

WUSHISAN: MONGGHUL (TU) EARRINGS AND TOBACCO PIPES IN HUZHU COUNTY, QINGHAI PROVINCE, PR CHINA

Limusishiden (Li Dechun 李得春), Joints Surgery Department, Qinghai University Affiliated Hospital*

ABSTRACT

This article introduces Wushisan (b. 1948), a Tu (Mongghul, Monguor) resident of Dangyan Village, Naja Administrative Village, Weiyuan Town, Huzhu Tu Autonomous County, Haidong Municipality, Qinghai Province, PR China. In 2020, he continued to wear an earring, bracelet, and finger ring. Wushisan's life experiences and his family background vividly characterize traditional Mongghul men. On 7 June 2020, I interviewed Wushisan at his home, recorded both interviews, transcribed the audio material in Mongghul, translated it into English, and wrote it in English.

KEYWORDS

Mongghul earring, tobacco bag, tobacco pipe, Huzhu Tu County, Tu life narratives, Monguor (Mongghul) biography, Monguor (Mongghul, Tu) history, Qinghai-Tibet Plateau

LOCATION

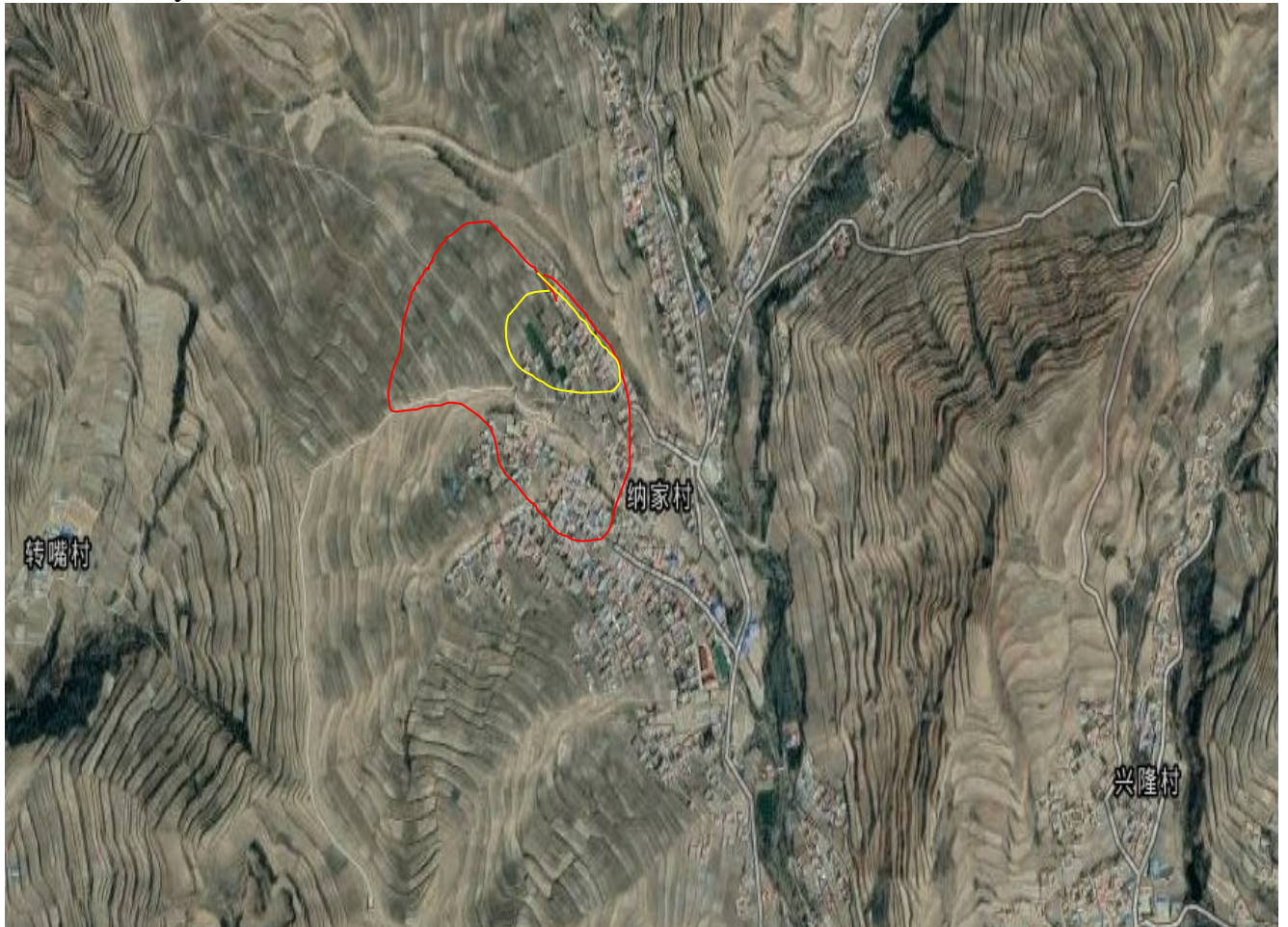
MAP 1. Huzhu Tu Autonomous County.¹



* Limusishiden (Li Dechun). 2020, Wushisan: Mongghul (Tu) Earrings and Tobacco Pipes in Huzhu County, Qinghai Province, PR China. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 60:378-392.

¹ An edited version of <https://bit.ly/3aJ3QXb>, accessed 6 June 2020.

MAP 2. Dangyan Village.¹ The red circle indicates Naja Administrative Village. Dangyan Hamlet is inside the yellow circle.



INTRODUCTION

Traditionally the first-born Mongghul² son had both his ears pierced for *qigi nukula* 'earrings' to protect against disease and ensure a long life. Mongghul men also smoked periodically throughout the day using an excellent *huangsa* 'pipe', which was considered an essential ornament for a man.

Wushisan's village of Dangyan is five kilometers from Weiyuan, the seat of Huzhu Tu Autonomous County, Haidong Municipality, Qinghai Province, PR China. This article explores why Wushisan continues to smoke a pipe and wear an earring.

I interviewed Wushisan in Dangyan Village and recorded our conversations using an audio recorder. He rarely leaves his village. To the best of my knowledge, in 2020, he was the last Mongghul man in Huzhu Mongghul communities, still smoking tobacco with a pipe and wearing a silver earring, bracelet, and finger ring. I transcribed the audio material first in Mongghul and then translated it into English. Here is the edited translation:

