

Praise for M. A. Aldrich's *The Search for a Vanishing Beijing: A Guide to China's Capital through the Ages*, available from Hong Kong University Press

'To me (a Chinese) it is Aldrich's open-mindedness—his awareness and acceptance that his values are not universal—that makes his book a delight to read. I take pleasure not only looking at the Old Beijing he so vividly portrays, but, also, in looking at him looking at Old Beijing.'

—Michelle Ng, *Zing Magazine*, Shanghai

'It's not the kind of thing you get from your average tour guide, and certainly not what you get from your average guidebook. For someone who is going to linger here for a few days, and really wants to walk around the hutongs—which really is the most interesting thing to do in Beijing these days—it is a fairly indispensable companion.'

—Evan Osnos, author of *Age of Ambition: Chasing Fortune, Truth, and Faith in the New China*

'Beijing is like the most interesting girlfriend you never had—rich, beautiful, and highly cultured but very, very difficult to understand and requiring a lot of time and thought. Michael Aldrich has produced by far the best crack at interpreting the city to date.'

—Paul French, author of *Midnight in Peking: How the Murder of a Young Englishwoman Haunted the Last Days of Old China*

'M. A. Aldrich's city history was my constant companion on bike rides around town. If a building caught my eye, I could usually find its description in Aldrich, who narrates in the relaxed voice of a patient guide.'

—Michael Meyer, author of *The Last Days of Old Beijing: Life in the Vanishing Backstreets of a City Transformed*

'Like an old friend who knows Beijing inside and out, M. A. Aldrich takes the reader by the arm as they discover the city together. By weaving history, legend and humour, the author portrays, with a sure hand, the rich tapestry of Peking. In doing so, the history of China also unfolds.'

—Valery Garrett, *Asian Review of Books*, Hong Kong

'The stories are what make the book a compelling read, regardless of whether or not you actually make it to the sites he is describing. Some are fact, some are myth, and many span the grey divide between the two.'

—Rebecca Kantor, *Far Eastern Economic Review*

Ulaanbaatar beyond Water and Grass

A Guide to the Capital of Mongolia

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Hong Kong University Press
The University of Hong Kong
Pokfulam Road
Hong Kong
www.hkupress.hku.hk

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ISBN 978-988-8208-67-8 (*Paperback*)

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed and bound by Hang Tai Printing Co. Ltd., Hong Kong, China

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Preface

In the 1920s a Danish scientific expedition travelled to an obscure corner of the Central Asian steppes. Its purpose was to set up an experimental farm to test a new variety of winter wheat and conduct experiments in modern dairy production. The group journeyed overland from North China to the newly independent sovereign state of Mongolia, a country where the Arctic winter conditions made it a perfect testing ground for their experiment.

One of the members of the expedition was Henning Haslund, an anthropologist, musician, and former officer in the Danish army. Haslund was a remarkably capable and outgoing young man whose optimism and cheerfulness impressed everyone who came to know him. Like so many of his countrymen, his open-minded and sympathetic attitude won him many friends among Mongolians who were delighted by his understanding of their customs and his ability to speak the rudiments of their language.

In *Tents in Mongolia* Haslund recalled his days in Mongolia with an infectious enthusiasm. A clear image of the man emerges from the book. He described the joys of boarding a train in Peking to escape to Kalgan, the expedition's first staging post in Inner Mongolia. 'I sank down on a comfortable leather-covered seat, under a whirring punkah, and ordered a Beck's beer, a big bottle.'¹ After weeks spent in the stuffy and insular Western community in Peking, he sensed a great exhilaration in finally being able to slip away from colonial social constraints.

We now left China, where a 'white' cannot live without half a dozen boys to wait upon him and cannot walk in the street, but must have himself drawn by a sweating coolie. We had done with dancing on roof gardens and with cocktails at clubs. We packed our dinner jackets at the very bottom of our trunks, exchanged the daily, fresh-ironed, spotless linen for shorts and khaki shirts and threw the other rubbish into wagons.²

After a crossing of the Gobi Desert enlivened by the Scandinavian camaraderie and conviviality of his colleagues, the expedition caught its first sight of the capital.

[The city] lay at our feet, traversed by the abundant waters of the [Tuul] river and encircled by [the Holy Mountain's] wooded steeps. The rays of the sun, which for

1. Haslund at 21.

2. Ibid. at 27.

weeks we had been cursing, now threw an enchanting light over thousands of birch and larch trees clothed in autumn foliage. The innumerable gild roofs and minarets of the monastic city, the goal of our desert journey, lay before our enraptured eyes.³

Haslund was a witness to a time of extraordinary change in Mongolia. With the assistance of the Red Army, a collection of Mongolian nationalists founded a government that was soon to adopt a strict Marxist-Leninist ideology under the dominating wing of the USSR. A curtain was about to descend on an ancient way of life. Nonetheless, at the time of Henning's arrival, the capital was still an open city for foreign businesses and the tumult that attended Asia's rude introduction to the modern world.

No town in the world is like [the capital]. Upon us newcomers it made an extremely strange impression. The most conservative eastern life and customs and western innovations like the telegraph, the telephone and the motor-car exist side by side in motely combination. The houses of the Russians clutter around the church with Byzantine cupolas; colossal Buddhist temples rise high over thousands of felt-covered Mongol tents. Mounted Mongols, slippered Chinese, long-bearded Russians and smiling Tibetans swarm between palisaded compounds whose walls are hung with gaily fluttering prayer-flags.⁴

This enthusiastic Dane was one of a small fraternity of inquisitive and restless travellers who recorded their experiences in Mongolia with an open heart and abundant sympathy. In his monumental work *The Modern History of Mongolia*, the British Mongolist Charles Bawden wrote that those who reached the distant city in that era were creative explorers who were articulate enough to write of their inner experiences while being moved by a sense of mourning that the culture of the Mongolians was on the verge of disappearing. Certainly, Haslund had heard people along the Gobi caravan route express a sorrowful expectation that 'the golden days of Outer Mongolia were drawing to close'.⁵ Bawden said that such travellers were 'tough romantics, spiritually capable of appreciating the lost horizons and physically capable of making their way there'.⁶

Nearly one hundred years after the Haslund expedition, travellers to Ulaanbaatar often experience the same impressions. A mixture of the commonplace and the exotic creates a dazzling kaleidoscope of images. People wearing Mongolian robes and boots queue in fast-food restaurants for Western brand pizzas, deep-fried poultry parts, and hamburgers. Young professionals savour fine imported French wines while the elderly quaff *kumis*, fermented mare's milk tasting of a cocktail of unsweetened yogurt and club soda with the slightest touch of vodka. The most sophisticated nightlife this side of Europe is on offer in winter temperatures that often drop below those of Nome,

3. Ibid. at 66.

4. Ibid. at 68–69.

5. Ibid. at 36.

6. Bawden (1989) at 17.

Alaska. In a city filled with Asia's best English speakers, taxis are neither marked nor metered and frequently create the sensation of hitching a ride in an ashtray on wheels. The unemployed of the suburban tent settlements scavenge rubbish heaps for recyclable water bottles while luxury stores purvey Vertu mobile phones and diamond-encrusted bottles of vodka.

For first-timers, the city never matches their expectations because, for many, Mongolia is only a by-word for remoteness, an isolated place to be mentioned in the same breath as Timbuktu or Patagonia. This stereotype is long-lived and deeply entrenched. In the last century before the Christian era, the Grand Historian of China, Ssu-ma Ch'ien wrote a compendium of all history known to the Chinese world at that time. However, unlike Herodotus, whose misperceptions faded with antiquity, the Grand Historian enshrined a standard Chinese cliché about the inhabitants of the steppes. The nomads of Central Asia, he wrote, 'move about according to the availability of water and pasture, have no walled towns or fixed residences, nor any agricultural activities.'⁷ This observation inadvertently insinuates purposelessness on the part of the ancestors of Mongolians and a lack of discrimination, as if *any* water or *any* pasture was suitable.⁸ Subsequent generations of Chinese historians picked up on this stereotype and passed it along to the outside world, where it spread far and wide.

If Mongolia is remote, then Ulaanbaatar does not even produce a flicker of recognition in the eyes of most outsiders. Not even the *Financial Times* includes it in its list of global weather forecasts. The capital city usually comes in for cursory treatment by non-Mongolian tourists, who rush out on their adventure tours to verdant mountain valleys, magical lakeside cabins, and the desert's relentless frown, all admittedly the stuff that vacation dreams are made of but nonetheless affirming the jaded assumption that Ulaanbaatar somehow does not really 'matter'.

Indeed, the capital is often dismissed as a 'scar of city' even by some of the purported experts who have devoted many years of their lives to the country. While I do not contest this impression—Ulaanbaatar is not everyone's cup of tea—this one-sided view ignores the dramatic tale of three cities that arose on the banks of the Tuul River, the first under the influence of Buddhism, the second as a consequence of a Communist revolution, and the third as a testing ground for neo-liberal economics with more than a few lashings of Tammany Hall ethics.

Few tangible relics remain of Ulaanbaatar's distant past. This book, therefore, is a subjective journey into the imagination to compose a pointillist dreamscape of long vanished or half-vanished sites. I also set out forgotten dramas and anecdotes, along with my own subjective and quirky digressions, as we make our way through the city. I ask for the reader's indulgence in this poetic licence because I do not attempt to write a 'serious work of scholarship'—too much fun can be crushed in that process. This is an unconventional guidebook written about this unconventional city for today's 'tough

7. Ssu-ma Ch'ien at 129.

8. Lattimore (1962) at 31–32.

romantics', of any origin, who wish to invoke the spirit of this overlooked city on the steppes.

