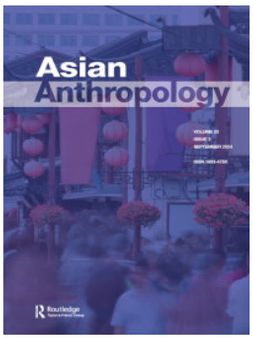

Asian Anthropology

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/raan20

“That-which-must-not-be-named”: hunting, secrecy, and the ontology of meat in northeast China

Richard Fraser

To cite this article: Richard Fraser (2024) “That-which-must-not-be-named”: hunting, secrecy, and the ontology of meat in northeast China, Asian Anthropology, 23:3, 195-211, DOI: 10.1080/1683478X.2024.2376434

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/1683478X.2024.2376434

Published online: 22 Jul 2024.

ASIAN ANTHROPOLOGY
2024, VOL. 23, NO. 3, 195–211
https://doi.org/10.1080/1683478X.2024.2376434

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

"That-which-must-not-be-named": hunting, secrecy, and the ontology of meat in northeast China

Richard Fraser

Anthropology Section, Institute of Social Science, UiT - Arctic University of Norway, Tromsø, Norway

ABSTRACT

In this paper, I describe the practice of sharing and eating wild meat amongst the Orochen in northeast China, a community of hunters who are no longer allowed to hunt due to state conservation policies. I show how for Orochen meat is the material intermediary between the human and nonhuman worlds, offered to the fire before meals and to animal spirit-masters during hunting. I suggest this demands reflection of what we might call the ontology of meat: that is, how it is experienced as an extra-ordinary and relational substance with the 'lived' capacity to act. I show how this contrasts with the Chinese state, which sees wild meat as a material substance only and, in the context of conservation, as something to be measured and controlled through the protection of wild animals. I suggest that, for the Orochen, to eat and share wild meat is an act of everyday resistance embedded in secrecy, as well as a way of rendering into action their ontology of relational existence and participation in the wider socio-cosmic economy of sharing.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 16 November 2023
Accepted 23 June 2024

KEYWORDS
Hunting; meat; secrecy; Orochen; China

1. Introduction

In the summer of 2023, Dalaa and his son set up a campsite on the banks of the Gan River, just on the edge of Alihe town, the capital of the Orochen Autonomous Banner in northeast China. The camp consisted of two canvas-covered ridge tents, which they used for sleeping and storing goods, and a third open-sided canopy tent, for eating and relaxing during the day. A fire had been lit for cooking and making tea and dozens of bottles of beer were kept cool, submerged under the icy waters at the river's edge.

The campsite is something that Dalaa and his son do together every year. Situated just a short drive from Alihe center, they leave the tents standing for several months over the summer so they can have informal meals, host parties with friends and family, and go swimming. As Dalaa explained, this harked back to the time when the Orochen were still nomadic, living in tepee-like tents and moving frequently between hunting grounds. Today things are different, as the Orochen are no longer mobile,

CONTACT Richard Fraser richard.a.fraser@uit.no

hunting is banned, and the camp includes all kinds of modern conveniences, including a solar panel providing electric light, foldable chairs and tables to sit comfortably and play cards, and a whole host of fresh ingredients which they shuttle from their apartments to cook on-site.

One afternoon Dalaa's son, Ouqi, arrived in his 4×4 to take me to the campsite for dinner. Although just a 15-minute drive away, access to the camp was complicated and demanded that we drive off the tarmac road and onto the open land surrounding the regional center. Within a few minutes, we were crossing the Gan River at its shallowest point while water submerged both sides of our vehicle. This gave the campsite a feeling of remoteness and privacy, surrounded by taiga forest, and with the recent summer rains charging the already fast-flowing river.

Since the start of summer, Ouqi had been living more or less permanently at the camp with several of his friends. Together, they slept on-site, hosted BBQs and drinking sessions, and set off fireworks under the night sky. On this occasion, there were eight people in total, all of whom were Orochen, and we arrived just as Ouqi's best friend was finishing preparing the last dishes for dinner. The group included three of Ouqi's friends, Dalaa and his elderly mother, and several uncles and cousins, all of whom had their roots in the Orochen village of Tuohe, situated several hours away.

Taking our seats at the table, we distributed bowls and disposable chopsticks and started opening the bottles of beer. The table itself was covered with dozens of freshly prepared dishes, with plates stacked on top of one another leaving little room for anything else. This included several typical northern Chinese dishes – or *dongbeicai* – including a stew of potatoes, pork, and green beans, freshly barbequed legs of lamb, and a soup made from a particular wild herb that all Orochen families harvest during the short summer months.

As everyone started to eat Dalaa came over and placed a final dish on the table immediately beside me. It consisted of nothing but brownish meat, which stood out starkly against the other colorful dishes covered with sauces, vegetables, and garnish. I watched as Dalaa took out his knife and carved a small piece of the mystery meat, before throwing it into the open fire, something Orochen do whenever cooking and eating, seen as an offering to the nonhuman spirits of the area in which they are situated. Without thinking, I asked aloud what type of meat it was and, immediately, everyone went quiet. Clearly caught off-guard but, calm in his response, Dalaa bent down and replied in a slightly hushed voice: "It is *mountain meat*," he said, "we don't call it by its real name." And immediately I realized my faux pas. This was deer meat, specifically roe deer, or *paozi* in Chinese, which had been hunted by one of Ouqi's friends and brought to the campsite for dinner.

Traditionally, roe deer was the most important animal in Orochen culture. It provided meat and sustenance on a daily basis and its pelt was used to fashion into the characteristic full-length gown that all Orochen wore before sedentarization. Roe deer was also used to make the unique Orochen hunters' hat, which comprises the upper portion of the deer's head and which Orochen wore as a mimicry device to convince the animal that the hunter was himself a fellow deer. Today, however, hunting is banned, and roe deer are designated a protected species, specifically on the grounds of state conservation policy. Now, to hunt (illegally) not only attracts fines and a

criminal record, but the very real possibility of imprisonment as well. Very quickly, everyone at the table moved on and ignored the tactlessness of the foreign anthropologist. But, it revealed something significant about the relationship between meat, hunting, and secrecy, which forms the basis of this article.

