8 Speaking of mountain deities beyond the county border: postsocialist cosmopolitics and state territoriality in Inner Mongolia, China

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Introduction

'Have you noticed the bullet holes?' Batbagan asked me. We were discussing the image of a camel that sits high on a cliff face in western Inner Mongolia, China. 'It was shot at during the Cultural Revolution'. Once graced with a Buddhist monastery which coordinated its veneration, the camel was attacked, and the monastery destroyed, by zealous Red Guards during this period of upheaval (1966–76), as manifestations of the 'Four Olds', which Mao sought to expunge from Chinese society. Batbagan leaned in and whispered, with a wry smile, 'those who shot at it died soon afterwards'.

Today rituals once again take place at Bull Camel Mountain, and you need good binoculars to see the bullet holes from the foot of a cliff. Following Mao's death, shifts in political winds meant that space opened up for the revival of certain cultural practices of minority nationalities, such as the Mongols (Sneath 2000). Positively valued conceptions of culture came to subsume practices that had been categorized negatively as 'religion' or 'superstition' (C. *mixin*) during the Cultural Revolution. Among the Naxi of Yunnan in southwestern, for example, the dongba 'religion' became 'dongba culture', which the anthropologist Emily Chao (1996: 210–1) describes as an 'invention of tradition… aimed at bolstering Naxi ethnic identity and prestige' in a way that was acceptable to the state.

This chapter discusses a brief moment at Bull Camel Mountain in 2013 when the frictions involved in the subsumption of Tibeto-Mongolian Buddhist practices of mountain veneration into local cultural heritage were made apparent. This happened when a Buddhist lama, in the course of a ritual he was conducting, criticized the attendant local officials for allowing mining in the mountains behind Bull Camel Mountain, in a speech that also admonished lay actors for their conduct of the ritual. I want to think of this as a fleeting instance of cosmopolitics, in which a particular sacred landscape and the other-than-humans that constitute it, which straddled the border between two administrative units of contemporary Inner Mongolia, became, tentatively, political. I choose to engage with the burgeoning

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literature on cosmopolitics (e.g. de la Cadena 2010; Sneath 2014; Blaser 2016) because thinking cosmopolitically draws our attention to the particular frictions encountered by projects of minority cultural revival in China, and by what I call the 'regionalization' of culture in contemporary Inner Mongolia, thereby demonstrating that contemporary state territoriality in China co-exists, sometimes awkwardly, with other 'socionatural formations' (de la Cadena 2010: 361). At the same time, a perspective from Inner Mongolia helps to highlight some of the lacunae of the existing literature on cosmopolitics, particularly the question of *how* other-than-humans become political through the authoritative voices of human subjects. This requires us to attend to competing sources of authority within a community, and their complex relationship to the state. I thus argue for the need to avoid homogenizing a minority or indigenous community in opposition to the modern state.

Blaser and de la Cadena acknowledge that 'making public these kinds of other-than-humans is difficult for those who live with them' (2018: 2). In the Chinese context, however, this is especially the case: the political forms of the (comparatively) liberal Americas, such as public demonstrations (de la Cadena 2010) and consultation meetings (Blaser 2016), are rarely available, and denunciation of 'superstition' (C. *mixin*), and suppression of 'evil cults' (C. *xie jiao*) (Makley 2018: 100), run parallel to the official celebration of certain circumscribed forms of cultural heritage. Inner Mongolia is a region that has witnessed intense ethnic violence and religious persecution within living memory; a region where one avoids speaking about 'sensitive' (C. *mingan*) topics in public; a region, like the nearby Qinghai described by Charlene Makley (2018: 14), where '[d]eferral and avoidance, not public avowal' characterize daily life. How might a mountain deity be 'made public' in such a context?

Padmasambhava and the Haruuna Mountains

The Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region in northern China is transected from east to west by a range of mountains that crosses many of its political subdivisions. These mountains are given various names in different parts of the region, including the Da Qing, Muna and Haruuna. As is the case with mountains across Inner Asia, they are host to a variety of sites of ritual significance, including numerous sacred cairns (M. *oboo*) and several significant Buddhist monasteries (Humphrey and Hürelbaatar 2013). Rich in mineral resources, these mountains have also been sites of intense mining activity, perhaps most notably at the Bayan Oboo mine north of Baotou, where the world's largest rare earth deposits are found (Bulag 2010). In 2013 I conducted fieldwork at the western end of this mountain range, known locally as the Haruuna Mountains. These mountains straddle the border between two administrative subdivisions of Inner Mongolia: Alasha League and Bayannuur Municipality. The Alasha side of the border is especially rich in mineral resources, particularly iron, and in 2013 numerous small-scale privately-run mines were in operation. These mines,

and the roads leading to them, had caused significant damage to local pastureland.[1]

Among Mongols in Alasha, as in other parts of the Mongolian world (High 2013), there is a strong taboo against digging up the earth. Those who do so risk angering local spirits (M. *nebdag sabdag*) and bringing upon themselves misfortunes such as illness. Mining in the Haruuna Mountains is particularly problematic since these mountains contain several sites of great significance within Tibeto-Mongolian Buddhist cosmology, particularly those situated in close proximity to the famous Monastery of the Caves (M. *Aguin Süm*).

