

Title page

Dr. Joseph Bristley

Research Associate

Mongolia & Inner Asia Studies Unit

Department of Social Anthropology

University of Cambridge

Mond Building

Free School Lane

Cambridge CB2 3RF

United Kingdom

jb2329@cam.ac.uk

ORCID ID: 0000-0003-3307-608X

Silence and history: epistemic framings of the distant past in rural Mongolia

Abstract

Since the 1990s significant attention has been paid to how producing historical knowledge goes hand in hand with producing silences about the past. In contrast, this article argues for attention to silence itself as an epistemically significant way to conceptualize the past. This is done in relation to Mongolian ethnography.

Key words: Historicity; Mongolia; silence; temporality; Türegs.

Introduction

The last thirty years have seen significant anthropological interest in understanding relations between the production of historical knowledge and the production of silences about the past (Basu and De Jong 2016, 8; Stewart 2016, 82-3; Stoler 2009; Zeitlyn 2012, 464-5). A major influence on this approach is Michel-Rolph Trouillot's (1995) study of representations of the Haitian revolution (1791 – 1804). Trouillot contended that this event, although globally important as a successful slave revolt that toppled French colonial rule in this Caribbean country, was 'silenced' through receiving relatively little attention from historians. Like scholars in other disciplines studying the exclusion of certain subjects and events from historical records (Chakrabarty 2000; Foucault 2002 [1969]; Spivak 1988), Trouillot viewed silence as a by-product of creating historical knowledge itself. "Silences enter the process of historical production", he observed, through a range

of practices that articulate what he called ‘historicity 1’ and ‘historicity 2’ (Trouillot 1995, 26). These two categories of knowledge of the past correspond to what earlier historians called “res gestae [things done] and the historiae rerum gestarum [the history of things that happened]” (Palmié 2013a, 196).¹ ‘Historicity 1’ refers to material traces of the past and includes bodily remains, ruined buildings, and textual sources. ‘Historicity 2’, in contrast, consists of narratives based on ‘historicity 1’ materials. According to Trouillot it is the very process of historians selecting ‘historicity 1’ materials and framing them within ‘historicity 2’ accounts that allows some things to be recorded for posterity, and others to be silenced for good.

This article also focuses on the epistemic significance of largely silent pasts, and their importance for shaping how we live today. But it takes a different analytic perspective from Trouillot’s. Instead of focussing on how the past is *silenced* through producing historical knowledge, it argues for anthropological attention to *silence* as an epistemically significant way to conceptualize the past itself. This argument draws on perceptions of the distant past (first millennium AD) afforded by one historical monument in central Mongolia. The Ulaan Uulyin *khün chuluu* (Red Mountain man-stone) is an anthropomorphic grave marker located on the steppe of Erdene district,² a pastoral region of the country famous for its horse husbandry. Some of Erdene’s residents consider this stone to have been carved from granite at the behest of a Türeg aristocrat, a figure who would have lived when vast Türeg *qaganates*³ ruled over the territory of modern-day Mongolia, Kazakhstan, and north-east China (between AD 552 and 744). But as far as residents in today’s Erdene are concerned this *khün chuluu* is not, like similar objects across the country, made in the image of a man. Instead, it is said to take the form of a fecund mother. Around one metre in height, it forms part of a complex surrounded by its four

‘children’: three rocks with carved faces, and one uncarved stone of roughly the same size and shape as the others. Having stood for up to fifteen centuries in grasslands used by local pastoralists to graze flocks of sheep, goats, cows and horses, these five Türeg objects are now surrounded by a broken-down wooden fence originally intended to protect them from livestock-related damage.

In today’s Erdene, the distant past in which the Red Mountain *khün chuluu* was constructed is widely understood as a mostly silent one. On one hand, this silence is situated in relation to a vast gap that separates the temporal modality of the present from that of the ‘deep’ historical past (Humphrey 1992). Unlike the area’s more recent history under state socialism (1921 - 1990), which is extensively documented by archival records, photographs, and infrastructure that make up the “materiality of the socio-historical process” (Trouillot 1995, 29) from this time, this *khün chuluu* is the only piece of ‘historicity 1’ material in Erdene said to date from the Türeg period. It was made during a long-gone past into whose conditions of life it can only offer limited insight. Moreover, only a vanishingly small number of published ‘historicity 2’ narratives describe this object (Sürenkhorloo 2010), even though Mongolian-language scholarship on the Türeg period has expanded significantly since its appearance in mid-twentieth century historiography (Delgerjargal and Batsüren 2017). For some herders who live near the Red Mountain *khün chuluu*, this past is so distant and internally undifferentiated that it is almost completely obscure. It is seen as a period that, to draw on Caroline Humphrey’s analysis of temporal relations between Mongolia’s post-socialist (1990) and pre-socialist (1921) pasts, is separated from conditions of today’s life by a wide temporal “chasm” (Humphrey 1992, 377). But it is a chasm even greater than the one examined by Humphrey because in this case, instead of being a gap of

seventy years just about bridgeable by living memory, it lasts for one and a half thousand years. Even for local people who temporally anchor the construction of this stone “in the Türeg period [*Türeg üyed*]”, such insights serve less as detailed expositions of ‘things done’ centuries ago, than as generic glosses or speculative insights – often presented in the form of reported speech - of what life may have been like.

