

**OASIES**  
The Organization for the  
Advancement of Studies  
of Inner Eurasian Societies

# CONNECTIONS

a biannual newsletter from OASIES @ Columbia University in the City of New York | Fall 2008

## Exploring Inner Eurasia

reviving an idea at Columbia University

Since the disbandment of the Center for the Study of Central Asia (CSCA) at Columbia University in 1996, there has been little institutional support for graduate students interested in studying the vast Inner Eurasian space between East Asia, Russia, the Middle East, and South Asia. Up until the disappearance of CSCA, Columbia was widely regarded as a university dedicated to the study of Inner Eurasia. Drawing on support from the four major area studies institutions whose scholarship contains and informs, but is not fundamental to, the study of Inner Eurasia, we have begun the process of reinvigorating this space as a focus of academic discourse. Motivated by our own deep interests in the region as well as the encourage-

ment of interested faculty and other students, we have decided to establish a community of graduate students and scholars which supports the study of Inner Eurasia: the Organization for the Advancement of Studies of Inner Eurasian Societies (OASIES).

Clearly, such an endeavor requires taking stock of what has come before and assessing the lacunae that may have developed as a result of the area-studies paradigm. As 2008 marks the fiftieth anniversary of the National Defense Education Act of 1958, the first goal of OASIES is to begin a conversation on the state of area studies and the ways in which it has shaped academic discourse over the past five decades. To this end, we have begun an

**Our goal is to foster dialogue across the boundaries of the East Asian, Middle Eastern, South Asian, and Russian area studies paradigms.**



ongoing series of scholar panel discussions on the state of area studies across the Eurasian space. These discussions invite senior faculty, both from Columbia and from other institutions, to speak on the genealogy of area studies around the Inner Eurasian space as well as how its paradigm has impacted their work.

More specifically, we aspire to use our organization as a nexus for strengthening the existing linkages between the Weatherhead East Asian, Harriman, Middle East, and Southern Asian Institutes at Columbia University, all of which have important connections to the study of Inner Eurasia. Starting from this strategic position, we have begun to assist in the dissemination of information regarding academic events that pertain to two or more of the aforementioned institutes. We support the organization of regular lectures, brown bag discussions, film screenings that transcend the various area studies approaches.

Finally we attempt to construct and support a community of student-scholars whose work transcends or does not fit neatly within the boundaries of area-studies institutes. Toward this end we serve as a Web-centered repository for resources and assist in coordinating student interests with such resources. We also host periodic graduate student conferences and workshops which involve presentations of papers on topics relevant to the study of Inner Eurasia.

## CONFERENCES

The first of these conferences “Interrogating Inner Eurasia” was held on April 13, 2008. Eight graduate students and scholars from institutions as varied as the University of Chicago to Al-Farabi Kazakh National University participated in the conference -- presenting papers on topics located across the Inner Eurasian space, from the medieval period to the present. Of special interest was Arya Rejaee’s (New School for Social Research) paper “‘Tant pis pour nous’: Nationalism, Symbolic

Martyrdom, and the Iranian Oil Crisis” which touched on the socio-political context in which Mohammad Mosaddeq defied the normative assumptions of rational choice theory, a dominant mode of thought in Western social science, and “instead consciously pursued policies that emphasized the symbolic and immaterial to the detriment of his country’s political and economic stability.” Rather than relying on a purely materialist explanation of Iranian political strategy, Rejaee compelled the audience to consider the deep cultural and religious influences at work in Iran in the 1950s and how they might be at work in contemporary Iranian politics.

Also of note was Hannah Barker’s (Columbia University) project on “Friar John of Plano Carpini’s Mission to the Mongols” in which she analyzed the role of envoys in exploring Mongol political intentions and cultural knowledge. Barker argued that Pope Innocent IV in particular and medieval Europe in general had much more information about the great Mongol Khans than was previously assumed in medieval scholarship. (Full abstracts of these and other papers can be downloaded at [www.oasies.org/conferences/index.html](http://www.oasies.org/conferences/index.html).)

