a longer period of time, correcting it over and over again and producing several different versions. The edition of Dambijalsan, on which also the present study is based, goes back to a Mongolian manuscript which is preserved in the Library of Liaoning province in Dalian and once belonged to the headquarters of the South Manchurian Railway Company. Two other (partly incomplete) Mongolian versions of the manuscript are preserved in the Library of the University of Foreign Languages in Tokyo.<sup>21</sup> Interestingly, after the Mongolian versions were finished, Lobsangčoidan also produced a translation of his work in Chinese. According to Manduqu, he explains his translation with the spread of the Chinese language which is “the most common language in East Asia”.<sup>22</sup> I will come back to this important aspect below when considering the prospect audience of his work.

<sup>20</sup> Jun Xiao, “Minzu zhuyi yu duoyuan wenhua lun zhi jian - lun Luobusangquedan zhuanxie <Menggu fengsu jian> de dongji, *Jilin shifan daxue xuebao (renwen shehui kexue ban)* no. 4 (July 2017), 42.

<sup>21</sup> For the differences in scope, content, titles, arrangement of chapters and the sequence in which the different versions are likely to be composed Manduqu, *Lobsangčoyidan-u*, 124–139. On the question why several versions ended up in the Tokyo library Manduqu, *Lobsangčoyidan-u*, 139–141.

<sup>22</sup> The Chinese manuscript is quoted in Manduqu, *Lobsangčoyidan-u*, 144.



## Understanding Mongolian Customs and Japanese Folklore Studies

In the afterword of the Mongolian version published by Dambijalsan, Lobsangčoidan explains his motives for his account as follows:

(368) As I think about these issues now, they become matters of urgency, because the railway has already reached Darqan banner<sup>23</sup>, which is like the heart of Mongolia, and how will my Mongols, who, despite their eloquence, were never good at doing business with the Chinese, stand up against the trading power of Japanese and Chinese?

I am worried that, once the legacy inherited from the holy Chinggis will be scattered, there will be no witness to the arrogance of noblemen and officials and to how they were spoken of; (369) I am concerned that you, Wang, Gong, Beile, Beise and Taiji,<sup>24</sup> and commoners such as Tabunang,<sup>25</sup> *tusalayči* and *jakiruyči* officials,<sup>26</sup> who are born with the fate of ruining your own roots, do not know about the time of your extinction; I wrote [this] as I am firmly determined to accurately reveal the truth about your life and all your doings.<sup>27</sup>

This passage mirrors the scenario of loss and destruction which characterizes Lobsangčoidan's work. For him, Mongolian ways of life were not only changing, but, in an irreversible process, were going to be eliminated. As an ethnographer, Lobsangčoidan saw himself as the only person who was aware of this and for this reason had the important role of documenting practices and concepts, which were about to cease to exist. In the preface, he is even more explicit on the prospect audience who would benefit from knowledge on the Mongols:

Because in today's world, people's concerns are increasingly centered on civilization, I am alarmed [at the prospect of] the Mongols' (*mongyol udum*) achievements fall into oblivion and try to be fast and write a brief account in order to leave a little trace; I am confident that this will provide a small contribution for experts and scholars debating on issues of the human lineage and have little by little put together [my account] by carefully going through Tibetan and Mongolian historical records and investigating today's economic activities.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Darqan banner is another name for the Qorčın left middle banner.

<sup>24</sup> These are honorary titles of the Mongolian nobility during the Qing period.

<sup>25</sup> This means commoners married to noble women.

<sup>26</sup> These are officials in the banner administration.

