

# Unpacking Cultural Heritage in Mongolia: The Image of the Mongolian Yurt (*ger*)

Ganchimeg Altangerel

## Abstract

Mongolians have lived and socialised in the Mongolian *ger* (yurt) for hundreds of years, leading a life closely connected to nature and exploring vast areas as nomads. But in present-day Mongolia the *ger* is associated with air and environmental pollution and has been scapegoated as the source of failures in urban development. The negative images of the *ger* in Mongolian society pertain to ideals of socialist modernism and current pollution, while positive images relate to cultural heritage and ethnicity, considering the *ger* as an intangible heritage, as the traditional dwelling of Mongolian nomads. Such a view tacitly turns it into an object for marketing, which exoticises its inhabitants. It seems that the *ger* has experienced a loss of value in the current debate. This article presents the specifics of the Mongolian *ger* and examines the different, diverging images of this traditional dwelling by examining the recent history of Mongolia.

**Keywords:** Mongolia, *ger*, yurt, intangible cultural heritage, air and environmental pollution

Nomadic heritage has often been a topic in politics and society in recent years in Mongolia. In order to protect Mongolian cultural heritage and pass it on to the next generation, many events regarding Mongolian – and especially nomadic – heritage have been organised. In fact, from 2010–2013, the government started an initiative to register people who claimed to practice traditional Mongolian folk art, music and folklore dances and customs. Furthermore, the 2016 Mongolian government introduced the programme “World Mongolians”, which is known for introducing and marketing Mongolian music and dance to foreign countries. For the first time, all museum artefacts were made accessible to the public to view free of cost for seven days in March 2018.

The Mongolian yurt has always been inseparable from the lives of Mongolians living in the countryside with their livestock. Before the Mongolian nomadic lifestyle gradually shifted to concepts of a more sedentary life, due to socialist ideas of modernisation starting in the 1930s, Mongolians dwelled in

Ganchimeg Altangerel, Institute for Asian and African Studies, Humboldt University Berlin; ganchimeg.altangerel.1@hu-berlin.de.

felt tents, called *gers* (yurts). These *gers* – as well as the manual labour associated with them and the lifestyle in general – are widely described by Mongolian media, tourist companies and general public opinion as expressing valuable Mongolian customs, practices and cultural history. In 1989, just before Mongolia transformed from a socialist government to a market economy, a census revealed that there were 108,100 families living in *gers* in Ulaanbaatar (see Figure 3). Even today a considerable number of families use the *ger* as a form of housing in Ulaanbaatar and other places. Its traditional importance for everyday life has turned the *ger* into a material object assigned as intangible heritage. But the picture of the *ger* as the main symbol for Mongolian culture is challenged, at least within Mongolia itself.

Ole Bruun and Li Narangoa have discussed the different meanings of the *ger* in two different cities, the Mongolian capital Ulaanbaatar and Hohhot, the capital of the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region in China.

Both Ulaanbaatar, the capital of Mongolia, and Hohhot, the capital of Inner Mongolia, have the traditional Mongolian dwelling, the yurt or *ger*. Ironically, this key Mongolian symbol has become the emblem of poverty and backwardness in Ulaanbaatar, while the few *gers* displayed in Hohhot have become a symbol of ethnicity and one of the main points that distinguish Hohhot from other cities in China (Bruun / Narangoa 2006: 12).

The *ger* is portrayed by Mongolia's politicians and most residents of central Ulaanbaatar as being associated with pollution, poverty, unemployment and crime. Yet it has also become an important symbol of the ethnicity and cultural heritage of Mongolia, of the Mongolian nomads and famous conquerors. But what exactly can be seen as nomadic cultural heritage in Mongolia and how is the *ger* intertwined with this? This paper will attempt to approach these questions.

## Comprehension of cultural heritage

Over a century ago, Mongolia declared its independence from Manchu-Qing rule. In 1924, the Mongolian People's Republic was established, and the country embarked on the political path of socialism. Before the turn to socialism, many Mongolians were able to throat sing *khöömii*, could tell folktales, sing blessings and praise-songs, recite epics, play the traditional horsehead fiddle *morin khuur* and the *tsuur* (Rinčin<sup>1</sup> 1979: 165–74).<sup>2</sup> Under the socialist government some of those literary, oral and musical skills, which had been spread

1 The authors of the Mongolian-language sources are listed by their first names, as is the case in Mongolia.

2 On this topic, see Rinčin's fieldwork results on the range of Mongolian epics inside the region until 1930 in Rinčin 1979: 165–74. For the historical meaning of the old Mongolian folk long song, overtone song, horsehead fiddle, fairy tale and epic, etc. see Pegg 2001. She conducted extended fieldwork for almost ten years and studied folk and musical heritage in depth, especially among the Western Mongolians.

particularly by the nobility, came to be viewed negatively as backward and as relics of feudalism – as part of a culture belonging to the exploiters of the people. The government intended to create a new society exposed to progressive high culture and restricted the playing of traditional music and songs, particularly in the 1930s. In the 1950s literary scholar and linguist Ts. Damdinsüren argued against two perspectives. He was against labelling all ancient Mongolian literature and oral history as feudal, but also against nationalist perspectives that glorified all ancient works (Damdinsüren 1987: 15). According to the ethnomusicologist Carole Pegg, new revolutionary thinking began and working classes were created around the middle of the twentieth century (Pegg 2001: 249–53).