Once upon a time, the legend goes, the great Indian Buddhist saint Padmasambhava pursued an evil spirit (M. *shulmus*) into a cave in these mountains, where he finally managed to crush it under a huge stone, still visible inside the cave today. Other caves nearby are said to be the dwelling places of five female deities (*dakini*). In the late 18th century, the Monastery of the Caves was founded at the site. This institution is unusual in its associations with the Nyingma (or 'Red Hat') branch of Tibetan Buddhism (Charleux 2002). The Monastery of the Caves contains a prominent example of the womb caves found in other parts of the Tibetan cultural area (Charleux 2002; see also Humphrey this volume). On passing through a narrow cleft in the rock, pilgrims are said to be purified of their sins.[2]

The site itself is known as a particularly 'fierce' (M. *dogshin*) place. Locals tell of the grisly end of a bandit in the early 20th century who set out to plunder the monastery: on approaching it, blood started pouring out of his nose and mouth and he collapsed, dead. It is also said that those who took part in the ransacking of the monasteries during the Cultural Revolution died not long afterwards.

The Monastery of the Cave's subsidiary institutions, also in the Haruuna Mountains, just over 10 km to the south, included a monastery located next to a phallic rock formation known as the 'Red Pagoda' (M. *Ulaan Subraga*). In 2007 a temple at the foot of the Red Pagoda was rebuilt, thanks, it was said, to a large donation from a Han Chinese businessman with mining concerns nearby who felt obliged to make recompense for contravening the Mongolian taboo on digging up the earth. Locals said that he had become concerned after several others involved in mining in the mountains were afflicted with serious disease.

The monastery at Bull Camel Mountain was another of the Monastery of the Cave's subsidiaries. This mountain is also connected to the legend of Padmasambhava, who is said to have ridden a bull camel (M. *buur*) on his way to destroy the demon in the cave. The footprints of the bull camel are said to be still visible outside Padmasambhava's Cave at the Monastery of the Caves, etched into a large rock by the mouth of the cave. After Padmasambhava had destroyed the demon, the bull camel was transmogrified into a dark imprint on the sheer cliff face of a nearby mountain. This image of a camel is said to change according to the season: in the winter, for example, a covering of rime makes it appear as if the camel is frothing at the mouth, as bull camels do in their winter

rut. The image is even said to be able to indicate future weather events: if it takes on a particularly dark hue and its humps look flatter, locals fear a drought.

Like the Monastery of the Caves, Bull Camel Mountain is also said to be particularly 'fierce'. There is a strong taboo against bringing bull camels in front of the mountain; doing so risks them becoming impotent or even wasting away.[3] This is because the power of the mountain will 'crush' (M. *darah*) their 'vitality' (M. *hii-mori*).[4] Many also hold the mountain responsible for the flourishing of camels in Alasha and for the speed of this region's camels in particular, which are said to resemble the image of the camel on the cliff face, being dark and small in stature. It is also said that if a cow camel that has repeatedly miscarried is brought in front of the mountain when the camel on the cliff is rutting, it will be able to conceive successfully.

As with the great Tibetan Buddhist monastery of Labrang in Gansu, described by Emily Yeh, the Monastery of the Caves and its branch monasteries 'formed a patchwork of territories across the landscape whose allegiances and social identities were primarily centred around [the main temple]' (2003: 510; see also Humphrey and Hürelbaatar 2013: 76). It was one of the eight main monasteries of Alasha (Charleux 2002). However, after the creation of Dengkou County in 1927 (Nasan Bayar 2000: 248), the Monastery of the Caves was no longer situated within the territory of Alasha, while the Red Pagoda and Bull Camel monasteries remained in the banner. This was part of a broader process of administrative reform, involving the replacement of Mongolian banners with Chinese counties, which was bound up with the arrival of waves of Han Chinese settlers in Inner Mongolia (Bulag 2002a).

Today the monastery still lies in Dengkou County (now part of Bayannuur Municipality), an overwhelming Han Chinese agricultural administrative unit. As a county, Dengkou is marked within Inner Mongolia as a particularly Han Chinese space. It even includes a museum celebrating the 'opening up' of 'wasteland' (in other words, Mongolian pastureland) through land reclamation projects by the Production and Construction Corps (C. *bingtuan*) during the Cultural Revolution (see White 2016). One Mongol amateur historian from Dengkou, who had self-published a book on the Monastery of the Caves, told me that it was a great pity that it was no longer located in Alasha; had it been so, he said, it would long ago have been declared a world heritage site. As a county dominated by Han Chinese settlers, Dengkou does not afford the same avenues for projects of cultural revival as those enjoyed by Mongols in Alasha.

