

# **Changes and Development of Traditional Culture of the Nomadic People – A Case Study on Naadam in Henan County of Qinghai Province in the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau**

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*Naadam in Henan County of Qinghai province in the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau is an important traditional ethnic sports activity that has been transformed into a sporting event in the course of cultural reconstruction. The changes in the connotation and form of the festival are intended to embed the traditional culture in the cultural reproduction process of modern life through the reinterpretation and recreation of the traditional cultural elements on the basis of ethnic interactions. Cultural markers, such as horse racing, cultural performance and interaction in the Naadam Festival, constitute high-level emotional connection with the game, thereby reinforcing internal solidarity within the ethnic community and the confidence in the ethnic culture. The changes in the significance of Naadam is also a cultural capital transformation process in order to achieve coordination between the traditional ethnic culture and modern market to achieve a unity of cultural, social, and economic development.*

*Keywords: ritual performance, Naadam, ethnic interaction, cultural capital*

## **INTRODUCTION**

As foreign cultural factors derived from globalization, social transformation, and the popularization of the internet in the process of modernization are introduced into the traditional cultural environment, the interaction between foreign and traditional factors stimulates cultural reconstruction. The enhanced ethnic self-awareness and the cultural self-consciousness accompanying the changes compel various ethnic groups of people to create new forms of modern events on the basis of their traditional sports activities, as represented by the Naadam Festival in Henan County, Qinghai Province in China. In essence, the changes in the traditional ethnic sports culture are the production and reproduction of traditional ethnic sports culture, which boost the continuous social and cultural progress in the form of production and reproduction (Hou 2021). As supported by the state and civil forces, Naadam has turned from a religious ritual to a festival event. The sports interaction has expanded from within a single ethnic group to multi-ethnic groups,

and from unconscious inheritance to conscious creation (Huang and Shen 2021). It demonstrates that people reinterpret and recreate traditional culture in the process of interacting with other ethnic groups, aiming to embed their traditional culture in the cultural reproduction process in modern lives so as to satisfy their real needs.

Based on a field investigation in July and August 2018 in Henan County in the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, this article intends to clarify the historical development and performance of Naadam in Henan County. The theory of inter-ethnic interaction is applied to analyze the interaction and interaction extension concerning the ritual space within and among ethnic groups in the ritual performance process, and the formation of the cultural and economic capital properties of the Naadam Festival. The goal is to illuminate the transformation of cultural, economic, and social capitals in the development process of traditional ethnic culture resources, and the interactive relationships among ethnic cultural resources, ethnic economy, and national discourse in the operation of cultural capitals. In the meantime, this article attempts to explore individual value and social significance of ethnic culture capital.

## **FROM A RELIGIOUS RITUAL TO A FESTIVAL EVENT**

As an explicit cultural symbol in the cultural reconstruction process, ethnic sports events are not only a major part of an ethnic culture, but also a significant platform for displaying its cultural characteristics. Naadam is widely celebrated in habitats of the Mongolians and is a traditional folk activity initiated, developed, and evolved in the nomadic production activities and life of the Mongolians. The existing Naadam Festival in Henan County in Qinghai Province is a restructured and re-created product of the Mongolian culture in Henan County, which combines locality and modernity by standardizing cultural symbol markers, reconstructing historical memory, and establishing event rules. The study on the changes in the significance of Naadam should start with tracing the origin of Naadam culture, and reviewing its historical changes.

### **Origin of Naadam and Its Historical Changes**

“Naadam” is a transliterated word in Mongolian, also called “Nair”, which means “entertainment and recreation”. Due to its complexity and diversity as a folk cultural event, it has become an important academic research topic. Scholars have reached the following agreements on the origin of Naadam.

Firstly, the occurrence of Naadam is closely related to the Mongolian tradition which claims that men should have three arts. Naadam can be traced back to the reign of Huns (1162-1227) and was a traditional skill and custom with a long history in the Mongolian plateau. As a folk event, its major activities include Mongolian Bōkh (Mongolian wrestling), horse racing, and archery, which are collectively called the Mongolian “three arts for men”(Bai2009).

