

МОНГОЛ УЛСЫН ИХ СУРГУУЛЬ
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LIFE AND WORK FOR THE SURVIVAL OF MONGOLIAN STUDIES IN
TURBULENT TIMES: IN COMMEMORATION OF THE MONGOLIST
DR. SC. UTA SCHÖNE (1941.11.28-2024.04.07)

Ines Stolpe



Photo 1: Dr. sc. Uta Schöne in our office and teaching room (2006)

We deeply mourn the loss of the meritorious Mongolist Dr. sc. Uta Schöne, who passed away on the 7th of April 2024. She has been closely connected to Mongolia since her youth. Schöne *Bagsh*, as her students affectionately called her, taught at Humboldt University for almost half a century. She was instrumental in establishing Mongolian Studies in East Germany and maintaining it in Berlin after the Fall of the Wall. Her life story is exemplary for the history of East-German-Mongolian relations during socialism and beyond. As her former student and PhD candidate, I have been closely related to Uta Schöne since 1994 for 30 years, and I feel honoured to pay tribute to her as a lovely person, a remarkable teacher and a devoted Mongolist. In the following, I will first look back on the 82 years of her life to give insights into her work and valuable personal memories that she shared with me in many conversations.¹

¹ During our meetings in the last years of her life, when she was no longer in such good health and I suggested writing about her unique memories, Uta Schöne entrusted me with historical photos from her personal archive and allowed me to include them in her life story.

Uta Rättig² was born on November 28, 1941 in Warsaw. Germans were part of Polish society there until the 20th century. Before the end of the Second World War, her family, consisting of mother, grandmother, grandfather and little Uta, had to flee to Germany. Uta told me what she remembered: They travelled in a lorry, loaded with parts of their household goods, to the Czech border. Almost everything was taken from them there, so they continued their escape with just a handcart. In it, together with their remaining belongings, sat the weakened grandfather and little Uta while her mother and grandmother pulled the vehicle. Before the escape, they had sewn jewellery into the heels of their shoes, but the most essential for survival turned out to be a cooking pot. Grandma had insisted they take it with them when they fled so they could boil water everywhere. Uta kept this pot, which she said saved their lives back then, in her kitchen at home as a memento. As Germans, her grandparents had already had to flee Warsaw during the First World War, and because her grandfather spoke Russian, they went to the Siberian city of Omsk. After the Second World War, the family arrived first in Dresden, which had been bombed shortly before, and Uta remembered the many ruins well. From there, they travelled to Meißen, where they could move in with friends and where Uta later attended school and took her Abitur.³

She then applied to the universities in Leipzig and Berlin. From Humboldt University, she received a list with study places still available, including in African studies and Mongolian studies. Her grandparents encouraged Uta to study Mongolian because they had met very friendly Mongolians in Siberia. Uta then read - while still in Meißen - the Secret History of the Mongols and a travelogue, and she organised accommodation with relatives in Berlin-Karlshorst before starting her studies.

During her very first day at university, however, the young student did not yet meet any teacher but her fellow student Renate Bauwe. Both were told in the office that their studies would begin only in the following week after they had taken part in the harvest. Uta then studied at the East Asian Institute at Humboldt University in Berlin from 1960-64, majoring in Mongolian Studies and minoring in Sinology. Her academic teachers included Paul Ratchnevsky, who had been appointed to the chair there in 1954. Thanks to him Mongolian Studies was accredited as a major subject for the first time, and the modern Mongolian language was also taught. In addition to historical and philological aspects, Uta's studies included social science elements, as intended for all subjects, that contributed to the development of close relationships with the Asian brother countries. Therefore, the second lecturer, Heinz Schnura, held seminars on the population, everyday culture, geography, politics, and economy of the Mongolian People's Republic. From 1961, Ratchnevsky's assistant Hans-Peter Vietze also taught lessons. He had developed a linguistic focus and later worked as a full professor of Mongolian studies at the Humboldt University from 1976 until the political change.

Uta and her fellow student Renate Bauwe, who later became known and appreciated for her excellent translations of Mongolian literature, were entrusted with interpreting work as early as their first year of study. Their interpreter jobs began in 1961 in the Pioneer Republic at Lake Werbellin, where the two students worked for six weeks every summer until 1964.

