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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Hunters, Warriors, Spirits: Nomadic Art of North China has been fifteen years in the making. Originally conceived as an ethnographic exhibition about the Orochen—China’s last nomadic hunters, and masters of the boreal forest of the Greater and Lesser Khingan Mountains since the 17th century—an extraordinary sequence of events interrupted our plans and forced us to change course more than once. As is natural for a project like ours, which has lived through several iterations over an extended period, we have benefitted from many friends and institutional partners.

First of all, I must thank Ms. Fione Lo, director of the Hong Kong Heritage Museum, who was the first person to see the value of an exhibition dedicated to China’s northern nomads. Her unflagging support has sustained us through our trials, and been integral to our ability to finally mount the exhibition in July this year. In the same breath, I would like to thank Dr. Isabelle Frank, the co-curator of the show and the co-editor of this catalogue. Isabelle has been a joy to work with, whilst her professionalism and attention to detail consistently pushed me to think deeper on many issues. Thanks are also due to Prof. Matthew Lee and Ms. Kathy Chan, respectively the Vice-President and Associate Vice-President (Development and Alumni Relations) at City University of Hong Kong. Their endorsement and support went a long way to making this exhibition a reality.

I would like to thank my dear friends Dr. Betty Lo and Mr. Kenneth Chu, who came to my rescue when the global Coronavirus pandemic made it impossible to bring in collections from overseas. Their wonderful collection of ancient nomadic art enabled Isabelle and me to discover a new curatorial angle, which added historical depth and significantly expanded the scope of the exhibition. The Mengdiexuan Collection opened up new vistas on the ancient nomads and the Silk Road, pushing the exhibition to expand beyond the focus on the culture of a single ethnic minority.

It has given me great pleasure to include my good friend, the Buryat maestro Dashi Namdakov, and his magnificent sculptures in *Hunters, Warriors, Spirits*. His works offer a contemporary perspective while providing visual focus in different parts of the exhibition. It has been a long-held dream to collaborate with Dashi, and I am grateful for his support under the challenging circumstances. Dashi’s sculptures provide a tangible link with the artistic legacy of the ancient nomads and remind us of the continuing relevance of their wisdom—the need to respect and live in harmony with nature.

An outstanding feature of this exhibition is the use of new media, which has created another experiential dimension to complement the display of objects. I am very glad to have my friends and long-standing research and curatorial partners, Prof. Jeffrey Shaw and Prof. Sarah Kenderdine, as the new media curators for this show. In this regard, their recent experience as the main new media curators and artists for the Hong Kong Palace Museum has been highly relevant, particularly for the Mongolia Deer Stones installation, which has in addition benefitted from the photography of Hong Kong-based, Swiss photographer Mr. Marc Progin. Marc’s evocative works capture the diversity, sublime grandeur, and loneliness of the Mongolian landscape, serving as a visual and sensorial bridge to the world of the northern nomads.

The new media installations of this show include several interactive displays—two sets of reindeer harness and two sets of shamans’ robes. I am grateful to the Kunstkamera Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnology for allowing Sarah and her team to digitally scan the reindeer harnesses and the Manegir shaman’s robe, and to the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at Cambridge University for granting access to the Numinchen shaman’s robe.

Special thanks are also due to Dr. June Zhang, who is the creator of the three short animated films featured in this exhibition. As always, June has approached the subjects with an admirable blend of meticulousness and sensitivity, which is fully reflected in the subdued yet unmistakable style of her mesmerizing artworks. I thank Guan Xiaoyun for narrating the stories in Orochen, and Guan Taofang for her song.

Whilst the current show has evolved far beyond the scope of the Orochen exhibition I originally envisioned, I acknowledge in deep gratitude Orochen friends and community elders who initiated me to the mysteries of their culture some twenty winters ago. Their wisdom and cultural legacy gave me the idea to create an exhibition that would bring to light the traditional ecological knowledge of the nomads of North China. Despite all the permutations, this has been a compass for me and the curatorial team. In particular, I wish to thank Ge Shuxian, who adopted me into her family and showed me the traditional Orochen way of life, at a time when her culture was rapidly disappearing. It was she who set me on the path of preserving and revitalizing traditional culture. I would like to thank my comrades Bai Ying, Bai Yan, and Bai Lan, of the Bayayir clan—respectively the leading Orochen artist and museum expert, musician, and scholar—who never wavered in their trust and belief despite all the setbacks. Bai Ying also personally performed the ritual carving for the ‘Bayin Achaa’ video installation, which was created in January, 2019, with the help of Nathan Gibson. As the intellectual and cultural elites of the community, their participation has not only given legitimacy and credibility to my work, but also ensured the support of the wider indigenous communities in North China. I am also grateful to the elders Bayartu, Erdengua, and Guan Kou’ni, who shared with me their unique experiences, memories and knowledge of life in the forest.

My thanks are also due to the lenders to this exhibition, including my teacher and friend Mr. Stephen Selby, Ms. Janet Cheung of Treasure Gallery, Ms. Claire and Mr. Francis Lee, and Warren Cheng of Wui Po Kok. To this list I add Onon Bataar, Sirguleng, Wei Meiyang, and Ge Shuxian, whose ballads have given the exhibition a human voice and significantly enriched the experience.