Secondly, the competition involving military skills is a major part of Naadam. The “three arts for men”, to a large extent, resemble military skills. According to the records in *the Collection of Mongolian Customs*, “In ancient times, warriors were found in every tribe and even every household. They usually practiced at home and joined the March Assembly, July Assembly, and October Assembly. A martial art practice assembly was to be held every three years. In the assemblies, warriors and soldiers from each tribe would compete in horse racing, archery, and wrestling. In the event of war, a martial art contest would be held at an assembling site to select the general.”(Luo1988) *Yesongge’s Tablet* also tells scenes of generals and soldiers being rewarded in an assembly in the return journey of Genghis Khan from a westward expedition in 1225. It can be found that during Genghis Khan’s reign, Naadam comprised military skill exercises, banquet and entertainment (Jiang2013).

Thirdly, Naadam was originally intended for entertainment and recreation, but it gradually developed into a religious event combined with the Oboo (sacred stone heaps) worshipping ritual. Different scales of Naadam are held during the Oboo Worship Ceremony which usually takes place at the end of summer. Sports activities follow religious rituals, becoming a part of the complete sacrifice ceremony. In our investigation at Saierlong Township in Henan County, an elderly man at the age of 90 recalled that “before the democratic reform (1948), we always held the Mountain God sacrifice event in the fifth lunar month

each year, and it was a fixed festival. At that time, people in my tribe all joined the festival and we offered sacrifices to the Mountain God and competed in horse racing and wrestling.”

Fourthly, in modern times, Naadam Festival gradually separated from religious ritual and developed as an independent sports event supported by the state. After 1949, the organized activities to worship the mountain gods gradually disappeared, but the sports activities in the traditional Naadam Festival have maintained their charms. In particular, people started to organize horse racing games after the China’s Reform and Opening up in the early 1980s. The enlarged number and scale of horse racing games provide preconditions for the occurrence of Naadam as a sports event. It was recorded that in August 1978, Henan County saw its first “traditional Mongolian culture and sport event”, that is, the Naadam sports event, and the event was included in *the Regulations on the Autonomy of Henan Mongolian Autonomous County* in 1989, thus establishing Naadam as a traditional festival by law. Today, Naadam is held every two years in Henan County and is combined with the autonomous county’s founding anniversary celebration, cultural festivals, and other activities. In 2018, Naadam was held on August 1-3 at the Tengger Horse Race Ground in Henan county, which was constructed in 2008 and is the largest horse race ground in the West of China (Figure 1). The three-days Naadam in 2018 included horse racing and other recreational activities. In the morning of August 1, the opening ceremony was first conducted and followed by a singing and dancing show (Figure 1). Then, 1000m, 2000m, 3000m, 5000m, 6000m and 10000m preliminary, semi-final and final races were held one after another from August 1 to 3. The horses came from Henan county and 19 neighboring counties in Qinghai, Sichuan and Gansu provinces. The audience composed of ordinary people, government officials, company employees, and tourists from all parts of China.

**FIGURE 1  
THE OPENING CEREMONG AT THE 2018 NAADAM FESTIVAL**



#### **Development Trend and Changes in Significance**

First of all, Naadam changes from Oboo worship ceremony to a festival in its own form. Traditionally as a part of the Oboo sacrifice activities, early Naadam events were collective ceremonies for people in tribes to entertain both gods and men themselves by religious rituals to consolidate solidarity within the tribes. However, in modern times, Naadam is no longer a ceremony affiliated to religious rituals, but has become a festival, focusing on competition or contest. Local governments and intellectual elites have replaced tribes as the main forces to organize and influence Naadam. As guided by the government, Naadam plays an important role in inheriting and promoting the traditional ethnic culture, building and enhancing ethnic identity.

Then, Naadam has gradually become game-oriented for competition. The ritual space for Naadam Festival in the past is Oboo ceremony assembly. With the changes, the ritual space for modern Naadam has shifted from the holy mountain to the horse race tracks. Tengger Horse Track is located in the south of Henan County and is one of the largest horse tracks in western China (Gongbao 2014). When it was completed in 2008, it became the main venue for the Naadam Festival in Henan County (Figure 2). The horse track is equipped with facilities such as an observatory in the shape of a Mongolian yurt, a torch platform, fences, judge seats, and a camera stands near the finishing line. These configurations, on the one hand, displays the local Mongolian culture and, on the other hand, guarantee the setup of competition rules and the establishment of a modern and standardized competition. Horse racing has gained competitiveness due to its popularity and has the potential to develop into a high-level competition.