By using the alternate designation "mountain meat" – and that "which must not be named" – Dalaa was explicitly positioning it within the realms of secrecy, illegality and, seen in the context of the hunting ban, of resistance as well. At the same time, by offering a piece of the secret meat to the fire, it also connected with Orochen more-than-human relations and their positioning within what they consider an important socio-cosmic economy of sharing. Reflecting on this, I thought about what we might call the ontology of meat: that is, how it is experienced as an extraordinary and relational substance with the 'lived' capacity to act – and activate – other things, such as spirits, animal masters, and relations between human beings. And, as I show below, how it reveals an apt example of cosmopolitics and what Mario Blaser (2009) calls political ontology. After all, this is a view that contrasts explicitly with the policies and ontological presuppositions of the Chinese state, which sees meat – and the animal from which it comes – as a material substance only, something to be measured, protected, and controlled through conservation and the hunting ban. The case of the secret meat thus serves as a useful prism to explore Orochen experiences of the non-human, their relationship to the state and how it has changed over time, as well as the power of materials (such as flesh) to transcend the nature-culture divide and sustain a radically different cultural world.

Before we move to the Orochen case, it is important to highlight the ethical dimensions of this article. I have carried out fieldwork in northeast China since 2008. And, since the time of my very first visit, I have seen fragments of (illegal) hunting amongst the Orochen, though it has taken many years to build up trust with local people and to generate what I consider to be accurate ethnographic material. I am fully aware of the ethical-legal dimensions of publishing on this topic and have consulted with several Orochen friends and interlocutors. First, I have anonymized all personal and place names to intentionally give a more general ethnographic account. Second, as emphasized by my informants, "everyone" knows there is illegal hunting in the northeast, including by Han-Chinese. While this does not make the study and its publication any less sensitive, it does capture how this is part of a more widespread story about hunting and its secrecy in the region.

2. The Orochen in the Peoples Republic of China

The Orochen are one of China's 55 officially recognised ethnic minorities (*shaoshu minzu*). Numbering just over 8,000 people, they live in the *Da Xinganliang* Mountains of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region and Heilongjiang province, in China's far northeastern corner along the border with Siberia. Entering what would later become Chinese territory during the mid-seventeenth century, the Orochen were characteristic hunters of the taiga environment. Moving around this remote region they hunted deer, moose, bear, and boar and in winter trapped squirrel, lynx, fox, and sable. Mobility and hunting inculcated intimate relationships between human beings,

animals, and nonhuman agencies, resulting in both animist and shamanic practices and beliefs (Pu 1983; Kim 2009), which still underpin much of their cultural reality today.

Prior to receiving recognition as a distinct ethnic group, the Orochen had no conception of themselves as a unified entity but consisted of loosely affiliated clans (Shirokogoroff 1929; Feng and Whaley 2004). These clans gradually interacted with the Qing and Republican states and eventually became designated a single ethnicity during the Ethnic Classification Project of the People's Republic of China (Elliott 2001; Mullaney 2011, 20; Fraser 2015; Dumont 2017). Beginning in the 1950s, they were sedentarized in the areas of their original hunting grounds where the majority remains to this day. They were also granted an Autonomous Banner – with Alihe as its capital – intended to protect their hunting lifestyle and establish a representative government. However, with the expansion of the logging industry and successive modernization campaigns, they have experienced dramatic changes resulting in cultural assimilation and language-loss, including mass immigration of Han-Chinese settlers, environmental degradation and a reduction in wild animal populations (which problematized subsistence hunting), and policies encouraging them to transition "from hunters to agriculturalists" (Lundberg and Zhou 2009).

By far the most dramatic change, however, was in 1996, when the state implemented a hunting ban in the area. The official reason given was the sharp decrease of wild animals and the result of a government survey which purportedly claimed the Orochen, could no longer survive *via* hunting alone (Lundberg and Zhou 2009). In fact, by this time very few were subsisting solely from hunting. As my Orochen friends explain, the ban was instead founded upon the developmentalist policy of the national state, which maintained – and still maintains – a teleological vision regarding hunting as a backward way of life. The situation was made worse by the fact that alongside the ban, the Orochen were forced to hand in their hunting rifles, which for them was the symbol of their cultural identity.

Today, only a small proportion of Orochen engage in subsistence hunting, though it is impossible to know the exact number as the practice is shrouded in secrecy. I have met hunters in all parts of northeast China, including in rural settlements, regional centers, and the capital of the Autonomous Banner, though the flow of hunters (as with meat) is highly fluid. It is important to note that many non-Orochen also engage in hunting, including other ethnic minorities such as the Daur, Buryats, and Evenki, but also the majority Han-Chinese. To some extent, these problematize the Orochen claim to have a distinct "hunting culture," as all hunting is now criminalised in the eyes of the state. Economically, the Orochen are engaged in the same livelihood activities as other ethnic groups in the region, including farming, owning shops and businesses, trading, and a relatively high proportion are employed within the minority government. This includes professions such as teachers and bureaucrats, but also higher-ranking government cadres. As I show below, this creates a complex network of relations within and between Orochen groups, which simultaneously restricts – but also facilitates – (illegal) hunting.

