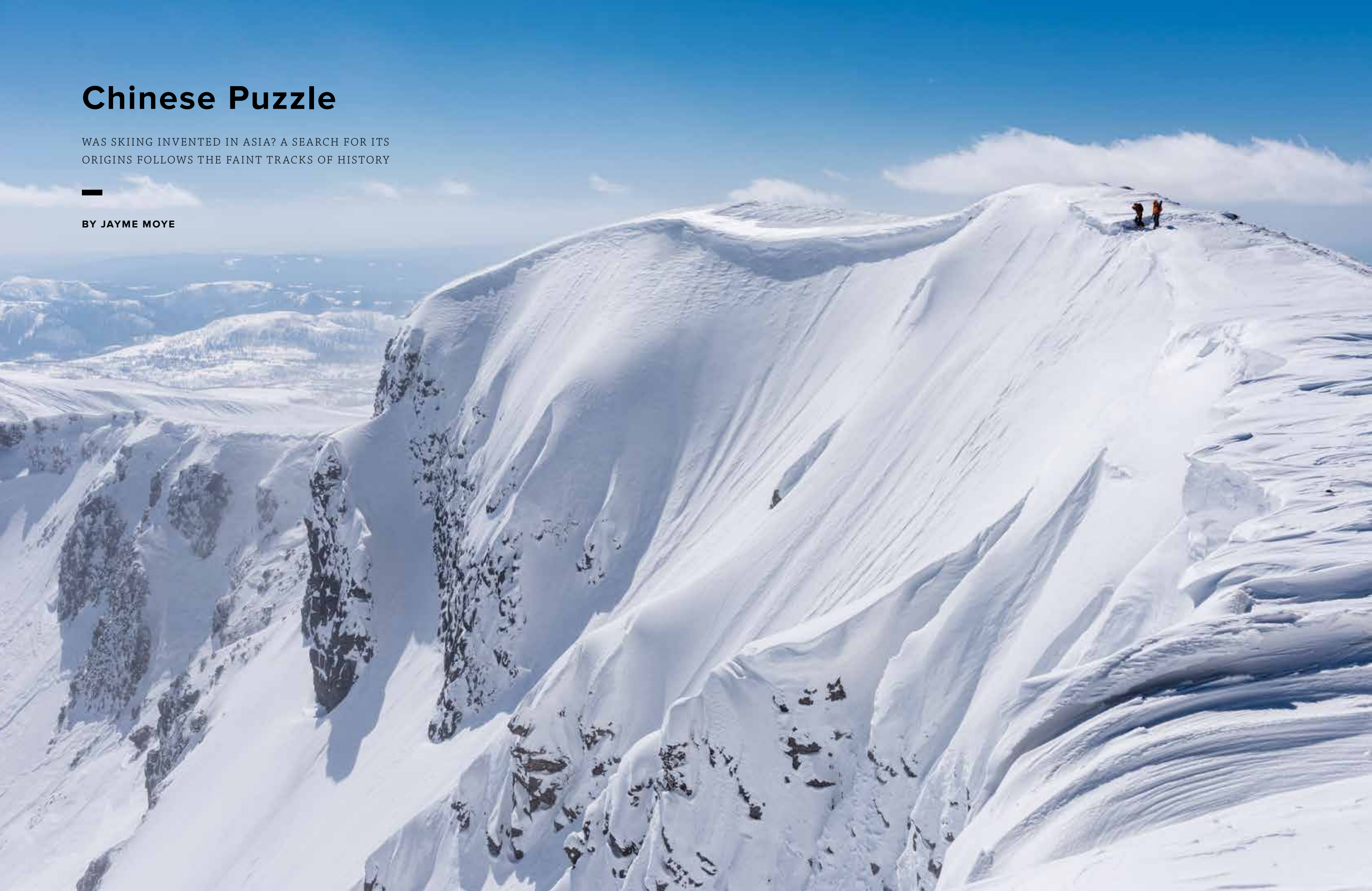


# Chinese Puzzle

WAS SKIING INVENTED IN ASIA? A SEARCH FOR ITS ORIGINS FOLLOWS THE FAINT TRACKS OF HISTORY



BY JAYME MOYE



**A**fter hours of ascending a ridgeline, my ski-touring companions and I gained the singular view we'd been seeking—the convergence of four countries. Looking east, the village of Khom in China, where we'd started, appeared in miniature, set against the birch-forested foothills of the Altai Mountains. Behind it loomed snow-shrouded ten-thousand-foot peaks marking the Mongolian border. To the west, row after row of progressively taller mountains marched away into Kazakhstan. Glancing north, through a frothy sea of toothy white mountaintops and soft blue sky, I peered into Russia. In the world of ski culture, we were standing on hallowed ground—a little-known region that's recently emerged as the possible birthplace of skiing.

I first learned of the Altai Mountains through the work of American ski instructor and designer Nils Larsen, who produced the 2008 documentary *Skiing in the Shadow of Genghis Khan*. The film portrays a thriving ski culture indigenous to this starkly beautiful corner of the world, where people still travel and hunt using wooden skis with thick horsehides stretched across the bottom from tip to tail, just as they have for thousands of years. My traveling companions and I, all avid backcountry skiers from Canada, the United States, and New Zealand, had each in our own way become charmed with the idea of being among the first westerners to visit this cradle of skiing. I came seeking connection to another side to skiing, more utilitarian and, perhaps, more authentic than the neon-hued sport I know and love. For me, it was a pilgrimage to skiing's living roots, the deepest of which may be lodged not in Scandinavia as I'd always assumed, but in the mountains of Central Asia.

