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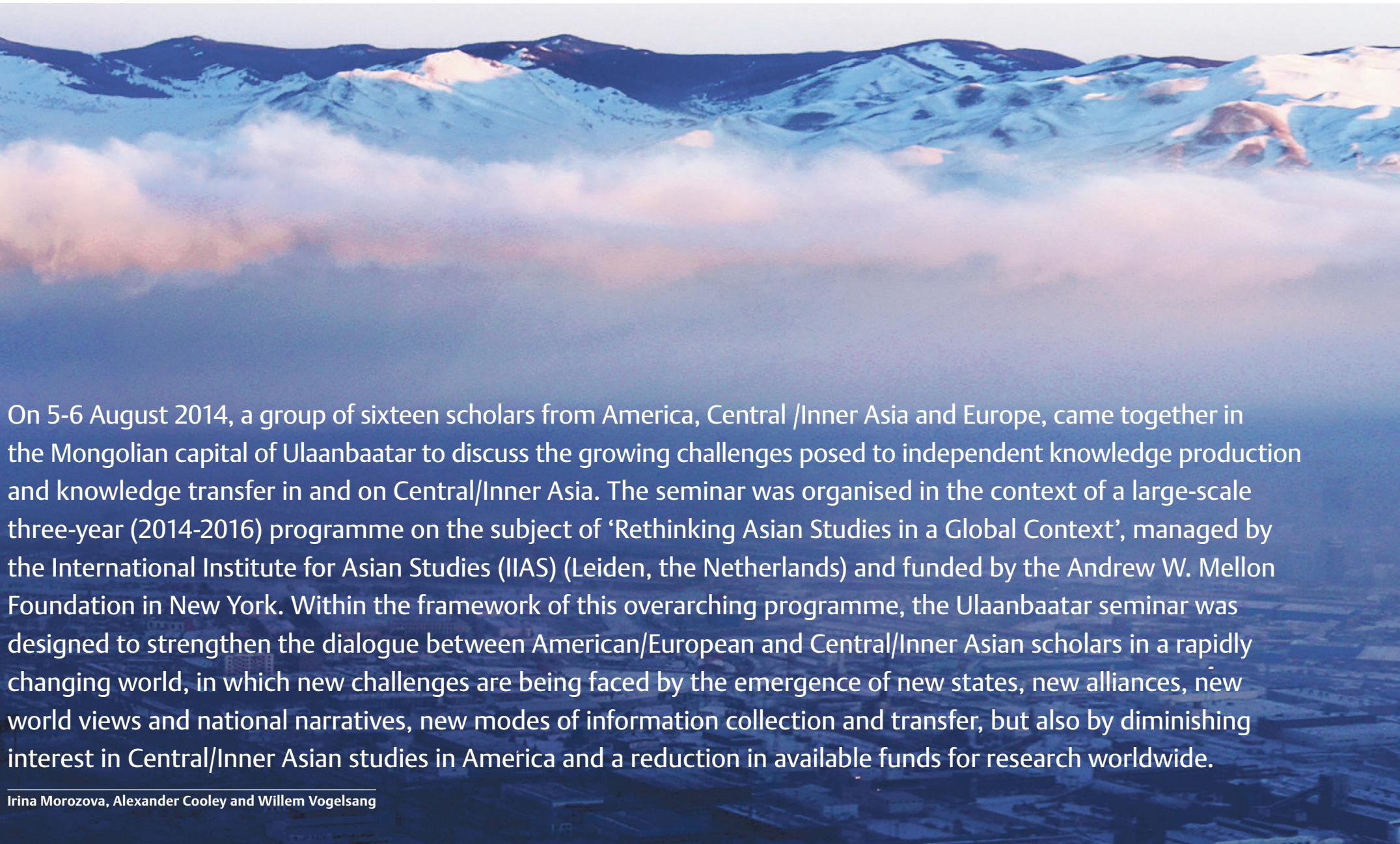
# theFocus

Central  
and Inner Asia:  
New Challenges  
for Independent  
Research

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# Central and Inner Asia



On 5-6 August 2014, a group of sixteen scholars from America, Central /Inner Asia and Europe, came together in the Mongolian capital of Ulaanbaatar to discuss the growing challenges posed to independent knowledge production and knowledge transfer in and on Central/Inner Asia. The seminar was organised in the context of a large-scale three-year (2014-2016) programme on the subject of 'Rethinking Asian Studies in a Global Context', managed by the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS) (Leiden, the Netherlands) and funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation in New York. Within the framework of this overarching programme, the Ulaanbaatar seminar was designed to strengthen the dialogue between American/European and Central/Inner Asian scholars in a rapidly changing world, in which new challenges are being faced by the emergence of new states, new alliances, new world views and national narratives, new modes of information collection and transfer, but also by diminishing interest in Central/Inner Asian studies in America and a reduction in available funds for research worldwide.

