

Chapter 14 – Mongolia with VSO

(2006 to 2007)

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(4th June 2014 – Penang)

Mongolia, New Kids on the Block

[Blog Entry for September 2006](#)

In March 2006, I started a blog at www.davidvso.blogspot.com, which is a picture diary of Gek and my life and times together. To date there are 997 postings which record our adventures and I really do not want to duplicate these postings in the Granddad Stories. From here on is to be taken as the background to posts on the Blog or additional ‘happenings’, things that I didn’t blog about. For example, the volunteer work we were both involved with during our time in Mongolia. I guess what I am saying is that my scribbling now must be read in parallel with the blog posting appropriate to time I am writing about.

Eleven of us arrived in Mongolia from Moscow that day. Urna from the Mongolian VSO office met us at Ulaanbaatar’s airport. Three other volunteers joined us later who hailed from the Philippines and Kenya. Weren’t we an international lot, there being eight different nationalities represented in our group with these new arrivals? By the time we had cleared the airport formalities it was time for lunch, after which we were delivered to our respective homes-to-be around Ulaanbaatar (UB). Gek and I had a flat which had been up until the morning before the home of the acting Director of VSO, Mongolia. In fact, the fridge still had fresh milk in it. And very comfortable it was too.



First day and trip into the countryside.

The next day we, new kids on the block gathered at the VSO office to meet with old VSO hands in Mongolia, including John and Mary who had been on the SKWID training course in Harbourne with me. Once we were all assembled, we boarded a small bus to take us for our first visit into the Mongolian countryside. We had glimpsed the Steppe's landscape as our plane was landing the previous morning. The treeless, fenceless, trackless scene with the occasional ger coming into view had made quite an impression on me.

We headed to a holiday ger-camp for lunch followed by a get-to-know each other session. We had not been on the camp very long when I collapsed without warning. One minute I was chatting away to someone and the next I was on the floor, hearing John speaking to me very softly and telling me I was ok. How embarrassing, but worse than just falling over I had completely shat my pants. I was a mess. Everybody thought I had had a stroke or a heart attack; I gave poor Gek a real fright. John and Mary took charge of me and with Gek, they helped me to the toilet block where I sat on the loo for a while before having a shower to clean myself up. Some kind person washed my soiled trousers and I was ready to leave with the rest of the group when the time came to go home. Mind you, I must still have stunk to high heaven, and in the confines of the minibus it couldn't have been very pleasant for my new VSO colleagues. What a start to our Mongolian adventure.

The next day, a Monday, we were due to start our formal in-country training (ITC), a five-week long Mongolian language course at the Bridge International College in the morning followed by Mongolian related culture sessions after lunch in the VSO office block. The language classes were a little wasted on me, I am afraid. Mongolian uses the Cyrillic alphabet, which I already knew from my days spying on the USSR back in the 70s but for me, the rest of the language sessions were just going through the motions. I knew from experience that time spent trying to master any understanding of Mongolian, beyond the basic "hello", "thank you" etc, was a lost cause. Defeatist, I know, but no point in beating up your tongue if it cannot make impossible sounds. My VSO colleagues all fared much better than I, I have to say, especially Gek, who even did homework, bless her.

The afternoon talks were much more my style, doing the country's culture stuff. Mongolians are very proud of their history; their forefathers having created the largest contiguous land empire in human history. The British have the distinction of creating the biggest peopled empire upon which the sun never set, but the Mongolians hold the record for the largest land empire. It all began with the Ghengis Khan uniting the numerous warring Mongolian tribes in 1206 and it expanded under his grandson, Kublai until it reached its zenith in 1279 by which time the empire stretched from China to the Hungarian steppes and Russia. The Mongolian Empire might have also included Japan and Vietnam but the weather thwarted Kublai's plans in the case of Japan and a cunning general in the case of Vietnam.

Mongolia today is a country of 1,564,000 km² with a population of only 3 million, mainly ethnic Mongolians, half of whom live in the capital city Ulaanbaatar, giving a population density of only 1.88 people per km². To put this into some sort of context, Singapore has

7,540 people per km² with Australia's Northern Territory having 0.17 people per km². The reasons for VSO having volunteers in the country can go back to the fall of the Berlin wall in November 1989, which caused the precipitous breakup of Russia's Union of Soviets, of which Mongolia was the furthest flung member. The communist Russians had been in Mongolia since 1921 when they came to Mongolia in pursuit of the so-called White Russians, the forces loyal to the Tsar they had deposed in 1917. During that almost 70 years of 'occupation' the Russians had not allowed their citizens to intermarry with the local people and had restricted promotions of Mongolians within the governing structures of all state organisation to those of just a technical nature. Consequently, when the Russians left in 1990 the country's governance literally stopped functioning. This did not immediately impact on the wellbeing of the population since the majority were still nomads, living a self-sustaining life on the Steppes and in the Gobi.

Mongolia has a climate of extremes with summer temperatures in the + 30 deg C and winter temperatures in the - 40 deg C with the daylight temperatures not rising above - 20 deg in mid-winter. Every ten years or so the winter becomes longer and the temperatures more extreme, falling as low as - 50 deg C. These winters are Zuds to Mongolians. From the winter of 1999–2000, three Zuds hit Mongolia in a row, in which an estimated 11 million animals were lost, devastating the herds on which the nomadic Mongolians on the Steppes so depended. In desperation, the nomads packed up their gers and moved en-mass to the capital, Ulaanbaatar, where in a matter of months they created tented suburbs that more than doubled the city's population, completely overwhelming the city's already fragile infrastructure. Near anarchy ruled, as people fought to survive. Thousands of children were either abandoned to fend for themselves on the streets or came there as orphans, their parents having perished in the frozen countryside. The education system collapsed. The nightmare scenario for a post-apocalyptic world science fiction film played out for real in UB in the early years of the 21st century.

On our arrival in the country, four years later, there were still hundreds of children sleeping rough on the streets at night, not to mention lord knows how many adults. The advice was not to be out after dark and no way should we be on the streets after 9 pm. On the odd occasion that we were out late at night, the pair of us would walk along, locked arms and in complete silence until we reached the security of our own apartment, as street crime was still a major problem. Over the twenty months Gek and I were in Mongolia, we experienced nineteen attempted robberies as we walked the streets in broad daylight. I say attempted because only on one occasion did we lose anything and then only a few tugriks. I twice actually caught the pickpocket by the wrist as his hand was leaving my pocket and on one such occasion, he apologised to me in English as I took my phone from his hand. And that was as I was walking out of the busy main entrance to the State Department Store in the centre of the city in the mid-afternoon. I am relating this anecdote here to illustrate how Mongolia was still finding its way back to a normalcy it had lost since the departure of the Russians and the effects of the three consecutive Zuds. Mongolians are a warm and



Gers in a Landscape

hospitable people, as all nomadic peoples are, and I count many among my friends but in extreme circumstances, survival takes precedence over human niceties in any culture.

One afternoon during the orientation course, we took a drive out into the countryside just to the west of UB, in the company of a Professor

from the City University, to visit a nomadic family living the nomadic life on the steppes. In the whole of Mongolia there were less than a thousand miles of metalled road with towns linked by cross-country tracks formed by vehicles through frequent use. So not long after we had left UB on a metalled road we soon turned off across country to find the ger home of the family.

Of course, in a landscape with no map reference points, the only way to find a specific ger is to ask occupants of the gers you pass along the way as to where your intended destination is likely to be. After a couple of such stops, we finally arrived at the gers shown in the photograph above. I think you will have to agree, a stunning place to pitch your 'tent'. With not even a hint of a breeze, there was total silence, the kind that hurts your ears and with air being so dry, you could see as clear



Kids and Lego

as crystal the successive outlines of mountain ranges tens of miles away. A photographer's dream.

I am not sure if the family was expecting us, but they made us feel very welcome never-the-less. We had brought along with us various tit bits from the city that our Urna from the VSO office thought appropriate. The children did enjoy them very much. Our professor guide explained to us the significance of the positioning of the ger with its door facing south and

customs and conventions when entering a ger. For instance, never step on the threshold of the door and always progress in a clockwise direction once you were inside the ger.



Our host, a trained vet, had chosen to return to live the life of a herder in the countryside. The children spent their school holidays with their parents on the Steppes but in term-time they stayed with relatives in the city to be able to attend school. Mongolia has a 90% literacy rate in spite of its ranking as one of the poorest countries on the planet, a testament to the importance given to education during the

Soviet era. The little girl at six or seven years old could already ride a horse bareback, and her little brother was soon to be in the saddle. Once the Lego type toy was out, I was down on the floor with the two of them building ‘things’ and they didn’t seem to mind this strange looking chap at all. They both clearly enjoyed the outdoor life, but it would be a mistake to think that a ger on the steppes is cut off from the rest of the world. You will notice in the photograph solar panels attached to the side of the ger, used to store energy to power a computer with its link to the internet.

(5th June 2014 – Penang)

During the last week of the in-country training, we were all assigned a homestay with a Mongolian family in the city for four nights. The idea was to get you to practice the elementary Mongolian language we had been learning over the past five weeks. My assigned family were a young couple, Khass and Shuree, with their little two-year-old girl Buriga. And wonder of wonders, both Khass and Shuree spoke perfect English, I didn’t have to speak a word of Mongolian for the whole of my three days, four nights stay with them. Khass had lived in London for several years where he was a boxer, employed by an East End boxing club. Shuree had been an air hostess, on which airline I have forgotten. I do not know if it was just the luck of the draw or if Urna at VSO office had taken pity on me and allocated me to an English speaking



family, but however it happened I had a great three days with Shuree and her family. Khass was working at his fledgling foundry on the edge of UB each day and so I spent most of my time with the mother and daughter.

