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Aurore Dumont

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Turning Indigenous Sacred Sites into Intangible Heritage: Authority Figures and Ritual Appropriation in Inner Mongolia

AURORE DUMONT

ABSTRACT: *Oboo* cairns are sacred monuments worshipped by minority peoples in Inner Mongolia. The inclusion of *oboo* worship on China's national list of Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2006 has caused negotiations and innovations in different social and ritual strata of local societies. Going from provincial decision-making to the local interpretation of heritage classification, this article examines how the indigenous intelligentsia and ordinary people appropriate *oboo* to make them valuable and powerful sacred monuments.

KEYWORDS: Inner Mongolia, ethnic group, *oboo*, worship, intangible heritage, intelligentsia, competition, appropriation, politics.

Introduction

The sacred landscape of Inner Asia is constituted, among other elements, by holy cairns called *oboo*. Built on the top of mountains and hills in an auspicious configuration, these sacred sites are worshipped by all Mongol peoples¹ to request protection and fertile herds. The *oboo* also function as territorial markers and gathering places where commoners and political leaders honour local deities. In the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region of the People's Republic of China, *oboo* are also inherent features of the landscape and fundamental sacred places in indigenous ritual life. Banned during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), *oboo* gradually reappeared from the mid-1980s during the era of reform and opening up and gained considerable popularity among local populations in the 2000s, following the campaign to Open Up the West² (*Xibu da kaifa* 西部大開發) and the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH, *feiwuzhi wenhua yichan* 非物質文化遺產) policy. Since "*oboo* worship" (*ji aobao* 祭敖包) was included on China's national list of Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2006, numerous new *oboo* cairns have been erected and old ones restored across the grasslands of Inner Mongolia. The political construction of *oboo* as heritage sites has given rise to negotiations and innovations in different social strata. Local governments³ and intelligentsia⁴ threw themselves into competitions to get their sites recognised as heritage items, thus redefining the process of decision-making at the local level. Meanwhile, ordinary people have recast the legends and stories of their *oboo* cairns in order to demarcate themselves from other groups. As I will show, when indigenous sites or practices are turned into intangible heritage, this fosters competition, exclusion, and innovation within indigenous groups.

Their inclusion on the heritage list made the *oboo* officially recognised

symbols of the "traditional culture" (*chuantong wenhua* 傳統文化) of the "Mongol ethnic group" (*menggu minzu* 蒙古民族). The "ethnic culture" of minority groups scattered across the periphery of China has been used for decades as a resource of economic development and a strategic tool of governance. Ethnic songs, dances, dwellings, and clothing became distinctive features of a commodified culture exhibited in museums, theme parks, or "ethnic villages." But does intangible cultural heritage fall within this process of commodification of local culture, or is it instead a major break that brings about fresh prospects and challenges as indigenous communities and local political authorities manage and experience a new form of ritual practice? Working on the Orochen, a small Tungus⁵ group in Heilongjiang Province, Richard Fraser states that heritagisation "must be seen as a dual process in China, increasing governmentality and interpellation of minority actors while simultaneously creating new spaces for cultural autonomy, innovation, and alternate expressions of modernity and tradition" (2019: 180). Intangible heritage is a broad national project covering both ethnic borderlands and Han-majority areas, as Tim Oakes argues, forming contested projects of governance and social ordering (2013). My aim is to understand what happens on a local level in the public and private spheres when an indigenous sacred site is turned into intangible heritage. To follow Marina Svensson

1. Some Tungus people also worship *oboo*. Furthermore, the Mongol *oboo* is identical in form and cult to the Tibetan *la-rtse* cairn (Atwood 2004: 415).
2. The campaign to Open Up the West is a policy launched in 2001 to reduce economic inequality between the eastern and western regions of China.
3. Local governments refer to the political structures governing an administrative entity.
4. Indigenous intelligentsia are understood as individuals or a group of individuals who form a social and political elite at a local level.
5. The Tungus people are small-numbered groups who speak different languages of the Tungus-Manchu branch of the Altaic language family. They are mainly found in Russia and China.



Map 1. Hulun Buir
Source: adapted from Wikipedia (<https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hulunbuir>).

and Christina Maags, what does the “heritagisation” process discursively and materially do to objects, places, and people? (Svensson and Maags 2018: 13). By taking the *oboo* in its multiple dimensions (sacred site, territorial marker, and place of political legitimation) as the primary object of analysis, I examine how a heritage practice conceived on a national level has been adopted and reformulated in a local context. I am interested in exploring the roles played by indigenous actors in this heritagisation of their sacred sites. Who are they? What actions do they undertake to make their *oboo* a valuable and powerful monument, even if it is not officially recognised as a heritage site? How can indigenous people offer an alternative view on heritage?

This paper draws on ethnographic research carried out between 2011 and 2019 in Hulun Buir Municipality (*Hulunbei'er shi* 呼倫貝爾市)⁶ (Map 1), a multi-ethnic area on the border with Russia and Mongolia in the north-eastern part of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region.

The fieldwork was based on participant observation conducted among the various Tungus and Mongol societies inhabiting the area. I attended several *oboo* rituals, holding formal and informal discussions with different actors (herders, members of local governments, religious specialists, and common worshippers) directly or indirectly involved in intangible heritage. This allowed me to gather data ranging from oral stories and historical accounts to contemporary unpublished materials written and/or narrated by the local intelligentsia and pastoralists. In the present article, I use the concept of *indigeneity* to describe both the sacred cairns and the people who worship them. The term *indigenous* does not contradict the official categories of “ethnic minority groups” (*shaoshu minzu* 少數民族) recognised by the People’s Republic of China. Indeed, the country officially recognises 56 “ethnic groups” or “nationalities” (*minzu* 民族): the Han Chinese make up more than 90% of the total population, while the other fifty-five are “ethnic minority groups” or “small-numbered ethnic groups” (*shaoshu minzu*). It rather tends to emphasise what Michael Hathaway has called an *indigenous space*, a zone of rethinking and remaking indigenous presence (2016: 3). In Hulun Buir, the *indigenous space* is what people consider to be their homeland, and all the *oboo* are physical markers of this connection between people and their land.

