Central Asia Initiative:
Mobility and Governability in Central Asia

An International Conference

Saturday, October 18, 2008
9:00 AM - 5:00 PM
Tom Bradley International Hall
Los Angeles, CA 90095

Co-sponsored by the UCLA International Institute and the Center for European and Eurasian Studies.
Mobility and Governability in Central Asia: Questions and Issues

Approaching the theme of Mobility and Governability from both a historical perspective and the thematic perspectives of the arts and religions of Central Asia, the conference seeks to identify and explore long-term Central Asian social or cultural characteristics of the region’s social, political, religious and artistic formations. A special concern is the impact of Central Asia’s distinctive geographical environments on the human scale of social and cultural activity. The basic parameters of the conference are framed by two key questions: Does mobility enable or disable governability? If so, what is the nature of this interaction between governability and mobility in different times and places?

One set of wider questions concerns historical perspectives on mobility and governability. What gets left out by thinking in terms of clear periodizations in Central Asian history, whether from mobile to sedentary government or from Islamic to Russian/Soviet rule? How have practical forms of mobility responded to the changing ideological contours of government? To what extent has the relationship between mobility and governability been re-shaped by technological innovations, whether of paper, stirrups or railroads? Does the geography of Central Asia demand ‘structuralist’ interpretations, with the environment seen as perpetually shaping human practices of mobility and governability?

A second set of questions turns to archaeological and artistic perspectives on mobility and governability. How have artistic and other material productions drawn on patterns of movement and/or government? Does the material record bear out a ‘Silk Road’ model of east/west diffusion? Or has an over-emphasis on movement seen artistic ‘spaces’ being lost on the ‘roads’ of Central Asia?

A third set of questions concerns religious perspectives. How have Central Asian religions interacted with regional patterns of mobility and governability? Has the mobility/governability nexus created common characteristics among the ‘different’ religions of Central Asia? Was religion—whether in terms of persons, institutions or theologies—more mobile in Central Asia than elsewhere?

Nile Green, Chair of the UCLA Central Asia Initiative
Mobility and Governability in Central Asia
October 18, 2008

Program

Introduction
9:00  Coffee

9:15  Welcome by J. Nicholas Entrikin, Acting Vice-Provost, International Institute

9:30  Opening Remarks by Nile Green, UCLA

Morning Session: Histories
Chair: Sanjay Subrahmanyam, UCLA

9:45  Lothar von Falkenhausen, UCLA
Archaeological Sidelights on Central Asia

10:30  Devin DeWeese, Indiana University, Bloomington
The Missing Middle: Broad Brushes and Narrower Perspectives on the Historiography of Central Asia in the Islamic Period

11:15  Coffee break

11:30  M. Nazif Shahrani, Indiana University, Bloomington
Mobility, Subjugation and States in 19th & 20th Century Central Asia

12:15  Buffet Lunch in Salon 5-6

Afternoon Session: Cultures
Chair: Gregory Schopen, UCLA

2:00  Introduction

2:15  Françoise Aubin, Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS), France
Rambling Reflections about Mobility and Governability of Religious Phenomena and Systems in Inner Asia

3:00  Susan Whitfield, British Library, UK
Reframing the Artistic Spaces of Central Asia

3:45  Coffee break

4:00  David Christian, San Diego State University
Mobile Army, Sedentary Tax Base: Mobility and Sedentarism in the Mongol and Russian Empires

4:45  Summary Remarks by Nile Green, UCLA

5:00  Close
Lothar Von Falkenhausen  
Professor of Art History and Associate Director of the Cotsen Institute of Archaeology, UCLA  
*Archaeological Sidelights on Central Asia*

Our ideas about the history of Central Asia have been largely shaped by the archaeological discoveries made since the beginning of the twentieth century. To-date, in spite of a wealth of incidental information, such tasks as reconstructing cultural sequences and identifying specific ancient ethnic groups still remain largely unsolved. As this lecture will illustrates, one major challenge for the archaeologist lies in accounting for the dynamics of population change over long time spans.

