



Article

Mongol Tribes: Hidden Financial Expenses in Social Life

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Abstract

This paper explores the hidden financial expenditures in the social life of Mongol tribes. These costs include various aspects of everyday life, such as tent construction, clothing, transportation, and palace architecture. Each item symbolized economic and social status, reflecting deeper cultural values. Men's and women's clothing often featured luxury materials like silk, pearls, and silver. Tents varied from modest yurts to lavish royal tents with golden elements. Transport systems were well developed and aligned with wartime strategies and traditions. The findings highlight that the Mongol tribes, despite their nomadic nature, bore considerable social expenditures as part of preserving heritage, asserting status, and ensuring functional lifestyles. This study emphasizes the nuanced economic dynamics within tribal social structures and underscores the legacy of Mongolian financial practices concerning identity and governance.

Keywords: Mongols, Tribes, Clothes, Budget, Accessories

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Introduction

The financial dynamics of Mongol society extended far beyond basic sustenance, encompassing a wide array of hidden expenditures that reflected both status and cultural identity. These costs included constructing and furnishing tents (yurts), maintaining Ilkhan palaces, ornate external decorations, and inherited jewelry, each representing a significant economic investment passed down through generations.

Understanding these expenses is essential, as they were deeply embedded in the daily lives of Mongol tribes and often overlooked in broader historical analyses. These hidden costs shaped not only the private lives of individuals but also contributed to the collective cultural expression at the tribal and imperial levels.

This study explores the financial dimensions of Mongol tribal life, focusing specifically on two main categories: (I) visible expenditures on housing, including tents and associated artistic designs, and (II) invisible individual expenses such as clothing, jewelry, and transportation. Together, these components offer insight into how economic priorities reinforced tradition, social hierarchy, and the preservation of nomadic identity.

Methodology

This study employed a historical-descriptive analytical approach, referencing documented historical records, travelers' accounts, and scholarly interpretations from various sources. Data were categorized based on two main themes: tangible housing and transportation expenses, and intangible or 'invisible' individual financial burdens. Primary and secondary sources were critically analyzed and synthesized to form a cohesive understanding of the economic framework in Mongol social life.

Results

Costs for Mongol Tribal Housing and Transportation

Tents and Carts

The tents of the Mongols varied greatly in design and color, reflecting the socio-economic status of each tribe, from commoners to the Ilkhans. Traditional yurts, or gers, were round structures with conical roofs built from wooden lattices covered with felt (Ahmed 2025). The expenditure did not stop at construction; significant funds were also allocated to the interior decoration, including wool rugs and colorful textiles (Ahmed 2025). The felt used, often made from sheep's wool, served both functional

and symbolic purposes, reinforcing tribal identity and social hierarchy (Azzam 2025 and Carboni 2003).

E.D. Philips identified two main types of tents that differed in size and mobility. Smaller ones could be transported easily by animals and erected quickly, while larger ones were fixed on wagons and not dismantled regularly (Dode 2018).

Over time, tent construction evolved into several distinct types:

Royal or Golden Tents: Reserved for Mongol rulers, these were the most luxurious and expensive. They featured elaborate architecture, golden structures, and silk-covered interiors. Toghri Khan's golden tent, for instance, had poles adorned with gold and interiors decorated with Persian rugs, silver cups, and rare jewels (Ahmed 2025), (Azzam 2025), and (Hussien 2025).

Round Tents: Originally resembling the tibi or wigwam, these were adapted to the steppes and served extended families grouped in protective circles with wagons surrounding them (Dode 2018).

Gigantic Tents: Designed for the Mongolian military, these tents could accommodate thousands of soldiers. Despite their minimal aesthetic, they were costly due to their size and purpose in large-scale gatherings and battles (Dode 2018).

Colorful Tents: Often used during wartime, these tents were funded by military budgets. Some could hold more than 2,000 people and were adorned with vibrant patterns and colors such as white and purple (Mitchell 2022).

Palaces

Mongol emperors also invested heavily in luxurious palaces. One remarkable example is the silver fountain at the Great Khan's palace, which is shaped like four silver lions pouring mare's milk, a symbol of wealth and status (Tawfiq 2025). In contrast, ordinary Mongolian homes were modest, constructed from wicker and with minimal decoration (Hussien 2025).

Transportation (Wagons)

Wagons were vital to Mongol life, used for transport, military campaigns, and carrying religious icons. Some two-wheeled carts had felt-covered chambers for sacred items and valuables (Dode 2018). Horses were also categorized by function, with specific breeds designated for chariots, carts, or warfare, highlighting the care given to transportation logistics (Mitchell 2022). These expenditures reflect how Mongol tribes deeply valued their customs and traditions. Despite evolving circumstances, they remained committed to preserving ancestral identity through material investment in mobile architecture and logistical infrastructure.