In line with the new communist ideology and the influence of the party, people were to sing and perform theatre pieces with revolutionary and socialist content (Marsh 2006, Pegg 2001: 250–56). Within the framework of state policy, the agenda demanded the development of a national culture with socialist content. Cultural heritage that could not be expressed by socialist content was either covertly adapted or discarded. This led to some loss of the established cultural elements. According to the cultural scientist B. Khishigsükh especially songs were censored.<sup>3</sup> Ts. Damdinsüren (1987: 24) notes that the number of musicians who could play popular musical instruments decreased. Old Mongolian folk music instruments were no longer handmade, but instead became “factory-made musical instruments” (Marsh 2006: 297).

In the early 1990s, while doing fieldwork in the Arkhangai province, Marsh found that there was no one in that region who could play string instruments or knew popular folk dances such as *bii biilgee*. Marsh noted that people from the Arkhangai province were therefore sent to learn such skills in the Uvs province, which had already been known as “a region, long considered to be less developed and more traditional” (ibid.: 302) in socialist times. In the process of building a new socialist culture, there were different movements targeting either the eradication or the conservation of cultural elements considered to be historical. In the 1990s, the conservation movement became stronger even as socialist high culture retained its importance.

Today the Mongolian government, in particular the Ministry of Education, Culture, Science and Sport and its agencies, tries to preserve cultural heritage. In 2005, Mongolia joined the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, which meant a big step forward in Mongolia’s cultural heritage policy.<sup>4</sup> Memorandums and UNESCO conventions that serve all member countries have influenced Mongolia’s cultural heritage policies. In line with the principles of UNESCO, Mongolia defines its own cultural heritage

3 Examples are the Khüree songs, mentioned at the Symposium “Kyakhta and Khüriye: From the Viewpoints of Eurasia” in Ulaanbaatar in 2018.

4 Mongolia became a UNESCO member in 1962. For the entry into the convention and the obligations to be borne by Mongolia, see Centre of Cultural Heritage 2012: 31.

in two ways, as tangible and intangible. As previously mentioned, between 2010 and 2013 the government registered musicians, singers and artisans who could still practice or play old Mongolian folklore, instruments, songs and popular customs such as the coaxing ritual for camels or felt-making for the *ger*. These and other aspects of the nomadic cultural heritage were collected and labelled as intangible cultural heritage. Tangible cultural heritage comprised 4000-year-old graves, as well as burial mounds and rock paintings from approximately 13,000 years B.C.E. (Altangerel 2014). To this day, UNESCO has registered 13 intangible Mongolian cultural heritages.

The representative list of the intangible cultural heritage of humanity includes the traditional music of the *morin khuur* (2008), the *urtiin duu*, traditional folk long song (2008), the Naadam festival (2010), the traditional art of *khöömii* (2010), falconry (2010), traditional craftsmanship of the *ger* and its associated customs (2013) and knucklebone shooting (2014). Other examples of intangible cultural heritage that are in need of urgent safeguarding are listed as: the Mongolian epic (2009), the *bii biilgee* traditional folk dance (2009), traditional music of the *tsuur* (2009), folk long song performance technique of *limbe* performances – circular breathing (2011), calligraphy (2013) and the coaxing ritual for camels (2015).<sup>5</sup> The UNESCO collection of world memory holds *The Golden History of Luvsandanzan* (2011), *The Mongolian Shunkhan Tanjur* (2011), *The Kanjur Written with Nine Precious Stones* (2012) and *The Sutra of the Great Deity Tara* (2014). Every year Mongolia sends additional applications to UNESCO, amongst others for art, popular music, ancient scripture, Buddhist scriptures and landscapes.<sup>6</sup> In 2005, Mongolia and China both claimed the long song as their intangible cultural heritage at the UNESCO. In 2009, China succeeded in claiming throat singing as a solely Chinese intangible cultural heritage,<sup>7</sup> which had a great impact on Mongolia and was the reason why Mongolia tried to register more cultural heritage sites and skills with UNESCO.

UNESCO aims to support its member states in conserving and promoting their cultural heritage. The Mongolian government engages in these programmes as a strategy to help Mongolian authorities to maintain and revive folk songs, musical elements, long-established customs and to protect or restore ancient literature. Yet the Mongolian government's strict adherence to the guidelines and principles of UNESCO in terms of cultural heritage policies leaves out any culturally and historically specific or shared interpretations of "heritage".

5 See Yundenbat 2011 and <http://www.monheritage.mn/mn/intangible/UnescoIch.aspx>.

6 <http://www.unesco.mn/p/230>.

7 There was huge criticism and discussion in Mongolia. See B. Tüvshintögs (2010), *Shaakhaitai khyatad khöömijl baikhyg sonsoogüi l yum baina* [Never Seen a Chinese in Slippers Who Did Throat Singing], on <http://www.baabar.mn/article/1270>.

Furthermore, UNESCO has often been criticised for interfering with their member states' policies.<sup>8</sup>

Over the past years, the Mongolian *ger* and all kinds of music, songs and cultural elements have been used for economic purposes, creating such terminologies as *mongol brend bolgokh* (“to become a Mongolian brand”) and *soyolyn öviig brendjuulekh* (“branding cultural heritage”).<sup>9</sup> These references seem to consider that all Mongolian cultural heritage sites on the UNESCO lists are of great importance for “branding cultural heritage” not only within the country, but also externally. The objective is to revive and regain certain cultural elements through marketing.