We based ourselves in Khom, a hamlet deep in northwest China's Altay Prefecture. The people there are ethnic Kazakhs, heirs to Central Asia's iconic horse culture, and Tuvans, hailing from semi-nomadic herding clans that crossed into China from Russia and Mongolia. A single paved road threads a mountain pass to connect Khom to the rest of China. In the winter, the area gets so much snow that the easiest way to get around is by *chana*, a horse-drawn wooden sled, or *khok*, horsehair skis. Until a few years ago, traditional methods of transport were the only way—there weren't motorized vehicles, let alone snowplows to clear the roads. There wasn't even electricity when Larsen first visited in 2005.

Thirteen years later, we found two Khoms. One, set along a river, consisted mostly of single-story wooden homes heated by coal-burning stoves, hemmed in by post-and-beam fences aiming to contain a horse or two. The houses, I'd later learn, were built in the ancient Tuvan tradition, with stacked log walls and steep wooden roofs.

The other Khom was brand new: a cluster of structures built in a smooth-hewn, modern facsimile of the same Tuvan style, with a rainbow-colored hot air balloon leashed about fifty feet above the valley floor. I remarked on the incongruity, and our translator David Chen, a twenty-something Chinese skier now living in New Zealand, leaned forward and exchanged a flurry of Mandarin with the driver. The new town, he reported, is “for tourism.”

We stayed in the old village, at a guesthouse known simply as Mr. Wang's. There, in the establishment's riverside café, I encountered a young family from Sichuan, in southern China. The father was keen to talk, using an app. He typed Mandarin into his phone and it spoke English out to me. I spoke English back into the phone and it translated my speech into Mandarin on his screen. He'd brought his kids to Khom—he used the town's Han Chinese name, Hemu—to see snow for the first time. They were about to take a chana ride up the hillside overlooking the river. I said I was here to ski, and his eyes widened. He said something excitedly to his kids, then turned back to me with a huge smile. He held up his phone and motioned me closer, indicating I should join him in a selfie. I grinned and stuck my head in the frame as he snapped a photo.

