

## Reflections on Academic Community

Cecilia Conte<sup>1</sup>

*When I was in Ulaanbaatar for only two days in early 2024 September, I had the chance to meet Tsetsentsolmon Baatarnaan at the National University of Mongolia for a very brief meeting. Due to my interest in both Mongolian archaeology and anthropology, she told me about a conference that was to take place. A bit more than two months later, I had the pleasure of participating in the “International Mongolian Studies Symposium: Current Research and Practices in Anthropology, Art & Archaeology in Mongolia and Beyond” in Vienna, which was held at the Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften from 2024 November 25th-26th. As a young researcher, I am sometimes apprehensive of conferences. In the worst-case scenario, they turn into an elitist competition between senior male scholars who happen to be specialists in a topic entirely unrelated, but very relevant to the current conversation. This symposium was the complete opposite: it filled me not only with novel information and ideas but with a feeling of belonging and new connections.*

In this piece, I would like to reflect on the Vienna Symposium 2024 and Mongolian Studies more generally. The cultural anthropologist Antonia Davidovic (2009), following Lave & Wenger (1991), looks at archaeology as a community of practice, defined by certain group conventions, ways of doing things, and producing (implicit) knowledge. Here, I would like to focus on Mongolian Studies as an academic community, developing the communal rather than the purely academic aspect. An academic community typically refers to a group of scholars, students, researchers, or practitioners associated with academic institutions such as universities and research centres. Mongolian studies – Монгол судлал (Mongol sudlal) in Mongolian or Mongolistik in German – encompasses various strands of research concerned with the study of languages, histories, and cultures of (Greater) Mongolia and Mongolian peoples. This field, depending on the academic tradition, might be viewed as part of the larger fields of East, Central, or North Asian studies (Bulag 2005).

### People and Things

Although I came to study Mongolian cultures via archaeology, my first introduction to Mongolian Studies as such was, as for most foreign students, through language classes. I distinctly remember learning *нэрийн хуудас* (*neriin khudas*), business card, as part of one of the first vocabulary units. Just as my Mongolian teacher insisted that business cards were very common in Mongolia, upon my first visit to the International Young Mongolists Summer School in 2023, I received several *нэрийн хуудас*. In the absence of a business card, adding

people on Facebook will also do the trick, ensuring there is the potential to stay in touch beyond this initial meeting. Connecting larger groups of people can also occur through the gifting of books and sweets, in a more and less formal context, respectively. As a student of material culture, I view things as essential in constituting relations between people (Latour 1991). Beyond politeness, the business cards, books, and chocolates exchanged in academic settings are physical items to remember the occasion and create a material bond between givers and receivers.

### Familiar Faces

As opposed to large disciplinary fields and specialities, I believe the feeling of community in Mongolian Studies also comes from its comparatively smaller scale. Conferences are not only for academic exchange, but also an opportunity to meet colleagues who have become friends, between Mongolia and Europe, the USA, and East Asia. Arriving at the Vienna Symposium felt like entering a room filled with familiar faces, some whose names I did not know yet, and conversely, known names which had not yet received a face. Then ensued the very enjoyable process of figuring out when you last met someone, how their journey was, and which day they were presenting. There was a clear sense of respect for older, more established scholars – something which is perhaps shared across academic and other social circles around the world. But the support received as a younger person involved in Mongolian Studies, whether in Mongolia, in Germany, or in this case, Austria, is truly special. From my perspective, this support is part of Mongolian culture – getting an education is highly valued and you are encouraged to study well – and a way to ensure that the small field of Mongolian Studies has a future generation of scholars.

