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Peer-Review Publications for Improving Scholarship in Central Asia

Introduction

In post-Soviet Central Asia, basic socio-economic challenges are exacerbated by simultaneous difficulties of nation building and successfully navigating global economic flows. Central Asian states are experiencing dramatic changes that distinguish them from other developing countries; changes are more rapid, more radical and more complex (4; 5; 9). Researchers have yet to conduct in-depth studies with and about individuals in countries experiencing the transition from socialism to free-market democracies, focusing how that transition affects teachers' development (11). The region's states are preoccupied with endemic low state capacity, the possibility of falling into neo-colonial dependence, and losing legitimacy. International, development and comparative scholarship has suggested education and development of local research capacities as among critical strategies to cope with the above challenges (10).

If shoring up the educational and research spheres is a fruitful potential form of capacity building for Central Asian societies and states, these spheres have undergone particularly deleterious transformations and endured crucial hardships. While Central Asian scholarship had achieved certain scope, prominence and quality during the Soviet period, post-Soviet scholars typically enjoy even less autonomous space for them to meet the highest standards of scholarship than they did in the Soviet past. Social science scholarship was driven through ideological doctrines of Marxism and Leninism. Most Soviet research including central Asian Soviet research primarily attempted to make aggressive arguments to disprove and delegitimize the western/ capitalist scholarship. Soviet-era scholarship has been criticized for its highly-politicized backdrop and reductionist projections (2). Research was formally guided by behavioural psychology and Marxist positivist epistemology exhibited in the form of quantitative statistical analyses and quantified sociological surveys, aimed at proving and verifying Soviet educational theories and models underpinned by the Soviet-style Marxism-Leninism (14). Thus, Soviet research studies there were shaped by ideological imposition (3) and often represented personal political interpretations rather than conclusions based on rigorous empirical fieldwork.

Central Asian scholars often lack economic independence from the state and therefore are subject to state pressures to produce ideologically correct work. High-quality work is often not rewarded financially or in terms of prestige. Can we imagine a Central Asian scholarship

that restores the best of Soviet-era practices, or—perhaps more appropriately—the standards represented by the many talented and dedicated pre-Soviet scholars historically? Clearly, there are many dedicated post-Soviet Central Asian scholars producing excellent work, despite the unfavourable conditions for quality education and knowledge production. What can be done to encourage their work and build their capacity to continue to produce and disseminate knowledge?

This paper focuses on the quality of research in Central Asia and how it could be improved. We suspect that there are dozens of ways of approaching the topic, but we focus on the added value that improving peer review in Central Asia would bring. Based on an examination of practices of scholarly peer review among Western social scientists, we suggest that peer review strategies—so central to the ways in which Western scholars improve and refine their work, by whatever standards exist within their own epistemic communities—are essentially absent in Central Asia. Remedying this absence could potentially produce a salubrious “ripple effect” that would benefit the region more broadly.

The State of Central Asian Scholarship

While scholarship varies considerably across Central Asia in terms of scope, purpose, and quality, we allow ourselves a few general claims about the state of scholarship in the region.

First, as a general rule, scholars publish in scholarly journals principally in order to defend their degrees, such as candidate or doctorate of science. Publications in acceptably scholarly outlets are required for such professional advancement, but exceedingly few scholars think of publishing as a form of intellectual exchange or as a way to build knowledge on subjects of common concern. In fact, National Attestation Committee (NAK) is a centralized body awarding science degrees. Universities and institutes do not have authority to award degrees (candidate of science or doctor of science); only NAK has this authority. NAK has a specific list of journals within the country which are approved by them as NAK-licensed journals, and a person trying to defend his candidate of science or doctor of science should have publications in these journals. Unfortunately, the procedure of journal selection and inclusion in the required list of NAK seems non-transparent and subject to speculations.

