

Light and shade of the only nomads' nation in the world

Mongolia, the sky is always blue

The ancient homeland of Genghis Khan is now one of the few true democracies in Asia.

Wedged between Russia and China, in crisis by a terrible winter and endemic poverty, Mongolia is an apart country, that has much to say to the West

"Not so far". The answer of the guide is always the same, so the distances do not really matter and sooner or later you arrive. Mind makes the difference, not the miles. If you start to think that it is difficult to see other cars around, that there are no signs, not even true roads, humans are scarce, there are hardly any houses, you could also become anxious.

Mongolia is a large open space. An empty space. And the land, the land so disputed elsewhere, the exploited, bounded, stolen, sold, waged land, here is free, it is for everyone and no one. Perhaps the imaginary "Wild West" is trivial, but really you would think of American Great Plains before the conquest of palefaces. Just put yaks (which in practice are cows with the fur) instead of bisons, and Mongols on horseback instead of redskins, and that's it. Indians' tent here is called "gher", is round and white, it is built in half an hour on the wooden structure, with felt to line, and the waterproof white cloth tied around to cover.

In the middle, inevitably, a wood stove. *Ghers*, isolated or grouped, are small white islands in a green sea, with a wisp of smoke to signal an otherwise invisible human presence. No, the anxiety does not come from this place. Maybe because summer vibrates with cicadas and crickets, with flowers and butterflies, and white and very severe winter (the last one as it has not happened for years) seems so distant, but all you feel is a sense of peace and freedom. A strangely not too exotic feeling, because many *ghers* have solar panels and satellite dish, Mongolian nomads use mobile phones, and it is not really hard to meet people who speak a little English, or they are, by the way, accustomed to foreigners, or Japanese bikers groups or lonely mountain European riders.

It is all Mongolia, intended as a society and a state, to be not so far, as it is truly unique in the world: the modern world no longer conceive nomadism, while here it is everyday life or nearly, for a half of population (very low: less than three million people, of which over one million lives in the capital Ulan Bator, in a country that is five times larger than Italy).

A hard life. A life that, after certain cold seasons like the last, can become impossible, and it fuels the constant exodus of Mongols from these "pastures of heaven" to cities, or rather the city, Ulan Bator, which has more than doubled its inhabitants in the last two swirling decades, that followed the end of communist rule in 1990-1992.

Mongols have a strange relationship with their history, it is better understood by visiting the magnificent National Museum in Ulan Bator. A harmonious relation (perhaps due to the strong Buddhist imprint) and proud (Mongols were a people of warriors, and they seem to have full awareness of it), which could be summed up with a slogan: we do not reject anything from the past. There is the man of the caves, the Bronze Age, because this land has been inhabited all along, and the magnificent, huge cave paintings of the first floor, with their hunting scenes, witness it very well. After all, bows and arrows, furs and sledges, tents and reindeers, shamans and amulets are still in the Mongolian life, and certainly not to please the tourists. You can feel the fear that shamans instill in young people born even in the eighties, with their iPods and rock music. There are no great rips between reality and magic, between faith and superstition, between history and legend, and even between different cultures and different ethnic backgrounds, or between different political ideologies.

Mongolia absorbed the whole of Asia, if not the world: the idea of the *limes*, the insurmountable border, does not belong to the "Land of Blue Sky".

Empires came and went, fell apart and came together, subjugated people and were subdued by them.

From this land, when Mongols did not yet exist, Huns left. Just those of Attila, the Scourge of God. The principle remained the same: few against many, always in minority, yet (almost) invincible, with the horses and the courage, the incredible ability to resist and ruthless determination. After Huns, who already scampered from Korea to Mediterranean shores, Turks came, or rather, an ethnic group having reference to Turkish stock. And after Turks, Mongols, "the sons of golden light".

No one knows for sure how these people were born, tied somehow by history and geography of the first two, Turks and Huns: we might as well mention the legend telling that the founder was originated from the coupling of a blue wolf and a tawny hind (the blue and red are the national colors, but should represent the sky and fire) on the shores of Lake Baikal (the geographic data seems certain: today, however, the lake belongs to Russia), in the Middle Ages. First Mongols were divided into fratricidal quarrels, until, in 1162, a boy named Temujin was born. "Do not trouble a puppy: it could become a tiger" (from the movie "Mongol"): the small Temujin survived everything, who wanted to enslave, who wanted to kill him. He had the audacity of the elect, he was a leader beloved by his warriors, he was fierce against his enemies, but he could be wise, generous and farsighted. Finally he adopted a true alphabet for Mongolian language, unified his nation, and then he went to the conquest of other more and more vast lands, although the maximum expansion of Mongol empire was reached after his death, which was almost contemporary to that of St. Francis of Assisi (1227).