<sup>1</sup> Institute of Prehistoric Archaeology, Freie Universität Berlin & Berlin Graduate School of Ancient Studies

## Language

Another facet of the Vienna Symposium that struck me was the language diversity amongst the perhaps thirty participants. Although all presentations except for one were in English, socialising took place in almost self-evident alternation between Mongolian, English, German, as well as Tibetan, French, and Russian. This is an aspect I know from academic conferences related to Central Asian studies, where exchanges occur in Russian, English, and national languages such as Qazaq or Uzbek. Finding another participant who shares one of your languages immediately creates a connection. As a German and French native speaker, I grew up with the fear of disrespecting my interlocutor through the wrong use of Sie or vous, the polite second-person singular. As a general rule, you should address a more senior person with this form and wait until said person, one day, proposes to use the informal pronoun. With German and French, this process can sometimes take years or settle midway, calling each other by the first name and formal pronouns for decades. Since I started to learn Mongolian, I have tried to be mindful of whom to call *ma* (*ta*) or *chi* (*chi*), following the general rule of seniority and social position. I felt relief when, at the symposium, women who were older than me immediately offered to use *чи*, creating a sense of familiarity and ease.

## Anthropology, Art & Archaeology

Although the symposium's focus was more anthropological – concerned with social practices in contemporary Mongolia – art and archaeology were also strongly represented. The presenters had diverse academic backgrounds, including the disciplines named above, as well as area studies, geography, and history, reuniting people who share a study area but have different methodological and theoretical approaches. Between the panels “(Im)materialities, Sacred Landscapes, Spirits”, “Arts”, and “Archaeology, Artefacts & Collections”, the overarching theme I discern is, once again, people and things. Traditionally, archaeology builds almost exclusively on material evidence such as pottery, metalwork, and stone tools in order to reconstruct what people did in the past, because those people are long deceased. Anthropology is, per definition, the study of human societies, cultures, and behaviours, which, if we look beyond anthropocentrism, are also mediated by things. As a layperson, I understand art as the creative process, which often, although not always, results in a material creation.

Looking across disciplinary boundaries, one topic especially caught my attention: the different ways in which people interact with the landscape, the physical features that are part of it (mountains, rivers, trees),

and the spiritual entities that rule it (spirits, ghosts, ancestors). This (im)material palimpsest connects to wider themes of historical memory and nation-building as well as extractivism. The discussions that followed the presentations were lively and respectful, opening up further questions such as: are there legitimate ways to dig into animate landscapes, e.g., in the case of subsistence digging (Hollowell 2006)? How did places of worship become museums, and are museums becoming places of worship (Tsetsentsolmon & Lang 2016; Bouquet & Porto 2005)? What happens when mining companies become involved in the conservation of cultural heritage (Oyu Tolgoi 2015) they are simultaneously destroying? These are questions that I hope will be addressed in more depth – pun intended – in future conversations.

*To complete these two days of interdisciplinary presentations and multilingual interactions, everyone enjoyed бууз (buuz), хуушуур (khuushuur), нийслэл салат (niislel salat) and vodka, or wine, kindly sponsored by the Mongolian Embassy. Many participants then reconvened not far from the Austrian Academy of Sciences building, at the Philosoph Bar, a locale which, as someone pointed out, bore the right name for more (or less) academic socialising. Sharing a cigarette outside with another participant, we heartily agreed that such Mongolian Studies gatherings felt warm and almost a bit magical.*

## References

- Bouquet, M., & Porto, N. (2005). Science, Magic, and Religion: The Ritual processes of Museum Magic. Berghahn Books.
- Bulag, U. E. (2005). Where is East Asia? Central Asian and Inner Asian Perspectives on Regionalism. *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, 3(10), 1-7. <https://apjff.org/uradyn-e-bulag/1557/article>
- Davidovic, A. (2009). Praktiken Archäologischer Wissensproduktion: Eine Kulturanthropologische Wissenschaftsforschung. Ugarit-Verlag.
- Hollowell, J. (2006). Moral Arguments on Subsistence Digging. In C. Scarre & G. Scarre (Eds.), *The Ethics of Archaeology: Philosophical Perspectives on Archaeological Practice* (pp. 69-94). Cambridge University Press.
- Latour, B. (1991). *Nous n'avons jamais été modernes: Essai d'anthropologie symétrique*. La Découverte.
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Cambridge University Press.
- Tsetsentsolmon, B., & Lang, M.-K. (2016). Temple and/or Museum. In M.-K. Lang, *Nomadic Artefacts: A Scientific Artistic Travelogue*. Austrian Academy of Sciences Press.