Invisible Expenditures of Mongol Individuals

A substantial portion of Mongolian economic activity was dedicated to personal attire, with clothing representing necessity and a powerful symbol of identity, rank, and cultural continuity. These expenses affected both men and women, from common tribespeople to members of the imperial family.

Financial Spending on Mongolian Clothing

Men's Attire

Deels: The deel, a traditional calf-length tunic with long sleeves and a high collar, was a central element in men's wardrobes. Crafted from costly materials such as silk, gemstones, or silver, the deel symbolized wealth and social position. It was buttoned at the shoulder using decorative fasteners (Philips et al. 1965). The Khantaaz, a shorter jacket variant often made of silk, was even more expensive and typically worn by nobility or imperial family members (Philips et al. 1965).

The terlig, a robe worn by emperors, represented the pinnacle of luxury. Originating in the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368), it was later adopted in other Central Asian courts such as the Mughal Empire (Gerllc 2003). Ceremonial garments for Khans and dignitaries typically consisted of traditional coats tailored with superior silk and meticulous craftsmanship (Dode 2018).

Boots: Designed for combat and climate, Mongolian boots were robust, with upturned toes to prevent slipping from stirrups. They were made from thick leather (buligar) and often decorated with silver and leather appliqués (Lattimore). In some cases, silver repoussé strips adorned the boots, especially for high-ranking individuals (Philips et al).

Hats: Headgear was a vital aspect of the Mongolian male wardrobe and varied according to season, occasion, and status. Special attention was paid to tailoring distinct hats for youth, the older ones, ceremonies, and seasonal conditions (Philips et al). Many were made of silk and were often decorated with gold and delicate embellishments (Tucker 2009).

Women's Attire

Mongolian women, particularly those from elite or Ilkhan backgrounds, invested heavily in their appearance. Clothing and accessories were aesthetic and symbolic, conveying marital status, tribal affiliation, and economic power.

Deels: Women's deels were commonly made from sheep wool and animal furs, often stitched with decorative elements (Lee 1997). High-status women wore garments

made from imported Chinese silk, reflecting beauty, access to international trade routes, and fine materials (Acta 2015).

Hats: Hats were tailored to reflect marital and social status. Married women often adorned their headwear with pearls, coral, and velvet. Some headpieces included red silk linings covered with mother-of-pearl and gemstones (Lattimore). Aristocratic women wore ceremonial helmets made from lightweight materials like bark and silk, topped with decorative feathers to signify high rank (Dode 2018).

Jewelry: Jewelry was both decorative and functional, often used to preserve wealth. Elite women typically owned intricate silver and pearl ornaments, including earrings and headdresses that varied in design by tribe (Lattimore), (Acta 2015). Such accessories served as cultural identifiers and economic assets, deeply rooted in Mongolian heritage.

These personal expenditures illustrate that Mongolian clothing extended beyond aesthetics. Every piece, whether a deel, boot, hat, or accessory, carried social, economic, and symbolic value, reinforcing individual identity and tribal allegiance. Despite the nomadic lifestyle, attention to dress and appearance remained a core expression of dignity, legacy, and hierarchical distinction.

Conclusion

This study highlights that the financial life of Mongol tribes extended beyond the conventional spheres of economics, politics, and military campaigns. Instead, it encompassed deeply rooted social practices, with substantial expenditures dedicated to housing, clothing, food, and ceremonial traditions. Notably, women played a central role in this economic framework. Their passion for adornment was reflected in significant spending on clothing, jewelry, and accessories, regardless of social standing, from ordinary families to the wives of Ilkhan rulers. These personal expenses formed a considerable portion of overall household consumption.

The Mongols also demonstrated a profound commitment to preserving their ancestral heritage. It was evident in their continuous investment in traditional practices such as tent construction, garment production, and artistic decoration, reinforcing tribal identity and intergenerational continuity. Moreover, the lavish use of gems, corals, pearls, silk, and feathers in clothing was not merely for vanity but a visible marker of status and lineage. Such practices were typically reserved for elite families, including the imperial household, who could afford the high cost of these handcrafted expressions of culture.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Author Contributions

Hind Sattar Hadi conceptualized and supervised the study. Mohammed Ahmed Mousa contributed to manuscript writing. Omar Azeez Idan compiled references and assisted in historical data analysis.

Ethics Approval

Not applicable. This research involved no human or animal subjects.

Data Availability

All data used in this study are available in the cited references.

Abbreviations

IRJMS – International Research Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies

Yurt – Portable round tent covered with skins or felt

Ilkhan – Title used by Mongol rulers in Persia

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