

Social Unity through Culture, Art and History: The Museum Challenges.

**Mongolian museum on the way of the progress: some experiences
and achievements**

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Abstract: The National Museum of Mongolia was established in 1924. This museum holds tens of thousands of precious objects related to Mongolian history and culture. Around 1 million years ago, the first humans began inhabiting this vast area. Throughout this long history, Mongolians and their ancestors have created a unique and beautiful culture heritage. Through this article, we aim to showcase some achievements of our museum, including the latest exhibition organized in and outside Mongolia. Especially, we will highlight the joint exhibition projects co-organized with Chinese, Korean and Danish museums. We will also talk about the barcoding project implemented and supported by US institutions.

Mankind has passed through many forms of lifestyle over the past millennia. Nomadic and urban lifestyles have both been important lifeways across the world, but as a result of modern development, urbanization is quickly becoming the main lifestyle of modern civilization. Although urban lifestyle is spreading around the globe, some nomadic ways of living still remain. Mongolia provides an example of a nomadic lifestyle that is still vibrant.

Mongolia is a landlocked country located in the high Central Asian plateau between Russia and China. According to the latest studies, the first humans began living there nearly 1 million years ago. Evidence from archeological studies shows us that a warm climate used to dominate this area. But after the last ice age, the climate changed to its current form—a continental climate with a hot summer and cold winter. As a result, people became herders, with a lifestyle based on breeding livestock. Such a way of life is called 'nomadic' or pastoral nomadism. Pastoral nomadism is an age-old way of life based in the arid and semi-arid zones which stretch from the Atlantic Ocean through North Africa, the Middle East, Iran and Afghanistan and further eastward from

Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan via Mongolia and Tibet into China¹.

Everything in Mongolia, including customs, tradition, culture and history, is based on the nomadic lifestyle. In other words, the unique and valuable characteristics of Mongolian life stem from the nomadic lifestyle. Pastoral nomadism created Mongolia.

In their long history, the ancestors of Mongolia made many wonderful things including rock art, deer stones, many forms of burial, ancient cities, writing systems, the most powerful army in human history, and so on. This way of life also brought great material wealth to ancient people, as can be seen in their ornaments, costumes, tents, furniture, household items, tools, weapons and equipment – all of the finest craftsmanship².

Much of the evidence related to these discoveries is stored and curated in the National Museum of Mongolia. The National Museum of Mongolia is the one of top scientific and culture institutions in modern Mongolia. And it has a long and unique history.

According to some sources, the word “*museum*” was first used to describe the collection of the Medici during the Renaissance period, in Italy in the 15th century. But some scholars say there were some institutions akin to museums in Kharakhorum, the capital city of the Great Mongolian Empire. Besides that, in the 1840’s, the 5th Noyon Khutagtu Danzanravjaa organized the so-called “Exhibition Temple”. This temple housed about ten thousand items and it is considered to be the first museum of Mongolia. In the early 20th century, Mongolia’s last king, the *Bogd Khaan* amassed an enormous collection of rare objects from the West and East. This collection formed the basis of the first truly modern museum in Mongolia. Nowadays, this institution is known as the National Museum of Mongolia.

Officially, the National Museum of Mongolia was established in 1924. The first Mongolian Museum’s purpose was to display and introduce ancient and valuable

¹ Christel Braae *Among herders of Inner Mongolia: The Haslund-Christensen Collection at the National Museum of Denmark*, Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2017, 11.

² <https://www.moesgaardmuseum.dk/en/exhibitions/previous-special-exhibitions/on-the-steppes-of-genghis-khan-mongolia-s-nomads/2019-07-23>.

artifacts to the public. During the 1930 and 1940s, the museum aimed to promote a patriotic view among the people. That was related to the political atmosphere of the time. From the 1940s to the 1970s, different types of museum were established, such as temple museums (Chojjin Lama Temple Museums, Bogd Khaan Palace Museum, Erdene Zuu Monastery Museum, etc), as well as the Sukhbaatar Museum, State Central Museum, Revolutionary Museum, The Fine Arts Zanabazar Museum, Ulaanbaatar City Museum, Military Museum, Railway Museum, Mongolian Theater Museum, and so on. Also during the 1960s and 1970s, local museums were established in every provincial center.

As of today, the National Museum of Mongolia is the nation's largest museum and holds the world's most significant collection (over 60,000 objects) relating to Central Asian History and the history of Mongolia. It covers material from prehistory to the end of the 20th century, with a portion of the collected artifacts on display in ten exhibition halls. The collections of the museum consist of 3 major parts— archaeology, ethnography, and history. These artifacts are considered to provide the fundamental basis for Mongol studies around the world and represent a unique cultural heritage. Our museum also serves as the chief coordinating, methodological, educational and professional training center of the museum sector in Mongolia.

