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# **Authenticity and Adaptation: The Mongol *Ger* as a Contemporary Heritage Paradox**

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## **Abstract**

The Mongol *Ger* is a transportable felt tent deriving from an ancient nomadic civilization. The structure encapsulates a specific Mongolian nomadic cultural identity by encompassing a way of life based upon pastoral migration, complex familial relationships and hierarchies, and spiritual beliefs. As Mongolia has rapidly urbanised over the past century, the form and function of the *ger* have changed, with some of the integral facets of the structure lost with a view to commercialising and/or adapting a nomadic symbol for modern consumption. This paper will explore the *ger* as a vernacular and globally recognised form, assessing whether its nomination by the Mongolian State Party on the *Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity* as a craft-skill is either sufficient or indeed appropriate. It will further be argued that to understand the *ger* in its totality requires an understanding also of the concept of authenticity to disentangle variations between the ‘livingness’ of the *ger* and its appropriation for a wider audience.

## **Keywords**

Authenticity, Ger, Yurt, Mongolia, Craft skills, Intangible heritage

## **Introduction**

Currently around 30% of Mongolia’s population is living as nomads from livestock husbandry, deriving from nomads who occupied the Altai region some 2 to 3,000 years ago (Lkhagvadorj et al. 2013, 2). Nowadays migrations typically involve distances from 5 km to 150 km and occur traditionally four times a year (Kawagishi et al. 2010, 142), reflecting a universal definition of nomadism as ‘a people that travels from place to place to find fresh pasture for its animals and

has no permanent home' (Oxford Dictionaries). Notwithstanding such a clear and widely understood definition, this paper explores the idiosyncrasies of Mongolian nomadism as more than a migrating people. Rather it considers nomadism (or the resilient traces of nomadism) as a lifeway enacted from within the ger, abiding to particular social structures and an organisation of space, a people and a respect for nature.

For much of the population, Mongolia's rapid changes over the past century have demonstrated a shift from rural to urban, nomadic to sedentary and traditional to modern. Mongolia has become a nation of contrasting identities. The Mongol *ger*, a vernacular nomadic dwelling, symbolically evokes these developments through the social, economic and political spheres that are intrinsic to its existence. Through the examination of Mongolian nomadism in the twenty-first century, this paper will assess the sustainability of the *ger* by exploring the complexities of a society attempting to connect its rural, nomadic past with an optimistic, global future. The flexibility and versatility of the *ger*, seen in the recent adoption of significant new roles and identities, has created a number of hybrid structures which fluctuate between permanent homes and mobile dwellings, particularly abundant in the capital city of Ulaanbaatar. These variations will be critically evaluated through an exploration of the tangible material significance and the wider intangible values associated with the structures and their related authenticity. In light of UNESCO's (2013) recent inscription of the 'Traditional Craftsmanship of the Mongol *Ger* and its Associated Customs' on the *Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity* (hereafter RL) as nominated by the Mongolian State Party, we argue that the encapsulation of its identity only in terms of craftsmanship is felt to greatly undermine the structure's wider significance. By examining the authenticity of the urban *ger* that exists in Mongolian cities and referring briefly to examples generated for tourism purposes, this paper will problematise the understanding of authenticity in relation to intangible cultural heritage (hereafter ICH). Authenticity within the discourse of ICH will further be considered as a crucial element when aiming to safeguard cultural diversity and human creativity.

## **ICH and Authenticity**

The craftsmanship of the Mongol *ger* was nominated for the RL by the Mongolian State Party on the basis that it facilitated the transmission of knowledge and skills to provide a sense of identity and continuity, encouraged the promotion of cohesion across society, testified to human creativity and raised awareness and capacity building (UNESCO 2013). The craftsmanship of the *ger*, therefore, fulfils UNESCO's understanding of ICH as the 'practices, representations, expressions, knowledge and skills' as well as tangible elements, that are 'transmitted from generation to generation' and which are 'constantly recreated' to provide a 'sense of identity and continuity' (UNESCO 2003, 2). While this definition permits cultural heritage in all of its variations to be acknowledged and safeguarded, Kurin (2004, 66) questions ultimately whether UNESCO can really help local cultural traditions to 'survive and even flourish in the face of globalisation?'.

The approach to understanding intangible cultural expressions has slowly evolved since the 1950s through the acceptance of the *Convention for the Protection of World Cultural and Natural Heritage* in 1972 and culminating in 2003 when the general conference adopted UNESCO's (2003, 1) *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* (hereafter ICHC) which aims to sustain living heritage, rather than collect only the tangible artefacts, and to recognise persons in the context of their life space and social world (Kirschenblatt-Gimblett 2004, 54). Recognition and safeguarding of the craftsmanship of the Mongol *ger* has therefore contributed to the sustainability of *ger* production, understanding the creative and technical skills rather than only the tangible structural elements. It is important to note, however, that tangible elements are also considered in ICH nominations when they are associated with the practice. Inscription, therefore, has the potential to become a facilitator of heritage in a community. Munjeri (2008,143) has explained how this is a cyclical process in which the community becomes a phenomenon and a mechanism that is sustained by ICH and enacted and based on knowledge systems. Cultural identity is therefore reinforced by the everyday practices of a community which contribute to their role as ethnographic producers

rather than solely as static studied objects. This is further substantiated in the Operational Directives (2008) for the Implementation of the ICHC which encourages state parties to involve communities at all levels and ensure their cooperation and ‘widest possible participation’ (2008, 1).