Today Mongols in the region of Ulaan Els[5], just across the border in Alasha, still attend the large annual ceremony at the Monastery of the Caves in Dengkou County (see Figure 8.1). This includes many of the Muslim Mongols who live in this region and who have their own mosques, but of whom some also attend Buddhist monasteries as well as *oboo*. They have also been actively involved in the revival of occasional rituals at Bull Camel Mountain (White 2021).[6] However, some people in Ulaan Els admitted that their engagement with Bull Camel Mountain was more substantial than with the Monastery of the Caves; they did not donate livestock to the latter, for example, because, they

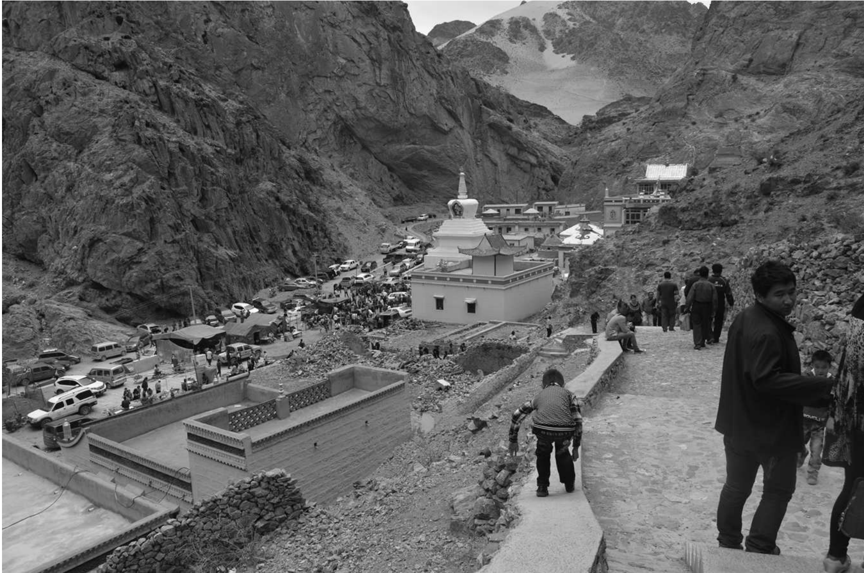

Figure 8.1 Festival at the Monastery of the Caves.

said, 'it's not our place (M. *manai gajar bish*), it's in Bayannuur'. So while locals do recognize a border-spanning sacred landscape, the official county (and now municipality) border also shapes how they engage with it.

Alasha camel culture

In 2008, Mongol officials in Alasha succeeded in having 'The Camel Husbandry Customs of the Alasha Mongols' listed as part of China's national intangible cultural heritage. Camels had once been a hallmark of Alasha's remoteness and backwardness; their valorization in the form of camel culture must be understood as an attempt to defend the value of Mongol traditions of animal husbandry using concepts that were acceptable to the state, in the context of the 'cultural heritage preservation fever' (Harrell 2013) that gripped China in the reform era. Extensive animal husbandry, a key marker of Mongol identity in Inner Mongolia (Khan 1996), was under threat at the turn of the millennium, as the state began to implement strict environmental policies to tackle a perceived crisis of desertification. These included grazing bans, stocking limits, and the relocation of herders away from the grasslands.

The official intangible cultural heritage listing contains three elements: camel races, camel tack, and 'camel veneration customs' (C. *ji tuo xisu*). The latter term is used to refer to the rituals at Bull Camel Mountain, as well as smaller-scale domestic rituals. In 2004 a small group of Mongol elites living in the capital of

Figure 8.2 Bull Camel Mountain, with the restored temple and *oboo* in the middle of the picture. The image of the camel is above the temple, three-quarters of the way up the cliff face.

Alasha, Bayanhot, had coordinated the reconstruction of a small temple at the foot of Bull Camel Mountain and arranged for a new *oboo* to be built next to it (see Figure 8.2). The new temple lay slightly to the east of the ruins of the much larger monastery, destroyed during the Cultural Revolution.

In Mongolia, the post-Soviet period ushered in what David Sneath (2014) describes as the 'nationalizing of civilizational resources'. Rites to mountain deities, once part of the 'Buddhist ecumene of high Asia' (2014: 464), were territorialized as part of a national cultural heritage which politicians are keen to support. In the case I am describing here, we see rather the 'regionalizing' of a Buddhist ritual at a sacred mountain associated with Padmasambhava and his demon-pacifying journeys across Inner Asia. As I will show, however, unlike the nationalizing described by Sneath in the case of Mongolia, which involves the incorporation of mountain deities into the national culture, regionalizing here involves the occlusion of such deities in favour of a local culture centred on the camel.

This regionalization has occurred in a context in which established nationality policies have come under increasing criticism from some Chinese intellectuals and policymakers, who have proposed instead a 'melting pot' model of assimilation (Elliot 2015). In recent years in Inner Mongolia, official discourse has increasingly framed culture in terms of particular regions, at various

scales, rather than distinct nationalities. Thus the notion of a 'grassland culture' (C. *caoyuan wenhua*), for example, formed by multiple nationalities, has been promoted as an integral part of Chinese civilization (Nasan Bayar 2014), and all across Inner Mongolia, local regions have been encouraged to develop their own distinctive 'cultural brands' (C. *wenhua pinpai*) (Hürelbaatar n.d.). Neighbouring Bayannuur Municipality, for example, now celebrates its 'Culture of the Great Bend of the Yellow River' (C. *Hetao wenhua*).

Regionalization has also been influenced by the emphasis on development through tourism (Oakes 1993; Makley 2018), a strategy which is increasingly evident at Bull Camel Mountain, as I show below. But it has also been adopted by local Mongol officials and intellectuals in their attempts to counter long-standing stigmatization of pastoralist practices in certain dominant discourses, in a way that is acceptable to the state and does not involve open criticism of other modes of land use that threaten pastoralist livelihoods, such as mining.