3. Hunting, secrecy, and resistance

The first and most obvious thing to note about the "meat that shall not be named" is that it means hunting is still practiced, despite officially being banned. And, of course, this is something that almost all Orochen are aware of, even if few will discuss it openly. Although most people no longer hunt, virtually everyone knows someone who does, particularly in smaller towns and villages. However, as one can be arrested, fined, and even imprisoned, the way people hunt has changed over time. Today, most hunting takes place late at night, either on foot (walking from villages) or from the back of people's 4x4s, specifically to avoid detection. Since 2003, the local government has employed several dozen forestry police to patrol the taiga; firstly, to prevent illegal hunting, and secondly, to act as fire wardens in the area. However, the forestry police also play a role in facilitating hunting. This is because many Orochen (and other ethnic groups) have friends, family members, and colleagues working as forestry police, as well as more widely within the regional government and local police force. This means they can draw upon these social ties to gain information, such as the location of the forestry police and establish in which areas they can hunt while avoiding detection. In other words, they can identify temporary 'safe zones' within the (still sparsely populated) taiga, to where people travel (sometimes driving for several hours late at night) and where they know they will not be targeted. They can also (try to) harness these social networks if – and when – they or someone they know does get arrested, which usually involves bribes and/or the reciprocation of favors. However, this certainly does not mean that hunting is without risk; first, because not all people have access to such networks, and second, because it is common for the forestry police to change every few months, and they themselves are under pressure from their superiors to target individuals and meet certain quotas. The result is that hunting is still a secret, arrests do happen, and might even include people within one's own social network.

But what does this mean for the meat obtained through hunting? First, it means that we are dealing with something that is officially illegal, and that includes not only hunting, but also the meat itself, possessing it, sharing it, cooking it and, of course, eating it. And, following on from this, it means that the availability and flow of meat involves an element of secrecy – which in turn creates a particular social dynamic surrounding who is privy to the secret – and who is not. Put another way, it creates a dynamic of inclusion and exclusion, of insiders and outsiders, and this in turn manifests as a reification of ethnic self-identity: this is an *Orochen* secret, for only Orochen will know the name of the mystery meat, who hunted it and where, and only Orochen will share the spoils of the hunt with friends and family. And this secret is articulated through language – as linguistic inversions such as "mountain meat" and "that which must not be named." Of course, much could be said about the power of language in maintaining a secret, and it is interesting that my Orochen friends use a Chinese term ('*senlin rou*' – or 'mountain meat'), rather than an Orochen one, which to some extent symbolizes the impact of assimilation and the hybridization of people's cultural identities.

But what I want to focus on is the secrecy itself, for to have a secret, and to maintain it (especially in the context of the hunting-ban), means that the meat also signifies a degree of resistance – resistance to the law, to the hunting-ban, to the state,

and to the forced ritual held in the mid-1990s where all Orochen were ordered to hand in their hunting rifles as an apparent mark of compliance. While continued hunting, of course, is the most explicit form of resistance, I argue that we should not overlook the everyday and more subtle forms that accompany it – such as sharing, preparing, cooking, and – indeed – eating the meat.

This evokes consideration of James Scott's well-worn thesis on "weapons of the weak." Here Scott (1985) argues that oppression and resistance are two sides of the same coin, and that by focusing (as political scientists often do) on explicit historic 'events' – such as organized rebellions and revolutions, we can easily miss more subtle but nevertheless equally powerful forms of "everyday resistance." For Scott, this means focusing on cultural resistance and non-cooperation, such as "foot-dragging, evasion, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander and sabotage" (1985, 29). And he finds these in both rural and urban settings, and across both the middle class and the elites (for example, tax evasion and fleeing military conscription). But, of course, the most notable examples he cites are rural peasants who are physically dispersed and less politically organized (Scott 1985).

Seen from this perspective, my Orochen friends are also engaging in a form of everyday resistance. Here, to eat meat is to resist, just as it is to cook, prepare, and share the meat after hunting. It must be remembered that even after the hunt, meat still carries a certain energy, or *mana* – it is a 'charged' material which attracts police presence, fines, and possible imprisonment. Indeed, everyone knows that the police in Alihe check the back of people's vehicles for evidence of hunting – specifically meat and blood. And everyone resists by participating in a web of secrecy, with meat constantly moving between – and being shared by friends and family members. I have participated in this web myself, as I have helped Orochen friends move freshly hunted meat from the back of people's cars to their freezers; from freezers to dinner tables; and even several hundred kilometers from remote towns to regional centers.

This is driven by the fact that every Orochen household (rural and urban) has – or seeks to have – freshly hunted meat throughout the year, and it is common for such meat to move between households at different times and seasons. On some occasions, for example, people will transport a whole deer carcass late at night straight after the hunt; at other times, they move only a leg or haunch just before celebrating a wedding; and yet this often involves an even more informal exchange, such as when an elderly grandmother brings over a plate of hand-rolled dumplings to share with her grandchildren, and they are already wrapped around the illegal flesh of the hunted animal. Seen from this perspective, this is an informal resistance and a politics of the everyday. It is grounded in people's practices, tastes, and sensorial desires – and flows along an informal network of sharing, mobile phone messages, and Wechat images.

The informal nature of Orochen resistance is something worth noting in more detail, specifically as it problematizes the overt directness of Scott's model, at least in the Chinese and Orochen case. On the one hand, my Orochen friends certainly do resist the hunting ban, by some of them practicing illegal hunting. And almost all are highly critical of the ban and the decline of what they see as a deeply meaningful cultural practice, particularly amongst men. And, occasionally, this comes to the fore in

very explicit ways, such as during conversations at the dinner table or when someone gets a little bit too drunk and scolds a random police officer walking down the street for, in their words, "taking our guns away" – even though of course that particular police officer had no connection to the policy and its implementation. However, more often than not, resistance here is articulated informally and enmeshed within daily and habitual practices, such as cooking, eating, and sharing the meat. And to some extent, this is even more informal than the resistance described by Scott – such as foot-dragging, evasion, false compliance, and feigned ignorance. Indeed, while those tactics have a clear and direct intentionality, I argue that the daily practices of cooking, eating, and sharing meat are of a more subtle and nuanced kind. And, when considered in the context of wider Chinese society, this is not at all surprising, for just like with the overt peasant rebellions described by Scott, it is hard – if not impossible – for my Orochen friends to stage a protest or revolt against the hunting-ban. Not only is the state – and its apparatus – far too efficient, but the ideological and discursive metanarratives of development, modernization, and, more recently, scientific conservation and animal ethics – which underpin the 'logic' for the hunting ban are so deeply embedded that they are hard to resist. This pushes my Orochen friends into an informal and I argue almost unconscious politics of resistance – articulated through sharing, cooking, and eating.

