

Mongolian (urban) homes

Justine Pribetich & Lucile Chombart de Lauwe



Sandstorm. Yurt neighbourhood. Bayankhongor, April 2011.

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The rapid urbanisation that Mongolia has undergone in recent years has changed the way its population lives. These transformations – at the crossroads between traditional culture, Soviet influence and Westernisation – are here portrayed in pictures by Lucile Chombart de Lauwe and in words by Justine Pribetich.

Photography and the social sciences: contrasting perspectives on Mongolia

In partnership with the Paris-based photographers' collective Le Bar Floréal, *Metropolitics* is pleased to present the first in a new series of articles that will explore themes from a dual perspective: through the photographer's lens and from the standpoint of a researcher. In this inaugural paper, Justine Pribetich's text and Lucile de Chombart de Lauwe's photographs depict recent urban and social transformations in Mongolia.

After first visiting Mongolia in 2007, Lucile Chombart de Lauwe returned on two occasions in 2011 in order to immerse herself in this country gripped by change and transformed by the development of the market economy and a number of climatic disasters. As her aim was to explore the consequences of housing changes on the Mongolian way of life, she prepared her journey with Justine Pribetich. In Mongolia, she stayed with families of contrasting social status and in various housing situations, and closely followed their day-to-day lives, resulting in several series of photographs (which can be found at the end of this text). Her work received the special mention of the 2012 Jury du Prix SCAM–Roger Pic. It has been the subject of a number of exhibitions, notably in the gardens of the Musée Albert Kahn in Boulogne-Billancourt, near Paris, and has been published under the title "La Mongolie au fil du présent" ("Mongolia through the present").

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How are we to address these changes and transformations? How are we to understand them? It is by combining two approaches – the first photographic, the second sociological – that we are able to appreciate the production of new urban forms, changes in the way spaces are organised, and their repercussions on lifestyles and residential habits. In the case of Mongolia, the shift from large open spaces to overpopulated cities and/or from mobile circular tents to fixed angular housing is not without its consequences; however, these consequences have to be identified and qualified.

The photographic work of Lucile Chombart de Lauwe opens our eyes to a different view of urban spaces, by recording the changes that are currently under way in this country in transition. Although certain trends and dynamics are familiar, her work enables us to distance ourselves from the categories typically used to consider the city – in particular those that characterise Western cities (Choplin 2012) – by painting a portrait of a world in motion in a unique historical and cultural context.

An urban trajectory under construction

The urban trajectory of Mongolia is recent, but it has already generated a series of transformations that have had consequences on the local population's relationship with space and place(s). Far from the popular imagery of endless steppes, Mongolia is in the process of (re)building itself around cities and urban hubs, leaving behind some of the traditional aspects that for so long

characterised the country. The social changes are happening rapidly, as are changes in the power relationships between Mongolia and its neighbours, and indeed the rest of the world.

The development of Mongolia, sandwiched between Russia to the north and China to the south, has been partly dependent on the phases of expansion and rising power of these neighbouring civilisations. After a period of unity under the influence of Genghis Khan, with the creation of the Mongol Empire, the country was split into two in the early 20th century, with Inner Mongolia attached to China and Outer Mongolia under Russian control. The independence of the Mongolian People's Republic was declared in 1924, but it would not be until 1990 that the Soviet influence would be brought to an end with the fall of the USSR and the rejection of communism. Fully independent since the proclamation of the Republic of Mongolia in 1992, the country is today a democratic nation.

Mongolia's present-day face is the result of its turbulent history, in terms of both its populations and its landscapes. It is the fruit of various migratory movements, which are now taking on a new importance as the country enters the era of massive urbanisation. With 2.8 million inhabitants¹ and a population density of 1.79 inhabitants per square kilometre, modern Mongolia remains a sparsely populated country, but one that has been experiencing a tremendous rate of urbanisation over the last two decades. Almost 60% of the population now live in towns and cities (compared to 20% in 1965) and nowhere is this more evident than in the capital, Ulan Bator, where the concentration of population creates a hustle and bustle that is in stark contrast to the sober, minimalist lines of the architecture of the city centre – a legacy of Soviet urbanisation – which is today enlivened by modern buildings.

Anarchic and problematic urbanisation

Several factors have led to the arrival and settlement of nomadic and semi-nomadic peoples in towns and cities in Mongolia. Climatic problems, causing the loss of thousands of livestock, have forced many ruined nomadic herders to head for the city in search of work. Furthermore, this urban expansion – nurtured by massive rural exodus and high fertility rates – has been encouraged by the government, which sees the concentration of citizens in limited urban areas as a means of more easily and more closely controlling the population.