Today, people living in Mongolia view cultural heritage in different ways. The horsehead fiddle and the knucklebone game are definitely claimed as Mongolian cultural heritage by Khalka Mongolians, but there are over twenty ethnic minorities of Mongolians and people of Turkic descent, such as the Kazakhs and Tuvinians in Mongolia,<sup>10</sup> who view this differently. During visits to Mongolia in recent years, I spoke to some representatives of the different ethnic minorities in diverse regions about their own cultural heritage. In their opinion, these customs and cultural heritage, which were passed on by their ancestors over generations, are their own. They claim that cultural heritage such as folk music, language and long-established customs of the past had almost been lost, but today this heritage is being revived in daily life. In August 2016 in Buyant *sum*<sup>11</sup> in Khovd *aimag*, for example, an 80-year-old man<sup>12</sup> noted that his grandchildren are not able to speak Tuvian. In summer 2015, in Ölziit *sum* in Khentii *aimag* a 44-year-old father from one of a total of 24 Kazakh families stated that every child can speak Kazakh but no one is able to recite a Kazakh poem or song. For that reason, he sends his children to a Kazakh school in Nalaikh during school vacation.

Currently, people are worried that the younger generation is influenced too much by their surroundings and does not cherish their own cultural practices and native languages.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, they worry that the people who used to

8 See Ericson (2001), Lixinski (2013). They wrote on the UNESCO definition of cultural heritage and offered a critique of the institution and its contracts. Mongolia was not even mentioned in their works. However, it is important to study how exactly UNESCO is influencing policies pertaining to Mongolian cultural heritage.

9 In reference to Damdinsüren's seminal essay *Soyolyn öviig khamgaalye* 1987 [1956]. For current debates on the terms, see Center of Cultural Heritage 2012: 8.

10 The current total population of Mongolia is 3,308,258 (NSOM 2020, as of February 24, 2020). The census, which takes place every ten years showed that 82.4 per cent identify as Khalkhas, 3.9 per cent are Kazakhs, 2.8 per cent are Dörvöds, 2.2 per cent are Bayads, 1.8 per cent are Buryatians, 0.2 per cent are Tuvinians and 0.01 per cent are Tsaatans or Dugas (NSOM 2011).

11 Mongolia is divided into 21 *aimags* or administrative units. An *aimag* is divided into *sums* (counties) and a *sum* into several bags, which is the smallest administrative unit. The country has 330 *sums*.

12 The informants are not mentioned by name to preserve anonymity.

13 In the Western and Eastern provinces, these children of ethnic minorities are taught at school in the Khalkha dialect.

play the old music instruments or those artisans who were skilled in special crafts have not sufficiently passed on their knowledge and are now either too old or have already passed away. In the summer of 2015 in Öndörkhaan, Khentii *aimag*, a 40-year-old craftsman stated that he is practicing his craft in the fourth generation and is able to produce the special style of blacksmithing from Khan Khentii, who was called “Tojil”. However, very few youth are interested in learning this from him.<sup>14</sup> The people who voiced these concerns were generally not interested in a UNESCO cultural heritage registry and most of them were not even aware it existed. However, current TV programmes and documentaries, which broadcast the correct performance of customs, are widely popular.

On an institutional level, cultural heritage is concerned with the ascription of ethnic specificity and the danger of losing skills, qualities and sites. People living in Mongolia participate in the discourse on loss but emphasise shared heritage, especially the Kazakhs I visited in Khentii and the Tuvinians in Khovd. They don’t necessarily define themselves as non-Mongolian. My informants argued that people of different ethnic background have lived in Mongolian *gers* for a long time and when asked why they didn’t prefer living in Kazakh or Tuvan *gers*, they resorted to functional explanations, stating that the Mongolian *ger* was wind-proof and stable.

## Historical development of the Mongolian *ger*

The socialist historians D. Maidar and L. Darisüren described the development of the *ger*, noting that people living in the region of Mongolia started to keep domesticated wild animals such as cows, sheep and horses approximately 3000–4000 years B.C.E. This was when these people began looking for nutritious pastures, following the river streams to herd their livestock and beginning a life as nomads in dwellings called *erüke* (Maidar / Darisüren 1976: 49).

About 50,000 years ago, people living in these *erükes* used a form of dwelling which was semi-underground. The roof was constructed out of thick branches and was the only thing that was above ground (ibid.).

From the eighth century onwards, the dwelling evolved into an *ovookhoi* (round shelter), the frame of which was made out of wood and grass. After that it became a *shovookhoi* (pointy shelter), then evolved into *terege suuts* (a tent on wheels) and then went on to develop into “Turkic yurts” of the Hunnu (Xiongnu), until it advanced to become the *khanat ger*, which was the first real *ger* with walls of some kind (ibid.). According to Maidar and Darisüren the *khanat ger* developed in response to the environmental conditions and

14 For further reading about the artisan Tojil and his blacksmithing, see Chuluunbat 2013.

nomadic lifestyle. It flourished thanks to Mongolian artisans in the seventeenth century and found its final shape in the *ger* we know today.

