

Journal of
**MATERIAL
CULTURE**

Volume 7(2) • July 2002

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AFTER-LIVES OF THE MONGOLIAN YURT

The 'Archaeology' of a Chinese Tourist Camp

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Abstract

The Mongolian yurt, now abandoned as a dwelling in much of Inner Mongolia (China), has an after-life in architecture, especially in public buildings in cities. We discuss the case of a failed tourist camp, constructed of brick 'yurts', which was built to exploit the exoticism of the Mongolian culture for the Han Chinese. This is an example of skeuomorphic architecture, with deliberate slippage between the original and the copy, and we describe how this situation gives rise to various symbolic interpretations of the 'yurts'. It is argued that, despite certain similarities with post-modern vernaculars (e.g. Las Vegas), the political and ethnically confrontational situation in China means that the imitation 'yurts' do not in fact constitute a vernacular.

Key Words ◆ politics ◆ post-modernism ◆ skeuomorph ◆ symbolism ◆ tourism ◆ yurt

INTRODUCTION

The yurt – the round mobile dwelling made of felts laid on a wooden frame (see Figure 1) – has disappeared from most parts of Inner Mongolia (China). Not only has it long been subject to ideological denigration by the Chinese government as 'backward' and 'unhealthy', but in the last 10 years the whole nomadic pastoral way of life has been discouraged by state land-use policies. Tied to delimited pastures and increasingly engaged in agriculture, the Mongols themselves prefer to live in houses in most regions (Humphrey and Sneath, 1999). Yet in these



FIGURE 1 Herdmen's yurt, central Mongolia, 1980s.

Photograph C. Humphrey

very areas, where yurts have been abandoned for 30 or 40 years, the yurt has come to have a variety of after-lives.¹ This article documents in particular the material culture of a Chinese tourist camp, consisting of imitation 'yurts' solidly built in brick. It presents a contemporary 'archaeology' of a distinctly 20th-century artefact (see e.g. Buchli, 1999; Buchli and Lucas, 2001). The tourist camp's relevance relates to the packaging of the ethnographic, and its 'yurts' resonate with the yurt-like domes that appear as symbols of Mongolness in the public architecture of Inner Mongolian cities. Such citation is something that occurs regularly in our lives, where it often operates at the level of caricature – a cipher of cultures and icons of identity. Built representations of ethnicity become an exercise in symbolism and style alone divorced from the previous social and economic matrix.

Our study thus relates to cultural politics. For the Han Chinese who built the tourist camp, 'the Mongolian culture' is already something to be distanced and encapsulated within the ethnographic. The great open-air Chinese Nationalities Museum in Beijing has exhibits of all the cultures of China except that of the Han Chinese (CNM, 1999). Evidently they do not consider themselves to be ethnographic subjects. Meanwhile, the Mongols in their everyday lives are ever more pressurized in the direction of Sinification, since the structure of employment and

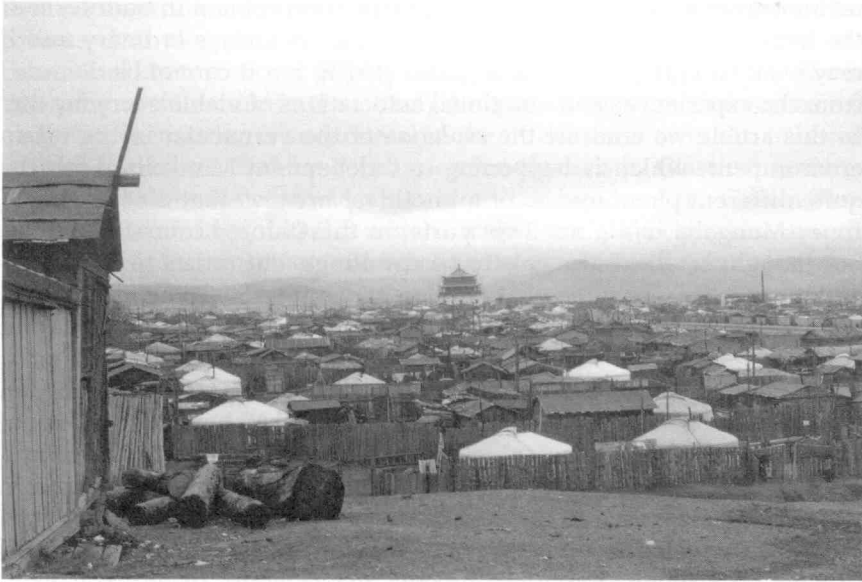


FIGURE 2 Ulaanbaatar city in Mongolia has many districts where yurts are the principal dwellings.

Photograph C. Humphrey

education is such that Chinese culture is the carrier of modernity and economic advance.

This article also concerns the fate of vernacular architecture in socialist and post-socialist society. The Mongolian yurt can be called a truly vernacular artefact, but this is not because of its romantic associations with rural 'nomadic pastoralism'. In fact the yurt can be an urban dwelling when there is no ideological pressure against it. In the independent country of Mongolia, unlike in China, yurts are a practical contemporary form of housing in the capital city, Ulaanbaatar, and they are also used by people with an urban lifestyle in many smaller towns in that country (see Figure 2). As Porphyrios writes (1997 [1983]: 179–80):

Despite the superficial associations with rusticity that the word 'vernacular' brings to mind, its essential meaning is different. The idea of vernacular has nothing to do with stylistics. [...] The essential meaning of vernacular refers to straightforward construction, to the rudimentary building of shelter, an activity that exhibits reason, efficiency, economy, durability and pleasure.