<sup>27</sup> (368) *edüge minu bey-e edeger-i bodoju yağaraqı yabudal bolbasu . nigente temür jam mongyol-un jirüke metü darqan qosıyud yağar orısan tulada kelekü-eče yadan-a kitad-lıya araljiğ-a tululçaju kücürekü ügei bayısan mongyol minu . odo nw bwn . kitad qoyar araljiğ-a-yin erke-yi yağakıju tululçamui-y-a:*

*olan noyad tüstimed omorqay bardang aju iregsen ner-e boyda činggis-un jögeju üledegegsen köröngge udum činu . sarnısan qoyın-a gereči temdeg ügei bolıojı kemen jobanin (369) köröngge-ben süidkekü buyantai törögsen vang güng beyile beyise tayiji qaraçus tabunang tusalayči jakiruyči tüsimel tan-a mökögsen çay medekü-ber ügei-yi sanaju . tan-a olan bügüdeger amıdu bayıqu üy-e yabuju bayıqu-yi činu ünün jıyaju tusqayılan sedkilçilen joriğ nemeju biçijü beledkebei : Lobsangçoyidan, Mongyol-un, 368–369.*

<sup>28</sup> *önödegen yirtinçü-yin kümün üjel ulam udq-a gegen-yi sigümjilekü tula mongyol udum yabuju iregsen-i balallaqu-aça bolıomjılaju silamağayılan dököm mör bolıaju qurıyangıui biçijü . kerbe merged bayı nar kümün-ü udum-i sigümjilekü kereg bayıqu çay öçöken nököbüri bolqu buyu kemen bodoju töbed mongyol-un üliğer tuğıji-aça narıbçılan abçu edüge aju bayıqu tölöp-i bayıçayaju des daraj-a-yi jıyayaju yağabai : Lobsangçoyidan, Mongyol-un, 4.*

This passage is interesting in several respects. We may conclude that Lobsangčoidan was aware of the contested meaning of the term “civilization” and its significance in debates on education and modernization in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries’ Japan and China.<sup>29</sup> The addressees of his work were “experts and scholars”, who discuss the *kümün-ü udum*, “people’s gene/stock/race” or “human lineage”.<sup>30</sup> From this it follows that Lobsangčoidan attempted to draw attention from academic circles and present the Mongol *udum* as a field of research.

Notably, for him both, written sources and daily practices were sites of knowledge production. It seems reasonable to suppose that Lobsangčoidan’s awareness of daily practices as fields of scholarly inquiry was sparked off while he was teaching in Japan. Because not much biographical information is available on Lobsangčoidan, we do not know exactly with whom he was in contact while in Japan. As already mentioned, it has been argued that Lobsangčoidan’s work may have been inspired by the ideas of the Japanese scholar Yanagita,<sup>31</sup> whose publication of the “Tales of Tono” in 1912 had attracted much attention and aroused a new interest in local traditions. Just like Yanagita, Lobsangčoidan emphasizes the value of folk tales as manifestations of past practices.<sup>32</sup>

At the center of Yanagita’s inquiries were the ordinary people and their daily life as a realm of experience that was unnoticed, unconscious or forgotten.<sup>33</sup> Lobsangčoidan seems to have taken up this focus on the common people when he puts the *qaraču arad*, “the common people”, in the center of his attention. When discussing issues like inheritance or marriage customs, he draws a line between practices of commoners and those of noblemen.<sup>34</sup> Likewise, he establishes a dichotomy between Mongols living as pastoral nomads and Mongols living as agriculturalists and uses the manner of economy as the most salient feature for grouping Mongolian communities. According to his understanding, originally all Mongols were pastoral nomads and only later some of them also practiced agriculture.<sup>35</sup> Lobsangčoidan’s preoccupation with origins and his little interest in cross-links are characteristics he shares with Japanese ethnographers of the time, for whom likewise traditions and authenticity were more important than the fluidity of contemporary practices. At the same time, Lobsangčoidan’s distinction between pastoral nomads and agriculturalists goes beyond the ideas of Yanagita, who sees the field of tension in Japanese culture rather

<sup>29</sup> On the translation of this term into Mongolian see Dorothea Heuschert-Laage, “Enlightenment in the Name of Chinggis Khan: The Founding of the Eastern Mongolian Publishing House in Mukden 1926/27,” *Asiatische Studien/ Études Asiatiques* no. 73/4 (2019), 683–711.