In the twentieth century, the wealthy began to embellish their *gers* with different covers, designs and engravings (ibid. 93; Baatarkhüü / Odsüren 2016: 225), while the majority lived in *gers* with plain brown felt and the poor even in *urts* (huts) or *ovookhoi* (Maidar / Darisüren 1976: 95; Altangerel 2015: 193). In the 1950s, under the socialist agenda, the appearances of *gers* were rigorously unified. From that point on, due to industrialisation many people left their nomadic life and settled with their *gers* in a belt around the city or began to live in flats (Maidar 1972: 31). According to the research of the anthropologist David Sneath, people who lived in the cities of Ulaanbaatar, Darkhan and Erdenet and were supplied with heating, electricity, warm water, television and telephone, nevertheless still maintained a connection to a nomadic way of life:

Social and kinship networks cross the boundaries between the rural and the urban so that virtually all pastoralists have urban relatives and friends. The speed with which urbanisation had been carried out in the 1950s–1970s meant that most urban residents at that time had been born in rural localities, and the large families usually contained rural and urban members (Sneath 2006: 157).<sup>15</sup>

Hence, thousands of urban migrants maintained a connection to people residing in the countryside, especially to herders. Therefore, the relation with the Mongolian *ger* and its related way of life and customs was not severed<sup>16</sup> – and the Mongolian *ger* did not completely disappear at the level of Mongolian daily life.

## The significance of the Mongolian *ger*

No doubt Mongolians have lived and socialised in *gers* for hundreds of years. The role of the *ger* for communication between people was discussed by the anthropologist Caroline Humphrey: “The round tent was virtually the only dwelling known in Mongolia, apart from Buddhist monasteries, and it was the focus for relationships between people widely separated by daily occupations” (Humphrey 1974: 1). Inside the Mongolian *ger*, the most respected side is the north side. The other sides comprise the west, male side, the east, female side, a fireplace in the centre, and the door. Every part has an important role and,

15 For more information about relatives, brotherhood and the relationship between siblings see Humphrey / Sneath 1999: 139–47; 209–300.

16 For the dissemination of the terms *khotynkhon* (“city people”) and *khödöönykhön* (“countryside people”), how those terms are used by Mongolians, what the lifestyles in urban and rural areas are like, see a comparative study by Altangerel (2015: 86–7) and Sneath (2006: 156).

in a way, represents a small universe in the social world, “a kind of microcosm of the social world of the Mongols” (ibid.).

In the 1990s, the researcher N. L. Schukowskaja found that every part in the Mongolian *ger* forms an independent little universe and that every section inside is connected and carries a symbolic meaning. Furthermore, she observed that these symbols guide the whole interior space in the *ger* and that all its separated areas secure and symbolise the relationship or the division between mine and yours, inside and outside, positive and negative. By dividing the *ger* into these areas, a kind of symbolic security is created (Schukowskaja 1996: 20). The anthropologists Baatarkhüü and Odsüren claim that the symbolic significance cannot be seen with the eye, but has existed for a longer period of time and connects the people’s deep respect for nature and their surroundings, worship of heaven and the herding livestock animals (Baatarkhüü / Odsüren 2016: 47–48, 98–102).

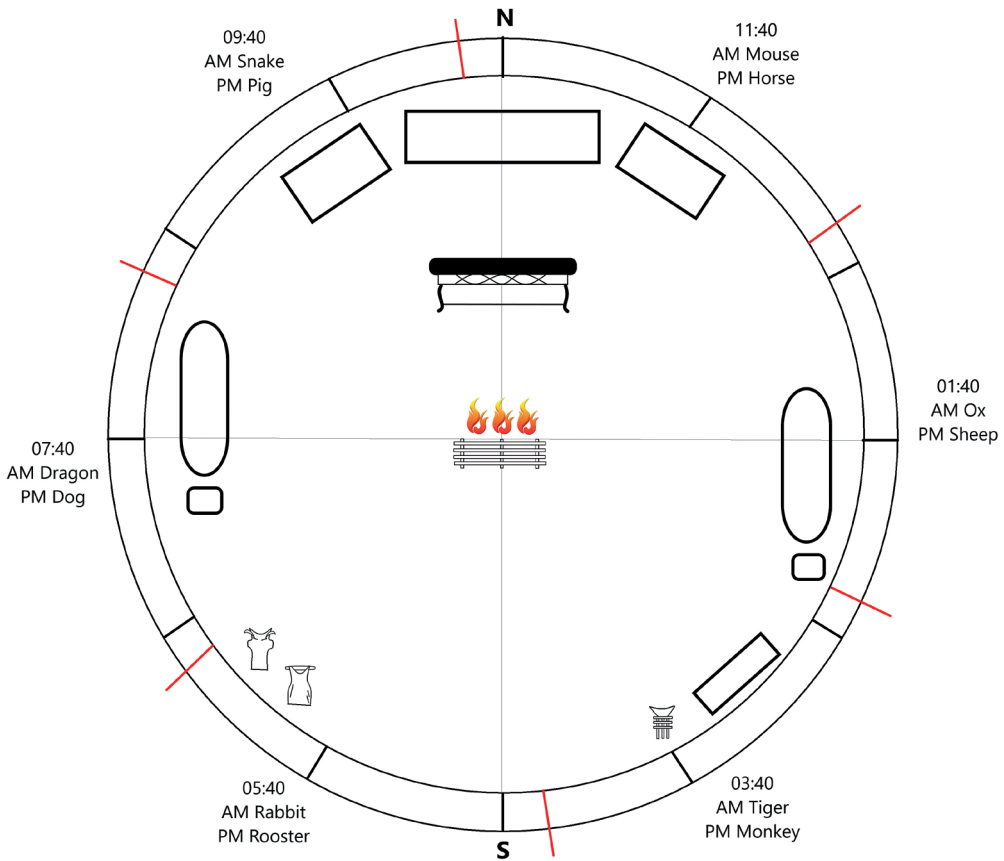
Another inseparable aspect of the *ger* is its role in astrology, its function as a calendar and as a solar calendar; for example, the two beams that connect the ceiling and the ground represent the past, the future and present (Schukowskaja 1996: 24). Furthermore, those beams are called *galyn süns* or “the soul of the fire” (Maidar / Darisüren 1976: 109–10) and symbolise husband and wife and the harmony between them because of their stability (Altangerel 2015: 84). In the centre of the *ger*, the area around the fireplace represents the origin and the cohesion of the family (Schukowskaja 1996: 20, Altangerel 2015: 68, Tserenkhand 2015: 67–72). It is a sign of respect when the elderly are seated in the north of the *ger*, the area reserved for honourable persons. The *ger* also features pictures of the family, of ancestors, gods and respected persons (Humphrey 1974: 2). Mongolians have always admired the west as the cardinal direction. This is also why they say the west side of the *ger* is the male side and why the *ikh ger* or the husband’s parent’s *ger*, considered the origin of the family itself, is also located to the west.<sup>17</sup>