Authenticity has been extensively debated since the Venice Charter in 1964 when the concept was first introduced by ICOMOS (1964, 1) in terms of handing down historic monuments in the ‘full richness of their authenticity’. The *Nara Document on Authenticity* (ICOMOS 1994) marked the height of these debates when authenticity was considered as relative and contextual as opposed to a universal absolute (Stovel 2008, 9). Here, experts debated its meaning and importance, particularly the prevailing considerations of monumentality and the idea that only original material and intent are attributes of authenticity. This ignored the contribution of values, which as Jokilehto (1995, 19) explained were not derived from authenticity; ‘rather it [authenticity] should be understood as the condition of an object or a monument in relation to its specific qualities’. Consequently, the diversity of cultural heritage of specific societies and cultures was embraced with a focus on local understanding and community importance. In relation to heritage protection, both intangibility and authenticity have therefore progressed towards a more people-centred approach (see Jones 2016, for example and for overview).

The *Operational Guidelines* submitted by UNESCO as a result of Nara (2005, 21; 2013, 22) express authenticity as ‘cultural values that are truthfully and credibly expressed through a variety of attributes’. These attributes include the intangible elements that a community, rather than professionals, have assigned value to, giving importance to aspects such as function, people, spirituality and social significance. Jones (2009, 133), however, has argued that these divergent approaches still cause authenticity to remain problematic due to the inconsistencies between materialist and constructivist approaches. The former focusses on the measurability of authenticity, while the latter conceives it as something culturally constructed. Jones asserts that neither achieves a full understanding of authenticity as they fail to address how people relate to

the historic environment. Affirmation of authenticity is found in the people who create their cultures as living, dynamic systems.

Given that UNESCO has aimed to separate ICH and authenticity, Kurin (2004, 70) has argued that the Convention essentially makes the intangible tangible and thus their distinction is problematic. Whilst the tangible materials of the *ger* and the intangible methods of construction are intimately linked, both the discussions concerning ICH and authenticity have elicited the need for a more holistic, people-centred approach to heritage management, where a way of life can be equally safeguarded. Without the comprehension of the social context of the Mongol *ger*, the risk of a homogenised culture adapting to global demands and embracing ‘modernity’ may outweigh the diversity and authenticity of this ancient culture.

A clear symbiotic relationship therefore exists between nomadic identity and the Mongol *ger* in which the manifestation of the tangible and intangible values are encapsulated. This has formed the basis from which to assess the Mongol *ger* in terms of its ICH and the limits of this, and how authenticity can successfully be incorporated into its future safeguarding when the people who create their cultures as living, dynamic systems are recognised as essential attributes.

### **Context**

Mongolia is a country in which pastoralism and urbanism coexist, yet with the pressure of urbanism now threatening the traditional Mongolian lifestyle. The Mongolian *ger*, shown in Figure 1, has traditionally been used for nomadic purposes as a lightweight structure that is easily erected, dismantled and transported. It has, however, become more recently adopted into sedentary life in Mongolia, as demonstrated in Figure 2. The practicalities of nomadic life in an ever modernising society have led scholars, politicians, and occupants of *gers* to re-evaluate its purpose and significance. Former Prime Minister Nambaryn Enkhbayar expressed this view by stating in 2001 that: ‘It is not my desire to destroy the original Mongolian identity, but in order to survive we have to stop being nomads’ (cited in Murphy 2001, 30).



Figure 1: A traditional rural *ger* in Mongolia.

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mongolia\\_013.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mongolia_013.jpg)





Figure 2: A sedentary *ger* settlement in the capital city of Ulanbaatar, Mongolia

([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Widok\\_na\\_U%C5%82an\\_Bator\\_z\\_Gana%27s\\_Guest\\_House\\_\(04\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Widok_na_U%C5%82an_Bator_z_Gana%27s_Guest_House_(04).jpg))

According to Marin (2008, 77), urban opinions of pastoral nomadism can be similar, expressing it as a difficult and undesirable way of life or part of an idealised Mongol past. It has also been said, however, that Mongolia's nomadic heritage is what helped them to transform successfully from a communist state into a democratic, free-market economy (Murphy 2001, 30) in the post-Soviet era. The question arises, therefore, why this rich culture has so hastily cast off its nomadic heritage in a call for modernisation (but see Humphrey and Sneath 1999 for an alternative view that the nomadic way of life can be compatible with modern society).



From 1937 to 1990 Mongolia was under Soviet rule, during which time the capital city of Ulaanbaatar was a particular focus for the regime. It served as a base from which to encourage the population to abandon their nomadic heritage and embrace the utopian ideals of a communist party. Within the city only a few buildings survive predating 1937 and instead multi-storey apartment blocks comparable to those across the entire Soviet bloc are abundant (Diener and Hagen 2013, 632).