² Rättig was her maiden name.

³ German higher education entrance qualification/baccalaureate.

Uta fondly recalled her first experiences with the Mongolian children, who were happy that someone understood them and spoke slowly and clearly so that the two students learnt a lot from them. Back then, translating was arduous because only Russian-Mongolian dictionaries were available.

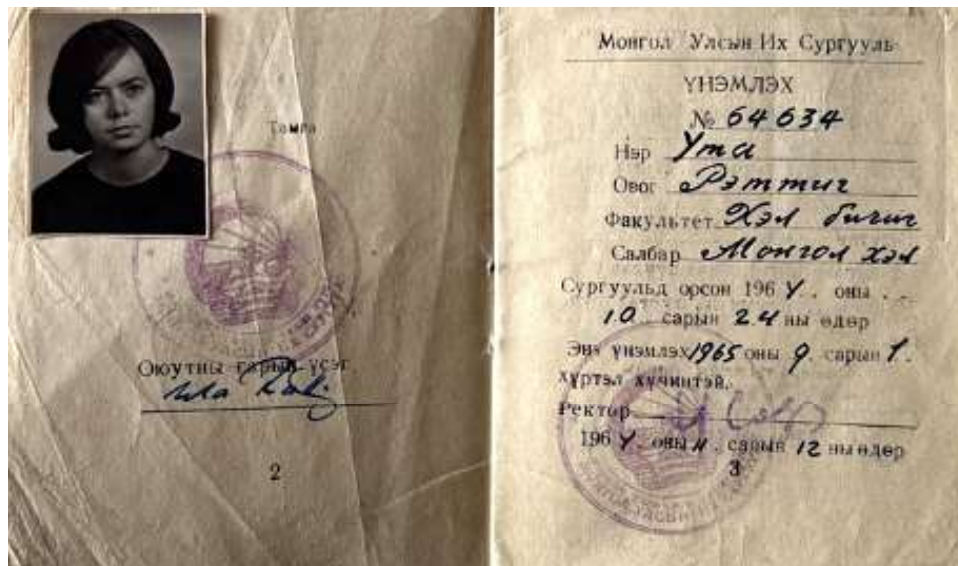
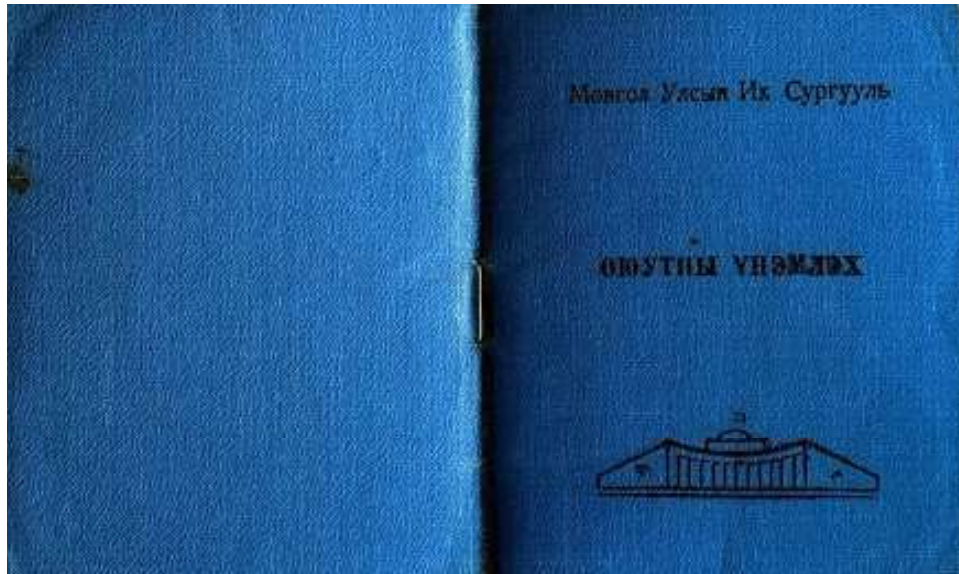


Photo 2: Mongolian Children in the Pioneer Republic at Lake Werbellin together with their leaders and the two German Students Uta Rättig and Renate Bauwe in 1961