**FIGURE 2  
TENGER HORSE RACE GROUND**



In addition, participants of Naadam Festival tend to be diversified in ethnic and geographic backgrounds. The establishment and improvement of the Belt and Road Initiative and the in-depth communication and interaction among various ethnic groups lay a foundation for the interaction in ethnic events to extend from inside a single ethnic group to multi ethnic-groups. Horse racing represents the competitive feature of Naadam, and is also an important folk event in the pastoral areas in the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau where Tibetans reside. In Naadam Festival in Henan County, besides local Mongolians, Tibetan candidates from surrounding provinces including Gansu, Sichuan, and other cities in Qinghai Province bring in their horses to take part in the event. Naadam gradually develops from a Mongolian festival to a regional event that is not restricted to a single ethnic group, but is open to all ethnic groups living in the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau.

### **FROM SPORTS INTERACTION TO FURTHER EXCHANGE**

As a driving force for social changes, rituals focus on men's interactions. Collective emotions linked to symbols arise from rituals, forming the basis for beliefs, thoughts, morality, and culture. People then use

the capacity for thinking and believing to create emotion-generating interactions. This model of interaction -> emotions -> symbols -> interaction forms patterns of interaction over time, and these patterns are the most basic structural force that organizes a society (Summer-Effler 2006, 135). Applying this ritual theory in micro contexts, Collins (2009) pointed out that as a ceremony, event means contents where men create dramatic tension and victory, and within such contexts, sports symbols are worshiped as holy objects. By focusing on events, men's feelings are amplified through physical interaction, making events a ceremony. Based on their fieldwork, cross-cultural comparison and holistic approach, Chinese anthropologists Wang Hongkun (2014), Sun Dechao (2017), Zhao Bin (2010), Zhan Xiaomei *et al* (2021), applied the ritual theory to study the origin of the ethnic sports events, ways of action, physical rituals, ethnic sports development, and other issues. Using the ritual theory to analyze sports events has become an important method for China's sports anthropology researches. To illustrate the changes in the significance and functions of the Naadam Festival, we need to analyze in details the ritual performance and interaction process involved in this sports festival.

### **Ritual Process and Emotional Expression**

Rituals provide significant situations for collective activities. In the process of ritual interaction, a human group gives meaning to symbols involved. Instant feelings are attached to these symbols in the ritual process through interaction, forming a long-term emotional status, and making these feelings shared and co-owned (Liu and Long 2020). The emotional link in the ritual space is presented through the interaction among participants, and the participants in horse racing include riders, audiences, and horse owners.

Firstly, horse racing is the main ritual symbol during Naadam, composed of two elements: rider and horse (Figure 3). On the one hand, the speed of a horse is the core of a horse racing event. But on the other hand, riders from different areas wear suits in different colors, symbolizing a region in the competition. Therefore, riders are participants in the event as well as a part of the symbols of the event.

**FIGURE 3  
HORSE RACING**



Secondly, audiences get together due to the attraction of the symbols of the horse racing. They form high-level emotional links through physical interaction. The horse racing starts when a starting gun fires and a rhythmic Mongolian song is played by the radio. When horses depart, and approach or reach the finishing line, the audiences will produce long sounding whoops to cheer up. The audiences are touched by the rhythm of the scene, forming an emotional link in the ritual ceremony. Throughout the game, audiences' eyes, body language, and verbal dialogues reveal that they pay close attention to the process and the results of the race. During this process, the audiences show low tolerance to any interventions, and those who cause interventions feel high-level pressure from the audiences. For example, during the competition, if audiences in front rows stand up or hold an umbrella, affecting audiences in back rows, they will be reprimanded.

Thirdly, owners of the horses are special participants in the ceremony. On the one hand, they are more concentrated than other audiences as they pay high attention to their horses during the race and need to conciliate the horses after the race and take them away. On the other hand, relatives and friends who share a close social tie with the owners of the horses experience higher physical involvement at the race. After the torch is lit at the opening ceremony, the torch platform turns into a ritual platform, where the relatives and friends pray for their horses to win by burning incense, singing, and chanting scriptures.