But as in Trouillot’s critique of the historiography of the Haitian revolution, silence in Mongolia is also produced through the writing of history itself. As Trouillot argued, there is a “massive disregard that French historiography shows for the colonial question and, by extension, for the Haitian Revolution” (1995, 101). This is not primarily because of “the inaccessibility of sources” (Ibid.,101) but due to a colonial racism that long shaped what did, and what did not, qualify as history. The situation is somewhat different in Mongolia, largely because of the paucity of ‘historicity 1’ materials that allow history to be narrated. Nevertheless, narratives of the Haitian revolution and Mongolia’s Türeg period resonate with each other to the extent that what qualified as ‘history’ in both contexts was shaped by imperial politics and the techniques of subjugation they enacted. Socialist-era historians traditionally paid relatively little attention to the Türeg period (B. Shirendev *et al.* 1966, 88-92), while post-socialist attempts to identify and mobilise historical exemplars from the distant past largely glossed over the Türegs (Humphrey 1992; Kaplonski 2004, 81-6). In part this lack of focus is contextualised against a perceived ethnic difference between Mongols and Türegs.⁴ But more significantly it embodied models of “state-created history” (Buyandelger 2013, 91) designed to ideologically support Mongolia’s socialist political system. These models framed Mongolia’s history as a linear, class-conflict driven process and focussed on the

transition from Manchu imperialism (Natsagdorj 1963; Sanjdorj 1980) to progressive socialism (Shirendev *et al.* 1966).⁵ Their narratives spoke to the epoch-defining emancipation of Mongolia's 'common people' (*ard tümen*) through socialist revolution. At the same time, though, they implicitly reproduced historiographical frameworks that emerged from the Soviet academy. These regarded (twentieth-century, Russian-articulated) socialism as an inherently superior form of social organization to those found among the Inner Asian populations who came under Russian imperial rule or hegemony from the seventeenth century onwards. And, in doing so, they allowed the fashioning of history – what should be recorded, praised, condemned, or simply forgotten – in a context of wider practices of political subjugation.

This silence, however, is not necessarily epistemically limiting for Erdene's inhabitants. In one sense this silence is not absolute. Some details of life long ago are known by local people through oral histories, the publication of local and academic history books, as well as ongoing archaeological discoveries in the region. But in a more important sense the general silence hanging over this time affords "reflective deliberation" (Williams 1985, 68) on the nature of the distant past itself. It forms, in a way, a kind of 'known unknown'. In a broader sense, though, the lack of extensive traces and narratives about the distant past opens a space for speculation on how forms of power associated with the *khün chuluu* can be phenomenally experienced today. This is often outside the scope of historicist narratives about its origins, although it is important to note that it does not come at the expense of speculating on how the past unfolded. Rooted in the *khün chuluu*'s "visual salience" (Severi 2015, 61) as a striking object from long ago, many in Erdene attribute special qualities to this object. Like rocks and caves with medically

beneficial qualities described elsewhere in Mongolian ethnography (Charleux 2022; Empson 2010; Humphrey 1993), the Red Mountain *khün chuluu* is seen by some as capable of improving aches and pains in limbs respectfully brought into contact with its stony surface. Whilst these forms of healing are attributed to the *khün chuluu* in an almost agentic way, this object also provides a point of orientation away from unsuitable pastureland located behind it: an area that can be the location of misfortune for people who live and pasture their animals there.

Aside from expanding attention to Mongolian notions of the past beyond social memory-oriented practices rooted in kinship networks and religious activities (Buyandelger 2013; Empson 2011; Humphrey 1992), this article also seeks to stretch the scope of anthropological understandings of historicity. Writing in 2016, Charles Stewart reflected on social anthropologists' interest in historicity as a "concept that captures the fundamental relationality of knowledge of the past" (Stewart 2016, 80). For Stewart, the importance of historicity lies in affording ethnographically nuanced analysis of the past, unfettered from approaches of western scholarship which tightly delineate past, present, and future as distinct temporal modalities (Hartog 2015 [2003]; Palmié 2013b). Many of the relations described by Stewart (2016, 83), which range from accounts of spirit possession to the interpretation of dreams, reveal the past as something known through substantive details of events and subjects located within, or emergent from, it. Whilst some of Erdene's inhabitants profess some knowledge of the distant past, however, its general silence nevertheless makes it largely inscrutable. Exploring how people in Erdene today think of this time draws attention to different understandings of the past's relationality. These are based not on the extensive imbrication of past and present within one temporal framework (Palmié 2013b), but

on a general sense of silence that separates past and present whilst allowing traces from long ago (in this case, the Red Mountain *khün chuluu*) to be seen in conceptually creative ways today.

Based on ethnographic research carried out over the last decade, the argument of this article is made in three sections. The first explores forms of familiarity with the Red Mountain *khün chuluu* as a material object. Focussing on the inhabitants of summer and autumn pastoral encampments located close by this object, it explores how people know it as something in the landscape endowed with a particular form of materiality. It details its physical form, layout, and steps taken to protect it from livestock-based damage. The second section explores how the past is seen as largely silent. It examines how this silence manifests concerning the notion of a distant past, in relation to the way people lived during it, and of knowledge about those people themselves. The final section examines how, in the context of such silence, new narratives can emerge that articulate this object within present-day webs of sacrality, respect, and power. This is done through examining how this object is understood as *shüteen* (sacred), as well as focussing on its healing properties and location near unsuitable pasturelands.

