



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

▶ ASIA

## BACKGROUND

**Land and Climate.** Mongolia is about the same size as Alaska, covering 604,250 square miles (1,565,000 square kilometers) between Russia and China. Grasslands and semidesert cover up to 80 percent of the nation's total area. The vast grassland plains of eastern Mongolia are considered the largest intact grazing ecosystem in the world. The Gobi region (Mongolia's semidesert) lies in the south. Although dry, the Gobi also has forests, oases, and mountains. The highest of Mongolia's three mountain ranges is the Altai Mountains, located in the far west. Rivers are mainly in the north. These include the Selenge River, which drains into Russia's Lake Baikal.

Mongolia has an extreme continental climate with long, cold winters and short summers. The country receives little snow, and annual precipitation is usually less than 15 inches (37 centimeters) per year in the wettest areas. Rain falls mostly in the spring. Summer (June–August) can be warm, and temperatures often reach above 70°F (21°C). Winds sweep the arid south and east in springtime. Mongolia is called the Land of Blue Sky because it averages 257 cloudless days a year. Winters are very cold (usually below freezing). When blizzards send enough snow to cover the grass, livestock cannot graze and therefore die. This winter weather, called *zud*, has been severe in recent years. Combined with summer droughts, harsh winters have led to food shortages and economic hardship.

**History.** Chinggis (Genghis) Khan created the first unified Mongol nation in the 13th century. He and his descendants built an empire that stretched from Korea to Hungary, the largest continuous land empire ever known. His grandson, Khubilai Khan, founded the Yuan Dynasty in China in 1279. The Mongol Empire began to fragment in the early 1400s and Mongols retreated to their homeland. Returning forces clashed

with the Oirad Mongolian tribe and civil war ensued. Dayan Khan's imperial forces defeated the Oirads around 1500.

War between the loosely confederated Mongolian nobles in the 1600s led the Khalka Mongols to ally themselves with the Manchus of China. The Manchus, who established the Ch'ing Dynasty in China, eventually dominated all of Mongolia. Southern Mongolia became Inner Mongolia (now part of China), and present-day Mongolia was Outer Mongolia. The Manchus dominated the nation through the nobility and the church, but local fiefs (called *banners*) had a fair amount of autonomy.

By 1911, when the Ch'ing Dynasty collapsed, the Mongol-Manchu alliance had dissolved and the Mongols declared independence. Because the head of Buddhism in Mongolia, Bogd Khan, was the only unifying political and religious figure in the country, a theocratic monarchy was established under his leadership. It ended in 1919 when the Chinese invaded. They were driven from the capital by the White Russian Army in 1921, but the Red (Bolshevik) Army allied with Mongolian national hero Sukebaatar to liberate the country in 1921. After Bogd Khan died in 1924, Mongolia was declared a Communist people's republic. The Communists destroyed the nobility and Buddhist monasteries; thousands died fighting the changes.

With communism's 1989 collapse, Mongolia embarked on a peaceful transition toward democracy. Successive governments have implemented reforms designed to modernize Mongolia, increase economic development and foreign investment, and further strengthen democratic institutions. These reforms have at times been painful and unpopular. However, political and economic restructuring slowly continues.

## THE PEOPLE

**Population.** Mongolia's population of 2.7 million is growing annually at 1.4 percent. One-third of Mongolians live in the capital, Ulaanbaatar. Approximately one-fourth live in smaller cities, especially Darhan, Erdenet, and Choybalsan. The rest of the population is spread throughout rural Mongolia. Most of these inhabitants are nomadic herders. With rural conditions increasingly harsh, more people are moving to cities—a trend that threatens the survival of traditional nomadic society.

Mongolia's population is quite homogeneous. About 90 percent is comprised of subgroups of the Mongol nationality, the largest being the Khalkha (79 percent of the total), who are mostly concentrated in the central and eastern areas of the country. Distinctions between the Khalkhas and other Mongols (11 percent, including Buryads, Dorwods, Zakhchins, Bayads, Oolds, Uriyankhais, Uzemchins, and Bargas) are minor. They may be expressed through dialects, certain traditions, and folk costumes. The largest non-Mongol ethnic group is the Kazaks (4 percent). They are a pastoral, Turkic-speaking, Muslim people who live in extreme western Mongolia. Three percent of the population is Chinese or Russian.

