

Historical Development of the Mongolian Ger

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Abstract

The Mongolian ger, a portable felt dwelling, represents not only an architectural form but also a complex embodiment of the nomadic worldview, encompassing social organization, cultural values, economic practices, and aesthetic ideals (Bat-Yar, 2015). Its circular structure, symbolic elements, and practical design reflect a unique integration of functionality and spirituality, making the ger both a living space and a cultural text. This study traces the historical development of the Mongolian ger across different periods, drawing on archaeological evidence, historical chronicles, and ethnographic studies. Special attention is given to the 13th–14th centuries, when the ger served as a central dwelling in the Mongol Empire and demonstrated architectural interconnections with the Yuan dynasty in China. The research also analyzes the continuity of symbolic meanings embedded in structural elements such as the uni (roof poles), toono (crown), and lattice walls, which function not only as technical components but also as cultural metaphors of unity, order, and cosmology. Beyond historical inquiry, the study explores the potential for incorporating traditional ger features into contemporary interior design. By adapting structural patterns, spatial arrangements, and symbolic motifs, modern design practices may both preserve national identity and reinterpret cultural heritage for new generations. Such integration demonstrates that the ger is not a static relic of the past but a dynamic source of inspiration for sustainable and culturally grounded architectural solutions. The findings confirm that the Mongolian ger is more than a practical shelter; it is a multifaceted cultural heritage characterized by technical ingenuity, symbolic systems, and socioritual significance (Zhao, 2011; Khurelbaatar, 2018). Moreover, applying its principles to presentday design highlights the enduring relevance of nomadic traditions in shaping innovative, locally rooted approaches to modern living.

Keywords: *Mongolian ger, felt dwelling, tradition, interior design, cultural heritage, uni, toono, wall structure, symbolism, ethnoculture*

Introduction

The Mongolian ger (traditional yurt) is a unique architectural and interior creation that reflects the aesthetic thinking, everyday life, and traditional decorative culture of the Mongols. This heritage is not merely intended for housing but embodies a multi-layered structure that conveys cultural values. Studying the interior decoration of the Mongolian ger and its components requires a comprehensive approach that considers the historical heritage, cultural concepts, literature, artistic thinking development, and aesthetic values of the Mongols. Traditional decorative art is not only for aesthetic purposes but is closely connected with symbolic meanings, behavioral characteristics, and spiritual beliefs, forming a unique expression of applied art.

The aesthetic values of the Mongols are deeply rooted in their relationship with nature, the lifestyle of nomadic herding, respect for freedom, adherence to order, and the culture of valuing livestock. The vast territory of Mongolia, its extreme climate, and natural environment have directly influenced Mongols' aesthetic imagination, material culture, architectural design, and interior decoration, as confirmed by research.

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Historical Origins of the Mongolian Ethnic Group

Historical records indicate that the Xianbei, Khitan, Shiwei, and Mongol peoples belonged to the same ethnic group called the Donghu (Zhao, 2011, p. 18). Recent archaeological research has uncovered numerous Donghu sites in the Liaohe River Basin in northeastern China. Most of the burial artifacts and weapons found there are made of bronze, suggesting that the Donghu lived during the Bronze Age from approximately 4000 BCE to the 1st century BCE (Liu, 2009, p. 44).

The name “Mongol” first appeared in historical records in the 7th century in the History of the Khitan and the Old Tang Book as “Mongüt Shiwei” or “the line of the Eternal Fire,” sometimes interpreted as “Eternal Fire” (Zhang, 2012, p. 9). By the 9th century, the Mongols migrated westward to the territory of present-day Mongolia, gradually merging culturally and ethnically with the Turkic nomads living there. Over time, the clans divided and scattered, and by the 13th century, under the leadership of Temüjin, the clans grew stronger. Through his military talent and organizational skills, he united the Mongol nomadic tribes. In 1206, Temüjin was proclaimed the Great Khan of Mongolia, later known in world history as Genghis Khan. Since then, the term “Mongol” evolved from a clan name to a national identity (Li, 2009, p. 28).