Living alongside the past

Stones like the Red Mountain *khün chuluu* are said by many Mongolians - including herders in Erdene, and scholars in Ulaanbaatar (Delgerjargal and Batsüren 2017, 231) - to mark the graves of pastoralist aristocrats who lived during the Türeg or later Uigur periods. This long stretch of history began in AD 552 with the deposition of a previous dynasty by an Ashina ruler from the Altai mountains of western Mongolia (Sneath 2007, 25). This resulted in the establishment of a vast state

stretching across Eurasia, which later fragmented into Eastern and Western Türeg polities. Much of this period was preoccupied with fighting against Tang dynasty China, which captured the ruler of the Eastern Türeg state in AD 630 and defeated the Western Türeg one by AD 657. By the end of the seventh century, however, a revived second Türeg state rose to prominence in what is now Mongolia, before being finally overthrown by the Uigurs in AD 744 (Ibid., 26). As with systems of monarchical rule observed elsewhere in the world, which are often marked by a “political economy of social subjugation rather than material coercion” (Graeber and Sahlins 2017, 15), Türeg rule over Inner Asia involved kings and aristocrats governing livestock-herding commoners and newly conquered subject peoples. Some rulers of Türeg polities left epigraphic records that survive in parts of Mongolia today. The famous Orkhon Inscriptions, notable for recording the deeds of two Türeg princes who reigned towards the end of the period in which the Red Mountain *khün chuluu* was made, are covered in text extolling the “God-like, Heaven-bred” status of one of their subjects (Ross and Thomsen 1930, 862). Although *khün chuluu* like the one at Red Mountain lack textual carvings, like the Orkhon Inscriptions they can appear to modern scholars (Delgerjargal and Batsüren 2017, 228-33) as attempts to create what Friedrich Nietzsche called ‘monumental history’: an often futile “demand that greatness [of historical subjects] shall be everlasting” (1997 [1876]: 68).

Today, however, the Red Mountain *khün chuluu* is located far away from political decision-making centres whilst the aristocratic social orders that governed Mongolia for much of the region’s history were suppressed after the introduction of state socialism in 1921. The *khün chuluu* sits on a low ridge of land stretching above summer and autumn pastures in rural Erdene. This area can be accessed from an

unpaved track linking Erdene’s small district centre with the national road network, along which this grey and white dappled monolith looms into view from the higher ground. Two of its nearest present-day neighbours, at least during summer and autumn, are Süren and her husband Demberel. Lean and hardworking, this elderly couple were born during Mongolia’s socialist era when the vast majority of the country’s livestock were owned by collectives. Today, though, they make a living tending their own herds of horses, cows, sheep and goats along annual migratory routes that encompass this part of Erdene. For Süren and Demberel the Red Mountain *khün chuluu* is embedded within the sprawling ‘chronotope’ of their seasonal migration networks, “sitting here at Red Mountain, where we have our summer and autumn pastures on the west and eastern sides of the Khökh river”. The *khün chuluu* is also quite close to the couple’s winter pastures as well, with their well-built wooden byres constructed to protect livestock from the cold and attacks by wolves. Whilst other mortuary sculptures like the wooden *malangan*-art described in Melanesian ethnography are deliberately ephemeral, “being destroyed or sold to western art collectors soon after their public display” (Küchler 1987, 239), the antiquity of the Red Mountain *khün chuluu* means it existed for centuries before Demberel and Süren were even born. Demberel himself has known it since his childhood, “when I was a boy of six or seven – meaning I’ve known it now for sixty years”.

Aside from its familiarity as a feature on Süren and Demberel’s migratory routes, the *khün chuluu* is also familiar to this couple as a material object. Tilted backwards by the passage of time, this unsmiling monument casts a gaze over the surrounding steppe from deeply set eyes. It is formed from a single piece of stone, with only its head and body distinct in silhouette. The sharpness of features carved

into it – a nose, mouth, and pair of breasts - have faded over the centuries and are sometimes obscured by droppings left by crows and other steppe birds perching on it. But sometimes they flash into view, foregrounded against the background of drab stone. As Demberel explained, in summer, “when it rains, the statute is revived, and [its face] becomes clear again”. Despite its austere form and lack of artistic detail for much of the year, in addition to the fact it does not appear to have any limbs, the *khün chuluu* is nevertheless clearly the figure of a human. Its anthropomorphism is also recognized by the statue occasionally receiving tea offerings made by respectful local people in a modern ceramic bowl at its base. Moreover, like other anthropomorphic rock figures in the Mongolian region, it is sometimes dressed in human clothes that include gowns (*deel*) made from various materials including silk.

Aside from the main *khün chuluu*, Demberel and Süren are also familiar with the four ‘children’ who surround it. As Süren explained, these stones are all linked together by a relation of physical proximity elaborated within the idiom of genealogy. Together, the *khün chuluu* complex at Red Mountain consists of a “female monument with four children, four children that go around it [*khöshöö dörvön khüükhedtei emegtei baisan geed, toirson iim dörvön khüükhed n’ baigaa geed l tegdeg yum*]”. Although three of these stones have human faces (the fourth one is blank), they lack any kind of anthropomorphic shape like their ‘mother’. They are also significantly smaller than the main *khün chuluu* and are referred to through their genealogical link with the main stone rather than as smaller *khün chuluu* in their own right. These four children stand around two or three metres from their mother. Anthropological accounts of the layout of some historical Buddhist sites in Mongolia have, like similar studies in Tibet and the wider Indic world,

described the emplacement of important buildings within encircling peripheral ones. Analysing the construction of the historical Zöölön monastery in northern Mongolia, Morten Pedersen noted that four outlying monasteries became “satellites, replicating (if never to a perfect degree) the properties of the center” (Pedersen 2011, 135). Although the Red Mountain *khün chuluu* was constructed well before the final dissemination of Buddhism in Mongolia during the late sixteenth century, the whole site is nevertheless arranged in such a way that smaller outer stones surround a larger and more important one. They replicate its human form, although in a lesser way. Like the main stone, age has tilted two of these to one side and tipped the others on the ground.