**Language.** Mongol belongs to the Altaic language family. The majority of people speak the Khalkha Mongol dialect. It is also used in schools and for official business. Other Mongol dialects are used by their respective groups. Mongolia's traditional script was replaced under communism with a Cyrillic alphabet similar to that used for Russian. In 1991, the parliament voted to revive the old script. It is slowly being introduced in schools. The process is slow due to the lack of printed materials and the fact that few adults can read it. The Mongol alphabet has 26 letters; text is written vertically and individual characters are written differently depending on where they appear in a word. Vowels and consonants are not written separately (as with printed English) but are connected together.

Kazaks use their own language with a Cyrillic alphabet in schools and local government. Adult Mongols speak at least some Russian, and many Russian words have been incorporated into the Mongolian language. English is spreading rapidly, and many official signs are written only in the traditional script and English.

**Religion.** Tibetan Buddhism (also called *Vajrayana* Buddhism) coexists with the region's traditional shamanism. Tibetan Buddhism shares the common Buddhist goals of individual release from suffering and reincarnation. Tibet's Dalai Lama, who lives in India, is the religion's spiritual leader and is highly respected in Mongolia. As part of their shamanistic heritage, Mongolians still practice ritualistic magic, nature worship, exorcism, meditation, and natural healing.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Mongolia had hundreds of monasteries and about 50 percent of all men were monks. The Communist antireligion campaign in the 1930s destroyed the extensive monastic system. Atheism was promoted and monasteries were closed (shamanistic practices survived). From 1945 to 1990, only one monastery (Gandan in Ulaanbaatar) was in operation.

Reform has allowed freedom of religion, and more than one hundred monasteries have reopened. Many young Mongolians are receiving an education through these traditional centers of learning, and people are once again able to practice cherished traditions. Boys are increasingly applying to become monks, and Buddhism is rapidly regaining its popularity. Kazak Muslims (about 4 percent) are free to practice Islam. Christianity is gaining influence.

**General Attitudes.** The people of Mongolia are proud of their history, especially the era when their empire stretched across much of Asia and Europe. As pastoral nomads, Mongolians have always regarded themselves as freer than settled nations. This way of life has given them a love for the environment and wildlife. Elk foraging for winter food are allowed to wander freely on city streets. Unfortunately, urban sanitation systems are underdeveloped and cities are increasingly polluted. Life in rural areas is dramatically different than in the city. Rural Mongolians appreciate wide-open spaces and feel a oneness with nature. A fast-running horse is prized everywhere. Voting is so important that rural residents will ride for hours on a horse just to reach a polling station.

Mongolians sometimes struggle to adapt to their society's new challenges. Because conformity was fostered under communism, older people are not used to personal initiative, risk taking, and entrepreneurship. Mongolian egalitarianism emphasizes shared values and common goals. Younger members of society are enthusiastic about change and Western values. Yet, even as some Mongolians are adapting successfully, many others feel unable to cope with rapid change. They favor a balance between the market-oriented system and a government that cares for the people. National unity is undermined by growing differences between rural and urban areas and a widening gap between the rich and poor.

**Personal Appearance.** Western-style clothing is common in urban areas. Mongolians are well dressed in public. The youth wear jeans and Western-style jackets. Men wear suits. In rural areas, the *deel* (a traditional gown or tunic) is more popular. A woman's *deel* is made of bright colors and has silk ornaments and fancy buttons. A man's *deel* is less intricate. Both have a sash, embroidered cuffs, and designs. Urban women may have a silk *deel* for very formal occasions. A winter *deel* commonly is lined with sheepskin or fur. In the coldest weather, urban people wear heavy coats, fur hats, and leather boots.

## CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

**Greetings.** A handshake is the most common greeting in urban areas. A standard greeting in formal situations or among strangers is *Ta sain baina uu?* (How do you do?). Acquaintances prefer more casual greetings such as *Sain uu* (Hello) or *Sonin yu baina?* (What's new?). In rural areas, Mongolians exchange their pipes or snuff as a greeting and ask questions about how fat the livestock are, how favorable the particular season is, and so forth.