We did keep in touch for a while after my short stay with them was over which included a visit to their place with Gek for dinner but we soon lost contact with each other. It wasn't until our last couple of months in UB that I learnt that Buringa had been in France, where Shuree's sister lived, for an operation to correct a genital birth defect and that little Buringa, the girl I had known, was now a boy. This explained why over the intervening months we had not seen the family as Shuree had been with Buringa in France. I was pleased that things had worked out for them as when we met up that day by chance in the Orange Café both mother and son looked very happy. By way of contrast, Gek's home stay family were an elderly couple with next to no English. Gek had dictionary referencing conversations with them, which can be very, very tiring. They were, again, a very welcoming pair as I found out one evening at the dinner they treated us to at their place.

ADB Project No. 39005-012

Now it was time to get to work. I was meant to start on the project VSO assigned me on Monday, 25th September. It may sound a bit crazy, but I signed up to this gig without really knowing what I was letting myself in for. In the event, what I thought I was about to do for the next two years was a bit off the mark.

“The ADB/VSO Project No. 39005-012 (Grant No. 9085) - non-formal Skills for Unemployed Youth and Adults, will focus on building a public-private sector partnership to design, implement and provide for the financing of a modular, non-formal skills training programme for the construction industry. This is to be achieved by drawing together resources from the construction companies, public and private training providers, and the relevant government agencies. The project will target the unemployed out-of-school youth and poor adults living in Ulaanbaatar.”

This was the Third Component, worth some US\$1.3 million, of the Third Educational Development Project, funded by the Japan Fund for Poverty Reduction (JFPR), managed through the Asian Development Bank (ADB). The First Component had covered the development of a national curriculum and the Second Component funded improvements to the teaching and learning environments in primary and secondary schools.

In the week previous to my supposed official start date on the project, the VSO office organised an event in a local hotel, the Bayangol, for us volunteers to meet the people from the organizations, which were mostly NGOs, that we had all come to Mongolia to help. No one from either ADB, the fund managing organisation, nor the Mongolian Ministry of Higher Education, the ministry hosting the project, turned up on the day. This got me thinking that perhaps I had signed up to a phantom project, which as I was soon to find out, was not far

off the mark. A couple of days after the meet-and-greet at the hotel which wasn't for me, I went to the ADB office in the city centre for a chat with a bank officer there. It soon became clear to me that I was the one and only person yet recruited to the project team, which, at full strength, should be seven individuals. I already knew that VSO was having great difficulty recruiting people to fill the other two vacant VSO posts on the project, but I had not even considered that the Mongolians and ADB for their part had not even appointed a project manager yet.

I was then introduced to Baigal, who sat reading a magazine in one of the ADB offices. In introducing Baigal to me, the officer mentioned in passing that Baigal had just successfully completed another ADB project as its manager and was considering the post of project manager for this new ADB / VSO project and then he left us to have a little chat. It was obvious to me straight away that I was being interviewed by Baigal to see what kind of punk I was and if she could, or more likely, would want to work with me before she committed herself to this new job offer. Fortunately for me and the project, a couple of days later ADB confirmed Baigal as the project leader. The game, or at least the warmup to the game, could now begin as we still had no office to work in or personnel to fill it. It might have helped Baigal decide to accept this new project leader post, as during our little chat we discovered we were both graduates from the University of Birmingham!! She had studied for her masters there a few years earlier.

On the Monday morning following our first meeting at the ADB offices, Baigal and I met up again to discuss how we should proceed, when she got a call from someone in the Ministry of Higher Education, requesting our attendance at a meeting that afternoon in the Ministry, no specifics being given. We duly turned up at the appointed time and place to find the room full of heavy weights, including my new boss in the Ministry, Mr. Baterdene, and a VIP representing the USA's Millennium Challenge Fund (MCF). The MCF was trying to give Mongolia US\$25 million to help implement much needed vocational training infrastructure in the country, workshops plus equipment etc. Also present were two guys from GTZ, Germany's equivalent of Japan's ADB. I am not sure if the two German guys thought the same as I, i.e. that this was just a courtesy invite to the meeting to keep us up to date on the other related projects in the pipeline to our own work. But no, it was a shit-kick with Baterdene giving the American an ear bashing for what the Mongolians side saw as feet dragging on the American's part in getting the MCF project agreed, signed, and sealed. Even though Baterdene spoke perfect English, much to my relief I have to say, he insisted on speaking at this meeting through an interpreter who was too shy to repeat in English what he had actually said in Mongolian, it being a little vitriolic. He got so frustrated with the poor girl's translations, that he sacked her on the spot and asked Baigal to do the translating in her place. Me and the two German guys glanced at each other across the meeting table, both of us in a little disbelief at the theatre playing out in front of us. I have to say, I did find the American's attitude towards the Mongolians at that meeting very

patronising and Baterdene's response to the American totally understandable. Me and the GTZ guys weren't an audience for long. Baterdene turned first to the Germans asking them to explain what their project was about and, guessing my turn to be thrust into the spotlight would be next, I had a little time to collect my thoughts. After a rather over long explanation from them of their proposed work, I delivered a very brief appraisal of Project 9085. Baterdene then asked me, point blank, if I thought we would be successful, to which I gave a positive and definite, 'YES'. What a first day in a new job!!!

(7th June 2014 – Penang)

[Blog Entry for October 2006](#)



Ariunaa

The week following the firecracker of a first day was a little more pedestrian. Baigal had first to persuade the Construction Ministry to 'lend' us an office. They eventually did, after a bit of arm twisting, in the Ministry of Construction and Urban Development National Housing Centre office block to the west of the State Department Store along Peace Avenue. Every place in UB references to Peace Avenue, it being the single road along which most of the city

is built. The State Department Store at the centre of it, which is known to practically everybody living in the city, it being the original and only department store in UB during the Soviet era. Our new office block was conveniently located opposite the only remaining State-run vocational training college in the capital, the aptly named Construction College. Baigal and I being the first recruited to the project, our initial task was to set up the Project Implementation Unit (PIU). This meant not only finding the furniture and all the usual stuff you would expect to see in an office, which we did in double quick time from a huge furniture outlet on the edge of the city, but



The New Flat

also the personnel to people the project team. Ariunaa was the first to join us, initially for just four hours a day but very soon she became my fulltime interpreter. Ariunaa was to be

my companion at meetings and site visits for the next twenty months, sitting by my side whispering to me in English.



About the time I started on the ADB project, Gek and I moved to an apartment nearer to the city centre, just behind the State Store and only ten minutes' walk to the PIU office. A brilliant location for us both as it would turn out. Gek, although on the VSO books, had no placement yet and we were beginning to find living on the US\$200 a month allowance from VSO not a little challenging. To bridge the

gap until she could find, or create for herself, a suitable VSO linked project in the city, Gek used her previous lecturing experience and her business qualifications to secure a lecturing post at Hartford Institute. The Institute was a private, Singaporean owned institute with the courses delivered in English. This job of Gek's increased our income tenfold allowing us to have a very comfortable life in Mongolia, although it did come at a price.

Gek being Gek, she threw herself into this return to lecturing with gusto, spending many out of office hours working on her course materials. Raffles Education Group was a corporate organisation ruled in a Singaporean style of management and this new job also came with the attendant 'office politics', not a good thing for Gek and her temperament. Although the extra money was very nice to have, it wasn't worth the price paid in terms of the changes it made to Gek's previously easy-going approach to life. Uptight and grumpy sometimes was not my Gek at all. Thankfully, Gek could leave Hartford after only one term and start on a VSO sponsored project at the Lotus Children's Centre.



We had sourced a place to buy art materials and Gek was already starting to paint, a much-needed counter point for the stress caused by her lecturing job at Hartford. On one of the VSO ICT orientation afternoons we went to The Lotus Children's Centre on the edge of UB, a home for children rescued from living on the

city's streets. Lotus opened in 1995 by Didi, an Australian, in response to the plight of girls, some of them as young as four years, living rough on the city's streets. The centre was now home to some 120 children with ages ranging from a couple of months to late teens. An idea began to form that perhaps Gek could create a series of paintings for an exhibition, with the proceeds from the sale donated to the Lotus Centre.

The 11th October was my 60th birthday and as it happened, John's 60th was also in October, a couple of days earlier than mine on the 8th. Our new friends in VSO arranged a surprise party for us at John's flat but Gek could not keep the secret and when we arrived at John and Mary's place, I had to feign surprise, although in fact I was surprised that they had gone to all the trouble to arrange a party for us. Gek had bought me a tailor-made dell as a present and I wore it that night for the first time, helping to keep me snug and warm on the walk over to John and Mary's place.

Towards the end of October, the days and particularly the nights were starting to get rather cold. Before leaving the UK for Mongolia we had visited a skiing clothes shop in St. David's shopping centre in Cardiff and kitted ourselves out with thermal underwear made from Merino wool. The secret to protecting yourselves from the cold and possible frostbite, a very real danger in a Mongolian winter, was to wear many layers. I judged the severity of a day's weather by how many layers you would need to wear to stay comfortable. In an extreme case, I would wear: a woolly hat under a sheepskin helmet which covered my ears, two pairs of gloves the top pair being ski gloves, two pairs of socks and at least six layers of cloths, the bottom layer being the Merino wool and the top being a thick, calf length woollen greatcoat with a detachable lining. And even then, in the middle of the winter months, January through February, my fingers and toes were in pain after the fifteen minutes' walk from the flat to the PIU office. I worked out a Whitworth Cold Scale numbering 1 through 5,

1. If, when I first walked out in the mornings, my eyes started to water, and my nose started to run..... it was cold.
2. If my knees started to feel chilled and my chin went numb after a further five minutes..... then it was very cold.
3. If my fingers then started to hurt in the ski gloves I was wearing....it was bloody cold.
4. If the soles on my shoes then hardened and it sounded like I was wearing wooden clogs....it was fucking cold.
5. If my breath froze in the air as I left the apartment, I didn't leave the apartment, it was way too cold.

