



THE GEORGE
WASHINGTON
UNIVERSITY
WASHINGTON DC

BY GEORGE!

GW's Faculty, Staff & Community Newspaper

Summer 2004

GW .org
News Center

GW Makes Mongolia a Hot Topic in Cold War Studies

By Thomas Kohout

At the foot of the Silk Road on the Mongolian Step in an isolated jhuree (a type of Mongolian tent) encampment outside Ulaan Baator, representatives of The George Washington University Cold War Group (GWCW) put on an impressive display. It wasn't their co-sponsorship, along with the Civic Education Project — Mongolia, of the conference titled the "International Workshop on Mongolia and the Cold War," that was so noteworthy. GWCW has been deeply entrenched in Cold War research and scholarship since its formation in 2000. Instead it was the fact that the assembly was dominated by graduate student participation. GW PhD candidates Yvette Chin and Malgorzata Gnoinsha, along with visiting faculty fellow at the national University of Mongolia, Sergey Radchenko, participated in the first major conference on Mongolia's impact in the Cold War.

The GWCW group was the brainchild of three faculty members, James Hershberg, associate professor of history and international affairs, Hope Harrison, assistant professor of history and international affairs, and James Goldgeier, associate professor political science, director for Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies. They created the group four years ago to promote Cold War studies at GW, both by faculty and graduate students. Recently, a grant from the Henry Luce Foundation has enabled GWCW to add to its slate of programs on the Cold War in Asia, including workshops on major Cold War in Asia topics and promoting research and document translation, in addition to supporting a position in the history department dealing with the history of US relations with East Asia during the Cold War.

Since 2000, the group has hosted a series of conferences and brown-bag lectures, including one focusing on the 30th anniversary of Nixon's trip to China, and another in Budapest, Hungary, spotlighting the importance of central and east European archives on the Cold War in Asia.

At the Budapest conference, the issue of Mongolia in the Cold War emerged as the next intriguing subject for a conference. A mysterious and isolated outpost during the Cold War, Mongolia's location between the Soviet Union and China placed the country in the center of the Sino-Soviet conflict. Following the Budapest forum, the GWCW group quickly moved to assemble the Mongolian conference.

"The presentations all went sensationally well," said Hershberg. He added that it was particularly gratifying because "graduate students were playing such a

prominent role — presenting fresh evidence at a really unusual level at an international scholarly meeting.”

According to Hershberg, although there were many prominent international Cold War scholars and institutions represented at the Mongolia meeting, Chin’s participation stood out. She gave a presentation on Mongolia’s admission into the United Nations, chaired a panel discussion and was co-editor of the briefing book of declassified Mongolian and American documents.

Her talk, “Mongolia’s Membership in the United Nations and the Recognition Crisis in the Kennedy Administration,” focused on the unexpected chain of events that led to Mongolia’s admissions into the United Nations in 1961.

“Through my research mostly I’ve been looking at the American documents at this point,” Chin said. “I noticed that every couple of years starting in the ’60s and into the ’70s, there were brief attempts toward recognition and establishing formal diplomatic relations with Mongolia. But it never went anywhere. It got tied up with America’s two-China policy [supporting Nationalist China’s claim to the nation over that of Communist China]. Our domestic politics made it so presidential administrations really couldn’t do anything about Mongolia. ... It gets all tied up with issues like, can you ignore a country? By 1961, Mongolia is sitting in the United Nations, you are looking at the delegation, but you don’t recognize them?”

Because international Cold War history is such a new field, and so many new opportunities for research are emerging in so many different places, explained Hershberg, graduate students are really able to make an impression at a much earlier stage than is normally the case in most other fields.

“For me there is a kind of subtlety to be had with smaller, less high-tension conflicts on the international spectrum,” said Chin explaining what lured her to study the diplomatic history of the Cold War.

Even though Mongolia seems awfully remote, Chin said, there are certain aspects of the history that really touch upon a lot of other Cold War flash points — the crisis that Cold War historians tend to look at.

“I really do believe in the power of the tail wagging the dog,” said Chin about the role satellite nations played in manipulating Cold War tensions between the super powers. “I really think the pull of small powers has grown considerably. That’s something the US needs to think about. In the field we’re always talking about being policy relevant, it’s not just enough to have a good story and look at a lot of archives and uncover a lot of documents. In the end there is something to be said here about how states determine their policy.”

Chin continued that for most Americans the Cold War is a clash between communism and capitalism. “There are these huge ‘isms,’ but we hardly ever look at how it’s played out. We have a tendency to look at the communist block as this large swath of red,” explained Chin. “That was exactly the problem that the State Department and leadership had at the time — the inability to look at those kinds of subtleties and actually formulate real policy to address real conditions on the ground.”

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