Seen from this perspective, what we are dealing with here is a more complex form of resistance that demands deeper consideration of the nature of secrecy itself. This is something highlighted by Georg Simmel, who notes that secrecy involves a paradox, because for a secret to be realized, someone must not only conceal something but someone else must know or suspect the concealment (Simmel 1950; Bellman 1981). In other words, while a secret may remain hidden, the act of concealment *must* be revealed even if only partially – if the secret is to have an audience and thus a social existence. This is something clearly visible in the Orochen case. Certainly, the acts of cooking and sharing wild meat are (like hunting) against the law – and thus examples of resistance. However, the lived-experience of this is that "everyone" knows that illegal hunting still takes place, including Han-Chinese government officials and police officers. In other words, the secret is at least partly revealed which I argue complicates the idea of intentional resistance on the part of the Orochen. It is important to note that I have even been offered hunted meat while sitting down to formal meals with government officials, who were eager to present the dish as a kind of symbolic capital and to some extent *wanting* to reveal the secret that hunting actually still persists. The reason this is significant is that if a secret is partly revealed, it maintains a degree of power/knowledge, which is vital in a context of minority-state relations such as the Orochen in China. Indeed, as Simmel points out, the power and attraction of a secret lies in the possibility that it *may* be disclosed fully, either as a favor to the uninformed who seek to learn it or as a betrayal or lapse on the part of those hiding it. In either case, secrets imply power – and that their own disclosure are desired; in other words, secrets give power to those who know them. I argue this reveals a more complex and realistic picture of Orochen resistance. It means that because "everyone" knows the Orochen still hunt, they have a certain degree of power – both over their neighbors, but also over the hunting-ban itself. As I show below, this is something that also

merges with Orochen social relations and the specific socio-cosmic dynamic between the hunter, the animal, and those who consume it. In particular, it highlights the other fundamental element in the flow of meat – namely, the sociality of *sharing*.

4. Sharing and egalitarianism

Now, sharing – and the sharing of meat, in particular, is a paradigmatic topic in the history of anthropology – connecting with several major disciplinary themes including the egalitarianism of hunter-gatherers, the role of so-called Big Men (with the best hunters giving away the most meat), and evolutionary ideas of nutrition, calorific intake, and group survival. And the Orochen case offers good comparative insight into these themes, but with certain modifications. For example, in Orochen areas a handful of prominent men are known – and respected for being expert hunters, but their valuation has changed in the context of the hunting ban. Today, these men (and they are all men) are not simply respected for being good hunters (which would have been the designation in the past) but, since hunting has been banned, they are respected for hunting *at all*. In short, they are valued for taking the risk of being a hunter.

This is something that affects the dynamics of sharing. Indeed, in the past Orochen hunters distributed meat openly amongst their community or clan, with no expectation of payment or return. The practice reflected the intentions described by Sahlins (2013) as generalized reciprocity, the so-called most altruistic form of exchange and which is common among egalitarian hunter-gatherers. This is precisely why, when the first Chinese ethnographers encountered the Orochen, they defined them as living in a state of "primitive communism" – with meat sharing seen as the material manifestation of their egalitarian political ethos.

This is something which positions the Orochen on par with other hunting societies, where sharing is a cultural norm and a mechanism for maintaining political equality. Amongst the Hadza, for example, Hann (1998) famously described meat sharing as a means of undercutting the development of hierarchy and enforcing egalitarianism. This is because hunting success is always variable, and a high proportion of animals are usually killed by a relatively small proportion of men (also see Lee 1979, 242–244). The result is that successful individual hunters are denied the opportunity to build wealth and prestige through the culture of sharing. Connected to this, hunters are expected to be self-deprecating about their hunting success, while boasting is met with suspicion (ibid, 243–246). This is something also seen amongst indigenous peoples in Siberia and the Arctic, where sharing is not only valued, but expected. In the Orochen and wider Siberian context (Brandisauskas 2007; Willerslev 2007; Brightman, Grotti, and Ulturgasheva 2012), this is articulated through cultural mechanisms such as ideas of luck and fortune, with hunters who share the most meat seen as generating more luck in future hunting, while not sharing is to invite bad luck in the form of hunting failure (and even personal or family loss), something we shall return to below.

But of course, the key in the Orochen case is that today all of this occurs under the radar – because of the hunting ban. And this has important consequences for the social dynamics of sharing, egalitarianism, and the role and status of would-be Big Men. First, it means that sharing is even more important than before because there is

less hunting (and less hunters), which means meat itself is harder to come by and thus more valued. Much as with the Hadza, however, this does not turn into increased economic/material value but is refracted through cultural ideas of sharing, egalitarianism, and status (also see Hann 1998, 48). That is, rather than creating channels for economic hierarchies to develop, the hunting ban actually reinforces the culture of expectation, whereby the hunter is expected to give away his meat to as many people as possible, that is, to ensure that everyone has *at least some* hunted game available in their freezers. It is for this reason it is still considered a "sin" in Orochen minds not to give meat away, especially if the hunter has been successful. And this is articulated through the re-telling of old stories of famous hunters in the past who hunted the most animals and who invariably are always described as the most prolific sharers. As one person put it, "the hunt would never happen" if meat was not given away. And this intersects with the situation today: because of the hunting ban, there is always a feeling that there is never enough meat, and thus the cultural expectation to share is heightened. In this sense, the ban has actually strengthened the mechanism of reciprocal sharing – and sharing widely – without the expectation of return.

