

Preface

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Preface

On November 6th and 7th, 2011, the National Museum of Ethnology in Osaka hosted scholars from Mongolia, Japan, Russia, and China at a symposium devoted to “New Horizons in Oyrad-Mongol Studies.” The present collection includes papers from that symposium as well as some additional articles.

The Mongolian word “Oyrad” has been rendered as “Oirat” in Russian and English, and this volume uses the latter spelling except when discussing details specific to the former. The term refers to nomadic groups in western Mongolia: Dorbets, Torguts, Zakhachins, Myangats, Altai Uriyankhais, Uluds, Bayads, and others. One of these groups, known in the scientific literature as “Kalmyks,” has since the early 17th century lived in a secluded valley between the Volga and Don rivers on the northwest coast of the Caspian Sea—an area that was once known to Russians as the Polovtsian Steppe but is now called the Kalmyk Steppe. Other Oirat people, descendants of late-18th-century emigrants from the Kalmyk Steppe, now inhabit the Ejene Oasis in the Chinese province of Inner Mongolia. Still others live in China’s Xinjiang and Qinghai provinces.

Information on the ancient history of Mongols in general and the Oirat in particular is scarce. Accumulated archeological materials relating to the early history of Central Asian tribes are impossible to link to any of the known ethnic communities. Chinese historical chronicals—including the *Shiji* (*Historical Records*) of Sima Qiang (circa 145–90 BC), the father of Chinese historiography—can at least partly fill this gap in historical knowledge, however.

According to most researchers, the early phase of the Oirat ethno-genesis took place within the boundaries of Central Asia and southern Siberia. During the first millennium AD, vast areas of the Mongolian steppe—from the Great Wall in the south to southern Siberia in the north and from the upper waters of the Irtysh River in the west to the Amur River in the east—were inhabited by wave after wave of nomadic peoples, including Huns, Hsien-pi, Jujan (Juan-Juan), ancient Turks, Uighurs, Kyrgyz, and Khitans. This region is known for sudden appearances by mighty nomadic empire-builders who stormed Asia and Europe. The ethnic and linguistic identities of some of these peoples have never been established.

The ancient Turks, Uighurs, and Kyrgyz were Turkic-speaking peoples, although they may have included a variety of proto-Mongolian ethnicities such as the Tunguso-Manchus and other Paleo-Asiatic ethnic elements. The origins and linguistic affiliations of the Huns, Syanbias, and Jujans are not entirely clear, but Mongolian scholars are unanimous in counting them among the ethnic predecessors of the Mongols. That the Khitans spoke a Mongolian language is not doubted by researchers, who generally point to the 10th and 11th centuries as the formative era for the Mongolian ethnic group, which gained economic and cultural visibility during that time.

During the same period, a change occurred in the ethnic map of Mongolia. The Khitan invasion into regions of Central Asia began, resulting in the escape of Turkic-speaking tribes, whose vacant lands were taken over by Mongolian-speaking tribes. By the middle of the 12th century, the whole territory of Mongolia and the adjacent areas to the north were ruled by

Mongolians and related tribes. Some separate groups of Turkic-speaking people remained through the 11th and 12th centuries (and even later) in Western Mongolia but were gradually assimilated by Mongolian invaders, among whom were the ancestors of the Oirat. Moving westward in the 11th and 12th centuries, they captured the territory previously occupied by Turkic tribes, now on the northernmost periphery of the Mongolian world. This region was then, as now, the border of the territorial core mixing Turks and Mongols.

The relocation to this new place and the close contact with nomadic Turkic tribes in the steppe and forest steppe conditions of Mongolia facilitated the transition of most of the early Mongolian tribes to nomadic pastoralism. Persian historian Rashid al-Din (1247–1318) wrote in his famous work *The Compendium of Histories* that the early Mongolian tribes divided into two groups: the “forest people” and the “prairie people.” According to researchers, the term “forest people” refers to the group’s habitat, not necessarily to its source of sustenance. According to the *Secret History of Mongols*, the forest people include the Oirats, Buryats, Barghunys (Barghouts), Ursunys (Ursutys), Khabkhanas, Khankhs, Tuvans, and Khori Tumats, all of whom had elements of Mongolian, Turkish, and Samoyed origins. When the state of Genghis Khan was formed, the Oirats were already an established ethnic community. Their rulers, including the Oirat Hutuga-Becky, bore the title of “Becky” and had a reputation as powerful witches.