Second, specifically publications in foreign journals are often required for career advancement, such as the defence of dissertations. Whereas prior to the 1990s, publication abroad typically meant being published outside the USSR, today publishing outside of the home country of the author but within Central Asia qualifies as “foreign.” For example, a scholar from Kyrgyzstan may get his or her work published in Kazakhstan or Tajikistan. As a result, scholars of these countries establish contacts with each other and support each other’s publications, sometimes with clear *quid pro quo* arrangements.

Third, unfortunately, much published work suffers from low quality. Once published, it is rarely read except by, as a rule, those other scholars working in the same narrowly defined field who seek their own degrees. Thus, the scholarly use of such published work is severely limited; knowledge does not cumulate and is not communicated effectively. Scholars who meet the formatting requirements for publication, who pay fees (see below), and who have personal connections to journal editors or members of editorial boards can easily have their work published. Others are routinely locked out.

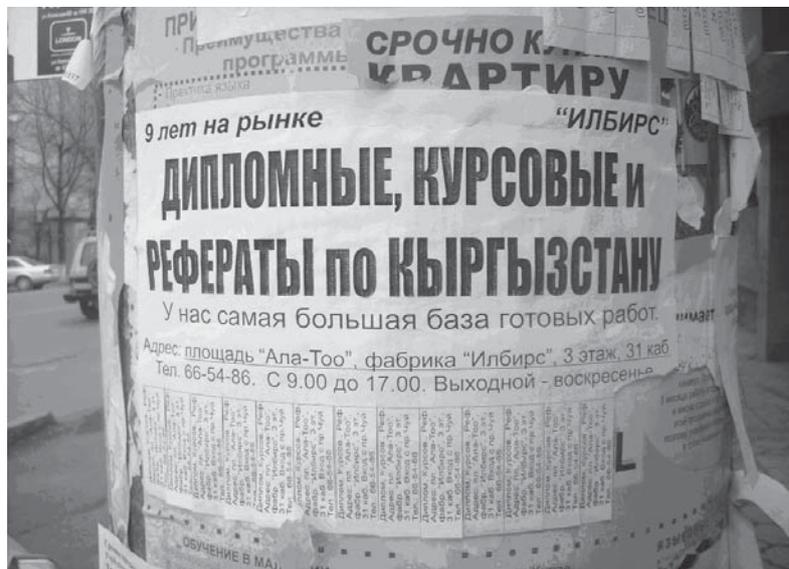
Fourth, most Central Asian universities produce a journal that periodically publishes articles primarily by university faculty. Articles published in such outlets are often quite short, and they often are no more than reports of scholarly activities in the most general terms. These articles serve to report to university superiors of the ongoing scholarly activities that university faculty undertake, but they often do not delve significantly into the substance of such research. They often thus fail the purpose of scholarly exchange and the production of cumulative knowledge.

Fifth, authors of articles often pay fees to get their papers published in journals. Central Asian journals typically do not have independent sources of funding; thus, in part by economic circumstance and in part by dint of the culture of capitalist entrepreneurship that has enveloped academic circles in Central Asia, journals often require fees to produce publications. As a specialist from Kyrgyz Academy of Education reported,

Because of market economy, some individuals are becoming very “creative” and profit-oriented. For example, I know one scholar who has three journals all included in the NAK list, and now they charge money, about 100-150 som per page because the journals are self-financed. Of course people pay that money because they would rather get their degrees. Unfortunately, no one really monitors quality standards of articles published in that journal. That is secondary to them. (Interview, June 29, 2009).

The same is true of the severely anemic academic book market; self-financed books get published, while others do not—with too little regard for quality.

Then, there is also an issue of plagiarism, and there is no proper check on plagiarism unfortunately. There is no discourse about the nature and effects of plagiarism in Central Asia nowadays. One can see the announcement being posted conspicuously in the central streets as given below.



