



Mongolia Goes High Tech

Ian Watson

ULAANBAATAR, MONGOLIA

Etienne Monlouis works on the fourth floor of the post office building in Ulaanbaatar (Ulan Bator), in an office that looks entirely out of place in an ex-Soviet satellite as poor as Mongolia. Computer screens flicker under fluorescent light, rows of three-ring technical reference manuals line the shelves, and behind glass partitions rise banks of sophisticated French telecommunications equipment. Monlouis is the technician in charge of installing Ulaanbaatar's new central telephone system, built by the French firm Alcatel under contract to the Mongolian government. When completed early this fall, it will allow subscribers to dial direct from Mongolia to any other country in the world at market rates—for the first time. It will also more than triple the capacity of Ulaanbaatar's noisy, Russian-designed telephone network. And through satellite links with Moscow and Hong Kong, it will allow Mongolians to hook into the increasingly popular international e-mail (electronic mail) network.

It's at first surprising to see such state-of-the-art equipment in a country which became Communist as early as 1924; which for nearly seventy years was so closely allied with the Soviet Union that it was often half-jokingly called its sixteenth republic; and which suffers from its obscure geographical position as sandwich filling between Russia and China.

But in fact technological projects like these are among the most concrete symbols of Mongolia's current swing towards democracy. A few blocks across town at the Mongolian State University, a group of linguists and computer experts met in mid-August to discuss the problems of desktop publishing in the Mongolian script. The government has decreed that the traditional script, which was replaced by a clumsy Russian-imposed Cyrillic writing system in 1941, will return officially by 1994. School children are already being taught the revived script, which leaves Mongolian publishers and bureaucrats scrambling to print new textbooks. Since Mongolian is written from top to bottom like Chinese, but with connected letters as in Arabic, this is a unique and difficult task for programmers. The workshop was aimed at encouraging Mongolian specialists to define a standard set of rules for the script for software designers to follow. The California-based Unicode consortium of major computer companies, which is working to replace the 256-character ASCII code used in most computers now with a 65,000-character encoding covering all the world's scripts, wants to include Mongolian.

Because high technology has seemingly become a necessary prerequisite for democracy, ensuring that countries like

Mongolia can telephone, fax, e-mail, and publish in the free world is imperative. The role of the press in the Tiananmen Square events of 1989 and the unbroken e-mail contact between Moscow and the West during the August 1991 coup are just two other examples of communications technology providing local democratic movements with a lifeline to the free world. For businessmen, scholars and tourists, the same systems ensure the free flow of information necessary to manage product distribution, share scientific data or reconfirm a plane ticket.

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But it is probably deceptive to believe that even a comparatively small and underpopulated country like Mongolia can be quickly "organized" from the top down with a planeload of satellites, modems and fiber-optic cable. Even Etienne Monlouis says that his greatest problem while installing the new Ulaanbaatar telephone system has not been bureaucratic intransigence or transport hassles, but rather finding food for himself. Basic staples are strictly rationed in the city. Most foreigners wind up eating in the restaurant at the Hotel Ulaanbaatar—where dinner costs less than 200 tugriks (80 cents)—but soon grow weary of the unvarying menu of tough meat and soggy cabbage. Meanwhile, power shortages force a rotating system of blackouts which alternate hourly through Ulaanbaatar's several districts. The Mongolian airline, MIAT, cannot find enough fuel to power its domestic fleet, which is on the brink of mortal dilapidation anyway. The country has virtually no paved highways and only one main train line. In summer, many *aimags* (country districts) are periodically quarantined during outbreaks of bubonic plague, which is endemic to Mongolia's population of marmots, a type of rodent which Mongolians find tasty. In the cities, unemployment is rising, while the tugrik has lost 85 percent of its value over the past year.

It's also unclear how much of Mongolia really wants to be "organized" Western-style. Seventy years of Soviet-enforced communism have grafted a socialized apartment-block lifestyle into Ulaanbaatar and a few smaller cities, but have left traditional Mongolian life substantially intact. Even in Ulaanbaatar, most of the population lives in suburbs of yurts—white, round, portable felt tents on a wooden frame with a smokehole on top. And well over half of Mongolia's 2.2 million people lead a semi-nomadic life in their yurts in the countryside. Mongolian country-dwellers have traditionally been comparatively self-sufficient. They measure their wealth in livestock and have little use for telephones, computers or a cash-based economy.

Tourists, however, have a way of changing peoples' attitudes towards money, and Mongolia has gotten trains full of them

this summer. Although leftover Communist bureaucracy still makes individual tourist visas hard to get, many travelers are willing to pay for a group tour to visit a country so closed for so long. Thus Monkey Business, a Hong Kong-based company that has cornered the market for tickets on the Trans-Siberian Express, has been doing a booming business selling Beijing-Moscow tickets, with a six-day group stopover in Ulaanbaatar, to European tourists. The reason behind this is not so much Monkey Business's love of Mongolia, but rather that tickets on the two trains a week that go directly from Beijing to Moscow are still priced way below market value, and are correspondingly overlooked.

Mongolia seems to be welcoming not only technology and tourists, but also intellectual, religious and economic freedom. The week before the script workshop, the international association of Mongolia scholars met for its regular conference, held every five years. Unlike the 1987 conference, which one participant criticized as an ideological showpiece, this year's meeting included discussion of such formerly subversive subjects as the legacy of thirteenth century Mongol ruler Genghis Khan, and the mass destruction of Buddhist monasteries and slaughter of monks during purges from the 1930s to the 1950s. One of the leaders of the campaign to restore the Mongolian script can again keep a picture of the Dalai Lama on the orange bookshelves against the north wall of his *yurt* (where Mongolians traditionally place treasured possessions). The Gandan Monastery in central Ulaanbaatar is under renovation. The latest issue of the *Mongol Messenger*, Ulaanbaatar's English-language newspaper, printed an exposé

of Russian interference in Mongolia's secret service. And free-market trade (particularly in consumer goods imported from China) is growing.

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The great paradox of Mongolian reform is that it is taking place with the apparent approval of the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party (MPRP), the same Communists who have been in power since 1924. In fact, the MPRP swept the country's first free elections this summer. Part of the reason may be that as in Albania (another former Communist country with a small, isolated, conservative, and overwhelmingly rural population), Mongolia's fragmented democratic opposition parties have been unable to win enough support outside urban areas to carry an election. At the same time, the Communists have been more progressive and more willing to support democratic reforms that give people hope for the future than their counterparts in Albania were in 1991. Yet the opposition parties have recently declared their intent to pool their strength in hopes of better results in the next election—an encouraging development, and one that may eventually combine with Mongolia's natural resources, splendid scenery, well-educated populace, strategic location and outside good will, to steer the country into eventual stability and prosperity. ■ FR

Ian Watson is currently studying in Beijing.

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