The regionalization of culture which frames rituals at Bull Camel Mountain as part of Alasha camel culture does not merely involve the rescaling of ritual practices to fit within the bounds of contemporary political geography. It also manifests itself as a kind of ontological gerrymandering. Articles produced by intellectuals in Alasha since the turn of the millennium work to obscure the Buddhist associations of the Bull Camel Mountain veneration and instead emphasize its 'concrete' or 'pragmatic' (C. *wushi*) nature. This is exemplified in a sympathetic article published in the authoritative *History of Alasha* by a Han Chinese member of the Alasha League Propaganda Department (C. *Xuanchuan Bu*), on the 'camel veneration customs' of the Mongols of Alasha (Li 2007), including the rituals conducted at Bull Camel Mountain. This article begins by contrasting these customs favourably to the worship of the stove god and the dragon king among the Han (see Chau 2006). Unlike those forms of ritual, the article claims, camel veneration is not directed at a deity (C. *shenling*) but at one's own camels, such that the very 'substance' (C. *shiti*) of the camel is regarded as 'sacred' (C. *shen*). Whereas most of my informants in Ulaan Els reserved the equivalent Mongolian term (M. *onggon*) for Bull Camel Mountain, in this article, it is applied to herders' own livestock.

The article distinguishes camel veneration from other 'religious veneration activities' (C. *zongjiao jisi huodong*) and writes that it is not a 'purely superstitious (C. *mixin*) activity but a mixture of faith (C. *xinyang*) and pragmatism (C. *wushi*)' (2007: 370). Such arguments must, of course, be seen in the context of the repeated attempts by 20th century Chinese governments to categorize and then expunge 'superstition' in their quest for modernization (Goossaert and Palmer 2011). A similar preemptive defence against the charge of 'superstition' is mounted in a recent publication by a group of Alasha Mongol intellectuals (Huqun 2010) describing Alasha's cultural heritage, which distinguishes these rituals from 'purely religious activities' (C. *chun zongjiao huodong*), in that they do not involve praying to a 'higher power' (C. *shangcang shenling*), but are directed at the substance of the camel itself (Huqun 2010: 21).

Both publications thus downplay the role of lamas, particularly when they discuss the rituals at the Bull Camel Mountain. Occluded too are the connections between the Bull Camel Mountain and the Monastery of the Caves, both in terms of the legend of Padmasambhava, and the historic institutional subordination of the monastery at Bull Camel Mountain to the larger monastery, now situated outside the borders of Alasha.

Instead, these articles stress that these rituals exemplify the ability of local 'ordinary people' (C. *minzhong* i.e. non-state actors) to organize themselves and demonstrate a kind of 'spontaneous and sincere social order' (C. *zifa er youzhong de minjian shehui chengxu*) (Li 2007: 378). This discourse thus works to transform the rituals at Bull Camel Mountain into officially approved regionally distinctive 'folk culture' (C. *minjian wenhua*) rather than religion (cf. Makley 2018).

The 2013 veneration ritual

One of the local Mongol officials and intellectuals who played an important role in the regionalization of culture was Altanuul. Born to a herding family just to the west of Bull Camel Mountain his family were persecuted during the Cultural Revolution, but in 1974 he was sent to work in the Alasha Left Banner[7] branch of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) (C. *zhengxie*), where he worked as a secretary and an accountant. After retiring from this job in 1999, he authored several books and lived in a modern apartment building in Bayanhot, only occasionally travelling to the countryside to preside over cultural events.

In March 2013, Altanuul invited me to attend an annual event at Bull Camel Mountain, which he had organized. Having arrived at the nearest small town the previous night, I was given a lift to the mountain early in the morning by two amiable police officers. On the flat ground in front of the cliff face was a Mongolian tent (M. *ger*), inside of which I found Altanuul's relative Batbagan, a local herder who was once party secretary of a nearby village (M. *gachaa*), preparing a sheep's breastbone, with an elderly lama advising. This was Sechen, one of the most important monks at the Monastery of the Caves. As they discussed the ritual, Batbagan did not refer to Bull Camel Mountain but instead to *hairhan*, the respectful Mongolian term used when speaking of sacred mountains.

An hour later, the breastbone was placed in a large bonfire outside as part of the 'fire veneration' ritual (M. *galiin tahilga*) that marked the start of proceedings. Batbagan, together with several other local herders, circumambulated the fire and threw yoghurt and alcohol into the flames. They were dressed in traditional Mongol robes but were joined in their circumambulation by several soberly dressed Han and Mongol officials from Ulaan Els, including the local (Mongol) party secretary, as well as the two policemen, one of whom took photos.

We then returned to the *ger*. Flanked by two other lamas from the Monastery of the Caves, Sechen sat in the seat of honour in the middle of a large table, with Altanuul and the officials at either end. Altanuul began to make a speech in halting Chinese, explaining the history of the revival of the veneration ritual,

which he claimed was 'spontaneously organized by local farmers and herders (C. *nongmumin*)'. He boasted that the revived ceremonies, which involved 'cultural activities' (C. *wenhua huodong*), like camel racing and wrestling, had been covered by media outlets from across Inner Mongolia.

