



International Journal of Education and Teaching

Publisher's Home Page: <https://www.svedbergopen.com/>



Research Paper

Open Access

Analysis of Educational Value of Inner Mongolia Children Shaga Game

Yan Huang¹ , Kangjian Liu² , Zain Abbas³ , Safdar Abbas⁴  and Jian Zhang^{5*} 

¹Center for Studies of Education and Psychology of Ethnic Minorities in Southwest China, Southwest University, Chongqing, China. E-mail: yh789225@outlook.com

²Sichuan International Studies University, Chongqing, China. E-mail: m17861319015@163.com

³Center for Studies of Education and Psychology of Ethnic Minorities in Southwest China, Southwest University, Chongqing, China. E-mail: zainabbas7587@gmail.com

⁴Sichuan International Studies University, Chongqing, China. E-mail: safdarbloch1986@yahoo.com

⁵Center for Studies of Education and Psychology of Ethnic Minorities in Southwest China, Southwest University, Chongqing, China. E-mail: 50533828@qq.com

Article Info

Volume 3, Issue 2, December 2023

Received : 14 July 2023

Accepted : 23 November 2023

Published : 05 December 2023

doi: [10.51483/IJEDT.3.2.2023.72-80](https://doi.org/10.51483/IJEDT.3.2.2023.72-80)

Abstract

This research paper delves into the cultural significance of the Shaga game within the context of Mongolian nomadic civilization. Examining the profound ties between Shaga and the development of nomadic communities, the study elucidates the intricate interplay of natural and human ecological environments that have contributed to the evolution of this traditional game. Moving beyond its role as a pastime for adults, Shaga emerges as a vital educational tool for imparting the wisdom inherent in the nation's lifestyle to younger generations. Originating from daily life, the game facilitates children's emulation of adult activities and cultivates logical thinking processes. This active participation not only fosters an understanding of cultural heritage but also instills values associated with nomadic life, encompassing religion, beliefs, and societal norms. The educational dimension of the Shaga game serves as a linchpin, connecting culture with the younger generation and providing sustained support for the development of children in ethnic minority areas, underlining the importance of a pluralistic and open approach in cultural preservation and education.

Keywords: *Shaga game, Mongolian nomadic civilization, Cultural heritage, Educational significance, Ethnic minority education*

© 2023 Yan Huang et al. This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license, and indicate if changes were made.

1. Introduction

Throughout the extensive historical trajectory of the Mongolian ethnic group, a myriad of sporting and recreational activities has manifested, with 'Shaga' standing out as a noteworthy example characterized by the act of bone-throwing. Referred to as "huai gu" in Chinese, Shaga involves the utilization of a small bone situated at the apex of the tibia in the hind legs of animals, such as cows, sheep, and deer. This traditional game reflects the cultural and historical intricacies

* Corresponding author: Jian Zhang, Center for Studies of Education and Psychology of Ethnic Minorities in Southwest China, Southwest University, Chongqing, China. E-mail: 50533828@qq.com

2788-5011/© 2023. Yan Huang et al. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

embedded in Mongolian society, offering a distinctive perspective on the indigenous forms of leisure and physical activity that have evolved within this ethnic group over time (Jing, 2013). Shaga bones exhibit diverse characteristics, encompassing variations in width, narrowness, convexity, concavity, and six distinct shapes on each of the six faces. The Mongolian populace has attributed nomenclature to these bones based on the five livestock species integral to animal husbandry, specifically horses, cows, sheep, goats, and camels. Furthermore, these bone attributes serve as the foundational elements influencing the skills and patterns inherent in the game of Shaga. This classification based on livestock not only underscores the cultural significance of the game but also accentuates the intrinsic connection between nomadic life, animal husbandry practices, and the unique dimensions of Shaga gameplay (Dachagan, 2001). Shaga, derived from the skeletal remains of both prey and domesticated animals, possesses intrinsic natural authenticity. The utilization of Shaga in various Shaga games signifies a diverse array of culturally rich and historically significant traditional folk games. Governed by designated rules and sequences, the Shaga game transcends age, gender, and temporal limitations. Primarily involving young children, the game encourages active participation in flexible and varied activities that engage their hands, minds, and speech, facilitating a personal exploration of the joys of play. The Shaga game assumes a pivotal role in promoting the comprehensive physical and mental development of young children, enhancing attributes such as attention, memory, imagination, and creativity. Furthermore, it fosters unity, cooperation, and social interaction within the community. Widely and universally inherited over millennia, the Shaga game has evolved into an indispensable component of Mongolian culture, sports, and artistic activities, standing as a testament to its enduring cultural significance.