Familiarity with the Red Mountain *khün chuluu* also extends to the means taken to protect it from livestock pastured nearby for much of the year. Like other pastoral regions of central Mongolia, which lack tree cover except in some northern areas and along the banks of large rivers, much of Erdene is open and treeless. This means that the *khün chuluu* stands out as an excellent scratching post for cattle. As Demberel, long familiar with the behavioural characteristics of livestock, noted cattle would “generally rub up against and lean on [the *khün chuluu*], and change its shape”. Because of this, and the fact many local people see it as an important piece of “cultural heritage [*soyolyn öv*]” needing protection for the future, a small enclosure was built around it some years ago. Funded by the local government, it is a metre-high wooden fence low enough to be climbed over and entered by interested local people (and foreign anthropologists), but high enough to keep out cattle. At the same time a large metal notice board was erected next to it, encouraging people to keep the site clean. But in the twenty-or-so years since its construction the fence has broken down in places, and Erdene’s local administration currently lacks the

funds or inclination to repair it. In the summer this enclosure is thick with steppe vegetation that livestock cannot access, but also collects plastic bags and empty plastic bottles blown in from the steppe. Because of its ability to trap and accumulate garbage, local herders like Demberel and Süren will sometimes clamber over the fence to clear out unwanted items inside it.

Modalities of silence

Although Demberel and Süren are familiar with the *minutiae* of the Red Mountain *khün chuluu*'s appearance and emplacement on the steppe, the distant past to which it belongs remains a largely silent one. From one perspective this silence relates to the broad sense of chronological expansiveness from which it emerged, something that means certain objects and events cannot be placed with certainty within it. "I've really no idea [*yostoi medekhgüi, neeree*] which period it comes from", Demberel laconically observed as he gazed towards this object across the yellow steppe early in 2023. The temporal chasm that separated contemporary life from what happened centuries ago made it difficult for Demberel to locate the existence of this object in any given period. Mongolian forms of genealogical or calendrical time-reckoning observed elsewhere in regional literature allow its passage to be measured through interconnected series of births and deaths, political events, and dates (Bristley 2021; Buyandelger 2013, 13-14; Humphrey and Ujeed 2013). But as far as Demberel was concerned there were few markers that could tether the present day to the time in which the *khün chuluu* was made. But his friend Bat, a retired local official who joined in one discussion, thought otherwise. "Never mind that", he followed up to me. "It's generally said that this stone was artistically produced by the Türegs. The Türegs were here in our homeland, and this is something that they set up. Yes,

they're said to have done this work. The Türegs.” A chastened Demberel, keen to conform with the emphatically delivered words of his friend, mumbled in agreement that it was indeed the Türegs who set up this stone. Nevertheless, the period to which Bat assigned the creation of this stone is, as he himself would recognize, also an extremely expansive one within which little can be done to locate the stone's temporal origins with precision.

But silence is also produced through the way Türeg history has been written about in Mongolia and received in rural areas like Erdene district. The “periods” (*üye*) to which Demberel and Bat referred to measure time are “datable period[s] in the history of the world” (Gell 1999, 22) that function as standard chronological units (*cf* Humphrey and Ujeed 2013, 285). But they also have political resonance and were harnessed within twentieth century socialist historiography to describe temporal periods defined by the class conflicts unfolding within them. This articulated *longue durée* narratives tethering the end of Manchu rule in Mongolia and the rise of (Russian-supported) socialism. But earlier history like that from the time of the Türegs was, although not erased, given limited attention in a context where Mongolia's socialist state “suppressed memories and engineered history” (Buyandelger 2013, 69). An official history published during Bat and Demberel's childhoods could, accordingly, dedicate a mere four pages to describing Türegs as one of the “peoples of the first age of feudalism in Mongolia [*Mongol nutagt baiguulsan fyeodalyn türüü üyeiin ulsuud*]” (Shirendev *et al.* 1966, 85). In this way, as in Trouillot's analysis of wider colonial historiographies, history was narrated through the dynamic overlapping of what was deemed worthy of recording, and what was destined for minimal engagement (or even complete suppression). This was done within an epistemic framework that, while narrating history as an

inherently progressive (albeit dialectical) process, also reproduced state-created models of history inspired by the Soviet academy.

Such views are not limited to books, however. For Bat, like the early authors of texts on this subject, the Türeg period is a temporally homogenous block rather than a two-century-span in which several heterogenous state forms emerged and collapsed (Sneath 2007, 24-6). And in this way – by attending to the past as a temporally homogenous ‘thing’ largely undefined by ready chronological referents – Bat shared much of Demberel’s perspective on the distant past as a largely silent one. This silence means that, for many of Erdene’s inhabitants, there are limited insights into what Bronisław Malinowski long-ago called the “*imponderabilia of actual life*” (2002 [1922], 23). What *is* said to be known is often tightly focused on specific objects like the Red Mountain *khün chuluu*. For Bat, a retired and well-read local official with a keen interest in Erdene’s history, some things about life during the Türeg period could be inferred through his readings on the topic (including a local history book) and the physical appearance of the *khün chuluu* itself as rare ‘historicity-1’ material. As Bat enthusiastically explained, it was probably a mortuary monument created by “an aristocratic man, a rich man who did not hold onto all his wealth and dedicated it to a woman close to his heart. That’s the reason for it”. Seen from this perspective the *khün chuluu* is not simply an index of a distant past (*cf* Palmié 2013b) but is also an artefact that invites imaginative speculation into the origins of a well-known local landmark. Others, though, are far more circumspect about what aspects of social life can be known from this time. This relates not only to the substance of what can be known from the distant past (according to Bat, the existence of social differentiation, economic surpluses, and mortuary symbolism) but, more fundamentally, the possibility of knowing such

things at all given the state of material traces left over from these times. As the more prosaic Süren claimed, “we just don’t know what it was dedicated to, do we? [*kharin medekhgüi odoo yuund zoriulj khiisen yum bol?*]”. This does not mean she is not interested in speculating on the meanings given to the *khün chuluu* in ancient times, reckoning that “it’s [a representation of] someone pointed towards the sun and praying, the image of a human worshipping the sun”. But she was also keen to avoid the epistemic commitment of describing this as fixed knowledge, instead attributing such insights to circulating stories about “what people say” this object is.