To this we would add that 'a vernacular', if that term has any validity at all, must relate architectural processes to a given social and

technological context. It is then the practical expression in built form of the habitus of social groups. The vernacular is always ordinary and it may even be ugly (Venturi et al., 2000 [1972]) but it cannot be divorced from the experiences and emotional associations of viable everyday life. In this article we contrast the *evolution* of the vernacular in the urban environment, which is happening in independent Mongolia, with the quite different phenomenon of mimetic *replacement* that is occurring in Inner Mongolia in China. The 'yurts' in the Chinese tourist camp are not thought by local Mongols to be dwellings, but rather to be alien – and it has to be said somewhat risible – structures. So, if the mock 'yurt' made of bricks is no longer a straightforward vernacular artefact, what is it?

A comparison with the transformations of classical architecture in Europe is instructive. As with the classicism that became the formal expression of modern secular institutions in the West before the triumph of modernism (Stern, 1997 [1984]: 183), the Chinese yurt-style is used in the public, as opposed to the private, realm. It is found in many official buildings associated with the Mongol people, such as the People's Congress, museums, important schools, mausoleums, or dining-halls in public parks. Yet in other ways it is very different from classicism, at least in the way that idea is understood by Porphyrios. No doubt some would disagree with him, but Porphyrios argues that classicism is not a style. Rather, the classical naturalizes the constructional *a priori*s of shelter by turning them into myth. True classicism is thus a platonic extension of the vernacular:

. . . demarcations of beginning and ending are commemorated as base and capital; the experience of load-bearing is made perceptible through the entasis in the shaft of the column; the chief beam, binding the columns together and imposing on them a common load, becomes the architrave; [. . .] and most significantly – the whole tectonic assemblage of column, architrave, frieze and cornice becomes the ultimate object of classical contemplation in the ideal of the Order. The Order sets form over the necessities of shelter: it sets the myth of the tectonic over the contingencies of construction. (Porphyrios, 1997 [1984]: 181)

Porphyrios seems to contrast this understanding of classicism, as an 'ontology of building', with piece-meal post-modern use of the same classical elements as mere 'borrowed stylistic finery'. We suggest that it is the latter that is closer to the fate of the yurt in contemporary China. The solid 'yurt' has taken on a skeuomorphic character. Skeuomorphs are artefacts intended to evoke the appearance of objects regularly made of other materials. They often involve transformation of previously practical features into decorative ones, such as the stone strips applied in diagonal lattices that imitate the structure of timber frames in English churches (Steadman, 1979: 119). It is not just that the stone lattices do

not perform the supporting functions earlier performed by the timber beams, but the skeuomorphic lattice has a different ontology and ideational context. For it is pretending to be something it is not. Skeuomorphic architecture is thus likely to spin away from the vernacular, whether vernacular is understood in the direct sense or in the transcendental form described by Porphyrios for classicism. Classical features, like the shallow decorative 'columns' on the façade of the Crown Plaza Hotel in Cambridge, can also acquire a skeuomorphic character. But the issue here is less the change of function than the way skeuomorphs work symbolically. The Crown Plaza columns do not work like the 'honest' employment of European classicism in earlier centuries to raise construction and shelter to the level of mythic order (Porphyrios, 1997 [1984]: 181). Rather, they allude to a derived meaning, the social formality attributed to classicism as contrasted with other architectural styles over the centuries. Similarly, the Chinese yurt-style should not be seen as an apotheosis of the yurt. In fact, as detailed below, the tourist and urban 'post-modern' yurt forms depart from Mongolian principles of yurt-construction altogether. Yet this does not mean that they cannot be symbolic.

We can distinguish here between the grand sense of a 'mythic order', as the term has been used above, and symbolism that may take many contingent forms. The skeuomorph cannot be seen to 'stand on its own' (of course, no object in fact does this), but inserts itself into relationality from the beginning by virtue of its pretending to be something else. In the case of the 'yurt' this is a copy that is not a copy. The slippage is deliberate (cf. Taussig, 1993: 52, 115–16), and is meant to convey the particular additional meanings intended by the builders. The very un-Mongol *solidity* of the new urban 'yurt' structures may have been intended by the Chinese builders to suggest public formality, or even to cross-refer to European domes. This same slippage, we suggest below, opens up a gap for the Mongols to interject their own meanings for the mock 'yurts'. Unlike the case of the lived-in yurt, which has a long-sedimented and largely agreed-upon set of symbolic meanings linked to each part and to the whole (Humphrey, 1974), the associations of the Chinese 'yurts' for the Mongols are highly idiosyncratic and contextual. So if mimetic *production* has a certain intentionality to it, a directional quality within the world of possible architectural forms, the *consumption* of such skeuomorphic entities involves a different, far freer, interpretative play (see Knappett, 2001). This has at least two modalities. People may make their own unexpected symbolic associations based on the (mimetically inaccurate) shape and materials of the skeuomorphic artefact – spinning off from the fact that these 'yurts' do not look much like yurts. And they are also likely to understand the ontology of the new artefact to include the intentions of the builders; or to be more accurate, they

incorporate their own interpretations of the builders' 'real' intentions into the totality of their idea of what the mimetic 'yurt' is.