On one occasion as Gek and I walked the half mile or so to the VSO office, the glass in my spectacles fell out! The air was so cold that the lenses had contracted more than the metal frames, causing the two to part company. The temperature was - 25 deg and by the time we had been walking for ten minutes of so, our extremities began to really hurt.



**NON-FORMAL SKILLS FOR UNEMPLOYED YOUTH AND
ADULTS**



PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION UNIT

Project Letter Head

On the run up to Christmas, Baigal continued to set up the PIU, recruiting an accountant for the project, Nymaa, whilst Ariunaa and I continued to visit the skills training providers nominated in the project documentation to be beneficiaries of Project 9085. I had forewarning at the ICT sessions that corruption was rife in Mongolia, particularly around aid projects, the funds for being seen as fair game to government officials and others in authority with which to line their own pockets. One of the talks given on the ICT was by a police inspector with the UB city police force and it was very telling. At the beginning of his talk, he asked us for words that we associated with the word 'Police'. Our responses included, law and order, protection, help, assistance etc. He quickly disabused us by saying that none of these applied to the UB police force who still had a Soviet era mindset of population control, they having been the servants of the Russian governing classes and not the general populous. Bit of a revelation and a heads up to be on your guard when dealing with local officials. In the briefing with the VSO Mongolia director, Alison, gave me some assurance that Baterdene, the official in the Ministry responsible for Project 9085, was a 'good egg' and trustworthy. I have to say that in the twenty months I was working under him, he never gave me cause to question Alison's appraisal.

But as to the project's nominated training providers, it soon became evident from my first meet and greet visits to their facilities that at least two of the nine were, to say the least, a little dodgy, with my bullshit radar sending back very strong pings. One of the nine did not even know that they were on the project list, the employee who had been associated with the project design team having quit the company some months ago. The current manager I met said at our first meeting that his company would not want to be a part of the project in any case. The other trainer that activated my bullshit radar had no facilities at all, with only an empty room to show us and with connections to officials in the body overseeing our project, something definitely to keep our eye on that one. By the middle of November, after two months of fact-finding visits around UB, we were ready to give the major stakeholders in the Project a briefing, which included a road map for the Project over the coming twelve months. Biagol and I delivered a well-rehearsed, double-act presentation to them. At the end, they accepted them, subject to the approval of ADB, the fund managers. A short time later ADB gave us the double green light and so it was go, go go!!!

(10th June 2014 – Penang)

[Blog Entry for November 2006](#) - [Blog Entry for December 2006](#)

Development bank funded projects such as this ADB Project have tightly worded defining documents and once signed off by the bank, it is difficult to deviate from the pre-prepare script in these project specification documents. This is fair enough as a means of controlling fund leakage from the project capital, however if the situation on the ground changes between the preparation of the project specification and the actual start of the project, this can create impediments to the project's successful completion. There is also the added complication in that external consultants invariably write the projection specification documents but do not necessarily fully appreciating the local conditions, which can also lead to our PIU running into difficulties later.

Baigal and I were faced with some of these issues, not only because some of the Project's nominated training providers were inappropriate or not fit for purpose but also because it was clear that VSO was having great difficulty recruiting the two other advisors required to staff two of the Project's three components. There was a very real possibility that I would be the only VSO volunteer for the whole three-year duration of the PIU's life. This would need some adjustment as to how we staffed the project and from where to recruit these new people. It made sense to both Baigal and me to try and recruit locally to fill these vacancies. With no provision for any locals at all, we both saw as a major flaw in the Project's original specification. I reckoned I could contribute enough to each of the other two Project components to make my own curriculum development component meaningful and effective, even if the vacant post remained unfilled. And so, it became Baigal's mission to persuade ADB of the soundness of our proposed changes to the projects specification and, thanks to her efforts, by the end of December we had the important 'no objection' letter from ADB to try and recruit the remaining PIU staff locally.

A couple of weeks before Christmas, Baigal and I got another urgent call from Baterdene's office for us to attend the afternoon session of another meeting with Millennium Challenge Fund (MCF) representatives. The morning session had not gone too well for the Mongolian side. Baigal and I were asked to come along and provide additional support, although we had no idea how on earth we could do that. This second meeting we attended also concerning the MCF proposal to fund vocational training facilities in the country. Although conducted in English this time, Baterdene was still in a combative mood, the atmosphere in the meeting room when we arrived being a little frosty to say the least. As before, without any prior briefing to the meeting, I had to pick up on the contentious issue between the two sides by listening to the exchanges between them. It seemed that a requirement to for MC funding was that the initial project proposal should not only written entirely by the recipient country, but it had also to be in English. Even from my short stay in the country, I immediately saw that this was a tall order for Mongolia. With such a small population,

whose second language was Russian, and with most of the 'pen pushers' having left with the Russian retreat from Mongolia's governance some twenty years ago, mission impossible I would have said. Even putting such a document together in Mongolian would be a challenge for them, never mind in a foreign language as complicated as English. The Americans were clearly unhappy with the written proposal prepared by the Mongolians and had rejected it out of hand. Not surprisingly this had upset the Mongolian side since the deadline given by the MCF for the proposal submission had now passed. After a further bit of ebb and flow, it became clear to me why I was there. Baterdene asked the Americans if they would accept a rewrite of their proposal document by this Englishman, i.e. me, with an extension granted for a late submission. After a little confab between themselves, for which the three Americans left the room, they acceded to Baterdene's request and set a new deadline for the resubmission of a revised document by the end of the first week in January. This with the understanding that this was the Mongolians last chance to get their project approved. No pressure then. It was perhaps as well that Baterdene had no knowledge of my awful record when it came to writing in English. But when he turned to me and asked me point blank for the second time in a couple months if I could do it, I responded by a "Yes, can do, no problemo", definitely a case of mouth working with brain disengaged. Why do I keep doing that?

The meeting broke up with Baterdene handing me a copy of the MCF project document for me to read. Before I had gotten to the bottom of the first page, I saw why the Americans had so readily rejected it. It was totally unintelligible. The English written on the pages made no sense whatsoever, even if it had made sense in Mongolian, a completely mashed up in translation. I had Baigal call Baterdene the next day and tell him that we would have to do complete rewrite of the document and for this we would need to assemble at least the key members of the team that had contributed to this original document. There was no way I could do this rewrite on my own. By this time Baigal had acquired a second office for our PIU and for the next three weeks we turned this room into an MCF project coordination centre with various people coming and going to help do the rewrite, notably Tserendash whose help was invaluable. Tserendash and I had met previously on one of my fact-finding visits to the Construction Ministry and he and I had hit it off together straight away. This was my first experience of the Mongolian 'think it do it' approach to life. It was ever to surprise me that if you could persuade a Mongolian as the soundness of your ideas, implementing those ideas happened in a very short time and with gusto. As a result, the new proposal write-up arrived on Baterdene's desk a full week before the deadline, but not before I had Ruth, a fellow VSO volunteer, proofread it for misspelling and word omissions. Baterdene was a little surprised by the early delivery of the new documentation but I assured him that this was the best we could do in the time available and that a couple of more days would not contribute greatly to its acceptance or rejection by the Americans. In the event, they accepted the document on resubmission with sighs of relief all round.

And so, after all the MCF excitement, it was back to Project 9085. Mongolia does not celebrate Christmas and the Julian calendar New Year, and it was business as usual. It did feel a bit strange working on Christmas Day and over the New Year, always having enjoyed a national holiday at this time. In early January, the ADB officer in charge of our project's funds, let's call him Mr. ADB, was in Mongolia on one of his regular visits and we got word that he was a little unhappy with the progress of Project 9085. I was surprised to hear this third hand as he had neither been to visit our PIU office nor called us to meet with him in the ADB offices in the city either. I decided I had better find out from him directly what he saw as the problem and I arranged to meet him in his hotel foyer on the eve of his departure from UB back to his HQ in Manila. I took along copies of the documents covering the 'start up' background research I had already written up, the twelve month road map for the project which he had presumably approved, together with copies of the draft course structure and management documents I was in the process of writing. On production of these, his frosty demeanour melted a little and we had a more amicable exchange of views. It turned out that he had red-flagged Project 9085 as a failing project and was sending in a short-term contract consultant to get it back on track. This came as a bit of a surprise to me, as I thought our PIU team was doing well considering we had been open for business only three months on a thirty-six-month project. It seems that he had not been receiving adequate feedback reports on what the PIU had been up to over that three months. Baigal, by her own admission, hated 'doing the paperwork' associated with her role in the PIU and had perhaps not communicated in full, details of what we in the PIU had achieved over this project start up period. At the close of our meeting, he seemed somewhat reassured, but he still wanted to send in the external consultant to get a second opinion, effectively saying that the Project No. 9085 was on hold for the time being.