Irina Morozova, Alexander Cooley and Willem Vogelsang

THE SEMINAR, organised by IIAS together with Ulaanbaatar University and the newly established International Unit for Central and Inner Asian Studies, focused on four related issues, namely:

- a) the evolution of the study of Central/Inner Asian history and society in the past and in recent years, highlighting the problems being faced in a rapidly changing world (abstracts published in this Focus by Jigjid Boldbaatar, Nikolai Kradin, and Irina Morozova);
- b) information collection and information accessibility for scholars worldwide in the field of Central/Inner Asian studies (abstracts published in this Focus by Timur Dadabaev, Ablet Kamalov, Morris Rossabi);
- c) the contextual and technical problems in publishing research findings by Asian scholars for a global audience (abstract by Andrew Wachtel published in this Focus);
- d) the future of institutional academic research in and on Central and Inner Asia in view of recent global events and new political structures and ideological constraints (abstracts published in this Focus by Alexander Cooley, Nargis Kassenova).

#### Challenges for Central/Inner Asia research and researchers

The two-day seminar in Ulaanbaatar, impeccably hosted by Academician Boldbaatar and his team from Ulaanbaatar University, led to a large number of observations that were astutely summarized by Alexander Cooley of Columbia University at the end of the second day. One of the main points, not unexpected yet unfortunately still of paramount importance in the study of Central and Inner Asia, is the fragmentation of academic research. If there has been any change in this situation, it has been for the worse.

A number of factors that play a major role in this development came up during the discussions time and again. These include the tension between ethno-nationalistic historiography on the one hand, and on the other a more objective, and international academic approach to the study of the history and modern developments in the region; the Soviet legacies and the differences in academic traditions; the problems of access to archival materials; the collection and interpretation of orally transmitted information; the new assumptions after the period of perestroika; the geo-politicisation of Central and Inner Asia area research and its use for intelligence and security-related purposes; the existing hierarchies of knowledge production on Central/Inner Asia; and the problems for Asian scholars in gaining access to international debates, to online sources and databases, and in having their research findings published in international peer-reviewed journals and book series.

On top of these problems, the decline for the last 25 years, in post-Soviet and post-socialist countries, in educational standards and in previously developed academic traditions, paralleled the destruction of social institutions. Secondly, Central and Inner Asian scholars find themselves in an academic environment that lacks funding for independent research. Funds available for research in Central and Inner Asian countries are limited. There is also, in many countries, a fear of attracting foreign (Western) funds and expertise. This specific problem is exacerbated by the dwindling interest in the US and Europe for Central and Inner Asia in general, which translates itself in fewer funds being available for research. In a vicious circle, promising students in Central and Inner Asia are thus discouraged from pursuing independent research, in the end negatively affecting the number and quality of future researchers.

What also became clear during the discussions was the lack of cooperation and dialogue between Asian scholars themselves. They only seem to meet at roundtables and conferences organised from the outside, by mainly Western organisations. This situation strengthens the relative isolation of Asian scholars, who often have to compete with more nationalistically minded scholars that are far better supported by politicians and the ruling establishment of their respective countries. The newly founded International Unit for Central and Inner Asian Studies (IUCIAS), with its regional centre established in an Asian country (Mongolia), would in this respect be a step in the right direction. It has the specific aim of regularly bringing together Asian scholars in an international context. In 2014, immediately following the seminar being discussed here, it organised together with IIAS and Ulaanbaatar University, an international three-day conference on Central and Inner Asian studies.