Another example of the *ger*’s relation to nature is that it is possible to tell what time it is by where the sunlight enters the *ger* (Schukowskaja 1996: 34, 43). In relation to telling the time the *ger*, as illustrated below, is divided into 12 parts, which are named after the 12 animals of the zodiac.

This customary way of counting time by observing how the sunlight falls into the *ger* and telling the hours according to the 12-animal zodiac cycle played a main role in the herding of livestock and daily household chores. At the time of the horse for example, the sun enters directly into the back of the *ger*, etc. Mongolians continued to use this method of telling time in the mid-twentieth century despite an increase in urbanisation. From that time on, they had also

17 For the significance of the Mongolian *ger* and its different areas, e.g. for the symbolic meaning of *khoimor* and other objects, see Maidar / Darisüren 1976: 107–10, Schukowskaja 1996: 16–26 and Humphrey 1974.



Figure 1: Schema of the 12 animals in the Mongolian *ger* and the interspaced timing system of the winter time

Source: Compiled by Ganchimeg Altangerel based on Maidar / Darisüren 1976: 50 and Schukowskaja 1996: 43

begun to use Western manufactured clocks. Nonetheless, my observations revealed that people tending their livestock in rural areas can still be seen using this kind of sun calendar in their everyday life. Generally, political and cultural events start at the time of the horse, e.g. *Naadam*, which would start at 10 a.m.<sup>18</sup>

It is also worth mentioning the education and nurturing which takes place inside the *ger*. These include teaching children life skills, skills pertaining to labour and the acquisition of knowledge (Altangerel 2015: 79–82). As stated by Baatarhüü and Odsüren, teaching children from a young age to respect their elders was one of the most important principles in upbringing (Baatarhüü / Odsüren 2016: 57–58). Until the end of the twentieth century the spaces

18 The horse time would be 9.40–11.40am from 23 March until 22 September every year according to the summer time and in winter 11.40–13.40 from 23 September until 22 March.

inside the *ger* and their profound symbols existed in correspondence with Buddhist knowledge and played an important role in daily life. According to Humphrey, “even if an individual herdsman’s family is prosperous and has fitted out its tent in luxurious modernity, the time has not yet come when past arrangements can be forgotten” (Humphrey 1974: 2). In her research she wrote that after the revolution a lot of new jobs were created in Mongolia e.g. teachers, party members, veterinary surgeons, etc. and the communication between people changed, but “the rank of each social category” and the social intercourse and the meaning of respect did not change (ibid.). A clear example of this is that to this day if any guest or unknown visitor stops by, they would be treated respectfully, seated in the honoured north and be given *idee* (tidbits of food) and tea with the right hand, which is a sign of respect.

According to Maidar and Darisüren the socialist government attempted to settle herders to lead a half-sedentary life while not removing *gers* from the capital. The government nevertheless aimed at improving their construction following the latest techniques (Maidar / Darisüren 1976: 145–47, 150–52). Since the transformation to a market economy the value of the *ger* has gradually fallen further for many reasons. Baatarkhüü and Odsüren argue that the use of the *ger* is decreasing in the present time and that there has been a corresponding decline in the different types of *gers*, the traditional craftsmanship of making *gers* and all related customs. Today, Mongolian *gers* are mainly mass produced (Baatarkhüü / Odsüren 2016: 4).