Devin DeWeese  
Professor of Central Eurasian Studies, Indiana University, Bloomington  
*The Missing Middle: Broad Brushes and Narrower Perspectives on the Historiography of Central Asia in the Islamic Period*

This presentation will address major problems in the study of Central Asian history in the Islamic period (i.e., from the Arab conquest to the Russian conquest), outlining some reasons for the region’s neglect, especially in the period from the 16th to 19th century; in the context of the themes of mobility and governability, it will suggest some tendencies that impede or undermine a better understanding of Central Asian history, both from an ‘internal’ perspective and from the perspective of those for whom the region is a periphery or transit zone. Among the issues to be addressed are: patterns in the integration of sedentary/urban and steppe-based nomadic political principles; statist preferences and the illusion of ‘imperial’ structures; modes of legitimation vs. practicalities of governance; historical approaches to nomadic societies; top-down models of change (especially religious change) and the processes they conceal; new regimes and narratives of decline; Soviet and post-Soviet historiographical projections; and lingering reluctance to engage the sources.

M. Nazif Shahrani  
Professor of Anthropology, Central Asian and Middle Eastern Studies, and Chair of the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures, Indiana University, Bloomington  
*Mobility, Subjugation and States in 19th & 20th Century Central Asia*

Central Asia before the nineteenth century was the home of legendary mounted nomadic horsemen who conquered the sedentary agriculture-based societies to the south and established powerful imperial dynasties. The area was also the key link on the vital ancient Silk Road between China and the West as well as the Indian subcontinent and the Muslim Middle East. By the middle of the 19th century, however, Central Asia had become the object of so called “Great Game” by the Russian, British and Chinese colonial powers, eventually leading to the suffering, subjugation, fragmentation, large-scale sedentarization, and prolonged isolation of the peoples of Central Asia well into the last decades of the 20th century. This presentation will examine the effects of various types of indigenous and externally imposed colonial state structures on spatial mobility, as practiced by the subjects or induced by the state policies, affecting the subjugation or governability of those they attempted to rule. More specifically, the impact of the policies and practices of the following types of states upon their subjects’ mobility will be discussed:  
* indigenous decentralized aristocratic orders among pastoral nomads on the Steppes;  
* various sedentary Khanates/Emirates of Turkistan, constantly in turmoil due to succession feuds within or at war with other competitors both nomadic and sedentary;  
* encroaching colonial imperial states of tsarist Russia, British India and China;
* the USSR as an “empire of nations”;
* post-colonial buffer nation-state of Afghanistan;
* the post-Soviet independent successor states of Central Asia—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan;
* and the post-Taliban militia-state in-the-making in Afghanistan.

The paper will discuss the differing valuation of various forms of spatial mobility by these states, their policies and practices effecting subjugation and governability, and the efficacy of such policies through time and space. It will also highlight challenges posed by the forces of globalization which have induced new forms of mobility of people, commodities, NGOs, international organizations, and cultural ideas—e.g., the transnational exodus of peoples; labor migrations (both transnational and rural-urban); immigrants; shopping tourists; trafficking in persons (TIP); satellite dishes and solar panels; cassettes, CDs and DVDs; human rights advocates; refugees and diaspora communities; armed and highly mobile transnational rebels; international missionaries; IMF & World Bank; UNHCR & ILO; etc.—to governance by the new nation-states in post-Taliban and post-Soviet Central Asia. It will be argued that the state structures extant in Central Asia during the last two centuries have tried consistently to curtail mobility in order to establish state sovereignty. There has been no concerted effort, even in the post-Soviet and post-Taliban eras, to transform the conditions of Central Asian peoples from perpetual subjects of sovereign police-states (ra’yat/tab’a’/fuqara) to those of empowered citizens (shahrwand or grazhdan) by adopting the technologies of governamentality in the Foucauldian sense. Therefore, the appropriateness and efficacy of the extant sovereignty-based modern nation-state system for the governance of increasingly globalized, mobile multi-ethnic and multi-national societies in Central Asia, as the appropriate vehicle of governance for the twenty-first century, will be questioned.

Françoise Aubin
Research Director Emerita, Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS), France

Rambling Reflections about Mobility and Governability of Religious Phenomena and Systems in Inner Asia

The treatment of the huge and diversified space of Inner Asia as a continuous unit with no political or linguistic boundaries looks a very timely idea. Having the honor to launch the religious side of the project, I would prefer, rather than dealing with Islam, to draw attention first to the most ancient form of a religious system known in the northern part of the region and then to its eastern part which is supposed to be the cradle of the first Turkish peoples. And I shall base my argument on some more or less recent publications, generally by French authors.