The greatest empire of the world, as it was rightly defined, extending for at least seven time zones from east to west (from the Sea of Japan to Poland), went south to New Delhi and north to Moscow. To hold it together, more than military force, it was a system of recognized rules, accepted by people who were subjected to them without a fight: Genghis Khan allowed religious freedom, absolutely assured safe-conduct of ambassadors (for someone he was the creator of modern diplomacy), guaranteed low taxes, especially to the merchants, organizing huge free trade area, as we would say today, with all the benefits.

It was the smallness of his heirs to dismantle the empire, and to relegate, slowly but surely, Mongolian people to a subordinate role, increasingly dominated vassal of China's Manchu dynasty, who were more akin to Mongols than the Chinese.

The "modern" fate of Mongolia was written: to get rid of Chinese giant, you must agree with Russian giant.

The aspiration to independence of Mongols never fails, just waiting for the chance to escape the yoke of the Celestial Empire, more and more decadent.

The opportunity comes when in China the famous Last Emperor is dethroned and the Republic proclaimed in 1911.

They are turbulent years, the first decades of the twentieth century: the Western Belle Epoque set down leaving world wars and revolutions, planetary upheavals not yet completely settled. Mongolia, which ipso facto proclaims its independence from China in 1911, gathers around the Buddhist faith, by appointing the religious leader head of state.

The nation that once belonged to Genghis Khan is going to be a monks kingdom like Tibet. But the Chinese are not in, and as soon as they reorganize they invade again the Land of Blue Sky (1915 - 1919).

To get rid of the Chinese, they need the help of Russians. But in Moscow the October Revolution has broken, and Russians are facing a bloody civil war between the red Bolsheviks and the white aristocrats. A chapter of this war takes place in Mongolia.

To drive out the Chinese, early White Russians arrive, led by "Mad Baron" Roman von Ungern-Sternberg, a German name, but Russian nationality, a ferocious and psychopathic leader, who felt Genghis Khan's heir and wanted to found a new Mongolian Buddhist empire. The monks who welcomed him as a liberator soon understood they were dealing with a criminal adventurer. To return independence to Mongolia, they needed the Communists and the newborn Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party (MPRP), the first political party of Mongolian history (and only for about seventy years), led by Sukhbat, hero of independence, who in the summer 1921 led

his men and the Bolsheviks allies to the final conquest of Ulan Bator (then still called Urga). The communist leader is still remembered as the father of the Fatherland, he looks proud down, from his equestrian statue, Genghis Khan, sat in front of Government House, in the great square that bears his name and it is the center of Mongolian capital.

Certainly, the advent of communism was not a walk, for Mongols, especially for Buddhist monks. In the early years, the party seemed to accept the clear supremacy of the Buddhist faith on the people: to get people in the meetings, to organize political life, they should always go to the appeals of lamas, the only ones to really be heard. But the strange symbiosis between Buddhists and the Communists could not survive the season of Stalinism: in the early thirties, in line with the Soviet purges, also Mongolia met its period of absolute terror; the monks and opponents were massacred in tens of thousands, their bodies dumped in mass graves, in crevices and in rivers, monasteries looted, burned, destroyed, piece by piece.

In any case, becoming a satellite country of the Soviet Union (the only one in the world at that time) allowed to Mongolia to repel the assault of the Japanese, on the eve of World War II.

And after the war, especially after the death of Stalin and Mongolian counterpart, Choibalsan, the country lived under an authoritarian but not brutal regime, establishing diplomatic relations with all other countries: Mongolia was a peaceful buffer state between the two giants of world communism, China and the Soviet Union.

The end of communist rule, remembered with the same pride of Bolshevik independence in the last room of the museum, was spectacular but not traumatic.

In the winter of 1989, an opposition movement called the Democratic Union was organized, led by a charismatic and respected university lecturer, Professor Zorig. In Sukhbatar square, where goats and camels still circulated and where there was not yet Genghis Khan monument, was filled with protesters, despite the freezing cold (temperature in Ulan Bator in the winter can drop to more than 30 degrees below zero) an end to one-party rule and a new constitution are demanded. The National Museum reminds those glorious days showing the thermos of hot tea that the protesters exchanged to stand the cold.

In practice, they celebrate the independence that led to communism and opposition to communism that led to freedom, without heroes.

The political transition was so smooth that Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party has not even changed its name, more unique than rare case, and it clearly won the first two free elections, those of 1990 and 1992. Then alternation came, (which is almost always a sign of good health for a democracy), with the Democratic Party.

Another positive sign comes from the tremendous level of popular participation: more than 90 percent of Mongolians voted in the first election, and even if subsequently the (physiological?) decreasing trend started, we are still at a good 80 per cent of voters. All accompanied by a lively independent press: there are 14 newspapers, with the highest spreads over 60 thousand copies, more than fifty periodicals and publications in eleven languages (English, Russian, Chinese and Japanese). Probably the success of the press is due in large part to good basic schooling of the population, a classic positive legacy of the communist regimes. This and other social point mean that Mongolia occupies a rank in human development certainly low (112) but not in proportion to GDP (for example: South Africa, with a wealth per capita four times bigger, is 13 positions down for human development).

