

## **Skilful Craftswomen of the Rich Cradle: Kazakh domestic crafts production in western Mongolia**

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As you bend your head slightly to go through the low doorway you find yourself, on the other side of the threshold, in a surprisingly large, round space. It is lit at the centre by a shaft of light that falls on a stove at the centre of the room. The stove is connected via a tall metal chimney to the round crown and smoke hole in the ceiling where the light comes in. There is a smell of fresh grass and earth from the ground which is covered only in part by linoleum pieces and felt carpets. As your eyes adjust to the dim light you find that the circumference of this living space is closely furnished and elaborately decorated. Embroidered wall hangings cover the lattice walls, carpets are spread out on the ground and folded in neat piles on top of silver-plated chests that reflect the pale light, and other carpets with pictures of running horses or wild mountain goats on hillocks are hung on the walls. The bed frames are hung with decorative embroidered panels and valances, pillows and pillow covers are embroidered and arranged in matching piles. Animal furs hang on the walls as decorative hunting trophies alongside family portraits. The ticking of a Chinese clock sounds from the wall above the chest where the television and DVD player sit. Toothbrushes, saddles, shampoo, cooking pots and plastic slippers have been placed all around the room. This modern summer dwelling, a Kazakh yurt, is surprisingly spacious and you could enter it and sit for a while being occupied by something, and only after a while pick up the sound of someone's regular breathing and realise that in one of the beds along the edge of this circular living space someone is

sleeping.

Some 100,000 Kazakhs live in the western-most province of Mongolia, its 'Rich Cradle', or Bayan-Oelgii as the province is called in Mongolian. Most people are either directly or through family networks engaged in pastoral nomadism and during the summer months live in yurts (kiiz yi, literally 'felt house'). Many of the domestic crafts used to furnish the yurt are made from raw materials derived from the animals herded. Sheep's and lamb's wool is used to make felt for the cover of the yurt itself and for the felt carpets (syrmaq) that furnish its interior; camel's wool is used to make thread; and yak and horse's hair is used to make rope and woven ribbons. Soft furnishings are made for use in one's own home and are given as part of wedding-related gift-exchanges between clans. Felt carpets, for instance, are made for sitting and sleeping on and to seat respected guests on; they may be used to pray on; and large felt carpets are used to carry the body of the dead to the grave. Felt carpets are also the most important handmade artefacts in the bundle of gifts given by the bride's mother to the newly-wedded couple and the groom's relatives.

Soft furnishings are made by women and young girls in the home in the course of everyday life. Young children are gradually integrated into their mother's and other female relatives' activities from an early age. Learning to make these furnishings begins with relatively simple embroidery tasks and proceeds to more complex tasks, such as making felt carpets, usually at the age of 14 or 15 before a young girl marries and moves away to live with her husband and his family. At this stage, learning is a way of contributing to the production of crafts for one's own childhood home. The transmission of this skill is rarely directly didactic, but rather takes place through observation, mimicking and copying the activities and interactions of one's co-learners and elders, improvising on these and elaborating one's own practices and responses. Learning to make these domestic crafts is thus a way of beginning to engage creatively with one's social, material and natural environment, observing how other households are furnished, and beginning to develop a critical and evaluative approach to one's own and others' crafts - both in process and finished.

Domestic crafts production is embedded in a more broadly relevant spatial and social organisation of household members and their activities. The arrangement of things and people within the home reflects dynamic hierarchies of seniority and gender, something which has implications for the ways in which soft furnishings are used and where and by whom they are made. Learning is part of this dynamic spatial organisation of persons and activities. It is a way of contributing to the activities of elders and co-learners and a way of contributing more widely to a routine of tasks that is largely collaborative. My research concerns the transmission and nature of the skilful knowledge of Kazakh syrmaq-makers in the Mongolian province of Bayan-Oelgii.

In this context I would like to pick up on the suggestion by Fabio Gygi in his posting on this blog entitled "Hoarding and Disposal in Tokyo" (19 December 2006), that semiotic readings may not always provide the most insightful perspectives on material culture. Like Gygi I have often found that initial reactions to my research have concerned the symbolic significance of these soft furnishings and their patterns and how uncovering such meanings might disclose a particular world view. While for certain people there may of course be important and historically pertinent meanings to crafts and their patterns which are valid in their own contexts, I have found such 'readings' difficult to marry with the skilful and specialised knowledge that the craftswomen in Bayan-Oelgii

have of their own practices and crafts. Poor, rural, Kazakh craftswomen were not so much concerned with what their practices meant or how their artefacts should be interpreted. They were, on the other hand, exceedingly active creatively and interested in working in 'dialogue' with a certain style and aesthetic and producing artefacts that would be both functional and would circulate as testaments to their own creative abilities within a community of relatives. What was involved in their specialised skilful knowledge went far beyond how this horn motif or that floral composition might be interpreted.

The creative process of making a wall hanging or a felt carpet was not so much animated by an intention to communicate a certain meaning. Rather, through working with the raw materials and tools in an evaluative manner, intentional aspects evolved in relation to the unfolding piece and in relation to a particular material and social environment. This creative process was at once oriented towards previous steps and previous learning, the immediate execution, and a broader unfolding piece of work in the making which had to be imagined. Learning, making and teaching the next generation to make soft furnishings were practices that continued to hold relevance in everyday life, as ways of making practical use of raw materials like sheep's wool, creating an aesthetically pleasing and functional home environment for one's family, entering into a dialogue with other women's crafts production, and leaving a material and social heritage for future generations in the form of a skill that has been transmitted and the artefacts that have been passed on. The dynamic and complex skilful knowledge of these women is rooted in particular social, material and natural conditions, and is in a sense a social and material condition for later, often quite abstract, interpretations of meaning.

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