

Duken Massimkhanuly: Institutional Development and Strategic Importance of Oriental Studies in Kazakhstan

Interview with General Director Duken Massimkhanuly on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the R.B. Suleimenov Institute of Oriental Studies

This year marks the 30th anniversary of the R.B. Suleimenov Institute of Oriental Studies. Founded in 1996, during the first years of Kazakhstan's independence when diplomatic relations with Eastern countries were just beginning to develop, the institute has today become one of the leading research centers in the field of Oriental studies not only in Kazakhstan but also across the CIS and Central Asia. We spoke with the institute's General Director, Doctor of Philology, Professor, and well-known Sinologist Duken Massimkhanuly about the thirty-year journey of the institute, the strategic importance of science, and its future plans.

– Duken Massimkhanuly, the Institute of Oriental Studies will celebrate its 30th anniversary this year. Congratulations! What kind of scientific path has the institute gone through during these three decades?

– Yes, our institute is a direct product of our Independence. On November 11, 1996, the R.B. Suleimenov Institute of Oriental Studies was officially established by Resolution №1369 of the Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan. At that time, the young state faced two important tasks: to scientifically study diplomatic relations with Eastern countries; to research historical sources related to Kazakhstan preserved in foreign archives and introduce them into academic circulation. Our institute was created to fulfill precisely these tasks, and I can confidently say that we have been carrying them out at a very high level.

Over the past thirty years, the institute has consistently adhered to these directions. Of course, the beginning of any endeavor is never easy, and the first years were not easy for the young institute either. During that period, the National Academy of Sciences in Kazakhstan was dissolved, funding for science stopped, and the situation of scientists became extremely difficult. Nevertheless, our scholars did not stop their research work even in those challenging times. Fortunately, after Kassym-Jomart Tokayev came to power, particularly since 2022, funding for science has significantly increased, and a system has been introduced that provides stable salaries for scientists. As a result, compared to 2020, the institute's budget has increased several times between 2023 and 2026. This is certainly a clear step taken by a state that values, supports, and protects science, as well as the result of the collective efforts of our team.

Over the past 30 years, the R.B. Suleimenov Institute of Oriental Studies has become one of the leading centers of Oriental studies in Kazakhstan, forming a solid scientific school and creating an important platform for studying national history and cultural heritage. Within the framework of fundamental and applied research programs, the institute's scholars have implemented more than 100 major scientific projects aimed at developing the documentary base of national history. These projects have introduced new sources related to the history, culture, diplomatic relations, religious history, and spiritual heritage of Kazakhstan into academic circulation.

In addition, within the framework of state programs such as “Cultural Heritage,” “People in the Stream of History,” “Seven Facets of the Great Steppe,” “Archive-2025,” and “Independence Above All,” the institute's scholars have identified numerous written sources, rare manuscripts, and historical documents preserved in foreign archives and libraries and brought copies of them to Kazakhstan.

To systematically study the history and culture of the Great Steppe, the institute established an “Archaeographic Association”, and “the Eastern Archaeographic Expedition” is actively conducting research. Around 100 books have been published within scientific series such as

“Cultural Heritage”, “Kazakhstani Oriental Studies Research”, “Kazakhstan and the Countries of the East”, “History and Culture of the Great Steppe”, and “Epigraphic Monuments of Kazakhstan”.

One of our major achievements in recent years is the launch of the institute’s trilingual website. The electronic academic journal “Kazakhstan Oriental Studies” (2024) is hosted on this platform and is included in the list of scientific publications recommended by the Committee for Quality Assurance in Science and Higher Education of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of Kazakhstan. Although the journal has been published for only two years, it has already gained recognition in both national and international academic communities. Today, both foreign and domestic scholars in Oriental studies regularly publish high-quality research articles in the journal.

Another indicator of the institute’s international recognition is the UNESCO “Science and Spirituality” Chair (UNITWIN Network), which has been operating at the institute since 2002.

In recent years, the institute’s scientific potential has risen significantly at the international level. A clear indication of this progress is the establishment of partnerships and the signing of memoranda of cooperation with prominent research centers and historic academic institutions in a number of countries, including the Vatican, Italy, Hungary, France, Germany, and other European states, as well as Turkey, China, Japan, Iran, Korea, and Mongolia. The Institute of Oriental Studies has also been recognized in the Go to Think Tank Index Report, compiled by the University of Pennsylvania (USA), which ranks global analytical centers. In this ranking, the institute was listed among the leading research centers in the Central Asia and Caucasus region and was included among the world’s top 800 analytical institutions. Nevertheless, there remain many new milestones to achieve and higher peaks to reach.

Thus, over the past 30 years, the Institute of Oriental Studies has made a substantial contribution to the revival of national historical consciousness, the study of written heritage in Eastern languages, and the analysis of political, economic, historical, and cultural relations between Kazakhstan and the countries of the East. The institute’s research activities are not limited to academic inquiry alone; they have also developed into an important scholarly school dedicated to preserving Kazakhstan’s cultural and civilizational heritage and promoting it within the international academic community. During these three decades, the institute has helped restore many previously unexplored or neglected pages of national history. As a result of domestic and international field expeditions, as well as archaeographic research missions, numerous valuable sources have been collected, introduced into scholarly circulation, and used as the basis for new academic studies. In addition, the institute has actively contributed to state strategic research by analyzing global political processes, assessing international developments, and providing expert analytical recommendations to governmental institutions and policy-makers.

– Next, let us turn to the nature and historical development of Oriental Studies. Could you share your thoughts on the emergence of this field, its spread within the global academic community, its institutionalization in universities and research institutions, and its main characteristics?