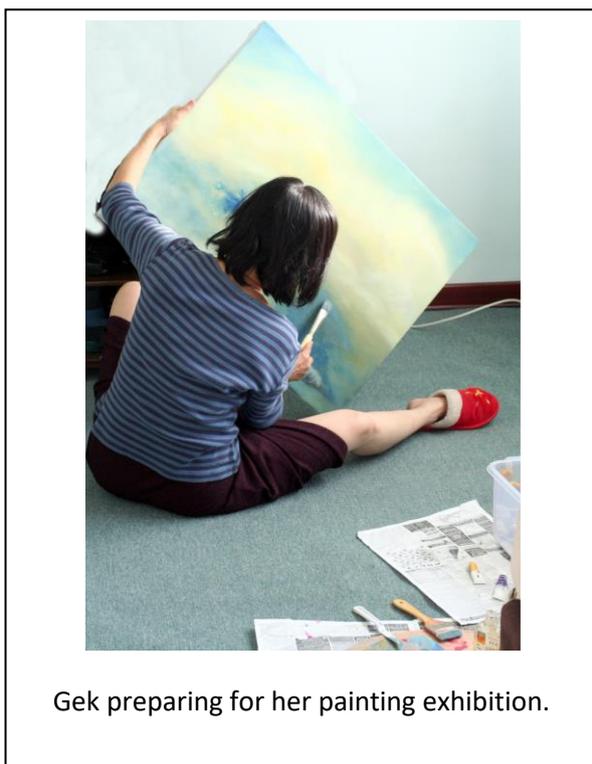
(12th June 2014 – Penang)

[Blog Entry for January 2007](#)

I was not sure what Mr. ADB had expected from our project after only three months into its thirty-six month life span, especially so as all building site work stops for the winter in Mongolia between October and April, when it was just too cold to work outdoors. Well, no worries, Gek and I had already planned a three-week trip to Singapore in February for Gek to sort out her affairs there. Being highjacked by me to Mongolia, she had not had the time to go home to see her family and friends.

Soon after the hotel foyer meeting with Mr. ADB, he sent Baigal and me a couple of prospective consultants' CV's for our inspection and selection. However, due to the short notice given for the appointment, only John Larsen was free to come and 'inspect' us. John was on leave from another project in Papua at the time, otherwise he would not have been free to come visit us either. By now the PIU team had locally recruited staff as part of the

projects restructuring agreed with ADB. Despite the project supposedly paused, three new staff members were recruited; Selenge, who was to liaise with the training providers, Bysaa who was to liaise with the construction companies employing the graduating trainees and Amraa our driver. Baigal had persuade ADB that we really needed a project vehicle to get around UB, as the rough public transport system and the harsh winter temperatures made trips out to see the projects clients very troublesome. And best of all for me was that, apart from Amraa, all my new colleagues spoke excellent English. We also by now had an additional, newly refurbished office along the corridor from our origin PIU HQ and we were a fully operational unit after starting from scratch just four months ago.



Gek preparing for her painting exhibition.

The week we had acquired the original office space in the National Housing Centre, the chief administrator of the building had approached me to hold twice weekly English classes for his centre staff. Me, to teach English as a foreign language? Not wanting to disabuse our hosts of my ineptitude in English, I agreed to hold two classes in the early morning starting at 8am, one class for beginners and the other for more advanced learners. It was a bit of a surprise, if not to say a shock, when on the first morning lesson some thirty people turned up. Needless to say, it wasn't long before the number of attendees dropped to a more manageable level at around five to ten individuals. I continued English classes for the whole time I was in UB, but by the

end of my time there the number of attendees was down to small group of my own project colleagues and a couple of staff from the National Housing Centre. These guys just wanted to practise their English with a native speaker, for which I found the BBC weekly online English comprehension exercises ideal material for our, by then, weekly get togethers.

We had only been in UB for a matter of four months or so but Gek and I already had an active social life which included holding Taiji classes for the VSO volunteers and gatherings in our apartment for DIY sushi lunches. Gek was also busy painting for her art exhibition, arranged by the XanaduArt Gallery and to open on the 29th March. It was during one of our early meetings with Didi, the Director of the Lotus Children's Centre, to talk about the exhibition, that a possible VSO project proposal immerged for Gek. Lotus recently had a small building donated by Coca Cola, Mongolia next to the Lotus's school which Didi wanted to set up as a craft workshop and gift shop in which to give the children some life-skills training. At our meeting over a cup of coffee she mentioned that she was looking for

someone to set up this new centre and that the person should not only have a background in arts and craft but also in business, as she saw the centre's operation as a possible source of income for Lotus. Of course, Gek was the ideal candidate for such a job. Didi submitted proposal to VSO for a volunteer posting to Lotus for Gek to set-up and run the new Lotus craft centre, which VSO headquarters in London accepted, with a start date in April. The money raised from Gek's exhibition sales would now help refurbish the newly acquired building and equip it as a craft training centre for the Lotus children.

Visit to Singapore

[Blog Entry for February 2007](#)

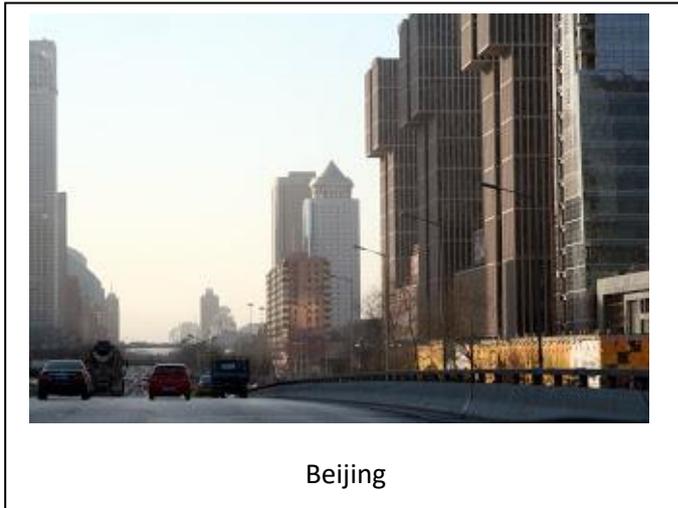
February saw Gek and I leaving the Mongolian winter with temperatures as low as - 30 deg C for the tropical heat of Singapore at + 30 deg C, the transition made in less than 24 hours. As we flew over the last of the peaks at the edge of the Mongolian plateau, we had a clear view of the Great Wall winding its way across the mountain ridges. Quite a sight.



Great Wall of China

To make the journey, Gek and I had to get official exit visas from the Mongolian immigration office and I had also to get a visa to be able to transit through Beijing airport from the Chinese Embassy, a requirement placed only on the British and Americans by the Chinese authorities. Since I had now had a Chinese entry visa, on landing at Beijing airport Gek and I took a taxi into Beijing city centre to

pass the time on our ten hours stop over there. This was my first, but not Gek's, visit to the city and all my previous notions of China gleaned from books and western news coverage I had read, was completely revised. Apart from the obvious fact that the city's inhabitants are Chinese, the city infrastructure looked just the same as any other modern metropolis on the planet, all high-rise buildings and wide roads stuffed with traffic. With only a short time to spend on the city's clean streets and in the many gleaming shops bursting to the doors with all sorts of goods, we raced around like children in a toy store. Compared to shopping in UB where even wood screws were difficult to find and bought singly by visited multiple stalls in the hardware market, Beijing appeared as an Aladdin's cave to us. I can still vividly remember the surprise and joy we felt when confronted with a bewildering array of colourful fruits of every conceivable kind in a fruit and veggie shop. We had for the last six months counted ourselves lucky if we found a bunch of bananas to buy in UB's market.



Beijing

Our onward flight to Singapore arrived very early in the morning. Gek's brother Harry and his wife Sandie with their two daughters, Audrey and Clara were so curious about me, that they all turned up at Singapore's Chiangi airport to meet us off the plane and have breakfast with us. Who was this strange Englishman that Gek had picked up in the UK? They quickly made me feel very welcome, which was a bit of a relief, as this was the first

members of Gek's large family of two brothers and three sisters that I was due to meet over the coming three weeks. All very curious about me, as I am sure they were.

For this visit, we stayed with Swi, the friend of Gek's I had already met on her visit to Emersion for Gek's exhibition the previous summer. It had been eight years since I was last in Singapore and we used Swi's place as a base from which to revisit familiar places and meet up with old friends from days past. The business that Gek had to sort out did not take up too much of her time and we had plenty of opportunities to meet and greet family and friends of both Gek's and mine. It did feel strange to have mutual Singaporean friends. Did beg the question, how on earth Gek and I hadn't managed to meet each other during my three year stay in Singapore in the early 80s?

Tragically, however, Gek did not get to meet her mother, Tan Kok Lee, who died a few days before we were due to go and visit her in the nursing home. Her death was unexpected, and it came as a bit of a shock to the whole family. Tan Kok Lee was Gek's natural mother, her mother's brother having adopted her soon after she was born, not an unusual practice in those days in Singapore. Both Gek's foster parents had died some years before we two got together.

The funeral arrangements were along Taoist lines, with the body brought to the family home in Hougang and lay in the void deck of Gek's eldest brother Lak Hai's HDB apartment block for the five-day wake. After the cremation, the ashes interned at columbarium. As an outsider, I found watching the rituals of a Taoist funeral all very interesting, the event following the cremation especially so. Immediately after the cremation, the whole family, including me, were ushered into a small room to where the ashes were brought. Each family member then took a piece of ash and placed it into the open urn, an act that I immediately recognised as giving closure for the living. Although we did not get to see Gek's mother before she died, we were fortuitously in Singapore to attend her funeral which I am sure all Gek's family appreciated.