## DISCUSSIONS

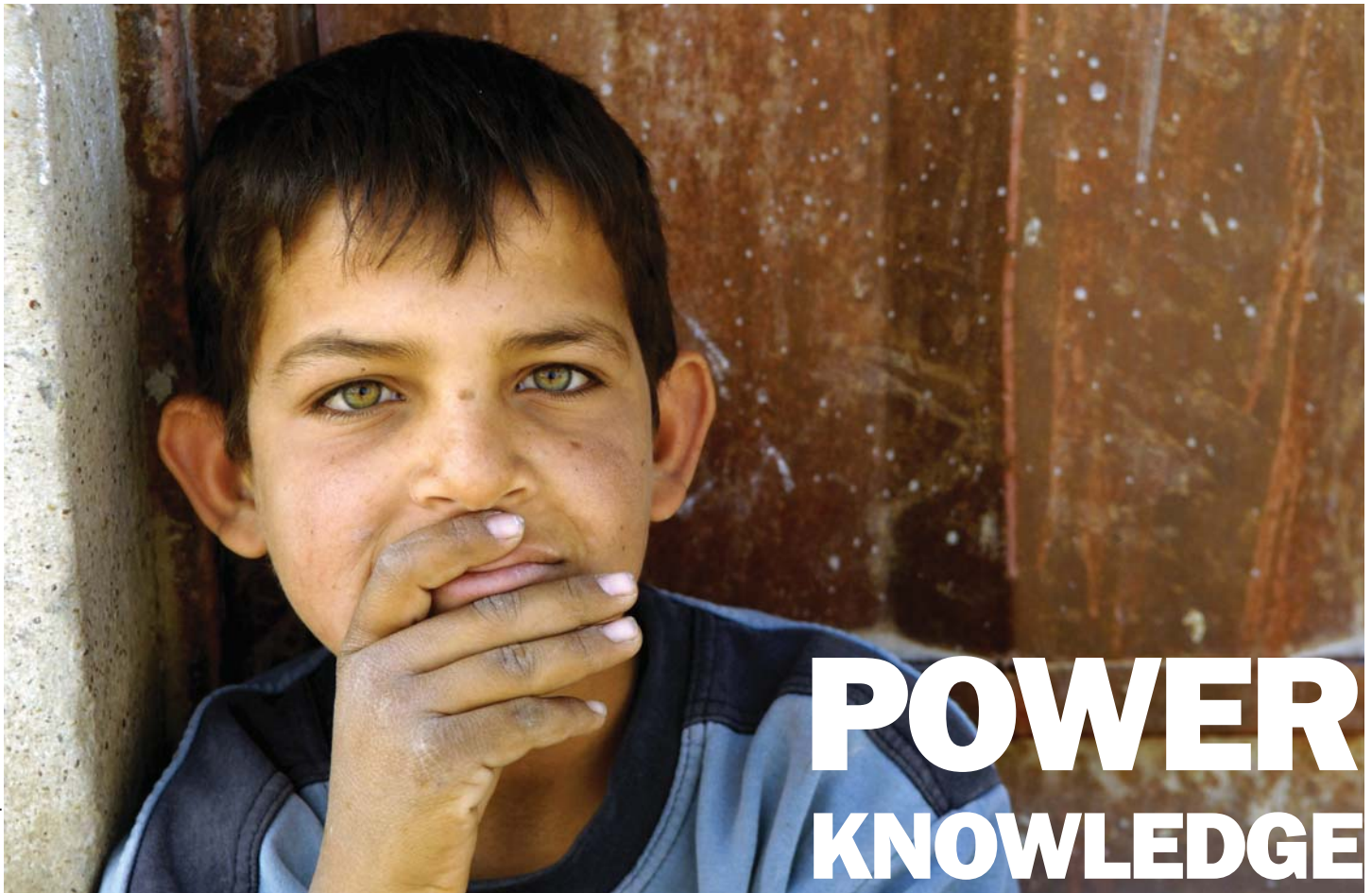
During the Spring 2008 semester OASIES hosted two scholar panel discussions on topics related to Inner Eurasia.\* The first of these discussions “Lacunae: Area Studies and the Inner Eurasian Space” brought together several senior scholars -- David Ludden (New York University), Richard Bulliet (Columbia University), and Jane Burbank (New York University) -- for a discussion of the genealogy of Area Studies, how it shapes scholarship related to the Inner Eurasian space and what steps young scholars should take to work within or transcend the paradigm. As leading figures in the study of South Asia, the Middle East, and the Russian Empire, respectively, each of these scholars made valuable contributions to the discussion which centered around politics (both academic and inter/national) and finances. Although there was some disagreement among the panelists as to the importance of philology in approaching the Inner Eurasian space, all of the panelists affirmed the importance of attempting to move beyond the current boundaries of area studies. Professor Burbank in particular stressed that young scholars should attempt this process while working within a discipline rather than the somewhat stricter confines of an area studies program.

Over the past semester we have instigated an ongoing conversation regarding the production and distribution of power and knowledge in the Inner Eurasian space. With the further support of graduate students and scholars this dialogue will deepen and intensify -- drawing us back toward the center of Eurasia where bodies of work collide and global history is made. Please join us as we examine the lacunae of Inner Eurasia. Visit [www.oasies.org](http://www.oasies.org) or send us an e-mail at [contact@oasies.org](mailto:contact@oasies.org) for more information on how you can get involved.

\*The second discussion, “Power, Knowledge and Kurdistan,” is detailed in the report on page 3.