In photo: Announcement about ready diploma, course papers and essays on Kyrgyzstan

Finally, peer review is almost entirely absent in most journals. Most journals accept submissions on a variety of topics—sometimes only tangentially related to the stated mission or title of the journal. There is typically no meritocratic screening process and no process to review content (though some review of format and presentation often occurs). It would be hard to overstate this point: *there is no forum for dialogue, review, feedback to each other's papers*. Only journal polemics happen occasionally—when another author writes to critique a certain author's published work. Authors who submit do not expect written feedback on their work; journals have editorial boards, whose members do not typically review, let alone write up comments about, submitted work. In those few cases where editorial board members select and review papers, they do so based on their individual judgments of quality. The assessment criteria are rarely shared with authors beforehand, so that authors could target them while writing their papers. Some international universities are trying to introduce peer-refereed journals. However, some Central Asian scholars studied abroad and they publish their work in international journals and they understand peer review procedures, but they are a minority.

Peer Review in Western Social Science Scholarship

There are innumerable works that examine the practices of peer review in Western (principally English-language) scholarship (13). As we detail below, the ideal form of peer review is often belied by the actual practice of it.

In its ideal form, peer review is a process by which the members of an epistemic community monitor the quality of work submitted for publication. It is a mechanism by which such scholarly communities uphold standards that the communities themselves have defined. There is a self-referential aspect to all community-based policing of standards of scholarship; it is hard to argue that work that meets a particular standard is *objectively* better. After all, ever since Kuhn (1962), we know that scholars' work is subject to paradigms that, put most baldly, can represent little more than the intellectual fashion of the day. But unless we want to suggest that all work is equally valuable, we need to accept that different scholarly communities will inevitably come up with their own standards of quality. Peer review is a mechanism to ensure that standards—whatever those standards are—are upheld.

In its ideal form, peer review (at least for journal articles) is “double-blind”—i.e., the person submitting the manuscript does not know the identity of the person reviewing it, *and* the person reviewing the manuscript does not know the identity of the person who wrote it. Ideally, manuscripts are reviewed by more than one or two reviewers because the standards of quality are really a feature of research *communities*, so a single review can often be idiosyncratic. The ideal is that the standards of the community are upheld when the number of reviewers gets high enough. Thus, on average each submission is judged fairly by the standards of the community.

In its ideal form, peer review occurs relatively quickly, so that scholars whose work does not meet the standards of the community can receive valuable feedback and find ways to revise their work for possible future publication. Also, for those scholars whose submissions ultimately *do* meet these standards, they can know that submitting to peer review will not inappropriately *delay* publication (and the professional and intellectual rewards that may come from publishing). Put differently, whatever delay before publication is built into

the process should be short enough that it is justified in terms of the prestige accorded to publishing in a peer-reviewed journal.

Ideally, work submitted for peer review undergoes review by the most qualified reviewers available. Given specialized knowledge, it is often appropriate for a piece to be reviewed by the main experts in the field. This is part of ensuring the highest quality for publications. More junior scholars may also be involved, if they have the relevant expertise. Ideally, scholars agree to conduct reviews for two reasons: 1) out of genuine commitment to the standards of quality that a community upholds; 2) out of a desire to be on the forefront of cutting-edge research—before it appears to broader readerships.

Finally, in its ideal form, peer review ensures meritocratic criteria for publication. That is, the senior scholar with many years of experience and a long line of previous publications is treated *exactly the same way* as the new scholar just cutting his/her professional and intellectual teeth. Thus, while intellectual fads can clearly influence decisions about the “publishability” of a given submission, these decisions in the ideal form should be immune from questions about institutional affiliation, power relationships, and the like.

The realities of peer review often fall short of this ideal in Western social science circles. Based on interviews and fieldwork Shamatov conducted in Toronto and Ottawa, as well as telephone interviews conducted more broadly in North America in 2008, we identify ten principle ways in which Western peer review often fails to live up to its stated purpose:

First, there are innumerable publishing outlets with some claim to being peer-reviewed, but they are not all upholding the same standards of quality. Thus, reviewers for the most prominent journals which receive the most submissions know that editors have to be more selective in their decisions about publishable quality. By contrast, reviewers for less prominent (but still peer reviewed) journals know that editors simply cannot afford to turn away too many submissions and continue to publish the journal. The result is simple: the threshold for determining publishable quality may be higher or lower, depending on the journal and the editor’s ability to ensure a sufficient supply of quality submissions.