After introducing the historical, religious, and ethnic context of the case study, I expose how intangible cultural heritage has produced a classification

of *oboo* and how indigenous people interpret this ranking. I then explore the involvement of the indigenous intelligentsia as authority figures in the heritage process. Finally, I show how ordinary people take advantage of cultural heritage to promote their own cairns and their belonging to a distinct community.

A sacred site for worshipping local deities on contested territory

Hulun Buir was traditionally a vast grassland border zone inhabited by diverse Tungus and Mongol nomadic pastoralists who settled in the area between the mid-eighteenth century and the 1930s. On the one hand, the Solon, the Barga, the Ölö, and the Daur people were sent by the Manchu rulers of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912) to the newly created Hulun Buir banner garrisons in 1732 and were organised into the Eight Banners system⁷ (Lee 1970: 52). On the other hand, the Khamnigan and the Buryats were refugees who fled from Siberia to China after the October Revolution (Janhunen 1996: 52). Regardless of the date of their settlement in Hulun Buir, all these people erected their own *oboo* cairns upon arrival, thus marking a link between them and their new territory. At the beginning of the twentieth century, access to pastureland was a major source of conflicts between long-established groups and newcomers who were looking for fresh grazing land. In this context of contested territory, *oboo* cairns characterised territorial boundaries between groups and materialised the legitimacy of land use. Today, Han Chinese people constitute the bulk of the population of Hulun Buir, while the largest minority group is formed by the Mongols, among which many come from other areas of Inner Mongolia.

Today, these different groups officially form what Thomas Mullaney has called “plausible communities” (2011: 69) that are categorised into “ethnic groups.”⁸ However, this official classification system does not always correspond to the far more complex reality of Hulun Buir (Table 1). While almost all of these groups share a common economy (except the Daur, who are agriculturalists), each possesses its own language (although Mongolian is a common language), beliefs, and a sense of belonging to their own community. In this respect, *oboo* embody a concrete tie between a given group and its native homeland (*nutag*). The hundreds of sacred cairns scattered across Hulun Buir offer an accurate overview of the area’s ethnic organisation. *Oboo* are also valuable clues for appreciating the political configuration of Hulun Buir. For years, *oboo* have been built according to a strict hierarchy inherited from the Qing mode of governance that stretches from the top-banner *oboo* worshipped by high officials down to the *sum* and *gachaa*⁹ *oboo* held by people of these same administrative units and the clan-based *oboo* worshipped by the members of a given clan. This political configuration not only shows the territorial division of the area into administrative entities such as banners and is still remembered in collective memory, but also reflects the way various indigenous groups have been

6. Hulun Buir was once a league (*meng* 盟), which is an administrative division of the region corresponding to a prefecture level. It has been administrated as a municipality (*shi* 市) since 2001.

7. The Eight Banners system (*Baqi* 八旗) were administrative military divisions which provided the basic framework for the Manchu military organisation during the Qing Dynasty.

8. The Solon and the Khamnigan are part of the “Evenki ethnic group” (*Ewenke minzu* 鄂溫克民族), while the Barga, the Ölö, and the Buryats are merged into the “Mongol ethnic group” (*Menggu minzu* 蒙古族). The Daur constitute the “Daur ethnic group” (*Dawo'er minzu* 達斡爾民族). These groups number tens of thousands of individuals.

9. The administrative structure of Inner Mongolia is organised from the league down to the banner (in Mongolian: *khoshuu*; in Chinese: *qi* 旗), and then down to the village (in Mongolian: *sum*; in Chinese: *sumu* 蘇木), and finally to residential and pastoral areas called *gachaa* (*gacha* 嘎查).



Figure 1: An *oboo* in the grasslands, Old Barga Banner, Hulun Buir, 2016. Credit: author.

organised across the decades by the various political authorities, from the Qing Dynasty and Republican China to the People's Republic of China.

Table 1. Ethnic groups in Hulun Buir

Ethnonym	Official Chinese classification	Prevalent traditional economy ¹⁰	Native languages ¹¹
Solon	"Evenki ethnic group"	Pastoralism	Solon, Mongolian
Khamnigan	"Evenki ethnic group"	Pastoralism	Khamnigan, Mongolian, Buryat
Daur	"Daur ethnic group"	Agriculture	Daur, Mongolian
Barga	"Mongol ethnic group"	Pastoralism	Mongolian
Ölöt	"Mongol ethnic group"	Pastoralism	Mongolian
Buryat	"Mongol ethnic group"	Pastoralism	Buryat, Mongolian

Source: author.

Oboo means "cairn" in Mongolian. *Oboos* are circular heaps of stones topped with branches and colourful prayer flags (Figure 1). For locals, *oboo* enjoy special veneration as dwelling places of local protective deities (Bawden 1958: 23; Heissig 1980: 103). The latter vary from one place to another, but often include master spirits of the land (*gazar-in ezen*),¹² water/dragon divinities (*luus*), or shamanic ancestor spirits (*ongon*). There is no clear-cut opinion regarding the religious sphere to which *oboo* worship belongs. According to Üjjiyediin Chuluu and Kevin Stuart, the *oboo* has been "classified as a shamanist cult object or the embodiment of Lamaist convention" (1995: 544). Mongolian Buddhism spread over Hulun Buir in the mid-eighteenth century, thus exposing shamanist peoples to a new faith (Bo and Amin 2013: 161).