In summer 2016 an old man from Khovd, who identified as a member of the ethnic minority Ööld, told me that once a young woman from Ulaanbaatar threw her used tissue into his *ger*’s fire during her visit with foreign guests – a huge taboo as it is assumed that the fire god could be polluted by this. He was astonished to find that she didn’t even know that one should not leap over the rope for tethering a horse. He felt immensely uncomfortable with her behaviour and considered her just like a foreigner. Today, stories about the disgraceful behaviour of many city residents at a herder’s *ger* or even at *gers* in the city, and their disregard for specific rules, are numerous. People claim that some urban residents, especially in the city centre, no longer know the most important rules of respect, such as not approaching the back area of the *ger*, the honoured place called *khoimor*, or the prohibition against walking between the two beams or throwing garbage into the fire. Customs and their meaning, which were well known by almost everyone before the social transformation, are no longer known by many city residents nowadays. However, publications about traditional customs are one of the more popular genres among urban residents. There seems to be a tacit relation between the evaluation of the *ger* and rural residents in urban contexts as “regressive” and the admiration for *ger* and rural residents in rural areas as keepers of tradition.

## Herders and cultural heritage

In 1921, after the revolution, wealthy herders had to relinquish their property, which mostly consisted of livestock. This was redistributed, so that the wealthy lost their property while the poor gained some. With that, a new society was created, “the revolutionary *ard*” (Bulag 1998: 50), a class that consisted of those herders who had received animals from the government. In the 1950s the government introduced collectivisation and a great number of herders began to live a semi-settled lifestyle. With the onset of the socialist government, the herders lost their high social status, which meant that they now became “the backward *ard* class” and were categorised as “the *ajilchin* working class”.

According to the anthropologist Uradyn Bulag, from that moment on the role of the herders lost its importance and the role of the workers became far more important for the new socialist state. Furthermore, he argues that through the herders’ loss of reputation, the nomadic lifestyle, its connected customs and the different kinds of cultural heritage such as popular folk music were negatively affected. “This ideological upgrading [of the *ajilchin* working class] led to repeated campaigns against Mongolian customs, tradition, culture, and even the nomadic way of life, which were labeled as ‘feudal remnants’ contrary to the socialist way of life” (ibid.). Thus, the number of herders who live in the Mongolian *ger* and maintain established customs – the heritage of the nomadic culture – have continuously decreased over the last decades for various reasons.

In 1925, 87 per cent of all Mongolian households were pastoral households. In 1956, the number had decreased to 63 per cent and in 1989 it was only 16 per cent (Altangerel 2019: 45). In 2019, Mongolia registered 904,496 households, 171,610 of which were pastoral households, accounting for 19 per cent of the total households (NSOM 2020). Although the population is growing in Mongolia the number of herders is still decreasing. This decline has further accelerated due to loss of livestock during periods of natural disasters, economic difficulties and arduous working conditions. Moreover, there is a lack of young people willing to lead a pastoral lifestyle.<sup>19</sup> Nowadays, knowledge about the pastoral lifestyle – formerly passed on from relatives in the countryside to city dwellers – is set to vanish as well. Ulaanbaatar and other cities such as Darkhan and Erdenet are home to more than two generations that have barely had any exposure to the nomadic lifestyle and the keeping of livestock.

<sup>19</sup> For further information, see Altangerel 2019.

## The image of the *ger* today

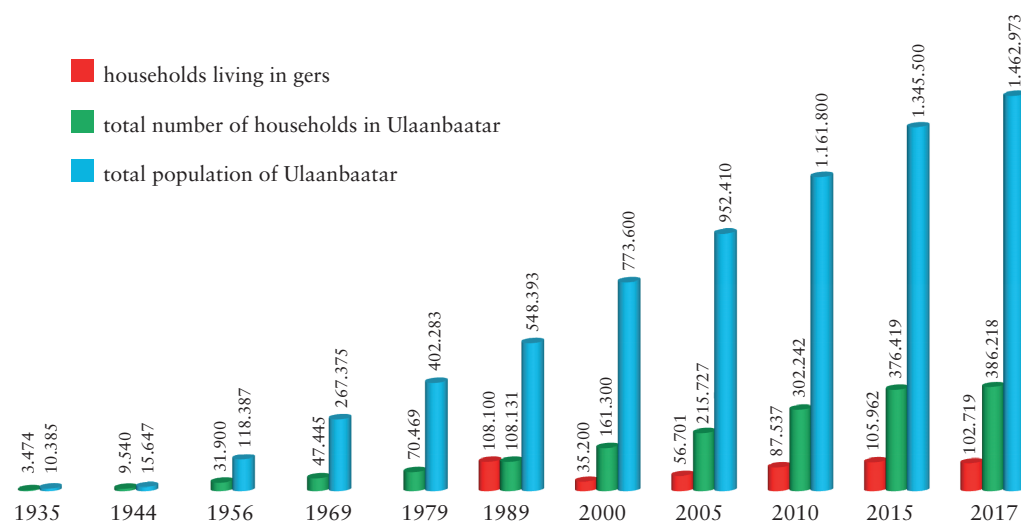
Initially, under socialist rule, it was planned that Ulaanbaatar would have a population of about 500,000 people, but today there are around 1.5 million people living in the capital, which accounts for half of the country's population. During the socialist period, rural migration to the capital city Ulaanbaatar was largely controlled by the authorities. In the 1990s, along with the social and economic transformation, as well as privatisation, everyone was granted the right to choose their place of residence. The transformation entailed hard times for the population, and many people moved from the rural areas to the cities to look for work and opportunities for a better life.