My name is Wushisan. I'm from Dangyan (Dongyua), which has about ninety households and 270 residents. Dangyan is a hamlet in Naja (Najia) Administrative Village. Naja is an all-Mongghul administrative village where some 400 households (~1,200 residents) reside.

¹ An edited version of <http://www.bigemap.net/city-17951.html>, accessed 6 June 2020.

² Mongghul terms are given in the Mongghul written system (Li 1988:9).

My wife (Tayinsuu, 1944-2010) was illiterate and died from emphysema. Her parents' home was in Naja Village. I have four daughters and three sons. The oldest child, Caihangsuu (b. 1963), is illiterate and moved into her husband's home in Naja Village. The second child, Qiixin (b. 1967), is also illiterate and moved into her husband's home in Duluun Village, Weiyuan Town. The third child, Sanzhinuri, (b. 1969), attended primary school but dropped out from lack of interest. He preferred fishing. The fourth child, Jaguri (b. 1972), has a middle school level education. The fifth child, Xangmu (b. 1974), is illiterate and moved into her husband's home in Durishidii Village, Weiyuan Town. The sixth child, Huanglunbog (b. 1984), is illiterate, has epileptic fits, is unmarried, and lives with me. Sanzhinuri and established their individual home compounds and live separately. The seventh child (Niiga, b. 1988) Jaguri attended middle school, married, and moved into her husband's home in Duluun Village, where my second daughter lives.

Huanglunbog suffered frequent epileptic seizures from the time he was about seven-months-old. The seizures seemed to be brought on by an accident when, around that time on a winter's day, my wife was carrying him on her back to visit her parents' home. As she carefully walked across the frozen river, she slipped, and his head hit the ice. My wife quickly stood, picked him up, and soon reached her parents' home. In the evening, Huanglunbog looked ill, became unconscious, his limbs jerked, and he vomited foam. My wife thought this would pass, and he would be fine days some days later. However, his situation worsened.