(24th July 2014 – Penang)

Back to Mongolia and Spring

After a busy eight months or so, Gek and I are adjusting to the pace of life back in Penang....slow. Since we left you guys back in August last year we have been to Australia, Taiwan and Singapore three times. But now we have to stay home here in Penang and save our monies for our next planned trip....to Japan in spring next year, 2015

[Blog Entry for March 2007](#)

After a short trip to Penang to meet the agent looking after Gek's property there, we headed back to Ulaanbaatar. There were only two other flights into UB apart from the Aeroflot flying in from Moscow, with the Mongolian national carrier and Air China both of which left from Beijing. We were booked on an Air China flight all the way through to UB but when we reached Beijing, our onward flight to UB was delayed by 'unfavourable landing conditions' over the UB airport. UB airport in the Soviet era had been a military airfield and consequently not designed to take large commercial aircraft. In addition to this, the runway is built at the side of the Tuul valley and was itself sloping up towards the steep hill side. These factors combined with the thin, dry air at the 4,429 ft made landing a passenger jet there a little dodgy at times. There was a rumour that Mongolian pilots are paid a bonus if they landed at the UB airport in these so-called unfavourable landing conditions. Urban myth or not, the China Air pilots regularly refused to land there and on occasion turned around and flew all the way back to Beijing rather than risk a landing.

This being a regular occurrence, we UB bound passengers cleared the Chinese border agency in double quick time via a back door and bussed to a local hotel to await the rescheduled flight time. We had only just settled into our allocated room, expecting to have to stay the night when we were instructed to gather in the hotel's reception area to re-board our busses back to the airport. What a kuffel! All this meant of course that we arrived



The British Ambassador to Mongolia, Christopher Osborne with Biagal as interpreter

back in UB very late at night but fortunately we had pre-booked a friendly taxi driver to pick us up at the airport before we had left UB. With a colleague of Gek's from Hartford Institute, who happened to be on the same flight, joining us for the ride into the city, we arrived home tired but safe.

March and April were very busy months for both Gek and I, what with Gek's art exhibition to organise, Ruth and Richard were due to pay us a visit and John Larsen, our

new consultant for the Project, was soon to arrive in town. I went to meet John at the airport off his flight from Beijing. I wasn't at all sure about this new chap coming to vet our progress on Project 9085. Some of the consultants I had bumped into in UB were to say the least a little bumptious and a bit too full of themselves for my liking. And so, it was with great relief that I saw this bearded Australian chap walking through the arrivals gate, dressed in gear more fitting for the Australian outback than an early Mongolian spring evening. As we drove John to his hotel in the city my initial impression was confirmed. My fears for a fraught time ahead on the project were unfounded with John and me hitting it off together right from the start. John made two short visits to UB over the period I was with the Project and he contributed greatly to its success with his down to earth approach to life and his ability to get on with practically anyone.

[Gek's Art Website for the Fusion Exhibition](#)

Gek's art exhibition, Fusion, was a great success. It raised US\$4,000 towards the restoration and equipping of the Coca Cola donated building as an arts and crafts centre for the Lotus Children's Home. The building had previously been a shop and when we first visited the place to assess what work needed to be done, it didn't look too bad. However, after an unusually heavy rain one night, it became clear it needed a new roof. Water had come in everywhere. The building would take three months to prepare for its new function at a cost of around US\$9,000 of which Gek had raised half by her own efforts through the sales of her works at the Fusion exhibition. No mean achievement, I think you will have to agree.



Gek with a couple of her artworks

For setting up the exhibition we gained three sponsors; MacCoffee, a Singaporean three-in-one coffee company distributing their products in Mongolia, Xanadu Gallery who hosted the exhibition and the Mongolia-British Friendship Society (more of them later). With their generous support, Gek was able to contribute all the cash generated by the art sales from the exhibition to the Lotus Craft Centre project fund with the unsold artworks given to Lotus for sale to future visitors to the Lotus centre.

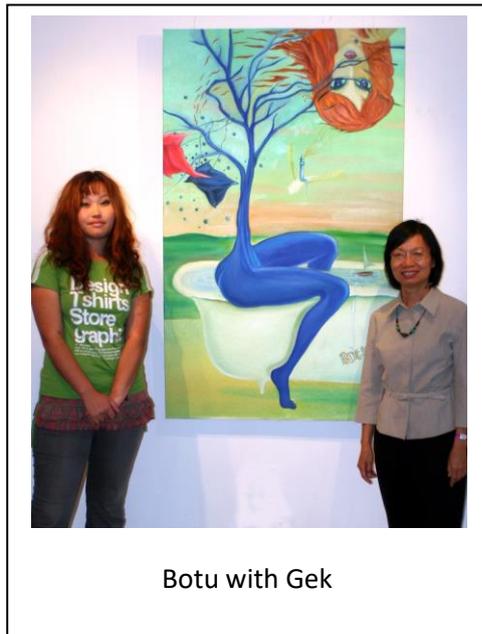
Christopher Osborne, British Ambassador to Mongolia at the time, officially opened the exhibition. The event was very well attended but poor old Christopher's address was at times drowned out by the hubbub from the assembled Mongolian artists at the back of the room, all friends of the Xanadu gallery. But with a stiff upper lip, Christopher soldiered on to the bitter end. Of course, Gek and I had drummed up support from the VSO crowd, who attended in force, teachers, and carers from Lotus together with some of the children and, last but not least, my colleagues in the PIU team supplemented by John. John and the PIU

guys helped Gek and me carry the thirty odd paintings and framed photographs from our apartment to the gallery, a distance of about 200 metres. But thankfully the Xanadu Gallery staff hung the artwork on the walls for us, all we had to do was then turn up for the opening.

Gek and I had decided to exhibit her oil paintings with some of my Mongolian photographs, hence the name of the exhibition, Fusion. The title reflected not just the mix of oil paintings with photographs but also Gek's and my different backgrounds from Asia and Europe, although I suspect this latter reference was lost on most people attending the exhibition.



Almost the photographs I had chosen to exhibit from those taken during our previous six months in Mongolia, was that of a young woman wandering through an early exhibition Gek and I had attended of Nyam Adiyabazar's work. And would you Adam and Eve it, this very same young woman was amongst the Mongolian artist the gallery had invited to our opening. Botu, her name, came bounding up to me after the opening speeches were finished with a big grin on her face to, thankfully, not upbraid me for sneaking a portrait of her without her permission but to say what a lovely picture she had made for me. It turns out she is also an artist. Gek and I visited an exhibition later in the year where her work was on display. Botu's art is very surreal and reflects her 'western art' training. She was no way a mainstream Mongolian artist, whose works are almost exclusively based in representations of the Mongolian landscape or culture. Wonder what she is up to now? I haven't been able to track her down on the web. Perhaps she has given up on art altogether.



Meeting Botu was not the only happenstance connected with this exhibition. The Xanadu Gallery owner and curator was the daughter of an ADB manager with a watching brief over our PIU team. This would not have been an issue but unfortunately, this manager was also connected with one of the dodgy construction skills training providers that had set my bullshit radar pinging on one of my site assessments visits. The one without any physical assets to do the training in, like a workshop. At the end of the day, the facilities were provided, and they did join our little band of training providers. But at the time of the exhibition, it wasn't at all certain that would happen, giving me a moment's pause for thought.

(19th March 2015 – Singapore)

Ruth and Richard's Visit

[Blog Entry for April 2007](#)

Gek and I are in Singapore at the moment preparing her apartment here for re-letting later this year. We are flitting between the two islands, between the Lion City and the Pearl Island, every six weeks or so. It is a hard life, but someone has to live it!!

Gek was now all set to begin her VSO supported project at Lotus, but before she could get stuck into her new role as construction site project manager, we had a prearranged visit from Ruth and Richard. The plan was for Ruth and Richard to stay in an hotel next door to our apartment for a week and then the four of us would take a further week together to visit Beijing. For their week in UB, Gek pretty much looked after the as I was committed each day to work at the PIU office with John and co. John was still in country when they arrived and Baigel kindly invited them both to join our 'get to know each other' away day at a holiday ger camp, the MIAT, some 30 minutes' drive out of UB. I was really pleased that Ruth and Richard would at least get some idea of the special nature of the Mongolian countryside and not just the dower impression of Mongolia that UB leaves on visitors to the city.

The winter snows were still lying on the north facing sides of the hills on the Steppes where the trees always seem to grow. It is very strange to see on every hill the trees growing on the north side, given that the sun is shining from the south all year round which in temperate climates would promote tree growth on the southern side of the hills. But here in



The Steppes

Mongolia with its extremely dry climate, less than a handful of days rain in a year, the trees grow where the ground water is most plentiful, i.e. where the sun doesn't reach and dry up the ground.