Our quest began with a visit to a traditional horsehair ski maker. From Mr. Wang's, we donned our modern ski-touring rigs and skinned across the frozen Khom River, then followed a hardpacked snow trail—a chana path—into a lanky forest. To my left, through pine and aspen trees, I caught glimpses of the bright white foothills and ice-blue sky. To my right, vignettes of the frozen riverbed. Underfoot, I dodged an occasional pile of horse dung.

The ski maker's homestead consisted of several log dwellings and barns in a clearing at the base of a hill. Two cows regarded our entry with a slow swing of their heads. It appeared no one else was home. Chen went to investigate and returned with a man in his forties, the ski maker's son. The man explained, through Chen, that his father's health was failing. He'd been in the hospital for some time, and the tone of the conversation left some doubt as to whether he'd ever return. The son said he never learned how to make skis, but he offered to show us around.

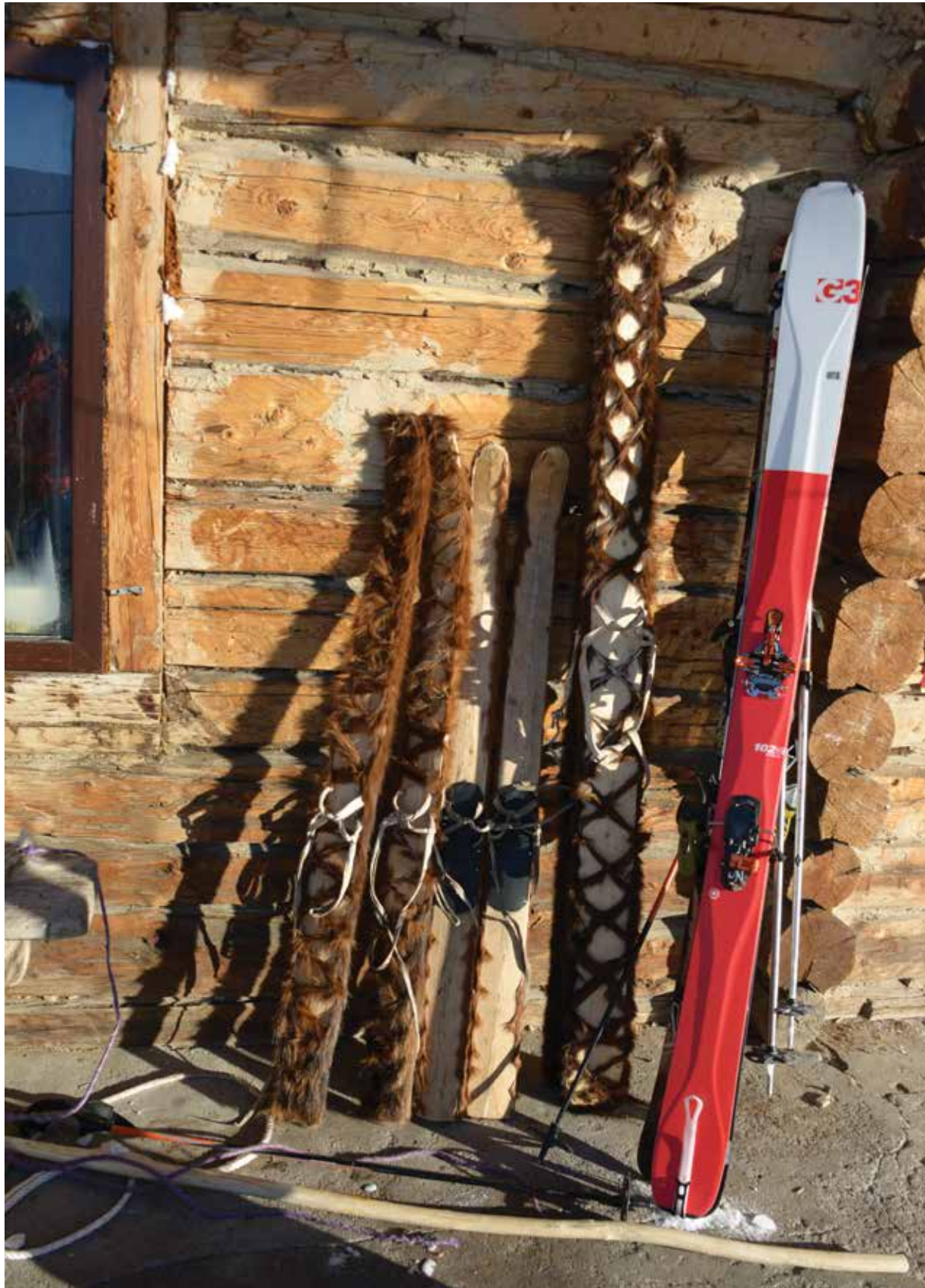
He led us to a small hut fronted by a porch, which, judging