1) Shamanism (the word being taken in its more restrictive meaning)

a. Shamanism is a highly flexible form of symbolic system characteristic of North Asian societies. It was found as a central institution only among the hunting societies of the Siberian forest. Its purpose was to establish and handle a symbolic procedure meant for subsisting on hunting both legitimate and possible. Its basic principle is a symmetrical and reciprocal exchange relationship with the spirits of the wild animal species killed for food. Just as humans live on game, so game spirits are supposed to feed on humans, sucking their vital force. Thus, life is perpetuated among both humans and animals. During the periodical ritual staging of the exchange process, the shaman was to “marry” a female animal spirit of the main game species, insofar as marriage alliance was considered to be the most appropriate frame for carrying out the exchange. As a legitimate “husband” he took from her as much “good luck” (promises of game) as possible. As a representative of the human group, he tried to have the spirits take back as little human “vital force” as possible. The practice changes with the way of life, but it will always consist in obtaining “good luck” through negotiations with spirits. For these reasons, shamanism precludes any dogma, liturgy or clergy, as well as any kind of centralized power in society. The corresponding social system was dualistic, with moieties exchanging wives and helpers for hunting [R. Hamayon].
b. The case of the Buriats (the northern branch of the Mongol people) is interesting in that it presents a full range of situations, going from the genuine hunter of the forest to the nomadic cattle-breeder of the tundra and the steppe. The basic principle of social and religious relationship in a society of nomadic herdsmen is hierarchical and vertical, based on the social power of the clan (the image of a shaman climbing up the life tree must be associated with cattle breeders of the steppe and not with hunters of the Siberian forests) [Hamayon]. The holders of power in the afterlife are the ancestors’ souls; and the wealth they are expected to protect is the livestock—a capital whose annual interest is the young animals. The conflict between a political leader and a charismatic endowed with prophetic and supernatural talents is exemplified by the rivalry which sets Chinggis Khan against Kököchü Teb Tengeri [Secret History, par. 244-246].

c. Turkic nomads brought with them in their western march to present-day Turkey their shamanic perception of this earthly world and the otherworld. The meeting of Shamanism with Islam may be analyzed from two different viewpoints. It could happen that Shamanism has the advantage [Shamanism: An Encyclopedia of World Beliefs, Practices, and Culture]. But here I would prefer to consider the impact of shamanism on Islam, which has been detected in several occurrences: for example in the Golden Horde of the 14th century [D. DeWeese]; in the Central Asian phenomenon of baksylyk, from the Caspian Sea to the Tianshan [P. Garrone]; and in the Turkish bektashi-alevi syndrome [I. Mélikoff]. In these cases, could we evoke a pattern of syncretism? We will touch on this problem in the conclusion.

d. Thanks to its flexibility and under the influence of Western neo-shamanism, Shamanism has been able to adapt itself to the post-communist setting and then to embody a path to ethnic identity associated with modernity.

2) Tibetan Buddhism among the Mongols

a. Shamanism was a religious system transmitted mainly orally, following people in their adaptation to new economic and environmental situations and altering in consequence. Conversely, the diffusion of a religion endowed with a complex dogma and elaborate rituals, through a movement of conversion under the aegis of a political power, is illustrated by the transfer of Tibetan Buddhism among Mongolian peoples, gradually from south to north. The first wave of Buddhism from the Saska-pa and other contemporary schools happened during the Chinggisid period in China (13th-14th c.) so much that it became the state religion. A second decisive wave of the main Gelug-pa was implemented under the impetus of the Chinggisid Altan-khan (1507/8-1582), leader of the Tümed, in the second half of the 16th century and helped him to launch an aggressive movement of conquest. The conversion to Buddhism entailed the foundation of settled monasteries, which meant in the steppes a beginning of urbanization and sedentarization [I. Charleux]. In the 17th century, a new tide of imperial support to Tibetan Buddhism (which we call improperly Tantric) once more brought the monasteries to the political scene. Buddhism, especially the so-called “Yellow” trend of the Gelug-pa, was at that time first a symbolic tool used in the war between northern Mongols (Khalkha occupying the present-day Republic of Mongolia, formerly Outer Mongolia) and western ones (Oïrad nomadizing in Altaï and present-day northern Xinjiang), then a tremendous agent in the hands of the new Manchu power for getting and keeping submission of Mongol princes to the Sino-Manchu Qing dynasty.

