

Chapter 2

The Hulunbuir Grasslands Beckon

An ancient ditty

As a middle school student in Taiwan, I learned about the Hulunbuir Grasslands. In my mind, they resembled the lyrics of an ancient folk song:

*The sky is pale,
the wilderness vast,
and when the wind blows
the grass bends
revealing cattle and sheep.*

So I had romantic feelings about this Inner Mongolian prairie. But as I researched the Silk Road, I came to realize the significance of grasslands in the spread of civilization.

In fact, a 10,000km-long belt of grassland or steppe stretches from east to west across the Eurasian continent. It was far easier to transport goods on the relatively flat steppe than in the arid desert or through the high mountains. After the horse was domesticated, this narrow strip formed the main route between Eastern Europe and East Asia some 4,000 years ago, and today it is known as the Steppe Silk Road.

Cutting across the eastern end of the Steppe Silk Road are the Hulunbuir Grasslands, which are located in the northwestern part of the Greater Khingan mountains. The Hulunbuir Grasslands are about 350km wide (east–west) and 300km long (north–south), and are classified as meadow steppe. There are thousands of rivers and many lakes in the region, whose name is a combination of the names of the Hulun and Buir Lakes.

Hulunbuir is not only home to China’s largest and most suitable land for grazing, it is also one of the world’s largest grasslands. It is connected to the Xilingol Grassland (another one of the largest grasslands in the world), which is also located in Inner Mongolia, and to the steppe in eastern Mongolia.

Unfortunately, most of China’s steppe is in the process of degradation. On the one hand, the proliferation of mines, an increasing population, and the development of towns are encroaching into grassland areas; and on the other hand, climate change has generally reduced vegetation and increased desertification. So pastoralism in Inner Mongolia is in gradual, even dramatic decline. The extent of grassland degradation in neighboring Mongolia is even more concerning.

Hulunbuir City and Hailar District

I had planned several visits to Hulunbuir over the past decade or so, but unfortunately each time last-minute changes prevented me from going. I have always wanted to write about my experiences and insights gained through travel on the Silk Road over the years, but that would have been incomplete without direct knowledge of the Hulunbuir Grasslands, which are both geographically and historically important.

In August 2018, I finally fulfilled my years-long wish. I was fortunate that the head of Guangxi Normal University Press, Liu Ruilin—who happens to be a Hulunbuir native—put me in contact with an old classmate of hers, so I got a warm reception and a very meaningful introduction to the region.

Hulunbuir is a prefecture-level city in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, which covers an area of about 260,000km² or about the size of the United Kingdom. With a population of just over 2.5 million, that is less than 10 people per square kilometer!

The Greater Khingan mountains run the length of the city, dividing Hulunbuir into three parts: the Hulunbuir Grasslands in the west, the Greater Khingan Forest in the center, and the low hills and river valley plains in the east. Everyone goes to Hulunbuir for the steppe. But in fact, the prefecture hosts a number of banners (an administrative unit dating from Qing dynasty times), county-level cities, and towns. I have visited some, each with its own unique characteristics, and there is more to them than just grassland.

The Hulunbuir city government is located in Hailar District. Hailar is fairly prosperous with wide and neat streets, skyscrapers in the center, and a large Genghis Khan Square. There is a theme park on its outskirts and a fairly large, well-connected airport.

What impressed me most was the Hulunbuir Ethnic Museum. It comprises three floors, one exhibition hall per floor, and each highlights regional and ethnic cultures. I found the Cradle of Ancient Peoples in Northern China exhibit most interesting.

The Golden Horde Mongol Tribes?

The tourist brochure from my hotel announced that the most beautiful part of the Hulunbuir Grasslands was the Mo'ergele River in the hinterland, and the most renowned tourist hotspot was a nearby site once garrisoned by the "Golden Horde Mongol Tribes."

Since it was not far from Hailar, of course I had to check it out. The river snaking through the green prairie set my heart at ease. The grassland, sliced into many pieces by the river, forms a number of gentle slopes that "nourish the eye" (as Cantonese speakers put it). Although it was still August, it did not feel hot at all.

If I had had better foresight, I would have viewed the beautiful landscape, taken a few snapshots, and gone on my way. I would have saved money, time, and avoided an unpleasant dose of commercialism. Most significantly, I would have preserved my hitherto perfect impression of the area.