The metal door of the *ger* then creaked open and an official in an elegant trenchcoat entered, carrying the traditional Mongolian gifts of brick tea and bottles of alcohol with a blue silk scarf (M. *hadag*) draped over them. A thick wad of red Y100 notes was placed on top of the *hadag*. The excitement was evident in Altanuul's voice as he stood up to greet the new guest and receive his gifts. The head of the Alasha Left Banner government, a Han, had arrived and was signifying his status as a guest and honouring Altanuul as host by presenting him with these gifts. Ignoring the lamas and speaking instead to Altanuul, the head of the banner used the plural 'we' (C. *women*) to express the government's hope that the 'local people' (C. *dangdi renmin*) would 'live and work in peace and happiness' (C. *anju leye*), a common idiom. Altanuul called Batbagan over to take away the gifts, laughing that they were 'too heavy' for him. Altanuul then announced, 'I will be sure to pass this on to the ordinary people' (C. *laobaixing*). Using standard Communist Party phraseology, he said, 'on behalf of the popular masses (C. *renmin qunzhong*) of Ulaan Els, I thank you'.

As Altanuul sat down, the elderly lama Sechen got up, announcing in Mongolian that he wanted to say something about 'the destruction of our homeland' (M. *gazar nutagiin ebdrel*). An awkward silence fell among the assembled Mongols. Clearly, this was not part of the script of today's 'cultural activities'; the lamas were merely supposed to chant in the background. Referring to the numerous mines in the Haruuna Mountains behind us, he complained in Chinese that the mountains had been continuously exploited (C. *kaifa*). Switching back to Mongolian, he told the assembled company that 'digging up the mountains is wrong'. 'You can't just dig anywhere' he added, now in Chinese. Altanuul tried to interject to restore the genial atmosphere of hospitality, but Sechen continued with his speech. He told them it was important to 'venerate the mountain properly' (M. *sain tahih*). He then criticized the breastbone offering which had just been used in the fire veneration ritual, saying that the lay organizers should have ensured that it was of adequate size in order to bring about the 'flourishing' of the five kinds of domestic animal (M. *taban hoshuu mal*).

Seated close by, I overheard Altanuul whisper to the Chinese official sitting next to him that Sechen was 'criticizing (C. *piping*) our mistakes'. Batbagan chimed in, explaining that Sechen was the 'number one' lama at the Monastery of the Caves. Overhearing this, Sechen then announced, in Chinese, 'I'm from Bayannuur (C. *Bamengren*), but I'm also a local (C. *dangdiren*)'. At this point, Altanuul got to his feet and instructed Batbagan to hurry up and start toasting. Batbagan obeyed and began, as is customary, with the most honoured guest, who in this case was deemed to be Sechen. By treating him this way as a guest rather than someone in charge of proceedings, Batbagan sought to close down the possibility of further authoritative, critical speech from Sechen. The awkward

moment seemed to have passed, and the toasting continued as the assembled guests began to tuck into the steaming mutton before them.

Cosmopolitics from South America to Inner Asia

The ethnographic case presented here has some obvious similarities with the emergent anthropological literature on cosmopolitics: a sacred mountain, regarded by locals as capable of wreaking vengeance on those who profane it, now threatened by mining. Marisol de la Cadena (2010), for example, describes opposition to mining close to a mountain named Ausangate in Peru. Rather than merely opposing the mine project because it would damage their pastures, she argues that local people were concerned that mining would anger Ausangate, conceived of as a 'sentient entity' and a 'political actor'. De la Cadena asks us to think of the conflicts over mining in this case not as 'politics-as-usual' but as 'cosmopolitics'; that is, a disagreement characterized not by 'power disputes within a singular world' but instead 'adversarial relations among worlds' (2010: 360). So rather than understanding the conflict over mining near the sacred mountain of Ausangate as characterised by divergent perspectives on a single nature, de la Cadena argues that we need to recognize the fact that different 'socionatural formations' were involved (2010: 361).

Ideas of cosmopolitics have also been employed recently by anthropologists of Mongolia in order to describe a context in which 'state prophecies, shamanic advisers, and astrological divination' are part of the political scene (High 2013: 754). Politicians at all levels of government, up to the President himself, attend rituals for sacred mountains, which are usually conducted by Buddhist lamas. However, David Sneath (2014) shows how other ritual practitioners such as shamans can represent themselves as the legitimate spokespersons of particular mountains. There is thus a politics of ritual authority and other-than-human mediation that is relevant to consideration of cosmopolitics in Mongolia.

Drawing on these approaches to cosmopolitics, in what follows, I analyze the way in which Sechen embodied and made public an alternative socionatural formation in opposition to state-sanctioned extractivism but also to the regionalization of culture promoted by lay elites in Alasha. I then argue that his ability to speak publicly in this way hinged on his deployment of official territorial identities and Maoist modes of grassroots criticism, thereby complicating the notion of a singular community conceived of in opposition to the state.

The official version of the event

What did the state officials who attended the 2013 veneration think that they were doing? Unfortunately, I was unable to interview them, but we are entitled to make some suppositions based on their words and actions at the event, as well as those of their 'host', Altanuul. In referencing the 'local people' (C. *dangdi renmin*), as he handed the gifts to Altanuul, the head of the banner confirmed him as the

legitimate representative of the local community; this was recognized by Altanuul, who thanked him formally on behalf of 'the popular masses of Ulaan Els'.