Though different participants may pay attention to the race in various forms, their interactions during the race form interactive exchanges that affect each other. The ritual space of the race becomes a specific social network. During the high-frequency, multi-dimensional, and efficient exchanges, the subjects involved exchange opinions, substitute energy, share resources, and understand each other's behaviors through communication (Li and Yu 2019). Therefore, participants share emotional experiences and focus in the micro context, which result from interactions and association among all the participants. The attention to the race in this process and the excitement it causes are mutually strengthened, achieving a collective experience of excitement, and reaching a high-level emotional link that treats each other as subjects (Figure 4).

**FIGURE 4  
THE AUDIENCES**



### **Group Solidarity and Cultural Confidence**

In the modernization process, response to anxiety and perception of cultural crisis leads to strong awareness of the cultural and identity crisis of ethnic groups. Culture reconstruction is not only a process that the traditional cultures of ethnic groups integrate with the world reality, but also the unconscious and instinctive cultural expression of the ethnic groups for their existence. This process can be regarded as the localization, globalization, and transformation of daily lives in the modern background (Giddens 2016). Culture reconstruction reflects the introspection of the ethnic groups and individuals on the modernization, and is a constructive part of the social life and transformation of the ethnic groups. As an important and explicit cultural symbol in the culture reconstruction, Naadam facilitates internal solidarity and displays the mediating effects of cognitive selection through the event and ceremony that focus on horse racing as the core symbol. It reflects the desire to maintain cultural boundary with other groups and their own ethnic identity. During the Naadam Festival in Henan County, individuals in the ethnic groups share attention paid to horse racing and enjoy collective excitement with the race, which stimulates the emotions of individuals, enhances their ethnic identification, and produces strong ethnic emotional link due to the high-level interaction with each other.

In the ritual performance and interaction at the Naadam Festival, the ethnic sentiment is represented by the cultural confidence which promotes the traditional ethnic culture. The high-level emotional links of the participants in the Naadam Festival leads to social integration of the ethnic group through the establishment of cultural confidence centering on the cultural symbols. It also promotes the exchanges and communication between the Mongolian ethnic group and other peoples. In the context of the diversity in unity of the Chinese Nation, the cultural confidence of various ethnic groups is an important source for ethnic and national identity. It is also a way to express sense of belonging and core cultural values that stabilize the internal social structures of various ethnic groups. Cultural confidence is of great significance to promote the creative transformation and innovative development of outstanding traditional ethnic cultures, and the development of the national identity in China. The shared identity is never built on the isolation and separation of various cultures, but depends on the recognition and emotional resonance through communications and exchanges. Naadam provides interactive space for multi-ethnic communication and exchange, in which individuals can enhance their cultural confidence by participating the event and ritual performance. They can also understand the value of their inherent cultures better, and then actively promote local and ethnic cultures. At the same time, Naadam provides them a change to understand other cultures in a more thorough and holistic way so as to prevent turning cultural confidence to cultural arrogance.

### **Ritual Space and Multi-Dimensional Field**

Economic behaviors always exist in certain social structures. Culture can shape the members through interaction and form specific social structures in specific situations, providing order functions and behavioral basis for economic activities (Granovetter 2014). In addition to the core events, Naadam Festival in Henan County includes other activities that promote ethnic culture and display local development.

Naadam Festival is now an officially recognized ceremony with standard time and space. Interaction among participants in the festival provides a market space, turning the ritual space into a market space. The involvement of businessmen from various ethnic groups brings diversified commodities to the Naadam Festival. Some local businessmen sell characteristic foods, such as meat pies, beef, and mutton. Some merchants from Inner Mongolia sell Mongolian commodities, and some Han merchants operate large recreation facilities, such as the Merry-Go-Round and the Swinger. With the siphonic effect of economic benefits, Naadam attracts local people, as well as participants from other ethnic groups in other neighboring counties or parts of China.

Simultaneously, as a way to express ethnic feelings and to convey traditional culture, Naadam has become a crucial way for multi-ethnic emotional and cultural exchange. It also provides a space for local people to inherit and develop local cultures in real activities by exhibiting typical ethnic cultures in shortened time and narrowed spaces (Li 2010). It acts as an interactive platform for multi-ethnic communication and interaction in various forms, and is also endowed with cultural and economic significance. During the three days of the Naadam, apart from sports events, the festival committee usually

holds an exhibition of Mongolian traditional culture, display and sales of goods from Mongolia, cattle and sheep competition, and international poetry reading conference, etc.