The urbanisation of the country has, however, been somewhat anarchic. Yurt neighbourhoods have mushroomed, particularly in the suburbs of Ulan Bator, where the newly arrived nomadic population set up their circular dwellings and surround them with wooden fencing, without any of the urban infrastructures and other amenities necessary for even the most basic of comforts. Today, over half of residents do not have access to running water, and day-to-day life is organised around journeys to and from the rare private wells and water kiosks and weekly trips to the public baths. Indeed, the rapid urbanisation of certain regions of Mongolia has led to reduced availability of water for domestic and industrial use and has caused major sanitation problems, particularly in Ulan Bator.² Living in the capital also means putting up with the air pollution of its suburbs, bearing in mind that most families still heat their homes in winter with coal from the nearby mines. Another facet of this uncontrolled urbanisation is the fact that waste is not dealt with or disposed of in Ulan Bator, but simply collected in rubbish dumps on the outskirts of the city. No substantial measures have been taken to deal with this problem either in terms of environmental protection or in sanitary terms to avoid epidemics.

Therefore, although some similarities with the West exist, the urban trajectory of this country and its cities nonetheless remains far removed from those of Western nations. Like most developing

¹ Data from 2010 and 2011, United Nations Development Programme (UNPD): <http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/MNG.html> and *Encyclopædia Universalis*: http://www.universalis.fr/encyclopedie/mongolie-republique-mongole/#i_59272.

² According to a report published in 2011 by the Mongolia Water Authority and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP).

countries that have undergone rapid urbanisation, the concentration of populations in the centres of Mongolian cities, and Ulan Bator especially, has been accompanied by the emergence or consolidation of social and sanitary problems. The gap is widening between social classes, and inequalities in terms of housing, health and access to resources are now visible in the urban public space – for example, between the comfortable suburbs in the north of the city and the yurt neighbourhoods where no one ventures outside without a mask. When urbanisation of this kind is combined with other developments, such as climate change, the situation becomes even more serious, putting Mongolia in a more than “vulnerable” position (Rufin 2004).

Adaptation(s) and reconfiguration(s) of ways of life: between the nomadic and the sedentary

In addition to the problems described above, the production of new residential habits also goes hand in hand with the acceleration and integration of urbanisation in Mongolian society. Ulan Bator has joined the ranks of cities in the process of globalisation, and is a place where three worlds now meet: traditional Mongolian culture, Soviet influences and a Westernisation of lifestyles resulting from the opening-up of the country to the rest of the world. By photographing the new ways of life of sedentarised nomads and by following the day-to-day lives of a number of families with different social backgrounds and housing situations living in UB (the local nickname for the capital), Lucile Chombart de Lauwe reveals a reconfiguration in the way they live. The co-presence of old and new spatial practices generates unique urban situations in a partially transformed built environment and city. Housing conditions vary considerably: some people live in yurts, close to the city centre; others live in permanent dwellings, with comforts inspired by a certain notion of Western-style “well-being”.

The shift from yurt to permanent building brings about major transformations. As round, conical structures with a single living space, yurts necessarily call for a specific layout of furniture and objects, as well as a strict spatial distribution codified by their occupants (Poujol 2007). The move to a permanent dwelling represents a break away from the physical framework of traditional ways of living: increased floor space and roof height, the presence of windows, more rooms, the option of having a choice of exposure, materials and layout, as well as the introduction of right angles, straight walls and ceilings. These new city-dwellers, living in apartments or houses, typically transpose their circular model of domestic organisation to an angular, compartmentalised dwelling, which requires certain adaptations and also leads to incompatibilities or, conversely, the development of new needs (Beffa and Hamayon 1983).

Although distinctions already existed between different areas within the yurt, the appearance of new residential partitions can be observed on two levels. First, within the family unit, with a partitioning of domestic and social practices between collective space and private space, owing to the division of the dwelling into several rooms. In this respect, a modification in the gendered distribution of the living space has also taken place: the women of the household, in the single room of the yurt, contributed to a certain intensity of social relationships; now, they are confined to the kitchen, a space dissociated from the other rooms, and in particular the rooms for receiving guests. The appearance of new social distinctions can be observed as a result, together with the modification of practices and forms of sociability within the dwelling, allowing for greater intimacy and individuality. Second, new spatial distributions and specialisations are also visible from the outside: detached houses and dwellings in apartment blocks include transitional spaces that highlight the partitions between the private sphere of the home and the public sphere. Yurts, on the other hand, are laid out in “yurt neighbourhoods” in the city, on plots of land surrounded by fences to show the boundaries of the property.

The creation of these new Mongolian residential spaces also has repercussions on residents’ relationships with their environment and modifies the rules of interaction with society (Marois 2006). Yurts – easily dismantled and transported – implied a particular representation of the environment, linked to the possibility of extreme mobility, that is not found in a permanent

dwelling. The fixed nature of houses and apartments leads to new frequencies of relations with a given place, as well as between individuals and groups. Furthermore, the settling of populations gives rise to a separation between work and housing, leading to the externalisation of a range of activities traditionally attached to the home. These elements play a role in changing the structure of interactions with others and establish an unprecedented regularity in social relationships outside the home.

