The Mongolia Society Brings a Bit of Mongolia to Indiana

by Peter K. Marsh

Bloomington, nestled among the corn fields and dairy farms of rural Indiana, is the unlikely home of The Mongolia Society, an internationally renowned, private, non-profit, and non-political organization devoted to the study of Mongolia's history, language and culture.

The Mongolia Society was born of a small but committed group interested in learning more about Mongolian peoples and cultures. Located deep in the heart of Asia, Mongolia is sandwiched between Russia and China and surrounded by high mountains, mountainous plains and rocky deserts.

But Mongolia's isolation has as much to do with international politics as it does the remote and rugged nature of the land. After the fabled conquests of Chinggis Khan and his Mongol hordes in the 13th and 14th centuries, Mongolia's neighbors, first the Manchus from China and then the Soviets, realized that it was in their best interests to neutralize and politically isolate the Mongols.

In the early years of the Cold War, the U.S. government funded several university-based projects and organizations to collect and publish information about the remote lands under Soviet rule, which included Mongolia. In 1961, a group of scholars at Columbia University working within these programs formed The Mongolia Society as a vehicle through which they could communicate their findings and ideas about Mongolia and Mongolian people throughout the world.

"Mongol" in traditional Mongolian vertical script, the logo of The Mongolia Society.

With the closing of the area studies programs at Columbia in 1963, The Mongolia Society moved to Indiana University, to make its home in connection with the newly founded Department of Uralic and Altaic Studies (now known as the Department of Central Eurasian Studies). The Indiana department quickly became a magnet for scholars of Mongolia and Inner Asia, who in turn became involved in The Mongolia Society. Among these were Denis Sinor, the founder of the department; György Kara, a distinguished Hungarian scholar; John Gombojab Hangin, a Mongol from Inner Mongolia, PRC; John R. Krueger, currently the Vice-President and Managing Editor of the Society; and Larry Moses, a professor of Central Eurasian Studies.

In the nearly 35 years since its founding, The Mongolia Society's membership has grown to include some 500 members, from professional Mongolists and students of Inner Asia to corporate executives, interested hobbyists and adventurous travelers. Its members hail from the United States, Europe, Russia, Australia, Canada, and many parts of Asia, including, of course, Mongolia.

The Society's activities are as diverse as its membership. Publishing continues to be a priority. Mongolia Survey, current successor to the first newsletter, contains announcements of events and news about Mongolia and the Society. *Mongolian Studies: Journal of The Mongolia Society*, published annually, contains more lengthy scholarly articles. In addition, the Society publishes *Occasional Papers* on a wide range of topics, from 19th-century travelers' tales of Mongolia to manuals of the Tuvan language, and *Special Papers* devoted to works written in the Old Mongolian script. Most recently, the Society released *Occasional Paper No. 16, Mongol Oral Narratives: Gods, Tricksters, Heroes, & Horses*, which contains English translations of more than 100 Mongolian folktales, with illustrations by Danzan, a Mongolian graphic artist. The Society is also in the process of reprinting the *Mongolian-English Dictionary* by Ferdinand D. Lessing. First published in 1960, it is the largest (over 1,200 pages!) and most comprehensive work of its kind, containing definitions in Old Script Mongolian, modern Cyrillic script Mongolian, and English.

The Society resells books from Mongolia, providing one of the few outlets for Mongolian books in the West. In true marketing spirit, it sells stunning
Mongolia Society T-shirts, tapes of Mongolian music, postcards, coloring books, and even tiny Mongolian flags. And not to be bypassed by the information superhighway, the Society recently created a World Wide Web "home-page" on the Internet.

In 1992, the Society established the Dr. Gombojib Hangin Memorial Scholarship in honor of the founding chairman of the Society. The scholarship provides up to US $2,500 for a student of Mongolian heritage to pursue studies in the United States. In addition, the Society announced an essay competition for students, with cash awards and consideration for publication in the Mongolian Studies journal.

The Mongolia Society hosts lectures, seminars and panel discussions, and arranges for Mongolian scholars and other professionals to visit Bloomington. In December 1994, Dr. Chinggis Andreev, from Ulan Ude, Russia, presented a lecture on the nationality question among Russia's Buryat Mongols. In April of last year, the Society organized a panel discussion entitled, The Current Situation in Mongolia and Kalmykia: Political, Economic, Educational, Cultural and Business. At the same time, the Society sponsored an exhibit of Mongolian photographs in the Indiana Memorial Union. The Society also sponsored a lecture by Ayuurzyn Hurelbataar from Inner Mongolia, who spoke about the effects of Chinese cultural policies on the Mongolian culture of Inner Mongolia.

The Society is honored to count among its recent visitors the Mongolian Minister of Culture and Member of Parliament, Mr. Nambaryn Enkhbayar, and the Director of Elementary and Secondary Education in Mongolia and President of the Mongolian Archery Association, Dr. S. Batkhuyag, from Mongolia's capital, Ulaanbaatar. In March, the head of Mongolia's libraries and the Director and Deputy Director of Ulaanbaatar's Central Library, Ms. Tsetsegmaa Sangchuidongiiin, toured the libraries at Indiana University and the Monroe County Public Library.

Since its inception, The Mongolia Society has brought a bit of Mongolia to those who couldn't visit the long-isolated nation. Now Mongolia appears to be opening its doors to all who wish to visit. Susie Drost, the manager of the Society's office, now handles as many questions about travel to Mongolia as she does questions about Society publications. In the coming decades the Western world is sure to hear more about Mongolia, and The Mongolia Society is sure to continue its low-profile but vital role in furthering the study and recognition of this fascinating country.