The evolution of the Mongolian Shaga game from traditional to modern delineates a transformative trajectory, marked by a gradual differentiation and subsequent diminution within the broader population. The process is accentuated by the encroachment of urbanization, causing these ancestral games to recede from the purview of the adult world. Concurrently, however, the preservation of these ancient games is evident in the recreational pursuits of children residing in pastoral or rural areas of China. This dichotomy reflects the dynamic interplay between cultural heritage and the forces of contemporary societal changes, underscoring the resilience of traditional games in specific geographic and socio-cultural contexts (Bihebatu, 2009). Ancient games have undergone a discerning process of adaptation through educational channels, imbuing them with new connotations aligned with modern educational paradigms, including “moral education,” “intellectual education,” “physical education,” “aesthetic education,” and “labor education.” These games, subject to evaluation and varying degrees of selection within prevailing educational objectives and regulations, have found integration into institutional frameworks where they are recognized as valuable educational tools akin to formal learning and research. The aspiration is to establish a successful nexus between ancient traditional culture and contemporary education, infusing the age-old Shaga game with fresh educational meanings. Such an endeavor seeks to capture the sustained attention of children and, importantly, to manifest the actual educational value of the Shaga game, transcending from children’s consciousness to their practical, real-life experiences.

2. Tracing the Historical Roots of Shaga

The Xiongnu ethnic group, historically recognized as the initial unified nomadic community exerting control over the northern grasslands in ancient Chinese history, sustained a robust pastoral economy with a predominant reliance on meat as their primary dietary staple. Nonetheless, archaeological investigations have brought to light a notable finding, specifically the unearthing of sheep astragalus bones. In 1983, a discovery was made at the Heng County Kiln Site in Liangcheng County, Ulanqab City, Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, China, where 19 ancient tombs were excavated. Within Tomb M12, a sheep astragalus bone was identified, strategically positioned on the abdomen of the deceased. Contrary to the placement of other animal bones at the peripheries of the tomb, the deliberate positioning of the astragalus bone in the abdominal region signifies its distinctive importance, both symbolically and culturally, to both the deceased and the broader living community (Bogali, 2011).

The Xianbei, an offshoot of the Donghu ethnic group, emerged as nomadic pastoralists in the Greater Khingan Range subsequent to the Donghu. Building upon the legacies of the Donghu and Xiongnu, the Xianbei played a pivotal role in advancing the development of pastoralism across the grasslands of northern China. Their adept herding practices, encompassing horses, cattle, sheep, goats, and camels, surpassed those of their predecessors, attesting to the flourishing nature of their livestock. The sustenance and lifestyle of the Xianbei were intricately tied to production, with a distinctive nomadic ethos centered around meat consumption. This lifestyle is archaeologically substantiated by the prevalence of animal bones in Xianbei archaeological findings, notably instances of bovid scapulae, such as the “jugal bone sha ga,” employed as burial objects.

The descendants of the Xianbei, namely the Khitan people, continued this nomadic tradition and rose to prominence on the grasslands after the Xianbei. Noteworthy archaeological evidence supporting this transition is found in various sites. For instance, in the Shuangjinggou Liao Dynasty cremation burial site in Balinzuoqi, Zhaoming Banner, Inner Mongolia, six sheep metacarpal bones were discovered in the MA4 cremation jar in 1963, while eight sheep metacarpal bones were found in the MB2 cremation jar. In 1983, within a Liao Dynasty tomb in Balinyouqi, Chifeng City, one bovine metacarpal bone, seven sheep metacarpal bones, and one copper-cast metacarpal bone were unearthed, providing substantive archaeological documentation of the Khitan people's reliance on sheep as a primary source of sustenance (Wu, 1991). As an illustrative case, archival records from 1963 indicate findings from the Shuangjinggou Liao Dynasty cremation burial site situated in Balinzuoqi, Zhaoming Banner, Inner Mongolia. Within the MA4 cremation jar, six sheep metacarpal bones were uncovered, while the MB2 cremation jar yielded eight sheep metacarpal bones. Subsequently, in 1983, excavations at a Liao Dynasty tomb in Balinyouqi, Chifeng City revealed a collection of significant specimens. Among these discoveries were one bovine metacarpal bone, seven sheep metacarpal bones, and an additional metacarpal bone cast in copper. These archaeological findings serve as tangible evidence of the material culture associated with the Liao Dynasty, providing insights into the prevailing burial practices and emphasizing the importance of specific animal remains, particularly those of sheep and bovine origin, in the funerary context (Zhao, 1963).