Oboo worship occurs annually in the summertime, when the natural environment is renewed with green pastures and new-borns in the flocks. In the same way that nature goes through a cycle of renewal, every local group (sharing the same clan, lineage, or village) worships its *oboo* in order to ensure its symbolic reproduction. As Caroline Humphrey and Urgunge Onon have illustrated, "by a sacrificial exchange, the celebrants acquire the blessing of the mountain spirit to make use of the land for the reproduction of life" (1996: 151). Although the size, shape, and materials of an *oboo* vary depending on the local area and the group that occupies it, worship follows approximately the same ritual sequences. A few weeks before the ritual,

the *oboo* leader (*oboon-i darga*) – usually a respected elder in charge of the organisation of worship – collects money among the community members. Indeed, people invest their own money and labour in the organisation of one of the most important ritual events of the year. The collected funds serve to buy offerings, pay the religious specialist (either a shaman or a lama), and reward the winner of the "three manly games" (in Mongolian: *naadam*; in Chinese: *nadamu* 那達慕) – horse racing, wrestling, and archery. Early in the morning, men refresh the *oboo* by replacing the willow branches and the prayer flags of the previous year. The refreshed cairn is now a receptacle for welcoming deities. Dressed in their traditional clothes, worshippers arrive at the site and start honouring the deities and ancestors with various ritual gestures. Men reach the upper part of the *oboo* to tie on ceremonial scarves, while women¹³ and the *oboo* leader place the main meat offerings on the southern side of the *oboo*. The ritual action of presenting offerings and prayers to the deities is believed to ensure good pastures, abundant livestock, and the welfare of the community. When the incense for purifying the deities is ready, the lama starts reading prayers (or the shaman starts performing) for a few hours. Throughout the worship, people feed the deities with the food and drink they have brought while circumambulating clockwise three times around the cairn (Figure 2). At the end of the celebration, worshippers gather



Figure 2: Offerings and worshippers in front of the Mergen clan *oboo* (Daur people), Evenki Autonomous Banner, Hulun Buir, 2017. Credit: author.

10. Indigenous people may also be employed in different sectors such as the administration, the police, etc.
11. Mandarin Chinese is understood and spoken by the majority of the ethnic groups living in Hulun Buir.
12. I use a phonetic transliteration close to the pronunciation of the different local dialects.
13. Women are not allowed to reach the upper part of the *oboo*. According to my informants, the exclusion of women is interpreted as a way to protect the *oboo* from female pollution (menstruation).



Figure 3: The act of calling the essence of the fortune performed by Buryat worshippers, Evenki Autonomous Banner, Hulun Buir, 2017. Credit: author.

and perform the "act of calling the essence of the fortune, *dallaga*" (Davaa-Ochir 2008: 53), which consists of making a clockwise circular movement with offerings in their hands (Figure 3). The *naadam* start in the afternoon. In the same way people please the spirits with prayers and offerings, they offer nature a tribute in the form of recreational games to obtain favours and ritual efficiency. *Oboo* worship and the connected *naadam* constitute a vital social event that connects a local group to its sacred homeland.

Oboo ranking: From heritage classification to emic interpretation

The *oboo*'s shift in status from a sacred monument to a site of intangible heritage started in 2006 in the Shilin Gol League (*Xilinguole meng* 錫林郭勒盟), about one thousand kilometres from Hulun Buir. Only two years after China joined the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, "*oboo* worship" became one of the first "Mongolian customs" to be included on the Chinese national ICH list, an initiative driven by the Shilin Gol League's Folk Art Museum. *Oboo* worship was once regarded as a "traditional Mongolian custom" bound up with ritual within the Buddhist and shamanist context of Inner Mongolia. Within the heritagisation process, *oboo* emerged as an areligious symbol used for shaping Inner Mongolian culture and identity. According to the new official heritage definition, "*oboo* worship" is neither a ritual nor a religious practice, but rather "one of the manifest expressions of how people of the grasslands venerate nature."¹⁴

The news that *oboo* worship had been placed on the national list spread rapidly over Inner Mongolia, generating sudden interest in *oboo* ritual practices. *Oboo* have sprung up everywhere, from banner cairns (re)built on sacred mountains to *oboo* erected in the middle of urban centres to imitations in tourist areas. Equally, those who supposedly possess knowledge regarding *oboo* worship were awarded the title of transmitters (*chuancheng ren* 傳承人) of shamanic culture and *oboo* culture. They are often elders who remember how *oboo* were worshipped when they were young, before the anti-religious campaigns started in the mid-1950s, and can tell legends related to *oboo*.

Among the hundreds of *oboo* scattered in Hulun Buir, only one has been placed on the first provincial-level list of Inner Mongolia: an *oboo* from the Old Barga Banner. Following the official model launched at the national level – itself inspired by UNESCO's 2003 ICH Convention – provinces, cities,

and other administrative units have also developed their own standards for managing cultural heritage. In 2007, Hulun Buir Municipality published its first list of intangible cultural heritage. All the selected items represent the different minority peoples living in the area. On the list, one finds the traditional clothes of the Khamnigan, marriage ceremonies among the Barga, the cribs of the Daur, yurts, and *oboo* worship. It is interesting to note that the yurt and *oboo* worship are the only two customs not associated with a specific group. Nomadic dwellings and *oboo* worship represent indispensable components in the way of life of diverse local societies in Hulun Buir. However, the government's desire to maintain *oboo* worship as a uniform practice in order to avoid ethnic tensions does not correspond with the heterogenous practices found in various localities.