In 1206, on the banks of the Onon River, a great convention (*Khuriltay*) brought together the steppe aristocracy, military leaders, close associates, and relatives of the Mongol Khan Temujin, who had received the title “Genghis Khan” in 1189. Thus all of Mongolia came to be ruled by Genghis Khan. All tribes inhabiting Mongolia at this time belonged to the nomadic civilization of the Great Steppe, which was under the political and cultural influence of the West Asian cultural region and differed in many ways from the world of Far Eastern Chinese civilization.

In 1207, the Oirats voluntarily went to Genghis Khan’s state during a two-year campaign led by the Khan’s eldest son, Jochi, against the “forest peoples.” The Oirats fell under the legal socioeconomic sphere of the early Mongolian feudal state, but their leader, Hutuga-Becky, retained his own power by recognizing the overlordship of Genghis Khan. The Oirats established four military and administrative units, called the “thousands,” from which, this author conjectures, their self-naming as “Durben Oirat” was derived. Genghis Khan did not demand any tribute from the Oirats or other forest peoples; from the outset, however, they had to perform military service and supply soldiers to the general army protecting the state’s northern border.

Genghis Khan and his descendants continually intermarried with the Oirat ruling family. It is clear, then, that the Oirats enjoyed a privileged status within the Mongol Empire compared to other groups. The Mongolian conquests of Central Asia, the Far and Middle East, and Eastern Europe played an important role in the fate of the Oirats. They were not only participants in but also active organizers of all the Mongol conquests. After completing their military campaigns, most Mongols returned to their homeland. However, some remained in the conquered countries and eventually assimilated into local populations. According to medieval Muslim authors, Oirats were among the troops of the Golden Horde Khans and the clans and tribes of *Jochi Ulus*. Many ended up in Iran, as reported by Rashid al-Din.

Mongolia's post-Yuan period, the 15th to 17th centuries, saw the creation of two Mongolian sister peoples: the Mongols proper (or the Eastern Mongols) and the Oirats. Despite their commonalities in language, traditional culture, and religion, we can assume that each group regarded itself as a separate ethnicity. The process of consolidation as an independent nation was made irreversible by the Oirats through an innovation that researchers have called *ulaan zalaа*. This is the custom of wearing a flag hand-made of red threads on top of a hat to signify being Oirat—a custom introduced around the beginning of the 15th century and still observed today. The “Oirat hegemony” that followed the collapse of the Yuan Empire in Mongolia is associated with two eminent Oirat statesmen: Togon Taishi (died 1439) and his son Esen Khan (1407–1455) from the clan of Choros. Togon Taishi and Esen Khan aimed to overcome the fragmentation of the country and create a centralized Mongolian state. However, they were not Genghisids and therefore could not obtain the support of the eastern Mongols.

By the end of the 16th century, Oirat society was no longer a motley alliance of tribal entities but a political alliance that included four major ethno-political associations: Khoshiuts, Torghuts, Derbets, and Khoits. Each had its own tribal structure and was managed by an independent ruler. These associations eventually absorbed and dissolved within their structures many medieval tribal Oirat groups, though some old tribal groupings and other communities continued to exist.

In the 17th century, a rapid surge in the military and political activities of the Khoshuts, Torghuts, and Derbets facilitated the appearance on the Eurasian map of three nomadic state entities: the Junggar Khanate (1635–1758) in Dzungaria and western Mongolia, the Kalmyk Khanate (the second half of the 17th century) in Lower Povolge, and the Khoshut Khanate (the first half of the 17th century) at Khukhnore. The nomadic Oirat entities extended from the lower reaches of the Volga River to the Great Wall of China and up to the foothills of Tibet.

The outstanding event in 17th century Oirat history was the emergence of Buddhism. Also at this time, a phonetic Oirat alphabet called “*Tod bichig*” (“Clear letters”) was created. These events were largely related to the activities of a famous religious and political leader, the outstanding Oirat scientist and educator Zaya-Pundit (1599–1662). Oirats were involved in global cultural processes and were part of the civilized component of Tibetan-Indian Buddhist culture.

