

# POACHING STATE POLITICS IN SOCIALIST CHINA: UXIN JU'S GRASSLAND CAMPAIGN, 1958–1966\*

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**ABSTRACT.** This study explores the local experience of a state-initiated campaign to improve the grassland in Uxin Ju, a Mongolian community in northern China, from 1958 to 1966. The contrast between the local experience and the official representation reveals great discrepancies and attests to the ability of local people to utilize state policies to meet local needs, transforming socialist ideologies into local rationales. Applying Michel de Certeau's theory of everyday practice that sees book reading as poaching and the use/consumption of political and cultural discourses as a process of creative empowerment, I examine how the Mongols in Uxin Ju "poached" state politics to their own advantages and appropriated the grassland campaign in the making of the local landscape. This poaching further elucidates James Scott's concept of ideological resistance by focusing on the creative use of nonoppositional nature, which is an important way in which local people could express their agency in the oppressive regime of socialist China. This article calls attention to how nonsubversive co-optation of state policies can function as an expression of agency in the making of local human-environmental history, even on the part of individuals who are actively accommodating to the ideology of the dominant regime. *Keywords:* China, grassland campaign, Inner Mongolia, Mongols, state policies, Uxin Ju.

Uxin Ju is no ordinary place, having once enjoyed national recognition in Mao Zedong's China. A Mongol-dominated pastoral community in western Inner Mongolia, Uxin Ju was praised in 1965 by China's state-run newspaper, the *Renmin Ribao* (People's Daily), for its active engagement in the campaign to transform its sandy grassland. After China's best-known model community at the time, Dazhai, a farming village in northern China, Uxin Ju was named the "Pastoral Dazhai" and promoted as a model for grassland improvement and socialist construction in China's pastoral areas.

During Mao's era, 1949–1976, China used the building of models as a means of political control, much as the Soviet Union used its fake model villages. Not only were these model communities typically sites of political manipulation, but their alleged achievements were often falsified (Friedman 1978). Although Uxin Ju experienced a similar level of political control, the Mongols' experience seems unique. During my fieldwork on post-Mao land use in 1998, I frequently heard positive reminiscences of the 1958–1966 grassland campaign, even comments indicating its important contribution to current land management. Why did local people give the Maoist campaign such an unusual vote of approval, when the Mao era has typically been considered a dark age?<sup>1</sup> What happened on the grassland? With these ques-

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