

and the merest hint of a bow. Each man will either take a pinch of snuff using the integral spoon or sniff the loosened stopper appreciatively. The stoppers are replaced and the bottles are returned to their respective owners with motions of equal decorum. The exchange of snuff is an indication of mutual respect, and to many remains an important part of conducting business.

Inevitably, Mongolian artistic tastes have always differed from those of the Chinese. An artistic people, they have a tendency to ornately decorate all their personal accoutrements. Additionally, since the use of snuff bottles is a "living tradition," its design has not only survived but continues to evolve. Consequently the types, styles and decorative motifs to be found on snuff bottles in Mongolia today conform to a different set of aesthetic values. There are two main kinds of pattern in Mongolian decorative art: the *hee* (ornament) which creates the rhythm, and the *ugalz* (scrolls and volutes) which emphasizes the form. Together they create balance.² The motifs fall into one or more of five themes: geometric, zoomorphic, botanical, shapes borrowed from natural phenomena (such as clouds) and symbols. While many of the designs are of Tibetan and Chinese origin, they have been merged with Mongolian imagery to create a rich decorative vocabulary.³

The Mongolians have a preference for bottles made of coral, jade, agate and lapis lazuli, the most highly prized material being coral (figs. 3, 4). The bottles are mostly of a bulbous, compressed flask shape with a tall cylindrical neck and a wide oval foot surrounded by a foot rim, as seen in this lapis lazuli bottle (figs. 5a, b). The most notable feature is the stopper, which is invariably tall and domed, rather like an exaggerated Charlie Chaplin bowler hat only without the rim, and normally made of coral with a gold collar (fig. 5c). The body is often plain or decorated with relatively shallow relief carving (fig. 5d). Sometimes the decorative carving is confined to the recessed foot (fig. 5e), the sides of the bottle being left plain to show off the natural markings of the material. In some examples the decoration is limited to just the gold collar. Mongolians esteem old bottles but wealthier businessmen also commission new bottles. I was told there were currently two "master carvers" in Ulaanbaatar who can take several months to complete a single commission. When I showed interest in meeting one of them, I was gently but firmly dissuaded with various excuses. It appears that their identities and whereabouts are as jealously guarded as those of a good tailor! To meet demand many of the new plain hardstone bottles to be found in Mongolia are imported from China (fig. 6). They are then stoppered and custom finished with carved decoration by local craftsmen in



Figs. 5 a, b. New lapis lazuli bottle showing Mongolian decorative themes; with carnelian stopper and gold collar. Photos of lapis lazuli bottle courtesy of B. Gurjav.



Fig. 5c. Detail of the stopper from the above bottle. Note decoration incised on underside of gold collar. Photo courtesy of B. Gurjav.



Fig. 5e. Detail of the foot, carved with a pair of fish. Photo courtesy of B. Gurjav.



Fig. 5d. Detail of carving on one main side. Photo courtesy of B. Gurjav.



Fig. 6. White jade bottle, probably made in China, with locally made coral stopper. Note the decorative motif on the gold collar.