## **FROM CULTURAL ACTIVITIES TO CULTURAL CAPITAL**

As the tangible form of cultural resources, Naadam carries the spiritual values, and displays the ethnic awareness. Cultural capital exists as positive and effective capital in symbolic and material forms, and the convertibility of different types of capitals lays the basis for production strategies, the purpose of which is to ensure the reproduction of capital through capital transformation (Bourdieu 1986). An ethnic cultural activity can accomplish the transformation process from the cultural resource to cultural capital only by becoming a market link with cultural added values that establish a connection between the cultural resources and economic development. It then helps to adjust the relationship between local society and the modern market as a capital used in the exchanges and circulation in economic interaction.

### **Traditional Ritual Symbols and Modern Technology**

In order to realize the transformation from cultural resources to cultural capital, Naadam coordinates the cultural inheritance and the modern competition. In the competition ceremony, the symbol of the ceremony is the object that is highly noticed by all participants and is the origin that stimulates emotional energy, and the core to display the charm of the culture of the competitions. Therefore, improving the quality of the competition and developing Naadam from a folk activity into a modern sports event is the driving force for Henan County to develop Naadam as a national sports event. The re-production process of the national sports needs technology-based factors which are embedded continuously on the basis of naturally shaped cultural foundation. During this process, technology and folk cultures are not simply in the opposite relationship. They need to coordinate with each other in order to achieve the innovative development of the ethnic culture. The cultural display and presentation of the ceremony shall not hinder the development of the competition. It is necessary to draw lessons from the experience of modern horse racing projects and to combine them with characteristics of the local horse racing culture to stimulate rule innovation and competition standardization. The participation of tourists from other parts of China and foreign countries in the Naadam competition makes the festival a floating site for power, capital, profit, and entertainment, and a site for visitors to experience ethnic cultures and pursue their historical roots (Yang and Wang 2021). Tourists and vendors get together at the festival in the form of capital and information to attract investment and embed it into the local construction.

### **Double Attributes of Resources and Multiple Values of Capital**

Compared with the capital transformation mode for natural resources, cultural resources are transformed into cultural capitals objectively by words, special articles for use, tools, and symbols, and then transformed into economical capital by means of commodity exchange and resource reproduction, thus achieving the sustainability and accumulation of the symbols to gain economic benefits (Bourdieu 2012). The evolution process of Henan Naadam is a practical process for human beings to continuously adapt to the culture in collective actions. Through the interaction and extension of the interaction, Naadam has acquired dual attributes of culture and economy. Having been transformed from cultural resource to the capital, Naadam is integrated with the social structure of the local Mongolian ethnic group at Henan county, becoming an important form of interaction between cultural and economic development, and acquiring multi economic significances.

First of all, the development of the traditional ethnic cultural resource of Naadam has restructured and interpreted the significance of Naadam in the modern times. The economic values of traditional cultures can be revealed through the capital operation of cultural resources so as to connect cultural performance and market construction, and integrate the ethnic sports competition highly with the social structure of a specific environment and the social network of a specific region, thus promoting the inheritance and development of the traditional culture.



Secondly, the cultural performance and competition at Naadam promote the unity within ethnic communities and the confidence in ethnic culture, and transform the cultural capital into social capital. At the same time, the development object of Naadam is cultural resource, not ecological resource. Therefore, it carries an environment-friendly feature, playing a positive role in maintaining the ecological environment and promoting the green development of local industries, which conforms to the government's policy that "Clear waters and green mountains are as good as mountains of gold and silver" in China today.