Following the end of Soviet rule (and see Honeychurch 2010, 405 for an overview), one third of the entire population lived in Ulaanbaatar, a city poorly designed throughout the Soviet era and now struggling to accommodate the continuous rise in population (Diener and Hagen 2013, 623-624). Although many of the city's inhabitants have effectively urbanised their lifestyles, approximately 60% occupy *ger* neighbourhoods which some consider problematic and detrimental to Mongolia's future (ibid., 623). The erection of permanent wooden or brick structures and fenced yards around the urban *gers* represents the trend towards permanence in these *ger* districts (ibid., 638). A paradox between the traditional principles of nomadic mobility and the new development of the static *ger* is therefore evident. Thus the conflict between, and the fusion of, the settled and nomadic communities is shaping a unique Mongolian society symbolic of a wider discussion between modernity and tradition.

The significant number of *gers* present in Ulaanbaatar perhaps indicates the resilience of Mongolians, holding onto traditional lifestyles in the setting of modernity, or the inability of the Communist Party to fully sedentarise the city in modern apartment blocks. The question arises whether this resilient national identity is strong enough to compete with global forces, but perhaps more importantly, whether the intangible values of nomadic heritage will survive in practiced form. Logan (2002, xii) describes the rapidly increasing urbanisation in Asian cities, and how this is thought to be associated with the loss of 'Asian-ness', especially in cultural heritage. Inevitably, globalisation and urbanisation will influence the future of Mongolia, but

whether this will involve a loss of ‘Asian-ness’ in their endeavours, as Logan (ibid.) describes, and thus the loss of a unique nomadic heritage, remains to be seen.

The past century has shaped a nation that has experienced political conflict, economic hardship and loss of traditional culture. As a result, nomadism has elicited extensive debates concerning its role in modern society, its sustainability and its symbolism of the Mongol culture. Whilst nomadism has in fact entered a new stage of popularity in the country with a high proportion of Mongolians recently returning to the practice of pastoral migration (see Bruun and Narangoa, 2006; 6), its sustainability remains uncertain. As a rapidly developing nation, it must be asked how Mongolia will connect its recent and distant pasts, along with new global influences, to form a strong future identity.

### **Tradition and Modernity**

The traditional *ger* as a symbol of a nomadic civilisation has existed since at least the fifth century BCE (Buell 2006, 172). The significance of the structure is derived from a number of principles and practices that are associated with its construction and use including a complex set of belief systems that are indicative of the spatial organisation of the dwelling and how social roles operate within it. The materials and methods of construction hold equal importance, and are traditions that have been altered very little over many centuries.

The Mongolian nomadic tent consists of five wooden lattice frame panels, a door, conical roof constructed with 88 wooden poles (*uni*) that radiate from the centre and rest upon the walls, a central opening for the flue from the stove (*toono*) supported by two posts (*bagana*), and layers of insulating felt and white canvas (Lawson 2007; Gundegmaa 2013, 3). The trellis is made up from an inner and outer layer of wooden laths pinned together with rawhide thongs (Andrews 1997, 25). The *toono* is usually semi-circular or segmental with spokes that run in a parallel or fan formation which brace the potentially fragile rim and provide support for the cover on top (Andrews 1997, 27-28). Figure 3 shows a typical *ger* in the process of construction.



Figure 3: A *ger* under construction showing *uni*, *toono*, *bagana* and lattice frame panels. (<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Yurt-construction-2.JPG>)

These materials hold significance in terms of their transportability and assemblage, a key principle of the nomadic lifestyle. They can usually be dismantled in half an hour and assembled in an hour with a small family of two to three adults (Gundegmaa 2013, 3). The complete frame weighs about 250kg and is designed to be transported by camel in Central Asia and Mongolia (Hyer and Jagchid 1979, 64). Importantly, the lack of archaeological evidence of past *ger* camps illustrates the fundamental aspect of the structure as a dwelling that leaves few marks of habitation on the landscape (see Cribb 1991 for a comparable example).

Within the *ger*, the position of the central hearth allows for all areas of the circular tent to be heated equally, while the shape encourages convection which regulates heat in both summer

and winter (Andrews 1997, 32). They are built to suit the conditions and climate of the Central Asian Steppe, being designed to fare well against strong winds and extreme cold (Cribb 1991, 86; Gundegmaa 2013, 3). In winter, earth is used to build an extra layer of protection around the bottom of the tent, diverting rainwater from the exterior walls and therefore protecting the interior entirely, while the felt walls can be raised 30-40 cm in summer months to allow cool air to replace warm (Andrews 1997, 32).

Felt is also intrinsic to nomadic society and remains central to the construction of the traditional *ger* due to its light weight and easy transportability. The felt layers of the *ger* are usually rectangular or trapezoidal and overlap by at least 10 cm creating a weatherproof cover (Andrews 1997, 29). The techniques of construction, alongside the materials, designs and motifs, have remained consistent from at least before 500 BCE to the present day in Central Asia (Bunn 2011, 504). The resilience of this type of material culture, Bunn (ibid.) suggests, is remarkable because of a lifestyle of fluidity and change, especially during Soviet rule where tradition was denied in favour of modernity. The production of felt can therefore be compared to the craftsmanship of the *ger* in its consistency and resilience. The repetition and evolution of the craft manifests a ‘chain of tradition... produced by adherence to an inviolable set of principles’, as Jones and Yarrow (2013, 18-19) have described, in relation to crafting authenticity through the ‘truth’ of practice. Authenticity of the *ger* can thus be found in the significance of the craft skills that are practiced to construct each new dwelling.

