

**Commentary...**

# Heritage and change in Ulaanbaatar

By Lynn Woodward  
Correspondent

It doesn't take long to drive between the vast calm of the country landscape of Mongolia to the sharp clamor of the capital city, but the difference feels like culture shock.

More and more Mongolians are moving to their cities, leaving behind nomadic life for promises from the Westernized world.

Gana was born in the western part of Mongolia in the early 1980s. She now works for Stone Horse Expeditions, and I was fortunate to have her and a colleague, Davaa, drive for me there. Her parents moved her family to Derkhan City in 1995, within a few years of the fall of the Soviet Union when "everybody started searching for a way to live." She said they wanted better education for their kids, less isolation and "brain work" instead of physical labor.

Her parents' oft-repeated comment on communism was, "it's not the way people should live." And yet, she admitted, some aspects of Mongolians' lives were better under socialist rule.

The brutal Manchu domination of the 18th and 19th centuries and then Soviet control are fresh in Mongolians' memories. And it feels like Mongolia is pushing away this recent history as it strives to reconstruct its own identity.

Gana said, "If you change the words, you can change the culture." This has happened in Mongolia, both subliminally and literally. Mongolian script, a beautiful vertical script developed under order of Chinggis Khaan in 1204, was used until the late 1930s when Stalinist repression in Mongolia destroyed nearly all the monasteries — which were also the country's education system — and exterminated tens of thousands of people, particularly Buddhist monks. Mongolian script was replaced with Cyrillic.

The most recent generation can use three alphabets to write their language. And 98 percent of the population is literate.

But the idealism of the 1990s has flagged and the young democracy is struggling to provide for its people. Their heritage is the mighty warrior and emperor Chinggis Khaan, and they are looking to him for guidance as they move into their own future.

On one drive, we stopped to admire a new statue of Chinggis Khaan on a horse.

It's impressive — 250 tons of steel, 130 feet high, formidable and cool. In the photo, right, each tourist on the crown of the horse is about half the size of one of the horse's ears.

You know his name as Genghis Khan, a brutal military leader whose lineage amassed the largest land empire in world history ... but you may not know that he also united the previously warring tribes of northeast Asia, putting many leaders in position according to merit instead of bloodlines. He decreed freedom of religion, outlawed kidnapping, and enacted laws that grew trade and forbade killing of ambassadors.

Today's Mongolia is six times the size of Oregon and has a human population of three million. Almost half of them live in the capital city, Ulaanbaatar ("UB" the locals call it). UB has three coal power plants. Too many cars. Tens of thousands of ger stoves burning coal for heat. Air pollution is a major health problem here.

Last year's animal census tallied just under 56 million livestock in the country, and a number of them live in the capital city, too. For the lack of fences and all the cattle, sheep, goats, dogs and horses wandering over the roads, I didn't see any roadside carcasses. Davaa told me, "if you kill an animal on



PHOTO BY LYNN WOODWARD

Built in 2008 of 250 tons of stainless steel, the Chinggis Khaan Equestrian Statue is 130 feet high; the world's largest equestrian statue. the road, something bad will happen to you."

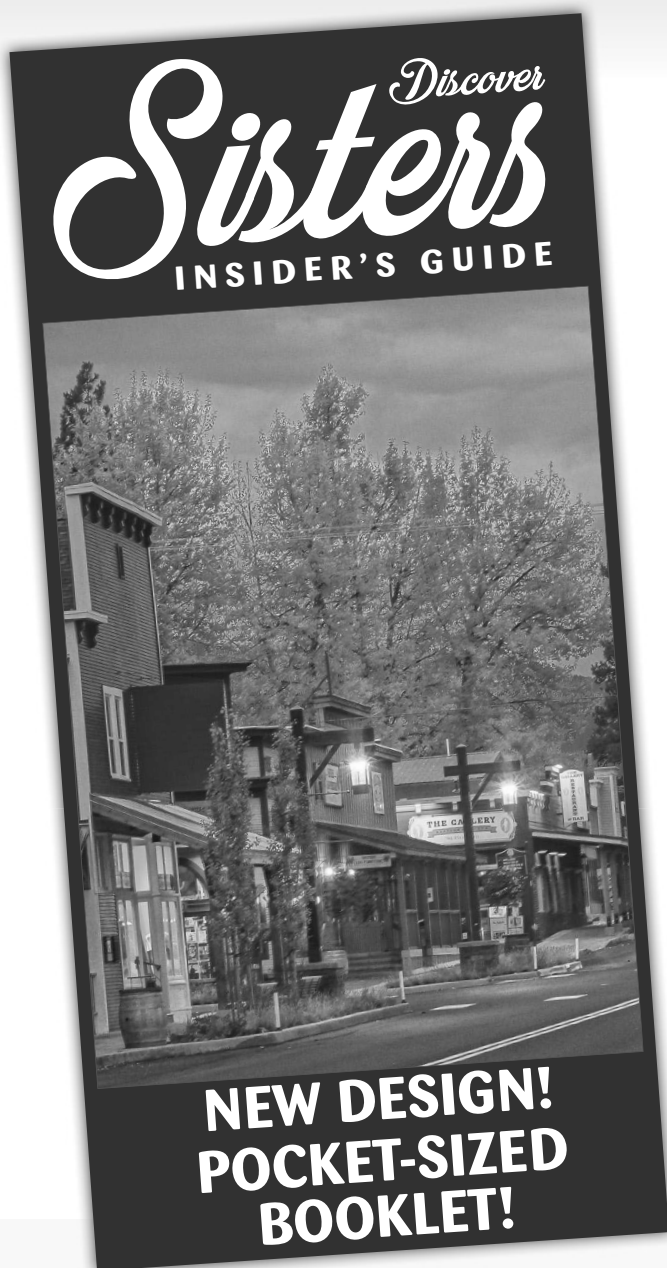
Ah, karma.

As we came into the outskirts of UB, we passed a large orange Buddha statue. It's where the dead rich Buddhists are cremated and placed in urns. For regular folks, the family and friends take the body to the country.

If they can't bury it, they leave the body for the wolves and vultures.

Just over half of Mongolians are Buddhist. The large atheist sector is a remnant of socialism. Shamanism, the oldest spiritual practice in Mongolia, is

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