These historical developments left the Oirat people geographically scattered and culturally diverse. They were also largely overlooked by historians and ethnographers, at least until famous Russian investigator-travelers such as A. M. Pozdnev, G. N. Potanin, G. E. Grumm-Grzhimailo, and M. V. Pevtsov began to study the group.

Since the middle of the 19th century, such travelers had periodically visited Oirat *khoshuns* (local military and administrative districts) that allowed them to observe firsthand scenes from everyday life, traditions and customs, and more. Their travel notes provide valuable information on Oirat residences, livelihoods, and material and spiritual culture. They described *khoshuns* headed by governors—*Amban Noyons*, who in turn obeyed rulers—and *Meirins-zangis* of *khoshuns* that consisted of smaller units called *sum* and *arban*. They made detailed observations regarding lamaism and shamanism and associated rituals and religious ceremonies, and they recorded data on weddings, funerals, other rituals, national sports, and folklore. A significant portion of their work is devoted to aspects of material culture: housing;

types of food, particularly dairy foods and tea, and how they were prepared; male and female clothing, including hats; and so on.

During the socialist period in Mongolia, disciplines such as history and ethnography were heavily influenced by official Communist ideology. Mainly for this reason, few serious scientific works were published on topics relating to the Oirat in particular or even to Mongol history and culture more generally. The first Mongolian research on traditional Oirat culture appeared in 1960, when the Mongolian ethnographer S. Badamhatan published in Russian a short article entitled “On the wedding customs of the Altai Uriankhians” (Badamhatan 1960). In 1963 the Mongolian historian J. Gongor published “A Brief History of Kobdo” (Gongor 1963), and in 1992 the Mongolian ethnographer Kh. Nyambuu published a book called *Introduction to the Ethnography of Mongolia*, one section of which was devoted to the Oirat (Nyambuu 1992). A collection of monographs called *Ethnography of Mongolia* was published in Mongolian in 1996 (Badamkhatan 1996), and the second volume of this fundamental work focused on the Oirat. These few papers comprise the extent of the literature on Oirat life. Not surprisingly, they cannot possibly provide a comprehensive picture of Oirat economy, family and social life, and material and spiritual culture.

An analogous pattern can be observed in Russia (then the USSR) and China, home to direct descendants of the Oirat. It would be unfair to claim that no academic work on the Kalmyks was done in Russia, however; in fact, the first such work was published in 1970. This was a book by the ethnographer U. E. Erdenieva entitled *Kalmyks* (Erdenieva 1970), and its publication testifies to existence of a scientific community in Kalmykia that included highly skilled specialists in ethnology, history, physical anthropology, and archeology.

Beginning in the 1960s, scientific institutions in Mongolia became involved in research on the history and traditional culture of nomadic tribes of western Mongolia—the Oirats. The Institute of History of Mongolia and the Institute of Linguistics and Literature, both members of Mongolia’s Academy of Sciences, engaged in the collection and study of materials relating to the economy, livelihood, and traditional culture of the Oirats. Their researchers gathered a variety of materials representing many aspects of everyday life and material and spiritual culture, including religious beliefs and customs, habits concerning burial rites and maternity, literature, folk art, handicrafts, and more. Though a great number of artifacts were collected during that time, they have not yet been subjected to much in-depth analysis.

The post-socialist period widened horizons for scholars by lifting limitations and prohibitions on research. New studies came out in many countries: in Mongolia, a new series entitled *Bibliotheca Oiratica* appeared in 2006 and continues to be published today; in Russia, unpublished works of Bakunin from the 18th century and of Bichurin from the 19th century were published in the 1990s, and an academic encyclopedia was published in 2010. Chances for researchers from different countries to convene have been limited, however. The present symposium enables scholars to explore new horizons through face to face meetings that transcend the borders of countries and the boundaries of academic fields. This international platform acknowledges both the cultural uniformity and the historical diversity of the Oirat people.

This volume consists of 22 papers on 4 broad topics: 2 on linguistics, 9 on history, 6 on ethnology, and 5 on folklore. Linguistically, the Oirat maintain older characteristics because they are separated from the Mongolian plateau and distributed across peripheral areas. Dr.