In 2015, *oboo* were selected as one of the ten cultural symbols of Inner Mongolia; then, in 2016, another list reshuffled *oboo* cultural heritage in Inner Mongolia. Seventy-two *oboo* from the autonomous region were selected as "Inner Mongolia's famous *oboo*" (*Neimenggu zhiming aobao* 內蒙古知名敖包), creating a formal heritage classification between the nominated sacred sites and those that were excluded. This new list also opened a space for promoting *oboo* worship and for negotiating its ritual value at different levels in the indigenous communities. The process started two years earlier in 2014, when the Inner Mongolia Academy of Social Sciences established a team of experts to conduct a general survey about "*oboo* culture" in the three leagues and nine municipalities of the autonomous region. The first census of Inner Mongolia's *oboo* was held, and a total of 3,747 sacred cairns were inventoried. One year later, the China's Association of Mongolian Studies, together with the Inner Mongolia's Folklore Association, gathered specialists who nominated the 72 "Inner Mongolia's famous *oboo*."¹⁵ With this new list, the selected *oboo* no longer simply represent a "popular custom" (*minsu* 民俗), but have also become famous sacred sites, provided with a name and connected to a territory and a people. These successive heritage lists, which provide the *oboo* and its worship with fluctuating values over time, must be put into a larger context of cultural authority. The emergence of the *oboo* as a heritage site marks a divergence between the state's desire to determine the *oboo* as a homogenous cultural feature of Inner Mongolia's landscape and the indigenous interpretation of *oboo* as a powerful sacred site.

In Hulun Buir, eight *oboo* were selected for the list. All are large formal *oboo* worshipped by one or several banners and are able to welcome hundreds, or even thousands, of worshippers. For indigenous people, whether common herders or members of the intelligentsia, what makes an *oboo* prestigious is not only its size and its capacity to welcome a large number of participants; it is also, and more importantly, its place in the political hierarchy and the power of its deities. The local representation of a prestigious *oboo* thus combines political authority – which can be reinforced by the inclusion of *oboo* onto an official heritage list – and the efficiency attributed to the energies perceived around the cairn.

According to the emic conception, each *oboo* occupies a particular position in the sacred landscape following the established political structure, going from top-ranking banner *oboo* down to *sum* and *gachaa*-based *oboo*, and clan *oboo*. The great sacrifices held at the top-level *oboo* until the

14. "祭敖包" (*ji aobao*, *Oboo* worship), *Zhongguo feiwuzhi yichan wang* (中國非物質遺產網), <http://www.ihchina.cn/Article/Index/detail?id=14997> (accessed on 30 September 2020).

15. Wurichaihu 烏日柴呼, "內蒙古首批知名敖包名單公布" (*Neimenggu shoupi zhiming aobao mingdan gongbu*, Announcement of Inner Mongolia's List of First Batch of Famous *Oboo*), *內蒙古日報* (*Neimenggu ribao*), 26 June 2016, <http://nm.people.com.cn/n2/2016/0626/c196667-28566095.html> (accessed on 8 October 2020).

1950s were a symbolic continuation of political power, determining loyalty between leaders and their subjects. *Oboo* rituals were major public events for gathering the different social strata of the population where Qing and Republican China political leaders demonstrated their authority.

The Amban *oboo* is one of the eight *oboo* of Hulun Buir on the “famous *oboo*” list (Figure 4). Everybody in Hulun Buir knows this high-ranking cairn, which was worshipped at the beginning of the twentieth century by the Eight banners of Hulun Buir under the patronage of the renowned Gui Fu 貴福 (1862-1941). Known locally and in the collective memory as the most prestigious *Daur Amban* (assistant military governor in Manchu) of the 1915s, Gui Fu was in reality the vice-governor of Hulun Buir in 1919 and then its governor in 1920.



Figure 4: Amban *oboo*, Hailar City, Hulun Buir, 2019. Credit: author.

As Hulun Buir’s most prestigious *oboo* in terms of political hierarchy, the Amban *oboo* was worshipped on the third day of the fifth lunar month of the lunar calendar; after this, other smaller *oboo* celebrations could start (Dumont forthcoming), following a strict political structure. Another fundamental aspect of *oboo* is the spread of deities’ power. As David Sneath has demonstrated, the *oboo* ceremony embodies and enacts the relationship between human and superhuman forces. As such, it is a highly political act, denoting those who are the legitimate representatives of the human community to the supernatural world (2014: 461). People make sure to worship at least once at one of the prestigious top-ranking *oboo*, an act akin to going on an important pilgrimage. The heritage classification of “famous *oboo*” appears to be a simplified replica of the emic interpretation of the political order. Many local people told me that the selected famous *oboo* are prestigious cairns accredited by locals with a particular power and as such deserve their nominations.

The heritage classification is also a way to reinforce the significance of political structure and legitimacy in contemporary Inner Mongolia. At the beginning of the 1980s, the Barga Banners’ government revived *oboo* worship. After the banners showed the way by “leading from the top,” the *sum* and clans could follow the example and organise their own ceremonies (Sneath 2000: 238-39). In a way, top-ranking *oboo* and their worship fit and even serve the current political ideology because they still gather local political leaders from the different banners, *sum*, and *gachaa*, the intelligentsia, and common worshippers under the symbolic leadership of the Chinese government. But how are these different categories of people involved (or not) in the symbolic continuation of the political

order? The shifting roles played by the indigenous communities of Hulun Buir at different levels of the heritage-making process will be examined, and especially the way they appropriate discourse on intangible heritage to create their own initiatives.