Last, there may be those who take offence that I do not present Ulaanbaatar as a pure Mongolian city without the 'taint of foreign blood' or outside culture. Such negative patriotism is not only ahistorical, but dangerous. I side with the nineteenth-century American satirist Ambrose Bierce who observed that patriotism is not the last refuge of a scoundrel; it is the first.⁹

M. A. Aldrich
Three Harbour Village, Formosa
Festival Day of Ayush
Full Moon, First Month, Year of the Female Red Fire Bird
12 March 2017

9. Bierce at 323.

Notes on Using This Book

'There isn't really much culture here, you know.' Or so was the declaratory judgement of a mid-level diplomat at an embassy shortly after my move to Ulaanbaatar in 2009.

Perhaps this misguided view can be understood in light of the paucity of information in English about Mongolia and its capital city. It is an opinion reinforced by contemporary travel books in which an author flaunts his or her own exceptionalism for travelling in an 'outlandish' country like Mongolia. Some of the guidebooks on the market strain at the bit to get past UB and introduce their readers to the scenes of natural beauty, inadvertently slighting the contention that Mongolia has a history and civilization that ought to be appreciated side by side with the more well-known cultures in Asia.

These misperceptions provided me with the grit determination to offer something new, something that might help open people's eyes and see UB differently. To paraphrase the great Carlos Celdran of Manila, you can't change the way UB looks, but you can change the way you look at UB.

I have divided this book into two parts. The first contains detailed chapters about Ulaanbaatar as a more 'serious' offering to provide the reader with a deeper appreciation of this unknown city. Chapter 1 sets out the cosmological plan of the original settlement and explains how the appearance of the city changed over time while remaining true to its core character. This is followed by the chapter 'Memories', which sets out Mongolian history viewed through the prism of the city from ancient days to the twenty-first century. Here I introduce themes and famous people whom we will encounter later on during our perambulations. Chapter 3, entitled 'Faith', paints a mosaic of the spiritual beliefs held by Mongolians and the institutions that supported these beliefs. This will hopefully make the city's surviving temples and shamanistic sites more accessible and help visitors take away more than a perfunctory impression of them. Chapter 4 introduces the reader to an overview of Mongolian architecture and ornamental decoration, another overlooked topic.

Brief discussions on Mongolian music, drama, literature, sports, and cinema are set out elsewhere in the book. I hope that these cursory introductions will whet the appetite of those who might pick up where I leave off and write a better and more thorough treatment of these topics.

The second part of the book sets out tours in the city and its environs and presents more subjective impressions. Chapter 5 starts with a description of a handful of eighteenth-century tent-style temples that have managed to survive. It then takes the reader on a tour of the imagination into the centre of the old monastic city as it looked one hundred years ago.

In Chapter 6 we enter terra firma as we embark upon a visit to mostly tangible sites (and sights) at the city's main square, enlivened (I hope) with my own idiosyncratic commentary. Each subsequent chapter moves farther from the centre of the city to more distant locales.

Throughout the book, I mention to black-and-white photographs of certain sites. A good collection of these is in Bayasgalan Bayanbat's *Ulaanbaatar Then and Now*, which can be found in book stores in UB and is a useful companion to this book.

Getting Around

Ulaanbaatar is not a pedestrian-friendly city. I recommend the reader to procure transportation by motor car for most of the visits to the sites described in these pages. Taxis range from professional radio-dispatched service to filthy wrecks. I recommend cutting a daily rate for visiting these sites if you meet a decent driver. Alternatively, public transportation costs very little, but there are few bus stops that are easily identifiable to a newly arrived traveller without the language. Furthermore, street addresses are seldom used or recognized. Directions are usually given by referring to landmarks, such as 'take the alley way next to the Cuban embassy until you pass a Khanburger joint'.

A winter visit is challenging, not only for sub-zero temperatures but the treacherousness of icy sidewalks, which can lead to nasty spills and broken bones for those from less northern climates. However, there is a much less 'touristed' feeling at that time compared to the summer high season.

Traffic congestion in recent years means that travel within the city can be agonizingly slow. There is a popular quip about a driver offering a ride to a friend walking by. He retorts, 'No, thanks, I am in a hurry.'

Accommodations

The quality of hotels ranges from ersatz five-star splendour to boisterous knocking-shops. As business standards come and go, it is somewhat futile to make recommendations for a place to stay. An international brand is also no guarantee of the quality that you may be accustomed to elsewhere. Personally, I find small guest houses to be more welcoming and personable than the dark, impervious behemoths that have cropped up in both the communist and capitalist years. Zaya Hostel is the best of the small inns.

Language, Romanization, and Names

Frustratingly, there is no standard method of romanizing Mongolian. This book is no more nor less consistent than other works in print. I add certain key words in Mongolian Cyrillic in the hope that this lessens confusion between the languages. I do this also to give primacy to the local language in this missive that seeks to give pride of place to Mongolian culture. At times I also use Sanskrit and Tibetan terms as these may be better known among Westerner readers. Chinese terms are in *pinyin* and sometimes simplified characters; when older forms of romanization are more recognizable to Westerners, I use them instead.

As I explain in Chapter 1, I call the capital city of Mongolia by three different names, depending on the historical context. I also use the traditional name ‘Peking’ in lieu of the officially-sanctioned *pinyin* spelling ‘Beijing’. ‘Peking’ has a more elegant appearance that conjures up the pageant of that city’s past. As a graduate of a Jesuit university, I will stick with tradition, at least in this one instance.

Mongolians do not have surnames, which, in case you were wondering, were probably an invention for tax collection and state surveillance in most parts of the world. In Mongolia the custom is for someone to have a personal name conjoined with a patronymic, which is usually the personal name of the father. Sometimes, the second part of the name is the mother’s name (as in the case of Choibalsan) or it may be the name of the person’s clan affiliation from long ago, if known.

As an illustration using English names, a person named John with a father named Peter would probably be known as John Peter. His daughter, named Naomi, would be Naomi John. In official documents, the patronymic precedes the personal name. In this case, the suffix *iin* (ийн) is added to the patronymic, similar to Peter’s John or John’s Naomi.

People use different styles to render a Mongolian name into English, which results in inconsistencies. For example, the woman mentioned above might present her name as J. Naomi or Naomi J. The protocol is to call her Ms. Naomi or just Naomi.

Mongolians also use nicknames and abbreviated personal names. Nicknames like ‘Bonehead’ or ‘Horsehead’ sound like Mafioso titles; they are not likely to be shared with you. Abbreviated personal names are similar to the Western custom where John becomes Jack. ‘Nominchimeg’ may go by ‘Nomio’, ‘Batbayar’ becomes ‘Bagi’, or ‘Erdenedalai’ is known as ‘Dalai’. Some people adopt Westernized names as an accommodation to non-Mongolians, which is helpful when encountering tongue-twisters like Terbishdagva.

Food and Beverages

Mongolian cuisine is predicated on its natural environment, and it cannot be denied that it is a trying place for vegetarians. Historically, dining customs embarked on a circular migration that went from the use of hands (for gnawing on a boiled mutton

rib), to chopsticks for noodles (sometimes), to a fork and a knife for Russian cuisine, and then back to using hands (for hamburgers and pizza). While healthier alternatives have become popular, people still say that ‘meat is a meal, but a meal with no meat is no meal’.

Meat was traditionally prepared by boiling, the least wasteful method, to conserve fuel, an understandable concern given the winter temperatures that drop to minus 40 degrees. It was also taboo to roast meats because some Buddhist Central Asians, unlike their Muslim neighbours, believed that the gods are offended by the smell of barbecued flesh. (Roasting meat wastes fuel, too.) The primary if not sole seasoning was salt as a necessity on the steppes. Sometimes green onions were added. Mongolian specialties on offer in Ulaanbaatar’s restaurants are often a local adaptation of northern Chinese cuisine. Russian cuisine introduced the liberal use of mayonnaise, pickled vegetables, sausages, and preserved cold meats.

Buuz (бууз) are steamed meat dumplings usually made with mutton, similar to Chinese *baozi* (包子). *Khuushuur* (Хуушуур) are lightly fried meat-cakes often filled with mutton and diced onions. For travellers coming from points to the south, *khuushuur* are similar to Chinese *roubing* (肉饼), but much larger. These two are the standard fare offered in many quick snack places throughout the city and in the countryside. *Buuz* and *khuushuur* are typically served with a semi-synthetic soy sauce sold under the trademark Maggie. I find that they taste their best when flavoured with a fiery Sichuan chilli paste, but that is too radically spicy for some of my Mongolian friends. (Take your own jar of this condiment with you if this sounds appealing.) *Tsuivan* (цуйван) is fried noodles made with mutton and carrot and cabbage shavings. *Khorkhog* (хорхор) are sheep ribs cooked in a pressure cooker and then eaten by tearing off a piece with the mouth and cutting it free with a knife—pointy-nosed Westerners are advised to use caution. It is cooked with potatoes and other root vegetables. The ribs are roasted with black porous stones which wind up covered in fat and handed out at the start of the meal. These are not mementoes to be taken home, or an hors d’oeuvre, as famously assumed by some visiting investment bankers, but are meant to improve the circulation of the blood in one’s hands. As these are piping hot, you will need to flip the stone from one hand to the other until they cool down.

Mongolian mutton is very tasty as it is grown organically. As noted fifty years ago,

[*Artemisia*], and several species of wild garlic and wild onion, and a plant that has a smell something like sage, give Mongolian mutton a flavor that eaters of the prim American lamb chop cannot even imagine.¹

We should land a knockout punch on the myth of ‘Mongolian barbecue’. The ‘original’ Mongolian barbecue was first sprung on an unsuspecting public in 1955 at the Genghis Khan Restaurant in Taipei, possibly as an excellent way to pawn off ingredients that had started to spoil. This type of restaurant wormed its way to Hong Kong

1. Lattimore (1962) at 18.



'Careful eating the *khorkhog*, Comrade!'. Photo by author.

and then to other eateries in the Chinese diaspora before showing up in Ulaanbaatar as purportedly a Japanese cuisine in the 1990s.