Tumurtogoo and Dr. Purevdorj, both from Mongolia, make clear the academic value of the Oirat dialect. Mongolia is the center of the Oirat dialect as spoken and researched, and these linguistic studies provide a frame of reference for researchers in other fields.

History papers in this volume are arranged according to period. First is that of Dr. Dorj, who could not attend the symposium but submitted a paper on historical artifacts of the 13th century. Researchers from Burgojin, the Oirat place of origin that now belongs to the Buriyat Republic, analyze that region. The next two papers focus on the westward movement in the 17th century. Dr. Bakaeva is a descendant of immigrants to the west, while Dr. Bolormaa is a descendant of emigrants from the east.

The Jungar were the leading group of Oirat for about a hundred years, from the 17th to the 18th century, and the Jungar Khanate has been called “the Last Empire of Nomads.” In this volume we have included 3 papers on the Jungar Khanate. Especially interesting is Dr. Chuluun’s discovery of letters in Mongolian to the Russian Emperor—a new finding, with the oldest known script written in Mongolian with the Cyrillic alphabet. Apparently, 250 years before the socialist Mongolian People’s Republic decided to use the Cyrillic alphabet as its official script in 1940, the Oirat tried to use this alphabet for diplomatic purposes.

Dr. Yanagisawa clarifies the process of Oirat relocation in the northeast area of Inner Mongolia in the 18th century, while Dr. Sukhbaatar contributes to Oirat studies with a list of historical source materials. In the last of paper of the history section, Dr. Shurkhuu writes about Tuva. Early in the 20th century, Tuva was separated from the Mongolian People’s Republic and incorporated into Soviet Russia, and the study of Tuva was separated from Mongolian studies and fell behind. Therefore the study of Tuva is itself a new territory that has opened up after democratization in the post-Soviet regime. Dr. Shurkhuu’s paper reveals the affinity between Tuvan and Mongolian.

In the 3rd section, ethnological papers report on the situation of the Buriyats, Kyrgyz, Altai, Mongolia, and Tuva and the Xinjiang-Uyghur Autonomous Region in China. The Buriyats represent east Mongolians, while the Oirats are quintessentially west Mongolians. Dr. Sodonpilova compares kinship structures among the Oirats and Buriyats, pointing out similarities between Mongolians; meanwhile, her husband, Dr. Nanzatov, focuses on diversity among the Oirat peoples. The descendants of those who left the Caspian Sea and stayed in Kyrgyzstan on the way back to Jungar became Muslim and called themselves “Kalmyks of the moon,” the crescent moon being a symbol of Islam.

Dr. Tyukhteneva, coming from the Altai Republic, reveals that an Altai group speaking a Turkish dialect has maintained its identity as part of the Oirat people. After democratization they were able to declare this self-identification, connect it with ancient history, and communicate with other Oirat groups.

One of this volume’s editors, Dr. Lkhagvasuren, was the first director of the National Museum of Mongolia after democratization. Here he uses Altai Uriyankhai artifacts from that museum to explain uniformity and diversity among Oirat groups from the viewpoint of material culture. There are two groups in Uriyankhai, one whose members call themselves Uriyankhai and another whose members call themselves Tuvan. Dr. Mongush, who is herself Tuvan, warns of the critical state of Tuvans outside Tuva trying to sustain their ethnic identity. Generally Tuvans, like Turkics, are not included in the Oirat-Mongolian groups. However,

Dr. Sarangerel clarifies the historically Mongolian identity of Tuvans in China, revealing the Genghis Khan cult among them.

The 5 papers in the last section analyze folktales and folk songs. One of the editors, Konagaya, works with Kodama to introduce their work of collecting life stories to form an oral history of southern Oirat groups in China. This is not folklore in the narrow sense; it represents another new possibility for the study of oral traditions.

As mentioned above, this volume covers a wide range of Oirat studies in order to highlight both uniformity and diversity among the Oirat peoples. All the subjects discussed will engender further inquiry in the future: the international network of researchers who met at this symposium has been maintained, a second symposium was held in 2012 in Ulaanbaatar, and a third will be held in 2013 at Elista in Kalmykia. This volume represents the first step in a series of academic endeavors by this network.

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