Indigenous intelligentsia as authority figures

The contribution of indigenous intelligentsia to the promotion and categorisation of their own culture is not new. Already in the 1950s, they were engaged by the Chinese state in the Ethnic Classification Project (*minzu shibie* 民族識別) to identify the country’s different “nationalities” (*minzu*) (Mullaney 2011). After the fall of the USSR, intellectuals in Inner Asia were leading figures in the creation of “invented traditions,” from the rehabilitation of Chinggis Khan in Inner Mongolia (Charleux 2009) to the reestablishment of collective rituals among the Evenki of Siberia (Lavrillier 2013). In Hulun Buir, the creation of an Evenki celebration called the “Auspicious Festival” (*Sebinjie* 瑟賓節) in 1993 illustrates how Evenki intelligentsia created a new adapted tradition. The content of the festival was invented by members of the Inner Mongolia Evenki Research Association (*Neimenggu Ewenke zu yanjiuhui* 內蒙古鄂溫克族研究會), mainly Evenki researchers and writers. As the former head of the association explained to me, every member collected data from Chinese ethnographic literature from different periods about Evenki collective rituals over the last two centuries. They then pieced together different ritual elements, chose the Evenki term *sebzen*, meaning “to rejoice” or “auspicious,” and transliterated it into Chinese as *sebin* 瑟賓. The Auspicious Festival was held for the first time on 18 June 1994 at the prestigious Bayan Khoshuu *oboo*, where worship, songs, and dances were performed in front of local political leaders. Since then, *Sebinjie* has been celebrated by the Evenki every 18 June in front of the Bayan Khoshuu *oboo*, known in Chinese as the “first *oboo* under heaven” (*tian xia diyi aobao* 天下第一敖包) (Figure 5). The Bayan Khoshuu *oboo* is also one of Inner Mongolia’s eight “famous *oboo*.” Like the Amban *oboo*, it was, and still is, among the highest-ranking *oboo* worshipped by the Evenki Autonomous Banner. The official history of the Bayan Khoshuu *oboo* is known among all the locals and has been published in a collective book dedicated to intangible cultural heritage in the Evenki Autonomous Banner (Tie 2014), a renowned Evenki intellectual who is also secretary of the Party committee in an Evenki *sum*.



Figure 5: Bayan Khoshuu *oboo*, Evenki Autonomous Banner, Hulun Buir, 2017. Credit: author.

In 1732, in order to restrain Russian expansion, the Manchus completed their frontier establishment with the creation of the Hulun Buir banner garrisons, where 3,000 Barga, Orochen, Daur, and Ölot military men were transferred (Lee 1970: 52). The groups were organised into Eight Solon banners (*Suolun baqi* 索倫八旗); and in 1800, the Qing government created a banner *oboo* known as the Bayan Khoshuu *oboo*, where military officers, local politicians, and nomadic peoples gathered annually for worship (Batudelger 2014a: 45-46; Batudelger 2014b: 95). In the regional literature, the Bayan Khoshuu *oboo* is presented as *oboo* equally worshipped by all the ethnic groups living in the banner. In practice, the *oboo* ceremony is mainly held by the Solon (Evenki) and the Buryats, but never at the same time or in the same way, as each group tries to appropriate the cairn for itself. Relying on the "sacred geography of conflict," Stefan Krist and Mōngönsan (2020) examined how the Bayan Khoshuu *oboo* became a site of contestation between the two groups. Since the Evenki "Auspicious Festival" is held at the Bayan Khoshuu *oboo* site, the Evenki is the titular nation of the banner and has managed to ethnicise the *oboo* ceremony by "de-mongolising it." They wear Evenki traditional clothes and replaced the Mongolian *naadam* with their own festival (Krist and Mōngönsan 2020: 6-7).

For their part, the Buryats keep worshipping the Bayan Khoshuu *oboo* in their own way on a different date from the Evenki celebrations. These initiatives are often led by leaders of the community, who give their followers instructions before worship.

Banner *oboo* have indeed always been sites of political action. However, since *oboo* worship was turned into intangible heritage, banner *oboo* cairns have emerged as a new arena of negotiation and controversy within different spheres of indigenous local societies. Members of the intelligentsia play a decisive role in the making of heritage and its reception by the local community. Christina Maags and Heike Holbig apply the concept of "fragmented authoritarianism" to demonstrate how in China the elite, often made up of cadres and scholars, form symbiotic networks that appropriate the discourse and concepts of domestic intangible cultural heritage to combine them with their own creative strategies (Maags and Holbig 2016: 72-73). In Hulun Buir, local governments (banner governments), museums, as well as cultural and tourist associations are the major official organs involved in heritage procedures at the local level, from recording a given "tradition" to its final selection and implementation. For instance, the Hulun Buir Centre for the Preservation of Cultural Heritage (*Hulunbei'er shi feiwuzhi wenhua yichan baohu zhongxin* 呼倫貝爾市非物質文化遺產保護中心) is one of the work units (*danwei* 單位)¹⁶ created in every corner of the country.¹⁷ Centres are often established by provincial administrations, and their members are mainly either members of local governments or researchers affiliated with local cultural and academic institutions. Their role is to survey, protect, and display intangible cultural heritage. Since its creation in the early 2010s, the Hulun Buir Centre has already surveyed more than 476 items, and has collected more than three million Chinese characters and 30,000 GBs of pictures and videos related to cultural heritage.¹⁸

While the Hulun Buir Centre is the pivotal body, other centres for the preservation of cultural heritage at the banner level have been created, leading to a hierarchical structure stretching down from a global perspective (the whole of Hulun Buir Municipality) to the most localised indigenous view of cultural heritage. As scholars have witnessed in other parts of China (Bodolec 2012; Svensson and Maags 2018), these local structures bring together politicians and regional experts, such as local ethnologists and intellectuals from indigenous communities. They take part in local surveys,



Figure 6: Lama and Barga worshippers in front of the Amban *oboo* before the ritual, Hailar City, Hulun Buir, 2017. Credit: author.

extract published materials and give advice on policies; in a word, they are centre stage in the heritage-making process. In our case study, most banner governments and centres for the preservation of cultural heritage are dominated by members of ethnic groups, who not only desire to have their "culture" recognised as valuable heritage, but also seek to differentiate themselves from other ethnic groups inhabiting the area.