This is something that connects the Orochen case to wider questions about the nature of sharing, the introduction of the market, and what economic anthropologists call "the moral economy." Indeed, while the hunting ban has certainly made sharing more important than before (given that it now operates in a context of meat scarcity), this does not mean that people do not find other ways to reciprocate – or at least try to. This includes offering gifts, labor, and social connections to the hunter, as well as more ephemeral things such as cigarettes and alcohol. In this sense, while there is not an expectation to return, people do try to reciprocate – at least something. Now the question is: why do they do this? Of course, the temptation is to say the Orochen have been incorporated into a new system of market exchange, which has re-shaped (or "diminished") their previously egalitarian hunting ethos of generalized reciprocity. Orochen have of course been part of the market economy since at least the founding of the PRC. And things have certainly intensified over the last decades, given the dramatic rise in living standards and increased economic differentiation between households. Much of this is tied to employment. For example, while some Orochen live and work as farmers in more remote settlements, others work for the local government and own high-rise apartments in the regional center. To some extent, this intersects with the culture of sharing. Thus, I have seen wealthier people offer more substantial things to the hunter in exchange for receiving meat, such as gifts, labor, and access to their social network, while poorer people (and farmers) usually offer only ephemeral things such as alcohol, cigarettes, and food. Seen from a purely economic (formalist) perspective, this would suggest a new class element affecting the culture of sharing, with people now "expected" to reciprocate on the basis of their wealth. I would suggest, however, that this is to misinterpret the role of the economy in Orochen culture. While people certainly recognize the emergence of new economic divisions, hunting and the sharing of meat are still seen as outside the remit of pure market exchange. This is visible in the fact that hunters always reject the offer of reciprocation outright, and especially money, while they may accept more ephemeral things such as cigarettes and alcohol. And in fact, this was always the case, as people would share many

things with the hunter, such as milk and milk products, wild herbs, and even traded items. Seen from an Orochen perspective, hunting and sharing meat are part of the *moral* economy: they are tied to cultural values, social relations, and would never be equated with the same ideas of economic maximization (such as owning an apartment). This is something similarly explained by Graeber (2014, 76–77) in his account of hunting and the moral economy. He notes that, much like the Orochen, successful hunters purposely avoid drawing attention to their hunting success, and often the polite thing to do is to make fun of oneself or downplay one's skill and ability. As Graeber points out, this was precisely the point made by Peter Freuchen, a Danish anthropologist who lived with Inuit in Greenland. He found that the quality of a delicacy offered to their guests was indicated by how much the guests belittled it. Thus, when a successful hunter gave away a large quantity of walrus meat, Freuchen found that you should never say thank you or overplay the offer: "Up in our country we are human!" said the hunter. "And since we are human, we help each other. We don't like to hear anybody say thanks for that. What I get today you may get tomorrow. Up here we say that by gifts one makes slaves and by whips one makes dogs" (Freuchen 1961, 154 in Graeber 2014, 76–77). This is something highly comparable to the Orochen case and reveals a very different relationship to what we think of as "the economy." Not only do Orochen people also *not* say thank you for meat (since it is a gift and everyone is supposed to have meat), but it would be an insult to the hunter to offer money in return, as it would elevate the hunter above everyone else and blur the distinction between the market and moral economies. After all, money is the one thing that you cannot share. In other words, despite the hunting ban and rise in economic differentiation, the Orochen still see hunting (and wild meat) as part of a moral and egalitarian system. And it is notable that money is the one thing that the hunter will *always* reject: because wild meat is explicitly non-monetary; it is part of a different social-economic sphere that is shaped not only by values, social relations, and the culture of reciprocal sharing, but cosmological principles as well. Indeed, as we shall see below, to accept money for wild meat would raise cosmo-ethical questions and the very real possibility of attracting "bad luck," specifically in the form of retribution from non-human animal masters who are seen as the ones who give the hunter "good luck" in the first place. Seen from this perspective, though on the surface the sharing of meat appears to have been integrated into an economic relationship, we have to problematize our own definition of the economy –in order to highlight the substantivist enmeshing of the economic with Orochen cultural and cosmological dimensions.

Connected to this, there has also been a change in the way people share meat because there has been a change in the way people store it. Traditionally, Orochen hunters would consume some of their meat fresh immediately after the hunt, especially the organs of deer and moose such as the liver and heart, while the rest would either be dried (in summer) or frozen (in winter). This means they combined what Woodburn calls both immediate-return and delayed-return reciprocity. In the context of the hunting ban, however, meat can never be consumed fresh, because when people hunt today, they must immediately hide and transport it as quickly as possible to avoid detection. This is something many hunters lament because, as they say, there is

no longer time to eat raw animal parts, which changes not only people's diets but also the way they share. As one person put it: "We no longer camp and sit together in the forest; and because of this we no longer know who shares the most." The implication is that social relations have themselves been fractured by the hunting ban, including the old vectors of respect and status as determined through the sharing of meat.

Connected to this, meat is now shared in a much more fluid way than before. Thus, while in the past meat would always be shared openly (and immediately) upon return to the camp – given by the person who hunted it to everyone in the household and clan, today this happens "in the background" and sporadically at various points throughout the year. For example, I have seen hunters return from the forest to butcher their animals and immediately drive it to friends and family while it is still fresh. At other times, however, I have seen them freeze pieces of meat for personal use, and then these same pieces end up being shared later, should a friend or family member ask. In this sense, the secrecy of Orochen hunting has made sharing more distributed over time and space, which has de-personalized it and reduced the status of the hunter – as people no longer know (or they forget or don't ask) who hunted what meat. In this sense, the hunting ban has heightened the expected egalitarianism of Orochen social relations – even while people still recognize that hunting today incurs greater risk. This is made even more explicit by the fact that boasting about hunting is virtually impossible in a context of secrecy. Thus, while some hunters are respected for still hunting (and for sharing meat), their status as 'Big Men' is undercut – or at least mystified – by operating in a context of illegality and thus enforced humility.