THE TOURIST CAMP

The camp lies before Mergen Monastery, founded in the early 18th century, the only active Mongolian-speaking Buddhist monastery in Inner Mongolia. Since 1995 a group of anthropologists and archaeologists has investigated the cultural landscape of the Mergen environs. Concerned with the diverse sacred places and spatial traditions of its Mongolian and Chinese communities, a preliminary survey was made of the 'ancient monuments' within the monastery's environs (Humphrey, 2001). These include an early length of the Great Wall of China (the White Wall of the Zhao Dynasty of 3rd century BC), associated forts, a major Han period settlement spread, various 'slab graves' and *oboo* cairn group settings (the *oboo* is a cairn built by Mongols as a site for worshipping the spirit-masters of the landscape, such as the lords of mountains, rivers, crags, etc.). We also studied the material culture of the area's 20th-century history. The latter includes gun emplacements and bunker/trench systems relating to the Japanese invasion of the 1930-40s and the Sino-Soviet conflict of the 1960s. Placed between the tourist camp and the monastery are the barracks and officer compound of the PLA (People's Liberation Army), also now abandoned. This is a landscape in which past and present have no definite divide or 'write-off', and the main surface finds are variously Han period pottery and automatic bullet cartridges. It is in this militarized context of landscape scarring (and veneration) that this study resonates.

For its recent immigrants the area is very much an economic frontier, and being prone to speculative ventures, is strewn with quick-money schemes. As the Chinese economic impetus pushes west along the Yellow River corridor - ploughing up great swathes of arable fields in what had been pasture and throwing up gerry-built houses along the arterial roads - its wake is littered with barely surviving shops, mines and industrial initiatives. (A cutting immediately in front of the tourist camp was apparently intended to take a railway siding up to an un-built fuel depot). The very existence of the tourist camp itself speaks of the different landscape attitudes and respective economic weight of the region's two populations. The entire concept of holidays is inherently alien to its resident Mongolian communities, who subsist primarily by rearing goats for the cashmere industry and consider themselves disadvantaged in relation to the smart entrepreneurism of their recent Chinese neighbours. Whereas for the Mongolians the jagged mountains behind the monastery, the Mona Uul mountains, are essentially somewhere to live, work and be in, for the Chinese they have long represented

the wilderness 'beyond the Wall'. Now they are presented to the urbanites of nearby Baotou city in terms of a landscape aesthetic, somewhere to visit and picnic.

The diverse landscape attitudes of the area's respective communities will be more fully explored in subsequent publications (see also Humphrey, 2001). Here let it suffice to observe that within the more deeply rooted regional identity of the Mongols, 'nature' is not regarded as something inert and rarefied, but as an intention-imbued whole together with human society, and is tied to concepts of magical punishment and misfortune for 'wrong actions' within it. In this context it is telling that the Chinese manageress of the tourist camp reported that advertising materials had been prepared on the instructions of the local Baotou City administration glamorizing various sites around Mergen. Although she knew the correct Mongolian name of the sacred cairn (*oboo*) north of the Monastery (Lamxain Oboo, a site where the Mergen monks worshipped local land-spirits), she was told to call it *xuo-fuo-gui-tian-tai* ('place where the Living Buddha returns to Heaven') as this would be more intriguing for tourists. Her own concerns were commercial and she said that she was not bothered by the misleading suggestion that the *oboo* was a burial place, nor by the systematic misnaming of the whole region in publicity materials. Mongol informants, however, remarked darkly, and were clearly not going to forget, that the city administrator who had given this impudent order died of cancer in 1994.²

Built only in 1993³ and now left empty like some sort of ghostly Antarctic station or abandoned film set, the derelict tourist camp of 36 'yurts' is laid out in fields on either side of the Monastery's approach road. This is very much a new material culture and it demands detailed visual documentation (see Figures 3–8). The 'yurts' are constructed of plastered brick with the roofs carried on woven lathe domes with painted designs. Akin to much holiday space in general (see below), the tourist camp is an example of compounded space involving the repetition of a small basic building with discrete specialist functions that only collectively define a whole. The residential units are all c. 5.00 m in diameter, with walls 2.15 m high and roofs rising a further c. 2.00 m. The larger 'facility yurts' are more substantial with diameters of c. 7.00 m. Mimicking local orientation systems, all have one doorway facing southwards, with the residential units having windows on each of their other cardinal axes (three in total). A number of them were abandoned with their furnishings intact. In the middle of their interior is a low circular table, with crescent-segment bed platforms arranged around the back wall. Provided with wooden stools for sitting (the floors are concrete), colourful cloth awnings were suspended below the dome to add a tent-like air.

As is clear in Figure 3, the site was essentially organized in separate arcs of six residential units each. While the western half of the camp was never completed, the layout of the 'finished' eastern side allows us to understand what was intended. It is laid out in two parallel six-'yurt' arcs framing a circular fire-place (the latter being complemented in the western half of the camp by an ovoid concrete hollow that seems to have been intended as a rather grandiose water-feature). Outlying these are two larger communal toilet-shower 'yurts', which – evidently to facilitate night-time identification – have onion dome-like profiles with ornate bosses. In front of these to the south is a line of six corridor-linked dining 'yurts' with seating for upwards of 100 people; the holiday-makers evidently ate *en masse*. Set in the corners of the conjoining walled compound are two larger 'yurts' that were probably used as offices (cooking appears to have occurred within a rectangular building attached to the back of the dining range).