Approximately during the Han Dynasty or possibly earlier, the Mongolian ethnic group traced its origins to the densely forested regions in the northern part of the Greater Khingan Mountains. Over successive periods spanning the Sui, Tang, Liao, Jin, and Yuan dynasties, the socioeconomic landscape of the Mongolian steppe underwent notable advancements, particularly marked by the rapid expansion of the pastoral economy. The Mongolian people demonstrated adept skills and extensive experience in the husbandry of the five primary livestock species: horses, cattle, sheep, goats, and camels. The flourishing socioeconomic conditions and stable social milieu during the Yuan Dynasty fostered a conducive environment for the proliferation of Mongolian traditional games and recreational activities, building upon the foundational practices established by preceding generations. Among these, the most noteworthy discoveries emanate from the extensive archaeological findings related to "Sha Ga" uncovered at the ancient city of Jingshui Road in Siziwang Banner, Ulanqab City. Excavations within a dilapidated residential site of the ancient city unveiled a plethora of "sheep Shaga," alongside a substantial assortment of "horses Shaga," "cattle Shaga," "camel Shaga," "wolf Shaga," "deer Shaga," as well as intricately crafted versions in copper, tin, and "silver-cast Shaga." These findings present a compelling archaeological revelation, contributing significantly to our understanding of the diverse range and materials involved in the practice of Shaga within the historical context of Mongolian culture.

The enduring persistence of Shaga culture can be ascribed to human veneration for and transformation of natural entities. Historically, individuals sought explanations for the objective world, the forces of nature, and natural phenomena through scientific concepts, fostering a sense of reverence and awe. This reverence led to the invocation of imaginary entities transcending the confines of reality, with this mystical power evolving into a belief system that wielded significant influence over both material and spiritual dimensions of human existence. Shaga, derived from the metacarpal bone of animals and known as 'Shaga' in Mongolian, holds cultural significance deeply rooted in ancient China, particularly among the nomadic peoples of the northern grasslands. Relying predominantly on animal resources such as cattle, sheep, camels, wolves, and leopards for sustenance, these nomadic tribes adopted a hunting and pastoral lifestyle as their fundamental means of survival and reproduction. Their dependency on and profound gratitude for these animals resulted in an incorporation of the surrounding environment into their way of life and production, giving rise to a spiritual and cultural belief system.

Moreover, the Shaga culture, stemming from the nomadic lifestyle, encapsulates a comprehensive array of historical, economic, and cultural facets, including customs, beliefs, funeral practices, divination, taboos, and calendars. These cultural components carry intricate meanings and profound significance, reflecting the intricate interplay between human societies, the natural environment, and spiritual belief systems that have persisted across time within the context of Shaga culture.

The belief in Shaga has endured since antiquity and persists in contemporary Mongolian culture, exemplified by the ritual of capturing Shaga during wedding ceremonies, wherein the victor is believed to receive auspicious signs. In these ceremonies, a symbolic practice involves the bride holding a sandalwood bone on the east side of the bridal chamber, while the groom holds another on the west side. Together, they kneel and bow three times toward the direction of the sunrise, symbolizing reverence for the sun and underscoring the cultural significance of sandalwood bones in Mongolian traditions. Furthermore, in certain regions, a custom entail the groom breaking a sheep bone during the wedding,

wrapping it in a ceremonial scarf, and placing it in the boots or under the pillows of the newlyweds for three days. Some couples retain the sandalwood bone under their pillows for an additional three days before permanently preserving it in their homes. As a symbol of collective identity, sandalwood bones hold profound significance for the Mongolian people, serving as both a cultural artifact and a tool widely employed in children's education, marriage rituals, healing practices, funerals, divination, and various facets of daily life.

Notably, sandalwood bone divination assumes critical importance in decision-making and strategic planning in various activities. Given their nomadic lifestyle, the Mongolian people rely on sandalwood bones for locating lost cattle and sheep, assessing the auspiciousness of journeys, determining the success of hunting ventures, evaluating annual harvests, and other crucial aspects of their existence. Numerous Mongolian scriptures and records extensively document the use of sandalwood bones in these diverse contexts, underscoring the integral role they play in the cultural, spiritual, and practical dimensions of Mongolian life (Subude, 2014).