Let us return to the famous Amban *oboo* mentioned earlier. Situated on a high hill, the Amban *oboo* overlooks Hailar District (*Haila'er qu* 海拉爾區), the political, economic, and administrative centre of Hulun Buir for centuries. The historical circumstances under which this *oboo* was erected are similar to those of the Bayan Khoshuu *oboo*. According to the official history, the Amban *oboo* is the oldest cairn: it was built in 1732 when 3,000 Daur, Evenki, Orochen, and Barga bannermen¹⁹ were organised into the Eight Solon banners of Hulun Buir (Ethnic Affairs Committee of Hailar District 2019: 1). It was a major sacred and political site where eminent political figures gathered annually. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Amban *oboo* was consecrated by different banners and ethnic groups under the authority of the Daur Amban, remembered even today. At this time, the Daur clans controlled the Hulun Buir area, rising to a position of dominance. Worship of the Amban *oboo* ceased during the Japanese occupation (1931-1945) and the civil war (1945-1949), and was then banned during the Cultural Revolution. It was revived only in 2003 by a Barga intellectual. After collecting funds among his community, he rebuilt the *oboo*, and the Barga started worshipping it under the supervision of a lama (Figure 6). However, a few years later, the Buryats also started to worship the *oboo* on a different date. After the Amban *oboo* gained the status of a "famous *oboo*" in 2016, the Daur declared, in turn, not only their interest in worshipping the *oboo*, but also their desire to renovate it.

16. The work unit has been the fundamental social and spatial unit of urban China under socialism. It was a source of employment, wages, and other material benefits for the vast majority of urban residents (Bray 2005). Nowadays, people still use it to refer to their workplace.

17. China has established four administrative-level intangible cultural heritage inventories: national, provincial, prefectural, and county, with each level in charge of selecting and publishing lists of the intangible cultural heritage under their jurisdiction (Lee 2020: 68).

18. Li Yuzhuo 李玉琢, "內蒙古呼倫貝爾市讓非遺'活'在當下" (Neimenggu Hulunbei'er shi: Rang feiyi 'huo' zai dangxia, Hulun Buir Municipality in Inner Mongolia: Let cultural heritage 'live' in the present), *Neimenggu ribao* (內蒙古日報), 11 January 2019, http://grasland.china.com.cn/2019-01/11/content_40640031.html (accessed on 6 October 2020).

19. The term bannermen (*qiren* 旗人) refers to the people who were integrated into the Eight Banners system during the Qing Dynasty.

To give the Amban *oboo* a fresh look was the long-held ambition of Su Furong 蘇福榮. He is the head of Hulun Buir's Daur Culture Research Association (*Dawo'er minzu wenhua yanjiuhui* 達斡爾民族文化研究會) and the author of many articles and books dedicated to Daur culture. Like many intellectuals from autochthonous communities, Su Furong is very concerned with the safeguarding of Daur "traditional" customs. Indeed, renovating the Amban *oboo* through official channels was a way to be part of heritage processes and recognise the prestigious past of the Daur as former rulers in the area. In 2019, members of the Daur Culture Research Association, the Barga Banner Association of *Oboo* Worship, the Daur Association of Evenki Autonomous Banner, the Evenki Research Association, some transmitters of "shamanic culture," and other experts jointly decided to renovate the Amban *oboo* (Chen Ba'erhu Banner *Oboo* Sacrifice Association *et al.* 2020: 3). They conducted a survey and submitted their investigation report to the Hailar government, the United Front Work Department, and the Ethnic Affairs Commission in June 2019. In September, a meeting about the "cultural history of *oboo*" was held by the Ethnic Affairs Commission, and finally in October it issued an official agreement for the renovation of the *oboo*. In March 2020,²⁰ an organising committee for renovating the Amban *oboo* was set up to take charge of the different steps of the renovation. In May 2020, a special ritual was celebrated at the Amban *oboo* by "transmitters of *oboo* culture," "transmitters of shamanic culture," members of the government, and local intelligentsia. The ritual consisted of asking the local deities for "permission" to renovate the cairn through different ritual actions (making offerings, burying holy vessels, and ceremonial scarfs). Although the project of renovating the Amban *oboo* has been officially undertaken by the Daur, the Solon, and the Barga, the whole process, from developing the initiative to collecting funds and undertaking the restoration work, was done under the leadership of the Daur. The special ritual was held by shamans under the leadership of the famous Daur female shaman Sijingua, who is also a "transmitter of shamanic culture." When the renovation of the *oboo* started in July 2020, the cairn and the altar were replaced with new ones, and a commemorative stone dedicated by the contemporary Daur painter Wu Tuanliang 吳團良²¹ was erected in front of the cairn. By bringing their experts and shamans and by carving their name in stone, the Daur assert the influence of their group in the worship of the most valued *oboo* in the area. In June 2021, the Amban *oboo* was successively worshipped by the Barga on 12 June, followed by the Daur on 17 June and by the Buryats on 20 June.

Like many other members of the indigenous intelligentsia, Su Furong operates on all fronts to highlight the "cultural heritage" of the Daur people and is a respected authority figure within his community. For local people, an authority figure is someone who is knowledgeable about his/her local culture and has the capacity to promote it as cultural heritage through his/her abilities and connections. When I was collecting data about *oboo*, people would always recommend that I ask those "who hold culture and knowledge," the voices of the community. Maintaining close ties with the authorities, members of local intelligentsia are also an integral part of a governance that advocates modernisation, economic development, and "harmony between ethnic groups." Numerous studies have pointed out that the prominent role played by this elite in cultural heritage often marginalises local communities (Bodolec 2012; Fan 2014; You 2015; Maags and Holbig 2016). Here, I wish to draw a quite different picture by demonstrating how indigenous communities take an active part in the perpetuation and innovation of *oboo* worship. Although ordinary local people are excluded from decision-making, they are nonetheless involved in various initiatives to make their *oboo* a ritually powerful sacred monument.