b. Tibetan Gelug-pa Buddhism implemented in the 17th century a westward movement when a part of the Oïrad left Central Asia for the Caspian region, where they are known as Kalmuks. In the post-communist era, Buddhism is still the root of the Kalmuks’ ethnic identity.

c. Gelug-pa Buddhism, strongly backed by the Sino-Manchu court, not only defeated rival “Red” schools, such as Sakya-pa, Karma-pa, and Nyingma-pa, while incorporating some of their rituals and liturgy [I. Charleux], but also absorbed many shamanic elements—the shamanism itself surviving as hidden familial practice—and the most usual native creeds, as the cult to the spirit of a numinous place in the form of a heap of pebbles called obô (or ovoo).

d. A figure who survived for centuries, Chinggis Khan, endured several changes in different settings, the most important one being its transformation into a Buddhist deity and a protector of the Sino-Manchu dynasty. In any circumstance, he legitimated the ruling power, whether Mongol
or Turkic. In the post-communist reconstruction of political legitimization, he remains for Mongols the ultimate ancestor and giver of civilization, and even Turkic people, especially the Kazakhs (in Kazakhstan), still include him in their fund of factors of ethnic identity.

3) Various Conclusions
I am afraid that the cases I have chosen are not able to bring very pertinent and general replies to the questions raised by the organizers of our meeting (I must confess that I am not sure that I clearly understood them). But, although here extremely sketchy, they bring out some other points:

a. Contrary to the usually held opinion that in Central Asia the diffusion of religions and cultures follows the Silk Road, from west to east or east to west, here we have scatterings going first from north to south or south to north—the extension to West coming later and secondarily.

b. Tibetan Buddhism among the Mongols, an organized religion with a clergy, missionaries and a vigorous expansion, presents a typical nexus of mobility and political governance;

c. while with shamanism, we see a non-organized religious system, lacking in professional holders of any kind of power (shamans are not at all similar to priests) and devoid of any universalist view, which transforms itself when the geographical, economic and social environment changes. Its purpose remains all the time as originally to bring “good luck” and to negotiate for it with supernatural beings. And it can easily adapt to another dominant religion. The point is that people carrying with them a non-conquering religion do not wish to convert their neighbors. This case could help to explain why Islam in China had no political ambitions and why its high literature was generally addressed only to Muslim co-religionists: it arrived held by plain believers who settled quietly among non-believers in great number from the Mongolian time in the 13th century, and then only occasionally received the help of professional imams coming from abroad. Whereas in eastern Turkestan, proselytism of a Naqshbandi branch led to a seizure of total power [A. Papas].

d. If we remain in the field of Islamic studies, the most irritating question is the label of “syncretism” which is very often placed beside phenomena of borrowings, for instance in Chinese Islam or Turkish bektashism. Following the late Maxime Rodinson, I am firmly against this easy explanation, at least as far as it concerns Islam. We may observe there not syncretism, but different layers of ritual or thought which coexist. Funerals among Chinese Muslims, which are usually qualified as “syncretic,” are a good example: as long as the corpse is concerned, the ritual is a quite orthodox Muslim one; but participants act as though it is customary in Chinese society. I would be happy if this question of syncretism could be discussed in further meetings.