3. The Evolution of Shaga Game: Accompanying the Growth of Mongolian Children

The Mongols, a nomadic ethnic group from the northern regions, demonstrated a receptive and inclusive attitude towards the diverse cultures of pre-Mongol rise ethnic groups, encompassing the Xiongnu, Donghu, Wuhuan, Xianbei, Khitan, and other foreign cultures, during their migratory and military campaigns. This inclusive approach reflected a broad-minded assimilation of cultural elements from various ethnic backgrounds.

Within the cultural practices of the Mongolian community, Shaga games hold particular significance during New Year's Eve and New Year celebrations. Functioning as both a recreational and educational activity, these games serve to impart knowledge about the anatomical features of animals to children. Mongolian expertise in livestock husbandry, encompassing cattle, sheep, camels, horses, and dogs, is central to the daily lives of Mongolian families. Engaging in activities such as herding, milking, and caring for hunting and herding dogs, children interact closely with diverse animals, fostering an understanding of various species based on attributes such as color, teeth, and bones. The educational aspect extends to the naming of livestock, utilizing distinct color concepts, exemplified by designations such as 'bald-tailed black-ridged blue horse,' 'waist-patterned horse,' 'white-mouth yellow horse,' among others. Beyond color distinctions, Mongolian pedagogy involves teaching children to recognize young horses, bulls, male camels, and rams, facilitating the differentiation of sexes and ages within the livestock population. This holistic approach to animal husbandry and education underscores the interconnectedness of cultural practices, nomadic lifestyle, and the transmission of knowledge within Mongolian society.

Traditionally, within the cultural practices of the Xiongnu people, adults would involve children in labor-related activities, providing them opportunities to observe or partake in tasks commensurate with their age. These tasks included responsibilities such as herding young cattle and lambs, with children engaging in activities within their physical capabilities. In such contexts, children often played alongside young animals, attempting activities like riding calves and, occasionally, experiencing falls. This hands-on experience not only contributed to the development of courage and resilience but also laid the groundwork for future military endeavors. Gender norms did not restrict the participation of boys in tasks such as assisting in milking cows or sheep, emphasizing the non-gender-specific nature of certain labor activities. The milking process, particularly extracting mare and sheep milk, demanded a high level of physical coordination from children, involving techniques, force application, limb coordination, and cooperative efforts. The Shaga game incorporates a 'milking sheep' gameplay feature, providing a platform for players to enhance their skills in a simulated setting.

Mongolian children are exposed to essential skills in cattle and sheep handling, with a specific emphasis on slaughtering techniques, skinning, plucking sheep, and dismantling cattle. Notably, the manual disassembly of meat by Mongolians adheres to the joints of cattle and sheep, rather than bone crushing, aligning with the requirements of the Shaga gameplay under objective conditions.

From the historical legacy of the Xiongnu people, a predominant mode of production has been the practice of animal husbandry. Both adults and children actively engage with hundreds and thousands of livestock and animals on a daily basis. This immersive environment serves as an educational platform for children, enabling them to identify various plants and domesticated animals. Additionally, children partake in practical activities such as leatherworking and wool production, fostering a comprehensive understanding of the traditional practices integral to the nomadic lifestyle of the Xiongnu people (Sima, 1959).

The Xiongnu people established their state through military power, and the social atmosphere of respecting the strong and venerating heroes created an inseparable connection between production, life, and military affairs. The harsh natural environment also shaped the people's indomitable character, "children could ride sheep, draw bows, and shoot birds and rodents. As they got older, they developed a habit of hunting foxes and rabbits." In other words, all men needed to undergo training in horse riding and hunting. Girls on the grassland also had to learn horse riding and basic hunting skills for survival. When training knights, the Xiongnu people started riding sheep and young cattle before riding fast and spirited horses. Hunting began with capturing birds and rodents and then hunting foxes, rabbits, and fierce beasts. The close interaction between children and domestic and wild animals provided excellent conditions for the emergence of the Sha Ga game.

Later, during the Xianbei period, the Xianbei people, like the Xiongnu, vigorously developed animal husbandry with even greater cattle, horses, and sheep. Similarly, they used sha ga as adornments, handicrafts, and burial objects. During the Northern Dynasties period, the Xianbei people employed sha ga for military simulation and performance, utilizing the variations in categories, colors, and shapes of sha ga to represent different military meanings. As the Xianbei people lacked a writing system, arranging sha ga for strategic layouts became a natural practice. This should be the embryonic form of early Shaga games. It can be assumed that children who enjoy and are skilled at imitation may create games with a military theme after observing adults using Shaga for simulated military exercises. The wisdom of the people gradually led to the rise and diversification of Shaga games. The heroic character of the Turkic people is also ingrained in their national character, as they believe in the saying 'dying with weapons in hand, a shameless disease to the end' (Li, 1974).