But driven by curiosity whetted by that glossy brochure, I bought a ticket for that scenic spot of Golden Horde fame. Not long after entering, I realized this was indeed an unabashed tourist trap. There were many tents, most with golden conical tops but very solid, modern structures; utterly different from the mobile Mongol yurts I have visited in the past. Gaggles of grinning tourists were busy posing for souvenir photos.

Not far away stood a massive, gold-hued tent. The sights and sounds of tourists chortling and joking greatly infringed on the pleasant feelings I had before entering, so I decided to have a quick look and depart.

I retraced my steps and when I reached the entrance, the middle-aged female ticket collector watched me leave. “Why don’t you stay for a better look around, Old Uncle?” she called out affably. “There’ll be a performance later!”

“I’m in a rush,” I replied awkwardly and made a hasty exit.

Once I reached the place where I had taken in the beautiful scenery, my eyes lit up again, and my heart rejoiced. “This panorama alone definitely makes up for the ticket price just now!” I consoled myself.

In the evening at the hotel, I searched online and learned that Genghis Khan may indeed have stationed his army in that area of the grasslands. Furthermore, it was there that he trained his soldiers and fattened their horses, thus preparing the Mongols for future victories. But no one knows the exact location where he garrisoned his forces.

About 20 years ago, tourism began to develop in Inner Mongolia, and a bevy of industry professionals chose this beautiful scenic spot to locate what is now designated the “Golden Horde Mongol Tribes.” From a business point of view, this was a perfectly logical choice! What I saw shows that they had more than just foresight; they knew how to manage operations. But perhaps it never occurred to them that one day an “Old Uncle” like me—who has a cult-like fascination with the Hulunbuir Grasslands—would not only *not* be attracted to those golden artificial tents, he would not even approve of the title unwisely bestowed on this tourist site.

The Kipchak Khanate was founded in 1243 by Batu, Genghis Khan’s grandson, in the Kipchak area which is in the western part of the

Eurasian Steppe. In the West, the khanate is known as the Golden Horde, the Mongol rulers of much of Eastern Europe.

Back when Temüjin was present in Hulunbuir before 1200, he had not yet become the supreme leader of the Mongols, now known as Genghis Khan. Then, how could this site have been occupied in his day by the Golden Horde, troops of his grandson Batu and their descendants?

Chapter 3

The Right Bank of the Argun

The Treaty of Nerchinsk

In the latter half of the 17th century, Emperor Kangxi and Russia's Peter the Great reigned concurrently. At this time the Manchu forces had long since moved westward into central Mongolia, while the Russians had reached Lake Baikal, north of Mongolia in Siberia. Soon Russian power expanded further eastward into the Heilongjiang (Heilong River) or Amur River basin, and they erected the cities of Nerchinsk (Nibuchu) and Yaksha north of the river, actions which caught Kangxi's eye.

From 1685–87, the Chinese emperor dispatched thousands of soldiers on two expeditions to capture Yaksha, killing many Russian soldiers and taking hundreds of prisoners. After several rounds of negotiations,

the Qing dynasty and Russia signed the Treaty of Nerchinsk in 1689 in the eponymous city, which brought hostilities to an end.

This treaty marked two firsts: the first time that China had signed a treaty composed in the spirit of international law, a concept that was only beginning to be respected in Europe, and the premier usage of the term “China” referring to the country ruled by the Qing dynasty. The original treaty was in Latin, with copies in Manchu, Chinese, and Russian.

The treaty allowed trade in both directions but did not otherwise allow individuals to cross the border. Most significant was the establishment of state borders: The northern portion of the Outer Khingan Range would belong to Russia and the southern portion to China. China acquired the territory between the Outer Khingans and the Amur River, thereby eliminating what had been the Russian city of Yaksha. West of the Argun River was to be Russian, while territory east of it was Chinese.

The boundary line in the eastern portion of the Outer Khingan Range was repeatedly disputed by both sides because the eastern part of the mountain range had not been well surveyed. Disputes multiplied later, partly because the Chinese alleged that the Russians often surreptitiously moved the boundary markers that were inscribed in Latin, Russian, Manchu, and Chinese.

These disputes continued until the Treaty of Aigun in 1858, which effectively reversed the Treaty of Nerchinsk, ceding to Imperial Russia the territory it had coveted for 200 years. This meant the border between the two countries moved south to the Amur, and all of the Outer Khingan Range was handed over to Russia.