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**A man in northwest China's Altai region makes his rounds on traditional skis covered in horsehide. Previous: The origins of skiing won't be found on the steeps, but the future will be.**

GARRETT GROVE | PREVIOUS: GARRETT GROVE





## Rumor was that local people move faster on these skis than a westerner on a modern touring setup.

by the wood shavings, scrap metal, and bits of sandpaper littering the ground, was where the craftsman carved white pine saplings into skis. A shabby stool sat among greying planks. The son didn't show us inside the workshop. Instead, he unlocked the door to a newer structure and led us in. A portrait of Mao hung high on the far wall, overlooking a gleaming wood floor and an array of cultural artifacts. We browsed sheepskin coats and fur vests, brightly colored silk garments, and embroidered hats. A display of wooden tools sat along one wall and beside it a pair of traditional horsehair skis.

Each was a perfectly sculpted plank of smooth, pale wood, about six feet long and clad tip-to-tail in surprisingly thick, furry horsehide. Crossed leather straps indicated the place where you'd insert your toes, then tie the ends around your ankle. The skins were lashed permanently to the boards, the coarse chestnut-colored hair providing traction on the uphill while still being smooth enough for the glide of the downhill. I'd heard that local people move faster on these skis than a westerner on a modern touring setup.

That's what I went to Khom to see, but the sight proved elusive. Roads are plowed now, so while we saw plenty of people moving by foot, snowmobile, and car, we didn't spot anyone on skis. Even on the trails connecting rural settlements and animal pastures, people weren't traveling by chana, let alone ski. They were on horseback, a faster and more efficient way to travel on hardpacked snow. The only chanas we saw were full of Mandarin-speaking tourists.

In the mountains, we found no people at all and instead got into a daily routine of alpine solitude. Each morning, we hired the men who gave snowmobile rides around the snow-sculpture park to tow us across the valley to the base of the peaks, where we'd start skinning. The idea was to climb as far as we could, typically three thousand to four thousand vertical feet, and make it back to the guesthouse

by the frostbite of sundown. After dinner we'd hang out in Mr. Wang's café—the only place in town where smoking was banned—and pore over topo maps and Google Earth to plan the next day's ski tour.

Then, toward the end of our stay, Ayiken Jiashan arrived with a documentary crew from the Chinese state television network, CCTV. Ayiken had become the face of traditional skiing in the Altai Mountains, and he joined us for dinner. In fluent English, he told us about the first-ever International Ski History Conference he helped organize in Altay City in 2015. Over chicken stir-fry served family style with rice and thick noodles, Ayiken said the conference brought together skiers and academics from around the world to answer definitively the question of who invented skiing.

Scandinavia was long thought to be the sport's birthplace, but then a shard from a wooden ski was found in a Russian bog and determined by carbon-dating to be seven thousand to eight thousand years old. But cave art discovered in the Altai Mountains depicts what appear to be human figures on skis stalking ibex. Chinese archaeologists have dated the paintings to about ten thousand years ago—a good two thousand years older than the Russian splinter. The pictographs haven't been carbon-dated, though, leading some to question the methodology of the Chinese researchers, as well as their motives, and a multinational team later estimated the age to be four thousand to five thousand years old.