Uta spent the following two years of her studies from 1964-1966 with Renate Bauwe at the Mongolian State University in Ulaanbaatar. They were the first generation of students from Berlin to take up additional studies in Mongolia as part of a bilateral cultural agreement that had enabled Mongolians to study in the German Democratic Republic since 1957.⁴ At the beginning of the academic year, the Mongolian State University appeared empty because students were in the countryside helping with the harvest. Uta liked to talk about her studies in Ulaanbaatar and how the Mongolian linguists offered special language lessons. She particularly remembered the lessons with 'Lu Bagsh' (Sonomyn Luvsanvandan)⁵ and the encounters with Byambyn Rinchen.

⁴ Cf. Newspaper report in *Wochenpost* No. 49, 05.12.1964.

⁵ For the transcription of Mongolian names and words the author follows the system commonly used in English..



Photos 3 & 4: Uta Rättig's Student ID Card from 1964

The two students from the GDR also enjoyed the opportunity to attend lectures in other disciplines. And they adopted Mongolian names: Renate was Khand, and Uta was Dulmaa. They impressed a journalist, who interviewed them shortly after their arrival, with their advanced language skills.



Photo 5: Newspaper article about the two students from the GDR (1964)

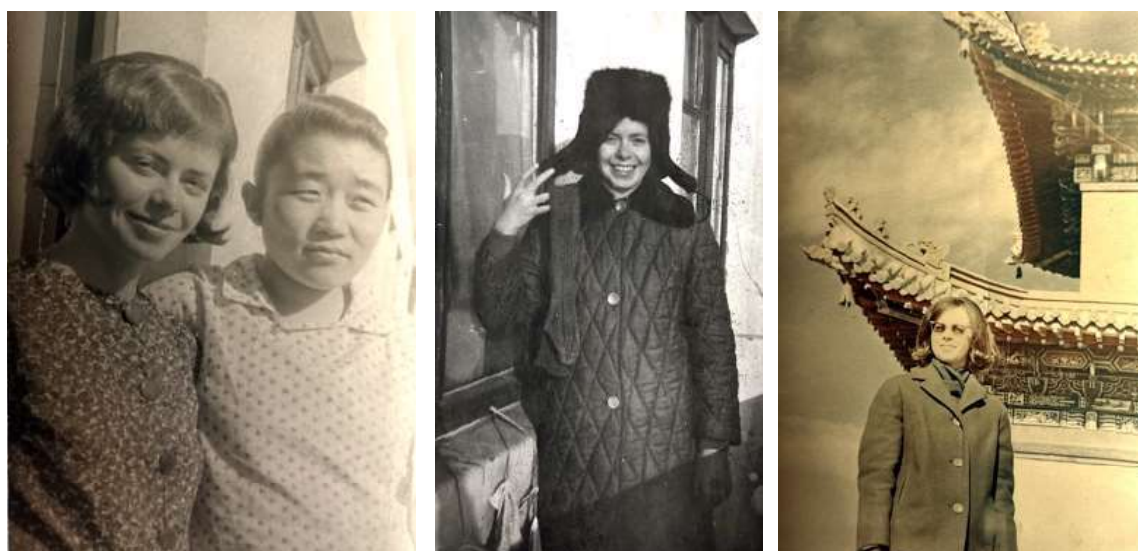
“German Khand and German Dulmaa” were the only Europeans in the dormitory and were supposed to share a room. However, they both expressed the wish to live together with a fellow Mongolian student to deepen their knowledge of the language and the country as much as possible. Uta lived in room 413 with the student Lkham, who was from *Övörkhangaï Aimag* and wanted to become a Mongolian language teacher. A loudspeaker was hanging on the wall from which music and news sounded throughout the day.



Photos 6, 7 & 8: Student life in room No. 413 in the student's dormitory in Ulaanbaatar (1965)

The relatively simple furnishings in the dormitory rooms were supplemented with armchairs, curtains and flowers with the help of the GDR embassy. The embassy also provided seeds for herbs to grow on the windowsill, which Uta's Mongolian roommate jokingly regarded as 'cattle feed'. During a visit, Lkham's father asked how many sheep, cattle and horses Uta's family had, and when he heard that there was only one budgerigar, he said in astonishment: "But you are poor!"

