

## Mongolia and Inner Asia Studies

U. Bulag  
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Although I generally accept the term "Mongolia and Inner Asia", largely because it is already an established terminology, I would like to see that Inner Asia be rid of much of present-day connotations such as 'inner hinterland', or frontier of China or Russia. We have to define Inner Asia in such a way as to make it something important, something that can make tremendous contribution to world academic discipline. Without making this stance, we are merely binding our own hands and live in a self-imposed marginality. The strategy is to make Inner Asia from a marginal position to something central. I haven't found out how to do that. But recent discussions on marginality, hybridity, critique of orientalism, etc. are important examples and insight from which we could draw some inspiration.

Owen Lattimore's study of Inner Asia as a frontier zone is useful. We could build on this. What is unique of Inner Asia is it is a special cultural zone. It is not a pure land or people, but a meeting place of various civilisations. It would be difficult to delineate a single cultural pattern; most people are bilingual or trilingual, or even multi-lingual. It thus provides a special 'field' for our study. It is a study of interaction, material and spiritual. It is not a study of something pure, as if they are living in vacuums. It is in this interaction we find myriad of interesting cultural, economic, political and religious phenomena. My suggestion is to develop borderlands studies, to study particular mixed cultures of borderlanders.

Once we make this field into such a category, we are then able to elevate the culture of the region from something marginal to something significant. We can then afford to say that the borderlanders are special categories of people. The study is important, because we can now see increasing interaction of peoples across political and cultural boundaries; we see numerous conflicts.

Within such a general theoretical framework, we can then proceed to analyse the cultural elements of the region. We should be able to understand what cultural elements are emphasised, and how those elements lead to peaceful co-existence or bloody conflict. We have numerous things to study, for example the indigenous cultures as proposed by

Carrie. However, we should be careful not to essentialise certain cultural criteria, otherwise we are no more than creating another kind of orientalism. What I would like to see is a kind of dynamic process, discourses, or bargains, or negotiations, or compromises of different cultures in the borderlands, rather than static cultural construction.

All this is easier said than done. However, the framework I outlined above should be operationable without restricting individual's ingenuity and be presenting a unique Cambridge perspective or approach to the studies of the region. I would like to see Carrie to write or edit a position paper or book, something like Clifford's *Writing Culture* or Zito's *Body Politics in China* book. Once such a work is produced, it becomes a starting point for a ball-rolling process. The advantage of such an approach would be that it lays a foundation, but not give a definition; it invites people across disciplines to think of the region in different kinds of ways. It set in motion an academic machinery.

It is a great tragedy that there is basically little dialogue between Inner Asian scholars and western scholars, despite the fact they work in the same 'field'. This is compounded by the fact that there is almost nothing written to assess the indigenous academic development and achievement. Anthropologists working in the 'Inner Asian' field often assume that our job is to do fieldwork, to observe people's everyday life. We seem to have an intuitive aversion for the high culture generations of Inner Asian scholars have aspired to develop. It is time to discard our old mentality. It is time to dialogue with Inner Asian scholars.

I have much admiration for the late Professor Gellner. His work on the *Soviet Thought and Society* was ingenious; it effectively removed many myths about the Soviet anthropology, and it helped western anthropologists to appreciate the works of Soviet anthropologists. I tend to believe that potentially we could also do a similar study, systematically analysing the high culture developed by Inner Asian anthropologists, historians or literary scholars. This approach I believe corresponds Carrie's suggestion that we collaborate with native scholars to uncover and define baseline native concepts.