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13th Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies

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Conference Reports

13th Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies

**Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia
21-27 July 2013**

Tibetologists from around the world gathered in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia from 21-27 July 2013 for the 13th Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies (IATS). Despite the long history shared between Tibetans and Mongols, this was the first IATS seminar to be convened in Mongolia.

The International Association for Tibetan Studies is a global organization devoted to the academic study and research of all aspects of Tibetan civilization. The first seminar took place at Oxford University in July 1979, convened by the late Michael Aris of St. Antony's College, Oxford. IATS had formed out of an earlier meeting of young Tibetologists organized by Per Kvaerne and Martin Brauen in Zurich in June 1977 (since then a new International Seminar of Young Tibetologists has been established). The International Association for Tibetan Studies meeting generally takes place every three years at differing locales around the world.

The 13th Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies in Ulaanbaatar was hosted by the Mongolian Academy of Sciences (MAS) in association with the National University of Mongolia (NUM). This was one of the largest meetings of Tibetologists with over 600 participants—almost as many participants as the

12th IATS Seminar held in Vancouver, Canada in 2010. The organizers reported an unconfirmed number of approximately 150 late withdrawals from the over 750 registrations, many of whom were Tibetologists from the People's Republic of China who had been denied permission to leave the country just days prior to the conference or while at the airport. Participants traveled from all corners of the globe—from other Asian countries, North and South America, as well as Europe and Australia—to meet in the beautiful capital of Mongolia, now called Ulaanbaatar, and known historically as Urga.

Outgoing IATS president, Professor Charles Ramble (University of Oxford and École pratique des hautes études, Sorbonne, Paris), stated, “How fitting that it should be held in Ulaanbaatar! Mongolia and Tibet have a history of political and religious interaction that goes back at least to the 13th century, and shared a stratum of popular culture that surely extends into an even more distant past. The present seminar is a landmark opportunity to reinforce these bonds with the many strands of intellectual enquiry that make up the rich fabric of modern Tibetan studies” <<http://tibet.net/2013/07/23/mongolia-hosts-the-biggest-gathering-of-tibet-scholars>>. The joint conveners included: Dr. S. Chuluun (Institute of History, MAS), Dr. U. Bulag (University of Cambridge), Dr. D. Bum-Ochir (NUM) and Dr. Ulrike Roesler (University of Oxford).

Growing interest in this fast developing field was marked with the founding of a Mongolian Association for Tibetan Studies on the occasion of the 13th IATS Seminar and the election of its first president, Yangjin Suren, the day before the conference started. Reflecting the astounding growth in the field of Tibetan Studies over the past thirty-plus years, the panels and papers covered a wide array of topics from astronomy and astrology to the latest in Tibetan information technology. In total, there were 45 panels and 17 sessions; a full list is available on the IATS website <<http://www.iats.info/panels-and-sessions/>>.

Since the 12th Seminar of IATS in August of 2010, we have lost three great luminaries of Tibetan Studies: Luciano Petech (8 June 1914 – 29 September 2010), Gene Smith (10 August 1936 – 16 December 2010) and Andre Alexander (17 January 1965 – 21 January 2012). In recognition of their respective contributions to scholarship in Tibetan Studies, commemorative sessions were devoted to each of these great scholars, illuminating further research in areas that each had pioneered in their lifetime.

The conveners worked with a number of co-sponsors in Mongolia including the Center of Mongolian Buddhists, the National Library, the National Museum of Mongolian History, the National Archives, and others. The doors to these organizations and others were opened to visiting scholars, displaying Mongolia's rich collections of Tibetological texts and artifacts. There was a guided visit to

Gandantegchinlen Monastery led by Professor Vesna Wallace (University of California, Santa Barbara), who has long fostered relations with Mongolian scholars, in cooperation with the monk-leaders of Gandantegchinlen Monastery's library, Munkhbaatar and Dashka. Tibetologists were not only awed by the architecture of the many temples on site, but also by the priceless texts and objects held in the two impressive libraries. When panels were not in session, scholars also feasted their eyes on the magnificent works by the great 17th century sculptor of Buddhist statues, Öndör Gegeen Zanabazar at two locations: at a museum devoted to this great artist and also at the Chojin Lama Museum.