Mongolian cuisine is ubiquitous in UB. For this reason, I do not have any recommendations for a Mongolian restaurant as they all tend to be equally fine because of the simplicity in the preparation of the food. In these chapters I point out a handful of other restaurants that have unique or interesting cuisine on offer, either by the standards of UB or elsewhere.

For those curious about the history of Mongolian food, there is no more fascinating resource than *A Soup for the Qan* by Paul Buell and Eugene Anderson, which details the fusion cuisine (and recipes) of the Mongolian court during the Yuan dynasty.

Mongolian vodka is of excellent quality but dangerous potency. Since Mongolian trademark practice is still in its infancy, various conglomerates have registered deceptively similar marks using the likeness of Chinggis Khan (who appears to be glaring out from some labels with a severe hangover). Other national symbols, such as Zanabazar's Tantric Soyombo emblem, have been ripped off as brands for vodka, too. I recall the days when the only spirit on the shelves of most shops was the trusty blue-labelled *arkhi*.

Local beers tend to follow the bland lead of American lagers, though GEM ale, whenever available, is a fine tippie that calls to mind English ales. Imported wines are available in the high-end shops.

The high altitude and dryness of the climate dehydrates visitors. Be sure to drink plenty of bottled water and keep some on hand in your hotel room in the evening in case you wake up parched.

Conduct

To me, fine nightlife means a single malt scotch and a good book by a fireplace so that I can salute the Goddess of the Hearth. That said, expatriate connoisseurs assure me that the nightlife in UB is as sophisticated as night-time haunts in Europe, with electronic music at ear-splitting decibels and light shows designed to induce epileptic fits in life forms higher than a clam.

While I do not wish to overemphasize this point, you need to maintain a certain Western 'streetwise' sense about you. One cannot take personal security as a given (as in many other Asian cities). Things can be a little dicey once the sun sets and the vodka flows. The foreign press has made much of groups of nativists, and they are certainly a nuisance betraying the tradition of their country. Nonetheless, you need to keep your wits about you. One should embrace the Taoist recommendation to be 'yielding like water' and flow away and around potential unpleasantness. For men, nightlife with Mongolian female companionship may bring with it the predictable consequences of alpha males wanting to maintain the purity of the herd.

Mongolia is the other half of Asia, the one without the oppressive crush of a large population or an agricultural and sedentary tradition made burdensome and heavy through political Confucianism. Asia of the steppe (as opposed to Asia of the sown) has been little appreciated outside a small circle of academic scholars and those who have 'gone native'. Nor is it often written about with affection. By giving a priority to Mongolian culture and an appreciation of its people, you will discover an overlooked jewel that, like all good things, pays rich rewards for the investment of time and patience.

Part I

The City

1

The Plan of the City

At its core, the amorphous spirit of Ulaanbaatar has all the versatility and fecklessness of one of the air signs of the Western zodiac. These qualities transformed the appearance of the capital into three vastly different cities over the centuries. In the sixteenth century it donned the robes of a lama and laid the foundations for Mongolian sedentary society. The settlement matured into a sacred city on par with Lhasa or Varanasi by the late nineteenth century. Then, in 1921, it traded its monastic robes and mitre for a black worker's cap and the high-collared tunic of a commissar, looking faithfully to Moscow for direction, if not inspiration. After the fall of communism in 1990 it morphed into a free-market entrepreneur, with a baseball cap worn backwards, tooling around town in an SUV while listening to Mongolian hip-hop as a badge of faux patriotism.

The city's mercurial personality is seen in its many names. Among Westerners long ago, it was called Urga, or Ourga, a mangling of the Mongolian *örgöö* (өргөө), meaning 'esteemed residence' or 'palace' of an important person.¹ In 1924, it took the name Ulan Bator (Улан Батор) or 'Red Hero'. 'Ulan Bator' is an imprecise Latin rendering of its classical Mongolian name as put through Cyrillic Russian. It also looks irritatingly like the name of a minor Star Wars character. In the 1990s an accurate rendering of its name, Ulaanbaatar (Улаанбаатар), from its Cyrillic Mongolian spelling, came on the scene, though this has been ignored by most Anglophone news outlets, which continue to use Ulan Bator.

In these pages I use one of these three names to refer alternatively to the three main historic phases of the city. Urga is the name I use for the city from antiquity to the formal establishment of the Mongolian People's Republic (MPR). Ulan Bator covers the period from 1924 to Mongolia's renunciation of Marxism-Leninism in 1990. The post-communist city is Ulaanbaatar or, in sympathy with the overused letter *a* on my keyboard, UB.²

1. The term originally referred to the flap in a tent used to cover its circular smoke hole. Lattimore (1962) at 61.

2. In Mongolian, too, the city has been called by a maddening multitude of names. Aside from Örgöö, it was called Khüree from the early eighteenth century, though this went through several modifications: Ikh Khüree (Great Monastic Settlement), Bogdiin Khüree (Monastic Settlement of the Patriarch), Khutagtiin Khüree (Monastic Settlement of the Incarnate One), and Ariin Khüree (Monastic Settlement of the North). Coming to the twentieth century, its name became Niislel Khüree (Monastic Capital) in 1912. Finally, we land on the name Ulaanbaatar Niislel Khot (Red Hero Capital City) in 1924. See Teleki (2008) at 12.

In the eighteenth century Urga coalesced into two roughly circular settlements like orbs in the upper sky of a Buddhist painting. One of the orbs was a monastic encampment, or *khüree*, which is a mobile collection of felt tents arranged in the shape of an inverted *U* with the residence of a high lama at its centre. A *khüree* is the nomadic counterpart to cosmological designs often applied to Asian cities. It has the same shape as the mobile hunting camps of the Manchu nobles or the travelling encampments of the Tibetan Sakyapa Buddhist patriarch. While lacking an intricate theory of urban design, unlike Peking, or Baghdad during the Abbasid Caliphate, the shape of a *khüree* determined the basic contours of monastic settlements.

The other orb was a trading post built by Chinese merchants who sold the manufactured necessities of life otherwise unavailable on the steppes. Their clientele consisted of mostly Mongolian herders and monks. The residents of the trading post attempted, haphazardly, to follow Chinese urban design by enclosing their settlement with a wooden 'city wall' plastered with mud to create a semblance of sturdiness. The second orb did not resemble in the least the grand walled cities of China because of cost—the interests of the merchants were practical rather than ceremonial—but it soon acquired all the accoutrements of a Chinese settlement in non-Han lands, such as opera halls, temples, and restaurants.

Urga took its prestige from being the residence of the Jebzundamba Khutugtu (Жавзандамба хутагт), or the Revered Noble One. This exalted lineage produced the Buddhist patriarchs who were the spiritual leaders of Northern (or Khalkha) Mongolia.

In the early nineteenth century, a third orb joined the other two. The patriarch established a 'university town' to the west of his *khüree* as a centre for higher Buddhist learning. This turned into a second monastic district. The original one was called the Eastern Monastic Settlement, or Züün Khüree (Зүүн Хүрээ), and the other the Western Monastic Settlement, or Baruun Khüree (Баруун Хүрээ). The tradesmen district, a 'Chinatown' in fact, was called Maimachin (Маймачин), from the Chinese *maimaicheng* (买卖城), meaning 'buy-sell city'.

During the nineteenth century Urga began to lose its nomadic character as it set down tenuous roots. Nonetheless, it still had the appearance of a transitory camp that could be disbanded rapidly. Wooden palisades enclosed felt tents and a few wooden houses, looking like the forts of the Hudson Bay Company in early nineteenth-century Canada. These palisades were conjoined to form unpaved roadways meandering through the settlement. Non-monastic dwellings for lay Mongolians grew to the south of the two religious centres while the Khalkha nobles built wooden courtyard town houses along the northern bank of the Tuul River for their occasional visits to Urga. Despite the appearance of Chinese architectural forms, fixed sites of worship, and other urban touches, it remained a loose hodgepodge of randomly positioned felt tents and wooden buildings well into the twentieth century.

However, that was almost not the end of the story. Some bright bulb in the 1990s coined a new name, Aziin Tsagaan Dagina, or, in a translation ripe for misunderstanding, 'Asia's White Fairy'. This suggestion mercifully slipped back into obscurity after its airing.



Gate for a khasaa in the ger district. Photo by author.



A view familiar to nineteenth-century visitors. Photo by Lukas Nikol.

Life was simple and basic compared to other Asian cities. Most residents of Urga were disinclined to walk any distance and travelled around on horseback. They purchased their water from Chinese labourers hauling barrels from the Tuul River and its tributaries. Dried dung, or *argol* (агга), was the fuel used for heating and cooking, wood being too valuable for combustion while the extraction of coal risked provoking the ire of underground spirits. Illumination was by way of lamps burning a wick in oil. Rubbish was left festering in the roads outside the palisades until the visit of an



Communist building mural. Photo by Lukas Nikol.

important person or a special religious holiday necessitated a rapid clean-up. Despite monastic protests, a marketplace gradually grew up between the two monastic settlements. By the late nineteenth century, a small tsarist diplomatic mission had become a nucleus for a Russian colony on 'Consulate Hill'.