On the western side of the road, a northern arc of residential 'yurts' was completed, as was a line of six further units arranged in a straight line to mirror the dining range (with a toilet 'yurt' lying isolated some distance to the west), but only one 'yurt' of the second/middle arc was built. Clearly, what was ultimately intended was the construction of a total of five lines, each of six 'yurts', two in the east and three in the western half. It is not clear that the 'yurts' were intended as family accommodation. The Chinese state population planning policy envisages one child per couple, but the interior of one residential unit available for inspection had four large bed platforms, rather than the three single-person beds the policy would envisage. More likely, the 'yurts' were intended as communal living space for diverse groups, such as school parties or works outings as well as families.

Despite the attraction of its setting in the shadow of the Mona Uul mountains, not very many urbanites come today to the Mergen area. They are day-tourists and they bypass the camp. Young couples wander a small way up the mountain valleys hand-in-hand. Family groups hire tractor-drawn carts for a bumpy ride to see the sights (incorrectly) described in the brochures. For western democracies this could only be subsumed as a post-modern experience – but is it in a Chinese context? How do we evaluate attempts at integrating (and selling) ethnic minority experience in a 'late' quasi-socialist/burgeoning capitalist party dictatorship? Aside from being a distinct product of the 'present', the Mergen camp escapes neat academic categorization. Yet it is far from unique in China. Similar tourist attractions exist in other Mongolian and Tibetan areas (see Figure 9) and they often have a more overtly ideological intent than the Mergen camp. But even in Mergen it cannot be an accident that the army barracks and later the tourist camp were built right in front of the monastery, swamping it visually and denying its

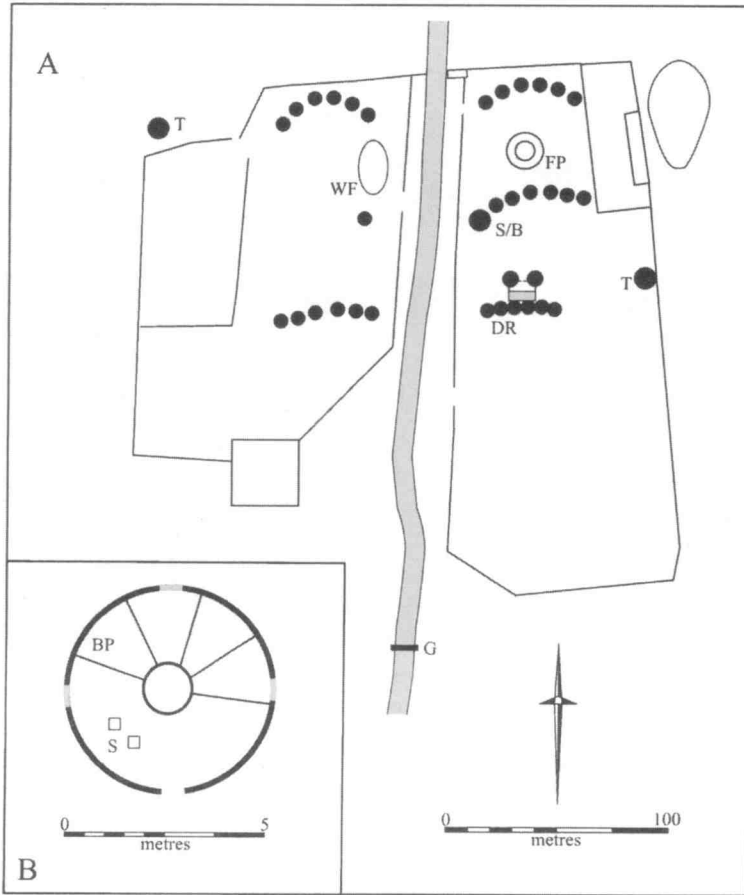
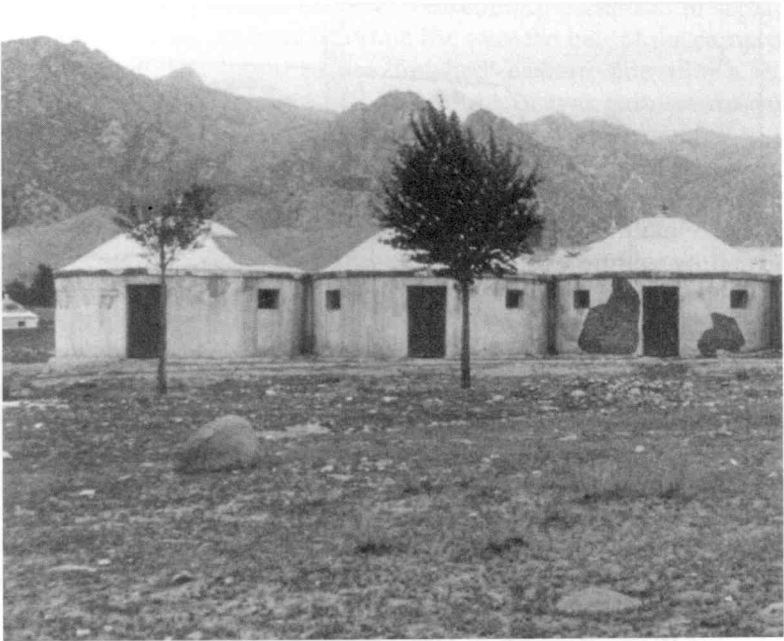


