For at least 10,000 years the people of Mongolia have dealt with minimal rainfall, sparse vegetation, and some of the most difficult climatic conditions in Central Asia by assuming a semi-nomadic existence. Although some collective agriculture was instituted by the country's communist government in the 1950s, pastoral nomadism is still a way of life for at least half of Mongolia's 2.5 million people.

Chenggis Khan, Mongolia's revered 13th century leader, would be pleased to know that nomadism continues to flourish in his homeland. He felt so strongly that his nation's strength depended on its mobility that he forbade the building of permanent structures. If a population was self-sufficient and mobile, he reasoned, it could never be defeated in war. It was a strategic principle he exploited in reverse to create the largest empire in history.

While today's Mongols are more concerned with maintaining their flocks of livestock than conquering or defending land, there are many aspects of their daily lives that their more warlike ancestors would still recognize.

Robert McCracken Peck has traveled throughout Mongolia, from the forested regions of the northern frontier to the Gobi Desert in the south, seeking out families and individuals who are still living in the traditional ways. "Since the opening of the country to the rest of the world in 1990, nomadic life in Mongolia has begun a profound and permanent change," observes Peck. "I have been fortunate to see and record the old Mongolia and to witness its transition firsthand."

"Mongolia Observed," an exhibition of Peck's photographs, will be on display in the Museum's Sharpe Gallery in early 1997. A small selection of his work is illustrated here.
**Fig. 3**

**Wrestler at Naadam**

Horvsgol Aimag, July 1996

Naadam is a multi-day summer festival during which Mongols gather to engage in riding, archery, and wrestling competitions. With Mongolia's national flag flapping beside him, a Naadam wrestler displays himself before an assemblage of horsemen who have gathered for the event. Such ritual dances, mimicking a falcon's flight, are performed before and after each match. They are intended to demonstrate the wrestler's grace, strength, and courage.

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**Fig. 2**

**A Horse-brededer and His Son with Saddles**

Horvsgol Aimag, June 1996

Even among nomadic families, semi-permanent storage buildings are sometimes needed to store food, skins, and pieces of equipment. Homemade wooden pack saddles are among the essential items kept in this horse-brededer's cabin.

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Fig. 5
BOWL OF CHEESE FOR NAADAM
Darhad Basin, Hoovsgol Aimag, July 1995
A bowl of yak’s-milk cheese, the bounty of the steppe, serves as both symbolic and real reward for successful wrestlers at Naadam. Recipients, who each receive a handful of cheese, toss pieces into the air in thanks for their victories before sharing their prize with family and friends.
© Robert McCracken Polk

Fig. 4
TWO OLD FRIENDS
Darhad Basin, Hoovsgol Aimag, July 1995
To the widely dispersed herdsmen of Mongolia’s steppe, Naadam provides a welcome opportunity to see old friends and new. Medals marking service to the country are often worn on such special occasions by men and women alike.
© Robert McCracken Polk
Fig. 6
Herders in Tent
Bulgaz Aamag, September 1994
When traveling more than a day's ride with their flocks, Mongolia's herders use small portable tents called gers. The larger gers, more difficult to move, remain in one location until the reduction of grazing opportunities nearby requires a more distant move.
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Fig. 7
Sisters
Bulgaz Aamag, September 1994
From an early age, the children of nomadic families are given important responsibilities. Caring for younger siblings, collecting firewood and yak dung for fuel, and assisting with the summertime milking of livestock are among the daily tasks expected of each child.
© Robert McCracken Peck
FIG. 8
FAMILY WITH MOTORCYCLE
Darhad Basin, Hongog Aimag, July 1995
A possession of enormous pride but limited utility, a Russian-made motorcycle symbolizes the changing aspirations of Mongolia's nomads. To save precious gasoline, this family demonstrates its most valuable possession with a pause.
© Robert McCracken Peck

FIG. 9
GIRL WITH PINE NUTS
Bulgan Aimag, September 1994
In northern Mongolia, where the steppe grassland is interspersed with forest, pine nuts provide a welcome addition to the traditional diet of meat and dairy products. Though difficult to find and harvest, they are offered to guests without hesitation.
© Robert McCracken Peck
**Fig. 10a**
Erecting a Ger
Darhad Basin, Hovsgol Aimag, June 1996
Against the age-old architecture of a ger (seen here in skeletal form before the felt walls and canvas cover have been applied), changing fashions of dress reflect contact with the outside world.
© Robert McCreadie Peck

**Fig. 10b**
Woman Giving Milk
Blessing
Darhad Basin, Hovsgol Aimag, July 1995
A felt and canvas ger, the traditional home of the nomad, provides shelter against the extremes of Mongolia's climate. A spoonful of milk, tossed skyward in blessing at the outset of a journey, assures safe travel to family and visitors alike.
© Robert McCreadie Peck

**Fig. II**
Hospitality
Hovsgol Aimag, September 1994
With bowls of cheese, a casserole of yogurt, and teapots at the ready, three women await the arrival of guests in their ger. The area to the right of the ger's door is traditionally where meals are prepared.
© Robert McCreadie Peck
FIG. 13
BOY WITH STAFF
Darhad Basin, Horsgol Aimag, July 1993
Crippled by a winter freeze that nearly cost him his life, 9-year-old Ugan Bayar possesses a wisdom and serenity that defies his age. Extremely harsh winters—temperatures of 20 to 30 degrees below zero are common—contribute to Mongolia's high rate of child mortality. The log structure is a government administration building in the town of Ruchen Lumbe.
© Robert McGucken Peck

FIG. 12
WOMAN GRINDING TEA
Darhad Basin, Horsgol Aimag, July 1993
Because of the difficulties in transporting loose tea on the hot and dusty trade routes from the plantations of China to the Mongolian steppe, the leaves are molded into bricks. The bricks are chopped and ground as needed. The pulverized powder is then boiled with water, milk, and salt before it is served. (A covered mechanical sewing machine sits on the table behind.)
© Robert McGucken Peck
SHAMANISM
Dorbad Rent, Howard Aimag, July 1995
A spirit religion as old as human history, shamanism in Mongolia has persisted through centuries of
competition (primarily from Buddhism) and prohibition (under the communist government,
1921-1990). Here, in an all-night ceremony, the shamaness Bayar journeys to the spirit world as her
family and neighbors look on. Her shaman’s robe and sacred drum are used only during ceremonies.
© Robert McCranor Peel

YOUNG MONKS
Gandan Daitlung Monastery,
Horgol Aimag, June 1996
With Buddhism now permitted after
many years of prohibition,
Mongolia’s monasteries are once
again filled with the sounds of young
voices. As in earlier times, boys from
nomadic families—some as young as
seven—are committing themselves
to the rigorous of Buddhist training at
monasteries throughout the country.
© Robert McCranor Peel
FIG. 16
Boy with Yak
Hovsgol Aimag, July 1995
At elevations of 5000 feet and higher, yaks and yak/cow hybrids are more commonly found than cattle in northern Mongolia. Their ability to haul carts, and their milk, fur, leather and meat are all vitally important to herding families. Though of enormous size and strength (a big bull can weigh up to 800 kilograms or 1760 pounds), most are sufficiently domesticated to be controlled by the children.
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