Susan Whitfield
Director, International Dunhuang Project, British Library, UK

Reframing the Artistic Spaces of Central Asia

With our knowledge of pre-Islamic Central Asia dependent largely on artistic and archaeological artefacts, how can we understand its history without understanding its artistic spaces and transmissions between them? A sophisticated theoretical framework is required yet modern scholarship has generally resorted to simple—and often simplistic—models to try to impose order on the large amount of artistic evidence that has been unearthed over the past century. Models such as dichotomies—the division between sedentary and nomadic, east and west, and civilized and barbarian—or those positing a linear transmission, such as the Silk Road, are common. Scholarship has also relied on the comfortable narratives of governable spaces—Eurocentrism and Sinocentrism among them—and Central Asia, its political and artistic spaces, are squeezed into the interstices. Artistic interpretations, as so often is the case, hang on to the coat tails of political history. This paper will consider some of these issues using examples of the art of Central Asia to illustrate the paucity of our approaches to date and asking what we can do to remedy this. We need a framework that can understand the artistic spaces of Central Asia and to see it as a nexus—both a center and a place of connections—rather than as an interstice.
The Mongol and Russian Empires were the two largest land empires ever created. Remarkably, they covered almost exactly the same territory, which suggests that geographical and ecological factors played a significant role in their formation. I will argue that this is indeed true. Despite the profound differences between pastoralist Mongolia and agrarian Muscovy, both empires were shaped profoundly by the relatively flat topography of “Inner Eurasia” (which allowed military expansion over large areas), and by the region’s relatively low natural productivity (which guaranteed low population densities and forced powerful states to mobilize resources over large areas). In such an environment, political and military survival required mobility: the ability to move armies and collect resources over huge areas. There is no puzzle about the mobility of Mongol armies. They were, after all, recruited mainly from pastoral nomads. But Muscovy/Russia was different. Most of its population consisted of peasant farmers. Nevertheless, successive Muscovite and Russian governments managed to build highly mobile armies. Indeed, this was one of their greatest military and mobilizational achievements and a key to their long-term success. But it was a complex and difficult achievement and one that shaped many aspects of Russian society over several centuries. The requirement of mobility, dictated largely by the geography and ecology of Inner Eurasia, helps explain why, despite the profound differences between Mongolia and Russia, there were some striking convergences in the strategies of state-building adopted by the two empires. Both adopted strategies that can be summed up in the simple slogan: “Mobile Army, Sedentary Tax Base,” though they converged on these strategies from opposite points of the ecological compass. This convergence can help us understand some of the subtler similarities between the Mongol and Russian Empires.
About the UCLA Central Asia Initiative

At a time when Central Asia is of growing consequence to the global economy and security, the UCLA Asia Institute launched an initiative in Spring, 2008 to foster greater understanding of the history and the significance of Central and Inner Asia within the campus and broader academic communities and among the general public. The organizing theme for this first year will be ‘Mobility and Governability.’ Highlighting the significance of Central Asia as a distinct geographic region which has been the site of repeated migrations and conquests from earliest times, this rubric encourages reflection on how the mobility of Central Asian peoples has allowed both for conquest within and outside Central Asia, and for the ungovernability that has faced occupiers from outside the region.

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Asia Institute
The Asia Institute, with its six regional member centers, promotes Asian Studies at UCLA and fosters greater understanding of Asia through a wide variety of research support, public programs, and community outreach on East Asia, Southeast Asia, and South Asia. It promotes collaboration with institutions in Asia, Europe, and North America to make the study of Asia even more interdisciplinary and truly international in its content, communication, and organization through international research exchanges and graduate and faculty fellowships. Its online publications, AsiaMedia and Asia Pacific Arts, serve global audiences with news and cultural criticism, and it has been recognized as a National Resource Center for East and Southeast Asia by the U.S. Department of Education.

Center for European and Eurasian Studies
The Center for European and Eurasian Studies (CEES) provides a pan-European perspective for scholars and students from a wide range of disciplines. CEES promotes teaching and research by internationally acclaimed specialists on Europe, the Russian Federation, and Central Asia, and fosters cross-country and cross-disciplinary collaboration among the social sciences, humanities, and professional schools. CEES is committed to training teachers and leaders of the future. Its goal is to promote academic excellence in teaching, research and outreach, to serve as a regional resource center, and to collaborate with educational and cultural institutions throughout Southern California. Our Department of Education National Resource Center programs place particular emphasis on curriculum development, support of graduate students, and ongoing training of K-12 teachers.
Photo Credits (clockwise from upper left):
Säküsn Süme Temple, near Elista in Kalmukia
Located in Southern Russia, between the Caspian Sea and the Don and Volga Rivers, it was opened in 1996 and combines Tibetan, Mongolian and Chinese architectural elements. Courtesy of Dany Savelli.

Apex of the ceiling of Cave 407 at Dunhuang, c. 700, showing a trio of rabbits or hares inside a lotus motif. Courtesy of the Dunhuang Academy.

Votive wooden plaque from Dandan-Uliq in the kingdom of Khotan. Courtesy of the British Museum, 1907,1111.70 (D.VII.5), ink and colors on wood.

Kyrgyz camp, Tian Chi, Xinjiang. Courtesy of Nick Menzies