Written by OASIES Executive Committee members Owen Miller, Tony Shin, and Darren Byler





JAMES GORDON | CREATIVE COMMONS

# POWER KNOWLEDGE AND THE **KURDS**

**A discussion addressing a “Forgotten Community of Inner Eurasia”** *By Darren Byler*

**T**HARRIMAN INSTITUTE, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY | The Kurds are often described as “the largest nation without a state,” Akron University professor Janet Klein remarked. A community of more than 30 million transnational farmers, pastoralists, traders and professionals situated on the margins of contemporary Turkey, Syria, Iran, and Iraq, the Kurds have long been relegated to the “backwaters” of academic discourse. In the modern paradigm of nations and cultural-economic (if not political) empires, Kurdistan has often been considered a non-essential focus of study by region specific academic institutions. Starting from this understanding eminent Kurd scholar Robert Olson (University of Kentucky) said he could think of no better place to start a series of discussions on the “Forgotten Communities of Inner Eurasia.”

On May 8, 2008 the Organization for the Advancement of Studies of Inner Eurasian Societies (OASIES) brought together leading scholars of the Kurds to discuss the vagaries of power relationships and hegemonic forces in regulating the

dissemination of knowledge. OASIES asked Ahmed Ferhadi (NYU), Janet Klein, and Robert Olson to discuss how they found themselves intrigued by Kurdish Studies, what challenges they have faced in this pursuit, and how those challenges have shifted in the new climate of war and terror in the Middle East.

For Professor Ferhadi, a Kurd from Iraqi Kurdistan, the process was a more natural progression relative to that of his fellow panelists. As a native speaker of Kurdish and Arabic he has published many works on Kurdish and Arabic linguistics and language instruction in addition to historical analysis of Kurdish liberation movements over his years at universities across the Middle East, Europe and North America.

Professor Olson, one of the first Western scholars of the Kurds, recalled dodging CIA recruiters during his days as a graduate student at Indiana University. In his experience, during the Cold War nearly all funding for study of Inner Eurasia was funneled through Altaic Studies in an effort to focus scholarship on Soviet Central Asia. Even as a young Turkolo-

gist, Professor Olson was forced towards this track but in the end managed to maintain his focus on Turkey and eventually the Kurds. Olson said the influence of U.S. foreign policy on what gets studied in Asia continues to be a major force. With the recent Kurdish “success story” in U.S.-occupied Iraq, the study of the Kurds has again begun to receive support through official channels.

Of course, with its overlap into the “sovereignty” of the surrounding nations, namely Turkey and Iran, studying the Kurds has long been shaped by other factors as well. As Professor Klein recalled, because of her work on the Kurds, her access to the Turkish archives was denied for seven years – a ban that was recently rescinded in the post-September 11 environment. Professor Ferhandi’s work likewise has been regulated by the political climate of his native Iraq over the past few decades of the Baathist regime.

As the floor was opened for questions from the capacity audience, the conversation turned towards the response of Kurds themselves towards these marginalizing forces. Professor Olson submitted that the further development of transnational oil pipelines crisscrossing the region “mitigated against” the development of a Kurdish state. Indeed, Professor Klein provocatively argued that in as much as Kurds would like to realize real political power and social equality such a goal may be “belated” and counter-productive in the current environment of global power relations. Rather, drawing parallels to the problematic creation of other states in recent Middle Eastern history, Klein demonstrated that more creative solutions outside the stratified systems of nationalist politics are needed – and that the development of these sorts of models should be a priority of Kurdish specialists.

All the panelists, including Gil Anidjar (Columbia University), who responded to their presentations, agreed that the recent U.S. success in Iraqi Kurdistan marks a turn in hegemonic pressure – making the need for alternative sources of knowledge – such as those produced by non-aligned Kurdish specialists, even more crucial than in the past when the possibility for change was not as strong.

**For further reading on these and other issues see:**

**Ahmed Ferhadi**, *The Kurdish Liberation Movements 1931-1961*. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003)

**Robert Olson**, *The Kurdish Question and Turkish-Iranian Relations: From World War I to 1998*, (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 1998)

– *The Goat and the Butcher: Nationalism and State-Formation in Kurdistan-Iraq since the Iraqi War* (Costa Mesa, Calif: Mazda Publishers, 2005)

**Janet Klein**, “Kurdish Nationalists and Non-Nationalist Kurds: Rethinking Minority Nationalism and the Dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, 1908-1909,” *Nations and Nationalism*, 13:1

– “Whither the Failure of Kurdish Nationalism?” *Journal of Turkish Studies / Türklik Bilgisi Araştırmaları* 31 (2008, forthcoming).



Janet Klein discusses her position on the future of Kurdistan.

## Fall 2008:

Our interrogation of the area studies paradigm and its relationship to the study of Inner Eurasian societies will continue on **October 16** with a discussion of the Mongol Empire and post-Mongol space.

Our series of discussions on the “Forgotten Communities of Inner Eurasia” will continue on **November 7** with a conversation with leading scholars on the situation of Uyghurs between China and Central Asia

Please consult [www.oasies.org](http://www.oasies.org) for further information regarding the times and locations of these events



[www.oasies.org](http://www.oasies.org) | [contact@oasies.org](mailto:contact@oasies.org)



OASIES is supported by:



DARREN BAKER

HOW DOGS I CREATIVE COMMONS