Discussed at length during the seminar, on the basis of papers with sometimes very different topics, was the often rather 'colonial' relationship between Western researchers on the one hand, and local Asian scholars on the other. In many cases, because of their deficient academic training, lack of funding, and perhaps a lack of prestige in their own country, local scholars find themselves in the position of assistants to Western researchers, who not only have the funds, but also the academic background and training, and language skills, to 'dictate' the research programme and to publish their findings in international peer-reviewed journals, thereby delegating the role of Asian scholars to that of informants. The reverse problem is the appropriation by some Central and Inner Asian scholars of the 'anti-colonial' rhetoric in order to hide their own shortcomings and the lack of results in collective projects. Soviet or Russian trained scholars often find themselves in a better position, since their academic training is in general far

Above: Panorama of Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. Image reproduced under a Creative Commons license, courtesy of Jargalsaikhan Dorjnamjil on Flickr.com.

## New challenges for independent research



better than that offered to the younger generations in the Central and Inner Asian states, but they, when working in these states, are often regarded with some suspicion, not only because of their background, but also because they, and American and European scholars in general, tend to go against the ethno-nationalistic approaches that have been adapted by many of the governments in Central and Inner Asia. What is clear therefore, is that the tension between American and European research on the region and that by Asian scholars is not a clear-cut East-West division, but also a disunion that is felt in Central and Inner Asia itself. Another tension that has affected the overall development of Central/Inner Asian studies is the division between 'Western' on the one hand, and post-Soviet/post-socialist scholars on the other, on their interpretations of the Cold War and its aftermath. Legacies of some of the Cold War ideologies seem to persist.

### The way forward

What to do? The difficult situation in which more internationally minded Asian scholars have to work, with lack of funding, training, and prestige, are regarded as paramount obstacles to the development of Central and Inner Asian studies. Editors and editorial teams from the field's journals are certainly aware of the problem and are increasingly requesting support to work with scholars from the region so that they better understand these publication and review norms. Donors and foundations could support the editorial and translation process, so that regional scholars are not at a disadvantage simply because they are not aware of Western publication norms. Another interesting initiative, next to that of other academic institutions in Central and Inner Asia, is undertaken by the American University of Central Asia. It will establish degree study programmes in regional studies within the region that attract Western and regional students, and are staffed by scholars and instructors from different institutional backgrounds. Potentially, this could make the region a magnet for Western students and a site of genuine learning and exchange, and not just a resource for them during the course of their Western graduate studies.

Another recommendation is to establish a new professional organization to assist in the support and networking of Asian scholars in particular. The establishment of IUCIAS is seen as a step in the right direction, because it will help in bringing Asian scholars together to exchange their research results and, in general, to exchange experiences and find mutual support. Non-Asian scholars and institutions can also play a role, in making sure that their research on Central and Inner Asia is not only shared with their Asian colleagues, but that the Asian scholars

are also actively included in the research, and receive credit for their work and contribution on collaborative projects. Asian scholars should in this process be encouraged and assisted in preparing their own research findings in international, peer-reviewed journals. In this way, Central and Inner Asian studies will become a truly global enterprise, with a large input by Asian scholars who receive due credit for their work, and may thus raise awareness among the ruling classes of their home countries, including their scholarly institutions, as to their value in international dialogue and the proper understanding of their country.

Outside assistance remains important. The dwindling interest among European and American countries towards Central and Inner Asia, which are rapidly becoming the playing field between the Russian Federation and China, is a sad, and in the end self-defeating policy. There is the geo-political issue, but also the knowledge and experience in Central and Inner Asian studies collected in Europe and America, and the wealth of archives and other research materials, constitute an enormous reservoir for further study, by both Asian and non-Asian scholars. With a decrease in European/American funds, with the loss of government-funded programmes like Title VI (also for American/European scholars conducting research in their own countries), and the concurrent dwindling number of Western scholars studying the region, many of these resources will become understudied or even inaccessible.

The IIAS/Mellon seminar in Ulaanbaatar provided a somewhat pessimistic picture of Central and Inner Asian studies. However, critically, the seminar moved beyond platitudes and general assumptions to pinpoint the specific problems, so that steps can be taken to remedy the situation. Among the participants of the seminar (and ensuing international conference), there was an overall sentiment of rising up to the challenges posed. The next IIAS/Mellon seminar, which will take place in Regensburg, Germany, in the summer of 2015, will again bring together Asian and non-Asian scholars, while IUCIAS will continue its endeavours, together with IIAS and the institutional assistance by Ulaanbaatar, to turn the international conference on Central and Inner Asia into a biennial event.

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