

MONGOLIA

Mongolia today is changing rapidly with a mining boom and a fast growing economy. Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia's national capital has traffic jams and gleaming new hotels. In the countryside, nomads send text messages on their cell phones on horseback and watch TV powered by solar panels in their yurts (portable round felt tents called *ger*).

In 2010 Mongolia celebrated 20 Years of the Democratic Revolution; in 2011 Christians celebrated 20 Years of the Mongolian church. Foreign Christians are welcome to come and help this dynamic country develop and to work alongside Mongolian Christian brothers and sisters.

Population

- Capital: Ulaanbaatar
- Population: 2.7 million
- Density: 1.7 per square km
- 90.9% Mongolian
- 6.6% Turkic (mostly Kazakh)
- 2.5% Other (Chinese, Russian)

Religions

- Buddhism 35.3%
- Shamanism/ animism-nature worship 32.4%
- Non-religious/other 26.5%
- Muslim 4.1%
- Christian 1.7%

Language

The official Mongolian language is Khalkh Mongolian, a Ural-Altaic language unrelated to Chinese but related to Korean, Hungarian, Finnish and Turkish. English has been declared the official second language of Mongolia, and foreign English teachers are continually requested. In addition, Korean, Russian, Chinese and Japanese are widely taught.

Geography

Mongolia is almost the size of Western Europe. It is completely landlocked, with Russia in the north and China in the south. There are mountains in the north and west, larch and taiga forests in the north, the Gobi Desert in the south and steppes (grassy plains with rolling hills) in the central part of the country.

Climate

The climate is extremely harsh. Temperatures range from -40°F (-40°C) to 104°F (40°C). Winters are very long, lasting from October to April.

History

In 1206, gifted chieftain Temujin from a small tribe called "Mongol" conquered and united warring tribes and was proclaimed "Genghis Khan," meaning "king of vastness." He saw himself as appointed by heaven to subdue the nations. He and his descendants created the world's largest continuous land empire in history, from the Pacific Ocean to Central Europe. Ruling over China, his grandson Kublai Khan established the Yuan Dynasty and moved China's capital from Xi'an to Beijing. Trade and the exchange of ideas was increased between Asia and Europe, and historians now view the *Pax Mongolica* as a forerunner to Christopher Columbus and globalization.

In 1368 the Ming Dynasty was established, with Han Chinese chasing their former Mongolian rulers back to the north. To prevent the Mongolians from rising up again, the Ming Dynasty encouraged Tibetan Buddhist monks to convert Mongolia to Tibetan Buddhism to pacify the once great warrior people. During the Manchurian Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) Mongolia became absorbed into Chinese territory. The southern Mongolians, closer to Beijing, were more loyal to the Qing rulers and their land became known as "Inner Mongolia," while rebellious Mongolian leaders to the north ruled over what came to be known as "Outer Mongolia."

"Outer Mongolia" declared independence from China at the deposing of China's last emperor in 1911. But *de facto* independence came in 1921 with the leadership of a young Mongolian nationalist D. Sukhbaatar, with great help of the Soviet Union. The Mongolian People's Republic was announced in 1924. The city of Urga was renamed "Ulaan Baatar" or "Red Hero," and became the capital city.

Soviet-style communism dramatically changed Mongolian life, bringing nearly 100 percent literacy, education, hospitals and agriculture. However, Stalinist purges also occurred and people were fearful of neighbor spying against neighbor.

Influenced by sweeping changes in Eastern Europe, young Mongolians began demonstrating in Ulaanbaatar in December 1989, and thousands demonstrated for political change in 1990. Communist one-party rule was renounced later that year and a multi-party democracy was instituted with a new constitution in January 1992. Today there are elections in which the democratic coalitions compete with the Mongolian People's Party (formerly the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party, or, Communist Party). Power shifts back and forth between the different parties.

Contemporary Mongolia

Mongolia is traditionally home to nomadic herding peoples, but due to desertification and harsh winters (and the resulting in widespread livestock deaths), many have migrated to Ulaanbaatar. With 1.2 million, about a third of Mongolia's population, Ulaanbaatar is reeling with change. Some nomadic herders are better off than their town cousins, who migrate to Ulaanbaatar and other towns in search of work in the hope of a better life. Those who cannot find adequate work in Ulaanbaatar seek to work in South Korea and other countries.



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With a mining boom and a nascent IT sector, some Mongolians are doing quite well. There is a construction boom, with many of the laborers imported from China



and even North Korea.

