Extension of the Culture of the Mongol Yurt
On the Distribution and Direction of the Inner Space of Mongolian Houses
in a District of Inner Mongolia

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Abstract
Because many people are acquiring settled dwellings in Inner Mongolia, they now no longer live in Yurts only. This article probes the extension of the traditional culture of Yurts by analyzing and studying the distribution and orientation of the earth brick house and cave dwellings compared with Yurts.

Keywords: Yurt; earth brick house; cave dwellings; Mongolian culture

1. Background of the Problem and Purpose of This Study
The Yurt has a long history of thousands of years and during its long developmental process, its inner space and orientation have changed a lot.

Mongolians do not now live in Yurts alone, more of them live in earth brick houses, single story houses, apartment buildings and even in caves. This article probes the extension and development of the culture of Mongolian dwellings by studying and comparing Mongolian farmers’ earth brick houses in Jirim Tsoglan1 and the farmers’ winter dwelling caves in Hulunbor Tsoglan2.

2. Developmental Process of the Formation, Distribution and Orientation of the Inner Space
The inner space of a Yurt is divided into four parts: the man’s place, the woman’s place, the place of the stove, and the main place. At the time that the Yurt was built, its door faced south, and people had to comply with the rules that the dwelling was divided into such areas as described above. According to the features of the inner space of the Yurt, we can analyze the historical developmental process of the formation of rules governing its inner space by dividing it into the following four stages.

The changes of division and direction inside the Yurt have been influenced greatly by changes in the Mongolians’ religious beliefs. Therefore, these changes are divided into the four stages mentioned so far. Of all periods, the cultural revolution under Chinese communism brought about the greatest change, which especially influenced the location of rooms inside the Yurt.

A. From Forty Thousand Years to Four Thousand Years Ago- the period during which people believed in nature.
Because people believed in the god of fire, they lit a fire in the middle of the house and sat around it to warm themselves and cook. This was the initial reason why the fire was put in the middle of the Yurt. The sacrificial offerings for the god of fire were put behind the stove. In normal times, the host’s place was at the stove, the main place of a Yurt.

Because of their belief in the sun Mongolians positioned the door to face the direction of the sunrise – east or southeast. In a Yurt, the man’s place was at the left and the woman’s at the right, this rule was formed at that time. (see figure 1)

Fig.1. From Forty Thousand Years to Four Thousand Years Ago
The distribution of a yurt’s inner space

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Regarding the reason and process concerning the formation of this rule, we can make the following analysis: Mongolians considered the early sunlight to be sacred, so they positioned their doors to face the direction of the sunrise – east or southeast. At seven in the morning the sunlight shone into the Yurt, when the door faced east and the light reached the innermost place. They believed that the place nearest to the sun sunlight reached into the left part of the Yurt. The most unimportant place was lower than the man’s, so the right side in a Yurt became the woman’s place while the left side was the man’s. (see figure 2)

Fig.2. Places in the Yurt Facing East or Southeast

B. From the 20th Century BC. to the 16th Century— the period during which Mongolians believed in Saman (a kind of Mongolian religion).

a. 20th century BC.—10th century

Because Saman was the main religion, changes took place in nomadic and hunting people’s dwellings during this period. The main place (the northwest side) in a Yurt was replaced by the Saman sacrificial altar, which was a distinct feature of the religion. However, other things were kept as they had been. According to < Mongolian Secret History > (Art. 112 and 165), the Saman’s place is at the left of the god or the man’s place. In many places including Chahar, Kertsin, Hortsin, Tumote and Barin (the area name of Inner Mongolia), the people still placed the sacrificial altar at the northwest in their Yurts up until 1935. This shows that the left was considered to be the best place in a Yurt.

Another feature of this period is that the utensils or articles of men and women were placed in different parts of the Yurt, depending on the sex they were kept separately at the man’s and woman’s places. Things were placed in proper order at the left side of the entrance; lambs, saddle, stirrup, wooden bucket holding milk, and a wardrobe for men and children. Also there were bedclothes on which were put the man’s personal effects (valuables) including a bow and sword.

