General Attitudes

Mongols are proud of their history, especially the era when their empire stretched across much of Asia and Europe. As pastoral nomads, Mongols 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 under-developed and cities are not highly polluted. Life in rural areas is dramatically different than in the city. Rural Mongols appreciate wide open spaces and feel a oneness with nature. They also value their families. 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 with the new challenges they face. Because conformity was fostered under communism, older people are not used to personal initiative, entrepreneurship, and risk taking. Mongolian equality emphasizes shared values and common goals. Younger members of society are enthusiastic about change and Western values. Yet, even as some people 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. Growing differences between rural and urban areas, as well as a widening gap between the rich and poor, are fueling tension and undermining strong national unity.

Personal Appearance

Western-style clothing is common in urban areas. Nice shoes are a status symbol. People are well dressed in public. The youth wear jeans and Western-style jackets. Men wear suits. In rural areas, the deel (a traditional Mongolian gown, robe, 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 lined with sheepskin or fur. In the coldest weather, urban people wear heavy coats, fur hats, and leather boots.

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 yutai ve?* (What's new?). In rural areas, people 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.

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*, or an honored elder as *Sumiya guai* (Mr. or Mrs.). 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. Mongols point with an open hand or the middle finger or thumb. Pointing with the index finger is seen as threatening. To beckon, one waves all fingers with the palm down. The right hand, placed palm-down under the chin, is sawed back and forth to indicate a person is too full to eat more. Crossing legs, yawning, or making eye contact is avoided in the presence of an elder. Women often cover their mouths when they laugh. Mongols 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.

Mongols use gestures to show appreciation, and gestures often take the place of a verbal "thank you." Some use a respectful gesture, a *zolgah*, when first meeting after the new year: 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.

Visiting

Mongols enjoy having guests in their homes and are known for their hospitality. Unplanned visits are common among Mongols, but international visitors wait for an invitation. The host and family members usually greet guests at the door in apartment buildings or outside a ger 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 mares 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 a higher social rank as a sign of deep respect and well-wishing.

Eating

Dinner is the main meal of the day throughout the country. The whole family sits together for dinner in the evening. Western utensils are common for all meals, but some people 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.

Family

Most Mongols 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.

In urban areas, 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 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 cool seasons. A *ger* in or near a city will have electricity but not heat or water. Nomadic extended families 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.

Dating and Marriage

Dating between schoolmates and coworkers commonly leads to marriage. People 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 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, people eat milk products (dried milk curds, butter, *airag*, and yogurt); meat is the inter 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

Mongol wrestling, horse racing, and archery are the most popular sports. The entire country gets involved in the annual wrestling championships. People also enjoy boxing, soccer, volleyball, basketball, and table tennis. Men like to hunt. For leisure time, 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, people 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.

Education

The public school system provides free and compulsory education for eight years, beginning at age seven. Students spend two additional years in either general education or vocational training. Educational standards tend to be low, but the government works to provide a basic education even in remote areas.