And yet it would be wrong to assume that a collective consciousness of “modernity” has taken over, or that the move from one place to another, or from one dwelling to another, creates only breaks and discontinuities. Continuities exist and settling does not necessarily mean the complete acculturation of former country-dwellers and of nomads to the urbanised model that we are familiar with. Certain forms of resistance can be observed within dwellings that are in no way traditional: different generations may live under the same roof; parents may still sleep in the same bed as their children, or may continue to lay out their mattresses on the floor of their apartment; and the kitchen is sometimes set up in the living room instead of the room provided for this purpose. Families may keep foodstuffs on the balcony or in one of the rooms, as in their former yurt. The combination of ways of living, old and new, inherited from traditional societies and inspired by the West, leads to the existence of multiple forms of intermediate residential systems that are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

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The only water supply for Bogd, a village of 5,000 inhabitants, is this tanker. That day, it broke down three times on the 12-kilometre (7.5-mile) journey from the well to the village.

Bogd, Gobi Desert, March 2011.



A woman collects sun-dried animal droppings. These are used to fuel the stove, located in the centre of the yurt, which provides heat both for the home and for cooking. In the city, the main fuel source is coal.

Karakorum, March 2011.



Neighbourhood close to the city centre.

Ulan Bator, December 2011.



Yurts in the country after a snowstorm.

Bogd, Gobi Desert, March 2011.



Neighbourhood of Russian-built apartment blocks.

Darkhan, April 2011.



City-centre apartment block.
Ulan Bator, December 2011.



Monkhjargal leaves his *khasha* (private plot of land enclosed by wooden fences). A *khasha* generally comprises a yurt and/or house, wooden toilets, and the wood or coal store. Several families may live in the same *khasha*.

Yurt neighbourhood of Sükhbaatar, Ulan Bator, December 2011.



The latest arrivals to the capital. Plots of land are distributed by the state: every citizen has the right to a plot of land of their choosing. If the plot is available, the family marks out its boundaries with wooden fencing.

The end of the yurt neighbourhood, Uliastai, Ulan Bator, April 2011.



Villager.

Bogd, Gobi Desert, March 2011.



Village hall in the centre of the settlement.

Bogd, Gobi Desert, March 2011.



Adiya, 91. She lives with six members of her family in a two-room dwelling. She sleeps on the floor, next to her two great-grandchildren.

Ulan Bator city centre, December 2011.



Giima and Diima wash their hair in the yurt. Once a week, the whole family goes to the public baths.
Yurt neighbourhood of Songino Khaikhan, Ulan Bator, December 2011.



Yurt in a *khasha*.

Yurt neighbourhood of Songino Khairkhan, Ulan Bator, December 2011.



Narantuya and Byambadorj get ready for bed. Some family members sleep in beds located close to the walls; the rest of the family sleep on the floor with blankets. Sleeping arrangements such as these sometimes persist even among families who live in houses or apartments in the city.

Bayankhongor, April 2011.



Typical Buryat house. One of the rooms in the house is too cold to be inhabitable in winter, and so is used to store food.

Yurt neighbourhood of Chingeltei, Ulan Bator, December 2011.



Badamdorj and Ghuluen with one of their daughters in their bed. The three of them sleep together. Badamdorj and Ghuluen sell luxury bathrooms.

Ulan Bator city centre, December 2011.



A broken refrigerator is installed inside a yurt. It will be used as a larder.
Yurt neighbourhood of Songino Khaikhan, Ulan Bator, December 2011.



A typical Buryat house.

Yurt neighbourhood of Chingeltei, Ulan Bator, December 2011.



A new mother with her baby at the hospital.
Bogd, Gobi Desert, March 2011.



Animal head and stomach stored in a cold room.

Yurt neighbourhood of Sükhbaatar, Ulan Bator, December 2011.



Monkhjargal covers his mouth before going out in order to avoid inhaling the coal particles that permeate the city. Coal is used to fuel the stoves in most yurts.

Yurt neighbourhood of Sükhbaatar, Ulan Bator, December 2011.



Construction of apartment blocks to the north of the city. The air pollution due to coal-fired stoves does not reach as far as this neighbourhood, which is intended for well-off residents.

Zaisan, Ulan Bator, December 2011.



Families from different neighbourhoods of Ulan Bator.

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Lucile Chombart de Lauwe is a photographer. A graduate of the École National Supérieure de la Photographie in Arles, she is today based in Paris, where she joined the Bar Floréal photographers' collective in early 2010. Her work is characterised by a principle of total immersion in the spheres she photographs or in which she is involved. These include SAMU Social (an organisation providing care and medical aid to homeless people), the charity Emmaus, orphanages and disability-related organisations. Her portfolio also includes portraits of the long-term jobless, future victims of redundancy and former miners, and a three-year project in which she explored the world of night workers.

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To quote this article:

Justine Pribetich & Lucile Chombart de Lauwe, translated by Oliver Waine, “Mongolian (urban) homes”, *Metropolitiques*, 29 April 2013. URL: <http://www.metropolitiques.eu/Mongolian-urban-homes.html>.