I have the fortune to have worked with a talented design team, whose dedication to the project never wavered despite all the setbacks and challenges. Chief among them I must thank Sjoerd Hoekstra, the principal designer of this exhibition, and his design partner Hoichi Ng, who worked on this project across two completely different versions from 2018 to 2022. In the same breath, I must thank Rosanne Chan, Eunice Chan and James Tong, of CA Book Publishing, who have faithfully adapted the spirit and aesthetics of the exhibition to the present catalogue. Thanks are also due to my ever dependable colleague Angela Choi, who has overseen the production of both the exhibition and catalogue with dedication and professionalism.

Last but not least, I owe my gratitude to my family, who have shown infinite patience and supported me through all these years. My late father’s generous donation provided the necessary funds for the Orochen Cultural Preservation Project. It is appropriate that the launch of the exhibition and its companion catalogue coincide with the 70th anniversary of my family company, Wah Kwong Maritime Transport Holdings. None of this would have been possible without the support of my loving wife, Vicentia, who has been a companion and partner since the beginning of this journey some twenty years ago.

Hing Chao



Landscape of the Northern Forests

Marc Progin

Siberian border, Mongolia
2005

FOREWORD

It is with great pleasure that I write this foreword to the catalogue *Hunters, Warriors, Spirits. Nomadic Art of North China*. The exhibition and the catalogue have been many years in the making. Mr Hing Chao (Chief Curator of the exhibition) had originally planned an international exhibition on the Orochen, to be held at the Indra and Harry Banga Gallery at City University of Hong Kong (CityU) in the winter of 2019. Because of the unrest in the fall of 2019, this was initially pushed back to the spring of 2020, and then because of Covid the international lenders could no longer participate.

A year later, Mr Chao fortunately discovered that a different—in some ways more ambitious—exhibition was possible using resources closer to home. By drawing on his own collection of nomadic artworks and those in the Mengdiexuan Collection of Betty Lo and Kenneth Chu (with additions from a few other lenders), he could offer an overview of nomadic art in North China and of the fascinating cultural exchanges occurring between the ‘Hu’ (as they were called) and the ‘Han’ over hundreds of years.

Covering a period ranging from the Neolithic period to the Liao dynasty, this exhibition reveals the beauty and variety of nomadic art through over 230 objects, rarely shown in such a comprehensive manner. The curators also included monumental bronze sculptures by Dashi Namdakov, himself a member of an indigenous nomadic people (the Buryats), whose work brings to life the myths and legends of the nomads through a continuous dialogue with the ancient artworks. To recreate the atmosphere of the nomadic steppes for the visitor, encompassing grasslands, desert land, and mountain forests, the curators included stunning images of the steppes taken by the Swiss photographer Marc Progin. The creative media installations—a hallmark of exhibitions at the Banga Galley—conjure up the spiritual worlds of shamanism and Buddhism. But none of this could have happened without the generous, continuing support of City University and its donors, and that of the Leisure and Culture Services Department of the Hong Kong SAR Government.

The catalogue in turn reflects the depth of scholarly research currently occurring in the field, so aptly described in Dr Jenny So’s preface. Many essays shed light on the objects in the exhibition, placing them within a broader historical context and underscoring the multi-cultural exchanges occurring over a millennium ago. This fascinating history of the nomads impresses one not only through its artistic and technical accomplishments, but also through its reach, stretching from eastern Europe to North China, an extraordinary forerunner of contemporary, networked globalism.

Isabelle Frank

PROLOGUE

The complex history, colourful life, and intricate artefacts created by early pastoralists—the ‘hunters’ and ‘warriors’ of this catalogue and accompanying exhibition—have fascinated generations of scholars and collectors around the world. Early studies were mainly carried out by Russian and European scholars.¹ In 1970, a pioneering exhibition organized by Emma C. Bunker, a foremost American scholar in the nomadic art of the steppes and Central Asia, at the Asia House Gallery (subsequently, Asia Society) in New York, brought this material to the attention of American audiences.² In Asia, research on ancient China had traditionally focused on ritual bronze vessels and epigraphy, until large quantities of steppe material began to emerge from archaeological activities in the north during the latter half of the twentieth century. Since the 1980s, archaeologists like Wu En E'situ 烏恩岳斯圖 (1933-2008) (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing) and Lin Meicun 林梅村 (Peking University) became China's leading authorities in the art of multi-ethnic peoples in ancient Eurasia through their archaeological fieldwork, research, and publications.

In 1990, the Oriental Ceramic Society of Hong Kong presented an exhibition, *Ancient Chinese and Ordos Bronzes*, at the Hong Kong Museum of Art,³ becoming the first major introduction to the art of the northern nomads in the city. The scholars responsible for the catalogue, Jessica Rawson (then British Museum, U.K.) and Emma Bunker (Denver Art Museum, U.S.A.), juxtaposed traditional Chinese ritual bronze vessels with intricately animated personal items of the northern nomads, revealing previously overlooked intercultural and artistic connections between them. Mengdiexuan 夢蝶軒 was among the many local collectors who contributed to this ground-breaking exhibition.