Mongolian names consist of a patronymic and a given name. All people are called by their given names. The patronymic is rarely used in ordinary speech and never used alone. Its purpose is to distinguish between people who might have the same name. It is the possessive form of the person's father's name. For example, a person named Hashbatyn Hulan is called *Hulan* and the father is known as *Hashbat*. A title often follows the given name. It is used to recognize a person's rank, seniority (in age or status), or profession. For example, a respected teacher might be addressed as *Batbayar bagsh*. The term *guai* is added when addressing an elder (male or female) or someone of higher status, so an honored elder would be addressed as *Sumiya guai* (Mr.). Sometimes a person with a close relationship to an older person will call that person "uncle" or "aunt," even though they are not related.

**Gestures.** Mongolians gesture and pass items only with the right hand. To show special respect, one supports the right elbow with the left hand when passing an item. Mongolians

point with an open hand. Pointing with the index finger is seen as threatening. To beckon, one waves all fingers with the palm down. Crossing legs or yawning is avoided in the presence of an elder. Mongolians do not like to be touched by people they do not know. Unavoidable contact, such as in line or on a crowded bus, is not offensive. However, kicking another person's foot, even accidentally, is offensive if the two people do not immediately shake hands to rectify the insult. It is impolite to sit in a way that the soles of the feet show.

Mongolians use gestures to show appreciation, and gestures often take the place of a verbal "thank you." Some use a respectful gesture (*zolghah*) when first meeting on the holiday of *Tsagaan Sar*: the younger person gently holds the elbows of the older person, whose forearms rest on the younger person's forearms; the older person lightly touches his or her lips to the younger person's forehead. This gesture may also be used when meeting a friend or family member after a long absence.

**Visiting.** Mongolians enjoy having guests in their homes and are known for their hospitality. Unplanned visits are common. The host and family members usually greet guests at the door in apartment buildings or outside a *ger* (a circular, domed, tent-like home) in rural areas. The door of a *ger* always faces south. When entering a *ger*, people customarily move around to the left. During formal visits, the host sits opposite the entrance; women sit to the left and men to the right.

Hosts serve tea with milk. *Airag* (fermented mare's milk) might be served instead of tea during summer, and vodka may be served at any time. Guests often give the hosts a small gift. For holidays or birthdays, more valuable gifts are given. On very important occasions, a younger person presents *khadag* (a blue silk band) and a silver bowl filled with *airag* to an elder or a person of higher social rank as a sign of deep respect and well-wishing.

**Eating.** Dinner is considered the main meal of the day. The whole family generally eats dinner together. Western utensils are common for all meals, but some Mongolians use chopsticks. Most urban dwellers use a knife to cut meat and a spoon to eat rice or vegetables. In urban apartment blocks, people have dining tables and chairs. In rural areas, people sit on the floor or on small stools to eat from a low table. In the evening, soup is served in separate bowls. If the main dish is boiled meat, diners eat it from a communal bowl. At restaurants, toasts commonly are made to all seated at the table. A host often insists on paying for the meal.

## LIFESTYLE

**Family.** Most Mongolians live in nuclear families. Elderly parents live with the family of their youngest son (or daughter if they have no sons). That son inherits the family home and what is left of the herd (after older sons have received equal shares). Grandparents are treated with great respect for their wisdom and life experience, which they use to help raise their grandchildren. The father is head of the family, but the mother is responsible for household affairs. Girls typically are given more responsibility while boys receive more freedom.

Urban families live either in high-rise apartments or in a *ger*, with its surrounding fence and storage shed. Most rural families live in a *ger*, a tent with a four- or five-piece wooden lattice, a roof frame, and a door. Its average size is 18 feet (6 meters) in diameter. The *ger* is covered with one or more layers of sheep-wool felt and a white cloth. It is easy to erect or dismantle and is warm in cold seasons. A *ger* in or near a city will have electricity but not heat or water. Nomadic extended fam-

ilies often live in a camp of several *gers*.