<sup>30</sup> According to Munkherdene Lhamsuren, the term *udum* is part of the Mongolian nationality lexicon and, often used analogous with the term *ündüsü* (root/lineage/nationality), is representative for the intertwining of genealogical and ethnic concepts as basic definers of (national) community. Lhamsuren Munkh-Erdene, “The Mongolian Nationality Lexicon: From the Chinggisid Lineage to Mongolian Nationality (From the seventeenth to the early twentieth century),” *Inner Asia* 8, no. 1 (2006): 72.

<sup>31</sup> Se, “‘Menggu fengsu jian’ de minsuxue jiazhi”, 72 ; Manduqu, *Lobsangčoyidan-u*, 200–201.

<sup>32</sup> For an example see Heissig, „Lobsangčondans Darstellung“, 244–246.

<sup>33</sup> Christy, *A discipline*, 198, 206.

<sup>34</sup> Manduqu, *Lobsangčoyidan-u*, 227, 238.

<sup>35</sup> Lobsangčoyidan, *Mongjol-un*, 231; Manduqu, *Lobsangčoyidan-u*, 72.

in the opposition between country and city.<sup>36</sup> While there is much to suggest that Lobsangčoidan in Japan got in contact with ideas on the formation of ethnic identity, the concepts developed in *Understanding Mongolian Customs* cannot be understood as mere adaptations of Japanese models.

### Ethnography and Travel in the Work of Lobsangčoidan

In the passage quoted above, Lobsangčoidan also gives information on the material he used, namely Tibetan and Mongolian historical documents and personal observation. Not much is known on the written sources. The Library of the South Manchurian Railway Company in Dalian, which Lobsangčoidan had access to, included Mongolian historical literature such as the *Erdeni-yin tobči*.<sup>37</sup> According to Heissig, it is very likely that Lobsangčoidan had access to the Qing-dynasty legal code and probably also relied on the *Subud Erike* (1835) of Ǧungčuyjab.<sup>38</sup> The question arises whether Lobsangčoidan's reference to "today's economic activities" can be understood as a commitment to traveling and everyday experience as the site of genuine knowledge as proposed by the practitioners of the Japanese folklore movement. When we read Lobsangčoidan's book against the background of folklore studies in Japan and especially the contributions of Yanagita, we have to keep in mind that Yanagita's theoretical treatises and his considerations on the art of fieldwork appeared only in the 1930ies, long after *Understanding Mongolian Customs* was written. When Lobsangčoidan was in Japan, Japanese anthropological and ethnographic studies were still in the process of formation. Nevertheless, Christy defines travelling as the "foundational ideal" of the discipline<sup>39</sup> and at first glance this is in accordance with Lobsangčoidan's stress on the importance of his travels in Jirim league as a registrar as a motivation for writing his book. Lobsangčoidan relates that "when I examined and got to know the places and locations I visited at regular intervals, I certainly was not under the impression that they were all the same."<sup>40</sup> It was the fact that he had been to remote places and personally experienced varieties of cultural practices, which enabled him to observe and classify Mongolian customs. However, there is no information on his personal experiences after his return from Japan. As he was travelling in Jirim league in the 1890ies, between his fieldwork and the writing of his book was a time gap of roughly twenty years. When Lobsangčoidan started to work on his opus, he had been living outside of Mongolia for almost twenty years. Accordingly, he does not relate his observations to specific encounters or events. The lesser importance attached to direct experience thus distinguishes Lobsangčoidan from the practitioners of native ethnography / folklore studies in Japan.

<sup>36</sup> Christy, *A discipline*, 98.

<sup>37</sup> Tatsuo Nakami, "A Forgotten Mongolian Manuscript of the *Erdeni-yin tobči*: Wang Guojin and Lobsangčoyidan," in *Unknown treasures of the Altaic world in libraries, archives and museums*, ed. Tatiana Pang, (Berlin: Schwarz, 2013), 52–57.

<sup>38</sup> Heissig, "Lobsangčondans Darstellung", 238.

<sup>39</sup> Christy, *A Discipline*, 45.

<sup>40</sup> ... *toyoriᠶsan ᠶajar oron-i üjeᠵü medeged egel bayiqu sanay-a ügei bolju* ... Lobsangčoyidan, *Mongol-un*, 365.