Uta remembers that the guard's yurt stood outside the dormitory, and his horse also roamed around there. In the dormitory, toilets were neither separated into male/female, nor did they have doors until a letter from the rector prompted the janitor to remedy the situation. The rector was always helpful and available to answer any concerns. Mongolian students, six of whom had to share a room, often came and wanted to do their homework in peace. Uta liked to bake cakes with preserved fruit in an electric baking pan as a change from the meat in the university canteen. The students from the GDR could purchase fresh produce and consumer goods through the embassy. Uta recounted with a laugh that she had also ordered a washing line, put it on the balcony and told her roommate that she should feel free to use it. But the priorities were different: When Uta came home from the lecture later, it wasn't laundry hanging out to dry on the line, but meat.



Photos 9, 10 & 11: Uta alone and with her friend on the balcony of the students' dorm (1965) and during a visit to Gandan monastery (1964)

Dancing evenings were very popular in the student dormitory, and other students from abroad, including Bulgaria, Hungary and Vietnam, also enjoyed attending. At first, as Uta recalled, the music was old-fashioned, but the live band was asked to play faster. The musicians smiled and understood because it was actually about dancing Twist, which the Mongolian students and even some teachers were happy to join. While this was possible at the university, the 'capitalist dances', as they were called, were forbidden in the Youth Palace (*Zahuuchuudyn Ordon*). Therefore, there were many informal meetings with Mongolian students who enjoyed listening to modern music and being shown new dances. On weekends, when hiking

in the area, the students were often invited by the Mongolians living there to have tea and food in their yurts. In preparation for her diploma, Uta also visited different workplaces.



Photos 12 & 13: Uta visiting the editorial office of the union newspaper “*Khödölmör*” and the printing house in Tsetserleg (January and February 1966)



In 1966, Uta passed her final exams at Humboldt University in Berlin. She had written her diploma thesis on the functions of *Chalcha* Mongolian verb forms. Extracts from it were incorporated into the first German-language textbook for modern Mongolian, which was developed collectively under the direction of Hans-Peter Vietze. The first edition was published in 1969.⁶

Photo 14: Cover of the first German textbook for modern Mongolian

From 1966-69, immediately after graduating, Uta worked as chief interpreter at the GDR embassy in the Mongolian People’s Republic. During this time, she accompanied

⁶ The fifth revised edition was published in 1988.

many Mongolian delegations on visits to the GDR. The visit with the Foreign Minister of the MPR, Mangalyn Dүgersүren, and the granddaughter and great-granddaughter of the Mongolian heroes Sүkhbaatar and Yanjmaa to Potsdam-Sanssouci in 1967 was particularly memorable.



Photos 15 & 16: Visit of the Foreign Minister's delegation in Potsdam (1967)



Photo 17: Official visit of a delegation of the People's Great Khural to East Berlin under the leadership of Tsedendambyn Gotov (1968)

While working at the embassy in Ulaanbaatar, Uta began her – initially extracurricular – Aspirantur,⁷ which she later continued as a regular Aspiratur at Humboldt University in 1969-1972. Every week, she was given a day off from her job as an embassy interpreter to collect material for her dissertation. Uta made intensive use of this opportunity to familiarise herself in detail with the Mongolian education system, the subject of her doctoral thesis. She went not only to the archives and the Ministry of Education but also to many different schools and vocational colleges. Thanks to her excellent knowledge of the Mongolian language, it was no problem to turn up there and get permission from the director to look at everything and ask questions. In this way, Uta gained a very realistic impression of the education system, and it is clear from her doctoral thesis how knowledgeable and well-founded the accounts were. Some were remarkably critical for the time, so the doctoral thesis was not freely accessible in the first years after the defence.⁸

⁷ German for its Russian equivalent 'Aspirantura', i.e. post-gradual study period as part of the doctoral education.

⁸ On the classifications of dissertations in the GDR see: 2. Introduction (Summary) in: *Bibliographie der geheimen DDR-Dissertationen*, edited by Wilhelm Bleek and Lothar Mertens, Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter Saur, 1994, pp. XXXIII-XXXVI.

