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Five observations in five years

I remember very clearly my first visit to Ulaanbaatar, the Red Hero, in March 2012. Approaching the brown and rugged Steppes, I looked out of the window, thinking that the barren snow-strewn landscape was like something from the planet Mars. The trepidation eased as I was whisked off from the airport with a friendly handshake, and after a few Chinggis beers later that evening, it felt much more like home. It has now been over 5 years since that first visit, and I have been based in UB ever since. In this first column for the De Facto Gazette, I thought I would reflect on 5 observations from my time here.

An open culture

When I first arrived full time in April 2012, my time in 1990's Moscow working as a lawyer in the aluminium sector came in handy. Frequenting some of the less 'high-end' bars in town meant that my remnants of Russian language proved useful. Hostile glances turned into friendly banter with the new Scottish "bratan" on the block. Having now been here for some time, it is clear to me that Mongolia has a strong European outlook. This is certainly the case compared to the southern neighbour. While importantly retaining its own traditions, sports, and nomadic lifestyle, the majority young generation willingly embrace Western culture. On the whole, society is open, friendly and democratic. The people have a voice and are not afraid to use it. Knowledge and skill in foreign languages, be it Russian, German, Japanese or increasingly English, is quite extraordinary.

The young population has huge potential. When comparing my

Mongolian colleagues based here in UB with their peers across Asia, people are impressed with their openness, professionalism, ability to absorb and willingness to learn. There is none of the narrow thinking that characterises those brought up in a communist regime, with a collectivist and rigid education. For me, this is a great cause for optimism for the development of the country as whole.

Democracy

Mongolia retains a robust democratic system in comparison to its neighbours. This is no small achievement, given the political development of the countries nearby, and a history of repression.

The world is going through a period of great uncertainty, with war in the Middle East, the threat of war in North Korea, a near crisis in the EU, daily terrorist attacks, and a media obsessed with every written word from Donald Trump. In many "developed" countries, we can see a creeping totalitarianism closely associated with these recent events. Each event results in calls for tighter controls on what people can say and do in the name of security. Censorship is becoming commonplace. Identity politics dictates the mainstream view and stifles genuine debate. The results of democratic elections are being contested by every means possible. In this context, and despite its many issues, Mongolia's young democracy and comparatively open media are a real cause for celebration. Post-democratic notions of identity politics and political correctness are refreshingly absent from the Mongolian political system and political discourse in general. There is a sense of genuine free-

dom and a healthy respect for the views of the people and the outcome of elections.

Urbanisation

While the wider economy may have stagnated due to policy missteps combined with a collapse in commodity prices, undoubtedly Ulaanbaatar has continued to develop at a very fast pace in my 5 years here. Although that development has been haphazard, and to some extent unplanned, the amenities available to working Mongolians have continued unabated. A lot has taken place.

There is a much wider range of quality restaurants, high end hotel chains, take-away delivery networks, entertainment centres, coffee shops, better supermarkets and improved road networks. All of this contributes to UB being a much more modern and convenient city.

But there are of course, numerous downsides. Rapid urbanisation brings increasingly difficult issues to resolve, such as the alleviation of poverty in the ger districts, the availability of water and electricity, the accompanying pollution in winter, and making the city as a whole more inclusive. These are not easy issues to address, requiring hugely significant economic resources, a real determination to prioritise the problems and perhaps a more collectivist approach to decision making. I don't have ready made answers, but it seems that little progress has been made in solving these issues over the past 5 years. And they will likely only get worse over time. There is no reason why a country blessed with Mongolia's vast mineral resources should not be capable of reducing inequality for its 3 million citizens.



► Tourism and the environment

Out and about around UB this summer, one major observation stood out in terms of tourism and environmental issues. This is the prevalence of discarded plastic, tin cans and other rubbish around major tourist sites. This is not just a Mongolian issue, but one that is becoming a major problem the world over.

Recently I read an article about an uninhabited island in the South Pacific Ocean, Henderson Island, where an incredible 38 million pieces of plastic, comprising 17.6 tons, had been washed ashore, simply as debris and rubbish accumulated from the sea. Scientists estimate that 13,000 pieces of plastic are washed on to the beaches every single day. All of this pollutes land and water, and causes damage to animals and plants. Moreover, fish, a major food source, are increasingly becoming contaminated by ingesting plastic debris.

In the last 10 years, more plastic has been produced than in the pre-

vious century. Only around 10% of plastic products are recycled. Plastic derivatives can eventually find their way into the human body, with likely negative effects on our health.

In short, it is vital that we all, Mongolians included, take care of our own environment and habitat. This growing issue likely needs a political level solution, with education about the potential damaging effects of disposable plastics, developing recycling facilities and emphasising their importance to the environment around us. Please take some time to investigate further.

Sporting prowess

On a lighter note, as a keen follower of sport, it has been great to see significant Mongolian success in Judo, Wrestling, Boxing and Shooting at recent international competitions. But even more exciting for me has been the grass-roots development of rugby union and cricket, two sports that I love.

Two weeks ago, a British rugby team from Hereford College,

Oxford University, toured Mongolia and played some matches against the Ulaanbaatar Warriors. There was an interesting (and perhaps predictable) contrast in styles, with the Mongolian side completely dominating the scrummage, where the two teams literally come head to head to scrap for the ball. In many ways, this symbolised the cultural advantage of wrestling for the Mongolian team, but there was also some excellent running rugby from the UB boys.

While both games were narrowly lost, I have always thought the Mongolian physique would be well adapted to success at rugby union, and hope that the game will continue to go from strength to strength in the years to come.

Likewise, the development of Mongolian cricket has taken off in the past two years, with a pitch and cricket training nets now set up in UB. There has been some international publicity around this, especially in the UK, and again it would be wonderful to see this sport gain some traction.