FIGURE 3 Tourist camp plan with 'yurts' blackened: 'T' indicates toilet and 'S/B', shower/bathing 'yurt'; 'DR', linked dining range with kitchen and office compound attached behind; 'WF' and 'FP' respectively indicate the complementary water feature and communal fire pit ('G' denotes gateway). Inset (B) is a schematic plan of residential 'yurt' with radial bed platforms ('BP') arranged around central table; 'S' indicates stools.

formerly dominant position in the landscape. 'In front' here refers to the ancient Chinese principle of architectural planning, still operative today, of alignment of the main façade towards the south. The beautiful old temples of the monastery are thus relegated, cast into an obscure hinterland behind the two modern camps, the military and the touristic. Exotic they may be, the message of the 20th-century builders seems to say, but they are not to be seen as important. The tourist camp presents a frozen



FIGURES 4-6 *The Mergen Tourist Camp.*

Above left and right, the corridor-linked 'yurt' dining range (Figure 4); below left, larger office 'yurts' (Figure 5); below right, northern residential segment (west side) with water feature in mid-ground (the Officers' barracks of the Army compound are visible in the background) (Figure 6).

Photographs C. Evans

FIGURE 5





FIGURE 6





FIGURES 7-8 *The Mergen Tourist Camp* (east side).
Above a shower/bathing 'yurt' with collapsed dome (Figure 7); note its more ornate boss when compared to the sleeping unit on its right and also below in Figure 8.

Photographs C. Evans

FIGURE 8



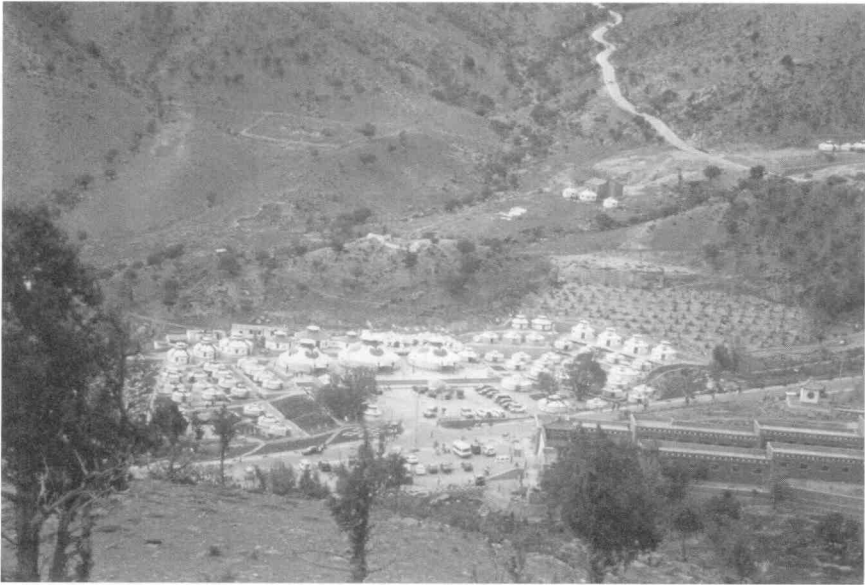


FIGURE 9 Active tourist camp of 'yurts' in Alasha, western Inner Mongolia, 2000.

Photograph H. Diemberger

tension, being simultaneously indirectly sympathetic to (because touristically exploitative of) and at the same time grossly denigrating of the 'traditional' landscape and its inhabitants. At the present time the camp is becoming more derelict by the month. Soon it will be a ruin, and then a relic to be deciphered, like the circles of flat stones littering the plain, which were probably the bases for the yurts of long gone nomads.

INTERPRETATIONS OF SKEUOMORPHIC ARCHITECTURE

The Mongolians of the Mergen area do not see the tourist huts as yurts, but rather as alien things and in some cases as an abomination. This judgement derives in part, we think, from the way the huts depart from Mongolian principles of vernacular architecture. The yurt (see Figure 1) is of course designed for rapid erection and dismantling, unlike the brick huts, and it comprises a specific organization of light, air-circulation, warmth and shelter (Humphrey 1974). Its only light source, apart from the doorway, is the circular hole centrally-placed in the roof over the fire-place/stove. Neither of these central heat/light sources are present in the tourist 'yurt'. Instead, the roof is solid (and is supported by the walls

rather than by two wooden posts as in the herdsman's yurt). The window in the back of the tourist 'yurt' (i.e. facing north) is something that makes the Mongols particularly uneasy, since the north is the direction from which evil influences come. Even in their modern houses, the Mongols avoid placing windows in north walls. Furthermore, the enclosed space of the tourist huts, with brick walls flush to the ground, creates a damp, airless room: The Mongol yurt, on the other hand, is covered with adjustable felts, and the hems of these are regularly hitched-up during the summer to create a fresh draught from the bottom of the walls to the hole in the roof. As for the idea of the 'toilet yurt', Mongols we spoke to found this somewhat shameful and funny, for the yurt should be a place of living, comfort and order. They designate special dips in the land at some distance from the settlement area for the excretory functions of men and women. Needless to say, the arrangement of the tourist camp as a whole compound is entirely different from that of the Mongolian pastoral camp, which normally consists of only one to three yurts.