In this context even the identities of those responsible for the existence of the *khün chuluu* remain largely silent. On one hand this silence relates to the individuals responsible for its creation. Although Bat guessed at the type of subject responsible for commissioning it – a wealthy aristocrat with an accumulation of wealth – his name is, unlike those of Türeg rulers commemorated elsewhere (Ross and Thomsen 1930), not recorded for posterity. Nor is it clear who manufactured it. Whilst social historian E. P. Thompson attempted to “rescue...from the enormous condescension of posterity” the lived experiences of workers and artisans ([2013] 1963, 12) neglected by a mid-twentieth-century English historiography that largely focussed on ‘great men’, the carvers of the Red Mountain *khün chuluu* – and even the positions they occupied within their own society – is unknown. All Bat and Süren say on the subject is that it must have taken a long time to carry out this work because of “the poor technology used in those days”. On the other hand, the identity of the Türegs themselves is obscure to many in Erdene. Like the Breton neolithic monuments described by Christopher Tilley (2004, 83), Erdene’s *khün chuluu* is visibly proximate to modern people who otherwise have relatively few relations

with this object and the site around it. For some, like Bat, the Türegs are merely one in a parade of different ‘peoples’ who lived in Mongolia during the distant past. Functioning as much as a chronological descriptor as an ethnonym, “the Türegs” signifies a “chronopolitical” (Kirtsoglou and Simpson 2019) period of habitation and rule by a long-gone elite. For others, though, their identity is even more nebulous. As Demberel opined:

I don’t know [who made this stone]. I really have no idea [*yostoi medekh yum baikhgüi*]. It’s said to have been people called the Türegs or whatever, and the stone here is meant to have belonged to a Türeg. But now it’s unknown what country they came from, or what people they are [*odoo al’ orond yamar ch uls baidgiig medekh yum baikhgüi shüü dee*].

Part of this silence around who the Türegs are, and where they came from, is because contemporaneous use of this ethnonym ended during the first millennium. This temporal detachment is, moreover, compounded by the fact that surviving Türeg inscriptions on the steppe or in museums are written in a text and language unintelligible to modern Mongolian laypeople.

Against this backdrop of silence, those attributes of the *khün chuluu* most readily visible to modern eyes inform how people understand its historical significance. This is largely considered in genealogical terms, and centres on descriptions of this object as a mother with four children. Much academic scholarship on *khün chuluu* conventionally describes these objects as male figures holding vases or goblets. Their gender is indicated in some cases by beards or moustaches, whilst the vessels they hold are recognisable by their distinct shapes.

In the case of the Red Mountain *khün chuluu*, however, such an interpretation is rejected. What may be seen through an outsider's eyes as two arms, bent at the elbows to hold a cup over its chest, experiences a figure-ground reversal and is seen as two pendulous breasts. The way the Red Mountain *khün chuluu* and its children are historically related is not only as a synchronic assemblage of material objects made during the same time. It is also through a posited diachrony between themselves, since one (the mother) is seen as productive of the others (the children). This relation is genealogical in the reproductive sense of a mother giving birth to her children. But it is not genealogically elaborated within the framework of wider present-day Mongolian ideologies of kinship, which emphasize the reproduction of an agnatic line in which a youngest son receives his family's hearth and the bulk of their livestock. Nor is it used to elaborate a clear genealogical connection between Türegs living in Erdene during the first millennium and Mongolians living there during the early twenty first century. Although some of Erdene's inhabitants may posit a broad connection between these two groups, a point also made in socialist-era historiography, the precise form it may have taken remains unclear.

Lithic affordances

Against the general silence around the distant past in which the Red Mountain *khün chuluu* was made, some local people like Demberel and Süren are keen to emphasize this stone's present-day qualities. These are contextualized not against 'historicity 2' narratives about 'things that were done' when this object was made, but on the *khün chuluu* itself as a particular type of object existing in the present. Indeed, in an important way, the general lack of such narratives opens a conceptual

space for speculating on how certain forms of power and agency associated with the stone can be phenomenally experienced by Erdene’s modern-day inhabitants. Many of these experiences are conceptually grounded in the fact many regard the *khün chuluu* as *shüteen* (a sacred thing). According to Bat, seeing the stone in this way is “said to have gone on uninterrupted until now, hasn’t it? [*ter shütleg n’ odoo khürtel tasrakhgüi l yavaad baigaa gej khelj baikhgüi yuu?*]”. But although the antiquity of the stone provides a context for its current status as *shüteen*, its sacredness is not simply a reification of its age. Nor is it recognition of the distant past from which it emerged as an epistemically privileged zone of temporal origin, a “site of truth...[and] vantage point of an absolute distance, free from the restraints of positive knowledge” (Foucault 1984, 79). Indeed, many older monuments on Erdene’s grasslands – notably Bronze and Iron Age *khirgisüür* said by local people to mark the burials of ancient steppe aristocrats– lack this recognition. Instead, in the same way early social anthropologists viewed ‘the sacred’ as a zone “set apart” from more mundane things and circumstances (Mauss and Hubert 1981 [1898], 31) Erdene’s *khün chuluu* is seen as categorically different from other objects in the landscape. As a *shüteen* object, though, it belongs to a category of local things including sacred cairns (*ovoos*) built at high places in the landscape, and local deities worshipped in the area’s two Buddhist monasteries. It also belongs to a wider category of lithic objects described in Mongolian ethnography that articulate present-day sacrality through a gendered lens. Writing of the “Mother’s Womb” (*Ekhe-yin Umai*) cave at Wutaishan in China, Isabelle Charleux (2022) describes a cave “shaped like a womb; pilgrims enter its narrow opening, the head and right arm stretched first, twist their body to crawl into and reach a dead-end chamber evoking a womb where they worship images of Buddhist deities” (185). Other

examples include an uncarved but nevertheless anthropomorphic “wife rock” (*avgai khad*) located outside Mongolia’s capital city Ulaanbaatar (Humphrey 1993).