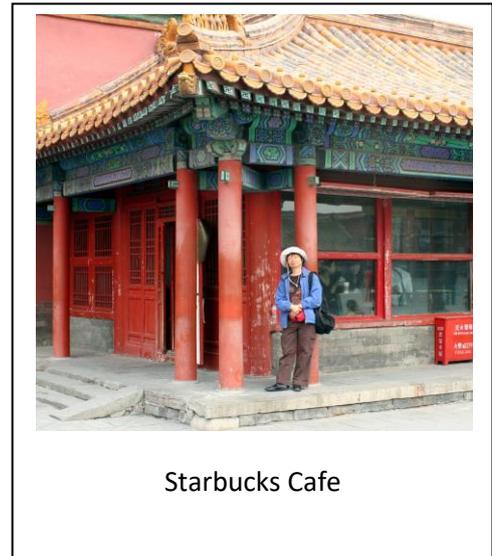
Gek and I had tried to book the overnight sleeper train from UB to Beijing, but it proved impossible to organise. There are trains

from Moscow passing through UB on their way to China, but you cannot pre-book a sleeping berth on them, you have to be at UB's station as the train arrived and pick up a berth if one was free. There was only one train a week leaving for Beijing from UB, but it did not leave on the day we needed it to fit in with Ruth and Richard's timetable. Waiting at the station on the off chance that four berths were available on a passing Russian train wasn't really a viable option. We had only one option, to fly to Beijing. But Gek and I determined that we would return to UB by train, if at all possible. But, here again, complications. We could only book the return train tickets once we had gotten to Beijing. We decided to take the risk, book one-way air tickets, since a train journey across the Gobi Desert had to be done, so special would it be. As a result, the first day in Beijing saw us going to the train station for tickets only to find that we could not purchase the tickets there, but at a Chinese run government travel agency whose office was in a hotel close by the station. What a palaver!! Finally, with the return tickets in our hands, we could relax and enjoy what the city had to offer.

I have to say, visiting China with Gek was marvellous. Gek is fluent in not only her own southern Chinese dialect, Teochew, but also in Mandarin and Cantonese. She can also make herself understood in Hokkien as well. Getting around the city using the underground rail network and the buses was the gift that Gek's language skills gave to us three Britishers. It also meant that we could go places that most tourist would not venture. For instance, into the old quarter of Beijing just south of the Forbidden City. Here, we savoured the delights of the restaurants that only the locals would normally visit. Of course, the major tourist/cultural sites in Beijing were a must visit, places such as the Summer Palace, The

Forbidden City, Tiananmen Square and of course the Great Wall at Badaling, just to the north of the city.

The 2008 Beijing Olympics were only eighteen months away at the time of our visit and the city was preparing itself for the gaze of the world to be on it with a major city wide clean and tidy up exercise. The new 'Birds Nest' Olympic Stadium was nearing completion as was the specially built underground rail link, connecting the new stadium to the main underground railway network. The Forbidden City was in the middle of a face lift too, with scaffolding cladding the outside of many its buildings, but quite a few buildings had already had their renovations completed and were open for business. Emperor Zhu Di built The Forbidden City was in 15th century.



Starbucks Cafe

However, not long after its completion in 1420, a fire almost completely destroyed it, the result of a lightning strike. Whilst this might seem to us as an unfortunate accident of nature and really piss you off, Emperor Zhu Di descendants took it as a sign that the gods were unhappy at his sanctioning of The Eunuch Admiral, Zheng He (Cheng Ho), latest



Lao She Tea House

excursion across the world's seas in a bid to extend China's influence over lands hitherto unknown. They also deemed his voyages of discovery as anti-Confucian. As a result, on the Admiral's return from his last voyage of discovery in 1435, all the information about those distant lands and artefacts he had brought back to China from the outside world were trashed. This act led to centuries more isolation of the China from the rest of the world. But for that fateful lightning strike and ensuing fire, China might well have been the America of the early second millennium.

The Forbidden City today, although restored to perhaps better than its former glory, is now a collection of 980, mainly empty buildings. Most China's cultural treasures that the Forbidden City used to house are

today in the other China, Taiwan, or the Republic of China. A specially built museum in Taipei houses about 70% of China's cultural heritage where Chang Kai Shek and the

nationalists retreated to after their defeat at the hands of Mao's communists in 1949. Bit of a sore point this with the Chinese on the mainland, an issue still not resolved.

A real surprise was to find a Starbucks coffee bar right inside the Forbidden City!! Not so forbidden then. How come a globally recognised, capitalist, free enterprise company such as Starbucks was allowed to set up its stall in the heart of a self-proclaimed communist state and not only that, but in the very cultural heart of its capital city? Even stranger since, if my memory serves me right, it was the only place in the whole palace where you could buy a cup of coffee. The café's location together with the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989 when battlefield tanks cleared student and worker demonstrators from the square, really lays the lie of the Chinese government's claim to now be governing the country according to communist/socialist principles. We had to go and have a coffee and cake from this very unique Starbuck franchise, which is now no more. Someone woke up to how incongruous a location it was for a very successful capitalist enterprise, and a year after our visit it shut down.

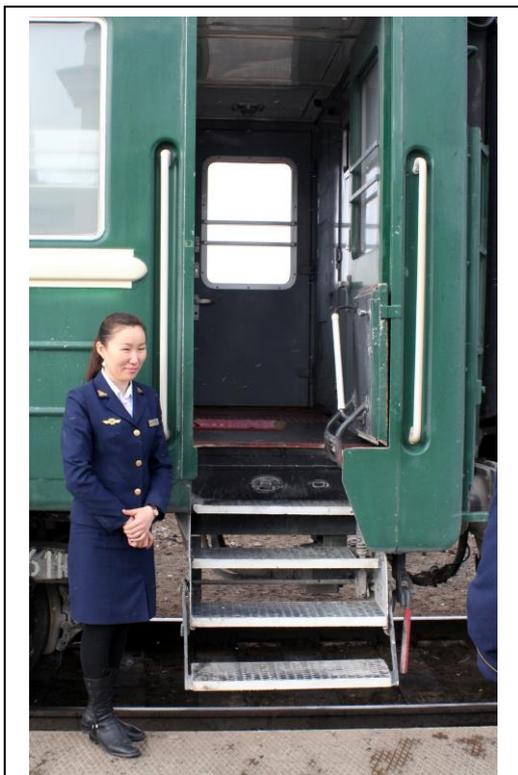
Tea is the drink most associated with China, in any case, and we just had to go to one of the most famous tea houses in the whole of China, the Lao She Tea House, just off Tiananmen Square, made famous mainly by the famous people who have taken a cuppa there. We opted for pu-er tea served to us as we sat in one of the small pagoda like structures built around the first-floor room of the tea house by a young lady in a traditional manner. Just a little more of an authentic Chinese experience than a Starbucks partaken from a polystyrene cup whilst sitting on a park bench, n'est ce pas?

(22nd March 2015 - Singapore)

We did take a one-day trip beyond the city limits to visit the Great Wall at Badaling. All sorts of erroneous myths surround the westerner's impression of China's Great Wall, the first being that it is a single, continuous, stone-built structure defining the border of China with its neighbours. There are hundreds of fragments of walls built between the coast and the Mongolian plateau, built at different times in China's long history as a state. Most are now in ruins and by no means were they all built of stone, with the earliest being mainly earthworks akin to Offler's Dyke in the UK. That is not to say that the structures that hundreds of thousands of visitors to China go to see at Badaling each year are not magnificent, they are and then some, as they stride across the mountain ridges. For a good read about the walls of China I recommend John Man's book, 'The Great Wall'. Richard had come to the East equipped with appropriate reading material covering the life of Genghis Khan and China's Great Wall amongst other topics that interested him. I had been amused by the first map of Mongolia I had bought in London a couple of weeks before our departure for UB, which marked the defensive walls in China as the 'Genghis Khan Walls'. The truth is, the walls were perhaps as much about regulating trade and the Chinese Emperor's desire to collect the attendant taxes as about a defensive military response to the aggressive, marauding nomadic tribes of the Steppes.

After a most enjoyable week in Beijing with Ruth and Richard, it was time for us to go our separate ways, Ruth and Richard to fly back to the UK, and Gek and I to train it back to UB. The rail journey from Beijing to UB took thirty hours. The sleeper carriages were of the Soviet era Russian design, not that dissimilar to the sleepers in which I had travelled from Rotterdam to Moscow in 1973, except there wasn't a coal fired samovar at the end of each carriage's corridor now, it being replaced by an electrically heated water urn. But everything else looked so familiar. The double berth cabins were of a generous size, much more so than those on the Australian Ghan train we took from Darwin to Alice last year (2014).

Soon after we left the city's suburbs, we passed through the Great Wall's gate at Badaling which we had visited a few days earlier. The train then headed northwest towards the Mongolian plateau. I had noticed on the flight across the same terrain on our way to Beijing from UB just how abruptly the plateau ends, and the lowland of China's middle kingdom begins. As the double header began to struggle up the foothills to the plateau, we came to a halt in a siding amongst the trees where engines recoupled to what had been the rear of



Our Carriage Attendant come Bogie Changer

the train and our direction of travel reversed. This is a commonly employed solution where the terrain is too steep for the engines to gain traction on the rails, the equivalent of a hairpin bend for a railed way. All very interesting for me of course with my lifelong interest in all things railed. The change of direction travelled soon after brought with it a change of scenery. From the farmed lands of the plains (which at times seemed covered in blue plastic bags blown over the land from urban areas) to the dripping forests of the foothills to now, the barren landscape to the Gobi Desert.

At this stage we were still in China, all be it in China's Autonomous Region of Inner Mongolia. We didn't reach the China/Mongolian border until around midnight where the train stopped for four hours whilst the carriages bogies were changed to accommodate the slightly wider tracks of the Russian built Mongolian railway network.

(27th March 2015 - Singapore)

At the border, most of the passengers took the opportunity to detrain and take advantage of the last minute duty free shopping to be had in the nearby border town, but Gek and I

opted to stay on the train so that I could watch the boggy changeover. What was more interesting than the method of mechanical change was who was doing the work, our diminutive carriage attendant. It was she who had been looking after our needs on the journey from Beijing, now down on the trackside, enormous spanner in hand disconnecting the Chinese bogies from our carriage and coupling the Mongolian bogies in their place. This is very typical of Mongolian women; they can turn their hand to anything and invariably do. Most of the Mongolians I was dealing with on the Project were women, whether the building skills trainers or the Mongolian Builders Association managers. The central place of women in Mongolian society goes back to the days of Genghis Khan when the men folk were off creating mayhem in Europe and their ladies left on the Steppes to tend the herds and keep the family safe. Today, Mongolian ladies are in this tradition, self-reliant and a force to be reckoned with.