The greatest dislike was evoked not by the tourist camp, however, but by another group of tourist 'yurts' built up a valley in the mountains near a 'scenic' waterfall. This provides our first example of the symbolic imagination at work. These 'yurts' were built of cemented-together rocks, a particularly unconvincing attempt at imitation of the Mongolian dwelling (see Figure 10). Strewn with rubbish and evidently never occupied, they had no windows and were shaped like squat bee-hives. This is a skeuomorph that has very evident slippage between the built form and the 'original'. An elderly Mongol man passing one of these huts observed to us that they were hateful, 'like graves for the living'. He was referring to the rocks and the rounded shape. It seems that his mind had involuntarily associated the 'yurts' with the rounded mounds of stones Mongols heap over graves. They avoid such places as both polluted and haunted.

Because the tourist 'yurt' is not a yurt it opens up the space for speculation about what kind of thing it is, and we have suggested earlier that part of its perceived character is comprised by the intentions of those who built it. Neither local Mongols nor Chinese see it simply in terms of the 'picturesque' described in the official brochures. Both peoples realize that along with the commercial goal of the tourist camp, a politicized statement is also being made about the character of Mongol culture within the Chinese State. This is most evident in the case of the 'yurts' in prominent urban sites. To provide ethnographic confirmation of our suggestion, let us describe a conversation between two minor bureaucrats, a Mongol and a Chinese, in the city of Huhhot. They were both working in a new government office, which was not yet completely constructed. The Mongol said that to finish off the building some symbol of Mongolness would surely be required. His Chinese colleague replied that there were

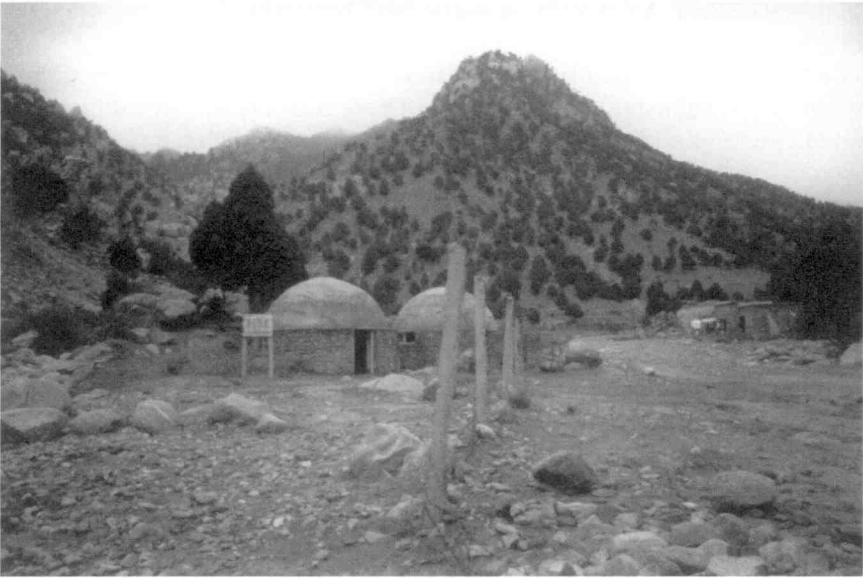


FIGURE 10 The tourist 'yurts' in the upper Mergen River Valley likened to abominable graves.

Photograph C. Humphrey

already too many yurts and statues of horses in Huhhot – this building should have a camel on top. Now for the Chinese camels definitely smack of the barbaric, and even Mongols think they are ugly and rather inauspicious creatures. So the Mongol official was annoyed and retorted that, on second thoughts, since Huhhot is swamped by too many Chinese, the best symbol for the summit of the building would be a sow with eighteen piglets.⁴ This joking conversation shows that people realize how symbols of nationality are used politically and indicates their own cynical adroitness in going beyond official stereotypes. Thus, for local Mongols the yurt-like dome on some official buildings is never just that. They are glad that at least some acknowledgement is made that Huhhot is notionally a Mongol city, but at the same time they are acutely aware of the strategic manipulation of yurt-symbols in city architecture. For example, that the People's Congress building is topped with a 'yurt' while the building of the far more powerful Party Congress is not (the Party is considered to be an All-China institution). Meanwhile, the carelessness with which the urban 'yurts' are rendered – what we have called the skeumorphic slippage – makes many Mongols feel uncomfortable and even insulted. It is jarring to see 'yurts' stuck up there on the roofs, they say, when the yurt is something to be lived in on the ground.

