

Research Reports and Briefs

Reports

Current Issues in the Study of Traditional Dwelling Space of Mongol-speaking People

Marina Sodnompilova, Culture and Art Studies Department, Institute of Mongolian, Buddhist and Tibetan Studies, Siberian Branch of the Russian Academy of Science, Ulan Ude, Republic of Buryatia, Russia, tscrynn@imbtsrv.bsc.buryatia.ru

In 1999 I started a project studying the residential complexes of the Buryat people, the Mongol-speaking group settled in southern Siberia. The study was conducted at and funded by the Institute of Mongolian, Buddhist and Tibetan Studies, Siberian Branch of the Russian Academy of Science. This study covers eleven regions of the Buryat Republic and Ust-Orda Buryat Autonomous Region. The data were collected through interviews, observation, and participation in rituals and household activities, and through the study of folklore materials, myths, and archeological data. Approximately 10-15 residents were interviewed in each village. Usually this group contained only one to three respondents with very deep knowledge of their traditions and customs, who would be interviewed and observed in greater depth. During one summer field trip a total of 250 people were interviewed. The main objects of study were rituals relating to residency, as well as life cycle rituals such as weddings, childbirth, and funerals. They were videotaped and sketched. Special attention was paid to the placement of items inside yurts and the arrangement of decorations according to the rules of internal house zoning. The purpose of the study was to identify the way the different Buryat groups' social structures are represented in their traditional housing.

The traditional approach to the study of dwelling space is to focus on material culture. This ignores numerous other aspects, such as the spiritual content of the house, the image of the house in the traditional interpretation of the world, the symbolic organization of its interior space, housing in the

context of ritual and mythological activities, and the connection between the house and social organization. The study of the non-utilitarian aspects of this cultural phenomenon leads to the solution of important theoretical problems, such as how human beings organize and develop their surroundings and how their surroundings orient them socially. This approach also has psychological and behavioral aspects in its focus on the contradiction between the internal and external, where human understanding of external space is contrasted with their view of themselves as beings protected by the walls of their own microspace, that is, their house.

The study of housing structure is an important development in the study of dwelling space. The traditional house of Mongol-speaking people consists of horizontal and vertical systems that organize the space inside a house. The horizontal and vertical space inside the yurt is divided by lines running through the sacred center (the fireplace), with one line separating the entrance and the rear (*khoimor*) sections, and another the right and left parts. The study of space inside a house provides a "map of social space" (Leach 2001:66), which in this case plots social divisions based on age (front to back) and gender (left and right). The family has a structure and this structure is communicated in the social context of the house, giving the house a function in enacting social distinctions.

The gender-dividing function of the internal space of the house is accompanied by a specific order in the positioning and usage of household items. In particular, this refers to the arrangement of masculine and feminine items in the traditional yurt.

For example, in the male part of the yurt are items such as gear associated with hunting and horses, and the *ongon*, a religious object that women, especially non-kin, are not allowed to touch. In the female part of the yurt one can find household items such as kitchen utensils, hides, grindstones, and so on. In the *khoimor* section there is an altar on either side of which are chests. The "chest of the right side" stores the masculine items and the "chest of the left side" stores the feminine items.

The social distinction function of the house is also expressed through the allocation of space to honorable and less honorable places that indicate one's social status and age. For example, elderly men occupy the space on the male side, closest to the *khoimor*, and the lower a guest's social status, the closer to the door the guest sits. A similar order is observed on the female side of the house.

The vertical structural planning of the dwelling space is also important and serves as a determining factor in different systems. The analysis of the construction elements of the traditional house reveals a correspondence between the vertical structure of the yurt, the human body, and the Universe. One brief example from our data is the decorations of a house, and especially the felted-wool yurt, which comply with this schema. The lower parts of the yurt's wooden railing are referred to as "limbs," the upper ones are called "heads," and the ornaments on the upper part of the door are referred to as the door's "eyes." The objects inside the yurt are placed in accordance with the rules of the vertical structure and the objects' semiotic status.

The issue of typologizing traditional dwellings of the Mongol-speaking peoples remains unresolved. Conventional detailed studies mostly focused on felted wool items, while the wooden many-sided yurt of the Buryats, the traditional houses of the Northern territories of the Mongol-speaking people, remain understudied. There are several aspects that differentiate between the wooden and woolen yurts — differences in the genesis, the structural arrangement of space, and the performance of an intricate ritual preceding the construction of a house need to be examined.

In general the data on the typology and structure of the traditional houses point to numerous issues, both general and specific, related to the origins of the lexical denotations for different parts of the house, the correspondence of the spatial parameters of the house with the parameters of the external world, and the semantics of house decoration. The "grammar" of the communicative relations between people in terms of the contradiction between the inside and the outside of a house is a promising topic of research. The next goal of this project is to study the problem of the existence of traditional cultural forms in the context of Buryat residences in contemporary conditions. Specifically, I am interested in the gendered aspect of the organization of space and the meaning and functions of various spaces within houses.

Reference

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Ethnicity and Inequality Among Migrants in the Kyrgyz Republic

Joseph Boots Allen, Ph.D. Candidate, Population Research Center, University of Texas, Austin, Texas, USA, jballen@mail.la.utexas.edu

My research investigates disparities in employment and living standards among migrants and non-migrants of varying ethnicities in urban settings in the Kyrgyz Republic. Its design was established to test the strength of the classic microeconomic approach to the study of migration, which states that individuals migrate to develop larger stores of social capital, boost living standards, and increase chances at greater educational attainment (see Borjas 1987,

Chiswick 2000). First I will outline the debate in the migration literature, then I will summarize information on migration statistics for Kyrgyzstan, and then I will discuss my recent fieldwork on this topic.

In the 1990s an emerging body of research began to show that migrants in the developing world were not necessarily becoming advantaged by their move from rural areas to cities (Massey 1996). A