Following the Mongolian border checks where two huge border guards dressed in soviet era style uniforms searched our berth, we turned in to sleep the night as the train slowly made its way across the Gobi. We awoke next morning to truly desert scenery through which we travelled for most of the day until we started to climb the first of the Steppes. Occasional we would see a mound of stones on the desert floor. We had also noticed quite a few of these mounts as we travelled through Inner Mongolia, sometimes amongst the trees by the side of the train track and never far from human habitations. But here in the Gobi they were on their own with no other sign of human activity around them at all. These randomly piled heaps of stones are in fact grave markers, the deceased being buried where he or she died, it being nomadic Mongolians way of returning the dead to the earth. Another traditional funeral rite still performed today is laying the deceased to rest on a raised platform in the countryside, open to the elements where the Steppes scavengers eventually eat the body. We had an indirect experience of this when one of our new Mongolian friends Oyunnas grandmother died. After performing the Buddhist rites of passage, the family took her body



Approaching the Steppes

to a remote area outside of UB where this traditional form of funeral practice was still allowed by the government.

We arrived at UB railway station late in the afternoon to be met by a gaggle of aggressive taxis drivers, grabbing our luggage, and trying to force us into one of their vehicles by loading them into their car boot.

Fortunately, we spied a trolley bus just arrived at the station and hot footed over to board it with a smile of relief to each other. Every car in UB could become a taxi. There was no enforced registration of taxi drivers in the city and as a result, every driver thought he could collect a fare if he had a mind too. This has resulted in some pretty nasty and often violent

incidents involving not so nice drivers and their passengers, something we wanted to avoid by always using public transport. Mind you, even then you had to be aware of the ever-present pick pockets on the buses.

And so Back to Work

[Blog Entry for May 2007](#)



The Proposed New Lotus Craft Centre Building – Before Refurbishment

And so back to work. Gek's priority in her new VSO project was to refurbish and then equip the new building Lotus had acquired for the craft skills teaching workshop. The two biggest jobs to be done were the replacement of the leaking roof which had caused extensive damage to every rooms' ceiling and the installation of a heating system linked to the centre's central heating boiler. The plan was to get the work completed by the time the children returned to the Centre in August following their annual summer camp in the Terelji National Park. Finding a building contractor was relatively easy as Didi, the Centre's director had a new school building built the year before and she was therefore well placed to be able to recommend a builder for the work.

For my part, it was back to the PIU office and preparing for the start of our first piloted training course which was to be in concrete working run by our star training provider at the Jiguur Grand Construction.

John had already left UB to return to Australia but not before he had given ADB a very positive report supporting our Project's proposed timeline. John had confided in me that before he had arrived in Mongolia he had been very apprehensive as what he would find and expressed his relief to see that we had established



On the Job Training on a Jiguur Construction Site

a sound footing for the Project and had already developed a doable time line for the next two years.

From the very beginning of the Project, Gungaa Shoovdor, the manager of the company's training section at Jiguur, had provided invaluable help and moral support to our PIU project team. Gungaa would always be straight talking with me and really did care about the welfare of the trainees, particularly the younger ones, many of whom, young men and women, came to the training from the slum ger districts surrounding the city. A training programme such as this Project No. 9085 had the potential to change a person's life for the better. One example in particular sticks in my mind. One young man arrived at Grand Perfect's training workshop clearly not having had a wash for several months, his face neck and hands caked in dirt, the likes of which I had never seen before. After a couple of days in the confines of the workshop, the other trainees began to complain about this poor lad's rather distinctive smell, not a little unpleasant was it. Despite Gungaa coaxing to get him to perhaps have a body wash before he came to work the next day, he still turned up in the same dirty, smelly state. After a few more days of this, Gungaa took him to her own home and insisted that he cleaned himself up. That was the kind of lady she was, committed.

I met the young lad again a few weeks later when he was doing his onsite training following his time in the workshop, at a Jiguur construction site just down the road from our PIU office. He was back to being filthy-dirty again, but worse this time, with caked on muck he never washed off after work from the concreting he was employed on. Gungaa was with me on that visit and she took him aside and gave him a bit of a talking too about his personal hygiene, or rather the lack of it. His story had a happy ending when I met up with Gungaa a couple of months later. She told me that this same lad had been taken on by Jiguur fulltime and had won the top graduation prize for his class. What's more, he had turned up at the presentation ceremony to receive his prize not only spotlessly clean but also in a suit and using a mobile phone!!!

Newspaper articles, FUSION Exhibition

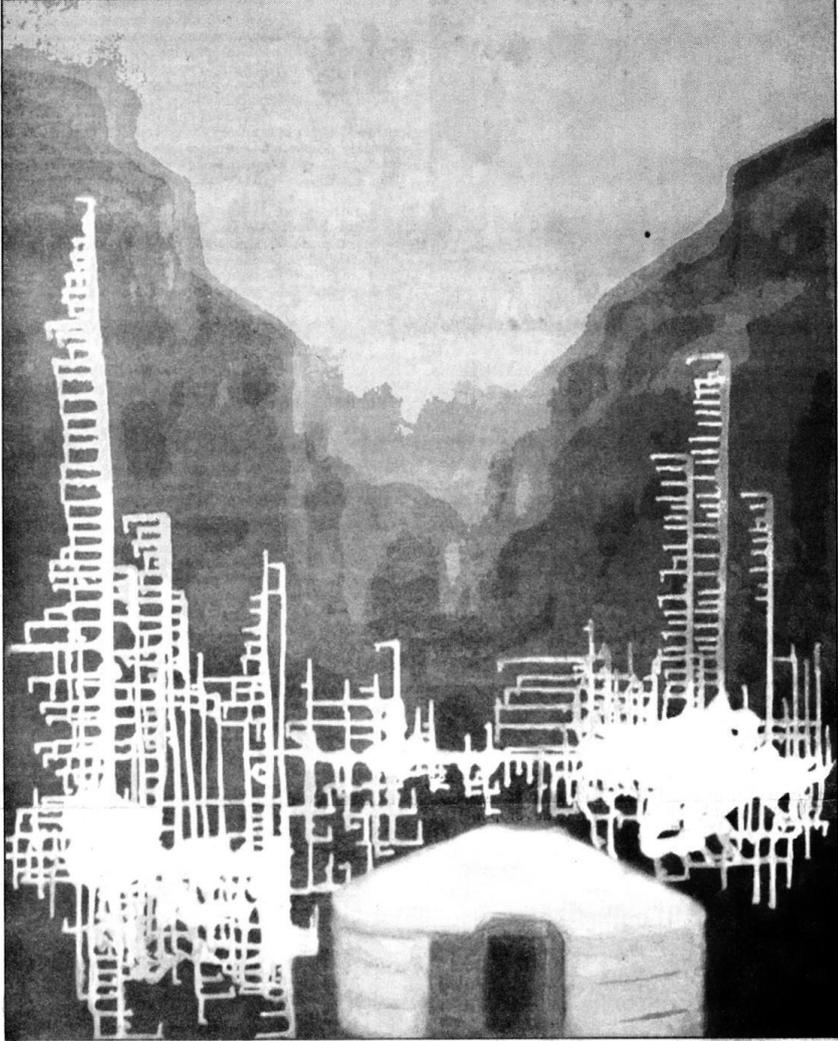
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THE UB POST

MONGOLIA'S INDEPENDENT WEEKLY NEWS

MARCH 22, 2007 No. 12 (565)



Art in a good cause

FUSION, a painting and photograph exhibition, opening on March 29 at the XanaduArt Gallery, aims to raise funds for a new arts and crafts workshop at the Lotus Children's Center. The exhibition will be opened by the British Ambassador to Mongolia, Mr. Christopher Wyndham Osborne at 6 pm.

The Lotus Children's Center was opened in 1995 by Didi Kalika, an Australian, to give homeless Mongolian children a chance to have a better future. The Center, situated in Yarmag just outside of Ulaanbaatar, provides the children with a family environment by creating small family groups, each with eight to ten children to one housemother.

Twenty-six oil paintings based on the themes of Mongolian landscapes and portraiture will be exhibited, all created in Mongolia by Gek. These paintings are mainly abstract.

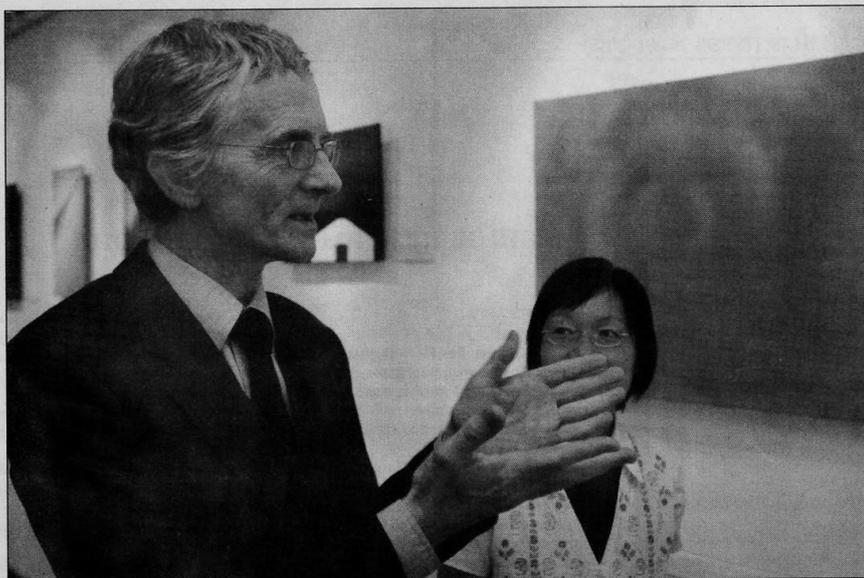
The exhibition will be open to the public between 11 am and 7 pm from March 30 to April 4.