THE PRESENT AND FUTURE OF YURT-FORMS

The Chinese-built 'yurt' is very different from the contemporary urban yurts of Ulaanbaatar (see Figure 2). These are lived-in dwellings, and often consist simply of the standard pastoral yurt placed in a city compound. Such a yurt is ready for a get-away to the countryside when the family feels like it. However, many city yurts are 'developed' in the direction of permanent settlement. Such a dwelling may have a solid elevated base, some steps leading to the door, a porch, or a tin roof. The open fire-place or movable stove inside may be replaced by a more solid stove. Electric lighting takes the place of lamps. Sometimes a family will have several yurts in one compound, designating one for sleeping, one for cooking and one for guests, and combinations of yurts and tiny one-roomed houses are also common. The whole is enclosed within a high fence, often including a latrine in one corner of the compound. The Mongol urban yurt - which so far retains the basic organization of space, heat and light mentioned earlier - may thus evolve through an unbroken practical vernacular architecture into a number of hybrids between the mobile dwelling and the house. This is in contrast to the Inner Mongolian case, where the Chinese 'yurts' are a reintroduction, as it were, of a building form that is ideologically held to belong to the past (even though there are regions of Inner Mongolia where yurts are still used). Our article suggests that the processes of substitution, quotation and estrangement of 'yurts' that are taking place in the Chinese environment are quite different from the vernacular *evolution* of yurts in the towns of Mongolia itself.⁵

Over the last decades, symbolic 'solid yurts' have become part of the fabric of Inner Mongolia's architecture. Alluding to some points made earlier, we can consider whether they should be seen as 'post-modern', that is as integrating with a Chinese post-modern architecture. The 'yurts' crowning, for example, Hohhot's Museum and the City's racetrack stadium, may seem a travesty but they are as nothing when compared to the Greco-Roman temple styles in the extravaganza of Baotou's post-modern architectural boom engendered through that city's embrace of market capitalism. In both cases, the quoted forms have little integration with the mass of the buildings that carry them. The use of 'yurt-styles' otherwise seems to relate to small specialist structures, ranging from ticket, newspaper and sightseeing kiosks to private restaurant 'rooms' (see Figure 11). In this respect two points warrant emphasis. First, their role seems to be largely confined to the public/state sector and, at least thus far, they are not being deployed as apsidal components in domestic architecture as has recently been observed in Central Asia (Buchli, pers. comm.). Secondly, as in the Mergen camp, they have a socially specialist role. Traditionally the Mongolian yurt is an all-encompassing structure in



FIGURE 11 A 'yurt-style' dining room in the restaurant of the Government Hotel, Huhhot.

Photograph C. Evans

which the panorama of life occurs. With its emphasis on centring principles and structured use of space for the entire domestic group, the yurt is widely held to be a pristinely holistic shelter form (Faegre, 1979: 91, 93; Parker-Pearson and Richards, 1994: 12). The recent solid imitations, on the other hand, either have no structural architectural or social function at all (e.g. the cupola shape over the Museum) or act as small buildings for a particular purpose. As many such 'yurts' have both a symbolic and a commercially 'persuasive' role, it is tempting to see the Chinese 'yurts' as similar to the paradigmatic post-modernity of a complex like Caesar's Palace at Las Vegas, with its diverse allusions to ancient Rome (Venturi et al., 2000 [1972]). We would argue that the analogy works in one way, but not in another. The 'yurts' have a similar emphasis on iconography to strip architecture, but we suggest that they are not, as things stand, a vernacular form.

Venturi et al. (2000 [1972]) have argued convincingly that the motels, supermarkets, parking lots and drive-in stores of the Las Vegas Strip *are* a modern vernacular, being adapted at low cost to environmental conditions, commerce and circulation systems. The Strip is a place of signs, intended to be read in big desert spaces and seen from cars moving at high speed, and while the message is 'basely commercial' the

architectural context thus created is fundamentally appropriate to the contemporary highly mobile and entertainment-oriented American way of life.

The building is low because air conditioning demands low spaces, and merchandising techniques discourage second floors; its architecture is neutral because it can hardly be seen from the road. (2000 [1972]: 9)

Although there is no reason in principle why Chinese tourist architecture should not become a vernacular, the particular case we are considering cannot be seen as the outcome of a viable way of life. The tourist 'yurt' does not make economical use of materials (as it does at Las Vegas) and it is not particularly well-adapted to its diverse specialist functions – indeed the camp may have failed in part because the 'yurts' were so inconvenient and unpleasant to stay in. Crucially, as we argue later, it also fails iconographically. It conveys messages no-one wants to hear.

We need to think about how the distinctive Chinese amalgam of socialism with relatively unpractised capitalism may inflect such phenomena as the tourist camp differently from the old-hand capitalism of the USA. And can we speak of 'post-modernism' in a country where the peculiarly European shift of consciousness from humanism to modernism (Eisenman, 1997) did not occur in anything like the same way? Could the absence of functionality of the Chinese 'yurts' be similar to 'post-functional' western architecture when there was no modernist doctrine of functionality to rebel against? We cannot answer these large questions in a short article, but will end by making some observations on the ideological and political context of the 'yurt' style, for it is this that conditions its meanings.

