

Effects of Rapid Urbanisation on Youth in Mongolia

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Nomadic Mongol tribes have lived on the unforgiving steppes of Central Asia for centuries. Seasonal migrations in search of the best pastures for livestock underpin the Mongols' nomadic lifestyle. Even today, one-third of all Mongolians are still nomadic herders living a lifestyle largely unchanged since the founding of the Mongol Empire in 1206. However, there has been a rapid increase in rural-urban migration in Mongolia since the democratic revolution of 1990. The capital city of Ulaanbaatar has doubled its population in the last 20 years, with most of the new residents being youth. This surge of urban youth has brought with it *opportunities*, but also numerous *challenges*.

Mongolia is the 19th largest country in the world by geographic size but, with a population of only three million, it also holds the distinction of being the least densely populated. Half the entire population lives in one city, Ulaanbaatar. Over the last 15 years, an annual average of roughly 30,000 residents have migrated from rural areas to Ulaanbaatar. To put this into perspective, the second largest city in Mongolia has a population of 90,000. Most of the migrants are youth seeking greater educational and job opportunities since the vast majority of educational institutions and employers are located in Ulaanbaatar.

Urbanisation as a Seismic Shift

Urbanisation has fundamentally altered the core identity and mentality of Mongolians. Mongols have a rich and proud history of pastoral nomadism. The nomadic tribes of the eastern Eurasian Steppes, ancestors of modern day Mongols, roamed for centuries on the edges of sedentary civilisations, engaging in both trade and conflict. Eight centuries ago under the leadership of the great Chinggis Khaan (Genghis Khan), the Mongol Empire unified these scattered tribes and set out on a conquest that would create the largest contiguous land empire in history. Large herds of horses allowed the Mongol army to cover wide stretches of territory in a short time span, and the constant movement of camps made them an unpredictable and near-unbeatable foe. The earliest instances of permanent settlement occurred in the 18th century, when

the Mongols established the capital city of Ikh Khuree, which literally translates as “Great Settlement”. However, a larger than marginal portion of the population became sedentary only in the early-to-mid 20th century, when Ulaanbaatar was established with the help of Soviet planning and infrastructure.

By 1990, more than a quarter of the total population lived in Ulaanbaatar. Since then, Ulaanbaatar has grown at an even faster rate, becoming essentially the sole centre of political and commercial activity in Mongolia. For the vast majority, sedentary life in cities such as Ulaanbaatar has existed at most for two generations, so almost all urban dwellers still have a strong connection to rural life.

Rural Versus Urban Mentality

Nomadic herders are fiercely independent people. Because small numbers of herders were dispersed across large swaths of land, it was practically impossible for even the strongest ruler or strictest regime to maintain surveillance over the daily life of herders. This allowed unabated freedom to speak, think and act in their domains.

This individualism, with the concept of *self* perceived as an independent and autonomous entity, is perhaps something that evolved among nomadic herders out of the necessity of self-preservation. On the merciless steppes, the ability to make decisions swiftly and unilaterally is a matter of survival and therefore of great benefit. In rural areas with extremely low population density, the herder’s actions rarely affect anyone besides themselves and their immediate family, so negative consequences to others are minimal.

In this environment, the sense of competition is low and desire for social interaction is high. Herders know that their success does not preclude the success of others since the small number of herders does not generate heated competition over resources. The low density also means that herders can sometimes go for days without seeing anyone else besides their family. This creates a yearning for social interaction and exchange of information. For example, in the Gobi desert, herders place food on the table and leave the door unlocked if they are leaving home in the hope that passers-by will feel welcome and stay until the homeowner returns. This is testament to the herders’ faith in the honesty and trustworthiness of even complete strangers.

This strong-rooted, independent mentality so ingrained in the Mongolian conscience conflicts with the urban way of life in settings such as Ulaanbaatar. Cities require that people learn to successfully cohabit with others. Individuals must

consider the impact of their actions on the collective since they have the potential to affect large numbers of people. The concept of *self* in an urban context is embedded in an understanding of the interdependence of the collective. Urban life therefore entails abiding by various written and unwritten rules, regulations and norms. This serves to establish a community based on trust, camaraderie and a unified vision for the future.

The sense of community is weak in Ulaanbaatar. In fact, the word community does not even exist in the Mongolian language. Rural migrants come to Ulaanbaatar with their *ger* (round, portable nomadic housing) and settle anywhere there is space on the outskirts of the city. This has led to the formation of the “ger districts”, semi-formal, unplanned settlements, where 60 percent of Ulaanbaatar residents live. This means a large portion of Ulaanbaatar residents still have not relinquished an important artifact of their nomadic heritage, hence the pervasive influence of nomadic history on contemporary life.

In addition, there is a severe lack of social and physical infrastructure such as neighborhood associations and community centres, which limits the social interactions vital for building a strong sense of community. So while Ulaanbaatar residents live in a densely populated city they are not part of a collective identity, remaining as loosely connected *individuals* inhabiting a common geographic area.