A week later, I was called to her parents' home and saw the boy's terrible condition. His regular convulsions made me think his situation was hopeless.

The next day, my wife, son, and I returned home. He continued to have daily convulsions - sometimes several times a day. I consulted my village *purghan*¹ and asked several monks to chant Buddhist scriptures. However, his seizures continued. Finally, we went to a high-ranking hospital in Xining and were given drugs that, we were told, should be taken for life. They worked. His convulsions became much less frequent.

Originally our ancestors were Han Chinese from Laisigang² in Beijing. We don't know why my ancestors came here. Initially, our ancestors settled in Hujiazhuang Village, Weiyuan Town. It is a Chinese village. Later, they moved from Hujiazhuang Village to Farijii (Heizhuang) Village, Weiyuan Town, for some unknown reason. I don't know the specific year, but my ancestors moved again from Farijii to today's Dangyan Village many years later. As far as I know, we have been living in Dangyan Village for 150 years or so. Our customs are completely Mongghul. My grandparents and parents spoke only Mongghul.

My family has twenty-six *mu*³ of farmland. I'm old, so I'm unable to farm by myself. A villager farms twelve *mu* of the twenty-six, and two of my sons use eleven *mu*, though their wives do not treat Huanglunbog and me well. They only visit once a year during the Spring Festival because they dislike disabled Huanglunbog. I grow three *mu* of crops, which is enough for Huanglunbog and me. My daughters regularly visit us.

I have no brothers. I'm the only son in my family. My father and grandfather also had no brothers. Only one son survived in each of the three generations in my family.

My mother gave birth to four sons and five daughters. Only my elder sister, Durijhua, and I survived. Our other siblings all died from smallpox. Durijhua (1944-2005) was illiterate and married into her husband's home in Naja Village.

¹ The *purghan* is a deity represented in the form of a sedan image or a cloth-covered pole held by four men or a single man, respectively. The *purghan* permeates Mongghul village life. It is available for consultation and represents the possibility that supplicants' distresses may be alleviated. It is consulted to identify a suitable spouse, treat disease, exorcise evil, ensure well-being and good harvests, and alleviate droughts (Limusishdien and Jugui 2010:23).

² Today, it is unclear where this is located in Beijing.

³ One *mu* = 666.6 square meters, 0.067 hectares, or 0.16 acres.

My father was Rnqan (1921-1982). He had one older sister and two younger sisters. I have forgotten my mother's (~1921-~1965) name. Her parents' home was in Garigan Village, Donggou Township, Huzhu County.

My maternal great-grandmother's parents were from Danyan Village, Donggou Township. I know neither my grandparents' names nor their birth and death dates.

My grandparents and parents were extremely afraid of losing me to smallpox as they had the other children. They went to the village temple and asked the *purghan* how to prevent losing their unborn baby. The *purghan* suggested piercing the baby's left earlobe and putting in a silver earring immediately after delivery, which was believed to be the only way to ensure the infant's survival.

After I was born, Mother immediately pierced my earlobe with a thin round silver implement she had prepared without washing my body. This was what our *purghan* had suggested. That implement was from one of Mother's adornments. Two years later, Mother added a coral bead to my earring and black thread tassels at the earring end.

When I was seven- or eight-years-old, village children teased me for being girlish because I wore an earring. I was embarrassed and asked Mother to remove it, but she refused. My parents were worried about my health if I removed it. When I was thirteen-years-old, I really could not stand being called a girl, and after repeatedly begging my parents to remove the earring, they finally agreed.

About two months later, I fell ill one night. I couldn't eat or drink anything. I lay in bed and felt mental fatigue and weakness, which developed into insanity. My parents were very anxious about losing their only son and again consulted the village *purghan*. They learned my illness was because I had removed the earring. I had to put it in again as soon as possible if I recovered, and I had to wear it throughout my life. If I remove it again, I will surely be ill and maybe in danger of dying.