The symbolic universe in which the tourist camp appeared is highly politicized, in that the Mongols are still suspected of potentially dangerous disloyalty to the centralized state. As Gladney observes (1995: 165), the 'hard' minorities of the Northwest, such as the Mongols, Tibetans and Uighurs, are depicted (e.g. in films) in a harsher light than the 'soft' minorities of Southwest China (Yi, Miao, Zhuang, etc.). We can note also that the camp is also politically dated, in an almost archaeological sense. It could not have appeared before the mid-1980s, when the Chinese economic reforms (enabling commercial enterprise) had taken hold in Inner Mongolia. It nevertheless retains some features of Socialist architecture, such as the 'welcoming gateway' over the road at the entrance. Such structures were well-known across the socialist world, being used both for the display of suitable slogans indicating the kind of space one is now entering and for control functions (a hut attached to the gateway would commonly accommodate police or other officials checking on those who entered). It is characteristic of China's current mixed political

economy that the control hut at the gateway of the tourist camp has not been abandoned, but now houses a lackadaisical employee, who is supposed to charge day-tourists for entering the Mergen area. Actually this man, an elderly Mongol who is fond of drink, is absent for most of the time. Nevertheless, the hut is an 'archaeological' trace of earlier state control. This can be seen clearly from the fact that the same kind of control hut exists at the second gate further up the road giving onto the army camp and the monastery. This gate is kept locked, despite the fact that the army abandoned the site years ago, and people cannot enter the site without rousing the somnolent guardians.⁶ These gates indicate that the subject is stepping through a boundary into a different kind of space, and they are reminders that the material culture of tourism must be inflected by the symbolic imagination (Schein, 1994) of a centralized, militarized state built on the idea of 'minorities'.

As Gladney rightly observes in the context of Chinese film and art concerning minorities (1995: 167), 'the representation of minorities in this exotic and romanticized fashion is more a project of constructing a majority discourse than of depicting the minorities themselves.' The effect is to homogenize the undefined majority as united, mono-ethnic and modern. More demanding films that present the ethnographic as truly other, vigorous and brutal have failed with the Chinese public, for they convince them that their own lives are less spiritual and less natural by contrast (1995: 169). In this context, the physical dereliction of the camp should be understood not simply in terms of commercial failure, but in relation to the acceptability (or not) of certain visions of the exotic presented to the majority and of themselves in these alien surroundings. Perhaps the Chinese tourists are happy to view 'wild mountains' and Mongolian temples, but not to step over a boundary and play-act *living* among them.

For all the distinctiveness of the Chinese case, perhaps there is some globally widespread phenomenon that we can recognize here? The modern deployment of the 'yurt-style' has parallels in ethnographically-inspired architectural types elsewhere in the world. The 'playfulness' of holiday architecture has a broad and long pedigree, ranging from Disneyland to the Edwardian mock-Tudor of Thorpeness, the Suffolk resort, and Portmeirion in Wales. At its heart sits the promotion of group fantasies whilst maintaining core social values, such as those of the family in Britain or the works-outing in China. An ethos of entertainment and 'basic healthy living' that still, for example, underpins Butlin's holiday camps increasingly finds resonance in various Inner Mongolian-promoted foreign tourist packages (e.g. steppe and Genghis Khan 'experiences' or *naadam* horse-racing festivals). However, these are highly specific phenomena in historical terms. They arise and flourish or fail in relation to particular configurations of the ethnographic within wider

polities. One thinks, for example, of Kohinbo cultural centres amongst the Gurung/Tamu-mai of central Nepal (essentially a grand-scale enlargement in concrete of their ritual rice effigies, Evans, 1999: 442, figures 28.2 and 28.3), which are a response to a newly aggressive sense of Gurung ethnicity within the country of Nepal; or of the giant tepees and timber lodges that express a certain conception of the North American First Nation peoples (Hurle, pers comm.). Both of these cases are operating at a historical cusp where the ethnographic subject turns into the political movement and are so-endowed to command their own 'public' architecture. The Mongols of the Mergen region are not fortunate enough to be in such a political position. The derelict Chinese tourist camp is a reminder of a particular period in the early 1990s, when Mongol exoticism seemed to lend itself to easy commercial exploitation. It seems, though, that the co-presence in the same territory of an infelicitous version of the exotic with real, impoverished Mongol inhabitants, was something no-one could stomach. If the yurt-form does go on being produced in Inner Mongolia, it looks as though it will be an increasingly estranged structure, employed cynically by the Chinese and ever more alienated from the Mongols.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful for discussions with and variously support/information provided by B. Bender, V. Buchli, H. Diemberger, M. Edmonds, A. Hurle and M. Rowlands, and are indebted to our Mergen Project colleagues, Hurelbaatar and James Laidlaw. Within the Mergen environs we are grateful for the co-operation of many, especially the Monastery's lamas. The project's researches have been generously funded by the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research of the University of Cambridge. Marcus Abbott compiled the 'site' plan (see Figure 3) after Ikonos satellite imagery (and our on-ground plans).

Notes

1. They live in Chinese-style mud brick houses, now being rapidly replaced by larger brick houses with glass windows.
2. Though the manageress claimed not to care about the administrator's 'misfortune', and said she was not religious and therefore not afraid of the monastery, she nevertheless took care to make donations to it. Given her penny-pinching in all other circumstances, this meant, according to the local Mongols, that she really was very afraid of supernatural punishment.
3. The camp was established by the Baotou city administration and subsequently sold into private hands.
4. Hurelbaatar, pers. comm.
5. Mongolia also has tourist camps of yurts. But these are essentially ordinary felt yurts, improved by the addition of electricity and furniture suitable for tourists, such as chairs and tables.
6. The army still owns the land of the military camp, which includes the monastery territory.

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