The power of ancestors

The addition of *oboo* worship to the list of intangible heritage has fostered a gap between the "famous" banner *oboo* and the *oboo* of smaller administrative and social units. While the former are worshipped annually and prominently by the highest political authorities of Hulun Buir and hundreds of worshippers, the latter are celebrated far away in the grasslands by small communities belonging to *sum*, *gachaa*, or clans. Local people express this difference in terms of size, distinguishing the high-ranking "big *oboo*" from their own "small *oboo*." While intangible cultural heritage is a discriminatory process with different hierarchy levels and forms of exclusion, it can paradoxically create innovative dynamics among those left out. In the countryside of Zhejiang, for example, lineages and religious associations renovate ancestral halls and temples that are not listed as heritage, and in this way create a sense of identity (Svensson 2016: 38-40). I suggest that in Hulun Buir, too, local people are not necessarily "un-empowered participants" (Liang 2013: 58). They also take advantage of the *oboo* cultural heritage to promote their own cairns and to inscribe their community within the ethnic and sacred landscape.

Heritage may impose a universalising trend on local diversity (Harrison 2009: 155). Since *oboo* worship was turned into intangible cultural heritage, *oboo* tend to be officially represented as a uniform practice of the Mongols rather than an element in the complex cultural and ethnic diversity of Hulun Buir. The various groups worshipping *oboo* do not consider themselves as a single homogenous unit sharing the same language, history, and cultural practices. Each group has its own stories, rituals, and memory that make people feel as if they belong to a distinct indigenous community. In this regard, *oboo* serve as territorial and ethnic markers separating the different ethnic communities. Every *oboo* has its own particular features and possesses its own story, revealing the historical or political circumstances under which a group of people settled in a given locality and marked it as their own upon arrival by erecting a cairn (Dumont 2017: 202).

Over the last few years, people have been concerned with restoring their *oboo*'s story and praising their ancestors. "Small *oboo*" are often linked to a mythical ancestor, such as rich herders, high-ranking officers, or powerful clan shamans whose souls are believed to have been transformed into deities controlling the *oboo* cairn. Today, among the clan *oboo* worshippers who consider themselves the descendants of Qing bannermen, many oral stories recount how a notable ancestor built a clan *oboo* upon his arrival in the Hulun Buir grasslands in the eighteenth century. Since the mid-2000s, elders and young people interested in their clan's history have started to piece together oral legends and historical data in order to trace the common ancestor of their clan. This is how *oboo* have been turned into powerful tools for the interpretation of social and local memory. As we have seen, 1732 is the official date on which some Mongol and Tungus bannermen settled in Hulun Buir. This endorsed version of the past became a reference date in people's memory and local narratives.

20. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in China has affected many administrative processes in the country and the renovation of the Amban *oboo* has been delayed. I was not able to go to China in 2020 and 2021: the information related to the renovation of Amban *oboo* comes from my previous fieldwork and documents shared with me by my informants.

21. So far, those whose names have been given are almost all male. This does not mean that all of the actors involved in the process of heritagisation are necessarily men. I provided this information on the basis of my observations during fieldwork. Although less represented in the political sphere, women play a significant role in the era of heritagisation. For example, in Hulun Buir, they are active in the transmission of skills and techniques, are present in music entertainments, and often lead small business.

I have collected different stories among people who consider themselves the descendants of bannermen. One such tale was gathered from the Solon people. Yal Khavan is one of the largest clans of the Solon. In 2015, three members compiled the story of their clan and its *oboo*. The creation of this clan *oboo* can be traced back to 1732, when the officer Khilkhiet reached Hulun Buir with his seven sons after serving in successful military campaigns for the Manchus. In 1734, Khilkhiet built an *oboo* in Edug Oron for his family. Time after time, the Yal Khavan clan has expanded, and today the clan consists of twelve generations, two hundred families, and one thousand people, all of whom worship the Edug Oron *oboo* (Batudelger, Khas-erdeni, and Zorigsöröng 2015: 2). Another story was gathered from the Barga people. The Khuichelig clan had a powerful shaman named Ayangan. After she passed away in 1800, the members of the clan set up a tomb for the deceased shaman, as she had requested; later, the tomb became the Khuichelig *oboo*. For their part, the Daur people possess a tombstone *oboo* that eventually became one of their ethnic markers. Worshipped by the Dentkhe lineage of the Aola clan, it is believed to have been erected in 1802 in memory of Fanchabu 範察布, a high-ranking officer from the Aola clan (Ali 2007: 7).

These three narratives all feature a distinguished character with a precise date and specific actions on a given territory. Tracing their primary ancestor allows the different clans and groups to locate themselves within the military and political history of Hulun Buir. The inhabitants of Hulun Buir were placed there to serve the Qing rulers, and state service remained the dominant conception of political life among the Hulun Buir intelligentsia up to the early twentieth century (Atwood 2005: 8). Intangible heritage places more emphasis on the former bannermen, who mirror the historical significance of peripheral areas for the Chinese nation. The official narratives now shown in local museums and during festivities relate a prestigious past, featuring bannermen as exemplary heroes who protected the frontiers of Hulun Buir from Russian incursion in the eighteenth century and participated in the expansion of China. As Kirk Denton notes, memorial sites in China are implicated in a highly politicised process of remembering and representing the past (2014: 3). *Oboo* cairns are also such memorial sites, in the sense that they are a support for a local history that steer people's sense of place and memories. People appropriate this historical value; as such, the "act of value appropriation becomes an act of power in which the past is used to legitimize interests in the present" (Zhu and Maags 2020: 6). Promoting ancestors is not only a way for ethnic groups to gain legitimacy in local history and to inscribe their cairn within the sacred landscape; it is also a way to link themselves to a local identity.

