

Publishing challenges for local Central Asian scholars

Scholars of Central and Inner Asia who come from the region face two major hurdles in publishing their findings for an international audience. The first has to do with the constitution of their field of study and is related to problems faced by all scholars (local or foreign) who deal with fields that have, on the one hand high qualification requirements, and on the other appear marginal to most outsiders. The second has to do particularly with the training these scholars generally receive, the kinds of institutions they work in, and the need foreign scholars in this field have for local knowledge.

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High qualification requirements

If we focus on the first, we see quickly that Central or Inner Asian Studies do not differ too much from Balkan Studies (which I happen to know quite well) or African Studies. What characterizes these fields? In order to be competent, the scholar needs to know much that few people know, and that knowledge takes a long time to acquire. First and foremost, I have in mind languages. Of course, it is possible to do work on Central or Inner Asia with only English and Russian, but what one can do is exceptionally limited. In reality, to do serious work, one should have English, Russian, a Turkic language, a Persian language and perhaps Chinese. Even for locals, the amount of time needed simply to amass the basic linguistic requirements (the ante price, we could call it) is large.

Because it takes so long to achieve what is needed for basic competence, however, and because life is short, the people who achieve it often do not have time to achieve other competencies that are absolutely necessary for

dealing with international publishing. First and foremost, the time they spend learning languages and getting field experience is time they do not spend learning the basic disciplinary and interdisciplinary discourses that are the coin of the realm for their foreign colleagues, who have the good fortune to study less obscure fields where the entry requirements are lower or are possessed by more people (by the way, it should be noted that the situation of local and non-local specialists on Central and Inner Asia does not differ in this regard).

Marginal to most outsiders

At the same time, the field has no *a priori* interest to anyone outside it. This again is a problem faced by both local and foreign scholars. If you study the US or China or any other big place, scholars who do not work on your topic have at least a glancing interest in it (or at the very least they are embarrassed to admit that they don't care about it). If you study Central and Inner Asia, you do not have the luxury of automatic interest.

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You need to do one of two things to get it. Either you need to have a topic that is *sui generis* (and therefore that your colleagues in other fields might care about) or you have to show how your field of study requires a rethinking of (or at least a modification of) the basic paradigms of scholarly discourse, which are almost always developed by scholars focusing on 'mainstream' regions.

The former case is rare and only happens by chance. Thus, Islamic studies, which was once just as obscure as Central or Inner Asian studies, has over the past 25 years become a topic about which one can publish in all sorts of international journals, because world events have thrust it into the forefront of interest. However, the things one can say about the topic are limited by what scholars in more mainstream fields want to hear. Thus, it is easy to publish on Islamic fundamentalism, but much harder to publish on everyday Islam.

Central and Inner Asian studies, however, have few, if any areas that are of automatic interest to anyone outside the region (perhaps energy policy?). As a result, it is not easy to publish by focusing on *sui generis* issues, because these issues are so unique as to be utterly uninteresting to colleagues outside the field. Therefore it is hard to get a hearing in the kinds of disciplinary journals in which good colleagues from other fields get to publish.

Instead, what is left is to take the road of showing how material from Central Asia allows (or forces) scholars who work on other regions to reconsider what they think we know about their own fields. But here we again run into the problem noted above. Because local scholars have spent many years building up local knowledge, but have not had the necessary level of exposure to the broad questions of their fields, they often do not know how to use the material they have acquired in a comparative way. To be sure, this problem is also faced by their foreign colleagues, but those colleagues have the advantage of native fluency in a major foreign language and at least an undergraduate education in a relatively broad field of studies outside the Central Asian context.

The result of this situation is a strange kind of scholarly colonialism. The smartest outsiders use local scholars as 'native informants', who can provide information that can be used by foreign colleagues. In the best-case scenario, these local scholars are credited as co-editors on the papers of foreign scholars, while in the worst they merely become paid research assistants receiving minimal credit for their work. Either way, it is hard for the local person to become a full-fledged scholar in his/her own right.

Institutional setting

To break out of this trap is exceptionally difficult for local scholars. In most cases, they have done their undergraduate work at substandard local universities (for even the best of those universities, and I would count the American University of Central Asia (Bishkek) among them, are not so great by world standards). When they go abroad to do graduate work, they bring with them good knowledge of one or two local languages and a working fluency in English and Russian. Trying to catch up with colleagues who have gone to better universities is not easy, but perhaps they more or less manage to do so. When they return home, however, they find themselves outside of the type of institutional setting that allows them to develop further. They often do not have good access to foreign publications, they do not have English language editors who can help them place their articles, they work in not very good universities and in not very good conditions, they may be paid enough to live reasonably well in their home countries, but not enough to be actively involved in international research, and they are in a limited amount of demand as 'local informants'.

Small wonder then that they have trouble publishing independently and making a breakthrough on the international scene when they work in obscure institutions on topics that few people care about, and carry a heavy baggage of knowledge but not much awareness of why it could be interesting to anyone else.

There is, unfortunately, no magic wand to solve the problems outlined above, many of which, as I have noted, are not limited to scholars of Central and Inner Asia but are pretty typical across a wide range of 'obscure' academic fields. The Academic Fellowship Program that used to be organized by the Open Society Foundations was one attempt to overcome the problems, but based on the experience of my own institution, I cannot say that it was all that successful (at least in this regard – it was quite successful in other ways). In the long run, perhaps the best way is to make sure that local university graduates interested in studying their own region are told, as early as possible, what obstacles they will face and that they need to focus on making their work legible and relevant for non-specialists.

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