The ability of Altanuul to play the role of representative was, I suggest, influenced by his former employment in the Alasha Left Banner CPPCC. This branch of government, part of the United Front (C. *tongzhan bu*), plays an important role for the party-state in 'co-opting potentially threatening social forces', as well as in monitoring public sentiment (Yan 2011: 54). In ethnic minority regions such as Alasha, the CPPCC works with minority elites in order to ensure social stability. It is also responsible for publishing works on local culture and history. Because of his association with the CPPCC, Altanuul was an appropriate mediator, in the eyes of the officials, between the state and local people. Through their gifts, the officials sought to indicate their support for approved forms of ethnic culture (cf. Makley 2018: 102), thereby contributing to social stability.

Altanuul, in turn, sought to frame the event within the discourse of the *minjian* (non-state) sphere. Using language reminiscent of the article on camel veneration in *History of Alasha*, he said that the events had been 'spontaneously' organized by local people. Adam Chau notes that since the mid-1990s, the idea of *minjian* as an 'expanding public sphere where citizens act upon their own initiatives' has 'gained salience in the public discourses in the PRC' (2006: 1). This is related to the retrenchment of the post-Mao state from the provision of many public services.

In his speech, Altanuul described the revived events at Bull Camel Mountain as 'cultural activities', thereby seeking to downplay their religious nature. It is not necessarily the case that Altanuul did not recognize the mountain deity; for other members of the laity, it was certainly present (witness Batbagan's use of the term *hairhan*). However, his official role as representative of the local community required him to emphasize culture over religion.

Not mentioning the lamas or the Monastery of the Caves, Altanuul claimed that the events were organized by local farmers and herders. Here he used an official phrase referring to multiethnic rural inhabitants (since farmers tend to be Han while herders are normally Mongol). In fact, there did not appear to be any Han farmers present, but by speaking in these terms, Altanuul hinted that the event might be an example of the 'unity of nationalities' (C. *minzu tuanjie*) that is so prized by the state (Bulag 2002b). In proudly announcing that the events had from news media across Inner Mongolia, Altanuul was also playing to the desire of officials to promote the region as a tourist destination.

Sechen's cosmopolitical speech

How are we to understand Sechen's speech? Again, Altanuul's words provide us with a clue. He explained to the official next to him that Sechen was 'criticizing our mistakes'. Sechen's speech had yoked criticism of improper ritual conduct to criticism of mining; what connected these two practices was their offence against the sacred landscape. To the laity, Sechen stressed the importance of 'properly venerating Bull Camel Mountain' by ensuring that the offering of the breastbone to the fire was of the right proportions. Only through correct

conduct of the ritual would it be possible to ensure that the mountain exercised its benign influence over the fertility of livestock in the region. Elided with this, and directed at the officials, was the necessity of observing the Buddhist injunctions against mining, especially in the Haruuna mountains with their numerous sacred sites.

I think we can regard Sechen's speech as 'cosmopolitical' in the sense proposed by de la Cadena since it 'makes public' an other-than-human actor, Bull Camel Mountain, which was omitted from Altanuul's speech. But even beyond the content of the speech, its very form – the fact that it was spoken from a position of ritual authority by a lama from the Monastery of the Caves – enacted an alternative socionatural formation at odds with the official version of the event. In this alternative, Bull Camel Mountain is part of a sacred landscape centred on the Monastery of the Caves, once visited by Padmasambhava, and must be placated through proper ritual conduct, directed by lamas, and not offended by the digging of the earth. This contrasted with the socionatural formation which undergirded the official event, according to which these mountains are resources to be 'exploited', while revived rituals are regionally distinctive 'cultural activities', which demonstrate the initiative of ordinary local people rather than the authority of lamas, and constitute a potential economic resource as a tourist attraction.

Sechen's speech was also cosmopolitical in the sense that it asserted the primacy of the Bull Camel Mountain as the object of veneration. This contrasts with the interpretations of this ritual produced by Alasha intellectuals, who argue that it is one of the 'camel veneration customs' which are part of Alasha's intangible cultural heritage. The article in *History of Alasha* classifies the ritual at the Bull Camel Mountain under the category of 'bull camel veneration' (C. *ji er tuo*), which can also take place in a domestic setting, involving the household's bull camel. Nowhere is it mentioned in the article that it is a mountain deity that is being venerated. Even after briefly mentioning the legend of Padmasambhava and the history of Bull Camel Monastery (without once mentioning the Monastery of the Caves), the author is keen to stress that 'camel veneration is, on the whole, not a religious activity directed at a higher power; instead it is directed at the domesticated camel itself.' Sechen's speech, however, with its correction of the laity, can be read as an assertion of religious authority which also made public the mountain deity which has been expunged from official versions of 'Alasha camel culture'. In the next section, I suggest that Sechen's public criticism was made possible by his adoption of certain spatial identities legible to the state, which at once placed him outside the jurisdiction of the Alasha officials, but also gave his criticism the moral authority of a grassroots subject.