Ayiken's was a Chinese-sponsored conference and, perhaps predictably, it backed the hypothesis that skiing began in the Altai. During our visit, China was preparing to host the 2022 Olympic Winter Games, which made the question a focus of national pride in a country whose president has mandated that three hundred million Chinese will become winter sports enthusiasts in time for the opening ceremonies. The new Khom—the one “for tourists”—is just one result.

Ayiken took a quick sip of tea and then said that while he believed China had proven itself to be the birthplace of skiing, “I am more interested in the living culture of skiing than debating the origins.” He told us that Altay City had been hosting a traditional fur ski festival and race every year since

MIKE BEEDELL

Horsehair sticks belonging to ski champ Maliquin and his children share porch space with a modern setup.





Skiing in the Altai is in transition, and traditional horsehair skis are increasingly the stuff of museums and traditional dress. Right: But not always. Previous: Dropping toward Khom.

2007. In fact, the winningest champion lived in Khom. “You should meet him!” Ayiken said, reaching for his mobile phone. He spoke a few words and put it down with a flourish. The champion would join us as soon as he’d put his kids to bed.

Maliqin, who like many Tuvans uses only one name, arrived in time to finish off what remained of the food. He was in his early forties and deeply suntanned from having just completed Ayiken’s latest project: a nearly two-hundred-mile, multiday traverse of the Altai Mountains on horsehair skis. He spoke no English, but shook all our hands in turn before sitting down at the head of the table next to Ayiken, who proceeded to tell us the story that first made Maliqin famous. In 2009, after winning back-to-back-to-back fur ski races at the Altay City festival, Maliqin was invited to demonstrate traditional skiing at the Asian Championships of Ski Mountaineering in northeastern China. Maliqin asked if he could also participate in the race, and the officials agreed, so long as he used modern gear. Maliqin borrowed a ski-mountaineering setup, practiced two days, then won the race. “He was at the top,” Ayiken said, lifting one arm over his head, “and everyone else was still down here,” jabbing his finger into the empty space between the dinner table and his elevated hand.

A herdsman from Khom beat the best ski-mountaineering athletes in China, Korea, and Japan, men who had spent all season training for that race. Since then, Maliqin hasn’t been asked to any more World Cup events. His focus now is promoting horsehair skiing and encouraging kids to become more active in the outdoors—a tough sell these days, when even children have smartphones and there’s little incentive to venture outdoors in minus-thirty winters.

We ended the evening with smiles and more handshakes and an appointment to ski with Maliqin. When we arrived the next morning he was waiting on his porch, dressed in black Gore-Tex snow pants and a bright orange and purple ski jacket. Beside him stood a white plastic bucket full of coal for his earthen hearth.

Maliqin learned to ski from his father, who was called Kuna, “Wolverine,” for his prowess in moving quickly and efficiently through the snow. Skis enabled herdsman like Maliqin and his family to retrieve lost or stranded animals in the deep snow of winter, and they also facilitated hunting. On skis, Maliqin and his brother could track elk from the snow-covered plains through the forests and across the rolling hills. They could get close enough to lasso an elk by the antlers and then hold on while the animal ran itself to mortal exhaustion in chest-deep snow.

He doesn’t hunt anymore, or even cut trees to make skis. Khom has become part of Kanas Nature Reserve, and both

GARRETT GROVE: RIGHT: GARRETT GROVE | PREVIOUS: MIKE BEEDELL





activities are now illegal. These days skiing is just for fun, Maliqin said, indicating two small pairs—his children’s—and gesturing toward a hillside on the edge of town, presumably the bunny slope.

Maliqin then tied his own horsehair skis to his feet and reached for a thick wooden staff. He demonstrated how to use the single pole for propulsion on the flats and stability on the descents—leaning heavily on the trailing staff in a distinctive three-pronged backseat style.