Foreign mining companies compete for Mongolia's vast deposits of copper, gold, coal and other mineral deposits. Foreign businessmen dine with Mongolian businessmen and officials in classy restaurants and cafes. Many Mongolians fear that Mongolia will have the "resource curse" as with some African nations, with foreign companies taking most of the wealth and increasing the wealth divide between rich and poor. Others welcome Mongolia's new wealth. Mongolia's rapid changes are welcomed as well as loathed, sparking anti-foreign sentiment in some quarters.

Agriculture has been developing in Mongolia, and the traditional Mongolian diet of meat and milk has been changing. Mongolians are learning that vegetables are good for health. Sea buckhorn, a berry extremely high in vitamin C, makes a good

health drink, and its oil is sought after, not only for health, but also for its use by foreign cosmetic companies.

Three worldviews live side-by-side in Mongolia: pre-modernism of sacred cairns on mountain tops, with shamans beating drums in esoteric rituals and Tibetan chanting Buddhist lamas; modernism with square Soviet-era buildings, atheists and jaded ex-communists who used to look forward to a workers' paradise; and post-modernism, including visiting Indian gurus and new age spiritualities, in which many seek to get rich.

Religion and Christianity

The most famous Mongolian in history, Genghis Khan, worshiped the Eternal Blue Sky and consulted shamans, but also had Buddhists, Christians and Muslims in his court. Christianity had entered Mongolian lands as early possibly as the 7th century and certainly in the 10th century with the Kherait tribe converting to Syriac (Nestorian) Christianity.

Kublai Khan, whose mother was a Christian, was visited by Catholics (probably by Marco Polo) and was attracted to Christianity. He wrote a letter to the Roman Pope to send 100 teachers of the Christian faith, but only two were sent, and they turned back. Kublai Khan later converted to Tibetan Buddhism, although he continued Genghis Khan's tolerance of different religious faiths.

By the turn of the 20th Century, most Mongolians were committed to Tibetan Buddhism. Very few Mongolians were Christians. The Communist Revolution of 1921 resulted in purges in the 1930s and 1940s. While Stalin purged the Orthodox Church of Russia, Mongolian Marshall Choibalsan ordered the killing of 150,000 Buddhist lamas. Almost all monasteries were destroyed.

In 1990 Mongolia began to open up to the world beyond the Soviet bloc. There were less than 10 known Christians, with some having heard the gospel as students in underground meetings in East Germany and other countries. In 1990 a Mongolian New Testament based on the Good News Bible was published. Many came to faith through this book, as well as watching the *Jesus* film, which was shown in Mongolian cinemas.

Contrary to what has been portrayed

in Western media, most missionaries that have entered Mongolia are not American, but Korean. Half of missionaries to Mongolia have come from South Korea, with others having come from approximately 30 nations.

After seven decades of sterile atheism with the State being god-like, many Mongolians have returned to Buddhism, which has been re-established as Mongolia's national religion. There are now about 200 monasteries and more than 3,000 lamas.

Since the early 1990s, Christianity has spread rapidly. Union Bible Training Center (now Union Bible Theological College) was established in 1995, bringing together a few training schools, emerging Mongolian Christian leaders and missionaries from different countries in 1995. The Mongolian Evangelical Alliance (MEA), which represents most churches, was founded in 1999. The first complete Bible was published in 2000, and Mongolian churches and mission agencies began to send out missionaries to countries near and far.

In 2012 the Christian population is more than 50,000, with approximately 400 churches. Many church members are young people, first-generation Christians. Yet there are also young Christian families and grandparents who bring wholeness to the churches.

Christianity has become more acceptable, but there are still pockets of social discrimination. Recently in the resurgence of Mongolian nationalism, shamanism has been growing by leaps and bounds, even to the alarm of some officials. There is an urgent need for trained church leaders, pastors and teachers. The church needs to mature on a solid biblical foundation.

OMF International works under the auspices of an intra-agency called Joint Christian Services (JCS International) in development, agriculture, education, alcohol abuse reduction, medical training and in small business development. JCS' vision is "to see Mongolians building and restoring families, churches and communities."

HOW TO PRAY

- Ask God to grant continued religious freedom in Mongolia.
- Pray that families would be healthy and free from addiction to vodka.
- Pray for workers who can reach out to the less reached in Mongolia, including Kazakhs and nomadic herders.
- Ask God to bless local Christians and Christian workers from many nations with continued unity in Christ.
- Intercede for Mongolian missionaries as they go out to other Asian nations.