Disjunctive territories

At one point during his speech, Sechen had switched from Mongolian to Chinese and declared himself to be 'someone from Bayannuur' employing a non-

ethnic category of spatial identity that is the recent product of administrative reforms of the modern state, unlike more historically durable identities, such as that of the Urad Mongols, whose three banners are today also part of Bayannuur municipality (Humphrey and Hürelbaatar 2013). At the same time, Sechen also described himself as 'local' thus appropriating the language that Altanuul had employed when he cast himself as the representative of the local community. Why did Sechen choose to make himself legible to the state in these ways, speaking Chinese and identifying himself with one of the administrative units of the contemporary state? One answer, I suggest, is that this placed him outside the jurisdiction of the officials he was criticizing. In Inner Mongolia, the salaries of lamas are paid by the state, and monasteries often find themselves 'supplicants' for state funds (Humphrey and Hürelbaatar 2013: 320). The local government generally controls such funds at the county/banner or league/municipality level. The Monastery of the Caves, now in Dengkou County, Bayannuur Municipality, was thus not under the jurisdiction of Alasha Left Banner, and Sechen, as a lama from Bayannuur, did not have to worry excessively about the consequences of publicly admonishing Alasha officials. His critical speech, whose form and content disrupted the regionalization of culture and its attendant ontological gerrymandering, was thus in part made possible by the way in which the management of religion in China is itself regionalized: structured according to the territorial-administrative contours of the state.

Sechen's self-identification as simultaneously from Bayannuur *and* local is itself significant. In official terms, this was an inherently contradictory statement since it was spoken (just) within the borders of Alasha, not in Bayannuur. In speaking as both a local and someone from Bayannuur, Sechen disrupted the regionalization of culture represented by the official event while also undermining the official understanding of state-society relations contained within it. According to this understanding, the state, represented by the head of the banner, was interacting with 'local people', represented by Altanuul and spatialized within the administrative unit of Ulaan Els. By positioning himself as a local who was critical of the officials for their improper conduct, rather than grateful to them for their gifts, Sechen disassembled the community which had been bundled together in the person of Altanuul and implicitly refuted his claims to act as its representative.

Having established his religious authority over the laity he had adroitly switched to the voice of the grassroots subject, one of the silent masses who were supposed to be ventriloquized by Altanuul. Of relevance here is Charlene Makley's observation, in relation to her work on Tibetan mountain deity mediums, that 'the speaking subject in practice is never unitary but emerges as a variety of voices' (2018: 74). Sechen's speech was described by Altanuul as 'criticism' and could thus be understood not only as an assertion of religious authority over the laity but as a kind of political speech that harked back to the Maoist era. Several scholars have shown how publicly enunciated criticism, both of the self and of others, was central to the political subjectivity which Maoism interpellated (Makley 2005; Bulag 2010).

'They have their *own* politics'. Thus did Sherry Ortner (1995: 177) caution us against the 'sanitizing' of subaltern resistance. Such caution is salutary in the case of cosmopolitics. Literature on this theme that has emerged from the Americas works with a very clear notion of the subaltern subject: a member of an indigenous 'community', conceived of in opposition to the modern state (Blaser 2009, 2016; de la Cadena 2010). The case from Inner Mongolia which I have analyzed cannot be neatly described in such terms. The official version of the event did indeed imagine a territorially bounded grassroots community interacting with the state; however, the uncertainty over the nature of this community, was indicated by the multiplicity of terms used for it: 'local people', 'herders and farmers', 'popular masses', 'ordinary people'. This ambiguity was also suggested by the subject positions of those involved in the event. The 'representative' of the community, Altanuul, was himself a former state official who had not lived locally for many decades. Sechen's speech, in turn, conjured up an alternative social imaginary along with the mountain deity, one in which this 'community' was itself divided into monastics and laity; then, in figuring himself as both from Bayannuur and 'local', he positioned himself outside the jurisdiction of Alasha officials, and highlighted the way in which contemporary state administrative units had failed to erase older socio-territorial identities; and finally, he undermined Altanuul's claim to represent this community by inhabiting the role of the critical grassroots subject, a subject position that historically had a central place in the political techniques of the Chinese Communist Party.

The following year

In 2014 another event was held at Bull Camel Mountain (see Figure 8.3). This time the organization was the responsibility of officials from Ulaan Els, who combined it with a conference on 'Camel Culture and Tourism'. It emerged that one of the sponsors of the event was a Han Chinese businessman who owned mines in the Haruuna Mountains but was seeking to diversify into tourism. Adverts for his hotel occupied a prominent position next to the stage. Local herders were this time instructed to bring cow camels and their recently-born offspring, as another ritual was incorporated into the event. This was the 'cow camel's fire veneration' (M. *ingen galiin tahilga*), at which the fire is worshipped to ensure the flourishing of the camel herd (Chabros 1992). This domestic ritual was traditionally conducted by individual households, separately from the event at Bull Camel Mountain.

The 2014 event was billed in Chinese as the 'Alasha Inner Mongolia Sacred Camel Veneration Folk Culture Festival.' A large stage was set up on the plain, on which was displayed an exhibition of 'Alasha camel culture', involving various items of camel tack. Monks from the Monastery of the Caves were present, chanting inside the small temple, but their role was far less prominent than the year before. Instead, the main ritual was conducted by two lamas from the monastery of Baruun Hiid, one of the two largest Buddhist institutions in Alasha.

Figure 8.3 Preparing for the 'cow camel's fire veneration' at the 2014 event.

