

IIAS reports

Changing patterns of power in historical and modern Central and Inner Asia

Conference, 7-9 August 2014, Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia
Organised by the International Unit for Central and Inner Asian Studies (IUCIAS), IIAS, and Ulaanbaatar University.

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IN AUGUST 2012, AN INTERNATIONAL WORKSHOP on 'The legacy of perestroika discourses in knowledge production on Central and Inner Asia' was organised by the Humboldt University in Berlin, Volkswagen Foundation, the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS), the National Institutes for the Humanities (Japan), the Union of the Historians of Mongolia and hosted by Ulaanbaatar University in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. During the workshop, a small number of scholars in the field of Central and Inner Asian Studies held a separate meeting to discuss a plan to establish an international association for the study of Central and Inner Asia and to organise an international conference to bring together a large group of researchers from all over the world to discuss various issues in a field of research that, especially over the last two decades, has gone through a number of rapid developments and changes. The intention was to especially focus on participation by Asian scholars, to give them an opportunity to discuss their work and research results in an international context.

The major developments and changes that occurred in the area include: the period of perestroika; the demise of the Soviet Union; the establishment of a number of new independent states; shifting geo-political alignments; a new approach to their history by many of these new states; the challenges posed by more ethno-nationalistic historiography; and added to all that, a growing awareness that Central and Inner Asia are inexorably linked to developments elsewhere in the world. These changes contribute to the situation, felt by many, that an international dialogue between scholars from all over the world to discuss the role, the position, and the history of such a large part of the Eurasian landmass was sorely needed.

The small group that met in Ulaanbaatar in 2012 decided to seek the establishment of the 'International Unit for Central and Inner Asian Studies' (IUCIAS) and subsequently received the support from IIAS (Leiden, the Netherlands) and Ulaanbaatar University, to organise an international conference, with the result that between 7 and 9 August 2014 some one hundred scholars from all over the world, and especially from Asia, came together in the brand new premises of Ulaanbaatar University. The international academic committee of the conference established by the Unit, together with IIAS, proposed the conference topic: 'Changing patterns of power in historical and modern Central and Inner Asia'.

The conference aimed to highlight the current state of knowledge in research on the history of Central and Inner Asia since the twelfth century until the present day. Understanding various patterns of power in a historical context, including their meanings, concepts and semantics, their competition, appropriation and exchange, as well as institutions and schemes of redistribution, is vital in this

respect. The conference addressed how patterns of power are reflected in the process of social adaptation, how this process allows former elites to retain their privileged access to resources, material and ideological assets, and how it enables new elite groups to emerge.

The conference programme was convened by Professor J. Boldbaatar (Ulaanbaatar University), Dr Irina Morozova (Humboldt University in Berlin, Germany / IUCIAS) and Dr Willem Vogelsang (IIAS). For the three days of the conference, a large number of broad themes were discussed, ranging from the structure of the medieval Mongolian Empire and its impact on society, to specific case studies of modern developments in some of the new states of the area. The setup of the conference followed the well-established pattern of many conferences organised by IIAS, namely a series of parallel sessions of one and a half or two hours each in which three or four contributors present their paper, an abstract of which is sent to all participants well in advance. To improve communication between all participants, simultaneous translation was provided in English, Mongolian and Russian.

The first morning of the conference, after a series of welcoming words by, among others, the Rector of Ulaanbaatar University and host of the conference, Professor Oh Deok Kyo, the floor was opened to key-note lectures by two distinguished scholars in the field. The first, Academician Sh.Bira, addressed a historical topic by discussing Mongolian Tenggerism. The second speaker was Academician Nikolai Kradin, who talked about the academic study, over time, of the historical dynamics in the succession of Inner nomadic empires.

Academician Bira (Ulaanbaatar University), in his talk on Tenggerism, discussed the development of this belief (roughly translated as 'heavenism'), which inspired and motivated the unprecedented rise of the Mongols in the 13th and 14th centuries. In its final form, after it had absorbed many aspects of Buddhism, Tenggerism became the official ideology of the Mongol Empire. This phase is related to the reign of Khubilai Khan, under whose rule the Mongolian Empire reached its greatest extent and universal character.

Academician Kradin (Russian Academy of Sciences, Vladivostok, Russia), addressed the nature of the dynamics of different cultural, economic, and social processes among the ancient and medieval nomadic empires of Central and Inner Asia. In doing so, he outlined the changing approaches to the study of nomadic societies over time, and the different factors that determined the structure of these nomadic and semi-nomadic societies:

environmental conditions, the near-proximity of agricultural communities, contacts with settled societies far beyond, technological changes, writing systems, etc.

The subsequent 27 panels covered a wide range of subjects. Nation building of the new states was an important topic that was discussed in many panels, and so was the role of informal structures. In this context, one of the panels focused on 'State-building in post-socialist Central and Inner Asia: propaganda, regional politics and *mafias*.' Also of particular interest were two consecutive panels on the subject of the dynamics of Mongolian pastoralists, organised and led by a number of Japanese scholars, led by Dr Hiroyoshi Karashima (Hokkaido University), and including Dr Yuki Konagaya (National Institutes for the Humanities in Japan, and co-organiser of the conference). Two other panels, chaired by Dr Zanaa Jurmed (Center for Citizen's Alliance, Mongolia), addressed the issue of power and gender in Central and Inner Asia.

An important part of the programme was a podium discussion on the subject of 'Eurasian frontiers and borderlands: the continuity and change of power models'. The discussion, moderated by Dr Irina Morozova (Humboldt University, Berlin), was conducted by Academician Bira, Academician Kradin, and Professor Morris Rossabi (Columbia University, New York).

Conferences are places where people meet and become acquainted with each other's work and background. The informal part of a conference is therefore very important. Ulaanbaatar University took this point very seriously, and with great hospitality they organised the joint lunches every day, and invited all participants to a dinner on the first evening. This dinner was particularly fascinating since it was enlightened by a singing performance of one of the organisers, Academician Boldbaatar, who together with Mrs L. Chuluunchimeg, a famous singer, introduced the participants to a number of Mongolian songs that told the story of the rich Mongolian past.

The first general meeting of the International Unit for the Study of Central and Inner Asia took place at the conference. The first set of Statutes of the Unit was adopted, as well as the membership regulations followed by the scholars' joining the Unit as new members. The Unit aims at networking and institutionalisation, stimulating research programmes and organising academic meetings, and seeks to involve professional individuals and scholars on the basis of their academic qualifications and potentials, regardless of their national affiliations.

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Top: Giant statue of Genghis Khan. Photo reproduced under a Creative Commons license courtesy of Ludovic Hirlimann on Flickr.

Below: Academician Sh.Bira.