At the age of thirteen, I needed a bigger earring. A silversmith used the small silver earring I had been wearing, added new silver, and made a larger one. I've worn it ever since. I never remove it. I've never suffered any illness, not even a bad cold. It's a miracle.

After I die, I will ask my sons to put my earring inside the small wooden box with my bone ash and bury it in our ancestral graveyard. My earring will pave a smooth road for me to reincarnate as a human in my next life.

Before 1970, all the first Mongghul sons had their earlobes pierced. This requirement was restricted to firstborn sons. Most earrings were silver that sometimes were set with coral, turquoise, or agate. Some had tassels at the end. Piercing earlobes with a tiny silver pin prevented infection because silver was said to have anti-infection properties.

When my grandparents consulted the *purghan* before my birth, the *purghan* suggested my family avoid funerals and visiting women confined after childbirth. If they attended a funeral, the deceased person's ghost might cause the children to be ill. Visiting women during their confinement meant the children might easily contract a disease. Therefore, I visited neither a home where a funeral had been held nor a family during confinement.

Many years later, when my daughters-in-law gave birth in my home, I left to live in a fellow villager's home and returned to my own home a month later.

All Mongghul men used to wear bracelets and finger rings. Some men wore common stone bracelets, but some well-off men wore silver, agate, and ivory bracelets. I'm currently wearing a bracelet I bought from a shop at Labrang Monastery during a pilgrimage several years ago. The bracelet is made of precious *xanglimu* 'rhododendron' wood. Locals get such wood from Huzhu National Forest Park, located in the northeast of Huzhu County. Before this bracelet, I had a silver one.

Rings were made of silver and worn on left ring fingers. Some rings were embedded with coral or turquoise.

Wearing rings, bracelets, necklaces, and earrings protects the wearer from *kiiniu* 'paralysis', for example, facial paralysis and paralysis of the limbs. They also protect against *pudog mudog* 'evils'.

I've worn a ring since I was twenty years old. A ring can also protect a person against rheumatic disease and nasty colds.

REFLECTIONS

When I, Limusishiden, was seven or eight years old, my older brother, Limudanzhuu (b. 1966), and my father's older brother's oldest son, Fangshinbog (b.1966), each wore silver rings in both of their earlobes. They were the first sons in their respective families. My paternal grandmother pierced their earlobes and put in the silver rings. As I noted earlier:

Until about the year 2000, the first-born son had both his ears pierced to receive protection against disease and ensure a long life. Usually, the male infant's paternal grandmother pierced the ears on the twentieth day of the first lunisolar month after rubbing the earlobes to make them numb. She quickly jabbed the lobes with a needle or awl without prior sterilization. Small earrings were then put in the ears (Limusishiden 2015:58).

At the age of nine, my brother and cousin attended primary school and were teased for their "girlish appearance" created by wearing the earrings, so they removed them and never wore them again. I observed fewer and fewer Mongghul boys wearing silver earrings until eventually, this practice was only a memory.

Although Wushisan continued to wear a silver earring in 2020, the practice of piercing earlobes and wearing earrings among Mongghul men and boys has nearly vanished.

Wushisan comments on smoking:

I began to smoke at the age of seventeen and am still smoking today. In 2020, I am the only person in my village who smokes loose tobacco. All the others smoke cigarettes. I am accustomed to smoking a pipe. I don't like cigarettes, regardless of their quality or even if their high prices suggest a superior product. They are too mild to smoke. I smoke tobacco in a pipe.

Locals used to grow tobacco in a small plot inside or outside the family courtyard. I have used more than ten tobacco bags and six pipes in my lifetime. Some of my tobacco bags were sewn by my mother, sister, and daughters. One was a gift from my lover.

Historically, the *shdarigha* 'tobacco bag' was used in conjunction with a *huangsa* 'pipe'. *Shdarigha* were often kept in sashes. Mongghul men smoked off and on throughout the day. Some older women also smoked. Owning an excellently prepared pipe was important. Once two men met, sat together, started chatting, and began smoking, they exchanged pipes and tobacco bags, talked, and carefully examined each other's pipes and bags. They discussed the materials used to make the pipe parts, when and where each piece was made, who had made each part, and who had made the tobacco bag, and when.