Die Entwicklung des Volkshilbungswesens in der
Mongolischen Volksrepublik 1921 - 1971

(Ein Beitrag zur Analyse der Grundprobleme der
Kultur- und Bildungsrevolution in Asien)

DISSERTATION
zur Erlangung des akademischen Grades
doctoe philosophiae (Dr. phil.)

vorgelegt der
Gesellschaftswissenschaftlichen Fakultät des
Wissenschaftlichen Rates der Humboldt-Universität
zu Berlin

von
Dipl.-Phil. Uta Schöne
geb. am 28. 11. 1941 in Varelhan

Bekan: Prof. Dr. phil. habil. Rita Schöber

Gutachter: 1. Prof. Dr. phil. habil. Fritz Gruner
2. Dr. rer. pol. Klaus Willerding
3. Dr. sc. phil. Hans-Peter Vietne

Berlin, den 30. Januar 1973
GELOESCHT
17. April 1980

Vertrauliche Dienstsache				
Buchst.- Zeichen	Ust. Nr.	Stich	Reg. Nr.	Stich
H 16-0	6	74	7	51 + 239

Photo 18: Cover sheet of Uta Schöne's dissertation



Photo 19: Visit to the library of the Gandan monastery during the II. International Congress of Mongolists (1970)

Uta worked as a research assistant at the Humboldt University in Berlin from 1969. During this time, she also accompanied GDR delegations to the MPR as an interpreter and delegations from the MPR on their visits to the GDR. From 1970, she participated in International Congresses of Mongolists in Ulaanbaatar.



Photos 20 & 21: Academy delegation visiting the Gandan monastery in Ulaanbaatar (1972) and Mongolian delegation visiting the Spreewald area near Berlin (1973)

After marrying Lothar Schöne in 1972, their first son, Robert, was born in 1974. In 1973, Uta submitted her dissertation on “The Development of the Popular Education System in the MPR 1921-1971” and was awarded her doctorate in 1975.

After obtaining her doctorate, then known as “Promotion A”, she worked again for three years as an interpreter and at the same time as a member of the economic policy department at the GDR embassy in the MPR from 1976-79. Among the many missions were friendship visits, such as accompanying a delegation of Mongolian pioneer leaders who planted trees with Mongolian children in the ‘Garden of Friendship’ in the Pioneer Republic at Lake Werbellin.



Photos 22 & 23: Visit to the Pioneer Republic (early 1970s)

She was also often entrusted with interpreting work at the state level. However, the most important focus of her work was a wide range of meetings within the framework of what was known as ‘socialist fraternal aid’ and what today is called ‘development cooperation’. As a result, Uta Schöne not only travelled to all regions of the Mongolian People’s Republic but also gained deep insights into the practice of a wide variety of cooperation projects beyond official meetings at the state level. She became acquainted with specialists in numerous fields and manufacturing sectors, including geology, mining, veterinary medicine, agriculture, the processing industry and food

production, as well as education and training. With her interpreting work, Uta Schöne made important contributions to developing friendly relations between the Mongolian People's Republic and the GDR. The knowledge she gained in the process flowed into her academic work, which promoted multi-perspective understanding and openness to other disciplines.



Photos 24 & 25: Translating during the talk between the heads of the Council of Ministers Jambyn Batmönkh (MPR) and Willi Stoph (GDR) in May 1977 & Translating during a visit to Bayan-Ölgii-Aimag (1979)

At Humboldt University's Mongolian Studies Department, there have been several collective Mongolian-German collaborations, of which the dictionary project under

the tutelage of H.-P. Vietze, Ts. Damdinsüren and T. Dashtseden, the results of which are still indispensable today, was probably the most complex.⁹ From 1980, after a short interlude at the GDR Ministry of Higher and Technical Education, Uta Schöne was senior research assistant for Mongolian studies at the Asian Studies section of Humboldt University. Her second son, Konrad, was born in 1982.

