**Article: The Horse in Mongolian Culture**

Did you know that horses were domesticated well after cattle and dogs? And that they were used in harness long before humans rode on their backs? Some scientists think horses were first domesticated in Mesopotamia and China around 4,000 B.C. Others believe that the Scythians, who lived on the treeless steppes of southern Russia, first tamed the horse around 3,000 B.C. Its use then spread rapidly through Asia and Europe.

The importance of the horse in exploration, agriculture, war, and sports is documented in ancient art and mythology, from the Scythians and Assyrians through Greek and Roman cultures and on to the present day. By making people more mobile, the domesticated horse radically changed many cultures. Nomadic caravans traveling via horse reached the foothills of the Asian mountains, and on northward and eastward into Asia. Whole villages learned to ride. This way of life was centered around horses, which were used as mounts, pack animals, and as a source of food (both for horsemeat and mare's milk).

**An Asian Empire Won on Horseback**

Nowhere are horses more central to daily life than in Mongolia. Mongolia is known as the land of the horse, and Mongols have a reputation for being the best horsemen on Earth. “It is not possible to imagine Mongolian history without horses,” says J. Tserendeleg, president of the Mongolian Association for Conservation of Nature and the Environment. “I think it is not possible to view the future of Mongolia without horses as well. Mongolia is not Mongolia without horses.”

Over the centuries, using chariots as well as mounted warriors, nomadic armies of Mongols struck south of the Great Wall and into the heart of Europe. The legendary thirteenth-century warrior Genghis Khan established an empire that extended from Hungary to Korea and from Siberia to Tibet. Known in Europe as “Hell’s Horsemen,” Mongols could ride up to 80 miles a day, across deserts and mountains considered—until the arrival of these mounted armies—to be impassable.

The administration and consolidation of the vast Mongol empire was closely tied to the use of the horse. Genghis Khan established an imperial circuit of communications similar to the famous Pony Express of the American West. Genghis Khan’s system had way stations for post riders established in strategic locations across the empire. This system enabled commands to be rapidly dispersed and news to be brought swiftly to the capital. When Mongol leaders assembled, their horses were hitched in established locations to facilitate communication and to avoid quarrels over lost and stolen horses.

The horse also made it possible for the Mongols to evade intruders and retain their independence. They finally conquered the Chinese empire, but after Genghis Khan’s grandson Khublai Khan ascended China's dragon throne, he lost control of strategic horse-breeding areas of the steppes. His decline began when he could no longer mobilize and unify the mounted nomadic warriors as his grandfather, uncle, and brother had.

**An Important Part of Daily Life**

Even in the twenty-first century, Mongolia remains a horse-based culture and retains its pastoral traditions. Its 2.4 million people are semi-nomadic and support themselves primarily by breeding five domestic species. These are invariably spoken of in a set order: horses, cattle (including yaks), camels, sheep, and goats. The horse, which is used for travel, herding, hunting, and sport, is the most prized. In the words of a herder who lives outside Ulaanbataar, Mongolia's capital, “We Mongols respect horse as our companion of night and day. The horse is the source of joy and pride of a Mongolian herder. And we are nothing without our horses.”

Beyond Ulaanbataar, the horse is still the main means of transportation. Mongolian children learn to ride when they are as young as three years old. Horse racing is a favorite sport, and young children are often the jockeys, as the Mongolians believe the race tests the horse's ability, not the rider's. Mongols have a large vocabulary of horse-related terms, and believe that one rides to heaven on a horse.

**A Symbol of National Pride Returns**

While all horses are important to the Mongolians, takhi—the wild horses that once roamed the Eurasian steppe in huge herds—are especially so. “Takhi” means “spirit” or “spiritual” in Mongolian, and Mongolians consider the species a symbol of their national heritage. “We have a saying, ‘as fast as takhi,’ and we, as herders, all have a dream of having our mares mate with takhi to have a breed of fast horses—but they always got away from our catching poles,” says the herder.

The takhi went extinct in the wild in the late 1960s, but several programs have since reintroduced the wild horse to the Mongolian steppe and the Gobi Desert. In this country where horses are equated with freedom and well-being, the takhi’s return is profoundly meaningful. In the words of J. Tserendeleg, “The history of Mongols is closely related to horses and . . . takhi were and are still worshipped by Mongols.”