As people had previously been organised in collectives their labour was specified. Privatisation from 1992 entailed that a single owner had to be capable of managing an entire herd. In combination with natural catastrophes many herders lost all their livestock and had to move to urban areas. This mobility affected the whole country. From west to east, people moved to the industrial regions in the centre or northern parts of Mongolia, and especially to Ulaanbaatar in search of better opportunities in education and services related to health care. Herders whose livestock had died from cold and natural catastrophes<sup>20</sup> had to move to Ulaanbaatar, Erdenet or Darkhan without any financial security.

Figure 2: A *ger* district in the south of Erdenet (Ganchimeg Altangerel, August 2019)



20 For more information on natural catastrophes (*zud*), see Altangerel 2017: 28.

Figure 3: Ulaanbaatar's statistics on total population, total households and households living in *gers* (1935–2017)\*

Source: Compiled by Ganchimeg Altangerel based on data provided by NSOM and the Statistical Office of Ulaanbaatar 2019 (\*the statistics about the households living in *gers* for the years from 1935 to 1979 are unfortunately not available)

Newly arrived people generally chose the outskirts of the cities and towns and set up their *ger* often without permission. Hence, the new settlements were unstructured. This had a severely negative impact on urban planning, especially in Ulaanbaatar. The city government failed to accommodate the migrants according to a well-developed policy or to settle them according to detailed plans. Later, many families were therefore forced to resettle. Until today this process remains ongoing. Especially when companies buy up a large quantity of land, the settlers have to move.

As a result of this rural to urban migration, *ger* districts spread on the fringes of urban areas and the population increased in these areas.<sup>21</sup> According to the Agency for Statistics, in 2017 Ulaanbaatar contained 386,218 households, of which only 1617 households lived in comfortable single-family houses or larger residences. 169,436 households lived in apartment buildings, 2045 households lived in so-called *tokhilog baishin* (mud brick houses) in the *ger* district, 110,220 households in *jijig baishin* (small houses) inside *khashaa* (wooden fences) and 102,719 households still lived in *gers* (Uchral 2018). Homeless households are not registered in these statistics.

As a result of the unplanned *ger* districts, many issues have arisen. Parallel to the growth of *ger* areas and the number of their inhabitants, there has been an increase in air pollution and smoke in Ulaanbaatar during the winter months.

21 For the expansion of *ger* districts in Ulaanbaatar, their population and living conditions, see Taraschewski 2008.

Families living in *gers* mostly use cheap, untreated coal for heating and cooking.<sup>22</sup> As Ulaanbaatar is situated relatively low in a valley enclosed by four mountains, the air scarcely circulates for fresh air to come in. Thus, polluted air caused by the emissions from the chimneys of the *gers* hovers over the city for quite a long time.

Another reason for pollution is the poor connection of the *ger* households to the sewage system. Because appropriate infrastructure is lacking, people in the *ger* districts simply dig holes and use outhouses. Research papers often conclude that the soil in Ulaanbaatar is strongly contaminated (Byambasüren et al. 2017: 32). This is not only the case in Ulaanbaatar, but also in the *aimag* centres. Especially in the winter season, the emissions from the *ger* districts, e.g. in Darkhan, highly increase air pollution (Schaller 2015: 35).

For these reasons, the Mongolian *ger* is now also often associated with air and environmental pollution and has become a symbol of the failure of modern development. However, this situation is not the fault of the families living in *ger* districts. Inconsistent policies and governments that have changed repeatedly since the 1990s have resulted in misguided political decisions (Schaller 2015: 39, 41). There has scarcely been any development in rural areas as the government has failed to create enough workplaces or comfortable living conditions there. Had there been better infrastructure available in rural areas, not as many people would have migrated to the cities. A well-managed system of registration and settlement planning would then have helped to organise the new city dwellers and avoid the growth of unstructured *ger* districts with all the related infrastructural and environmental problems.

In additional to the heating practices in the *ger* districts, huge heat and power stations in the centre of Ulaanbaatar also use coal when temperatures drop, which also contributes to the high level of air pollution. In February 2018, the government passed a resolution to ban the use of raw coal as fuel from 15 May 2019. This prohibition affected private households, public institutions and private providers in the central six districts of Ulaanbaatar, all of whom must now heat with coal briquettes. However, the prohibition did not apply to state-owned heat and power stations.<sup>23</sup> According to the observations of some city dwellers, air pollution in the winters of 2019 and 2020 seemed to have improved somewhat compared to previous years.

Another factor in air quality is the fact that most of the vehicles and buses in the country are old imported models, which cause more pollution than the newer ones. Hard statistics are difficult to obtain, however, as – through the influence of political and government authorities – some sources of information have spread unreliable statements, casting doubt on the results of many studies.

22 Impoverished residents use trash, old car wheels and other such things as fuel to heat their *ger* (see Schaller 2015: 35, 37).

23 For the ban on raw coal, see Jargal 2018.

The latest study on air pollution in Ulaanbaatar, for example, showed that 80 per cent of the air pollution was estimated to have been caused by households in the *ger* districts, 13 per cent from vehicles and 7 per cent from coal-fired steam boilers and power plants (Ragchaa 2018). However, according to the research of Peter Schaller, 88 per cent of Ulaanbaatar's air pollution comes from three main sources: 42 per cent from all type of fuels used by *ger* residents, 27 per cent from coal-fired power plants and 19 per cent from the coal-fired steam boilers used to heat large buildings and industrial enterprises. The remaining pollution is attributed to vehicle exhaust, street particles and the open burning of waste (Schaller 2015: 37). Taken all together, the massive air pollution, daily traffic jams, and lack of space and water supplies make life difficult for Ulaanbaatar's residents. They have therefore given a new nickname to their city: "Utaanbaatar", meaning "Smoke Hero".