However, this does not mean that meat is – or can be – shared with everyone. Indeed, precisely because it is a secret (given the potential for arrest or fines), meat sharing runs almost exclusively along family lines. At least in its initial phase, meat is almost always first shared from the hunter to a family member – that is, someone that the hunter trusts implicitly. And this is in line with the findings of many anthropologists, who measure food sharing as statistically correlated with lineage membership (Alvard 2002) and consanguineal relatedness (Betzig and Turke 1986; Gurven et al. 2001; Ziker and Schnegg 2005). In this sense, while the hunting ban has reinforced the expectation to share, its secretive nature means that it is still channeled through family networks. This is why hunters within individual households are still known and respected, while their status in the wider community has become more disparate.

The secondary result of this is that some Orochen families are still informally known for being "hunting families," which to some extent gives them a unique form of cultural capital. For example, when the anthropologist arrives to ask questions, s/he will (after first building trust) be pointed in the direction of these so-called "hunting families," specifically as they are seen as still having hunting knowledge – in other words, that they still hunt. But again, this is always undercut by the illegality and secrecy of hunting – for one can also never say too much, people can never be too brazen about their knowledge and skills, and thus the secret is still maintained.

5. Meat, sharing, and the nonhuman

While the anthropological literature on meat and sharing is extensive, particularly in the context of southern Africa, it is interesting that the cosmological and animistic dimensions are less discussed. Amongst the Orochen, however, as with other Siberian indigenous people (Willerslev 2007; Brightman, Grotti, and Ulturgasheva 2012), meat plays an absolutely central role in maintaining relations with the nonhuman world – and specifically, with nonhuman agencies such as spirits and animal-masters. This is something we already saw in the context of the riverside camp, when Dalaa offered a piece of the mystery meat to the fire. Here meat – and meat from wild game – is seen as the one material (along with alcohol), which most directly connects the human and the nonhuman. Thus, every day while cooking, almost all Orochen will throw a small piece of meat into the fire as an offering, including in both forest campsites and in their apartments (where they now throw it directly onto the kitchen stove).

Here fire is seen as the domain of *Gulam-Ta*, a spirit in the form of an old woman, who has the power to administer both good and bad fortune, and thus must be propitiated through offerings and by showing respect. In the Orochen understanding, misfortune can come in many forms, such as illness, and becoming lost in the taiga, but which nowadays also includes things like being caught by the forestry police in the context of illegal hunting. Still today, people will sit around the fire to listen to its cracking, hissing, and burning, which is seen as a form of communication from *Gulam-Ta*. People then discuss the meanings of such messages to solve practical problems: for example, if someone is feeling ill, to obtain good luck in hunting, or whether someone should invest in sending their daughter to university. In this ontological matrix, fire is not just fire but a link to the nonhuman world. Offering meat is referred to locally as feeding the fire and has been documented across Siberia, Mongolia, and the Arctic (Vitebsky 2006, 85; Thomas and Humphrey 1996; Sneath 2000; Laptander and Vitebsky 2021). Much like a shaman or other intermediary figure, fire is seen as a source of knowledge, communication, and advice and experienced by people as an active and engaged being with whom people relate in a personalized way. Put in the language of contemporary anthropological theory, fire is representative of the Orochen animist ontology. In this ontology, meat is a tool in Rane Willerslev's terms (2007) to actualize a relationship; it is a material channel to the nonhuman world and a device through which to maintain one's place in the wider socio-cosmic economy of sharing.

Another apt example of this comes during hunting. After an animal has been killed, the hunter will offer a small piece of meat (or organ or fur) to the spirit-master associated with the animal, specifically by placing it in a special place such as the upper branches of a tree. In the Orochen understanding, all wild animals are managed by what are called animal-masters (or *ezed*). And each species has its own master, so there is a deer master, a sable master, a bear master, and so on. Hunters are expected to communicate with these masters, by following certain rituals and practices, which in turn determine whether the animal-master will allow an animal to be hunted or not. Some of these rules are very practical, for example, not hunting during certain seasons and never hunting pregnant females. While others are more animistic, such as

making offerings of meat (and alcohol) to the animal-masters and praying to the hunting spirit called *Bajnachaa*. Also, hunters are expected to adopt certain bodily rules, for example, never saying the name of the animal they are hunting, not shouting in the forest, and generally acting with respect. This is a radically different conception of hunting, grounded in ideas of nonhuman personhood and agency, something on par with the hunting beliefs of many northern Indigenous people. For example, Paul Nadasdy (2003) describes that the Kluane, a First Nations people in Yukon, Canada, say they are embedded in a web of reciprocal relations with the animals on whom they depend. They are adamant that in the act of hunting, animals choose to 'give themselves' to the hunter, that is, they offer their bodies to be consumed, so long as the hunter engages in proper and respectful relations with them in return. Similarly, with the Orochen, hunting is facilitated by the will of the animal-masters; it is thus seen not simply as the killing of animals, but a social encounter between humans and nonhumans in a reciprocal relationship of gifts and counter-gifts.

These are dimensions that add another layer of complexity to the ideas and practices of sharing. Indeed, since Orochen hunters see themselves as embedded in cosmological relationships with nonhumans (also see Ziker and Fulk 2018), they feel an obligation to reciprocate – specifically through meat – which become actualized *via* ideas of luck and fortune. First, as we have seen, it is considered essential to share hunted meat with others and use the animal "properly," including consuming its meat and organs in their entirety, and turning its pelt into clothing. This is something still practiced despite the restrictions on hunting and is refracted through people's ideas of good and bad luck. For example, if someone successfully hunts an animal, people will say it was given/allowed by the animal-master and that they must reciprocate by sharing the meat and using the pelt. Failure to do so would almost certainly incur the wrath of the animal-master in the form of bad luck (either in hunting or in life more generally), which people take very seriously, and which determines their behavior regarding reciprocation. This is something akin to Bird-David (1990) notion of the "giving environment" and Anderson's (2000) "sentient ecology," where ideas of hunting are based on a relationship of gifting and counter-gifting with the natural environment (also see Brightman, Grotti, and Ulturgasheva 2012).