The Museum has 1 Department, 2 Centers, and 3 Divisions. These are as follows: The Policy Planning and Management Department, The Museum Training and Methodology Centre, The Research Centre, The Collection Management Division, The Public Communications Division, and The Security and Services Division.

The history collections are subdivided into the following categories: archaeology, Middle Ages, 20th century, photography, recordings, and documents. Ethnography collections are subdivided into these classes: jewelry and accessories, costumes, vessels and utensils, musical instruments, Mongolian ger (yurt) and ger furnishings, animal husbandry equipment, and craft and religious items.

Like other museums, our daily activities are directed to show and introduce the richness of Mongolian history and culture to the public through museum objects. Besides the permanent exhibitions halls, temporary exhibitions are considered one of the main public activities of the museum. Annually, we organize over 10 temporary

exhibitions and 1-2 joint exhibitions (with foreign museums or institutions) under a special theme. These exhibitions are an important way to introduce Mongolian heritage to domestic and foreign visitors. Most temporary exhibitions are organized near the end of the winter and in mid summer because the two most important national holidays—Mongolian Lunar New Year – Tsagaan sar and the Naadam Festival—are held at these times. For their themes, these temporary exhibitions usually aim to recover and raise awareness of old forgotten traditions of culture and history to modern visitors. In addition, our museum offers free entrance to the public to celebrate certain holidays or important days. For instance, in 2018, during the week of Patriotic Day (March 1), our museum received nearly 80000 visitors free of charge. After this event, we were worried we would lose a whole year's profit from visitors. But, by the end of the year of 2018, we received more than 100 thousands visitors, according to our financial results. Through these exhibitions, visitors gained valuable information. Most importantly, as a result of these efforts, the public's interest in the museum greatly increased.

In order to introduce or publicize Mongolian heritage, we have also organize special exhibitions overseas. During the socialist period, Mongolian museum exhibitions were displayed only in Eastern bloc countries led by the Soviet Union. After the democratic revolution of 1990, our country opened its doors to whole world. Relationships with countries to both East and West have been developed. As part of this progress, Mongolian museums have the great duty to present our country to the world. Therefore, many important exhibitions have been organized since mid to late 1990s in countries including the USA, Germany, Japan, South Korea, Holland, Italy, France, Russia, China, and Belgium. As a result of these exhibitions, millions of people have received information about Mongolia and its amazing culture and history.

In recent years, we have implemented some important projects with Chinese and Korean museums. For example, the special exhibition *Nomadic Empires of the Mongolian Steppes* was held from May to July 2018 in National Museum of Korea. This exhibition was organized by the National Museum of Korea, the National Museum of Mongolia, the Bogd Khaan Palace Museum, and the Institute of History and Archaeology of the Mongolian Academy of Sciences. The exhibition commemorated the 20th anniversary of the *Mon-Sol* project, a joint academic project implemented by the

Institute of History and Archaeology of the Mongolian Academy of Sciences, the National Museum of Mongolia, and the National Museum of Korea since 1997. In this exhibition, over 500 objects were displayed representing the history and culture of nomadic empires from prehistory to modern times. Among these were precious pieces, including silver artifacts decorated with Hellenistic gods found in a tomb of the Huns, the golden crown of the Turkic Bilge Khagan, and the leather boots of a Mongolian nobleman who lived during the Mongolian Empire. They provided a fascinating chronicle of the history and culture of Mongolian nomadic empires, which helped to shape world history by serving as a crucial axis for cultural exchange between East and West. This exhibition not only promoted a broad understanding of Mongolian history, culture and arts, but also played an important role in deepening the friendship and mutual understanding between the people of our two countries and broadening their cultural cooperation.

Mongolia and China are eternal neighbors which they have had a relationship since very ancient times. Annually, we receive a lot of foreign visitors, many of them Chinese. We plan to receive still more tourists from China in the near future. In 2019, we implemented two projects with the National Museum of China. The first was a special exhibition called *Sharing a Common Future: Exhibition of Treasures from the National Museums along the Silk Road*. The National Museum of China, in conjunction with national museums in 12 other countries, showcased the rich and diverse cultural exchanges between the countries in an exhibition of 234 cultural relics from different periods and categories. The exhibition was held at the National Museum of China from April 11 until July 14, 2019. In this exhibition, organized within the “Belt and Road” initiative, the National Museum of Mongolia contributed 29 displays related to the Silk Road culture and history. In his introduction, Wang Chunfa, director of the National Museum of China, said that these exquisite cultural relics fully demonstrate the breadth and depth of the integration, mutual learning, and marriage of science and art among countries along the Belt and Road, and reveal the historical inevitability of building a “Community for the Shared Future of Mankind” as the future developmental direction of the world. Generally this exhibition aimed at promoting cooperation between

international museums and cultural sectors, through which the history of the Silk Road can be publicized.

