Urban Fringe

Planning for Nomads at the Urban Periphery: Paradox or Possibility?

Wendy Tao

Urban planners and aid-donating institutions cherish and seek to preserve the nomadic national identity of Mongolia. These outsiders romanticize nomads as representing a simpler, freer pastoral existence unencumbered by the excessive materialism of modernity. By contrast, the Mongolian government abhors and seeks to end the same nomadic national identity on the grounds that it is materially impoverished and perpetuates a "culture of poverty" (Lewis 1966). Both these divergent perspectives frustrate planning by focusing on extremes rather than the real process of nomadic transition.

In Rio de Janiero, Janice Perlman critiqued the Brazilian government's attempts to eradicate settlements at the periphery, claiming that marginality was a myth and that the urban poor can perform valuable functions within society, slum communities can be a vibrant part of the urban fabric (Perlman 1976). Mongolian tent settlements at the urban fringe are often synonymous with notions of poverty and marginalization, but in fact reflect a dynamic space of community interaction and portray images of a surviving nomadic tradition.

Figure 1. Ger.
Photo: Wendy Tao, © 2005.

Figure 2. *Ger* community plots, some with fenced-in space and permanent housing fixtures. Photo: Daniel Waugh, © 2004.

The *ger*, a wood-frame felt tent that can be assembled within hours, affords Mongolian pastoralists a flexible medium to straddle temporary and permanent settlement. When *ger*s accumulate in suburbs at peri-urban boundaries and dock into stationary water and electricity hookups, traditional ways of life encroach into the territory of urban informality. *Ger*s themselves remain flexible spaces – traditional dwellings that can pack and go at a moment's notice. However, the structures around them – new bathhouses, access to schools, piped-in clean water – suggest permanence.

Today, those living in modern *ger* suburbs do not fall into the distinct nomad-urban dweller dichotomy. This makes it difficult to accommodate lifestyles and preferences of transitional nomads whose identities have been shaped by planning influences and policies. In fact, during decades of Soviet socialist planning, allowing nomads to live at the urban fringe made it easy to ignore planning for them. The changes in attitude towards urbanization brought by these planning forces were advanced by socialist conceptions of industrialization and decentralization; planning policies during the Soviet period intentionally attracted traditional herders to urbanized life. *Ger* suburbs formed rapidly at the periphery; these temporary arrangements were the perfect solution to housing shortages in Ulaan Baatar and other large cities. Building infrastructure for sewerage, electricity, and roads out to *ger* suburbs creates a zone where previously temporary nomads take on a more permanent urban

identity. The educational opportunities in larger cities have attracted many nomads to settle on the urban fringe, and governmental policies privilege Mongolians who decide to settle in these locations.

To someone firmly settled, the concept of planning for nomadism is strange; being a nomad is when you do not have to plan. But to secure the lifestyles of the majority of nomads in Mongolia, planning for a *ger* suburb of networked infrastructure and continuing to discredit the myth of marginality among development and government institutions is critical. Naturally, there are high costs associated with building extension projects to the suburban fringes. But if building services outward is limited by cost, the dialogue should focus on providing needed social services to an informal population rather than about promoting a lifestyle of poverty.

The nomadic transition in Mongolia provides important insights on urban informality as peri-urban *ger* suburbs become the crossroads of compromise between urbanization and nomadism. *Ger* settlements have become critical sites of what Ananya Roy would call "doubleness" – neither the romanticized notion of freedom worthy of being framed in a museum, nor the modern Mongolia envisaged by the pursuit of a modern national identity detached from the notion of poverty (Roy 2006). Instead, the adaptation of Mongolian nomads in this transitional space provides a lifestyle that can be sustained despite pressures of economic changes, fundamentally challenging the link between poverty and informality and our understanding of peripheral space.

References

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Wendy Tao *is a Masters student in the Department of City and Regional Planning at the University of California, Berkeley.* *Her full paper on nomads at the urban fringe won a prize in the 2006 Foundation for Urban and Regional Studies Essay Competition. She wishes to express her gratitude to Professors Michael Teitz, Jim Buckley, and Dan Waugh, as well as the Silk Road Foundation for the opportunity to participate in an archaeological excavation in Mongolia.*