Coming on to the stage in the third decade of the twentieth century, Ulan Bator was a complete repudiation of Urga and its traditions. Its distinctive shape arose through the gradual adoption of Soviet urban design implemented by teams of Mongolian and Russian architects. Gone was the ramshackle chaos of the lamas and tradesmen. A main square formed the centre around which concentric paved ring roads connected neighbourhoods with newly built apartment complexes. Heated water and electricity were supplied from power stations. Dorian, Ionian, and Aeolian columns, recalling their distant origins on the Aegean Sea, decorated public buildings along with delicate and subtle Mongolian motifs shorn of religious associations. Modern hospitals, schools, cooperative stores, museums, opera halls, cinemas, and macadamized roads replaced the hard scrapple existence of urban life under monastic rule. Thanks to Soviet technical guidance, urban planners placed buildings in locations for the best use of air and light.

The municipal authorities created discrete suburbs called microdistricts as the city expanded beyond the outer ring road; however, construction perennially lagged behind migration to the city. Felt tents were always being added to the suburbs and were never fully replaced by modern housing.

By the mid-1960s, Ulan Bator had completed its metamorphosis into a carefully designed Siberian provincial capital built in accordance with a tastefully restrained

Soviet neoclassicism. It was a city pleasing to the eye if unexciting to those seeking more libertine excitements or bourgeois consumerism.

With the advent of Ulaanbaatar, time went backwards. The appearance of the city reverted to an unplanned settlement with helter-skelter construction that marred the carefully crafted Soviet design. Some justify the lack of planning on the excuse that Mongolians are nomads unfamiliar with such foreign concepts. In truth, there has been little desire to preserve the Soviet patrimony of Ulan Bator and an intense hunger to make a quick buck. The city was also inundated with herders uprooted in the aftermath of neo-liberal economic policies in the 1990s. The sprawling 'ger districts' or the newly settled outlying suburbs are a throwback to nineteenth-century Urga; its residents depend upon water trucked in and have to make do with minimal,



'Sacrifice zones' for the free market.
Photos by Lukas Nikol.

if any, public utilities. The Mongolian capital became a 'sacrifice zone' for a new set of imported economic theories.

As UB entered the twenty-first century, the downtown district tossed up ill-placed skyscrapers that look, for all the world, like they have somehow managed to pull up sticks and wander up from Hong Kong or Singapore, setting themselves down uninvited next to Soviet monuments, felt tents, and the few surviving Buddhist temples. Once important buildings fell victim to the wrecking ball or were robbed of their former dignity in the rush to embrace modernity. The resulting jumble resembles a surrealistic Central Asian city dreamed up by Terry Gilliam as a modern-day Xanadu. Or perhaps it suggests an alternative reality for Lhasa if the Tibetan capital had been able to escape the clutches of the 'Fatherland'.

The chaotic face of Ulaanbaatar hides the stories of its past, locking them away in the stony forgetfulness of neglected or misunderstood buildings—that is, until we release them.



Ger district. Photo by Lukas Nikol.

Part II

The Sites

Eastern Monastic Settlement (Züün Khüree)

The Eastern Monastic Settlement or Züün Khüree (Зүүн Хүрээ) was the religious centre of Urga and the site of the official residence of the patriarch.¹ For non-Mongolians trekking across stony deserts and undulating grasslands, the first sighting of Urga's fantastical buildings must have seemed as otherworldly as the lunar scenery in Georges Méliès's *A Trip to the Moon*. Monks dressed in scarlet robes chanting mysterious prayers and lay residents wearing exotic costumes topped by elaborate headwear would have looked like apparitions from a universe far from the familiar and predictable Euro-American world.

Only three main buildings of the Eastern Monastic Settlement survive to the present day. They are all Mongolian ger-style temples that were requisitioned as storehouses for Buddhist artwork looted from other monasteries during the Great Purge. In 1941 the temples were appropriated by the Ulan Bator circus, a form of entertainment newly imported from the USSR, for use as a training ground for performers and a stable for animals.

After fifty years of this less-than-exalted use the Mongolian government reallocated two of the three main buildings in 1990 to the revived Dashchoilin Monastery of the Eastern Monastic Settlement, or Züün Khüree Dashchoilin Khiid (Зүүн Хүрээ Дашчойлон Хийд) along with two much smaller gers that survived the 1930s. (These other two are now the monastery's library and a monastic tailoring/embroidery workshop.) The Dashchoilin Monastery is located on Akademch Sodnom Street in Eighth Khoroo of the Sükhbaatar District, which is located to the east of what was once the centre of the Eastern Monastic Settlement.

A noble from Tüshetu Khan Aimag founded the 'Prince's Aimag', or Wangain Aimag (Вангайн Аймаг), in 1740, and the current ger-temple was built for it in 1790. The temple continued to be an active site of worship until the Great Purge. In its day, it was notable for having a set of the twelve volumes of the Prajnaparamita Sutra written in vermilion ink (which was returned to the temple's care in the early 1990s).²

The Wangain Aimag is now the tsogchin dugan for the Dashchoilin Monastery's monks, who meet every morning to chant prayers from 9:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. Its

1. See Teleki (2008).

2. Teleki at 113–16.

interior has been redecorated—the ceiling is painted a light blue and the beams and pillars are red and gold. In the morning hours, effulgent sunlight streams through the toono, illuminating the victory banners and thangkas over the monks as they pray. On the main altar are bronzes of the Shakyamuni Buddha, the bodhisattva Maitreya, and Tara, as well as a set of plaster sculptures of arhats. At one side, there are thousands of small statues of Zanabazar in five different hand gestures, or *mudras*, in the glass-covered cupboards.

Next to Wangain Aimag is the Enkhem Tonni Aimag (ЭНХЭМ ТОННИ АЙМАГ). This structure was also built in 1790 and reconsecrated as the temple for the monastery's protective deities, Baldan Lkham and Jamsran, at the time of its revival in 1990. In the antechamber are the Maharajas of the Four Directions. The interior of the temple proper is decorated in red, the symbolic colour of the wrathful protective deities of the monastery. On the west side of the temple's interior, monks read *jasaa* for supplicants, who sit on the nearby benches and pass among themselves an urn containing burning juniper incense, fanning the smoke over their heads while waiting their turn for consultations. The bronzes of the two protective deities are placed above the seats for the main disciplinary master and his assistant on each side of the interior entranceway. Hanging from the ceiling are large thangkas of Yamantaka (Jigjid) and Vajrapani (Vachibani) in the centre, Sitamahakala (Gongor) and Mahalaka (Gombo) on the left, and Sridevi (Baldan Lkham) and Yama (Choijoo) on the right. The main altar has a bronze of Tsongkhapa and his two disciples. Set out elsewhere on the altar are bronzes of the Tathagata Buddhas and the dharmapala. The Enkhem Tonni Aimag was founded as an institution in 1737 with the approval of the Second Patriarch, who sought to unify the protective deities for all Mongolian lineages initiated by his great-grand uncle, Zanabazar.³

In 1999 the Dashchoilin monastic authorities added the concrete Gandanchoinkhorin Aimag (ГАНДАНЧОЙНХОРИН АЙМАГ). Its main image is a copper Shakyamuni Buddha gilded with gold. On its walls is a mural of the Vajrayana Buddhist pantheon, namely the eight main disciples of the Buddha, the sixteen arhats, the ten dharmapala, the protectors from the four continents, the White Old Man, a Mongolian prince holding a tiger by a chain, and eight stupas with eight auspicious symbols, among many others. A set of huge rosary beads decorate the altar. The Gandanchoinkhorin Temple is used primarily for providing *jasaa* readings or casting horoscopes for the laity.

Outside the grounds of the monastery to the west, the Ikh Daginiin Aimag (Их Дагины Аймаг), built in 1903, is still used as one of the administrative offices of the circus. It was commissioned in honour of Dongogdulam, one of the wives of the Bogd Khan and a purported *dagina*, or female goddess. Despite being the wife of the Patriarch and a female goddess to boot, Dongogdulam's fortunes were limited—she died within a decade of the consecration of the temple. Her replacement-spouse was

3. Ibid. at 109–11.



Wangain Aimag, now the Main Assembly Hall of the Dashchoilin Monastery. Photo by author.

a woman who quickly grasped that an improper marriage to a highly placed incarnate lama could do wonders for disposable income. The new wife had been the consort of a famed wrestler who, upon learning that his missus was eagerly sought for the Bogd Khan's bed, gallantly gave her up with a shrug.

Today's Dashchoilin Monastery does not capture the grandeur of Urga in the era of the patriarchs, but we can reconstruct in our imagination how the Eastern Monastic Settlement looked, thanks to a map of Urga painted by the artist Jügger in 1913 for the Bogd Khan.⁴

The Central Square was a vast unpaved oblong expanse with its narrow ends on the north and south perimeters. It was enclosed on the east and west by rough-hewn wooden fences with prayer wheels 'as plentiful as fire plugs' that were kept in nearly perpetual motion by passing lamas and pilgrims.⁵ The south gateway of the Central Square was a red imperial arch with green tiled eaves built on the orders of Peking in 1883 to welcome the Eighth Patriarch to Urga. Two stone lions flanked the imperial arch (and later in the mid-twentieth century, they were posted for duty in front of the Museum of Natural History, where they still stand guard, like demoted zeebads).

From the imperial arch, the Holy Walkway, or Zarak Zam (Зарак Зам), ran along the main north–south axis of the Central Square. Porters carried the Eighth Patriarch in his sedan chair along the Zarak Zam whenever he travelled between the Eastern Monastic Settlement and his other palaces.

On the north side of the square was the Yellow Palace, or Shar Ordon (Шар ордон), the official residence of the patriarchs. The palace took its name from the

4. Full-scale copies of the map may be viewed at the Temple of the Oracle Lama and the Bogd Khan Museum.

5. Meignan at 322.



Stone lion, formerly in front of the Holy Walkway. Photo by author.