Maliqin only had one extra pair of skis, so we nominated as our guinea pig Whitney Thurlow, the veteran guide who put the trip together. Thurlow sportingly tied into a pair of traditional skis, shuffled up a mound of snow beside Maliqin’s porch, and pronounced himself ready. As we hurried to click back into our own ski-touring gear, we didn’t notice that Maliqin was leaving—seated in the passenger seat of a car backing out of his driveway. Maliqin explained he had a meeting. We should get started. He’d catch up.

We skinned from Maliqin’s yard, up the bunny hill, and across a wide plateau where a handful of indifferent horses congregated around a twenty-foot pile of hay. We had just climbed out of the foothills and were starting to ascend into the steeps when Thurlow called it quits. His arms and shoulders ached from carrying the pole and he wasn’t comfortable using the horsehair skis in steeper alpine terrain. They didn’t want to turn, he explained, and while we all heckled him, none of us thought it wise to try and change his mind. Maliqin never did catch up.

On our last day in Khom, one of our drivers, a young, broad-shouldered Kazakh with light brown eyes, delighted us by showing up at Mr. Wang’s with a pair of traditional skis. We planned to do some mellow skiing that morning on our way out of town, at the pass, and he was apparently game to join. Chen, too, wanted to finish the week in style: He’d brought his paragliding wing from New Zealand and planned to fly from the ridge.

We spotted our ideal slope just over the pass about an hour from Khom: a section of smooth, powdery, low-angle terrain that would serve up an Altai Mountain panorama on the descent. A relatively flat bench about seven hundred feet up would make a fine transition point. We anticipated doing laps until we’d skied it out.

Our caravan pulled off the side of the road. A carload of Chinese tourists parked behind us to watch. Thurlow broke trail and we stepped off the road, one by one, to follow. I went last, curious to monitor our Kazakh driver’s progress. Thurlow cut a fairly steep skin track, which seemed appropriate given the gentle grade of the slope. But it was too steep for the horsehair skis. After about fifty feet, our driver began breathing hard. He veered off Thurlow’s course and created his own line, longer and much more gradual, across the slope.

But he couldn’t seem to catch his breath. He fell behind, his frame stooped over in the growing distance, chest heaving, head hanging. Finally he caught my eye and mimed that he was going back to the car. He was less than a quarter of the way to the bench. Thurlow was already there, starting his transition.

The driver was a smoker, but I sensed his lack of lung and leg power had more to do with the electricity, cellphones, and automobiles that have arrived in Khom since he was a child. I had gone to the Altai seeking connection to a culture in which skiing is not mere sport, but a way of living—a culture in which skis are essential tools. But skis aren’t tools anymore. There are easier ways to make a living, and why should anyone do things the hard way when there’s a faster, easier way? My own group was no different, opting to get towed across the plains to save our legs for the steeper stuff.

By the time I reached the bench, it was just me and Chen, who needed a bit longer of a transition to rig his paraglider wing. I was three turns into my descent when he soared overhead. It was a marvelous sight—Chen’s bright red wing above a sea of snow. I stopped and watched. He executed a perfect ski landing on the road, where the tourists and drivers swarmed him with their camera phones. They paid no mind to the others in my group, who were also on the road, preparing for another lap after having carved a perfect row of turns on the slope.

I was the only one on the mountain. I paused to savor the view of seemingly endless faces, velvety white against a sharp blue sky. I don’t believe I’ve ever seen terrain with powder on every aspect and not even a hint of wind. There were no other cars driving up or down the pass. There were no ski lifts. There were no horse-drawn chanas negotiating the valley floor. There was no one tracking elk in the hillsides. The traditional ski maker was gone, replaced by a museum. I was struck by the notion that I’d missed something. Despite being among the first westerners to visit this cradle of skiing, I was already too late to find what I’d been seeking. But not too late, never too late, to add my own tracks to the long arc of the sport. 🏔️

**Above: Khom freshies. Below: Nearby, cave paintings that Chinese archaeologists believe to be 10,000 years old depict hunters on skis stalking ibex.**