Local people are engaged in a double process of alignment and demarcation. On the one hand, they appropriate official narratives and *oboo* heritage ranking to affirm the legitimacy of their community; on the other, they also make sense of their distinctiveness by undertaking independent initiatives.

Authenticity and *oboo* ritual efficiency

The promotion of cultural heritage often goes hand-in-hand with the development of tourism. Once *oboo* were authenticated as heritage site by official authorities, they were also appropriated for commercial purposes and became a standard part of local tourism. Apart from high-ranking *oboo* and small *oboo*, countless new cairns have been constructed either in tourist camps or in urban parks, opening up potential for the contestation of authenticity. My informants always referred to these as

"fake *oboo*." These so-called fake cairns are imitations of *oboo*, often not properly oriented (as with the door of the yurt, the front of the *oboo* should always face southward) and constructed with inappropriate materials. Tourist camps are often managed by Han Chinese or Mongols who are not native to the area. In tourist camps, the *oboo* is a decorative element that is never worshipped. However, it complements other artefacts that are supposed to symbolise authentic Mongolness: yurts, horses, and men dressed in deel, the traditional Mongolian clothing. As Christopher Evans and Caroline Humphrey observed, "for those who built the tourist camp, 'the Mongolian culture' is already something to be distanced and encapsulated within the ethnographic" (2002: 190).

For local people, what makes an *oboo* unauthentic is not its incorrect features or unsuitable location, but rather its loss of ritual efficiency. For the Mongol and Tungus who worship at *oboo* annually, the sacred cairn is a living monument dedicated to the land spirits and powerful ancestors. In contrast to tourism practices that promote a static folk image of *oboo*, local people emphasise the living ritual efficiency of their cairns. As Robert Shepherd suggests, a religious heritage site is caught between the preservationist ideal of freezing time and the practical realities of faith as a living practice (2013: 13). This dualistic vision of the sacred site in no way prevents people from preserving their own authentic *oboo* sites. On the contrary, gaining ritual efficiency takes on meaning when it is embedded in a lived ritual experience.

Among the myriad *oboo* scattered across Hulun Buir's landscape, from the high-ranking *oboo* celebrated by heritage policy to the "fake tourist" *oboo*, how do ordinary worshippers celebrate? By what material and symbolic means is *oboo* worship made authentic? In Hulun Buir, the ritual season starts in the summer. High-ranking banner *oboo* and small *oboo* are celebrated in every locality and at the same time. People prefer to go to their own *oboo*, which depends on their native place and/or clan belonging. The celebration of a "small *oboo*" gathers the whole community, which pays homage to the spirits and ancestor to obtain the protection of the community, abundant rain for good pastures, and the fertility of herds. Through different ritual actions we have mentioned above, people please the deities, which in turn strengthens the ritual efficiency.

Oboo worship encompasses a set of embodied knowledge and practices that bestow authenticity and ritual efficiency. Through their individual and collective actions, members of ethnic groups remember their ancestors, transmit heritage culture, and make the *oboo* a physical sign of their homeland and identity.

Conclusion

For decades, *oboo* cairns and their worship have served as territorial markers and sites of political and ritual action. Today, for the Tungus and Mongol societies of Inner Mongolia, whether employees of the local government, members of the intelligentsia, or pastoralists, *oboo* and their worship represent an intrinsic element of their religious life. Each community uses various narratives and actions to demarcate itself from the others: the *oboo* is thus becoming a site for the legitimation of one's ethnic belonging.

The identification of *oboo* worship as intangible cultural heritage in 2006 generated new challenges and prospects for local governments and their communities. *Oboo* are an integrative part of the Chinese national project of governance aimed at ensuring a given socio-political order within the margins of the country. Turned into cultural heritage, *oboo* also exemplify how minority borderland groups and their cultures are appropriated to provide a multi-ethnic dimension to the Chinese intangible heritage

governance. Nevertheless, intangible heritage governance is rather different from the ethnic policies established decades ago. It seems to be an intricate process that is no longer restricted to exoticised ethnic groups, one that generates a combination of shifting roles, reciprocities, and obligations between the different actors involved. The heritagisation process provides *obao* with a new socio-political significance, which is understood in different ways. We have seen through our Inner Mongolian case study how the political notion of “*obao* heritage” was first formulated at the provincial level and then implemented, celebrated, and reinterpreted by indigenous peoples in a local context. If the state has the “ultimate authority to determine the meaning of the landscape” (Nyiri 2006: 75), be it sacred or not, local people use their own strategies and agency to place their communities and sacred sites within this political order.

Instead of opposing the state discourse on *obao* heritage and the actions of minority people, this paper has explored the initiatives undertaken by different strata of indigenous communities as they seek to make their *obao* a prestigious site within the sacred landscape of Hulun Buir. In southwest China, Yu has shown that despite the recognition of a Miao ritual as Intangible Cultural Heritage, the ritual maintains its sacred and secular functions thanks to the ritualists’ inherited practices and the persistence of community narratives (Yu 2015: 17). In Hulun Buir and elsewhere in China, *obao* worship and other religious practices offer a

glimpse into the way local societies, be they Han or ethnic groups, exert their influence on their own heritage by performing and maintaining narratives and ritual actions.

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GSRL, 5^e étage Bâtiment Recherche Nord, Campus Condorcet, 14 Cours des Humanités, 93322, Aubervilliers, France
(auroredumont@gmail.com).

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