As a single-space structure traditionally occupied by two or more generations of a family, the separation and organisation of space is key to the function of the *ger*. This organisation delegates a rigid management of space in which every object and person is assigned a specific area. The layout from rear to front dictates the order of importance for family, guests and objects. Humphrey (1974, 1) has argued that objects and the space in which they are arranged within the *ger* signifies a complex system of categories that have been used to define social positions within the family unit, facilitating the practice of binding their work and leisure activities

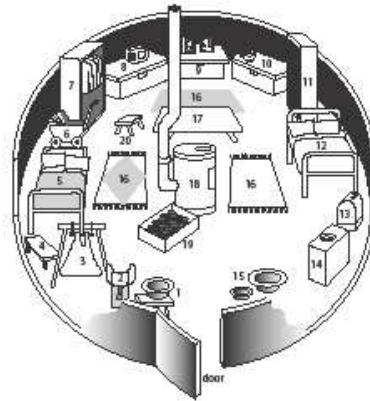
together. Apart from Buddhist monasteries, the round tent was the only dwelling known to most Mongolians, and Humphrey (ibid.) has argued that the “categories of age, sex, genealogical seniority, wealth and religious status” maintained within the *ger* created a “kind of microcosm of the social world of the Mongols”. Figure 4 shows the typical layout of a traditional *ger* alongside that of a 1970s *ger*, with the key elements labelled (after Humphrey 1974, 3).

### The traditional tent



1. saddle, lassu, hobbies; potential winter sleeping area for young animals, beggars, widows, ill people.
2. bridle, halter, harness, hanging on peg.
3. preparation of sour mare's milk in leather bag.
4. preparation of yoghurt; in front sat 'dean' old people ie who have vowed to abstain from sex.
5. place for storing felt, skins, blankets, bought food; in front sat junior male guests (towards the door) and middling guests (towards the xaimor).
6. one or two chests for the husband's clothes and goods; those nearer the xaimor more valuable, those nearer the door less (perhaps including children's clothes); in front sat honoured guests.
7. gun and other hunting equipment.
8. Mongol and Tibetan books; in front would sit a distinguished lama.
9. centre of the xaimor, extending to (8) and (10); the Buddhist altar; under this were kept valuables.
10. chest for wife's valuables; in front sat the husband when receiving guests; his pipe etc kept on top.
11. box for hats; household children sat here.
12. marital bed, of wood or felt; at the foot, perhaps, a pen for toddlers; in front sat the wife.
13. place for the wife's saddle and bridle (perhaps).
14. wooden plate; food; the daughters sat here.
15. brazier, cooking pot; youngest daughter's place.
16. felt mats.
17. low wooden table for serving tea and food.
18. brazier.
19. metal box for dried dung fuel.
20. skins on the ground.
21. lowest place, barely counting as inside the tent; women's boots and dirty underclothes kept here; place for wrong-doers, polluted people and dogs.

### The 1970s tent



1. 'hygienic corner', including washstand.
2. saddle and harness, otherwise kept in 'small ger'.
3. preparation of sour mare's milk in leather bag.
4. preparation of yoghurt; or perhaps writing desk.
5. children's bed, with storage beneath; in front sat middling male guests (usually).
6. child's pram and toys.
7. wardrobe with clothes.
8. chest for the husband's clothes and goods; radio and ornaments kept here or on chest (10).
9. chest containing valuables, supporting photos of family members or famous people; or children's bed.
10. chest for women's clothes; mirror; teapot of husband (who usually sat in front).
11. book case.
12. the marital bed; at the head sat the wife, with her children around her; at the foot sat female guests.
13. portable sewing machine.
14. cupboard with china crockery.
15. cooking pot and utensils; things for washing up.
16. woolen rugs.
17. low wooden table for serving tea and food.
18. iron stove, with door facing east; the chimney passed through the traditional smoke-hole.
19. metal box for dried dung fuel.
20. low stool or small chair for guests.

Figure 4: The interior of a traditional modern ger (above) and a 1970s ger (below). After Humphreys 1974, 3).

Further underpinning the arrangement and compartmental significance of space are the nomadic belief systems associated with the structure. Most importantly, the interaction and symbiotic ritual of equally respecting nature, animals and humans through the everyday practices enacted from within the *ger*, reflects a way of living with the environment (Bunn 2011, 514; Humphrey and Onon 1996, 363). The circular shape of the *ger* is thus symbolic of every aspect implicit in a nomad's life, relating the interior to the exterior, and the personal to the universal. The authentic nomadic life is thus presented in the totality of the *ger*.