In urban areas, both spouses generally work outside the home. Due to a housing shortage, three generations often share a small apartment; parents sleep in the living room and children and grandparents in the bedrooms. Urban families have one or two children. In rural areas, husbands take care of herding and slaughtering, while wives handle milking and food preparation. Older children care for younger siblings.

Networks of family reciprocity are an important means of support. For example, rural relatives may supply their city relatives with meat and dairy products, and the urban dwellers may reciprocate by taking one or more of the rural family's children to live with them in the city so they may receive a better education.

**Dating and Marriage.** Dating between schoolmates and coworkers commonly leads to marriage. Mongolians usually marry between the ages of 18 and 25. Urban wedding ceremonies take place in "wedding palaces." Afterward, many couples now go to a Buddhist monk to receive a blessing or have their future predicted. A large feast treats as many relatives and friends as the new couple's families can afford to feed. In rural areas, common-law marriages are typical. Rural couples receive a *ger* from the husband's family. Mongolian families traditionally exchange gifts in conjunction with a wedding. The groom's family usually gives livestock, while the bride's family offers jewelry and clothing.

**Diet.** The Mongolian diet consists largely of dairy products, meat, millet, barley, and wheat. Most people eat mutton or beef at least once a day; goat, camel, and horse are also eaten at times. City dwellers enjoy rice. The climate limits the variety of available vegetables and fruits. Potatoes, cabbage, carrots, onions, and garlic might be added to soups. Wild berries—and in a few areas, apples—grow in Mongolia. In the summer, Mongolians eat milk products (dried milk curds, butter, *airag*, and yogurt); meat is the winter staple.

Breakfast in rural areas might include dairy products and tea. In cities, people add bread and sometimes meat. Midday meals in cities are becoming more Westernized, while rural people generally eat dairy products. A common dinner meal is *guriltai shul* (mutton-and-noodle soup). Boiled mutton is popular. A favorite meal is *buuz*, a steamed dumpling stuffed with diced meat, onion, cabbage, garlic, salt, and pepper. A boiled version of the dumpling is called *bansh*, and the fried version is *huushur*. Salt is widely used as a seasoning.

**Recreation.** Traditional wrestling, horse racing, and archery are the most popular sports. The entire country gets involved in the annual wrestling championships. Mongolians also enjoy boxing, soccer, volleyball, basketball, and table tennis. Many men enjoy hunting. Urban Mongolians watch television, go to movies, or go on nature outings. The youth enjoy rock concerts. Visiting friends and family members is also important. In summer, Mongolians spend as much time as possible in the countryside. Small cabins in the hills around the capital are popular summer homes for those who own them. Others visit rural relatives. Sunday is a favorite day for picnics.

**The Arts.** Mongolian arts reflect the country's nomadic heritage. Horses, nature, and freedom are often themes for the nation's rich oral tradition. Poetry, especially *magtaal* (poetic songs of praise), is the heart of much of Mongolian literature. Storytelling is a respected art, and proverbs, legends, and epic tales are passed down through generations. Folk arts include embroidery, colorful mosaics, and *shirdeg* (richly ornamented felt carpets).

## Mongolia

Many Mongolians enjoy singing. Traditional songs are often performed at weddings or family gatherings. Traditional dance and music performances at the theater in Ulaanbaatar are popular. The *morin-khuur* (bowed lute with a carved horse head at the neck) is a symbol of Mongol culture.

**Holidays.** Mongolia's national holidays include New Year's Day (1 Jan.), the Lunar New Year, Children and Women's Day (1 June), Mongolian People's Revolution or *Naadam* (11–13 July; celebrated with horse races, wrestling, and other events), and Independence Day (26 Nov.).

The Lunar New Year, called *Tsagaan Sar* (White Month/Moon), is marked by family gatherings. People go to the home of the eldest member of their family at sunrise, greet them with the *zolgoxh* gesture, and exchange gifts. The holiday is preceded by days of house cleaning. Also, since many older Mongolians do not know their date of birth, they add a year to their age on *Tsagaan Sar*.