One or two strings of coral, agate, Qing Dynasty copper coins, and a hook used to clean the pipe's brass bowl were attached to the mouth of the bag.

A tobacco pipe was twenty to thirty centimeters in length. Pipe bowls were often made of brass. The stem was made from sheep, yak, or goat bone. Precious woods, such as rhododendron and birch, were also used. The mouthpiece was agate or common stone.

There were no matches or lighters in the Mongghul area before 1958. Consequently, pipes were lit with flint and tinder. The men would light the twisted sesame straw that they kept inside their sashes and snuff out the smoldering sesame stalk when they stopped smoking. It was used again after

being lit with flint and tinder. A small iron bowl attached to the mouth of a tobacco bag might also have been used to hold smoldering fuel to light the next bowl of tobacco. This bowl was no longer used once cheap lighters were widely available.

Tobacco was historically grown locally in *suuqang* 'small plots' inside or outside of the courtyard. When someone's tobacco ran out, they bought supplies from shops or vendors, or borrowed from other men.

In 2020, many young Mongghul young men did not smoke at all. Wushisan smokes cigarettes if offered; however, he prefers to smoke his pipe.

Wushisan wears a bracelet on his left wrist and a silver ring on his left ring finger at all times. In 2020, it was unusual for a Mongghul man to wear a bracelet and a finger ring, though it used to be a common cultural practice, as noted by Schram:

Traditionally, many men are fond of wearing a bracelet, but only on one wrist. It is usually a heavy copper ring, silver plated and carved with Chinese designs. Nearly all young people wear a bracelet on each wrist, resembling the single bracelet of a grown man. A man also hangs from his belt or sash a sheath containing a knife and chopsticks. Some of these are beautifully carved and ornamented with coral and turquoise. A man's finger ring is made of two thin, small rings with a broad ring soldered outside them. A piece of coral or turquoise is set in this ring (2006 [1954-1961]:260).

The numerous Mongghul silversmiths in Mongghul areas made it easy to find a silversmith. Silversmiths were kept busy making earrings, bracelets, necklaces, finger rings, plates, pins, bowls, chopsticks, and drinking cups. As Schram notes:

Silversmiths make earrings, bracelets, finger rings, and the plates, cups, and pins that are used for the [women's] headdresses. They also make the sheaths that hold knife and chopsticks. The work done by Monguor silversmiths can always be distinguished from that done by Chinese, but as their work is done for a small population, it is bound to remain on a very small scale ((2006 [1954-1961]:268).

After 1980, as shops and vendors became common, silversmiths gradually vanished in Mongghul areas. The old ones died, and young people did not learn this skill because they could not earn a living as silversmiths. Furthermore, silver items such as cups became less popular, and fewer women wore earrings, necklaces, and finger rings.

Huanglunbog takes drugs daily and is unable to live independently. Father and son live in their traditional house. Wushisan does both farming work and housework. This seventy-two-year-old Mongghul man has a busy, demanding life. However, he appears healthy, is talkative, extremely humorous, and energetic. After his wife passed away, he found an older friend. The two are separated by about thirty kilometers. To make visits more convenient, Wushisan bought a small vehicle, regularly visits her home, and brings her to his own home.

Wushisan's traditional way of life, his two-storied house, his earring, tobacco bag and pipe, bracelet and finger ring, and *manii* 'string of prayer beads', evokes, in my mind, a traditional Mongghul. I admire Wushisan for being "Mongghul" in 2020.

PHOTOGRAPHS

FIG 3. Wushisan in his home compound courtyard. The house is a 150-year-old traditional two-floored wooden building (7 June 2020, Jugui).



FIG 4. A traditional style old wooden ladder connects the first and second floors (7 June 2020, Jugui).



FIG 5. Wushisan wears a silver finger ring and bracelet (7 June 2020, Jugui).



FIG 6. Wushisan keeps his tobacco bag and pipe underneath his pants' belt (7 June 2020, Jugui).



FIG 7. Wushisan wears a silver earring in his left ear (7 June 2020, Jugui).