To look at the changing structure of the *ger*, we return to Humphrey's account and diagrams of spatial organisation. Figure 4 details both the modern and traditional characteristics of the *ger* showing how modernisation in Mongolia, especially during the Soviet period, has influenced a change in objects and organisation. For example, whilst spatial organisation has remained stable, it seems that a change in social values is present in the modern *ger*. The division of men and women, adults and children, appears to be relaxing, moving towards a less rigid social organisation of space and people.

As demand has increased for *ger* camps, especially in mining towns and tourist areas, new materials for *ger* construction have developed, such as brick walls, wooden floors and metallic roofs (Gundegmaa 2013, 4). Further, nomadic herders have begun using small buildings or log cabins in their various seasonal migrations to avoid erecting and dismantling *gers* at each site (ibid.). It has been suggested that for those still using traditional *gers* in these circumstances, it is often due to the unaffordability of buying permanent structures both in the countryside and the city (ibid.).

Traditional nomadic families that live comfortably have begun to improve the practicalities of the *ger*, by repurposing individual *gers* into solely a kitchen or storeroom, thus keeping residence *gers* free as bedrooms, living and dining rooms (Kawagishi et al. 2010, 144). This



enables nomadic families to adapt their living conditions and create a comfortable home which offers space and flexibility whilst continuing with seasonal migrations.

Additionally, thousands of Mongol nomadic families have begun using solar and wind power, allowing them to watch television and use alternative fuels for heating and cooking (Gundegmaa 2013, 5). Engineers have designed solar heating systems, insulating canvas and electric floor heating. However, these are currently only accessories and have not been integrated into the traditional *ger*-making craftsmanship (ibid.). The effects of globalisation are therefore evident even in rural nomadic dwellings where contact with increased media resources and access to technological items demonstrates the transition of nomadic culture towards western, consumerist cultures.

Societal shifts in Mongolia over recent years have resulted in significant urbanisation and a change towards fixed-residence living. The *ger* districts on the periphery of the city have led to Ulaanbaatar increasing significantly in size (Kawagishi et al. 2010, 139). It is now estimated that 1.2 million people live in the capital city, over one third of the country's population (3.1 million), with approximately 60% of the city's residents occupying *ger* districts (Diener and Hagen 2013, 623). These un-serviced housing plots lack electricity, heat, water and sanitation, and communication, and thus residents spend disproportionately high percentages of their income on attaining these basic needs (Dore and Nagpal 2006, 17).

Hearths have been replaced by wood-fired stoves for heating and cooking, but due to their sheer concentration within Ulaanbaatar and the coldest temperatures of any capital city in the world, (plummeting below -30 degrees) this basic utensil has contributed to some of the highest pollution levels recorded globally (Diener and Hagen 2013, 626). In 2009, it was estimated that 700,000 tonnes of coal were needed to supply Ulaanbaatar's 160,000 *ger* district families (Kohn 2009, up) at any one time.

As the population in Ulaanbaatar continues to increase, it seems that the *ger* districts will continue to expand, increasing social and environmental impacts. An obvious solution is to embrace the modernity of Mongolia and promote modern, energy-efficient adaptations, especially to the city *ger*. If in some cases, the *ger* is inevitably to become sedentary, it must offer compatibility between tradition and modernity, rather than encompassing the ideas and facilities of an obsolete and arduous lifestyle. Having implemented environmentally friendly technology in rural areas through a World Bank-funded project that subsidised the sale of solar panels to over 100,000 herder families (ibid.), it is essential to more forcefully improve efforts in urban environments to improve health and social conditions.

### **Nomad Tourism**

Although a topic for separate discussion, it is worth briefly bringing attention to the representations of the *ger* for touristic consumption and the issues they have prompted. In a country which has quickly adapted to the effects of globalisation, the *ger* in particular has seen changes to its identity and purpose. These iterations appear to question the authenticity of the *ger* most by focussing on the material significance of the structure and disregarding the way of life attached to it. In the UK and the USA, for example, the *ger* (usually referred to as the yurt in these situations) has emerged as a means of alternative and tourist accommodation. The adaptability of the 'yurt' alludes to its multi-faceted use and a variety of purposes have been reported including: a luxury 'Dream-Folly' yurt sold for \$75,000 as well as eco-holiday accommodation in the Canary Islands and ski chalets in Oregon. The variety of approaches to the structure, however, questions whether they remain an appropriation of the traditional *ger* or an apotheosis which has been inauthentically reproduced for the Western consumer.

Furthermore, this reflects a development in Mongolia itself where the growth of tourism, particularly over the past two decades, has seen the *ger* assigned new functions and identities in order to cater for a new global market. Subsequently, this appropriation has been used to form

a specific Mongol identity that can be marketed and sold to the foreign visitor, an identity that fails to represent the true origins of the *ger*.