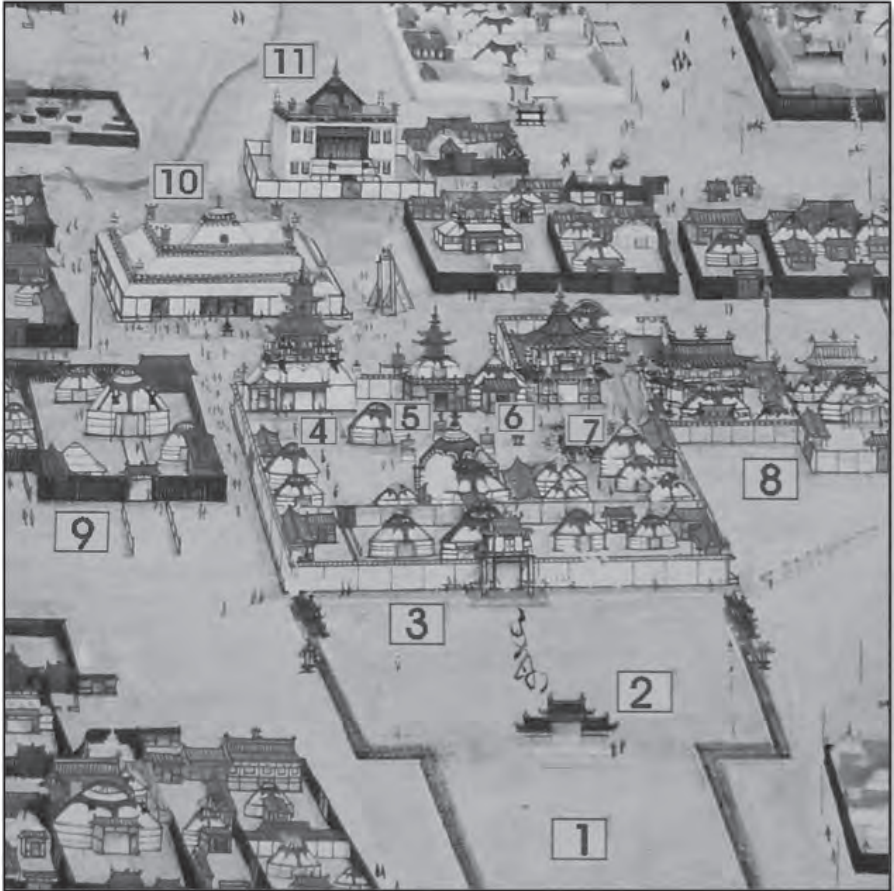
yellow wooden palisade that enclosed it. The Manchu court had granted the Eighth Patriarch the privilege to use the imperial colour yellow as a sign of its favour.⁶

The Central Square and the Zalrak Zam were positioned in accordance with the geomantic principle of placing the main entrance of a royal palace at the north end of a 'divine walkway'. For a nineteenth-century traveller, the Holy Walkway would have appeared like a Central Asian version of Tiananmen Square or the courtyard outside the main royal palace for the Nguyen kings in Vietnam. When approaching the Yellow Palace along the Holy Walkway, travellers would inevitably have had the impression that with each step they were drawing closer and closer to a celestially chosen ruler.

The Central Square was used for religious events that also served social functions. It was the site of the twice-yearly ceremony for the Tsam—a Buddhist masked dance ritual performed by lamas to exorcise harmful karma from the settlement. In the summer, it hosted the traditional quasi-religious Mongolian sporting contests that later morphed into the secular Naadam festival.

Outside the main entrance of the Yellow Palace, pilgrims waited to receive the blessings of the Patriarch. The monks ran a red string from the interior of the Yellow Palace to the Central Square where the end of the string would be handed to a pilgrim,

6. Pozdneyev (1978) at 362.



Central Square, Eastern Monastic Settlement. Graphic designed by Aubrey Ding-Shan Yang, original map by Jügder, 1913, Bogd Khan Museum.

Key

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1. Holy Walkway | 7. Octagonal temple |
| 2. Triumphal Arch | 8. Temple of Vajradhara |
| 3. Yellow Palace | 9. Western Palace |
| 4. Dechingalav Temple | 10. 'Massive White' Assembly Hall |
| 5. Temple of the Bodhisattva Tara | 11. Temple of Maitreya |
| 6. Temples of the Three Bodhisattvas | |

who was instructed to give a tug. The Patriarch, or more likely an unseen proxy holding the other end of the string, would tug back to signal a blessing being sent through the cord by the highest Buddhist authority in Khalkha Mongolia.

As observed by a British travel writer,

[The] devotions [of the pilgrims] form an important item in their daily routines; though perhaps, to an unbeliever in the Mongol Buddhist faith, these devotions may seem to take a form which is somewhat astonishing. Still, it cannot be denied that they are carried out with great sincerity . . . The ‘prayer boards’ are also placed for public use in various parts of the city, and on which are continually to be seen prostrate figures lying on their faces, and thus literally humbling themselves to the very dust.⁷

Behind the main gate of the Yellow Palace were fifteen temples. On each side of the walkway within the Yellow Palace there were two palatial gers for the Patriarch. These were not his main place of abode since he owned many other palaces in Urga and elsewhere. Generally, he preferred to be elsewhere away from the site of his clerical duties.

To the north-west of the Patriarch’s gers was the Dechingalav Temple, the site for the initiation into the Kalachakra and a notable structure in the city. The temple traced its origins to the Second Patriarch, who in 1729 formed a lamas’ ‘working group’ to introduce the Kalachakra into Khalkha Mongolia. (Those familiar with the Mongolian administrative process might recognize, with a shudder, this long-entrenched administrative vehicle for delaying decisions and avoiding responsibility. The concept of a ‘working group’ might have been somewhat more suited for religious matters given the gravitas accorded to the faith, but the sceptic in me doubts it.) The temple sites for the Kalachakra initiation remained mobile until 1806 when the Fourth Patriarch ordered the construction of this ornate temple after his own initiation by the Dalai Lama during a pilgrimage to Lhasa. The building burned down in 1892 and was then rebuilt with the same facade and interior. It had a Mongolian mezzanine surmounted by a square cupola and a gilded roof decorated with small bells that were the source of uninterrupted melodic tinkling—a delightful Buddhist sound heard in Asia from Siberia through Tibet into Burma and beyond. Every year on the first day of the last lunar month, the lamas held the Kalachakra initiation ceremonies. The Dechingalav Temple was also the personal temple for the patriarchs. Consequently, it was the temporary resting place for their remains while the astrologers sought an auspicious day for their immurement in a stupa.

The Temple to the Bodhisattva Tara stood directly to the north of the Patriarch’s gers. Next to it was the Temple of the Three Bodhisattvas in honour of Avalokitesvara, Manjusri, and Vajradhara, built at the order of the Fourth Patriarch in 1793. Near the gers was an octagonal shaped wooden temple, originally built as a palace for the Third Patriarch, dedicated to the Vajra. To the east of this was the Vajradhara Temple which

7. Price at 282–84.

had a bronze of its deity cast a century earlier by Zanabazar. (This bronze is now on the main altar of the Vajradhara Temple in Gandan Monastery.)

The 'Massive White', or Bat Tsagaan (Бат Цагаан), was the main tsogchin dugan of the Eastern Monastic Settlement. In the late nineteenth century, the Russian Mongolist Pozdneyev compared it favourably to the grand cathedrals of Europe.⁸ It was a large square-shaped Tibetan building with its exterior walls splashed with white-wash and its roof crowned with a square cupola.⁹ One hundred eight pillars supported its roof, an auspicious number referring to the number of volumes in the Kanjur. (The entire Kanjur was recited here during an annual three-day festival.) The tsogchin dugan accommodated 2,500 lamas for routine rituals. For vow-taking ceremonies and other special events, additional felt tents could be laid on and attached to the hall to accommodate up to 10,000 lamas. The interior of the Massive White was not ornately decorated; there were only rows of low benches placed perpendicular to the main altar and a 'lion throne' in front for the Patriarch. On the main altar, there was a large bronze of Shakyamuni Buddha, or Ikhiin Zuu (Ихийн Зуу), cast by Zanabazar. (This bronze is also now in Gandan Monastery.)

Zanabazar inaugurated the Massive White as an institution for lama convocations in 1654. Like other monastic institutions in Khalkha Mongolia, it was not set in one fixed place but could be dismantled to accompany the patriarchs in their wanderings until the nineteenth century when it was settled for what was expected to be a long duration. It maintained the original appearance designed by Zanabazar.

Outside the Yellow Palace to the west was the Western Palace, or Baruun Örgöö (Баруун Өгрөө), a ger-temple for the veneration of the Abatai Khan, the great-grandfather of Zanabazar, the builder of the Monastery of the One Hundred Treasures, and one of the main supporters of Buddhism at the outset of the Second Conversion. It served as a site for worshipping Jamsran and other pre-Buddhist Mongolian deities absorbed into the Buddhist pantheon. Inside were logs that were roughly hewn into shapes of fierce heroes of olden days.

Faces painted red, barred teeth, enormous bulging eyes, high raised brows . . . were everywhere in evidence here. The logs were clothed in khyak (mail) and duulga (helmets) made of steel and ornamented with gold. The Mongols held these heroes in special veneration, and each person upon entering the yurt deemed it his duty to press his forehead to their shoulders in the hope of thus receiving a small portion, at least, of their heroic strength.¹⁰

This temple was where, in 1920, Sükhbaatar, Choibalsan, and other proto-revolutionaries put their foreheads to the shoulders of the red wrathful deities, swore an oath

8. Pozdneyev I (1997) at 54.

9. Following the Tibetan custom, monks threw a coat of whitewash on the exterior of multistorey stone building rather than apply it with a brush.