In the cultural upbringing of the ethnic group, adults impart a distinct ethos to boys, nurturing their untamed nature and advocating for fearlessness and daring courage. The prevailing belief is that boys should embody a spirit akin to wolves, characterized by bravery rather than the meekness associated with sheep. To instill these values, boys are actively encouraged to participate in wrestling and physical contests involving wild horses, camels, buffalos, and their peers. The incorporation of these educational principles into Shaga games has contributed significantly to their widespread popularity.

Over time, these principles have evolved into entrenched cultural values within the ethnic group, where elements derived from seemingly simple games find integration into specific customs and rituals. Such rituals play a pivotal role in shaping self-awareness and fortifying ethnic identity, particularly during the formative years of childhood. The emotional connection between these aspects is evident as children become both custodians of customs and transmitters of culture.

With economic development, significant transformations have occurred in people's lifestyles and modes of production. The rapid pace of urbanization and the adoption of modern ways of life have gradually encroached upon traditional practices, limiting the space available for the preservation of traditional culture. In the contemporary context, the inheritance of Shaga culture within the realm of school education has undergone a significant shift, viewing it as a subject of knowledge and a traditional game. Notably, cultural elements linked to religion and belief have been entirely eliminated from the educational narrative. Within modern family life, there is a conspicuous absence of these traditional cultural practices. Consequently, Shaga games have experienced a gradual detachment from religious and symbolic representations, evolving into secularized and personalized activities. This secular transformation has positioned Shaga games as individualized and child-centric endeavors, marking a departure from their earlier religious and communal dimensions.

4. Research Methods

The research employed a comprehensive methodology that integrated ethnographic fieldwork with anthropological interpretation to investigate the game of Shaga. This approach entailed extensive ethnographic fieldwork in diverse cultural settings to observe and document Shaga gameplay, coupled with an anthropological lens applied to analyze the collected data and findings. The fieldwork methodology encompassed participant observation and interviews with players to obtain firsthand data regarding the educational value of Shaga, variations in gameplay, and the socio-cultural context surrounding its practice. Additionally, archival research and a thorough literature review were conducted to trace the historical origins and evolutionary trajectory of Shaga. This historical inquiry, in conjunction with anthropological data, underwent analysis within a broader anthropological framework. The objective was to explore the multifaceted role of Shaga games in providing enlightening education, their significance in child development, and their contribution to the evolution of ethnic culture. By seamlessly integrating these methodological approaches, this research endeavors to

comprehensively understand Shaga games, including their educational value, historical provenance, and broader influences on child development. The amalgamation of these approaches in our research is designed to yield a holistic understanding of the Shaga game, encompassing its historical roots, educational contributions, and broader societal impact.

5. Thinking Analysis of Shaga Games

The decisive factor for the evolution of the game of Shaga is people's concern for morality, health and public interest. Shaga games can also meet the growth needs of children's moral, intellectual, physical and aesthetic education (Zhao, 2013). Under the guidance of modern education concepts, we can not only retain the excellent ideas of Shaga games, especially the unique thinking form of Shaga culture, but also use games to promote the development of children's multiple intelligences

5.1. Symbolic Thinking in Shaga

In terms of temporality, borrowing something or using something as an implication suggests the anticipation or future presence of someone or something, expressing affection and conveying good wishes. The Mongols used "Shaga" to symbolize different meanings, often symbolizing hopeful aspirations.

5.1.1. Symbol of Indissoluble Bond

The Mongolian people have permanently attached great importance to fate \ddot{y} which can be seen in the story of the blood brotherhood between Genghis Khan and Jamukha in 'The Secret History of the Mongols,' which indicates that the tradition of exchanging 'Shaga' as a symbol of brotherhood and eternal friendship was already widespread in children's games by the late 12th century (Bayar, 1980). Some works also describe the unique use of 'Shaga' in wedding ceremonies, symbolizing the beginning of a happy life for the newlyweds. Furthermore, certain books mention unique rituals held when a child is born, wishing for healthy and prosperous growth and eternal companionship with their parents. These distinctive practices symbolize and wish for the eternal continuity of friendship, marital bonds, and the unbreakable bond between mother and child."