In a simplification of the difficult issues facing Mongolian cities, the *ger* has become the scapegoat for all the problems of urban development. Baatarkhüü and Odsüren argue that the *ger* is perceived increasingly negatively, as it is equated with the *ger* districts and the associated problems of urban development. This view brings a negative image not only to the *ger* itself, but also to the traditional Mongolian way of life and its centuries-old popular customs (Baatarkhüü / Odsüren 2016: 4).

When one compares this image of the *ger* in Ulaanbaatar to its positive image in Hohhot as a representation of Mongolian traditions in China,<sup>24</sup> it becomes apparent that the negative images of the *ger* in Mongolia pertain to ideals of socialist modernism and current pollution, while positive images relate to cultural heritage and ethnicity. The Mongolian government is trying hard to preserve the image of Mongolian *gers* by branding them as *Mongol Ulsyn gal golomt* (the "Mongolian State's hearth"). A large white Mongolian *ger* was built as a State Residential Palace in the government building, where a traditional Mongolian craftsmanship workshop was held. The president welcomes high-ranking political foreign guests there and the state's highest awards are also bestowed there. This State Residential Palace is placed within the current parliament building and a new custom of lighting a fire in the *ger* every year in honour of the 29 December, the anniversary of the victory of the National Liberation in 1911, was recently established.

The *ger* is now increasingly used as an object for promotional purposes and viewed from an economic vantage point. This development particularly pertains to the tourism sector. The *ger* is intentionally employed as a national

24 During my last stay in Hohhot in September 2019, it was stated by scientists of the Inner Mongolia University that the Mongol population is approximately 6.5 million in the People's Republic of China. According to the census from 2000, there were around 4 million registered Mongols. For demographics of Inner Mongolia, see New World Encyclopedia 2018.

symbol with the use of slogans such as “Nomadic by Nature”<sup>25</sup> at exhibitions in foreign countries. In this context it is also possible to advertise *ger* camps in the countryside established for tourists. Interestingly, for purposes of tourism, *gers* have been changed to fit Western living standards by joining two or three *gers* via gangways, dividing them into a living room, bedroom, kitchen and bathroom with permanently installed heating, while maintaining the *ger*'s shape. Through the increasing economic benefits provided by travel agencies,<sup>26</sup> surrounding communities may receive additional employment opportunities in the lower service sectors. However, the marketing of the *ger* also exoticises its inhabitants. Thus, the *ger* is shifting from a traditional dwelling to a symbol of cultural heritage and identity. The herders who live in the *gers* in the countryside are considered as keepers of Mongolian nomadic cultural heritage and are advertised by some politicians as the only people in the world who live in *gers* and still follow a nomadic way of life. At this point, it should be mentioned that Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and other places also have their own traditional yurts. During official visits to foreign countries, certain politicians from Mongolia claim to have grown up themselves as children of herders – in other words, in *gers*. In general, this is a problematic tendency in that the *ger* seems to have become “privatised” as cultural heritage, against the notion of shared culture.

Nonetheless, the government of Mongolia takes numerous measures to preserve and market the historical and cultural treasures of the country, with the *ger* and the associated nomadic life of its inhabitants serving as the flagship. This representation of the *ger* as intangible heritage is contradictory, however, as the same *ger* is scapegoated as being harmful to the environment, particularly with regard to air pollution, and is seen as a regressive form of dwelling, as noted previously.

Finally, as a concluding remark, it should be pointed out that in this entire discussion of the *ger* as either the main symbol of Mongolian cultural treasures or as failed urban development and environmental politics, the opinion of the many *ger* dwellers and herders has never really been included. Of course, there are still people who deliberately move from a city apartment to a *ger* district or into a *ger* to escape the traffic, overpopulation and stress of the city. A 70-year-old woman in Erdenet, for example, decided to live in a *ger* because she thinks that “the air in there is fresher than between the multistorey buildings in the city and it is therefore easier to breathe”. In an interview in August

25 With this slogan, Mongolia, as the exhibition's partner country, represented itself for example at the ITB Berlin in 2016.

26 Over the last years, since the economic crisis, the Mongolian government has decided to diversify its economy and to reduce its dependence on the mining sector. It intends to concentrate on the development of different economic sectors such as agriculture and tourism. According to the Mongolian Tourism Association, 577,262 foreign tourists came to the country in 2019 (see, Tourism Department of City Governor 2019). In 2020, the government planned to receive up to 1 million tourists.



2019, she told me that she was raised in a *ger*. After a long time in a city apartment, she found that by moving back into a *ger* in the *ger* district her life has become “much more pleasant” again. This is one example of how a *ger* can have deep meaning in the daily lives of many Mongolians and can therefore accomplish a variety of functions today. Hence, it is preferable that Mongolian politics consider the *ger* from multiple perspectives, taking into account ecological, socio-cultural and economic aspects.

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