10. Pozdneyev I (1997) at 60.

to defend Mongolia and Buddhism from gamin invaders, and then left to seek the help of the Bolsheviks.

Old photographs reveal the stunning exterior of the Temple of Maitreya, or Maidariin Süm (Майдарийн Сүм), another of Urga's famous sites of worship, which stood to the north-west of the Yellow Palace. The temple was part of the plans of abbot Agvaankhaidav for the propagation of Maitreya in Urga. The abbot was a devotee of Maitreya because the bodhisattva had visited him during a childhood dream.

The temple was first constructed in the Chinese style but burned down repeatedly. The Mongolians lamas sought the guidance of the Panchen Lama, who interpreted these disasters as a sign of Maitreya's displeasure at the absence of Tibetan motifs in the temple's design. In 1860 the temple was rebuilt in a square shape with white wooden walls and a domed roof with an interlocking green and brown design. Within the temple, there was a magnificent masterpiece of Mongolian art, a 16-metre bronze statue of the Maitreya bodhisattva seated on a lion throne. It had been cast in Doloon Nor in 1834 at the request of the Fifth Patriarch. Along the north wall behind the Maitreya bronze were bronzes of the five Tathagata Buddhas. Ten thousand Ayush Buddha bronzes, cast in 1799, were placed along the eastern and western walls. It was said the interior was identical to the celebrated Tibetan 'cathedral' in Lhasa, the seventh-century Jokhang Temple, the most holy site for the dharma in Tibet.¹¹

Beyond the Yellow Palace the settlement consisted of meandering alleyways formed by 3- or 4-metre wooden palisades that enclosed lots, or khasaas. The entrances to the khasaas were weather-beaten red wooden gates with a beam or two as lintels bearing plaques with the symbol OM or the Svayambhu. Inside the khasaa there were at least two gers, one for use as a dormitory for the monks and the other as their kitchen. Occasionally, well-off lamas built wooden summer homes in their courtyards. The overall impression must have not been that different from the ger districts in Ulaanbaatar today.

The custom of enclosing each residence with a wooden palisade was a borrowing from the Chinese, who favoured walls around their houses for privacy and security. On the steppes Mongolians did not erect fences, given that there was no need to denote personal space, but urban settlements were a comparatively late innovation to which this Chinese custom was applied.

The Eastern Monastic Settlement was not designed for pedestrians but for people on horseback, just as Ulaanbaatar today is not the most pedestrian friendly city in the world. In the dry weather, the streets became a whirl of dust storms. In the summer rains they were impassably flooded mud ruts that then turned into slippery ice-covered paths in the dead of winter.

While nineteenth-century visitors commented on how the streets appeared to be empty of people, the Eastern Monastic Settlement was in fact a beehive of activity behind the wooden palisades. Several gers housed woodblock printing presses that

11. Pozdneyev I (1997) at 61–62; Teleki at 76–78; Tsultsemin at 143–47.



Urga as orientalist exotica. Source: *Mongolia: The Tangut Country and the Solitudes of Northern Tibet*, Nikolai Mikhailovich Przhevalski, London, 1876.

prepared Buddhist sutras, philosophical treatises as well as literary and historical works in Mongolian and Tibetan. Other ger-temples were the sites of ‘eternal assemblies’, where convocations of lamas were in continual session to chant prayers and seek the intervention of the gods.

In 1900 there were thirty aimags in the Eastern Monastic Settlement. Linguistically, the term *aimag* (аймаг) was applied to many broadly similar concepts. In its most elementary meaning, it refers to a territorial subdivision. As noted in Chapter 2, it was also the name used for the four main subdivisions of Khalkha Mongolia. In Urga, the ecclesiastical authorities subdivided a monastery into aimags when it had grown too large for unitary administration. To avoid regionalist friction, lamas from the same locality in Khalkha Mongolia were assigned to the same aimag. Other aimags came into being to handle specific tasks, such as the preparation of food or the printing of books. (In the twentieth century the term came to mean political and administrative subdivisions of Khalkha Mongolia, hence its modern meaning province.) In Urga each aimag was assigned a separate khasaa that contained a ger-shaped temple along with

other gers for use as sleeping quarters or kitchens. Each aimag was assigned a sequential letter of the Tibetan alphabet to indicate the chronological order of its establishment. (These days, the Bayangol Hotel is a pale shadow of this custom since it never got up the velocity to go beyond Buildings A and B.)

In addition to the aimags, the khasaas near the Yellow Palace also contained *datsans*, or monastic colleges for the study of the higher philosophical arts of Vajrayana Buddhism. The *datsans* were sheltered in Mongolian temples capped with square cupolas and upturned eaves or, sometimes, in a large ger. Each *datsan* was dedicated to one of the main fields of study. The courses were taught by highly qualified lamas with higher degrees obtained in Mongolia or Tibet.

Training in philosophical debate was an important element of the curriculum. Debates were conducted in the Tibetan style of aggressive argumentation. One lama would circle his opponent, present a proposition and then lift his right hand behind his head, bring it forcefully down with a boom on his left hand, and accusingly point at his opponent. The opponent had to refute or expand upon his interrogator's proposition.

Questions on Buddhist metaphysics went something like this:

What is the difference between a man sitting on a tree and a man standing on the ground?

Or this:

Does the mountain called Bukung Buru mentioned in the book of the Buddha rest *in* the ocean or *on* the ocean?¹²

This was no ivory tower gathering at high tea to consider carefully another's view and proffer gentle rejoinders. The debates were aggressive, entertaining, and often raucous, with the audience hooting at a poor showing by a quailing contestant or aggressively cheering champion debaters. In the hands of a skilled examiner, the cross-examination could lead to the humiliation of those ill-prepared for the contest or to a sophisticated journey into Buddhist logical argumentation.

Pious pilgrims, both laymen and clergy, would engage in a circumambulation of the Eastern Monastic Settlement along its outer pathways. As an act of devotion, a pilgrim would lie down on the ground with arms extended above the head and mark the length with a stone. The devotee then stood up, took two or three steps to the stone, and repeated the process. This continued for a course of prayer around the entire perimeter of the settlement. The hands, knees, and elbows of the devotees were wrapped in leather to lessen wear and tear. A learned lama composed a treatise describing the correct manner of performing this ritual given its importance as an act of devotion. Nonetheless, this was an extreme form of worship (that can occasionally be seen in Lhasa these days along the Barkhor and the remaining segments of the Lingkhör). Some devotees performed this act of piety for the entire distance of the pilgrimage

12. Perry-Ayscough at 102.

from their home to Urga. As one observer remarked in 1914, 'These pilgrims will continue this slow and awkward process for perhaps 100 miles before reaching Urga; and when it is remembered that at the best of times the Mongol dislikes walking and is accustomed to ride from the earliest infancy,' it was a testimonial to the faith of the common herders.¹³

A pilgrimage was not an exercise in pure piety, however. Like the journey taken by the band of travellers in *The Canterbury Tales*, it was also a diversion, a chance to visit the main commercial hub of the region, meet other Mongolians, and exchange gossip and news about the goings-on among the nobles and lamas. It was an opportunity to pick up some of the basic necessities for life on the grasslands and attend religious pageants, sporting contests, and Peking operas in the Chinese quarter. People thought little of undertaking a tiresome and extended journey of hundreds and hundreds of kilometres to partake of the merriment and excitement to be found in Urga.

For the less pious, travel to the Urga did not have to be made by crawling but on horse-drawn contraptions in the age before the automobile. The most notorious was the Peking cart, which was an enclosed two-wheeled wagon with no springs pulled by horses, camels, or oxen. The wooden wheels of a Peking cart slowly lost their circular shape through travelling over rough roads. They were gradually bumped into octagons, then hexagons, and then near squares, with increasing torment for its occupant. The famous (and thoroughly obnoxious) Russian explorer Przhevalskii commented on this mode of transportation during his visit to Urga in the 1870s.

The traveller usually disposes himself in a Chinese cart, which presents the appearance of a great square wooden box, set on two wheels and closed in all sides. In the forepart of this machine, there are openings at the sides, closed with small doors. These holes serve the traveller as a means of ingress and egress to his vehicle, in which he must preserve a recumbent position head foremost in order that his legs may not be on a higher level than his head. The shaking in this kind of car baffles description. The smallest stone or lump of earth over which the wheels may chance to roll produces a violent jolting of the whole vehicle and consequently of its unfortunate occupant. It may be easily imagined how his sufferings may be aggravated when travelling with post horses at a trot.¹⁴

A more comfortable way to make the journey to Urga was on horseback or by Bactrian camel, which created the impression of gently rolling travel on an overstuffed sofa. The latter became the preferred transport of nineteenth-century Russian traders who had come to appreciate the nuances of life and travel in Mongolia.

The daily monastic regime in Züün Khüree started with early morning chanting followed by tea breaks and then other ceremonies. At 11:00 a.m. the Yellow Palace closed its gates for the day. The laity could enter other parts of the Eastern Monastic Settlement, but women had to leave by 6:00 p.m. In the afternoon, pilgrims and monks

13. Ibid. at 145–46.

14. Przhevalskii at 4–5. Some have compared the Peking cart to Air China.

headed to the marketplaces to pass their leisure time, loaf, or get up to mischief, often with a tribal bent. As more Chinese merchants moved to Urga, there were more altercations between Mongolians and Chinese. Throughout the nineteenth century, the patriarchs issued proclamations forbidding monks from brawling but to no avail. With time, Chinese migrants learned the wisdom of refraining from going out alone or at night and to seek entertainment in 'safe' establishments for Chinese. As the American traveller Thomas Knox noted laconically, 'The Mongols have no great friendship for the Chinese inhabitants.'¹⁵

In the course of the lunar calendar year, Urga saw many festivals but perhaps the two most festive in the Eastern Monastic Settlement were the annual circumambulation of the Maitreya bronze and the annual Tsam dance rituals.