At this point, I would like to come back to the criteria for “native” production defined by Kuwayama and presented earlier in this article. Lobsangčoidan wrote his account in his mother tongue but, after completing it, translated it into Chinese, which he considered to be the most common language in East Asia. This clearly shows that the audience he hoped to reach was not confined to readers of Mongolian. This is also indicated in the foreword of his book and his appeal to the scholarly world. It seems that for Lobsangčoidan, distance and the ability to adopt an outsider’s viewpoint were fundamental elements of ethnographic writing. When in the afterword informing his readers about his biography, he stresses that he had spent many years in Beijing, Tokyo and Kyoto. He seems to reinforce the accuracy of his account not by his being an insider, but rather by the fact that he had been to the outside. For him, his absence from the “field” was not a deficiency but rather what qualified him to write about Mongolian customs. In this context, mobility was a precondition for the creation of Lobsangčoidan’s *Understanding Mongolian Customs* in a twofold process. Firstly, through his travels in Eastern Mongolia he acquired knowledge on the practices of different Mongolian communities and thus travelling for him was a way of producing knowledge. It was only through his long-term stay in Japan, however, that he developed a new space for himself as a mediator who was able to produce knowledge both from personal experience and the collection of data in written sources.

In sum, it can be said that Lobsangčoidan’s gaze as an ethnographer was markedly different from that of Japanese native ethnographers / folklorists and likewise was his motivation. While Yanagita was determined to withstand Western hegemony over discourses on Japanese culture, Lobsangčoidan rather wrote out of a feeling of powerlessness. He saw himself as a last witness of a Mongolian culture on the verge of being extinguished and wished to give Mongolian issues a voice in scholarly debates. As regards the affinity between the researcher and his objects of study, an aspect also addressed by Kuwayama, in the case of Lobsangčoidan this rather seems to be a tragic coincidence. In his book, Lobsangčoidan criticizes both the nobility and Buddhist authorities, but likewise disapproves of the way common herders spend their lives in leisurely idleness which makes them unable to defy resistance to unfair trading practices.<sup>41</sup> His book ends with his confession “I mourn about been born among the Mongols”.<sup>42</sup> With this remark, Lobsangčoidan distances himself from his fellow Mongols.

Even though he corresponds with representatives of *minzokugaku* in that ethnic/national identity in its purest form is located in the past, what singles Lobsangčoidan out from Japanese writers, is his gloomy outlook and his harsh judgement on his compatriots.

The impact of Lobsangčoidan’s ideas on his contemporaries may have been limited, but the continued interest in his book shows that after one hundred years

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<sup>41</sup> Lobsangčoyidan, *Mongyol-un*, 240–241.

<sup>42</sup> *mongyol-dur oroju törögsen-degen yomodamui*: Lobsangčoyidan, *Mongyol-un*, 369.

the issues he raised are still of high topicality. As Inner Mongolian authors argue, in China, the folklore movement is closely related to the New Culture Movement which only started around 1919. Lobsangčoidan, however, began to work on his book in 1915 and thus engaged in folklore studies earlier than his Chinese counterparts.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, his main sources of inspiration go back to Japan and his research cannot be seen as a by-product of the intellectual development in China. For this reason, Lobsangčoidan is a figure who stands for a “native” and at least not “China-dominated” research tradition.

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<sup>43</sup> Manduqu, *Lobsangčoyidan-u*, 2–3.

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### Author

Dorothea Heuschert-Laage is a lecturer in Mongolian history at the University of Bonn, Germany. She obtained her doctoral degree with a thesis on the Qing-dynasty Mongolian legal code. Her research areas include Mongolian cultural and political history (seventeenth to early twentieth centuries), legal anthropology and the frontier regions of the Qing Empire. Her interest in Lobsangčoidan goes back to a research project at the University of Bern, Switzerland, in which she investigated processes of cultural translation in early twentieth-century Inner Mongolia.

[Dorothea.Heuschert-Laage@relwi.unibe.ch](mailto:Dorothea.Heuschert-Laage@relwi.unibe.ch)