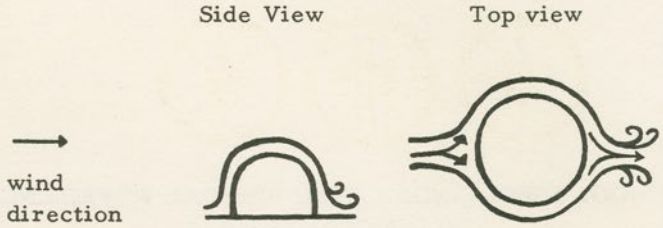


ASPECTS OF ALTAIC
CIVILIZATION
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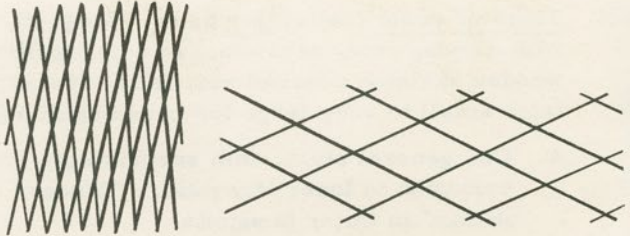
MONGOL DWELLINGS - WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE
TO INNER MONGOLIA

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- I. Permanent adobe houses, clustered around Lama temples or shrines, or in secluded valleys for winter use; rectangular, often square, usually only one room. Two main types:
 - A. North China style, with the rear half of the room raised to form a dais, heated by an interior flue system (Chinese: k'ang).
 - B. Mongol style, square, with central hearth like that in a yurt.
- II. Tents or yurts (called ger by the Mongols), round with sloping roof, consisting of a collapsible wooden skeleton covered with felts. Various sizes, from small to very large for ceremonial use.
 - A. One general style, with surprisingly little variation in Inner Mongolia. "Modern improvements" in Outer Mongolia.
 - a. An exception in Northern Afghanistan, where the once-Mongol Hazars have summer yurts, more hemispherical and covered with light straw mats instead of felt.
 - B. Shape. The rounded structure is most practical for severe climate conditions, as it conserves heat within, and in the wildest winds the curved sides lead the wind currents over or around them, presenting no flat, resistant surface to the gales.



- C. The Frame. Great stress on portability. Everything arranged for ease and speed in erecting and dismantling tent, because of sudden emergencies in the life of a nomadic people.
- a. Permanent door, in frame, with board below for threshold. (Reverence for threshold, must not be stepped on.)
 - b. Outer skeleton for lower walls. Three or four sets of sticks fastened together so as to fold tightly for transport, but capable of expanding widely, then bending flexibly, to form a segment of the outer circle. (Operates on the principle of "lazy tongs.")

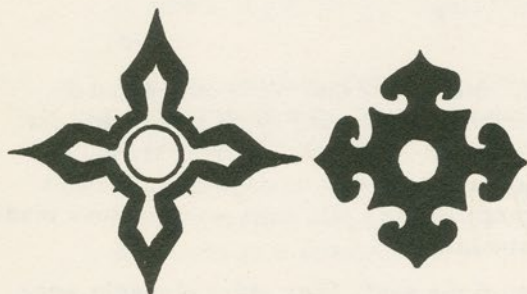


- c. The smoke-hole frame and connected roof skeleton. Consisting of a circular wooden frame with inner bracing, its outer edge toothed to offer slots into which are fitted hinged sticks, which can radiate outward to support the roof felts, or can be collapsed like umbrella ribs for transport. The sticks may or may not be curved downward.



Three familiar patterns for the inner bracing of the smoke-hole frame.

- D. The outer cover or skin of the tent, formed of rectangular sheets of felt, secured by anchoring ropes, and ropes crisscrossed over them.
- a. An extra square of felt on top is drawn over the smoke hole in rainy or snowy weather.
 - b. Sometimes a special piece of heavy cloth or felt is used to frame or set off the smoke hole on the outside. In the symbolic form known to the Chinese as a "Cloud Collar" (yun chien, 雲肩).