Another ongoing project is the special exhibition *Splendor of Asia: An Exhibition of Asian Civilizations*. This exhibition is being held at the National Museum of China from May 13 until August 11. The exhibition features over 400 cultural relics from 47 Asian countries including Mongolia and the ancient civilizations of Greece and Egypt. The exhibition aims to tell stories of Asian civilizations through their cultural heritage, and build an important platform for Asian countries to understand each other. The National Museum of Mongolia sent 11 historical relics, including silver tea bowls decorated with traditional Mongolian patterns, teapots, saddle, horsewhip, bridle, lasso, branding iron, lasso and horse sweat scraper. Together these are representative of the traditional Mongolian lifestyle. Some 600,000 people have so far toured the major exhibit “The Splendor of Asia” within less than a month from its opening ceremony, according to news reports³.

Tourists from Western Europe make up a large portion of the visitors to Mongolian museums. Therefore, we have organized some exhibitions in countries of Western Europe since the late 1990s. The latest one is the exhibition *On the steppes of Genghis Khan – Mongolia’s Nomads*, developed by the Moesgaard Museum in collaboration with the National Museum of Denmark and the National Museum of Mongolia. The exhibition was held through June 2018 until April 2019, and is now on continued display until the end of 2019 in the National Museum of Denmark. The special exhibition *On the steppes of Genghis Khan – Mongolia’s Nomads* takes visitors on a journey in the company of Mongolian nomads and their animal herds. It reveals a life on the move, where Genghis Khan is ever-present, both as a historical hero and as the personification of the dream of a united people. The exhibition shows visitors how the nomadic way of life, right up to the present day, constitutes an intriguing alternative to our own settled and sedentary existence, characterized by a completely different view of the world.

³ <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/437046/Some-600-000-visited-The-Splendor-of-Asia-within-a-month>2019-07-23.

Besides all of the above, we annually receive and display some exhibitions organized by foreign museums and institutions. The latest is an exhibition co-organized by the National Museum of Mongolia and the Inner Mongolia Museum, *The Khitan State-The Great Liao* exhibition puts on display some 450 relics from museums and archaeological institutions in China's Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region. Some 70 percent of the exhibits, ranging from gold accessories to ancient frescos, are national-level relics, the organizers said at opening ceremony⁴. Khitans were one of the ancient Mongolian tribes. They inhabited an area corresponding to parts of modern Mongolia, Northeast China and the Russian Far East. As Proto-Mongols they spoke the Khitan language, which is related to the Mongolic languages. They established the Liao dynasty in 907. The Liao dynasty, also known as the Liao Empire, and officially as the Great Liao, or Khitan (Qidan) State, was an empire in East Asia that ruled from 916 to 1125 A.D. over present-day Northern and Northeast China, Mongolia and portions of the Russian Far East and North Korea. This year marks the 70th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic ties between China and Mongolia. This exhibition is part of a series of activities to celebrate the friendship between the two countries. The exhibition is scheduled to run from June 27 until September 6, 2019.

All of these exhibitions aim to introduce and advertise Mongolian history and culture to the world and strengthen friendship between nations and understanding between people. In short, all these activities are contribution toward global peace and partnership.

The Museum's main purpose is to display precious items to the public. But another important task is to preserve valuable objects in proper condition. Nearly 90 percent of the whole collection is housed in special storage rooms. The collections are the heart and soul of a museum. Like many other museums around the world, the National Museum of Mongolia has common problems such as limited space and poor storage conditions, unsuitable conservation, and many more. Successfully tracking the location of objects in the collection is another issue we struggle with. To solve these problems, we have worked to generate financial and physical resources aimed at

⁴ http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-06/28/c_138181840.htm 2019-07-24.

cultural heritage preservation, with the generous support of foreign institutions. Most important in this regard has been our barcoding project sponsored by the U.S. Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation and the American Center for Mongolian Studies. In 2017-2018, we implemented a barcoding project during which we overcame many obstacles. The project was one the most significant in the museum's past three decades. This has not only revolutionized our museum's inventory and conservation process, but also paved the way for other Mongolian museums to adopt a modern standard.

Before the project, we had a paper-based inventory system that was used throughout the museum. The paper-based inventory system was the only tool to track the the whole museum's collection, and it had served for nearly 100 years. This system did not list precise object locations, but rather only the room an object was located in. Looking for one object amongst a room filled with artifacts is like looking for a needle in a haystack. Barcoding has turned the tables completely and every object is linked to a precise location and cataloging information in our database. In my opinion, this project was like an *Industrial revolution* for our museum – saving time, increasing speed and work efficiency, and allowing our museum staff to spend our time on more of our urgent conservation needs.

All of these facts are just small parts of the current development of our museum. We are always first in line to enlighten and educate our people and community in order to create a brighter future tomorrow.