In 1989, Uta Schöne received her doctorate B (Doctor of Science - Dr. sc., corresponding to a habilitation) on the subject of “Cultural Revolution in the MVR: Main tasks, problems and experiences in their realisation in the years 1921-1960” and was awarded the license to teach (*Facultas docendi*) for Mongolian Studies. From 1988 to 1990, she worked as head of the East Asia-II department, which then included Tibetology and Korean studies in addition to Mongolian studies. In 1990, she took over the interim leadership of the Central Asian part of the Department of Asian and African Studies, of which she was acting director from 1991-1995.

During the 1990s, core elements of Mongolian Studies in Berlin, such as in-depth language training, in collaboration with lecturers from Mongolia (T. Dashtseden, G. Luvsan, Sh. Choimaa), and knowledgeable seminars on literary genres, Mongolian customs, geography and other aspects of regional studies, were retained. Schöne *Bagsh*, as Uta was fondly called by her students, expanded her spectrum beyond modern history to include courses on current political, economic and socio-cultural developments in Mongolia, Buddhism and the history of Mongolian relations with the two neighbouring countries. Such topics of current social relevance were essential for the qualification of young academics, especially in times of change.

From 1994-1996, Dr. Uta Schöne was Deputy Managing Director of the Institute of Asian and African Studies (IAAW). During this time, Mongolian Studies was integrated under the umbrella of Central Asian Studies, and unfortunately, a drastic reduction in the number of posts began, which, regarding the qualified and specialised teaching staff, was above all a gradual liquidation of the subject. Fortunately, the cooperation with Mongolian partner universities continued for a while, especially with the language lecturers Prof. Tumenbayaryn Dashtseden and Prof. Sharavyn Choimaa. The then Rector of the Mongolian State University, Prof. Gantsog, and the then Vice-Rector, Prof. Davaa, also repeatedly visited the seminar led by Uta Schöne.

In the 1990s, she also cooperated with the Department of Education at Humboldt University. Prof. Jürgen Henze, whose comparative educational research focused on Asia, asked Uta to accompany a delegation of educationalists to Mongolia. During the preparation, she gave the group, which consisted entirely of West Germans, not only a subject-specific introduction but also practical advice on how they could prepare for power outages. But no one believed her that candles and matches would be needed even in an international hotel. So one night in the dark Bayangol Hotel, Uta helped the delegation members become enlightened by sharing her supply of candles with them.

It became clear that the Cold War continued after the fall of the Berlin Wall. For example, on the occasion of the International Congress of Mongolists in 1992, only the West German Mongolists were invited to the (then actually all-German) embassy.

⁹ Two volumes: Vietze, Hans-Peter (1981): Wörterbuch Deutsch-Mongolisch. Leipzig: Enzyklopädie & Vietze, Hans-Peter (1988): Wörterbuch Mongolisch-Deutsch. Leipzig: Enzyklopädie.

When the ambassador complained in a conversation with Uta shortly afterwards that everything had to be thrown away after taking over the GDR embassy, Uta quick-wittedly asked him why the Meissen porcelain hadn't been thrown away too?

From 1996-2000, two cooperative research projects were carried out at Humboldt-University within the framework of the bilateral agreement with the Mongolian State University: one on the 'History of the Moon Cuckoo', on which Sharavyn Choimaa and Renate Bauwe worked, and one on the topic of 'Mongolian Women's Personalities', which was worked on by Jamsrangiin Urangoa and Uta Schöne. In addition, another five Mongolian guest researchers worked at the Humboldt University's Mongolian Studies department during the 1990s and 2000s: Prof. Kh. Nyambuu, Prof. J. Boldbaatar, Prof. Ya. Ganbaatar, Prof. O. Batsaikhan, and Prof. M. Khurmetkhan.



Photos 26 & 27: Sharavyn Choimaa and Uta Schöne meeting in 2002 & Uta Schöne talking with Jamsrangiin Urangua and the Author at an exhibition opening in 2007

Although semesters abroad were no longer compulsory in the 1990s, Schöne *Bagsh* encouraged all her students to spend at least one semester in Mongolia. Her demand that MONGOLIAN perspectives always have priority for us as Mongolists remains a role model. This is not limited to the perception of academic discourse in Mongolia but also extends to knowledge of diverse realities of life. Last but not least, her openness to new topics, questions and theoretical approaches was appreciated, an indispensable attitude for young academics' future-oriented skills development.