During Genghis Khan’s era, large-scale military campaigns extended Mongol influence across Central Asia and Russia. These campaigns promoted active East-West cultural exchanges, and Genghis Khan encouraged cultural interaction, which is highly valued in history (Bat Yaar, 2015, p. 77). The emergence of outstanding leaders like Genghis Khan and Kublai Khan played a key role in ethnic unity and cultural consolidation, significantly contributing to the development and strengthening of Mongolian culture (Zhao, 2011, p. 23).

Origins and Development of Mongolian Architecture

The earliest forms of Mongolian architecture are believed to date back over 4,000 years. The earliest depiction of this is found in the Mandal Mountain rock paintings in western Alashan, Inner Mongolia, known as the “tent rock paintings” (Li Junfeng, 2009, p. 37). These paintings show the earliest tent-like forms of the Mongolian ger. According to the historical evidence, around the Bronze Age (c. 4000 BCE), local inhabitants transitioned from living in natural caves to human-made tents, indicating a shift from hunting to pastoral life (Bat-Yar, 2015, p. 121).

The rock paintings depict a settlement of 18 tents, with the largest in the center and smaller tents arranged in two overlapping rows, demonstrating a planned layout radiating from the center (Bat-Yar, 2015, p. 122). The central tent likely served as the main structure, possibly the residence of a clan leader or a place for meetings and gatherings. The surrounding depictions of horses, livestock, and human activity suggest an integrated relationship between humans and animals, leading researchers to call this image a “tent settlement painting” (Li Junfeng, 2009, p. 38).

By the 7th–8th centuries CE, the Yinshan rock paintings show depictions of “round felt dwellings,” measuring about 0.17 meters, engraved with metal tools, resembling modern gers with felt coverings and circular roofs. Early humans did not fully understand natural disasters, so shelters were essential for survival. Nomadic people, with little natural refuge in the open steppe, developed constructed dwellings as protective solutions, forming the basis for the Mongolian ger.

The Mongols, with thousands of years of history, have preserved a rich cultural heritage expressing unique traits, arts, aesthetics, and lifestyles. Traditional Mongolian culture is not only a source of national pride but also recognized internationally as tangible and intangible heritage worthy of preservation. The ger reflects lifestyle, thinking, social spatial organization, and aesthetics. Its structure, choice of natural materials, patterns, and color coordination express aesthetic sensitivity, cultural traditions, and a philosophy of living in harmony with nature.

The ger also embodies hospitality, communal psychology, and ethics, serving as a spatial element of national cultural resilience. It represents a unique form of dwelling that integrates the historical development of the Mongolian people, their culture, aesthetic thinking, and philosophy of coexistence with the environment.

Research on Mongolian Ger Structure and Decoration

The wooden structure, patterns, material selection, and spatial organization of the ger have a prominent place in interior design research. Scholars have noted the potential to integrate ger traditions, symbolism, and practical wisdom with modern design (Badamdorj, 2021; Molomjams, 2008;

Tsogzolmaa, 2005). B. Bold (2018) defined the toono (ceiling crown) as a spiritual center connecting heaven and earth.

Recent domestic and international research has explored integrating traditional ger architectural and interior design elements into modern public spaces. Wei Jun (2019), Liu Min (2021), and Zhang Hui (2023) have conducted practical experiments, while international researchers Kim Young Hoon (2018), Sarah Williams (2020), and David Anderson (2022) noted that interior elements positively influence psychological relaxation, transmission of national values, and user cognition.

Numerous scholarly works have analyzed ger structure, decorative patterns, design, symbolism, and methods of crafting color-coded ornaments. Key foundational works include D. Maydar and L. Darsuren's *Mongolian Architecture and Urban Planning* (1972) and *Ger* (1976), examining housing development in relation to ethnic history, structure, patterns, color symbolism, and decorative methods. Other works such as L. Batchuluun's *Felt Art* (1999), C. Erdenetsog's *Color System in Mongolian Visual Art* (2018), and studies by N. Ankhbayar (2010) and D. Ganbayar (2014) provide detailed insights into traditional motifs, color harmony, symbolic meanings, and modern adaptation possibilities.

Research emphasizes that Mongolian decorative patterns are not only aesthetic but carry symbolic, ritual, and cultural meanings. The ger's wooden structures, patterns, and color schemes are integrated with social values, spiritual beliefs, and practical use, demonstrating the fusion of art, life, and philosophy.