It can be argued that the tourist camps that have emerged within the country have developed as representations of a traditional *ger*, ones which have ignored key principles of spatial organisation and cultural objects and decoration for the benefit of consumers in search of the diluted, comfortable version of Mongolian culture. The effect of tourism can therefore become ‘a metaphor for destruction, erosion, or commodification’ of heritage where essential features of the *ger* have been manipulated or removed (Winter 2010, 117). On the other hand, Winter (ibid.) also explains that, ‘tourism’ can be a source of revival, empowerment or grassroots development. Kirschemblatt Gimblett (2204, 56) reinforced this point by advocating heritage as a mode of cultural production which can contribute to the sustainability of the practice and provide it with a ‘second life as an exhibition of itself’. Paradoxically, then, these tourist camps can be viewed as both destruction of cultural authenticity and identity, as well as forces that celebrate this tradition and enliven interest in its heritage, amongst locals and tourists. But as Mowforth and Munt (2209, 224) have explained, this can also contribute to communities becoming part of the tourist ‘experience’ in which they are relabelled as objects and commodities. Tourists, therefore engage in a voyeuristic ‘experience’ where people become a spectacle, and the distance between ‘us’ and ‘them’ is further enlarged.

### **Authenticity and the *ger***

The Mongolian *ger*, by incorporating both the tangible and intangible values of nomadic culture, has highlighted a paradox when endeavouring to safeguard it. As a tangible object that is impermanent and reproduced for each generation, rarely lasting longer than a lifetime, it does not comply with world heritage guidance on tangible property where authenticity of design, material, workmanship and setting are fundamental conditions. The recent inscription of the structure on UNESCO’s RL has only acknowledged the craftsmanship of the tangible elements of the *ger* and failed to consider the key principles that are needed to ensure survival of the

dwelling in its current practised form. Furthermore the exclusion of the term ‘authenticity’ from the ICHC, problematises the understanding and safeguarding of heritage when the tangible and intangible are so intimately connected.

When dealing with real communities and the heritage values they uphold, authenticity becomes fluid. Jones and Yarrow (2013, 24) maintain that authenticity is neither a subjective construction, nor something waiting to be preserved; “rather it is a distributed property that emerges through the interaction between people and things”. With the Mongol *ger*, it is the interaction between Mongolian nomads and the objects they construct and use that is important, being part of a specific way of life rooted in the ancient practice of Mongolian nomadism. Authenticity is thus found in the people who create their cultures as living dynamic systems. This definition will be used to understand the authenticity of the *ger* in the context of its material alterations, as a symbol of Mongol culture, and the significance and problems relating to its inscription on the RL.

The nomination of the *ger* on UNESCO’s RL includes a detailed account of the structure, describing its craftsmanship as ‘a traditional household enterprise or a neighbourhood where men engage in woodcarving while women and men are painting, sewing and stitching, felt-making etc.’ (Gundegmaa 2013, 2). The key elements of the *ger* are as follows: ‘wooden structures painted and embellished with traditional Mongolian ornamentation; covers made of white felt and white canvas; ropes made of animal hair; flooring and carpets made of hand-sewn felt; and furniture located inside the *ger*’. The nomination describes the related nomadic traditions integral to the *ger* such as animal husbandry, migration and community, yet fails to integrate these in the inscription of the structure focussing solely on the tangible artefacts and their methods of production. The intent of the nomination is to expand the awareness of the *ger* by teaching younger generations associated skills and the significance of the structure itself. It aims to promote *gers* as a cultural resource which can unite the population by closing ‘the gaps between young and old, city and country people, and hopefully at best, between rich and poor’

(Gundegmaa 2013, 6). Such recognition will revive interest in the tradition, while allowing the *ger* to operate in modern Mongolian society and face its environmental challenges. While the ICHC (UNESCO 2003, 2) claims to understand ICH as providing communities with a “sense of identity and continuity”, the inscription of the *ger* evinces the severe lack of awareness of the lifestyle attached to the structure and the people who live within it.

By focussing solely on the intangible value of the craft, the Mongolian State Party’s nomination of the ‘Traditional Craftsmanship of the Mongol *Ger* and its Associated Customs’ vastly undermines significant attributes that are connected to the Mongolian nomadic tradition. By nominating only the craft of the structure and the associated customs, such as felt-making, painting and sewing, Mongolian representatives have failed to fully comprehend the significance of the traditional *ger* and the lifestyle of the people intrinsic to its survival. Intangible crafts, as recognised by the ICHC, have been the sole focus of this nomination rather than the comprehension of the *ger* as a symbol of Mongolian nomadism as derived from the communities and individuals living within.

### **‘Living’ Heritage**

The vernacular *ger* has seen fundamental changes since the Revolution of Independence and the Soviet influence that caused such rapid urbanisation and development. The interior and spatial divisions have altered most significantly to suit a more contemporary style of rural living. The addition of modern objects such as televisions and radios, and the removal of religious items including the Buddhist shrine exemplify how adaptations have been made with the change in political ideologies and perhaps also in line with the progression of family values and sedentary forms of living. The complex structure of the *ger* has, however, retained its traditional construction and craft-making skill thus demonstrating that the traditional properties, worthy of inscription as recognised by UNESCO and the Mongolia State Party, embody authentic values.

