

CONFERENCE REPORTS

The 13th Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies, 2013

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The Thirteenth Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies (IATS) was held in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia on 21-27 July 2013. The Seminar was convened by the Mongolian Academy of Sciences with organisational assistance from Dr Hildegard Diemberger and her team at the Mongolia and Inner Asia Studies Unit, Cambridge, and was hosted at the National University of Mongolia. This was one of the largest international academic conferences to be held in Mongolia and by far the biggest gathering of Tibet scholars to date. 730 paper abstracts were received for the conference, and just under 500 scholars attended and participated from over 30 countries. A number of senior Tibet scholars noted how unimaginable the scale, diversity and location of this year's event would have been at the first IATS Seminar at the University of Oxford in 1979. Whilst it was encouraging to see strong attendance from scholars from Mongolia and Russia, to the frustration of everyone involved last minute travel restrictions were imposed by the Chinese authorities on many scholars coming from Tibet and China.

Only the second IATS conference to be held in Asia (the first was the 5th Seminar held in Narita, Japan in 1989), it was particularly fitting that Mongolia be the venue in 2013, exactly 100 years after the signing of the Tibeto-Mongol Treaty in 1913. The strong cultural, religious and political connection between Tibet and Mongolia over the centuries was highlighted in the opening plenary speeches, and was a running theme through a number of the panels. These covered topics including Mongolian Buddhist art, connections between Amdo and the Mongols, medicine and astrology in Tibet and Mongolia, and the implications of increasing urbanisation in both regions. A number of papers also reflected on the resurgence of Buddhism within Mongolia in the last two decades. The seminar provided an unprecedented opportunity to strengthen networks between Tibet scholars in Mongolia and across the world, and to forge new institutional and personal connections.

The seminar's opening and closing ceremonies were held at the

imposing Independence Palace, just off Sukhbaatar Square in central Ulaanbaatar. Speakers at the opening plenary session included: Academician B Enkhtuvshin, President of the Mongolian Academy of Sciences; Professor A Galtbayar, Acting President of the National University of Mongolia; His Eminence Khamba Lama Gabju D. Choijamts, Abbot of Gandan Tegchenling Monastery; and the outgoing IATS President, Professor Charles Ramble. The seminar also saw the launch of the Mongolian Association for Tibetan Studies, and the election of the new IATS President. Professor Tsering Shakya, Canada Research Chair in Religion and Contemporary Society in Asia at the University of British Columbia was elected by IATS members during the closing event, and will serve for a six-year term.

The Mongolian convenors organised a wide range of cultural programmes for the participants including a fantastic series of performances by the Mongolian National Song and Dance Academic Ensemble with throat singing, traditional and contemporary dance, 'long songs' and the impressive National Orchestra of Mongolia. Visits to Gandan monastery and the Bogd Kahn palace museum were also arranged and there were plenty of opportunities for networking and socialising and in city's restaurants and bars in the evenings. Many participants also took the opportunity to travel beyond Ulaanbaatar before or after the conference.

The 63 panels held over six days covered a huge diversity of topics and reflected the current vibrancy of Tibet studies. IATS has a long tradition of providing a forum at which both established and aspiring scholars can present original academic research, and it was particularly encouraging to see large numbers of young scholars attend an IATS seminar for the first time. A key feature of the 13th Seminar was a series of memorial sessions held to honour and celebrate leading Tibetologists who had passed away in recent years. These included: a tribute to André Alexander's contributions to the study of Tibetan architecture, architectural preservation and Tibetan cultural heritage (convened under the aegis of the Committee for the Study of Historic Tibetan Architecture), a memorial session on Luciano Petech's impressive and diverse work on Tibetan history, and a series of sessions celebrating Gene Smith's invaluable work on Tibetan digital texts. The latter was a particularly strong theme in the conference, with sessions on Tibet information technology bringing together both technical specialists and those who use such technologies

'on the ground' within the region. Recurrent across the six days were packed out classrooms in the National University of Mongolia's impressive buildings in central Ulaanbaatar, with participants filling every space to hear paper presentations and contribute to lively discussion. Particularly popular panels included Holly Gayley and Nicole Willock's session on 'The Secular in Tibet', Matthew Kapstein's workshop on Tibetan manuscripts and a series of sessions on 'Post-revolutionary narratives – early Tibetan encounters with the Chinese Communists' organised by Benno Weiner, Françoise Robin, Robert Barnett, with insightful discussant comments from Uradyn Bulag.

As well as featuring panels on research pertaining to Amdo and Kham, and on the Bon tradition, Sakya studies and Nyingma studies, the conference also reflected wider understandings of 'Tibet' as a region with thought-provoking panels on Bhutan and Sikkim, transnational Tibetan identities, and the idea of 'greater Tibet' itself. A series of panels addressed aspects of culture and the arts, from ritual dance and musical traditions to new research on Tibetan folk literature and on the Gesar epic. An emerging theme at this year's event was also a focus on environmental issues, with panels on changing livelihoods on the Tibetan plateau and on nomadic religious traditions, as well as a day-long series of sessions on changing climate in the region which featured anthropologists, religious scholars, ecologists and geographers. Indeed, this reflected the widening range of disciplines engaging with the Tibetan region, diversifying the field beyond its traditional focus on religion, history, linguistics and art. Whilst a number of the panels with participants from Tibet/ China ended up having many gaps in their programmes, for those who were able to travel and participate, the event was a rare opportunity for Tibetan scholars from both sides of the Himalaya to meet and exchange ideas. This exchange was fostered by a number of sessions being conducted entirely in Tibetan.

The success of the seminar was an important reflection of the strength of Tibet studies as a dynamic and growing field of research which is contributing in important ways to a range of broader theoretical and empirical concerns. The event was possible thanks to co-sponsorship in Mongolia from the Centre of Mongolian Buddhists, the National Library, the National Museum of Mongolian History, the National Archives and Gandantegchinlen Monastery. Generous support was also received from

Ev-K2-CNR, Italy, the Mongolia and Inner Asia Studies Unit, Cambridge, the Network for University Co-operation Tibet-Norway, the Sigrid Rausing Scholarly Exchange, Cambridge, The Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation, New York and The Trace Foundation, New York. Bids are currently being considered for the 14th IATS Seminar, to be held in summer 2016. Panel and paper titles can be viewed here: <http://www.iats.info/panels-and-sessions/> and paper abstracts will be available on the IATS website in the future (www.iats.info).