Another important example of scholarly cooperation between Mongolia and the international community of Tibetologists was the recent rediscovery of an important Tibetan-language historical document entitled "The 1913 Tibeto-Mongol Treaty of Friendship and Alliance." Many had thought this document to be fictitious, lost, or destroyed, but it was recently found in the National Archives of Mongolia. This important document, signed on 2 February 1913, proclaimed the independence of Mongolian and Tibetan States a hundred years ago (cf. Elliot Sperling in *Lungta* Issue 17, Dharamsala, Amnye Machen Institute, Spring 2013).

On the eve of the final day of the conference, Tsering Shakya (Canadian Research Chair in Religion and Contemporary Society in Asia, Institute for Asian Research at the University of British Columbia) was named president of the International Association for Tibetan Studies. Professor Shakya, the author of *Dragon in the Land of Snows: A History of Modern Tibet since 1947* (Penguin Compass, 2000) and numerous articles, had convened the 12th seminar in Vancouver in 2010.

The presidential term lasts six to eight years, so he will preside over the 14th and 15th IATS Seminars. The General Secretary of IATS is Professor Hildegard Diemberger (University of Cambridge, UK). The other members of the Advisory Board can be found on the IATS website <<http://www.iats.info/people/>>.

In all, the 13th Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies established new relationships with Mongolian scholars, helped Tibetologists across the world reconnect and forge deeper ties, and saw the establishment of new initiatives in Tibetan Studies. All of these endeavors reflect the continued growth of Tibetology as well as its sub-disciplines, and make for an exciting future full of possibilities.

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The Bhutanese Refugee Re-settlement Experience

**SOAS, University of London
22-23 May 2013**

Bhutanese refugees represent an ethnically and linguistically Nepali minority group that fled southern Bhutan in the early 1990s (Michael Hutt. 2003. *Unbecoming Citizens: Culture, Nationhood, and the Flight of Refugees from Bhutan*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press). Refugees traveled initially to Nepal, where the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) established a series of camps for their protection. In 2007, after nearly two decades of refugee camp life, host countries in North America and Europe as well as Australia agreed to accept Bhutanese refugees for resettlement. Today, most Bhutanese refugees have been

resettled, with the majority residing in the United States; around one third of the population remains in camps (2014 UNHCR Regional Operations Profile: South Asia. *Bhutan*. <<http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e48766.html>>).

The Bhutanese Refugee Re-settlement Experience, a workshop hosted by SOAS in May 2013, sought to gather scholars and practitioners working in this context of radical migratory transition. The event took place over the course of two days and featured presentations from a range of disciplines and perspectives. Co-facilitators included Dr. Tania Kaiser, an anthropologist focused on migration studies, and Dr. Michael Hutt, a recognized expert in Nepali languages and cultures and one of the few researchers to do direct fieldwork in Bhutan during the mass exodus of refugees from the country in the early 1990s (Michael Hutt. 2013. Editorial. *European Bulletin of Himalayan Research* 43). Thanks to the generous support of the organizing committee, conference participants represented resettlement communities in North America, Europe, and Australia as well as the region in which the refugee camps are located in Nepal.

Presentation topics were diverse and covered a range of issues related to the impact of resettlement. At the most general level, a number of researchers focused on shifts in collective identities in the context of Bhutanese refugee migration. Roz Evans, for example, considered the hopes of young Bhutanese refugees for post-resettlement life as well as the realities they met with. Sreeja Balarajan reflected on the transition to the composite identity of Nepali-Bhutanese-American. My own presentation drew on data from both the camps and a resettled community (in Burlington, VT) in exploring