Whilst change is inevitable, it is the dichotomy between history and memory that Boyer (2003, 65) describes as problematic to the conservation of the built environment. While memory is in constant evolution and change, history is a reconstruction that can be unreliable and incomplete (ibid.). In this sense, to limit the *ger* as a tangible and historic nomadic tradition is to isolate and freeze it in the past. Instead, when understanding its intangible values it can be thought of as living heritage, where memory is constantly created and developed to allow the nomadic communities to have a sustainable future within the *ger*. Jokilehto (1995, 31) contends that cultural heritage values should be understood in this dynamic manner and that “the concept of authenticity [can be] seen in relation to traditional continuity”. This continuity, particularly of function as perceived by the original planners, can be used to describe a cultural property as ‘living’ (Weerasinghe 2011, 143-144). The *ger* as an entity that continues its original function is therefore ‘living’ heritage and can be understood to maintain its authenticity in spite of adaptations necessary for modern (urban) living. Luxen (2003) has similarly identified the need to conserve cultural diversity and the more intangible aspects associated with heritage. Luxen (ibid.) suggests that it is through this approach that a better appreciation is gained of the “uniqueness of cultural properties, the presiding genius of a cultural group and its ‘roots’, against a backdrop of rapid social change and openness to external influences”. This translates effectively when considering the protection of the *ger* and its associated cultural values by understanding its uniqueness, the significance it has to a group of people and as a symbol of their culture, and lastly how this survived amongst social and political changes with global forces increasingly encroaching.

As a microcosm of Mongol society where people, objects, and structure are inextricably linked, the *ger* exemplifies a whole in which each element cannot be considered independently of the others. These independent components are essential to the authentic *ger*, where they are subject to change yet always in relation to one another, forming a cyclical relationship and presentation of the structure. The intangible values inherent in the operations of Mongol nomadic society therefore demonstrate how authenticity can only be achieved through a holistic approach and it

is understood as a fusion of the parts of which it is composed. Jokilehto (1995, 32) explains how authenticity may include “interventions in different periods of time” but that this is “integrated into the context of the whole”. How the people and objects have changed within the *ger* reaffirms the versatility of the structure and how the essential principles that allow a family to survive in this context have continued over such a period of time. Authenticity in the *ger* is thus made up of the intangible qualities that exist in the relationships between people, objects, nomadic principles and structure as well as the authentic materials and methods used in construction.

The extent of adaptation can, however, risk these traditional relationships which are intrinsic to the composite whole. The urban *ger* that has migrated to the city, in many cases specifically to Ulaanbaatar, has had to adapt to a sedentary lifestyle where a cityscape replaces the expanse of the Mongolian Steppe and commercial business replaces pastoral herding. When one element of the whole is redundant, authenticity can become problematic. In this case, primarily the nomadic principles of migration and pastoralism have been removed, resulting in permanent structures affixed to the supposedly mobile dwelling and former nomads searching for opportunities outside of pastoral production. The longevity and endurance of the structure, especially when re-located to new environments, however, maintains the ancient practice of Mongolian communities enacting their lives from within the *ger*. It is not a rejection of nomadism, but a continuation of a way of life which remains compatible with the practice and symbolism of the nomadic culture.

It can be understood that the perceptions of Mongolia, solely as a nomadic, rural society, have been extended, resulting in a lack of awareness of the deeper history of urban - rural relationships and integration. Sneath (2006, 141) has suggested that the urban ‘elite-centralist’ and the ‘rural-localist’ can actually be thought of as symbiotic because they have complemented, reflected and reinforced each other. Furthermore, Sneath (ibid.) argues that both of these cultural sectors are ‘traditional’ because they resemble ‘historical predecessor forms’



and are contemporary and subject to change. In this respect, the *ger* simply occupies two settings, each of which are equally thought to be ‘Mongolian’. The interaction of the two spheres of culture suggests that they are not as polarised as once thought and that individuals rarely locate themselves in either of the two sectors exclusively (ibid., 158). Here, authenticity of the *ger* and the way of life attached to it remain authentic for the Mongolian families living within. The values of Mongolians are therefore relative to their location and situation, supporting the case for an authentic urban *ger* when people, objects and structure continue to coexist in a dynamic system.

It has been argued that authenticity needs to be considered via more open and flexible concepts, which can be applied with a “full understanding of the socio-economic, ecological, cultural and historical contexts” (Von Droste and Bertilsson 1994, 7). To understand the urban *ger* within each of these contexts presents the differences between the rural, traditional *ger* and the urban, modern *ger*. While differences abound, the essential construct of the *ger* is retained through the relationship between people, objects and the structure ensuring the ability to maintain their culture as living dynamic systems. Authenticity cannot be reduced to merely the material fabric; it is the function, continuity and livingness of a site that must be sought (Weerasinghe 2011, 145). A bespoke approach, as Von Droste and Bertilsson (1994) have suggested, can inform the understanding of a different ‘category’ of *ger* that is required to perform a different role in a contrasting landscape with the considerations of “socio-economic, ecological, cultural and historical contexts” (1994, 7).

In relation to World Heritage inscription and guidelines, Labadi (2010, 79) has suggested that nomination dossiers often represent a state of hyperreality, the result of blurred boundaries between an actual state of authenticity and its fake presentation. To suggest that the rural *ger* is the ‘real’ phenomenon and the urban *ger* its ‘fake’, would be to misunderstand the socio-cultural context of the country. Rather, the diversity of the various types of Mongolian cultures (many of which have not been discussed here) associated with the *ger* should be embraced to allow

authenticity to be understood in terms of livingness and continuity of a cultural people and the space they inhabit.