On the first day of the fifth lunar month the monastic community brought out one of the Maitreya bronzes from its main temple for a constitutional around the Eastern Monastic Settlement. The ceremony attracted thousands of pilgrims from the Buddhist communities in Mongolia, Buryatia, China, Tibet, and even Kalmykia at the mouth of the Volga River.

All of Urga was busy in preparation for days in advance; lamas and laymen went forth and made what we would call 'municipal repairs' that had been ignored over the preceding year. Young monks were dragooned into gathering up all the rubbish from the pathways and shifting them to Züün Khüree's outer ring road while tradesmen moved their market stalls to other parts of town.¹⁶

The long train of participants in the ceremony was made up of three processions of monks moving forward side by side. The lamas and others pushed carts laden with Buddhist relics while beating large drums and gongs and blowing horns and oboes. The centrepiece of the procession was a bronze Maitreya placed upon an elaborately decorated carriage 'pulled' by a green wooden horse symbolizing Amoghassiddhi. The Maitreya bronze was sheltered from the sun by multicoloured umbrellas and banners. In contemporaneous black-and-white photographs, the main cart creates the impression of a top-heavy load, precariously close to tipping over. The *Five Treatises of the Maitreya* were also brought out and placed in the carriage for the ceremony. Mid- and low-ranking lamas carried other ritual objects on each side of the main cart while behind it came the bright yellow sedan chair with the Patriarch and then the other ecclesiastical dignitaries, abbots of temples, disciplinary masters, chanting masters, and teachers of higher Buddhist studies, all dressed in their finest robes.¹⁷

The circumambulation went in a clockwise direction, going first to the western gate of the settlement and continuing along its perimeter until the Maitreya bronze was brought back with pomp along the Holy Walkway from the south. At each of the four gates, the procession took breaks while the lamas refreshed themselves on snacks provided by the monasteries.

15. Knox at 168.

16. Price at 297.

17. Ibid. at 299.

This was a spectacle to see and to be seen at. Thousands of nobles, pilgrims, tradesmen, prostitutes, and herders gathered on the sidelines in their finest fashions. An English visitor wrote in 1892:

I don't think I ever saw a more gorgeous display of costumes and jewellery. Some of the women were dressed in the richest of silks and were literally one mass of silver decorations from head to foot . . . most of the elite were on horseback.¹⁸

Another English visitor noted the appearance of the crowds on this special day.

At the time of my visit, the city was full of rough, simple shepherds and their wives who had come on pilgrimage to bring their presents and to take part in the adoration of their incarnate God. They appeared to me, from my acquaintance with them during the whole time I was in Mongolia, to be rough, simple, honest and ignorant people.¹⁹

The festivities did not always go smoothly. Fist fights between the monks and Chinese onlookers and other altercations broke up the sanctity of the event. As the nineteenth century wore on, more Chinese shops cropped up on the pathway for the ceremony, thus bringing formal and successive complaints lodged by the lamas with the authorities in Peking. In true Chinese bureaucratic manner, the Peking authorities usually ignored a problem when there was no compulsion from 'on high' to resolve it.²⁰

The Tsam ceremony was held on the third day of the ninth lunar month. These days, an abbreviated version is performed at various boilerplate Mongolian culture-day festivities and other forums in UB.

Sometimes described as meditation as a performance art, the Tsam celebrates the triumph of Buddhism over evil. The traditional Urga Tsam was first performed in 1811 based on a seventeenth-century script by the Fifth Dalai Lama. Two months before the ceremony, the participating lamas went into extensive preparations such as *yidam*- or deity-focused meditations and rehearsals. During their meditations, the lamas visualized a mandala as the motif for the dance; each lama focused on becoming the deity that he was to represent within the mandala and manifesting the attributes of the deity during the dance.

The lamas wore colourful costumes and masks depicting bodhisattvas and dharmapalas. The ceremony was performed before a gigantic thangka unrolled in the Central Square to the sound of horns, drums, and cymbals. The ceremony began as two lamas wearing skull-masks of the Citipati circled the Central Square and chanted prayers. Other Citipati carried a triangular box containing a human figure moulded in dough or *balin* (балин) and placed it in the centre of the square. The dough figure represented all the sins and corruption accrued in Urga since the previous year's ceremony.

18. Ibid. at 297.

19. Sheepshank at 90.

20. See Pozdneev I (1997) at 48–49; Tsultemin at 147–49.



Tsam ceremony in Ulaanbaatar. Photo by Janice Law.

The Citipati were followed by the assistants of the Lord of Death, Yama, dressed as deer. This might have been an allusion to the Shakyamuni Buddha's sermon in the Sarnath deer park about overcoming death and decay through the Four Noble Truths. Next, a 'Tibetan lama' came out to engage in some slapstick to make sure the less spiritually minded stayed on for the show. (In Tibet this slapstick character was a Chinese monk, a parody that perhaps could not have happened in more strictly controlled Mongolia with its detachments of Chinese soldiers and merchants spoiling for a fight.)

After the comic interlude, the main figure of the ceremony appeared. This was Yama or Hayagriva, followed by ten fierce deities, who came out and joined the main figure, slowly leaping from foot to foot and brandishing swords, skull cups, and axes. The Red Protector, Jamsran, typically was part of this slow dancing ensemble given his status as a patron saint of Mongolia. The near end of the ceremony was foreshadowed by the White Old Man, the indigenous Mongolian spirit, who came out and was followed by the thirty-two 'black hat' lamas. In closing the ceremony, a lama wearing a stag mask ceremoniously tore apart the dough figure as a symbol of the dharma's conquest of evil and the dispersal of sin.²¹

Both the Maitreya procession and the Tsam dance ritual have been revived at the Dashchoilin Monastery. It is worthwhile to plan your visit to Ulaanbaatar to coincide with these events.²²

Perhaps the single most important ceremony in the history of the Eastern Monastic Settlement was the inauguration of the sovereign theocratic government in 1911 and the elevation of the Eighth Patriarch to the status of the emperor, or Bogd Khan.

21. Other Tsam dances are based on themes such as the Chojin Lama or King Geser.

22. A collection of pre-revolutionary photographs of a Tsam ceremony at the Monastery of the One Hundred Treasures is in Baasansuren.

On 29 December 1911 the ceremony began at the Hour of the Horse, 11:40 a.m., as the Patriarch and his consort (and erstwhile dagina), Dongogdulam, rode to the Eastern Monastic Settlement in a yellow four-wheeled horse-drawn carriage, preceded by high-ranking lamas and flanked by soldiers wearing traditional costume. The carriage was driven eastward into the Central Square at a dignified pace followed by the nobility on foot. The entire square was filled with lamas, lesser nobles, and commoners trying to catch a glimpse of the ceremonies but kept to a respectful distance by whip-wielding lama bodyguards.

The Holy Couple first went to the Eastern Ger Palace and then walked along a path of wooden planks draped with yellow silk to the Temple of the Three Bodhisattvas and then to the Western Palace for the enthronement ceremony before an altar to the Abatai Khan. Lamas prostrated themselves three times as representatives of the sangha while the aimag princes declared the Eighth Patriarch as the emperor of Mongolia under the regnal title Exalted by All, or Olnoo Ergegdson (Олноо Өргөгдсөн), with 1912 as the first year of the regnal cycle. At this point the five ministries of the government were brought into formal existence and the emperor and empress withdrew to the Eastern Palace to receive the symbols of imperial rule: a thunderbolt crown, a jade seal of office, a golden plaque and the 'nine whites' consisting of a white camel and eight white horses loaded with silks and furs. Mongolians recorded that a rainbow appeared overhead precisely (and conveniently) at the moment when the Bogd Khan was enthroned.

After a brief banquet the Bogd Khan and his wife, now the Mother of the Country, returned by carriage to the Green Palace with military and monastic escorts and thousands of commoners kneeling in the streets.²³

This moment of triumph for Mongolia was to be rescinded on this same stage before the decade was out. In 1919 the Peking warlord government launched a plot to seize Mongolia forcibly and incorporate it into the Republic of China. Through the machinations of certain Mongolian nobles and the support of newly arrived Chinese troops, Xu Shucheng forced the Bogd Khan to revoke Mongolian autonomy by sending a petition requesting direct rule by the Peking government. After Peking accepted this petition Xu insisted that lamas and nobles, including the Bogd Khan, undergo a three-day fast as a purification ritual before the formal retrocession to Chinese sovereignty—an absolute insult resented by all Mongolians (except those standing to benefit from it) because the office of the Bogd Khan was perceived as beyond reproach and his person beyond impurity.

On 1 January 1920 the ceremony was held in front of the Yellow Palace. The Bogd Khan and other Mongolian dignitaries had to arrive on foot (while Little Xu arrived in his car) with Chinese soldiers lining both sides of the Holy Walkway to the platform for the ceremony. The Bogd Khan was then required to face towards the north, in the traditional manner of barbarian envoys before the Son of Heaven, and kowtow nine

23. See Batsaikhan at 94–101, quoting several sources.

times to a portrait of the Chinese acting president Duan Qirui and the five-coloured striped flag of the Republic of China. Xu, of course, was standing next to the portrait to bask in radiated glory.²⁴

Within two years the Red Army and Mongolian revolutionaries reclaimed the country's sovereignty without the panache of ceremony. Within five years the MPR abolished the lineage of the Jebzundamba Khutugtus. The Eastern Monastic Settlement was soon to be erased from the face of Ulan Bator except for the three main temples at the Dashchoilin Monastery.