FIG 8. Wushisan's home and a garden plot located at his home compound's center with peonies in bloom. Historically, all Mongghul cultivated peonies in their gardens (7 June 2020, Jugui).



FIG 9. L-R: Wushisan and Limusishiden (7 June 2020, Jugui).



FIG 10. An unused wooden chest. Such chests were in the center of the main room of a house and filled with wheat flour (7 June 2020, Jugui).



FIG 11. An unused cupboard in Wushisan's home (7 June 2020, Jugui).



FIG 12. The back wall of Wushisan's compound yard abuts a hill where caves have been dug to store potatoes and coal (7 June 2020, Jugui).



FIG 13. In 2020, Wushisan used this tobacco bag (made by a friend in 1999), pipe, and pipe implements (7 June 2020, Jugui). 1 Tobacco bag. 2 A white string to fasten the tobacco bag. 3 A metal scraper to clean the brass bowl. 4 An iron bowl that held smoldering fuel to light the pipe. After lighters became common, such bowls were no longer used. 5 A metal bowl-cleaner. 6 Copper coin for decoration. 7 A copper hook to clean the pipe hole when blocked. 8 The pipe's brass bowl and stem. 9 Silver connector. 10 Agate mouthpiece. 11 Copper connecting chain.



REFERENCES

- Limusishiden. 2015. *Health and Illness Among the Mongghul*. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 36:30-63, 301-332. <https://bit.ly/395vU9A>, accessed 24 November 2020.
- Limusishiden and Jugui. 2010. Passions and Colored Sleeves: Mongghul Lives in Eastern Tibet. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 7. <https://bit.ly/370SnSs>, accessed 24 November 2020.
- Schram, Louis MJ (Juha Janhunen, Owen Lattimore, Paul Nietupski, Gray Tuttle, Keith Slater, Jeroom Heyndrickx, and Limusishiden and Kevin Stuart, introductions). 2006. *The Monguors of the Kansu-Tibetan Frontier*. Xining City: Plateau Publications. <https://bit.ly/2RBxre5>, accessed 14 April 2020

NON-ENGLISH TERMS

Caihangsuu, a person's name

Danyan 丹沿 Village

Dangyan (Dongyuan 东源) Village

Dasilu 大寺路 Village

Donggou 东沟 Township

Duluun (Baiya 白崖) Village

Durijihua, a person's name

Durishidii (Duoshidai 多士代) Village

Fangshinbog, a person's name

Farijii (Heizhuang 黑庄) Village

Garigan (Gagan 尕干) Village

Haidong 海东 Municipality

Huanglunbog, a person's name

huangsa, a tobacco pipe

Hujiashuang 胡家庄 Village

Huzhu 互助 County

Jaguri, a person's name

Jugui, a person's name

kiiniu, paralysis

Labrang (bla brang ལྷ་བླང་།) Monastery

Laisigang, a place name

Limudanzhuu, a person's name

Limusishiden, klu 'bum tshe brtan ལྷ་འབུམ་ཚེ་བརྟན། Li Dechun 李得春, a person's names

Mongghul, Monguor, Mangghuer, Tuzu 土族

mu 亩, unit of land measurement; 1 hectare equals 15 *mu*

Naja (Najia 纳家) Administrative Village

Niiga, a person's name

pudog mudog, evils (possibly *pu* pho ཕོ 'male' and *mu* mo མོ 'female' - 'male and female evils'; the meaning of *dog* is unclear)

qigi nukula, ears pierced

Qiixin, a person's name

Rnqan, Rin chen རིན་ཆེན། a person's name

Sanzhinuri, Seng 'brug nor bu སེང་འབྲུག་ནོར་བུ། a person's name

shdarigha, a tobacco bag

suuqang, small plots of land, often in a courtyard for growing flowers

Tayinsuu, a person's name

Tu 土, Monguor, Mongghul, Mangghuer

Weiyuan 威远 Town

Wushisan 五十三, a person's name

xanglimu, rhododendron wood

Xangmu, byang mo བྱང་མོ། a person's name

Xining 西宁 City, the capital of Qinghai Province