Second, the peer review process can get bogged down by the submission of papers that are unsuitable for the targeted publication. This may occur because a scholar does not adequately consider the match between her/his work and the journal’s mission. It may also occur because students whose work requires further refinement are increasingly be encouraged by their supervisors (in the spirit of “publish or perish”) to submit their work to journals as early in their careers as possible.

Third, the peer review process relies—to varying extents—on editorial boards. Such boards are staffed by well-known people in their fields, whose identity is clear to those submitting. This has two implications: 1) it diminishes the extent to which peer review is actually “double-blind,” and 2) it narrows the range of scholars from a community who conduct reviews of submitted work. Arguably, both of these implications are not good for the purpose of upholding the standards of scholarship within an academic community.

Fourth, even when the best practices of double-blind peer review are followed, in narrowly defined and highly specialized topics, the identity of a reviewer or of an author may be known or easily deduced. This is especially true in an age where increasing numbers of scholars post working papers on websites that are easily discovered via search engines.

Fifth, reviewers are often simply too busy to review pieces. As a result, some scholars may end up reviewing pieces that are out of their “comfort zones”—i.e., out of their areas of special

expertise. Finding suitable reviewers can be—as journal editors attested to Shamatov over and over again—the most arduous of tasks. Prestigious journals typically find reviewers rather more quickly than less prestigious ones. Delays can be especially significant for the latter.

Sixth, while reviewers who share the standards of an epistemic community may often come to similar judgments about the publishability of a submission, this does not always occur. In fact, reviewers may come to fundamentally different views about a piece, based on fundamentally different criteria. In such cases, which happen to varying extents all the time, the editor makes a judgment about which of the reviews is most persuasive in laying out the reasons for the judgment it offers. The role of the editor looms large in such cases.

Seventh, if part of the peer review process is designed to provide valuable feedback, and therefore an informal source of mentoring to scholars, some reviews are simply too thin to be useful. This happens often enough, and may in part result from reviewers having too many demands on their time.

Eighth, and related to issues of slow review processes, some professors at major universities in North America are simply and entirely against peer review because the delays built into the process mean that, by the time the article is reviewed, reworked and published (if it is, in fact, published), time passes and often materials become outdated. As a result, these pieces may have less of an impact. In political science, for example, the *Journal of Democracy* was created exactly for this reason—to bypass the time-consuming review process and produce scholarly (though not peer-reviewed) work that would remain timely and relevant (in this case, relevant to policy-makers) when it appeared in print.

Ninth, peer review—when embraced at the level of individual institutions—can lead to the devaluation of work that is *not* peer reviewed. There are good reasons for scholars to be publishing for different (even non-scholarly) audiences—for policymakers, for students, and for the non-specialist educated readership. Some social science departments in North America simply do not count publications that are not peer reviewed as they assess the suitability of candidates for promotion and tenure; most departments to at least some extent discount these publications.

Tenth, even when the peer-review process works fairly well, it serves to reify the epistemic community in question. That is, the more that peer review serves to reiterate the common standards of that community, the less it speaks to others *outside the community*. This hinders cross-disciplinary conversations. It also hinders the creation of work that is broadly relevant to policy-makers. Obviously, this can be defended as a practice necessary for producing “basic research” (using language common in the natural sciences), but in its worst form it produces insularity that may render scholarship especially prone to intellectual fads and the hegemony of particular paradigms.