5.1.2. Digital Symbol

In the symbolic culture of the Mongolian ethnic group, numbers hold significant importance. In their daily lives, the Mongolian people have different preferences and taboos associated with different numbers. As a result, in the game of Shaga, there are various numerical games, such as 'San Tou' (throwing three Shaga) and 'Si Tou' (throwing four Shaga). One version of the game involves throwing three Shaga, while another involves throwing four Shaga. Subsequently, the terms 'San Tou' and 'Si Tou' represent these two versions.

'San Tou' refers to the practice of Mongolian people taking turns throwing three Shaga, and if three lands upright, it is considered an auspicious occurrence. The odd number 'three' symbolizes abundance, enormity, completeness, and perfection, while the horse represents auspiciousness and upward movement. Thus, the combination of 'three' and 'horse' represents a unique significance, reflecting the wish for perfect and successful outcomes.

Sitou: Four Shaga dice are thrown to form four different shapes, namely horse, ox, sheep, and camel. Achieving this result is quite challenging. Thus, it is considered a problematic toss. If the four shapes of Shaga dice are obtained on the first throw, it is considered a fortunate event. Therefore, the symbolic significance of "four" is recorded in many historical documents, such as the Four Braves, Four Dogs, and Four Steeds of Genghis Khan, representing auspiciousness, smoothness, and completeness. In children's games, there is also a typical game called "Four Shaga Toss." The gameplay involves two players taking turns throwing four Shaga dice. Throwing two horses, 2 camels, 2 sheep, or 2 cows of any kind earns 1 point. Throwing three horses, three camels, three sheep, or three cows earns 10 points. Throwing a horse, camel, sheep, and cow together earns 10 points. Throwing four horses, four camels, four sheep, or four cows of any kind earns 100 points. The first player to reach 100 points wins. The primary purposes of the Four Shaga Toss game are to practice manual dexterity in hand movements and to develop children's ability to compare sizes and perform mental addition within 100."

5.2. Five-Body Thinking in Shagga Game

The Mongolian ethnic group uses the names of five livestock to designate different patterns of dunes in the Shaga game: (1) Named after sheep. Among them, the front side represents a female sheep, and the back represents a male

sheep. Many Mongolian regions still retain the term “sheep” because sheep are considered essential animals. Furthermore, the gentle nature of sheep is used to describe the human character. Therefore, special attention is paid to maintaining silence in daily life, such as when shearing sheep wool. Sheep are intelligent, stable in temperament, and resistant to cold and hardship. Sheep meat is high in calories and can be used to drive away cold. Sheep meat is also essential in major ceremonies such as weddings, confirming its value in the eyes of herders.

Named after cattle or goats. Cattle have a gentle and easily trainable nature and usually live-in herds. Goats are agile, possess excellent sensory perception, and have strong group living abilities. The Mongolian people appreciate the loyal and gentle nature of cattle and goats and the abundant supply of milk from these animals. Goat meat has a cooling effect and is usually eaten during autumn. Meanwhile, beef has a neutral effect, is available in large quantities, and is commonly consumed as a winter food.

Named after horses. In the hearts of the Mongolian people, horses are spirited animals with keen eyes, exceptional speed, and intelligence. The Mongolian ethnic group has a deep affinity with horses, starting from when their ancestors rode horses into battles and created heroic deeds.

Named after camels. The front side represents the female, and the reverse represents the male. Camels possess characteristics such as cold resistance, thirst resistance, hunger resistance, and hardiness. The Mongolian people commonly used camels for transportation during their nomadic migrations. Camel meat is considered excellent and can be consumed. Camel milk aids digestion and helps in the treatment of gastric ailments. Mongolians believe that children who grow up drinking camel milk are generally healthier and less susceptible to rickets.

Therefore, children’s games often have a game called “Seeking the Five Livestock.” This is a relatively simple basic game in the Shaga playing tradition, mainly played by younger children. There is no limit to the number of participants in this game. It is advisable to prepare a specific number of Shaga playing pieces based on the number of players, ranging from a dozen to several hundred. The participating children gather around the Shaga playing mat. After dividing the total number of Shaga playing pieces equally, each child takes out four pieces from their allocated pile in each round. The children take turns throwing four Shaga in a clockwise or counterclockwise direction. Only the Shaga showing a “horse” or “camel” face can be won back by the child who threw it. The game continues until one child wins back all the other children’s Shaga, and that child becomes the winner.