Additionally, to consider the tourist ger as 'fake' would be to invalidate the role of cultural production. Macdonald (2013, 96) highlights that tourism does not always need to be considered in isolation from authentic heritage associated with 'cultural contamination' that is somehow regarded as inherently inauthentic. Instead Macdonald advocates that heritage tourism can be thought of as a phenomenon in itself. The tourist industry in Mongolia based upon the traditional structure of the ger, has contributed towards a revival movement, celebrating the ancient practice and ensuring that the craft is continued and re-learned by new generations. It is, however, problematic when considering the significance of the Mongolian nomadic way of life enacted from within the ger. It focusses on the craft and materiality of the structure in a similar way to the nomination file, omitting the way of life of the very people who have sustained the practice for millennia. Together, the nomination of the craft of the ger and the appropriation of the structure for tourist purposes within Mongolia, contribute towards the credibility of the ger as a national symbol. Lindholm (2008, 98) contends that modern governments appropriate indigenous symbols in order to legitimise themselves, demonstrate continuity and embed reality. The omission of the cultural producers' who shaped, enforced and sustained the practice of Mongolian nomadism and who usually live on the fringes of society and are thus unable to identify with a national symbol, contributes to an adulterated form of heritage.

MacCannel (1992, 168) explains the production of 'reconstructed ethnicity' as the preservation of ethnic forms for 'persuasion or entertainment'. Here, MacCannel (ibid) argues that although 'reconstructed ethnicity' is based upon an earlier construction of ethnicity, it finalises the dialogue associated with the practice and freezes the ethnic representation, especially when authenticity is sought. Thus a process of categorisation is useful in which the traditional, rural *ger* is understood separately from the urban *ger*, and in which each of the former can be viewed distinctly from the *ger* appropriated for tourism.

## **Conclusion**

The traditional Mongolian *ger* is outstanding in its complexity and in the elegance with which the design responds to the environment and the people who live within it. Its craftsmanship displays degrees of human ingenuity and continuity that ultimately appear to justify its protection. However, while it represents an ideology that is ethnically and culturally relevant within nomadic society, it is more problematic in the sedentary world. This is perhaps, why Mongolia has shied away from considering its intrinsic functional values and has contributed towards a packaged version of the Mongolian *ger* for touristic consumption.

Yet the integration of modern technologies to improve standards of living presents a new life for the *ger* in which modern Mongolians (both nomadic or sedentary) can apply their own meanings and authenticity. Its current existence in both spheres suggests that the *ger* is not significant only because of its structural properties, but also because of the flexible and inclusive values that permit the continuation of a people who create their culture as living and dynamic from within the *ger*. The indigenous inhabitants of Mongolia who have ensured the survival of the *ger* are, unequivocally, the pivotal element of the structure. It has been established that authenticity of the *ger* lies in the relationship between people, objects and structure, yet the essential loss of the producers of culture not only results in a loss of authenticity, but a loss of existence and cultural identity. The protection of only the craft-making skill of the *ger*, has crucially failed to grasp a true understanding of the entirety of the structure and how the safeguarding of this will only preserve the tangible features and their processes, rather than the intangible way of life that underpins it as an ancient cultural tradition. Ensuring the sustainability of the *ger* as a vernacular form of housing and as a component of pastoral nomadism is dependent upon the understanding of those who inhabit the structure. In order to sustain the *ger*'s existence, it must be approached with specific principles to allow the dwelling to respond to its surroundings and to prevent its demise towards a nostalgic and idealised entity. In this case, authenticity is related to the cultural idiosyncrasies of the Mongolian people living

within the ger and allows for the culture producers to recreate and shape their heritage based on changing needs and environments.

This paper has sought to place the ger within its own specific local context, and also within a broader global context, in order to gain an understanding of the spectrum of Mongolian ger production. It can be seen that a number of variations exist posing problems in the understanding of what a 'traditional' ger might be. It has been demonstrated that 'authenticity' is the most appropriate framework within which to assess this, but only when the definition is known to be flexible and concerns the relationships between the Mongolian people, objects and the structure of the ger. Thus authenticity is found when it is connected to the cultural idiosyncrasies of the communities that use the ger in their daily lives and is not tantamount to the term 'originality' or the material significance of the structure. Despite 'authenticity' being disregarded by UNESCO as unnecessary in ICH discourses, it has been argued that in the case of the Mongolian ger, there is a strong role for authenticity to differentiate traditional Mongolian gers and those that have been appropriated for and re-presented for the detached tourist and western consumer. Authenticity has been shown to be a crucial element when safeguarding ICH as a 'mainspring of cultural diversity' (UNESCO 2003,1), as well as supporting the continued evolution of communities and their relationship to their ICH. If 'authenticity' is to remain within heritage discussions for the foreseeable future, the case study of the Mongol *ger* demonstrates how it must be reattached to the intangibility of heritage, which has become more focussed on a people-centred approach in order to contextualise the origins and future endeavours of human creativity.

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