Editorial Introduction

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Although Inner Asia has emerged as an entity with a distinct identity in areas bordering sedentary farming populations and their cultures, it is more complex than we might have expected. For one thing, its populations are not only distributed into various mutually exclusive countries and regions, they are also linguistically divided into at least three large branches, Mongolic, Tungusic and Turkic, which further splinter into numerous national and sub-national or ethnic languages and dialects. For millennia, ambitious native leaders always mobilised some source of commonality (e.g. felt-dwelling, hunting and pastoralism) for state-making purposes or for military campaigns against sedentary neighbours, but such commonality is no longer easy to come by. Today, diversity has become a valued means to come to terms with reality. Identity and its management thus become or remain an exciting if not always a happy subject for musing in the region, as the five main articles in this issue have demonstrated.

I have personally long been intrigued by the anxiety on the part of many Inner Asian groups, including those of independent Mongolia, over imminent dilution of ethnic or national identities. Identity, in this angst, is one of pure origin, so it is imagined to be prone to pollution and even loss through contacts with outsiders. However, if identity is understood to be a process, and its formation and reformation is a crystallisation of diverse elements, aided sometimes by political power, then the identity stabilised at certain point of history (which is seen as the original pure identity) is not pure in the modern sense. Joo-Yup Lee and Shuntu Kuang's study on the DNA patterns of the ancient Turkic peoples is thus to be commended for their heroic delving into Chinese historical sources for comparison with genetic and linguistic mapping. Their conclusion goes categorically against the popular nationalist imagination based on pseudo-scientific racial knowledge: the Turkic peoples are unitary not because they have come from a single stock with genetic unity, but from linguistic diffusion. In other words, what gives unity to the Turkic peoples is culture, rather than nature.

The choice of culture or nature is not given, but always political. Inner Asian rulers do not always follow their cultural instinct, but formulate identity politics in calculation of pros and cons. This is the gist of David Bello's argument in his meticulously researched paper on the Qing decision to support hunting and pastoralism among the Inner Asian garrison soldiers in Hulunbuir borderlands. Indeed, we could further argue that the purity angst among today's Mongols and other Inner Asians may be the legacy of the Qing policy to maintain military prowess, which is believed to be ecologically determined. There is no need to blame or celebrate the Qing rulers for such decisions, but we do need to know the social consequence of such decisions or policies for Inner Asian identity formations.

This is the message in Svetlana Huusko's excellent article on the ethnic identity problems among the Evenki adolescents in Buryatia. Unlike the Qing, which promoted a purity-based Inner Asian identity vis-à-vis the Han Chinese culture, maintained through segregational policies (ended around 1902), the Russian empire and its successors the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation have not shown much interest in supporting the cultures of the Inner Asian indigenous peoples in Siberia. Inner Asian identity, and that of the Evenkis as documented in Huusko's article, has always been stigmatised by official policies. The consequence for the Evenkis, and especially their impressionable adolescents is devastating, and doubly so. They shy away from their own Evenki identity to embrace Russian identity, but tragically if not ironically, in a racialised environment based on physiognomy, Russian identity is closed to them. If this is how Evenki adolescents have been forced to manage their identity, one can pass negative judgement on the Russian management of Inner Asian identities.

If Inner Asian ethnopolitics is perhaps too messy, as people do not agree on who they are or who they ought to be, how about their cosmopolitics? Well, the term is already indicative of its messiness. We are here particularly pleased to present an article on Kalmykia and the Kalmyks, which/who, although located outside of the traditional Inner Asian geographical region, are quintessentially Inner Asian. In fact, despite their geographical distance from Inner Asia, no late imperial history of the Mongols is complete without that of the Kalmyks now living in the Volga region of Russia. Yet we may say, from a Mongol-centric perspective, just as they have moved away from the Mongol heartland, their every-day concerns are also becoming more otherworldly.

Thus, Ulanov, Badmaev and Holland's paper shed important light on a fascinating phenomenon, viz. the constitutional change in post-Soviet Kalmykia where the old article on separating the church and state was removed and replaced by the introduction of Buddhism as the national religion. What it

amounts to is not just launching 'the only Buddhist nation in Europe', but something profoundly complicated with far-reaching consequences. Laws in Kalmykia and early Mongol laws for this matter, we are told, were informed by Buddhist canonical laws, and they were politically designed to support Buddhism and the clergy. While this reflected the political will of the Mongol (including Kalmyk) leadership, the religious dimension did not fade away after the Kalmyk incorporation into the Russian state, thus laying the foundation for the post-Soviet constitutional change. This process may be compared to the undercurrents of the popular though unsuccessful campaigns for making Buddhism the national religion in Mongolia.