Now the crucial point here is that in this understanding, meat sharing is a function of social relations beyond merely the human. And this demands reflection on what I call the ontology of meat: that is it forces us to ask what exactly is hunted meat to my Orochen friends and interlocutors. Of course, in its purest material sense, meat is tissue, animal flesh, blood, sinew, and fat. But from an Orochen perspective, it is also something more. For them, meat has an almost magical quality – it has *hau* (or life force in the Maori sense) – a kind of agency to act and affect. Now we might speculate on why this is so. I argue that at least one reason is because meat is the one material that is most closely associated with death – and thus with hunting and the animist ontology of nonhuman personhood. Indeed, precisely because it comes from death – meat is the one material which most embodies life – and a life force. It is thus active and has the capacity to activate the nonhuman, including spirits, animal-masters, and animals.

And it is significant that for Orochen, it is especially *this* meat – that is, meat from animals hunted in the taiga (rather than from domesticated animals such as pigs) – that carries this agency. Indeed, it is only hunted meat that is used to give thanks, offered to the spirits, and relayed back into the socio-cosmic economy of sharing. This implies that hunted meat is of a different kind and order: it is a material that is itself in-between the human and the nonhuman, in-between life and death. Seen from this perspective, meat is also an actor in a wider network of relations – between animal-master and animal, animal and hunter, hunter and family, family and friend, and even friend and anthropologist. In short, meat is itself more-than-human – and sharing it thus enables people to transcend the multi-species divide.

6. Cosmopolitics, the state, and the pleasure of meat

This brings us back full circle to the hunting ban and what Mario Blaser calls the cosmopolitical. This is a view and set of relations that are entirely beyond those of the Chinese state and its system of scientific and bureaucratic control. The state, in the process of banning hunting and rendering roe deer an object of conservation, operates from an entirely different ontological basis. It sees wild meat as illegal precisely because the animal from which it comes is beyond the realm of the social. It exists – and has meaning – only in direct opposition to the human as a representation of nature and as distinct from the socio-economy of sharing.

And yet this is a view entirely antithetical to my Orochen friends and interlocutors – who see humans and nonhuman animals as co-existing – through sharing – in the same socialized world of gifting and reciprocation. As Dalaa's elderly mother put it when discussing the hunting ban, by seeking to protect roe deer the state is actually denying the animal its true nature. By which she means, to exist in the world on its own terms, to be led by *its* animal-master, and to have the choice to give *its* animal to the hunter – should it so wish.

Here it is also interesting that discussions about animal-masters now intersect with the language of conservation and 'illegal' hunting. I have heard people say that the animal-masters no longer understand the intentions of the hunters, specifically because they don't understand the idea of conservation. In short, the animal-masters don't live in the same world. And this is reflected in how people describe the new semi-mechanized style of secret hunting – which takes place from the back of 4x4s and uses spotlights. People say because hunting is more difficult than before, the intermittent visibility of roe deer is an even more powerful vector of the desire of the animal-master to give to the hunter. In other words, the infrequent occasions when roe deer do appear are seen as indicating even more strongly the desire of the animal-masters to share.

In opposition to this, the state is trying to impose a new ontology – one in which the animal cannot be part of the socio-cosmic economy of sharing. Under the rubric of scientific logic, conservation, and bureaucratic control, the state has become the de facto owner of all nature – and all deer. Seen from this perspective, the state is the new animal-master. This is a clear example of cosmopolitics, but it is also the basis for Orochen resistance and secrecy. Resistance not only to the law and the hunting-ban

but to the ontology of the state itself – to the scientific 'logic' of conservation and the depiction of deer as a mere 'animal species' in the Linnean classificatory system. Here to share, prepare, cook, and eat meat is thus not only a strategy of resistance, but a way of rendering into reality another ontology – the Orochen ontology of relational existence, of inter-cosmic flows between humans, spirits, and animals, and ideas of nonhuman personhood articulated through sharing.

But if to eat meat is an act of resistance, a "weapon of the weak," in James Scott's terms – it is also a cultural mnemonic, a memory of a past world that is now under threat. And an embodied and sensorial representation of practices and relationships that carry less and less meaning in the new China, except in the remote taiga forests on the fringes of the nation-state. Here to cook and eat meat is thus also a practice of remembering when Orochen *only* cooked and ate meat, and thus serves as a powerful act of cultural self-reflection and self-identification – of actively activating the past in the present.

But because this is an everyday and informal resistance, it is also tied to – and is – an act of enjoyment, pleasure and sensory value – for people also literally want to eat meat, *because they like to eat meat*. Here we must allow my Orochen friends a degree of agency beyond the political, or at least to recognize the envelopment of the political inside the quotidian. That is, resistance is entwined within the sensorial, olfactory, and textured pleasures of consumption itself. For all my Orochen friends, eating wild meat is essential and unquestionable – it is right, it is what people should do, and through it they express deep-seated ideas of health, strength, and vitality. This is something regularly discussed by Orochen at the dining table. People will speak about the deliciousness of hunted meat, the importance of eating the fattiest parts of the animal, and the inherent health benefits of avoiding too much processed and farmed meat such as pork. There is also a ritualized practice of how hunted meat is eaten and shared at the table: the host will always place a sharp knife beside the dish, usually belonging to the hunter himself. Then, people take turns using the knife to carve a piece of meat for themselves, then handing it over to the next person at the table. This again harks back to the time when hunters would only eat meat, with men, in particular, having their own individual knives, which carried both symbolic and material value. In addition, it is common for the host of the dinner to carve a piece of meat and offer it to his guest, combining both the ritual of hosting with the pleasures of consumption itself.

