

## **Introduction**

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From 11 to 13 September 2018, an international conference on “Mobility and Immobility in Mongolian Societies” was held at the Institute for the Science of Religion and Central Asian Studies at the University of Bern, Switzerland, bringing together scholars from numerous countries. The conference marked the conclusion of the same-named research cluster which consisted of scholars from the Rheinische Friedrich Wilhelms University of Bonn and the Georg August University of Göttingen, Germany, the Swiss University of Bern, and the National University in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. Since November 2015, the cluster had been generously funded by the National Council for Mongolian Studies with a grant from the Mongolian Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science (see the website of the cluster: <https://www.mongolistik-mobilitaet.uni-bonn.de>). The collaborative research cluster was founded in order to improve the scientific cooperation of the individual departments of Mongolian Studies in Germany, Switzerland, and Mongolia. Furthermore, the cluster aimed at the promotion of young scholars in Mongolian Studies, thus involving Ph.D. students. The participants met at an annual basis to present and discuss the results of their individual research projects. The 2018 conference officially concluded the funding period of the research network. On the one hand, the participants presented the results of the collaborative research to a broader academic and public audience. On the other hand, the conference served as a starting point for future research in this field and therefore invited established scholars as well as young researchers to contribute to this research area. In this way, it aimed at better understanding complex discourses and practices of mobility and immobility and the role they play in historical and contemporary Mongolian societies.

Mobility has always been a defining characteristic in the history of the Mongols. Mongolian studies has therefore focused on movement and different forms of migration long before the “mobilities turn” in the Humanities and Social Sciences. The thirteenth century in particular proved to be an extraordinarily mobile century for both Asia and Europe. At the heart of this mobility lay the Mongols and their policy of drafting people skilled in various arts and sciences into their service and relocating them across the Eurasian continent. The case of the Mongol Empire with its multiple trading routes, travelling people, and cultural flows embedded in immobile infrastructures emphasizes that seemingly dislocated places are tied into networks of connection that transcend fixed places and apparently solid boundaries.<sup>1</sup> Against this backdrop it comes as no surprise that since its very beginnings in the early nineteenth

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas T. Allsen, *Culture and Conquest in Mongol Eurasia*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

century, Mongolian studies has focused on mobility and immobility, movement, and infrastructural nodes of the Mongols.<sup>2</sup>

Proceeding from the assumption that place and placelessness, “movement and spatial fixity”,<sup>3</sup> are co-constituted, the conference was informed by a broad concept of mobility that encompasses both the embodied movement of people and commodities and their cultural representations and meanings. This approach includes a focus on materialities, spatialities, and temporalities. Firstly, material objects like transport vehicles, shoes, mobile phones or, to give an example from the period of the Mongol Empire, a *paiza* constitute mobile systems. Secondly, as John Urry asserts,<sup>4</sup> the complex character of mobility systems derives from the fixed infrastructures that facilitate movements. Roads and caravanserais enable movements and mobilizations on a transregional or even global scale. Through these immobile systems social spaces (in the sense of Lefebvre)<sup>5</sup> are re-arranged or even newly created. Thirdly, aspects of temporalities such as fastness or slowness determine the geography of movement and fixity. Moreover, in Urban studies, new mobile communication devices like the mobile phone constitute new temporal spatialities.

The new transdisciplinary field of *mobilities research* has drawn attention to the issues addressed here. Theoretically situated in this new research area, the conference focused on the relational dynamics of mobility and immobility in Mongolian societies from the late sixteenth century until today. Under the umbrella theme of (im)mobility it addressed the interplay of material objects, spatial fixities, and temporal aspects that constitute and shape past and present (im)mobilities in the Mongolian regions.

Our conference was opened with a keynote lecture by Ines Stolpe in which she presented some basic reflections on mobility and immobility in rural-urban networks in Mongolia and showed that mobility develops its analytical potential only when our theoretical concepts are “localized”. Her essay also opens this special issue of *Acta Mongolica* comprising some of the conference contributions. The articles collected in this volume include historical (Dittmar Schorkowitz), science-historical (Dorothea Heuschert-Laage), sociological (Tserenbazar Pioner), religion-related (Ekaterina Sobkovyak, Iuliia Liakhova), art-historical (Uranchimeg Tsultemin, Isabelle Charleux, Mungunchimeg Batmunkh), social-anthropological (Sendenjaviin Dulam, Elisa Kohl-Garrity), and folkloristic (Alevtina Solovyeva) case studies, all of which discussing the outlined fields of inquiry from different theoretical and methodological perspectives. This breadth of theoretical approaches contributed significantly to a fruitful academic exchange. Some colleagues whose papers substantially enriched the conference in Bern and contributed to our debate were unfortunately unable to

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Caroline Humphrey and David Sneath, *The End of Nomadism? Society, the State and the Environment in Inner Asia*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> Mimi Sheller, “Mobility,” *Sociopedia.isa* 2011:3 (Doi: 10.1177/205684601163).

<sup>4</sup> John Urry, *Mobilities*. (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> Henry Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991).

make their papers available for publication for various reasons. We would like to take this opportunity to thank them all. The organizers of the conference would also like to thank the editor-in-chief, Prof. Dr. Zayabaatar Dalai, for his willingness to publish the results of the Bern conference as a special issue in *Acta Mongolica* and Dr. Lhagvademchig Jadamba.

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Recent publications include "Red Catechisms: Socialist Educational Literature and the Demarcation of Religion and Politics in the Early Nineteenth Century," *Religion* 48/1 (2018): 8–36 and the co-edited volumes *Socialist Imaginations:*

*Utopias, Myths, and the Masses* (with Stefan Arvidsson & Jakub Beneš, Routledge 2019) and *Narrative Cultures and the Aesthetics of Religion* (with Dirk Johannsen & Jens Kreinath, Brill 2020).

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