Adapting to a Different Value System

The process of moving from a rural area to a large city is transformative. Initial shock arises from the stark differences between nomadic life and the hallmarks of city life—high-rise office buildings, bright LED lights on billboard advertisements, traffic congestion and pollution. Soon enough, the less obvious differences come to light as it becomes clear that the value system and way of life in rural Mongolia do not fit with a metropolis.

Unlike many older Mongolians who resist change, migrant youth who are new to the urban context strive to adapt quickly to their changed surroundings. These youths do not yet possess a worldview steeped in Mongolian nomadic culture, allowing them to adapt to this “modern” context. But these boys and girls are used to seeing livestock outnumber humans 40:1, so learning to live in a large urban setting can be daunting.

Growing up, children of nomadic herding families learn to value minimalism and self-sufficiency. A lifestyle that entails constant movement in search of the best pasture inevitably requires ultra-portability. Nomads own very few possessions, learning to keep the bare minimum of belongings. They are also completely self-sufficient, deriving all the necessities—food, clothes and transportation—from their livestock so money is not needed on a daily basis.

In the city, youth are exposed to a markedly different value system. Sedentary life does not require portability and minimalism so the availability of space is the only restriction on the accumulation of possessions. Youth migrants are exposed to endless choices in the city. The drive towards consumerism is fueled largely by access to traditional and social media. Another adjustment is the necessity for money on a daily basis, as *everything* requires money. Unfortunately, unlike livestock, money does not regenerate itself. Instead, youth must learn to earn money in a competitive environment with insufficient employment opportunities. Having not received a high quality education in rural areas, migrant youth have an incentive to do anything to gain comparative advantage over others.

Role Models for Urban Youth

Newly urbanised youth naturally seek role models to help define their worldview and identity. In a context where doing anything requires money, and consumerism controls behaviour, the notion of success becomes entwined with the concept of wealth.

In rural areas, a wise elder usually functions as a role model, providing all sorts of guidance to youth. This elderly role model commands respect because of success achieved over many years. For herders, success is measured by the size of their herd rather than money or possessions. Owning enough livestock is the herders' only guarantee of survival. They know that their entire herd can perish if they are not prepared for the long, harsh winters on the steppes. Herders value hard work, attention to detail and constant preparation, knowing their livelihood depends on these traits, which must persist over many years to accumulate a large herd.

Over 1,000 head of livestock is a key milestone in Mongolian nomadic culture, guaranteeing livelihood and enhancing the herder's resilience. A large herd provides the best chance to survive a *dzud*, a harsh winter with extreme cold temperatures (commonly dipping below -40°C) that can kill large numbers of livestock. For most herders, maintaining a large herd is the end goal, not a means to something else. Youth in these circumstances learn to value the traits that ensure this outcome.

Success is measured differently in Ulaanbaatar however. The recent mining boom has injected a flood of wealth and resources into the economy. Suddenly, the wealthiest are no longer just comparing themselves to (and competing with) those in Ulaanbaatar, but with their wealthy counterparts in New York and London. Unlike rural values, wealth in the city is not necessarily perceived as the end goal but a means to achieve something more—power, influence and material possessions. Accumulation of wealth becomes the primary focus, while the traits that make one wealthy are seen as secondary. Urban youth look up to wealthy individuals without discerning the path that led them there.

The prevalent rural individualistic mentality does not place importance on the considerations of impact on the collective. Adapting to a competitive landscape that values money above all else coupled with the lack of significance placed on traditionally important traits creates a setting that fosters a dangerously ruthless and self-serving mindset amongst urban youth.

Unlocking Opportunities

“Wealth above all else” has become the slogan for Mongolia’s urban youth. That this mantra has captured the popular imagination is especially harmful in a young country where 70 percent of the population is under 35 years old. Landlocked and sandwiched between two giant neighbors, Mongolia’s small population is perceived by most people as a distinct disadvantage. But it may instead be a blessing in disguise. Unlike its larger counterparts, Mongolia has the capacity to reinvent itself in a short period of time. A young, technologically savvy and educated citizenry, boasting a 98 percent literacy rate, has the necessary preconditions for a quick turnaround. If the right steps are taken, a complete transformation of mentality can potentially occur within a span of a few years rather than over many generations.

There is an old Mongolian parable found in *The Secret History of the Mongols*—our oldest and most important literary work chronicling the life of Chinggis Khan—that is perhaps even more relevant today. In the parable, Alun Gua, a mythical ancestor of the Mongols, gives each of her five sons an arrow to break, which they all do easily. Then she bundles five arrows together and asks her sons, one-by-one, to break it. No-one is able to. This story demonstrates the strength of a unified, collaborative and supportive society. But how do we establish such a society when selfishness is so regularly rewarded? This seems to be *the* question of our time. Perhaps we need to go back to our roots and re-learn what we have forgotten.