At Indiana University’s mid-year Commencement ceremony that took place on December 17, 2005, the former president of Mongolia, Natsagiin Bagabandi, received an honorary Doctor of Laws degree from Indiana University in recognition of the decades-long relationship between the central Eurasian country and the university.

Bagabandi has long been an advocate for modernization in Mongolia. He entered politics in 1980 and held various political positions, leading to his election as leader of the Mongolian People’s Revolutionary Party in 1991, the year after the collapse of the Soviet system (under which Mongolia was a “satellite” country with a communist regime). He served as parliamentary speaker and opposition leader in the Mongolian Parliament. In 1997, he was elected as president and served for two terms until 2005.

Mongolia is the only fully democratic country in the former Soviet bloc east of the Baltics. Bagabandi has played a strong role in preserving Mongolia’s stability, guiding the country through controversies, including constitutional issues, privatization, environmental crises, and contested Parliamentary elections. Mongolia participates in the United Nations Millennium Development Goals project and is broadly recognized for promoting democracy and transparency in government, as well as for progress in education.

Early in his presidency, Bagabandi worked to reclaim Mongolia’s previously high standards of universal education, which had broken down with the dissolution of the Soviet Union. He successfully steered the country away from unproductive educational practices by opening up avenues with other countries, and secured agreements with more than 20 nations to offer higher education scholarships that enabled Mongolians to receive their education and training abroad.

Bagabandi has advanced degrees from Russia and Ukraine and is a trained technologist in the food industry. He holds a number of honorary doctorates from Japan, Kazakhstan, South Korea, Turkey, and Ukraine, as well as from many universities in Mongolia.

Indiana University’s connection with Mongolia began in 1956 with the creation of an interdepartmental Uralic and Altaic program—now the Department of Central Eurasian Studies (CEUS) in which Mongolian Studies resides. Altaic studies were strengthened in 1961 with the arrival of Denis Sinor as department chair (see p. 8 for related story). Sinor recruited John Gombojab Hangin, an ethnic Mongol who began teaching Mongolian at IU in 1963. Since then, Mongolian language and culture, both classical and modern, has been continuously taught by native speakers at IU.

“Mongolia’s ties with Indiana University increased rapidly during President Bagabandi’s years in office,” says Christopher Atwood, associate professor of Mongolian studies at IU, who praised the president’s active role in promoting greater Mongolian-American relations and in setting a tone of openness and accessibility that welcomes academic researchers from abroad. IU’s Mongolian Studies program has three permanent faculty

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members, comprising the internationally known Mongolist György Kara, who specializes in old Mongolian, Manchu, and Evenki texts and philological studies; Atwood, who concentrates on Mongolian nationalism and the modernization of Mongolian culture and regularly serves as an official interpreter for the U.S. Department of State; and Tserenchunt Legden, the current lecturer in Mongolian language and culture.

IU is also home to the Mongolia Society, the oldest and largest academic society related to Mongolia in the United States, brought to IU from Columbia University by Hangin. It is a private, nonprofit, nonpolitical organization whose aims are to promote and further the study of Mongolian history, language, and culture. Each year, the society sponsors a speaker series, an annual meeting, and periodical publications related to Mongolia, and it serves as a general resource in the United States about Mongolia.

During his two-day visit to Bloomington, Bagabandi was accompanied by Ravdangiin Bold, the Mongolian ambassador to the United States; Sukpantar Altantsetseg, the second political secretary at the Mongolian Embassy in Washington; and a Mongolian journalist, A. Avirmed. Also joining the presidential party were Baasan Ragchaa, currently a visiting scholar in CEUS who served as the official translator for the visit, and visiting scholar M. Saruuł-Erdene from the National University of Mongolia.

The group met with Buddhist monks at the Dgoyom Geden Tensung Ling Monastery in Bloomington. Later that day, Bagabandi gave a public lecture sponsored by the Lilly Library, where director Breon Mitchell had organized a special exhibit that included Buddhist texts written in early Mongolian script and a hand-
written account of Marco Polo’s travels to Mongolia.

Bagabandi addressed a full audience, stressing the deep ties of respect binding Mongolia to IU and his future hopes for the development of even greater activities of mutual benefit. In an interview following his address, he stressed the educational needs of his country and the particularly useful role of informatics and computers in a vast country with a sparse, still largely nomadic population who would benefit from such innovations as distance education and medical diagnosis at a distance. Bagabandi describes himself as a pragmatist in international relations, aware of maintaining good relations with Mongolia’s two large neighbors, China and Russia, while reaching out to “third neighbors” like the United States. As he counseled, “There is a saying in Mongolia: The person with a change of horses can go a long way.”

Later that day, Ambassador Bold was interviewed by Patrick O’Meara, dean for international programs, for a WFIU program that was aired in February. The final event of the two-day visit was a formal evening reception highlighted with a musical performance by six musicians from Chicago who played traditional instruments and an exhibition by a contortionist—a very popular spectacle in Mongolia—who performed before an enthusiastic audience.

—RMN