Fourteen years later, in 2004, the Art Museum at The Chinese University of Hong Kong organized an exhibition on Qidan 契丹 art and culture. The Qidan were mounted hunters and warriors who occupied much of North China and founded the Liao dynasty (916-1125) contemporary with the Tang and Song dynasties. *Noble Riders from Pines and Deserts: The Artistic Legacy of the Qidan* was the first exhibition and catalogue in Hong Kong to spotlight a single pastoral group and how their interactions with neighbouring Chinese regimes produced some of the most colourful and unique artifacts of the time.⁴ The exhibition's selections also came from local Hong Kong collections, Mengdiexuan being one of the primary lenders. Unprecedented was the inclusion of large numbers of woven and embroidered Qidan textiles, which were studied and conserved in collaboration with Zhao Feng 趙豐, China's leading textile scholar and founder of the National Silk Museum in Hangzhou. It is fitting that this collection of Qidan textiles was subsequently donated to the National Silk Museum for study and conservation in perpetuity.

In 2013, the Art Museum presented another exhibition and catalogue, this time highlighting one single material, gold. The inspiration came from a pioneering article by Bunker.⁵ Based on archaeological discoveries, Bunker's 1993 article suggested that using gold as an *artistic* medium—and not simply valued as currency—was introduced into North China from civilizations across ancient Eurasia during the second millennium B.C.E. In the Art Museum's exhibition and accompanying three-volume catalogue, gold artefacts spanning over three thousand years explored the full range of technical, artistic, social, political, and cultural impact of gold's long history and development in China, illustrated by products from interactions with the art and culture of Eurasian peoples.⁶ Mengdiexuan's loans to this exhibition subsequently formed part of the collectors' gift to the Hong Kong Palace Museum, featured in its inaugural exhibition this year.

The current exhibition and catalogue, organized by Hing Chao for the Indra and Harry Banga Gallery at the City University of Hong Kong, continue to further the city's appreciation of the artistic legacy of China's northern peoples. The catalogue's scholars cast spotlights on a wide range of artefacts from different eras: on specific motifs of fantastic and composite creatures and status regalia among late Bronze Age groups that suggest deep-seated personal or regional affiliations; on personal articles (such as belt and archery accessories, tools and weapons, and horse harness fittings) that illustrate the often brutal realities of a hunter-warrior's life in the harsh climate and rough landscape of the Eurasian steppes; on the subtle transformations, over millennia, of the animated imagery of the different pastoral groups (Xiongnu 匈奴, Xianbei 鮮卑, Qidan, Jurchen 女真) as they adapted, adopted, and learned to live peacefully with their settled, urbane Chinese neighbours. Material legacy represented by artefacts is matched by the spiritual legacy emanating from religious images created under similar culturally complex conditions. Examination of Buddhist murals and caves dedicated by mixed ethnic and cultural groups along the Hexi 河西 Corridor in the early centuries C.E. reveal imagery that reflected the fluctuating fortunes of the peoples who occupied those lands. Spiritualism manifested itself not simply in religious rites, icons, and iconography, but also artistically, in deep-seated cultural terms such as shape, line, and colour.

The 18 pieces in the present exhibition that are the work of Dashi Namdakov take the exhibition's historical focus into the contemporary world. Set in the cultural and spiritual context of the Buryats in Siberia, their abstract and sometimes even strange forms may seem far away from the lively animals that inhabited the ancient artefacts. Nevertheless, they remain imbued with the spirit of life, land, and beliefs in the Eurasian steppes, the same spirits that informed the creation of the animal imagery of past eras. Namdakov's creations open a new door to our appreciation of the hunter-warrior's art and spiritual universe in the 21st century.

Jenny F. So

1 Michael Rostovtzeff, *The Animal Style in South Russia and China* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1929); J. Gunnar Andersson, 'Hunting Magic in the Animal Style', *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities* 1 (1929):11-27; Alfred Salmony et. al., *Sino-Siberian Art in the Collection of C. T. Loo* (Paris: C. T. Loo, 1933). Max Loehr, 'Ordos Daggers and Knives, Parts 1 and 2', *Artibus Asiae* 12 (1949): 3-83, 14 (1951): 77-162; Karl Jettmar, *Art of the Steppes* (New York: Greystone Press, 1964); these represent only a small selection.
2 Emma C. Bunker, Bruce Chatwin, and Ann R. Farkas, *Animal Style: Art from East to West* (New York: The Asia Society, 1970).
3 Jessica Rawson and Emma C. Bunker, *Ancient Chinese and Ordos Bronzes* (Hong Kong: The Oriental Ceramic Society of Hong Kong, 1990).
4 Jenny F. So, ed., *Noble Riders from Pines and Deserts: The Artistic Legacy of the Qidan* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2004).
5 Emma C. Bunker, 'Gold in the Ancient Chinese World: A Cultural Puzzle', *Artibus Asiae* 53, no. 1/2 (1993): 27-78.
6 Jenny F. So, ed., *Radiant Legacy: Chinese Gold in the Mengdiexuan Collection*, 3 vols (Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2013).