And yet, in every bite and chew, in every morsel of fat and sinew spat out on the plastic table, it is also the condensation of all the above – of sharing and resistance, of secrecy, illegality and the nonhuman, of animal and the spiritual. For my Orochen friends sitting on the banks of the Gan River, meat is both the material and the animistic; it is dead and alive, a gift to the spirits and a material of rebellion, nourishment for people's minds, bodies, and souls, and a memory of their fractured relations with the past and the present.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

ORCID

Richard Fraser http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2690-2136

References

Alvard, M. S. 2002. "Carcass Ownership and Meat Distribution by Big-Game Cooperative Hunters." In *Research in Economic Anthropology*, 99–131. Leeds: Emerald Group Publishing Limited.

Anderson, D. G. 2000. *Identity and Ecology in Arctic Siberia: The Number One Reindeer Brigade*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bellman, B. 1981. "The Paradox of Secrecy." *Human Studies* 4 (1): 1–24. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02127445.

Betzig, L. L., and P. W. Turke. 1986. "Food Sharing on Ifaluk." *Current Anthropology* 27 (4): 397–400. https://doi.org/10.1086/203457.

Bird-David, N. 1990. "The Giving Environment: Another Perspective on the Economic System of Gatherer-Hunters." *Current Anthropology* 31 (2): 189–196. https://doi.org/10.1086/203825.

Blaser, M. 2009. "The Threat of the Yrmo: The Political Ontology of a Sustainable Hunting Program." *American Anthropologist* 111 (1): 10–20. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1433.2009.01073.x.

Brandisauskas, D. 2007. "Symbolism and Ecological Uses of Fire Among Orochen-Evenki." *Sibirica* 6 (1): 95–119. https://doi.org/10.3167/sib.2007.060104.

Brightman, M., V. E. Grotti, and O. Ulturgasheva. eds. 2012. *Animism in Rainforest and Tundra: Personhood, Animals, Plants and Things in Contemporary Amazonia and Siberia*. Berghahn Books: London.

Dumont, A. 2017. "Declining Evenki 'Identities': Playing with Loyalty in Modern and Contemporary China." *History and Anthropology* 28 (4): 515–530. https://doi.org/10.1080/02757206.2017.1351363.

Elliott, M. 2001. "The Manchu Way." In *The Eight Banners and Ethnic Identity in Late Imperial China*, 1–30. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Feng, L., and L. Whaley. 2004. "The End of Nomadism: Oroqen History, Migration and Current Distribution." Proceedings of the First International Conference on Manchu-Tungus Studies (Bonn, August 28-September 1, 2000): Trends in Tungusic and Siberian Linguistics, Otto Harrassowitz Verlag, Bonn, Germany.

Fraser, R. 2015. "Tents, Taiga, and Tourist Parks." In *Reclaiming the Forest: The Ewenki Reindeer Herders of Aoluguya*, edited by Ashild Kolas and Yuan Xie, 130–155. London: Berghahn.

Freuchen, P. 1961. *Peter Fruechen's Book of the Eskimos*. World Pub Co.

Graeber, D. 2014. "On the Moral Grounds of Economic Relations: A Maussian Approach." *Journal of Classical Sociology* 14 (1): 65–77. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468795X13494719.

Gurven, M., W. Allen-Arave, K. Hill, and A. M. Hurtado. 2001. "Reservation Food Sharing among the Ache of Paraguay." *Human Nature* 12 (4): 273–297. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12110-001-1000-3.

Hann, C. M. 1998. ed., *Property Relations: Renewing the Anthropological Tradition*, 48–63. Cambridge University Press.

Laptander, R., and P. Vitebsky. 2021. "The Covid-19 App and the Fire Spirit: Receiving Messages in Britain and Siberia." *Anthropology Today* 37 (6): 17–20. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8322.12688.

Lee, R. B. 1979. *Hunter-Gatherers in Process: The Kalahari Research Project, 1963-76*. New York: Academic Press.

Lundberg, M., and Y. Zhou. 2009. "Hunting-Prohibition in the Hunters Autonomous Area: Legal Rights of Oroqen People and the Implementation of Regional National Autonomy Law." *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights* 16 (3): 349–397. https://doi.org/10.1163/138819009X12474964197638.

Mullaney, T. 2011. *Coming to Terms with the Nation. Ethnic Classification in Modern China*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Nadasdy, P. 2003. *Hunters and Bureaucrats: Power, Knowledge, and Aboriginal-State Relations in the Southwest Yukon*. Chicago: UBC Press.

Pu, Q. 1983. *The Oroqens: China's Nomadic Hunters*. Beijing: Foreign Languages Press.

Sahlins, M. D. 2013. "On the Sociology of Primitive Exchange." In *The Relevance of Models for Social Anthropology*, 139–236. Routledge.

Scott, J. C. 1985. *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. Yale: Yale University Press.

Shirokogoroff, S. M. 1929. *Social Organisation of the Northern Tungus*. Shanghai: The Commercial Press Limited.

Simmel, G. 1950. "The Secret and the Secret Society." In *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, edited by K. H. Wolff, 307–376. New York: Free Press of Glencoe.

Sneath, D. 2000. *Changing Inner Mongolia: Pastoral Mongolian Society and the Chinese State*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Thomas, N., and C. Humphrey, eds. 1996. *Shamanism, History, and the State*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Vitebsky, P. 2006. *The Reindeer People: Living with Animals and Spirits in Siberia*. London: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Willerslev, R. 2007. *Soul Hunters: Hunting, Animism, and Personhood among the Siberian Yukaghirs*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Ziker, J., and M. Schnegg. 2005. "Food Sharing at Meals: Kinship, Reciprocity, and Clustering in the Taimyr Autonomous Okrug, Northern Russia." *Human Nature* 16 (2): 178–210. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12110-005-1003-6.

Ziker, J. P., and K. S. Fulk. 2018. "Indigenous Siberian Food Sharing Networks: Social Innovation in a Transforming Economy." In *Collaborative Innovation Networks: Building Adaptive and Resilient Organizations*, edited by Francesca Grippa, João Leitão, Julia Gluesing, Ken Riopelle, and Peter Gloor, 117–127. Berlin: Springer Link.