Two forms of ornamental and symbolic "Cloud Collars"

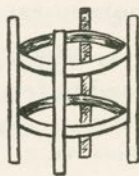
- E. Felt rugs or mats on the floor (leaving a square place open at the center for the hearth) to keep out ground dampness, and thus provide greater insulation against the cold.
- F. The hearth and its fittings (also found in permanent winter dwellings of the second, more typically Mongol, style).
- a. A square frame of wood let into the ground to set off the central fire pit. Sometimes left in

place in winter dwellings, or on a yurt site when the owners expect a quick return. Otherwise transported with the rest of the tent furnishings.

- b. Metal spider to support cooking pot.
- c. Open iron cooking pot for boiling water or milk, etc.



a.



b.

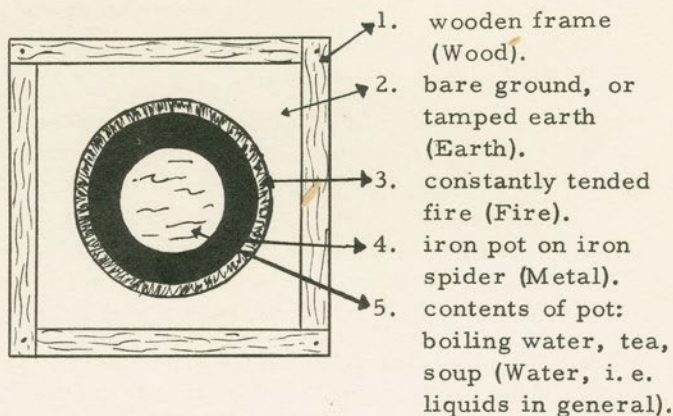


c.

- G. Furniture. Storage chests for clothing and a special shrine box, serving as an altar table for lama images, butter lamps, offering trays, etc. A rack for metal utensils against wall, blanket rolls, sometimes fine pile rugs and cushions made of this material.
- H. Symbolism of the yurt. (The older Mongols were still very conscious of this, in the region north of the Ordos, in the 1940's).
- a. The more or less hemispherical shape of the whole tent, viewed from within, is considered as representing the "Dome of the Sky." (To anyone in a desert or the wastelands of the North, the sky appears to be a vast, inverted bowl or dome, coming down to meet the earth on all sides, at the horizon line.)
 - b. The circular smoke-hole at the top of the "dome" is considered to represent the "Sun Gate," "Gate of Heaven," "Sky Door," all names referring to a place imagined to be marked by

the Pole Star. (The same concept was symbolized by the oculus, or Janua Coeli, atop the hemispherical Pantheon at Rome, as rebuilt c. 120 A. D.)

- c. In connection with the concept of the "Sun Gate," the bracing of the smoke-hole frame always takes a cruciform or eight-fold pattern, the four-fold or eight-fold designs being familiar in solar symbolism elsewhere.
- d. The Cloud Collar, sometimes used to set off the smoke hole on the outside, was an ancient symbol found on cosmic diagrams as early as the Han Dynasty in China. Originally used to frame, or draw attention to, the Vital Center in the cosmic plan, and to symbolize the benign influences radiating from it, it was later used to stress the Four (or Eight) Directions of Space.
- e. The fire pit was sometimes considered as representing the entrance to the Underworld, in contrast to the Gate of Heaven above.
- f. The hearth with its various fittings formed a cosmic plan, representing the unity of the Five Elements in a microcosm.



The four-sided diagram represented the universe in miniature with its four principal directions.

(A circular center, in a square within a circle characterized the Maṇḍala-forms of Lamaism, in themselves representations of the micro-cosm).

- g. The column of smoke from the fire, or steam from the pot, rising from the floor through the center of the tent, and out the smoke hole, was considered as representing the "World Pillar," trunk of the "World Tree," etc., in short, the Axis mundi. In its vapor, offerings were supposed to rise to Burkhan (God) or various Lama deities, believed to reside in Heaven which lay beyond the Solar Gate, above the dome of the sky.
- h. Application of the symbolism. The concept of the gate in the sky dome is implicit in the old Altaic or Siberian rite by which the shaman enacts a symbolic journey into Heaven by climbing a ladder to reach the smoke hole, then looking out through it, before returning down with "a message from the god."