At this point, we should let these images of Züün Khüree fade from our imagination like the ghostly impressions of passers-by in an old daguerreotype. It is high time to visit more tangible sites.

24. Baabar at 193.

The Holy Mountain (Bogd Uul)

Since the Holy Mountain provided shelter for each of the three cities of Urga, Ulan Bator, and UB, it is a fitting place to bring our perambulations in the Mongolian capital to a close. The mountain stands like a silent and stable older brother to the feckless city and its ceaseless changes in priorities, appearance, and values.

The Holy Mountain has been a site sacred to Mongolians since the time of Chinggis Khan. Chinese officials, European Jesuits, Russian envoys, and Western explorers have left us their impressions of the Bogd Uul as the most impressive of the four mountains surrounding the Tuul River Valley. Its majestic appearance gave rise to the belief that a protective spirit lived in Bogd Uul as well as in its three smaller neighbours: Bayanzurh to the east, Chingeltei to the north, and Songino Hairhan to the west.¹

In their reverence for the mountain, Mongolians forbade hunting, tree cutting, and any disruption of the earth on the Bogd Uul, all of which were capital offenses in the days of the patriarchs. No bloodshed was even permitted within its sight for fear of offending the spirit. For this reason, executions took place in a hidden hollow to the west of Urga. Travellers noted that deer and antelopes in the mountain sanctuary were tame and forests of birch, pine, and larch grew thickly.

In the late eighteenth century the Mongolian amban Yondendorj petitioned the Qing court to grant titles to the two peaks of the Holy Mountain. The name of the mountain was changed from Khaan Uul to the more honorific Bogd Uul while its two peaks were granted the titles of ‘duke’ and named after the two main aimags—Tsetee Gün (Цэцээ Гүн) and Tüshee Gün (Түшээ Гүн).² Yondendorj also spelled out the Tibetan phrase *Om As Kun* in white stones on the eastern and western slopes of the mountain as an offering for the purity of the Tuul River water used by the patriarchs.³

Because of these honorific titles, the Bogd Uul was entitled to receive a stipend, paid in silver ingots twice annually, as well as an annual tribute of the ‘nine whites’, which consisted of nine white camels, nine white horses, nine white sheep, nine white

1. The Qing court also bestowed the title of the White Shell Protector, or Dünjigarav (Дүнжигарав), to the Bogd Uul. The title refers to the conch shell, one of the eight auspicious symbols and a token of the sovereignty of the dharma.

2. Teleki at 270 et seq.; Jambal at 17.

3. Jambal at 17, Wallace at 224.

cows, nine white goats, and a white dog, all paid for by the patriarch's treasury. The number and colour of the annual tribute was based on nine as an auspicious number for good fortune and white as a symbol of purity and power since the time of Chinggis Khan. These animals were allocated to the herds of livestock maintained for the mountain spirit just like the herds kept for the benefit of the monasteries and the nobility.⁴

Every year, the Mongolian and Manchu ambans in Urga had to trundle over to the mountain to honour the spirit of the Bogd Uul and present the semi-annual stipend. In this ritual, they were joined by five representatives from the aimags and the patriarch as well as high lamas, Mongolian nobles, and other dignitaries. The silver ingots were pitched into a crevice next to a temple atop the mountain.

In addition to its supernatural power to grant wishes, protect supplicants, and inflict harm, people believed that the mountain was a wilful being with peevish expectations for the benefits and entitlements accruing to the elite. However, an amban could punish the spirit of the mountain for its maliciousness. In the eighteenth century, a severe snow storm impeded a Manchu amban's entourage as it laboured to the top of the mountain. The amban fulfilled his duty and completed the ritual despite the storm, the cold, and icy trails, but then he also lashed back, 'I am worshipping you because it is my duty, not because I want to. What do you think you are up to?' As a punishment, the amban ordered twenty lashes to be given to the mountain and had put its oboo in wooden fetters.⁵ It did not take long for some ambans to wake up to the pointlessness of the tribute and to figure out ways to embezzle the silver and confiscate the herds. I wonder if this was the motivation in petitioning the Qing court to grant titles to the mountain in the first instance.

Coming to the twentieth century, Baron Ungern-Sternberg violated the centuries-old precedent of the Bogd Uul being a peaceful preserve free from bloodshed and disruption. In February 1921 his soldiers crossed the mountain from the Manjusri Monastery on its southern side and rescued the Bogd Khan from house arrest. It was the first and last time of a breach of the mountain's sacred status until the encroachment by illicit construction projects from UB upon its northern foothills in recent years.

In the aftermath of the Great Purge the MPR authorities replaced the Tibetan mantra written in white stones with the Soyombo and the Mongolian words for 'Long Live the MPRP' (МАНДТУГАЙ МАХН). During the 1990 revolution protesters tapped into Mongolia's fine satirical tradition by removing the last letter from the acronym so that it read 'Long Live Meat', a superb taunt to the Communist government's failure to fulfil basic needs.⁶ In the 1990s the phrase was changed so that every year it reads 'Long Live the [umpteenth] Anniversary of the Revolution'. Reflecting the spirit of the age, the government set out a white stone portrait of Chinggis Khan on another peak. This iconic image becomes less easy to see as Ulaanbaatar's urban blight

4. Wallace, *ibid.*

5. Jambal at 16.

6. Becker at 44.



Bogd Uul foothill overlooking Ulaanbaatar. Photo by Janice Law.

continues apace. In 1995 the government officially reinstated ceremonial worship of the Holy Mountain. Ministers, officials, and lamas attend the annual ritual at the foot of the mountain and do not bother with clambering up to the peak.

Facing the city, the Soyombo (Соёмбо) is the important Tantric symbol designed by Zanabazar. It is supposed to represent the Mongolian word for the Sanskrit *Svayambhu*, meaning ‘self-creating,’ an ancient metaphysical term referring to the mystical origins of all forms of being. In Vajrayana Buddhism, Svayambhu is also an allusion to the Kalachakra philosophy generally and a specific reference to the Adi-Buddha.

The top of the Soyombo has the same features found on stupas throughout Mongolia and Tibet—a sun, a crescent moon, and a three-pointed flame. Below this is a circular image perhaps borrowed from Taoist philosophy but more likely to have been derived from the Tibetan Buddhist symbol of two golden fish. On each side is a vertical pillar with downward-facing triangles and a short bar. In its pre-revolutionary format, a lotus flower was the foundation for the Soyombo image. Collectively, the symbol stood for the union of feminine wisdom and masculine skill producing the flame of enlightenment.⁷

The theocratic government adopted the Soyombo as a symbol of Mongolian independence in 1912. During the communist era, a star representing the party was placed on the apex of the symbol (only to be discarded after the 1990 revolution). In 1945 Choibalsan became alarmed about the potential embarrassment from the continued use of a feudal superstition as a national emblem. To remedy the problem, Choibalsan ordered Rinchen to help him out and come up with a politically correct reinterpretation. (Can’t you just picture the sage at his desk, opening the letter with

7. Atwood at 518–19.

these instructions, and then leaning back in his chair and sighing?) Rinchen borrowed liberally from Marxist theory to concoct an anachronistic explanation of the image. The downward-pointing triangles were said to represent the destruction of class enemies while the horizontal bars were the people's struggle for justice. The two fish were recast as unblinking vigilance against the enemies of the state and so on. Rinchen's interpretation is the one most commonly known by Mongolians today as most people are not aware of the symbol's religious origins.⁸

A Newari mystical symbol was Zanabazar's inspiration for the design of the Soyombo. This is the Ratna, or the 'All Powerful Ten', an interlocking set of symbols, combining the initial seven syllables from the Kalachakra mantra written in the Lantsa script and a depiction of the sun, the moon, and fire, all symbolizing enlightenment. The Ratna was often set out in plaques over the gateways to lamas' khasaas in Urga and can be seen in temples of today's UB.⁹

Turning back to the mountain itself, Tsetee Gün has reassumed its status as a sacred summit of the mountain. During the Great Purge, the 'men in green hats' destroyed the wooden temples and pavilions on the peak. These days, there is a stone altar, a rusting incense burner, and ovoos bundled up with wind horse flags and blue khadags. Tsetee Gün can be reached from Manjusri Monastery on a two-hour hike, but it is best to go with a guide who truly knows the way. People have been known to get lost.

8. *Ibid.* at 519.

9. Beer at 123.

Afterword

The ghosts of a city are never more evident than when you take a late night stroll along its deserted streets or its empty spaces. It is said that long-deceased urban spirits are drawn to places where they have an unhampered view of the scenes that meant so much to them in life.

When I lived in Ulaanbaatar, I sometimes found the occasion to wander through the grounds of the Temple of Avalokitesvara in the evenings, seeking a glimpse of a scene from UB's elusive past, if only for a moment or two. I remember one night sitting on a bench near the temple, contemplating the moon over the city and allowing myself the luxury of letting my thoughts drift as the evening wore on. While lost in this reverie, I heard a far-off horn. At first, the long and mournful sound made me think of a lama blowing into a conch shell to summon the clergy to prayers. This impression soon faded as I became aware that it was only a horn on a train rumbling past the south of the city. Then another vision passed across my mind's eye. It was the grand ceremony in 1956 for the opening of the Trans-Mongolian Railway and the long-forgotten promise of a Mongolia without want. This flickering impression dissolved as I realized that, in fact, I had just heard a train hauling timber illicitly harvested in Siberia or coal destined to pollute the lungs of UB's citizens.

With another blast of the locomotive's horn, all three images returned, swirled together, and then disappeared, leaving me to sense the sound of chuckling from the spirit who performed this ethereal legerdemain for a fellow eccentric who had come out that night to pay him a visit.

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