On the last day of the exhibition, an auction of the works will be held at 6 pm. All sales proceeds will be contributed to the Arts and Crafts Workshop of Lotus Children's Center. The exhibition is sponsored by MacCoffee, the Mongolian-British Friendship Society and the XanaduArt Gallery.

D2

“ӨНӨӨДӨР” 2007 ОНЫ ДӨРӨВДҮГТЭЭР САРЫН 19

УРЛАН



Лим: Цонхон дээр тогтсон мөсөн дээр тийм гэж дүрсэлж хэлж чадамгүй зургууд байж билээ. Ц.БАТБААТАР © ФОКСЛЭ

Дэвид: Үнэхээр гайхалтай...

ГАНЦ ГЭР, “ГАХАЙ” ҮҮРСЭН НАЙМААЧИН ЭР...

Б.ХОНГОРМАА

“Урлан” буландаа Английн иргэн гэрэл зурагчин Дэвид Витворт, түүний эхнэр Сингапур улсын харьяат, зураач Лим Жэк Хен нарыг урилаа. Тэд саяхан “Xanady art” галерейд “FASHON” нэртэй үзэсгэлэнгээ дэлгэсэн юм.

Дэвид: Би энд ирсний дараахан ийм том /Тэрбээр гараа алдан дүрслэв./ үхсэн нохой гудамжинд харсан.

-Хаана тэр вэ?

Дэвид: Жийгний хамар дээр хүлчихсэн байна лээ.

-Аан. Тэр чинь чоно байхгүй юү?

Дэвид: Юү гэнэ ээ. Бүр зэрлэг чоно байсан хэрэг үү?

Энэ тухай тайлбарласан боловч Дэвид Витворт гуайн санаанд нэг л буухгүй байгаа бололтой. “Улаанбаатар чинь хөдөө биш, бүр нийслэл биз дээ. Тэгээд яагаад...”

Английн иргэнийг гайхшируулсан энэ мэт зүйл манайд олон гэсэн. Машины түгжрэлд гацчихсан морин тэрэг, троллейбус...

Гэхдээ өнгө муутай ч гэсэн троллейбус

-Дэвидийн “Халтар жаал” яг л монгол хүүхдүүдийн нийтлэг дүр төрх мөн дөө.

Дэвид: Өнэ хүүтэй хөдөө явах үеэр танилцсан юм. Эгч нь түүнээс нэг их томгүй хэрнээ хурдны морь унадаг гэсэн шүү. Тэр хүүгийн зуурсан хаалганы бариулыг л хар даа.

-Hand made. /Түүнийг сураар сүлжсэн байв./

Дэвид: Окей. Надад бас хүүхдээ тэврээд явж байгаа эрчүүд сонин санагдсан. Ийм дүр зургийг Англид хэзээ ч олж харахгүй.

-Тийм гэж үү?

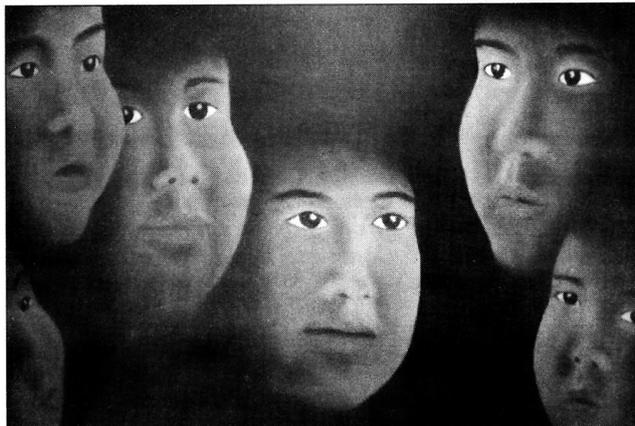
Лим: Сингапурт ч мөн адил.

Харин зураач эмэгтэйд манай монгол гэрийн тавилгын өнгө онцгой сэтгэгдэл төрүүлжээ. Бас цонхон дээр тогтсон мөсийг нэвтлэн тусах нарны

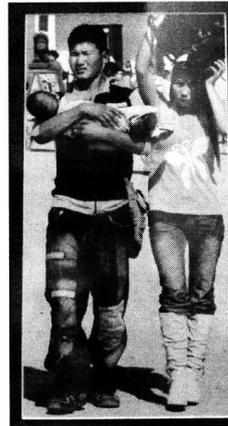
Мэт зүйл манайд олон гэсэн. Машин
түгжрэлд гагчихсан морин тэрэг,
троллейбус...

Гэхдээ өнгө муутай ч гэсэн троллейбус
түүнд эртний үзмэр шиг л санагдаж, ихэд
таалагджээ.

Харин зураач эмэгтэйд манай
монгол гэрийн тавилгын өнгө онцгой
сэтгэгдэл төрүүлжээ. Бас цонхон дээр
тогтсон мөсийг нэвтлэн тусах нарны
туяа, хүүхдүүд, тэргэл сарыг онцгойлов.



"Хөвгүүд"



Харин эхнэр Лим Жэк Хен "Монголд
үйл явдал маш түргэн өрнөдөг" гэлээ. Тэр
монголчууд биднийг их хурдан шийдвэр
гаргадаг, бусдын юу хүсээд байгааг дор
нь ойлгонгуутаа учрыг нь олж, хужрыг нь
тунгаагаад өгчихдөг, ер нь их боломжийн
хүмүүс гэж дүгнэв. Бас манайхны энэ
ээлдэг зан тэдэнд, үзэсгэлэнгээ
гаргахад нь их тус болж.

-Манайд гаднынхан үзэсгэлэнгээ тэр бүр
гаргаад байдаггүй ...

Дэвид: Бидэнд Монгол орон онцгой сэтгэгдэл
төрүүлсэн. Сайн, бас муу ч талаараа. Тэгээд л энэ
бүхнээ бодит байдал дээр буулгаж, бусадтай
хуваалцаж гэж санасан юм.

Лим: Бид үзэсгэлэнгийн орлогоо хүүхдийн
асрамжийн "Лотус" төвийнхөнд хандивлах бодолтой
байгаа.

Дэвид: Гэрэл зурагчин, зураач бол бидний давхар
мэргэжил. Уг нь би инженер, харин Лим компью-
терийн багш. Манай хүн Англид уран зургийн
мэргэжил эзэмшсэн л дээ.

Лим: Хообий маань биднийг ийм зүйл хийхэд
хүргэсэн хэрэг. Хүүхдүүдийн төлөө өөрсдийн чадах
бүхнээ зориулах ёстой биз дээ.

*Дэвид гэрэл зургууддаа бидний сайн
мэдэх хэрнээ тэр бүр шүүрч аваад
байдаггүй агшныг буулгажээ. Олон
"гахай" үүрсэн атлаа тамхиа асааж ядан
зогсох наймаачин эр, нөхрийнхөө үсийг
янзалж зогсоо бүсгүй...*

-Лимийн "Хөвгүүд" их гоё юм аа.

Лим: Асрамжийн газрын хүүхдүүд. Тэдний
гэгээлэг, баяр баясгалантай дүрийг товойлгож
харуулахын тулд гэрэл сүүдрийг ашигласан юм.

-Миний хувьд тэд их ноомой. Ямар нэг
зүйл хүлээсэн байртай, эсвэл сэтгэл нь зовоо
юу даа гэмээр...

Дэвид: Магадгүй ээ. Ер нь Лимийн зургийг
ахин дахин харах хэрэгтэй. Харах бүрт өөр зүйлийг
олж үзнэ. Жишээ нь, энэ "Мөсөн уул" /мөсөн арал"
ч байж мэднэ/-аас морь, сүнс гээд өөр юу ч тодорч
магадгүй. Харин тэр "Сарнай" -гаас нохойны
хоншоор, мазаалай гээд л.

-Зориуд ингэж зурсан хэрэг үү. Эсвэл
санаандгүй л...

Лим: Аль аль нь.

-Та гол төлөв эрс тэс болоод тод өнгийг
сонгох юм аа.

Лим: Гол дүрээ гаргаж ирэхэд хэрэг болох
учраас дүрслэлийн энэ аргыг илүү ашигласан
хэрэг. Би ихэвчлэн абстракт чиглэлээр зурах
дуртай.

Дэвид: Жишээ нь архичин хүний амьдрал,
бодол сэтгэхүй хязгаарлагдмал орчинд байдгийг
Лим хар буюу цагааны хослолоор үзүүлсэн. Тээр
тэнд, хонгилын үзүүрт харагдах гэрэл улам бүр
цаашлан байгааг та анзаарч байна уу?

....

*Тэд үзэсгэлэнгийнхээ танилцуулгад
их хотын дундаас цайран харагдах ганц
гэрийг онцлон тавьжээ. Харин гэрийн
хаалга онгорхой юм.*