Mongolia is the second country in the world after Ecuador, to have adhered to the UN Convention about the social, economic and environmental Rights, which allows every citizen or group to seek UN intervention if they rights are violated by the government (the third country to join was recently Zapatero Spain, the first among European countries).

Of course there are not only light in the history of Mongolian young democracy.

To begin with, there is a political murder to spot the two post-communist decades: in 1998 Professor Zorig, the leader of the democratic revolution of 1990, is killed under mysterious circumstances. The only defendant of murder, after being kidnapped by Mongolian intelligence in France (!), tortured and then released because sick, dies leaving the case unsolved, which is actually

buried.

Then there is a rampant cross corruption, also due to the rapid growth that characterized the country, with the onslaught of Russian mining companies in Mongolian huge resources (copper, especially, but also gold, iron, oil), China's one in the construction and infrastructure field (which the country absolutely needs), and the monopoly of Japanese and Korean cars and electronics.

The opening to foreign capital continues unceasing, now the big names of French and Italian fashion come, but the preference for Russians is indisputable, so that Mongolian language is still written with the Cyrillic alphabet, adopted at the time of Stalin. There is more distrust of the Chinese "because Mongols have in mind what happened in Tibet" says a Catholic missionary. The moral relaxation made more murky political life. In the last elections, the mutual accusations of fraud between the two major parties degenerated into violence, and the headquarters of the MPRP, the former Communists, were burnt. The increasingly bitter political fight between former communists and Democratic opposition finally "ended" in an associational embrace, a great coalition that sees 60 per cent of government posts to the MPRP (still the majority in the country) and 40 percent to Democrats.

Apparently, the strange coalition seems to work much better than previous governments, even if the distance between the ruling class and the people is remarkable, in some cases abysmal. A Mongolian *homo novus* is inevitably created, who loves to flaunt wealth, in clothing, cars and gadgets. He sits with friends in trendy clubs (there is something for every taste) and drinks whole bottles of whiskey or vodka. Showy attitudes, phones always on, and without European paranoia of smoking bans (apart from that, therefore, in all respects similar to us).

At the same time the women of the capital are beautiful, proud, attracted by very sexy clothing (with a real passion for stiletto heels). They look very emancipated, at least in attitude, because they walk alone or with friends, sit drinking and smoking in clubs, in the evening.

The fact is that Mongolia is one of the safest countries in the world with very low numbers of murders, rapes and real crime, and all this without even seeing the police around.

Poverty is endemic, but it never becomes misery, both for the support of relatives living outside the city (thanks to which the food requirement is still insured) and for social programs of government and NGOs, which assist outcasts, elder or abandoned children. But there is also a strong sense of Mongols' dignity, who, despite the hard impact with the modernity, maintained a strong identity, free from inferiority complexes.

Of course, the reality of deep Mongolia, beyond the great natural beauty, is quite prosaic, especially for women, who are charged with much of the work. But they also learn to ride a horse (basically, it is like for us cycling), they go to school as boys and they do not have at all submissive air. The problem, once again, relates especially to men, because the family is fragile, they separate very easily, and the usual cowards men do not look after their children. Alcoholism is remarkable and domestic violence is widespread. But eventually, not higher than in many other countries.

The problem of nomadism in Mongolia is mainly linked to the total uncertainty about the future, in a country that, paradoxically, would require immigrants to better utilize the huge availability of land. So far Mongols farmers have always made shift, but the government must find ways to sustain the economy of subsistence of these people, who live in harsh conditions (no running water, there is no bathroom that is not a latrine, electricity is rationed, and it is better not to get sick here). Seeing kids ride free for these immense plateaus certainly you do not regret the chaotic traffic of Ulan Bator. Actually, among all these animals (horses, yaks, goats, sheep, cows, camels) hides a treasure of Mongolia, its most prestigious product: cashmere.

And the interesting thing is that there is not only raw materials export (Mongolia is the world's largest producer), but also an increasingly sophisticated process, which can easily compete for quality, style and design, with European brands, to significantly lower prices. And in addition to cashmere, a great help comes from tourism (18 percent of GDP), although the facilities are almost nonexistent, and the level of improvisation is very high, but the tourist who comes here once gets used to let behind every idea of comfort, discovering oneself every day a little wilder (and inevitably a little dirtier).

Yes, Mongolia is as fascinating as hard to live. But it is nice to know that even in the chaos of the crazy New Millennium, there is a country like this that did not infringe and perhaps never will the solemn promise made by the U.S. government to Native Americans before entering the twentieth century (as recalled by the "Little Big Man" at the end of the film of the same name): "a land to live free and in peace, a land of their own, as long as grass grows, the wind blows and the sky is blue".

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