By contrast, the Argun River has served as the official border between Russia and China for more than 300 years. Since it is a natural

boundary and not easily crossed, there has been no need for boundary markers, so for three centuries it has not engendered conflict.

Ergun City

Ergun is a county-level city under Hulunbuir City, located in the northwest of the latter. Its western boundary is the entire right bank of the Argun River, which runs for about 1,500km from south to north before joining the Shilka River in Russia to form the Heilongjiang. Covering 30,000km², Ergun is sparsely populated, home to only about 80,000 residents.

Ergün is a Mongolic word which means offering, an etymology that illustrates that the Argun River basin was influenced by Mongolian culture. Temüjin was active in this area when he became chief of the Kiyat clan. Later, he moved westward to present-day Mongolia, where he was elected as the Great Khan by representatives of various Mongol tribes, and has been known as Genghis Khan—universal ruler—across the globe ever since.

There are a number of small townships and towns under Ergun's jurisdiction, the largest of which is downtown Ergun where the city government is located, more than 60km from the eastern bank of the Argun. Although the population is generally dispersed across the vast area of the city, in the downtown area it is relatively concentrated. Rows of six- and seven-story residential buildings take up quite a bit of space. There is also an industrial park in Ergun's suburbs. I did not see any factories, but I spotted a Russian-themed ethnic cultural scenic area.

The existence of such a scenic site is actually not because Russian culture has taken root there but because of the recent keen interest of Chinese people from interior parts of the country in visiting border

areas like Inner Mongolia. If one can enjoy the exotic atmosphere of a foreign land—without having to cross a border—does not that make such a destination more attractive?

In fact, tourism income is quite significant for the Ergun region, and I happened upon a group of red Russian-style buildings on the national highway, 60–70km from the Russian border.

I found the scenic area's Lieba Culture Hall particularly interesting. *Lieba*—a Chinese transliteration of *khleb*, the Russian word for bread—refers to a large, mound-shaped loaf of bread that is typically about 20cm in diameter. The height of the mound varies from place to place. This sort of heavy, chewy bread is a feature of Russian cuisine. Its origin may be that Russian Orthodox clergy offered the bread, which symbolizes the Holy Body of Christ, to the faithful during religious rites, sometimes dipped in salt.

I have been to Russia seven or eight times but have never sampled this style of *khleb*. At any rate, Ergun's Lieba Culture Hall is a place where visitors can experience so-called Russian culture on the spot. Many of the female attendants actually looked Russian. After some observation, I confirmed that their main task seemed to be neither to explain the culture nor to tout *khleb*, but to pose for pictures with the tourists who went there to experience the exotic atmosphere.

I can attest that when it comes to making *lieba*, the culture hall is authentic. Visitors can watch up close how the bread is made on site in a large open kitchen.

“Food is everything to the people” goes the ancient Chinese adage—so why not enjoy Russia on the tip of your tongue in Ergun City, amidst the Hulunbuir Grasslands?

The Evenki

The Evenki (lit., mountain dwellers) once lived as nomadic hunters in various places east of Lake Baikal and south of the Outer Khingan mountains. They raise reindeer for transport and their milk and antlers.

Centuries ago, the concepts of countries and borders were foreign to them. But today the Argun River divides their traditional homeland into two separate nations. Some 60,000 Evenki remain in Russia where they are known as Evenk, while slightly less than 40,000 reside in China's Inner Mongolia and Heilongjiang Province. They have thus unwittingly become a "cross-border people" who sadly cannot cross the border freely.

The Evenki on the right bank of the Argun have been ruled by several different regimes—their fellow Tungusic-speaking Manchu during the Qing dynasty; Chinese warlords during the Republican era; the occupying Japanese army; Manchukuo, the Japanese puppet regime installed in Manchuria (1932–45); the Nationalist government of China; and since 1949 the People's Republic—for more than 100 years and have suffered much persecution and discrimination.

In the early Qing era, some Evenki enlisted in the Qing army, and a handful became generals and were recognized for meritorious service on the battlefield. They include Dolar Hailanqa (died 1793), who pacified the Dzungar Khanate and suppressed the large-scale anti-Qing rebellion of the Heaven and Earth Society in Taiwan led by Lin Shuangwen.

In 1763 under the reign of the Qianlong Emperor, some Evenki bannermen were transferred to the northern frontiers of recently conquered Xinjiang and garrisoned there for defense, but they have