

Roles of Women in Mongolia and Japan

Narantuya Dodongiin

A Word About Myself and Mongolian National Railways

I left my native Mongolia to study at the Moscow University of Rail Transport where I graduated in 1986 in railway administration and transport planning. From July 1986 until July 1988, I held a number of posts at two freight stations in Tolgoit and Ulaanbaatar, controlling freight movements. In 1988, I was appointed head of the Ticket Reservations Centre at Ulaanbaatar Station, where I was named stationmaster in March 1989 at age 27. I still occupy this post.

In 1998, I had the opportunity to participate in the East Japan Railway Culture Foundation training programme, giving me a chance to compare railway operations in Mongolia and Japan.

Mongolian Railway (MTZ) operates a total of 1815 km of tracks; 1111 km of this is the Trans-Mongolian Railway linking Europe and China. It is also the shortest route between north and south Asia.

MTZ plays a major role in the country's transport system, carrying 80% of all domestic freight and 30% of all domestic passengers. Although MTZ is a national entity, it is financed in equal parts by

Mongolia and Russia.

The railway headquarters is made up of a number of departments. The six most important departments have jurisdiction over transport planning, passenger transport, locomotives, tracks, signalling, and communications. There are also corporate planning, finance and accounting, personnel, and safety sections at the headquarters. Other departments administer power supplies, equipment, information systems, construction, sales, and hospitals.

MTZ has about 50 stations, three locomotive depots, two rolling stock depots, four track maintenance depots, three signalling and communications depots, two electric power maintenance depots, two structural service depots, and four building maintenance depots. About 13,000 people are employed, 6600 of whom hold jobs directly related to rail operations.

The railway has been carrying international freight and passengers since 1953 and these international ties influence its fare schedules, rules and regulations, and technology. MTZ joined the Organization for the Collaboration of Railways (OSShD) in 1957, and now has close contacts with

transport and trade organizations in 50 countries.

Ulaanbaatar Station

Ulaanbaatar Passenger Station has 177 staff—60% of whom are women. They sell tickets, provide information, work in finance, planning, and personnel, and perform janitorial services, etc.

The station has seven large concourses with a wide variety of shops, including beauty salons, restaurants, bars, an office offering domestic and international communications, a bookshop, a post office, kiosks, a pharmacy, and souvenir stands. There are three platforms for domestic and international passenger trains.

Women in Mongolian Workforce

The population of Mongolia is just 2.15 million in an area about four times the size of Japan. With such a low population density (1.35 people/km²), women are an important part of the workforce alongside men. Labour legislation prohibits employment of women only for certain



Stationmaster Dodongiin at her desk in Ulaanbaatar Station

(Author)



Visiting a Japanese family during her 1998 EJRCF training

(H. Komatsu)

types of heavy manual work. When they bear children, Mongolian women get 3 years maternity leave.

MTZ employs women in a wide variety of posts—some are technicians, some work in railway departments overseeing finances and operations, and others work for the railway hotels, stations, restaurants, kindergartens, and hospitals.

Mongolian Women at Home

Men and women have an equal place in the Mongolian workforce, and this equality carries over into the home. Married couples look on problems as something to be solved together. Because most husbands and wives both work outside the home, the partner with fewer working hours tends to spend more time looking after children and doing housework. In some cases, the mothers of young couples help out a great deal. I clean our house and do most of the shopping for food and clothes. My daughter and husband help with the cooking. I go to our daughter's school to meet her teachers. My husband looks after other aspects of her education and upbringing. Needless to say, women still tend to do more than half the housework, and their role supporting the family is still the basis of the Mongolian family. An old Mongolian proverb says, 'When a pond is full of fish, it attracts a lot of birds'. This describes the role of women in the family and means that a clean comfortable home with good food attracts many visitors. This service role of women in the family partly explains why there are more women employed in service posts throughout Mongolia, including in MTZ.

My Impressions of Japanese Women

When I was training in Japan, I was very impressed by the Japanese workplace, particularly the high level of computerization and mechanization and the information networks linking the nation. However, it seems to me that the life of the average Japanese woman after marriage is boring. Husbands come home very late from work, and only see their children on days off. This means that Japanese families do not have much chance to enjoy life together. Since young Japanese women know that marriage will probably lead only to housework, I suppose it is natural that many would rather remain single. I am surprised that even well-educated Japanese women with university degrees quit their jobs after having a child. I cannot help wondering why, when their country could benefit from their skills and knowledge. Is it perhaps because Japan has a huge population, so there are enough qualified men to fill all the jobs without women? And the recent recession coupled with record unemployment levels can only make matters worse. Although I can partly understand this situation, it seems to ignore the potential and aspirations of half the population!

Transition towards Market Economy

Until 1990, Mongolia was a communist country. It began embracing democracy after the Cold War ended and now it is in transition and moving towards a market economy. When I was younger, relations with the outside world were limited to countries in the communist bloc, so we went only to those countries to study science, technology, and culture. Today, we are free to travel and study almost anywhere in the world. And with the global spread of the Internet, young people in Mongolia can easily get information from across the world. For example, while I was studying in Japan, my daughter sent me email every day although she was far away in Mongolia.

I believe Mongolia's decision to adopt the principles of a market economy is placing it on the road to development. My visit to Japan showed me what development means.

When my daughter graduates from high school next year, I would like to send her to Japan to study so she can use her knowledge to help our own country achieve some of the better aspects of Japanese technology and society. ■



Narantuya Dodongiin

Ms Dodongiin has been stationmaster at Ulaanbaatar Passenger Station since 1989. She is one of three female stationmasters in Mongolia and visited Japan on a training programme of East Japan Railway Culture Foundation from June to December 1998.