Methodology

The following methods were used in the study:

1. **Historical source analysis:** rock paintings, 13th–14th century chronicles, and ethnographic records (Bawden, 1989; Zhao, 2011).
2. **Archaeological artifact study:** analysis of dwelling forms, structures, and usage evidence.
3. **Ethnographic approach:** examination of customs, myths, and traditions, as well as contemporary data collection (Khurelbaatar, 2018).
4. **Comparative analysis:** studying changes by comparing the pre-19th–20th century period with subsequent developments.

This methodology allows a comprehensive study of the Mongolian ger's structure, construction, interior decoration, and symbolic patterns.

Research Results Brief history of the Mongolian ger

The earliest dwellings are depicted in rock paintings and archaeological finds, showing that early shelters were mainly lightweight tents made of leather with wooden supports (Bat-Yar, 2015). Feltcovered gers, suitable for nomadic lifestyles, became more sophisticated from the Xiongnu period onward, adapting to climatic and environmental conditions.

During the era of the Mongol Empire, the ger was not only a household necessity but also a significant political and ceremonial symbol, reflected in the architecture of the Yuan dynasty capital, Khanbaliq (Zhao, 2011).

Characteristics of ger components

- **Toono (crown) and uni (roof poles):** In the transitional period of the 19th–20th centuries, toono designs included sarhinag, saraljijn, and khurd types. The toono serves as the source of light and a symbol of life, while the uni supports the roof and represents the sun's rays and cosmic balance (Bat-Yar, 2015).
- **Wall structure:** Featuring a rhomboid lattice, the walls are sturdy yet foldable. Variants such as saraljijn, morin, and khurgan walls symbolize clan unity and communal strength (Khurelbaatar, 2018).
- **Doors and entrance rituals:** Early gers used felt curtains, but wooden doors became common in the 19th century. Doors were traditionally oriented toward the south and decorated with motifs such as ritual prohibitions, water waves, and eternal sky patterns (Dorj, 2018).
- **Columns, hearth, and tuurga:** The two main columns symbolize the sky and marital relations. The hearth represents the ger's "eye" and spiritual energy. The tuurga and felt roof provide insulation and carry decorative and symbolic significance (Bayarmaa, 2020).

- **Central hearth, tulga, and chagtaga:** The hearth symbolizes the head of the household, wife, and daughter-in-law. The chagtaga strengthens the structure and symbolizes prosperity and well-being (Tsogtbaatar, 2017).

Interior decoration and household items

The ger's interior uses eco-friendly materials such as wood, leather, and felt. Its lightweight and foldable design accommodates beds, chests, shelves, hooks, felt mats, and curtains, serving both practical and decorative purposes (Bat-Yar, 2015). **Patterns and color coordination**

- **Patterns:** Motifs such as alhan, olzii, tummennast, horns, and cloud designs symbolize life, happiness, and natural phenomena (Tsogtbaatar, 2017).
- **Color scheme:** Red represents fire and strength; yellow symbolizes abundance; blue signifies the sky; white stands for purity; and green represents nature and life continuity (Bayarmaa, 2020).

Discussion The study shows that the ger's form is not only an engineering solution but also reflects the nomads' worldview and aesthetic values (Zhao, 2011). Incorporating natural materials, circular shapes, and central symmetry into contemporary interior design can preserve and promote cultural heritage.

The ger's structure embodies both mechanical ingenuity and ethnocultural understanding, with each component carrying social and ritual significance. Using these elements in modern interior design helps maintain national identity and raise awareness of Mongolian culture (Khurelbaatar, 2018).

Conclusion

The historical development of the Mongolian ger reflects the nomadic lifestyle, environmental conditions, and cultural characteristics of the people. Symbols embedded in the 19th–20th century transitional period—such as the toono, uni, wall structure, door, columns, and hearth—combine practical function with ritual meaning (Bat-Yar, 2015; Zhao, 2011).

Integrating these unique designs and symbols into contemporary interior design is a crucial way to preserve Mongolia's cultural resilience and promote its heritage globally.

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