The most interesting thing was that the bucket holding milk was not at the woman’s place, but at the man’s because taking care of cows and milk, was not the woman’s work but the man’s. The period described above was chosen from < Mongolian Secret History > (Art. 90). (see figure 3)

b. 10th century—16th century

During this period changes took place in the places of the host and guests. Originally, the host sat to the left of his guests who were considered as his friends and he allowed them to sit to his right as the owner of the Yurt. But after that, to show his respect, he allowed them to sit to his left and sometimes even sat at the woman’s place and let his guests sit at his.

C. After the 16th Century— the Lamaist period prevailed.

At that time Lamaism was the main religion. People placed the Lamaist sacrificial alter in the main place. Before it (to the right side of the entrance, beside the Lamaist sacrificial alter) was the place for the Lamaist priests (lamas). The host sat at the right of the lamas every year while religious ceremonies were being held. The man’s place was given to the lamas when they came to chant the scriptures, while others sat in the woman’s place3. According to the religion, the entrance faced to the south-southeast. (see figure 4)

D. After the Great Cultural Revolution

Following ten years of calamity caused by the great cultural revolution, the people’s ideology changed from absolute belief in religion to modern ideology. This led to a qualitative change in the distribution of seats in a Yurt. That the guests were supreme changed into the idea that the host and guests were equal. People were allotted seats according to their generation and age. Under these circumstances when the host and a guest were of the same generation, the elder sat at the upper place and the younger at the lower. When they were the same age, the elder generation sat at the left side of the younger generation.

Moreover, a mirror, photos, and certificates of awards were placed at the main place instead of at the Lamaist sacrificial alter. During the great cultural revolution the portrait of Mao Ze Dong and other photos were put in the main place, representing the political atmosphere and times of communism.

3. The Distribution and Orientation of the Inner Space of a Yurt

The inner space of a Yurt can be divided into four main parts; the man’s place, the woman’s place, the place of the stove, and the main place, with the entrance facing south.

We can divide the inner space of the Yurt into nine seats and twelve directions, based on the oriental sign of twelve animals. The rabbit direction is east, which is for the woman; the horse direction is south, that is the entrance; the chicken direction is west for the man; the mouse direction is north for the main place; the sheep
direction is for lambs; the dog direction is for the man’s utensils; the cattle direction is for the woman’s needlework and the dragon direction is for water and pots. (see figure 3, 4)

Nine Seats
1. Entrance: The herdsmen entered the Yurt after dismounting from their horses, so this is called the direction of the horse.
2. The place for the lambs: The left side of the entrance where the new born lambs were held.
3. The man’s place: Called the chicken direction, it meant to thrive and prosper.
4. The place where the man’s utensils were kept.
5. The white mouse symbolized to flourish. The place at the mouse direction is the most important and the most sacred.
6. The place where the woman kept her boxes holding needlework.
7. The place for women: In the past a woman was regarded as being as weak as a rabbit which was chased by a tiger. So the woman’s place was in the rabbit direction.
8. The place where water and pots were kept: Cooking utensils such as pots, bowls and tubs were kept at the right side of the entrance.
9. The place of the stove: This originated from the customs in which people lived around the fire in primitive societies. So the stove was put in the middle of the Yurt.

Twelve Directions
Horse, sheep, monkey, chicken, dog, pig, mouse, cattle, tiger, rabbit, dragon and snake

4. The Division and Orientation of the Inner Space of Mongolian Dwellings in Inner Mongolia

A. Cave Dwelling
There are still some herdsmen leading nomadic lives in the northern parts of Hulunbor Tsoglan, Inner Mongolia. When they move in the spring, summer and autumn, their dwellings are Yurts. In winter, to avoid the cold weather which is tens of degrees centigrade below zero, they choose caves to live in. From the nomadic people’s point of view, the Yurt and cave life-style are totally different. The Yurt is a kind of moving dwelling, while the cave is a settled dwelling. The two totally different forms of dwelling are both adopted by them, and fit best their living circumstances and geographical conditions. So, until now they are both adopted.