Idea of Working Paper Series

Given the shortcomings of Central Asian scholarship and the benefits (with qualifications noted above) of the peer review process, what can be done to bring peer review processes to Central Asia, and in what form should they exist in Central Asia? How can such processes be of benefit to Central Asian scholars and, more broadly, to the community of Central Asianists, regardless of where they physically reside? How could such a process be initiated or revived in Central Asia without falling into the traps of neo-colonial dependence, asymmetrical power

relations, and lack of relevance and practical usefulness of the knowledge produced and processes engaged and methods employed (6; 12)? We propose the following plan, which we think avoids some major potential pitfalls.

We propose a plan for a working paper series for Central Asian scholars. The series would involve forms of peer-review, though not—at least at the initial stages—the exact forms that have been developed in the West. In addition, the working paper series would be structured as a two-way street—with both Western and Central Asian scholars involved in *both* review and submission of papers. The principal aim of such a symmetrical involvement would be to ensure that individual participants would be involved as equal partners, even if the innovation of peer review is nonetheless best understood as an aspect of Western scholarship.

Because it is conceived and constructed as a “two-way street,” with Central Asian and Western scholars both involved in submitting and in reviewing submissions, it seeks to avoid major disparities of power. Since Western scholars enjoy disproportionate human and material resources for their work, they are often able to dictate the terms of engagement and disproportionately determine what constitutes valid knowledge. While it is true that Central Asian scholarship may often suffer from low quality generally (see above), it remains also true that “quality” is determined in large part through the ways in which a community upholds its own standards. If the construction and maintenance of those standards have more to do with who is in the material position to determine them, then power disparities—including those between Central Asia and the West—loom large.

Thus, our plan seeks to avoid denigrating the value of indigenous, local knowledge, but, at the same time recognize that Western approaches to social science do have something inherently valuable to offer; our goal is not to valorize local knowledge necessarily over its alternatives, but to suggest that knowledge should be constructed and construed as a two-way street.

Crucially, those authors who publish in the Series would retain sole and exclusive copyright over the material. Without abandoning the notion of quality entirely, we believe that Central Asians themselves need to be included as equal partners, and, crucially, *to take on the responsibilities associated with being equal partners*, in the constitution of standards for research. The plan below seeks to enable the Central Asian research community to participate equally in the knowledge generated via the Series.

It was emphasized what Central Asian scholarship stands to gain from this kind of initiative, but it's worth adding how much Western scholars stand to gain as well. Four things stand out. First, Western scholars who publish in the Series will have their work receive greater exposure to non-English speaking audiences than otherwise would be the case. This can have a second advantage for them: it serves as a check on their analytic reasoning and empirical knowledge when they expose themselves to critiques by people living in Central Asia itself. Third, exposure can bring the possibility of new collaborations with Central Asian scholars. This can suggest a fourth advantage: that, given Western scholars' teaching and administrative obligations that can limit their time spent in Central Asia itself, such collaboration can help them retain links to ongoing developments in the “field” beyond what would normally occur. This initiative is also going to contribute to the following: bridging gaps and addressing suspicions about Western scholarship. For example, McMann (2002) encountered many problems while collecting data in Kazakhstan. She faced “the standard

battery of questions: ‘Who sent you to this country? Why did you come to my village?’ and people were very suspicious of her intentions.¹

Conclusion

This paper analyzed the shortcomings of Central Asian scholarship with particular reference to quality of scholarly publications. We make no claim that peer review would solve all of these problems, especially in light of the practical challenges of conducting peer review in Western contexts (discussed above). We do contend, however, that peer review would go a long way towards improving scholarship in Central Asia. There is a need for creating a forum for dialogue, review, feedback to each other’s papers – exchange of ideas through writing, which is otherwise almost non-existent nowadays. Establishing and promoting mechanisms of peer review could be vital in improving quality of publications as well as research skills of scholars in Central Asia.

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¹ Aksartova (2003) alludes to the general reluctance of people in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan to participate in research studies conducted by western scholars. She describes the people’s concern about exploitive external researchers coming to study them to “purloin their ideas, which they then use to produce publications and advance their careers” (p. 15).