The game of ‘Seeking the Five Livestock’ can help children recognize basic domestic animals, practice simple mathematical concepts such as comparing sizes and calculating numbers within a hundred, and it is of great significance to children’s cognitive and social development. In raising the five livestock, the Mongolian people not only obtain benefits from them but also develop a deep emotional connection. For example, they use the five livestock to name various shapes of objects in their environment and distinguish between male and female using the front and back sides, which represents their special affection towards the five livestock and a form of magical holistic thinking.”

5.3. Image Thinking in Shaga Games

Games such as horse racing, wrestling, archery, milking competition, and long-distance travel are vivid metaphors for traditional Mongolian games, employing associative techniques to depict the forms of traditional Mongolian games vividly. These games draw inspiration from actual cultural customs that exist in daily life. Although these cultural practices have endured the test of time, they persist tenaciously in the lives of the Mongolian people, being passed down through generations and continuing to evolve.”

For example, wrestling is one of the “Three Skills of Mongolian Men,” and those skilled in wrestling are honored with the title of “Boke” Mongolian boys aspire to become Boke from a young age. “Wrestling game” is a competition in which participants combine the numbers 16, 32, 64, and other multiples to form elimination matches between two individuals or even-numbered groups. In each round, participants throw one Shaga, and the one who exhibits the “horse” position is declared the winner. “Wrestling game” satisfies children’s curiosity about the adult world and enhances hand muscle strength and flexibility. Through Shaga game, children imitate adult wrestling games, which helps them better understand the rules of wrestling competitions and develop an interest in wrestling.

6. The Educational Value of Shaga Games

6.1. Enhance Physical Fitness and Well-Being by Engaging in Physical Exercise

The Mongolian people, initially a nomadic ethnic group known for their horsemanship, greatly emphasized physical exercise. Regardless of gender, boys and girls are expected to have muscular physiques. ‘Ice Shaga’ is a game played on

the frozen surface of a river, with a field resembling an ice hockey rink, and the goals are constructed using cow and sheep Shaga. The number of participants in the two teams can range from 4 to 24 individuals. During the game, participants throw the Shaga from outside the field, aiming to slide them toward the target and knock it down. This game is usually played by adults and children together, where adults narrate the rules of the game and stories of hunting from their ancestors to the children. It is an opportunity to inspire courage, advocate harmonious coexistence with nature, encourage teamwork, and it is a valuable parent-child activity. Children gain physical exercise through shooting, running, and sliding, contributing to their physical well-being and helping them build resistance against illnesses.”

6.2. Promoting Cognitive Development in Children and Fostering the Acquisition of Historical and Cultural Knowledge

The game of Shaga offers a variety of game forms, with its greatest inspiration derived from the traditional nomadic lifestyle. The vast grasslands have nurtured the Mongolian people, who engage in activities such as herding livestock, hunting, and entertainment on the grasslands. Through the ‘Seeking the Five Livestock game,’ children repeatedly memorize the names of horses, cows, camels, sheep, and goats, opening the gateway to natural knowledge and gradually understanding the characteristics of plants, animals, and birds in the grasslands. In the game of ‘Gathering Livestock,’ they learn basic living skills related to herding. Similarly, in the game of ‘Livestock Conversion,’ they acquire mathematical knowledge, practice simple addition and subtraction, and foster the development of children’s abstract logical thinking. The ‘Throwing Four Shaga’ game enhances children’s hand-eye coordination and mental calculation abilities. Simultaneously, Shaga games are not merely for entertainment; they incorporate traditional stories, folk songs, handicrafts, and other cultural elements, integrating the wisdom of the Mongolian people into the games. Through these games, children gain insights into their grassland lives, acquire their cultural heritage’s excellent traditions and customs, and develop an understanding of the relationship between humans and nature.”

6.3. Fostering Children’s Sociality and Cultivating Exemplary Emotional and Moral Virtues

The Mongolian ethnic group is characterized by their bold and cheerful nature, bravery and enthusiasm, strong cohesion, and a sense of honor. It is important to develop these cultural characteristics at a young age. In addition to imparting knowledge and guidance to children, adults also encourage children to learn and reflect through Shaga games. Shaga games serve as a platform for group activities, where children of different ages learn how to interact with others in a joyful atmosphere. They experiment with different social roles such as ‘leader,’ ‘supporter,’ ‘partner,’ and ‘rule supervisor,’ thereby developing an awareness of rules. For instance, Mongolians traditionally conduct hunting activities in winter and rarely engage in hunting during spring, leaving other times as resting periods for wild animals to reproduce and maintain ecological balance. This custom of ‘not hunting during the breeding season’ has been passed down through generations among the Mongolian people (Wang, 1996). In the ‘Circling Fierce Horses game,’ children learn about competition and strategic tactics while respecting nature and harmonious coexistence.