**Commerce.** Weekday urban office hours are generally from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. and 2 to 6 p.m. Shops are open from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. Wage earners work a 40-hour week. Grocery stores have the same hours as shops but often are open on Sunday. A large open market featuring consumer goods, rural crafts, and assorted items operates several days a week on the capital's outskirts.

## SOCIETY

**Government.** Mongolia's president (currently Natsagiyn Bagabandi) is head of state, and its prime minister (currently Nambariin Enkhbayar) is head of government. The president is directly elected to a four-year term. The prime minister is the leader of the majority party or coalition in Mongolia's parliament, the 76-seat Great Hural. Parliamentary elections are held every four years. All citizens may vote at age 18. The country has 18 provinces and 3 autonomous cities (Ulaanbaatar, Darhan, and Erdenet).

**Economy.** Nearly half of all Mongolians raise horses, cattle, Bactrian camels, sheep, goats, and yaks. During the communist era, herding was done in collectives, but with the transition to democratic government, the collectives were privatized and herds were split. Farming is not widespread. A small light-industrial base produces animal-skin clothing and building materials. Mongolian goats produce cashmere wool for export. Mongolia is rich in copper, gold, zinc, tungsten, and silver. Copper and cashmere are Mongolia's main exports. Oil discoveries, rising gold production, and road construction projects should help future economic growth. Tourism is a growing industry. Unemployment (more than 50 percent in some areas) and inflation remain serious problems. Poverty affects around 40 percent of all people. The ongoing cycle of drought and severe winters has long-term negative effects on the economy. The currency is the Mongolian *tugrik* (MNT).

**Transportation and Communications.** Paved roads are common in cities, but less than 20 percent of all roads are paved. Japanese investment is helping Mongolia build more roads. Cities have buses and trolleys. Cars and trucks are important outside urban areas. Private ownership of cars is rapidly increasing, causing hazardous driving conditions in some areas. Nearly all international trade and some passenger travel

## DEVELOPMENT DATA

|                                  |                                |
|----------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Human Dev. Index* rank . . . . . | 117 of 175 countries           |
| Adjusted for women . . . . .     | 95 of 144 countries            |
| Real GDP per capita . . . . .    | \$1,740                        |
| Adult literacy rate . . . . .    | 99 percent (male); 98 (female) |
| Infant mortality rate . . . . .  | 57 per 1,000 births            |
| Life expectancy . . . . .        | 61 (male); 65 (female)         |

are conducted on the Trans-Mongolian Railway, which connects Ulaanbaatar with Naushki, Russia, and Erenhot, China. The Mongolian airline provides domestic travel and some international flights. Telephones are uncommon. Mail moves slowly. Radio and television stations are government owned, but there are many private newspapers. Mobile phone use is widespread in Ulaanbaatar. Internet availability is increasing in urban areas.

**Education.** The public school system provides free and compulsory education for eight years, beginning at age seven. Nearly 90 percent of students are enrolled in primary school. Most spend two additional years studying either general education or vocational training. Higher education was once carefully regulated, but it is now being reformed and liberalized.

**Health.** The government provides free medical care throughout the country. However, doctors tend to be undertrained. There is a shortage of imported medicines, and healthcare facilities are poorly equipped, especially in rural areas. Maternity and child care are the highest priorities for now. Alcoholism is a serious problem among men. Private insurance and higher-quality private clinics (especially dental) are being integrated into the system.

## AT A GLANCE

### Events and Trends.

- In January 2004, the Great Hural defeated a proposal to allow foreign mining companies to begin exploration for coal, zinc, uranium, and other minerals in the eastern plains. However, plans are still being considered to develop roads and other infrastructure in mineral-rich areas of eastern Mongolia previously set aside as nature reserves.
- Natsagiyn Bagabandi of the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party (MPRP) was reelected president in 2001 with 58 percent of the vote. The MPRP also won 72 of 76 parliamentary seats in 2000 elections, bringing Nambariin Enkhbayar to office as prime minister. The MPRP had been overwhelmingly defeated in 1996 elections by a coalition of several parties, but discontent with a struggling economy brought about the MPRP's return to power. Although the MPRP is the former ruling communist party, today it has a platform of privatization and reform.

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