### **Festival Activities and Economic Capital**

Under the background of globalization and marketization, the local governments in China take it an important and effective measure to use traditional cultural resources to revive ethnic cultures and to increase economic incomes. Festivals have become an important means for capital generation with the business values that involve cultural communication and tourism activity. The production process of sports activities at ethnic festivals is internally driven by the capital logic which transforms cultural resources at festivals into economic capital to stimulate asset accretion (Wang and Zhang 2020). Tourism development of festivals takes the intangible cultural landscape as the production material and a new point for economic growth. Horse racing festival in Henan County has been changed from a simple view of riding and shooting into a grand event for economic exchanges and tourism development. The unique charm of traditional ethnic sports attracts a large number of people to watch this grand event every year. The county is almost full of visiting tourists in the days before and after the event, and some visitors even have to live in the homes of Tibetans nearby. With the continuous influence of this horse racing event, restaurants, hotels, and retail services receive considerable good revenues from participating in goods exchange and reception activities at Naadam. Naadam Festival is also a trade fair for farming and animal husbandry goods and investment. In addition to industrial and agricultural subsidiary products, Naadam involves restaurant business with local ethnic features. Naadam has become an economic event with butterfly effects that bring in trade during the festival time and strong follow-up economic benefits, promoting local economic development (Zhang and He 2020).

Henan County government now organizes and undertakes this horse racing festival every year, and actively uses it as a platform to attract investment and business. This practice has made a positive contribution to the economic development of the county. Today, the Naadam Festival in Henan County has gradually developed into a comprehensive fair integrating folk customs exhibition, investment, economic and trade negotiations, and grassland tour sightseeing. It is also an important opportunity to show off the social and economic achievements and development in this ethnic county, to strengthen the exchange and cooperation with other economically developed areas and enterprises outside the county, and to further expand the opening to the outside world. Horse-racing festival in Henan County is not only a simple folk traditional sports event, it also helps to form an industrial chain to promote the development of the local economy of Henan County.

### **CONCLUSION**

Based on our analysis of the Naadam Festival in Henan County, one can see that the transformation of Naadam from religious rituals to festival event has gone through a process that turns it from a sacred activity to a secular activity. This process results from the expansion of the interaction and communication from a single ethnic group (Mogolian) to multi-ethnic groups (including Mogolian, Tiben, Han, and Hui) at the Naadam Festival. Ethnic culture can be regarded as relatively stable information undergoing a process of production, reproduction, and transmission in its public performance. These information are distributed in social networks, and are viewed as reflection of values, beliefs, and skills of an ethnic group. They are transmitted through communication and interaction. Consequently, the changes in significance and form of Naadam are the intentional or unconscious changes of ethnic cultural elements in the communication process with other ethnic groups due to the interaction between senders and receivers on materials, resources and information. These changes let the performing form of cultural elements of an ethnic group exist in a dynamic process so as to adapt to the changing world in terms of environment, ethnic emotion,

social network, and communication mode that occur in the course of interaction among various ethnic groups.

From ritual to production and from festival to daily life, Naadam's relationship with daily life is constantly reinforced. Naadam is a typical case of the traditional ethnic sports culture going through the process of cultural reconstruction. Changes in its significance and functions are closely associated with production and life. From cultural activity to cultural capital, the Naadam Festival led by the government promotes the establishment of ethnic cultural self-confidence by strengthening its function as the vehicle of ethnic historical memory. Furthermore, the coordinated social, economic and cultural development of the ethnic group at Henan county has been achieved by the industrial development of cultural capital. As far as the individual is concerned, Naadam is increasingly related to the individual behavior of herdsmen, and has changed the livestock structure dominated by cattle and sheep. It has affected herdsmen to coordinate their production with their culture to satisfy their needs in the modern lifestyle.

The changes in function and significance of traditional cultural activities such as Naadam are deemed not only as the reproduction process of transforming cultural capital forms, but also as the process of coordinating culture and production relationships. While being reinterpreted and operated by the government, members of the ethnic group and cultural elites have transformed their traditional cultural activities into cultural capital. They play the role to maintain the subjectivity of the ethnic culture. They are highly integrated with the social structure of a specific environment and the social network of a specific region. They have established the connection between traditional cultural resources and economic development. Moreover, the reconstruction and adjustment of traditional Naadam culture can contribute to improve ethnic pride and cohesion, to promote the inheritance and development of traditional culture, and to maintain the diversity of Chinese national culture. Naadam has become an important platform for promoting the exchange, communication and integration of all ethnic groups in China, and a spiritual link to consolidate the sense of community for the Chinese nation. It has provided a new path for the inheritance and development of ethnic cultures in the context of the rural revitalization movement in China.

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