

**Wild, Domesticated, and Displayed:
Animals and Cultural Heritagization in Ethnic Areas of China
International Workshop in Paris, France**

Date: 28 May 2027

Location: on site in Paris and online (Zoom)

Language: English

Organizers: Valentina Punzi (École pratique des hautes études/CRCAO) & Aurore Dumont (Université Paris Cité/CRCAO)

Through the history of the People's Republic of China, the association between certain animal species and state-identified "ethnic minorities" (*shaoshu minzu* 少数民族) have been shaped by a combination of emic cultural symbolism, environmental factors, and socio-economic activities. Far from static, these associations have been evolving following the Chinese state's governance and modernization policies across its ethnic borderlands and beyond. Indeed, over time, shifts in political agendas — including economic structures and more recently environmental policies and cultural heritage programs — have contributed to redefining the perception of the symbolic and practical roles that animals play in representing ethnic groups and their cultural practices. Granted a new agency, particular animals have become emblematic of certain ethnicities or territories, thus contributing significantly to the (de)construction of "cultural identities" and heritage narratives in contemporary China.

Different types of animals are involved in these symbolic relationships. Some species are displayed as exotic or geographically distinctive, meaning they are strongly associated with particular regions. This is the case, for example, with the snow leopard in Qinghai Province, whose conservation status further contributes to its symbolic value, and with the reindeer in Inner Mongolia, which has historically been central to pastoral economies.

Since the beginning of the 2000s, both traditional and newly emerging processes of meaning-making that connect ethnic groups and animals have been strongly impacted by the Chinese state's cultural heritage policies. Numerous practices involving animals have indeed been inscribed on China's national or provincial list of Intangible Cultural Heritage, producing selectivity in the choice of practices elevated to heritage status (Maags & Svensson 2018). For example, Evenki people and their herds became symbols of "reindeer culture" after the development of summer tourism (Dumont 2016).

In some cases, these human-animal relationships are promoted by the state as part of broader narratives on ecological harmony and cultural authenticity. Most recently, the transition from national diversity to national homogeneity within Xi Jinping's "Second-Generation Ethnic Policies" (Roche & Leibold 2020) highlights new conceptions of "a post-ethnic local culture, in which differences between nationalities are de-emphasised" (White 2024a).

With these animals often becoming cultural markers, heritage discourse, policies, tourism promotion, and popular media often emphasize positive stereotypes of harmonious human–animal relationships. In ethnic tourism, tourists may encounter animals through staged photographs, opportunities to ride or feed them, themed souvenirs and gadgets, and stage performances, and may also consume them through displays in ethnic museums and "traditional" food products. However, these encounters may be rather distant from local people's lived realities, which often involve economic dependency, environmental pressures, and occasional conflict. Examining these dynamics can reveal how different actors — including local communities, state institutions, conservation organizations, and tourism industries — participate in shaping the meanings and roles attributed to animals.

Following the past and ongoing research on cultural heritage in ethnic minorities areas (Blumenfield 2018, Fraser 2019, Dumont 2023, Milan 2023, Yu 2015, Zheng 2023, Zhu 2018), as well as on the animals-minority groups relationships in China (White 2024b), this workshop seeks to explore what does the heritagization process of a given local culture or area does to human-animal relationships in the ethnic borderlands of China and beyond. Being wild, herded, protected and/or displayed, how are animals used and consumed within the context of heritagization? How have ethnic minorities-animal associations and interactions transformed across major political and social changes in contemporary China? How have the lives of humans and animals been (re)shaped within conservation and heritage policies? What kinds of experiences, negotiations, and contestations are being locally produced?

We welcome case-studies' contributions which are based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in China and/or on primary Chinese or minority languages written or oral sources. Case studies may focus on a specific geographic area, one or more animal species, one or more ethnic groups. Proposals are expected to deal with one of following themes:

- The shifting role and use of animals within domestic and tourism economies
- Representation of nature and human-animal relationships in ethnic tourism
- Heritage narratives versus lived realities
- Ethnic and animal otherness
- Transformations in the cultural heritagization of animal symbolism from the "ethnic" to the "regional"

Proposals must be sent to Valentina Punzi and Aurore Dumont at: animals.ethnic.heritagization@gmail.com by 30 October 2026 and should include a paper abstract (ca. 300 words) and a biographical note (ca.100 words). Applicants will be notified in December 2026. As we intend to publish the outcome of the workshop as either a special issue or a book, papers will be circulated among participants one month prior to the workshop. The working language will be English.

There is no registration fee for the workshop. One lunch and one dinner will be provided for all participants. Participants are expected to arrange and cover their own travel and accommodation expenses. The organizers will make every effort to secure funding to help offset these costs, but no financial support can be guaranteed at this stage.

References

Blumenfield, Tami, 2018, "Recognition and Misrecognition: The Politics of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Southwest China," in Maags Christina, Svensson, Marina (eds.), *Chinese Cultural Heritage in the Making: Experiences, Negotiations and Contestations*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press: 169-193.

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Zhu, Yujie, 2018, *Heritage and Romantic Consumption in China*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press.

Photos' captions (from left to right):

1. Snow leopard logo on a public bus in Xining, “snow leopard capital” (Xining, March 2026 © Alex Leo Rhea)
2. Packed dried yak meat (2026, source: Taobao)
3. Camel racing during a *Naadam* (Old Barga Banner, Hulun Buir, 2012 © Aurore Dumont)
4. Booklet of the Third Baima People Folk Culture and Tourism Festival in Wen County (2018, source: WeChat)
5. Camels during a winter Naadam (Evenki Autonomous Banner, Hulun Buir, 2010 © Aurore Dumont)
6. A reindeer Evenki woman on a summer tourist camp (Genhe, Hulun Buir, 2019 © Aurore Dumont)