A major way the *khün chuluu* is engaged with as a *shüteen* object is through various respectful practices carried out by local people. In the same way it is not merely sacred because of its great antiquity or reasons elaborated within ‘historicity 2’ narratives concerning the distant past, its age also fails to determine the respect (*khündlel*) shown to it by many local people. For Demberel, who lacks the antiquarian interests found in his friend Bat, the articulation between age and respect widely observed in human social relations (Humphrey and Ujeed 2013, 176) is only one aspect of why the Red Mountain *khün chuluu* is important. From his perspective it is not just respected merely because it is ancient. Instead, what counts most is that it represents a mother surrounded by her four children here and now. “It’s a mother stone with its children, so that means it feels quite close [to us] [*eejiin khöshöö khüükhdüüdteigee eejiin khöshöö baina gekheer chin’ l arai l dotno baina biz dee*]”. Showing respect can involve walking around it in a clockwise direction. It can also include making material offerings that, unlike the “transactional” movement of goods discussed in some of the early anthropological literature on sacrifice (Hubert and Mauss 1981 [1898]), instead serves to “enact” (Sneath 2006) a particularly respectful subject position in relation to this object. Sometimes a bowl may be placed on the ground in front of the main statue holding a *tsainy deej*. This is an honorific first offering of tea, which in many of Erdene’s herding households is placed in small bowls on a household altar in the morning, before being offered outside at night to the “seven gods” (the constellation *Ursa Major*) (*cf* Heissig 1980, 81-4). Other offerings involve clothes placed on the stone itself, or *khadags* - blue

silk scarves used to show respect to people or things – that are tied around its neck. These may be placed here by visitors to the site drawn to it by the reputation of the *khün chuluu* as an exemplary mother stone. They also attract the attention of other local people who keep the area around the stone clean after *khadags* left there are torn into threads by fierce winds blowing across Erdene’s steppe, and also draw the ire of staff at a nearby museum who periodically tour the countryside with scissors to unceremoniously cut off *khadags* found on any ancient monuments.

Aside from having the ontological status of a respected and sacred object, the Red Mountain *khün chuluu* also features in local life in more directly interactional ways. Narratives of such interactions are primarily located in the present. But they can be readily projected backwards to encompass the lived experiences of particular individuals (albeit in ways that emphasize recalled memories and stories relayed by others, rather than ‘historicity 2’ accounts that articulate today’s conditions with the distant past). One such account concerns supposed dangers posed to herders by living or herding in the area directly behind the *khün chuluu*. Writing of how feelings of fear articulate with expressions of morality and subjectivity, Caroline Humphrey (2013) discusses a Mongolian film called “Tears of the *Khün Chuluu* [*Khün Chuluuny Nulims*] (1990)”. In this film’s cinematic depiction of Mongolia’s socialist past, an increasingly disturbed protagonist hides behind – and eventually seems to merge with – a *khün chuluu*. Examining how this object relates to the broader sense of fear the film evokes, Humphrey observes that *khün chuluu* are human-like but not human. This incongruity, alongside their obscure temporal origins which “pre-date the Mongols,” means they “are seen as mysteriously dangerous and should be avoided” (2013, 298). In Erdene district, danger and the sense of fear it evokes are not posed

by the stone itself. Instead, the stone helps to index or point out dangerous areas located in relation to it. Resonating with broader associations between topographical behind-ness and ideas of the unobservable and concealed, a region behind the Red Mountain stone is said to be replete with threats to humans and livestock.

The main form of danger indexed by Erdene's *khün chuluu* is a "running path" (*güideltei gazar*). Running paths are areas traversed by local spirits than can cause harm to people who cross them, as well as livestock that pasture on or near them. According to Demberel, a shaman (*böö*) who once carried out a family ritual not far from the *khün chuluu* informed him that "the direction behind [the stone] is prohibited...it's connected to a running path there [*odoo ene ar luu ochij ochikh tseertei...iim kholbootoi güidel ingeed baidag yum shüü*]" . Whilst the shaman was "probably right" as far as Demberel was concerned, his knowledge of what could go wrong by living behind the *khün chuluu* came from his own experience. Once, he and his family unwittingly set up their yurt in this area when they moved to Red Mountain for one of the herding seasons. Within a relatively short space of time, however, this weather-resilient structure had been "blown away by the wind", causing the family to encamp somewhere else instead. This was a lucky escape, though, as Süren recalled another incident concerning an elderly neighbour who lived there in the past: "in those days Mr. Lkhagva lived there, he was encamped at the *khün chuluu*. It was said that one of the children there was struck by lightning [*tengert n' nirgüüleed*] and died as a result". In this sense the *khün chuluu* affords an understanding of the dangers of a particular place in the unfolding present. It also acts as a kind of mute index, pointing out a place behind it that is best avoided.

Finally, it is important to note that accounts of interaction with the Red Mountain *khün chuluu* can be directly beneficial to individual people from Erdene. Like the stories focussing on the problematic pasturelands behind the *khün chuluu*, these accounts also engage how people in the present live alongside this object. This is important in relation to medicinal qualities said to be possessed by the stone. Writing of the ‘White Rock’ in eastern Mongolia, Rebecca Empson (2010) noted how this massive natural object was said to “gather a magnetic ‘energy’ from lightning” that was “meant to be good for our heart, liver and kidneys” (138). Erdene’s *khün chuluu* is also said to have healing properties, although these are not drawn from external sources nor directed at internal organs. Instead, as Demberel explained, it is meant to cure various skin problems in people who come to it for help. This is achieved by the person with a skin rash, or who happens to have aches and pains in a particular body part, hopping over the fence into the enclosure containing the *khün chuluu*. The body part in question, usually a hand or arm, can then be rubbed on this ancient monument for a short period of time. After that, the problem is meant to get better. Like the stories about the pasture behind the *khün chuluu*, the possibility of this object curing someone from harm has a presentist focus. But such accounts can also be projected back into the biographies of people who have used this method to get better, and can tell other people about it. Tellingly, though, this ability is grounded in the *khün chuluu* as a particularly powerful type of object, rather than by virtue of it being from the distant past.