The ‘Ice Shaga’ game teaches children the spirit of cooperation within a collective. The game of ‘Wrestling’ instills in children the natural law of survival of the fittest, fostering their courageous and heroic character. Throughout the game, everyone must abide by the rules and adhere to the constraints of the game.”

6.4. Emotional Catharsis Facilitates the Healthy Psychological Development of Children

Shaga game occupies an important position during leisure time and festive celebrations among the Mongolian people, as it plays a role in relieving fatigue from labor, fostering neighborly unity, and venting negative emotions. Although the Mongolian people are generous, they can also be impulsive. When conflicts or disagreements arise among friends and relatives, instead of using verbal expressions of apology, they often choose to play a game of ‘Ice Shaga’ or sing a folk song or chant associated with Shaga game. Children thrive in this welcoming and open atmosphere, where any conflicts or tensions are peacefully resolved, and negative emotions can be expressed in a healthy way, promoting their overall psychological wellness.

7. Conclusion

This game, rooted in the fabric of daily life, serves as a catalyst for children to emulate the activities and logical reasoning of adults, facilitating a gradual assimilation of their own ethnic religion, lifestyle, beliefs, and culture. It assumes a pivotal role in establishing a connection between cultural heritage and children’s education, furnishing sustainable support for the holistic development of children in contemporary ethnic regions marked by diverse and open-minded perspectives.

The Shaga game, viewed as a cultural treasure for Mongolian children, transcends its localized significance to emerge as an educational asset with broader implications for the entire country and, potentially, the global community. The trajectory of inheriting and advancing the Shaga game unfolds as an extensive journey. As custodians of this heritage, the imperative is not solely to “carry on the ancient” but also to “embrace the present.” This necessitates innovation and adaptation of the Shaga game to align with the characteristics of the new era, enabling this time-honored game to radiate a more captivating brilliance and, concurrently, contribute meaningfully to the comprehensive development of preschool children.

References

- Bayar (1980). *The Secret History of Mongolia*. Inner Mongolia People's Publishing House, 3, 30-34.
- Bihebatu (2009). *Mongolian Game Culture*. Inner Mongolia People's Publishing House, 1, 45-60.
- Bogali (2011). *Traditional Sha Ga Game of Mongolian People*. Inner Mongolia University.
- Dachagan (2001). *Mongolian Traditional Game - Shaga*. Inner Mongolia People's Publishing House, 4, 53-57.
- Jing, H. (2013). Analysis of the Characteristics of Shaga Entertainment Style of Sunite Mongolian People in Qing Dynasty. *Lantai World*, 395(09), 137-138.
- Li, Y. (1974). *Beishi-Turkic History*. Zhonghua Book Company, 167-170.
- Sima, Q. (1959). *Biography of the Xiongnu in Historical Records*. Zhonghua Book Company, 89-96.
- Subude (2014). *The Study of the Structure of the Mongolian Anklebone Game*. Inner Mongolia Normal University.
- Wang, F. (1996). The Protection of Wild Animals in the Laws of the Yuan Dynasty. *Social Sciences of Inner Mongolia*, (3), 46-51.
- Wu, Y. (1991). A Brief Discussion on the Basic Clothing, Food, Housing and Transportation of the Khitan People in the Liao Dynasty. *Northern Cultural Relics*, 3, 66-71. <https://doi.org/10.16422/j.cnki.1001-0483.1991.03.014>
- Zhao, X. (1963). Liao Cremation Tomb in Shuangjinggou, Baarin Left Banner, Zhaomeng, Inner Mongolia. *Archeology*, (10), 3.
- Zhao, Y. (2013). The application of Shaga games in Mongolian Kindergartens. *Modern Education Science*, 12, 188-190.

Cite this article as: Yan Huang, Kangjian Liu, Zain Abbas, Safdar Abbas and Jian Zhang (2023). Analysis of Educational Value of Inner Mongolia Children Shaga Game. *International Journal of Education and Teaching*, 3(2), 72-80. doi: 10.51483/IJEDT.3.2.2023.72-80.