Even though the former professorship was ultimately abolished, it was filled with outstanding commitment by Dr. sc. Uta Schöne as a university lecturer with equal status under cooperation and membership law, yet she was only employed as a 'teacher

for special tasks'. By 1999, only one of the former nine positions for academic staff remained. Teaching assignments became indispensable in maintaining a competence profile for the degree programme. These were taken on by Master's graduates and doctoral students, who received collegial support from Schöne *Bagsh*. Until the end of 2006, she worked as Mongolian Studies' subject representative at the Institute's Central Asia Seminar. At the beginning of 2007, she was presented with the Medal of Honour of the former Mongolian President Nambaryn Enkhbayar by the then Ambassador, Prof. Tuvdendorjiin Galbaatar, in a festive ceremony.



Photo 28: Uta Schöne receiving the Medal of Honour from Prof. T. Galbaatar

After her retirement, Uta Schöne continued to volunteer in the Department of Mongolian Studies for an impressive nine years. Students and doctoral candidates further enjoyed her interesting courses and were grateful that she supervised seminar papers, Bachelor's and Master's theses, and dissertations. At that time, the only remaining position had already been reduced to a 50% part-time lecturer.¹⁰

Uta Schöne has been well-networked with scientists in socialist countries and has regularly given presentations at major international conferences such as the PIAC (since 1969)¹¹ and the International Mongolian Congress (since 1970). The last time she could actively participate in Ulaanbaatar was in 2002, so she received the Friendship Medal (*Nairamdal medal*) in 2006 in absentia.

¹⁰ Uta Schöne appointed the author as her successor since Ines Stolpe had already worked as a lecturer in two subjects (Mongolian Studies and Educational Sciences) since 2001. She completed her doctorate in 2008 on the relationship between education and nomadism in Mongolia under Uta Schöne's supervision and was appointed to the Mongolian Studies professorship at Bonn University in 2013.

¹¹ For the topics see here: <https://www.altaiist.org/home/confessions/rattig-u/>.



Photos 29 & 30: Uta Schöne at the 8th International Congress of Mongolists in 2002 (in sessions with the author)

In 2011, she received the Mongolian Democratic Party Medal. In 2016, on the occasion of her 75th birthday, Dr Sc. Uta Schöne was awarded the Polar Star Order (*Altan Gadas Odon*), the highest-ranking medal for foreign individuals from the Mongolian Government, by the then Ambassador, Tsolmongiin Bolor, at a conference held in her honour on “Family and social transformation processes in Mongolia”.¹²

¹² For details see here: http://www.mongolei.de/berichte/uta_schoene.htm.

Uta Schöne has worked as a researcher and teacher at Humboldt University for almost half a century (precisely 47 years). Her impressive spectrum of content ranged from linguistic, historical, educational, cultural and political science topics to questions of identity, emancipation and equality. In addition to her three academic qualifications (diploma, doctoral thesis, and habilitation) and her textbook contributions, she has published more than twenty scholarly articles in German and Mongolian between 1971 and 2012.¹³

Furthermore, she has written conference reports and articles for newspapers and magazines, as well as translations, and she also gave interviews to journalists and took part in external science communication, for example at the ‘Long Night of Science’.

Everyone who had the good fortune and honour to study and/or do their doctorate with Uta Schöne appreciates her as a competent, wise and warm-hearted teacher. She always supported her students and doctoral candidates in a friendly and critical manner, gave them suggestions, answered many questions and provided them with difficult-to-access literature from her private library. Her academic approach always went hand in hand with an openness to new ideas and a friendly, down-to-earth attitude. Her valuable advice was often embedded in unforgettable, humorous anecdotes. She created a motivating learning and working atmosphere and exemplified that Mongolia-related competence encompasses more than just desk knowledge. Many of her former students honour the memory of *manai* Schöne *Bagsh* through their own work.

The last two years of her life were overshadowed by illness. We are deeply grateful that we were able to spend part of our lives with Uta Schöne. She will live on in her works and our memories.

¹³ For a list of most of her written works see: Barkmann, Udo B. & Ganchimeg Altangerel (Hg.): *Familie und gesellschaftlicher Transformationsprozess in der Mongolei*. Berlin: Lit-Verlag: 14-18.