Conclusion

Writing about silence and the production of history nearly thirty years ago, Michel-Rolph Trouillot argued that “any historical narrative is a particular bundle of silences, the result of a unique process, and the operation required to deconstruct these silences will vary accordingly” (1995, 27). As anthropologists and other scholars strive to “deconstruct” the silences produced in the history of colonized places and in colonially shaped narratives, Trouillot’s insight has proved prescient indeed. This article, though, has chosen to address silence from another analytic perspective: not only as a by-product of the work of historians, but as something that describes how the past itself – as a particular modality of time – is understood. It has done so by examining how the understanding of significant levels of silence about the distant past – here, of Mongolia during the first millennium, as exemplified in relation to a Türeg period (AD 552 – 744) artefact – allows people to live and behave in the present day. Although this silence does not possess the level of ethical resonance of the silences addressed by Trouillot and others, it is still important to understand as a means by which people understand their own “relationality” (Stewart 2016) to times gone by.

This argument was made in two ways. It addressed how the past comes to be understood as silent: not in an absolute sense as a complete temporal void, but in broad terms. It examined how the distant past in which the Red Mountain *khün chuluu* was made is seen to have great chronological depth. It also examined the limitations to creating ‘historicity 2’ narratives about this past. This is based on the limited amount of material traces that survive from long ago, but also on how such histories were shaped by regional politics and the forms of subjugation they articulated. As a result of this silence, the remainder of the article explored creative ways in which people in Erdene live alongside this object today. Detailing ideas of

sacrality and respect conceptually vested in it, it examined how this object was situated in relation to dangerous pasturelands and a unique healing potential.

Acknowledgements

The research on which this article was based was supported by the British Academy (Stein-Arnold Exploration Fund scheme, under grant SA1920\100006) and Economic and Social Research Council (PhD studentship scheme, under grant B102291G). I would like to thank all the participants of the research on which this article is based. I thank David Henig, Editor of *History and Anthropology*, and the anonymous reviewers of this article, for their incredibly helpful, generous, and useful comments on my work. I also thank Ganbold Manibadar for research assistance.

Disclosure statement

The author reports there are no competing interests to declare.

Notes

¹ Trouillot's identification of these two categories of historicity has been critiqued in two major ways. On one hand it is seen as disaggregating two ways of understanding the past that can profitably be viewed as part of the same mediating processes that link together past and present (Stewart 2016, 82). On the other hand, the extent to which "isomorphy" (Palmié 2013a, 195) exists between these two categories of historicity has been questioned. Nevertheless, I find the broad distinction between perceptions of material culture and the formation of historical narratives to be a useful one for examining how the Red Mountain *khün chuluu* is seen in present-day Erdene district.

² The name of this district, like all other places and individuals in this article, has been anonymised. All participants provided informed consent to take part in the ethnographic research on which this article is based. The research forming the basis of this study received ethical approval from the Ethics Committee, Department of Social Anthropology, University of Cambridge; and Ethics Committee, Department of Anthropology, University College London.

³ A people called the Türegs ruled Mongolia between the sixth and eight centuries through a series of steppe polities. One of these, the Türeg *qaganate*, has been claimed by ideologists of the modern Republic of Türkiye as one of several ancient predecessors to this modern state form.

⁴ For some of Erdene’s residents, however the Türegs – although not themselves Mongols – can nevertheless be regarded as ‘our ancestors’ (*övög deedes maan*’).’

⁵ Between 1691 and 1911, the territory of present-day Mongolia came under the rule of the Beijing-based Manchu Qing emperors. The collapse of the Qing dynasty saw Mongolia declare independence in 1911 and name its leading Buddhist incarnation, the eighth Jebtsundhamba Khutukhtu, as king. In 1921, after the Russian civil war spilled over into northern Mongolia, a Russian-supported socialist government was established in the country and instigated large-scale socio-economic changes.

References

Basu, Paul and De Jong, Ferdinand. 2016. ‘Utopian archives, decolonial affordances. Introduction to special issue.’ *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale*. 24 (1): 5 – 19. doi:10.1111/1469-8676.12281

Bristley, Joseph. 2021. ‘Times of debt: heterochrony and bank loans in rural Mongolia’. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute (N.S.)* 27(3): 638-652.

Buyandelger, Manduhai. 2013. *Tragic Spirits. Shamanism, Memory, and Gender in Contemporary Mongolia*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. 2000. *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.

Charleux, Isabelle. 2022. 'The Mongols and the Womb-cave of Wutaishan'. In V. Goosaert and T. Masaaki (eds) *Lieuz saints et pèlerinages: La tradition taoïste vivante / Holy sites and pilgrimages: The Daoist living tradition*. Turnhout: Brepols. Pages 185-217.

Delgerjargal, P. and Batsüren, B. 2017. *Türeg, Uigur. Mongolyn Ertний Түүkh. Dөtgөөр Bot'* [Türegs, Uigurs. Mongolia's Early History. Fourth Volume]. Ulaanbaatar: Soyombo Printing.

Empson, Rebecca. 2010. "'Enclosing' for Growth: Including or Excluding People from Land in Northeast Mongolia". In Isabelle Charleux, Grégory Delaplace, Roberte Hamayon, and Scott Pearce (eds) *Representing Power in Modern Inner Asia: Conventions, Alternatives and Oppositions*. Bellingham: Western Washington University. Pages 123-148.