The distribution of the inner space of a cave dwelling is its plan, the shape is square and it is built under horizon. Otherwise the distribution and orientation are not very different from a Yurt. (see figure 5)
1) The similarity between a Yurt and a cave dwelling: The man’s utensils are kept at the left side of the entrance. The woman’s cooking utensils including pots, bowls and shelves, are kept at the right side. In the middle is the stove.

2) Differences between a Yurt and a cave dwelling: The cave dwelling’s plan is based on a square; the main place disappears in it. The man’s and woman’s places in a Yurt are replaced by the distribution of the first and second Kang, the main heating system in a cave dwelling. The Kang on the right side is the second Kang for children, while the one on the left is the main Kang for the host and adults; the guests sit at the main Kang.

We can see that the inner space of the cave dwelling still maintains the rule that the left side is the main and most important place.

**B. Earth Brick House**

In the northeast of Inner Mongolia, “A policy of immigration” was carried out during the Tsing dynasty. As a result of the introduction of Chinese culture, Mongolian’s changed their lives gradually from that of nomads to farming and settled lives. Their dwellings also gradually changed from Yurts to earth brick houses.

**a.** The plan of the main forms of the earth brick houses: A two-roomed earth brick house consisting of a kitchen and a left room. The only bedroom is built at the left side of the kitchen. (see figure 6)

**b.** A comparison between the inner space of an earth brick house and a Yurt:

1) The rooms of an earth brick house are the same as those of a Yurt: The entrance faces south and leads to the kitchen, this is the same as the location of the stove, which is near the entrance in a Yurt. The stove in a Yurt is replaced by the form of a kitchen in an earth brick house. The two-roomed earth brick house has a left room and kitchen only, not a right room and kitchen. It maintains the custom that the left side is the main and most important place. In a three-roomed house the kitchen is in the middle, while at the left is the main room for the host and adults. At the right is the second room for the host’s family or relatives, sometimes it is used for keeping their articles for daily use. It can be assumed that the distribution of the main and second room comes from the distribution of the man’s and woman’s places in a Yurt. (see figure 8)
2) The distribution of the inner space of the left room in an earth brick house patterns after the distribution of a Yurt. Entering the left room we find in the middle of it a stove and at both sides two Kang – the south and north Kang. The south Kang is for the host and adults, while the north Kang is for women and children. Their guests sit at the south Kang. At the right side of the stove there are shelves, on them are photos, certificates of awards, a mirror, and sacrificial altar. This is the same as the main place in a Yurt. (see figure 9)

Fig.9. Comparison between the Inner Space of an Earth Brick House and a Yurt

We can see from the above analysis that the distribution of the rooms, their inner space and the structure of the earth brick house follows that of a Yurt.

5. Conclusion

During the thousands of years of the nomadic people’s history, the Yurt formed its own unique structure, the inner space of which fits well with the natural circumstances and ways of Mongolian living.

Mongolians changed their way of living from a nomadic life to a settled one and as a result the appearance of various types of residences are now different from the conventional Yurt. Nonetheless the inner space of these adopted the rules of the Yurts. These rules, which in fact developed from the Yurt culture, are a splendid national culture.

Notes

1. This is personal data collected in Inner Mongolia. The housing materials of the earth brick house and the cave dwelling can be prepared by local people who build their own houses by themselves.
2. This is the basic style of dwelling adopted by the farmers who live in the village named Ji rin Tsoglan which is located in the north-east area of Inner Mongolia.
3. When people believed in the god of the sun, the entrance of their dwellings was set to the southeast. After adopting Lamaism as their religion in the 16th century they attached more importance to the interior of the Yurt.

References