One of these lamas was also a prominent member of the Alasha Left Banner Buddhist Association (C. *fojiao xiehui*), the official organization which represents worshippers to the state. Seated on an armchair in one of the Mongol *ger* by the side of the stage, however, was an even more eminent religious figure: the Züün Gegeen, from the other main monastery in Alasha, Züün Hiid. He sat silently as local herders prostrated themselves in front of him. Outside the *ger*, the two other lamas continued with their ritual. Soon the loudspeakers were switched on and the formulaic speeches of various officials drowned out the Tibetan chanting.

By combining these two rituals and employing lamas from Alasha, I suggest, local officials sought to emphasize the regionalization of culture. This ritual innovation involved in this event literally relegated the veneration of the mountain to the background, with the 'cow camel's fire veneration' taking pride of place on the plain in front of the cliff. The event thus involved the re-gionalization of the sacred landscape and foregrounding of local 'folk culture'. The lamas were not afforded an opportunity to speak in front of the officials or to 'make public' Bull Camel Mountain and its associations with the Monastery of the Caves.

Conclusion

In Mongolia, the nationalizing of civilizational resources in Mongolia, nourished by ideas of the nation promoted in the Soviet era, appears to be a *fait accompli*

(Sneath 2014). In this chapter, however, I have suggested that the incipient regionalization of Buddhist rituals to mountain deities in Inner Mongolia, does not proceed without challenge. Such challenges can be conceived of not merely as cultural politics but also as cosmopolitical in de la Cadena's sense. In both form and content, Sechen's speech 'made public' a particular socio-natural formation (a Buddhicized landscape inhabited by other-than-humans, mediated by lamas) that was threatened by the mining permitted by local officials in Alasha, but also by the official version of 'Alasha camel culture' promoted by officials and intellectuals in Alasha in response to perceived threats to rural ways of life. According to this official version, the ritual exemplified not the Tibeto-Mongolian Buddhist veneration of 'spiritual beings' but instead a distinctive local folk culture that involved the veneration of camels themselves.

But how was cosmopolitical speech made possible here? This, I argue, is a crucial question that is largely absent from the emerging literature on cosmopolitics, focusing as it does on indigenous peoples in the Americas. This literature takes for granted a political context that appears to permit speaking of 'other-than-humans', even if such speech is ultimately relegated to the category of 'belief'. By contrast, the Chinese context is one in which such 'other-than-humans' have been treated as dangerous 'superstition' and which have invited state violence within living memory.

In the case I have discussed here, this 'making public' of a sacred landscape was afforded by the very administrative divisions which are integral to state territoriality. Sechen was a lama from a monastery with cosmological ties to Bull Camel Mountain, whose authority was recognized by the laity; at the same time, he hailed not from contemporary Alasha, but from a neighbouring administrative region, and thus did not depend on the assembled officials for support and patronage. He could also, however, present himself as a humble 'local', whose public criticism conjured up the grassroots subjectivities and political forms of the Maoist period. Sechen thus appears as a thoroughly multiple subject; indeed, it was this very multiplicity that enabled his critical speech.

If 'indigenous cosmopolitics' requires us to 'slow down reasoning' (de la Cadena 2010; Stengers 2005) in order to reveal assumptions inherent in our all-too-human conception of politics, I suggest that an anthropology of 'post-socialist cosmopolitics' in China might require us to slow down further still, in order to avoid figuring cosmopolitics in stark dichotomous terms as indigenous worlds against the modern state. Instead, we must trace ethnographically the various ways in which sacred landscapes are brought into relation with state territoflying horse. Mongolians attempt to 'raiseriality by minority subjects who themselves can occupy complex positions in relation to the state.

Notes

1 In late spring 2014, not long after the events described in this chapter sudden subsidence caused by an iron mine in the mountains led to the deaths of three local Mongol herders. Following this accident, the government of the Inner Mongolia

Autonomous Region called for an immediate halt to private mining operations in the area.

2 Another famous example of a womb cave is found at Wutai Shan in northern China, an important pilgrimage site for Mongols.

3 Owen Lattimore, who passed by the mountain on his travels, mentions this taboo (1928: 140–1).

4 This Mongolian concept translates literally as 'air horse' and is represented on Buddhist prayer flags as a flying horse. Mongolians attempt to 'raise' (M. *sergeeh*) their hii-mori, and thus invigorate themselves, through certain practices, including releasing bits of paper with flying horses printed on them to be borne aloft on the breeze: the higher they go, the greater the *hii-mori* (Humphrey and Hürelbaatar 2012).

5 This place name, as with personal names in this chapter, is pseudonymous.

6 The Muslim Mongols of Alasha are officially members of the Mongol nationality (C. *minzu*), and some members of the community explain their involvement in Buddhist rituals by saying that 'Mongols are Buddhists': being a Muslim Mongol thus means having two religions. Some distinguish the manner of their participation in these rituals from other Mongols by saying that they do not prostrate themselves in front of Buddhist icons in the temple or by claiming that they only attend because of the entertainment provided. In this region, there is also a significant Hui (Chinese Muslim) community, who attend the same mosques as the Muslim Mongols, though they have not been involved in the revival of rituals at Bull Camel Mountain.

7 Alasha League is subdivided into three 'banners'. The easternmost, and most populous, is Alasha Left Banner, where Bull Camel Mountain is also located.' Leagues and banners are administrative units unique to the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, and are equivalent to municipalities and counties in other parts of China.

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