Empson, Rebecca. 2011. *Harnessing Fortune. Personhood, Memory, and Place in Mongolia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Foucault, Michel. 1984. 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History'. In P. Rabinow (eds) *The Foucault Reader*. New York: Pantheon Books. Pages 76-100.

Foucault, Michel. 2002 [1969]. *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith). London and New York: Routledge.

Gell, Alfred. 1992. *The Anthropology of Time. Cultural Constructions of Temporal Maps and Images*. Oxford: Berg.

Graeber, David and Sahlins, Marshall. 2017. *On Kings*. Chicago: HAU Books.

Hartog, François. 2015 [2003]. *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time* (trans. S Brown). New York: Columbia University Press.

Heissig, Walther. 1980. *The religions of Mongolia* (trans. G. Samuel). London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Hubert, Henri and Mauss, Marcel. 1981[1898]. *Sacrifice. Its nature and functions* (trans. W.D. Halls). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Humphrey, Caroline. 1992. 'The Moral Authority of the Past in Post-Socialist Mongolia'. *Religion, State and Society* 20(3-4): 375-389.

Humphrey, Caroline. 1993. 'Avgai Khad: Theft and Social Trust in Post-Communist Mongolia'. *Anthropology Today* 9(6): 13-16.

Humphrey, Caroline. 2013. 'Fear as a property and an entitlement'. *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale* 21(3): 285-304. doi:10.1111/1469-8676.12033

Humphrey, Caroline and Ujeed, Hürelbaatar. 2013. *A Monastery in Time. The Making of Mongolian Buddhism*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.

Kaplonski, Christopher. 2004. *Truth, History and Politics in Mongolia. The Memory of Heroes*. London: Routledge Curzon.

Kirtsoglou, Elisabeth and Simpson, Bob. 2020. 'Introduction: the time of anthropology: studies of contemporary chronopolitics and chronocracy.' In E. Kirtsoglou and B. Simpson (eds) *The Time of Anthropology. Studies of Contemporary Chronopolitics*. Oxford and New York: Routledge. Pages 1-30.

Küchler, Susanne. 1987. 'Art and Memory in a Melanesian Society'. *Man* (New Series) 22(2): 238-255.

Malinowski, Bronislaw. 2002 [1922]. *Argonauts of the Western Pacific: An Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelagos of Melanesian New Guinea*. London and New York: Routledge.

Natsagdorj, Sh. 1963. *Manjiin erkhsheeld baisan üyeiin Khalkhyn khuraangui tүүkh (1691 – 1911) [A brief history of Manchu-dependent Khalkha (1691 – 1911)]*. Ulaanbaatar: Ulsyn khevleliin khereg erkhekh khoroo.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1997 [1876]. *Untimely Meditations* (trans. R. J. Hollingdale). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Palmié, Stephan. 2013a. 'The Trouble with History'. *Small Axe* 17(3): 193-202.
DOI 10.1215/07990537-2379000

Palmié, Stephan. 2013b. 'Historicist Knowledge and Its Conditions of Impossibility'. In R. Blanes and D. Espírito Santo (eds) *The Social Life of Spirits*. Chicago: Chicago University Press. Pages 218-240.

Pedersen, Morten Axel. 2011. *Not Quite Shamans. Spirit Worlds and Political Lives in Northern Mongolia*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.

Ross, Edward Denison and Thomsen, Vilhelm. 1930. 'The Orkhon Inscriptions: Being a Translation of Professor Vilhelm Thomsen's Final Danish Rendering'. *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies, University of London* 5:4 (861-876).

Sanjdorj, M. 1980. *Manchu Chinese colonial rule in northern Mongolia* (trans. U. Onon.). London: C. Hurst & Company.

Severi, Carlo. 2015. *The Chimera Principle. An Anthropology of Memory and Imagination* (trans. J. Lloyd). Chicago: HAU Books.

Shirendev, B., Sh. Natsagdorj, Kh. Perlee, Sh. Bira, E. M. Jukov, A. A. Guber, G. F. Kim, and S. D. Dilikov (eds). 1966. *Bügd Nairamdakh Mongol Ard Ulsyn Tüükh* [History of the Mongolian People's Republic]. Ulaanbaatar: BNMAU-yn Shinjlekh Ukhaany Akadyemiin Khevllel.

Sneath, David. 2006. 'Transacting and enacting: Corruption, obligation and the use of monies in Mongolia'. *Ethnos. Journal of Anthropology* 71(1): 89 -112. 10.1080/00141840600603228

Sneath, David. 2007. *The Headless State: Aristocratic Orders, Kinship Society, and Misrepresentations of Nomadic Inner Asia*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 1988. 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' In C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (eds) *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. London: Macmillan. Pages 271-313.

Stewart, Charles. 2016. 'Historicity and Anthropology'. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 45: 79-94. 10.1146/annurev-anthro-102215-100249

Stoler, Ann Laura. 2009. *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.

Sürenkhorloo, Darjaagiin. 2010. *Minii Saikhan Nutag: Tüükhen, temdeglel, dursamj*. [My beautiful homeland: Historical notes and memories]. Ulaanbaatar: Soyombo Printing.

Tilley, Christopher. 2004. *The Materiality of Stone: Explorations in Landscape Phenomenology*. London: Routledge.

Thompson, Edward Palmer. 2013 [1963]. *The Making of the English Working Class*. London: Penguin Books.

Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. 1995. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Williams, Bernard. 1985. *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. Cambridge (Ma.): Harvard University Press.

Zeitlyn, David. 2012. 'Anthropology in and of the Archives: Possible Futures and Contingent Pasts. Archives as Anthropological Surrogates.' *Annual Review of Anthropology* 41: 461 – 480. 10.1146/annurev-anthro-092611-145721