– If we consider the East as a collection of great civilizations, then Oriental Studies can be understood as a field that investigates entire civilizations. More specifically, Oriental Studies is a multidisciplinary field that comprehensively examines the languages, history, economy, religion, philosophy, and culture of the peoples of Asia and North Africa. Within this broad field there are numerous specialized branches, including Egyptology, Arab studies, Iranian studies, Turkic studies, Chinese studies, Japanese studies, and Indian studies, among others. Thus, Oriental Studies is not a single discipline but rather a complex aggregation of dozens of scholarly directions.

Its origins can be traced back to the eighteenth century, when European scholars discovered the linguistic relationship between Sanskrit and European languages. This discovery later contributed to the emergence of comparative linguistics. It also revealed historical connections between European and Indian civilizations, led to the development of the Indo-European language

theory, and laid the foundations for modern linguistics. In this sense, the roots of Oriental Studies are closely connected to the development of linguistic research.

Over time, various branches of Oriental Studies began to emerge. For instance, Napoleon's expedition played an important role in transforming Oriental Studies into a scientific discipline. In 1798, Napoleon brought more than 150 scholars with him on his military expedition to Egypt. These scholars conducted extensive research on Egyptian history, the Arabic language, archaeological monuments, and local culture. As a result of these studies, the monumental multi-volume work "Description de l'Égypte" was published. This publication gave a powerful impetus to the development of Oriental Studies and significantly expanded its academic influence.

The introduction of Oriental Studies into higher education was closely connected with the establishment of language departments in universities. In Europe, Oriental Studies initially emerged through academic chairs created to teach Eastern languages. For example, a chair of Hebrew was established at the University of Cambridge in 1540, a chair of Arabic in 1643, and a chair of Oriental languages at the University of Oxford in 1546. In other words, the earliest form of Oriental Studies took shape primarily as philological research.

In Kazakhstan, during the years 1989-1991, the Faculty of Oriental Studies was established at al-Farabi Kazakh National University, where training of specialists began in such fields as Arab studies, Iranian studies, Turkic studies, Chinese studies, and Japanese studies. Today, young specialists in Oriental Studies are trained at several institutions of higher education, including al-Farabi Kazakh National University, L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University, the Ablai Khan University of International Relations and World Languages, and Nazarbayev University.

Global Oriental Studies has had a significant influence on the development of modern social sciences. Research conducted within this field contributed to the emergence and advancement of such disciplines as comparative history, comparative linguistics, and cultural anthropology. Therefore, Oriental Studies should not be viewed merely as a regional field of research, but rather as a major scholarly direction that has significantly shaped the development of the humanities.

Like many scientific fields, Oriental Studies has gone through several stages of transformation. One notable moment occurred in the twentieth century when the discipline became the subject of critical reassessment. In 1978, Edward Said's influential work *Orientalism* introduced a new perspective on the field. According to Said, some Western scholarship about the East had been closely connected with colonial policies, meaning that knowledge about the East sometimes served as an instrument for reinforcing Western dominance. As a result, many universities replaced the term "Oriental Studies" with alternative designations such as "Asian Studies" or "Middle Eastern Studies." In the contemporary period, Oriental Studies has moved away from one-sided perspectives and increasingly focuses on intercultural integration, dialogue between civilizations, and multidimensional analysis of historical sources.

– As a well-known scholar of Chinese studies, you have extensively researched Chinese literature and culture, as well as the historical relations between our two countries. It is widely acknowledged that literature plays a crucial role in understanding the worldview and identity of a nation. In this regard, your literary translations from Chinese into Kazakh hold particular significance. How would you assess the current relations between Kazakhstan and China in general? In which areas of cooperation between the two countries do you see the greatest potential for future development?

– Relations between Kazakhstan and China have deep historical roots and are multifaceted and promising. The two countries are connected not only by geographical proximity but also by centuries-old civilizational, cultural, and trade ties. Interaction that began during the era of the Great Silk Road continues today in a new form. Currently, cooperation between Kazakhstan and China has risen to the level of a strategic partnership and continues to develop steadily in the political, economic, and cultural spheres.

Trade relations are expanding, trade turnover is increasing, and demand for transit and industrial cooperation is growing.

From the political and diplomatic perspective, in 2025 in Astana the leaders of the two countries, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev and Xi Jinping, agreed to strengthen trade and economic cooperation, expand cooperation between law-enforcement and defense institutions, and intensify joint actions against terrorism, separatism, and extremism.

In terms of trade and investment dynamics, according to data from the General Administration of Customs of China, trade turnover in 2022 amounted to 31.2 billion US dollars. In 2023, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan reported a figure of 41 billion dollars. According to Chinese customs statistics, trade turnover reached 43.82 billion dollars in 2024, and from January to November 2025 it amounted to 43.8 billion dollars (including 26.5 billion dollars in Chinese exports and 17.3 billion dollars in imports from Kazakhstan).

Energy resources and metals occupy an important place in the structure of exports, while machinery and electronics dominate imports. In 2025, when the Caspian route faced certain risks, Kazakhstan used the Atasu-Alashankou pipeline as an additional diversification route toward China. From the perspective of transport and logistics infrastructure, the World Bank considers the so-called “Middle Corridor” route through China-Kazakhstan railway crossings to the Aktau port and further across the Caspian Sea to Europe.

We must clearly understand that the main opportunity in relations with China for Kazakhstan lies in transit potential. However, infrastructure and the speed of customs procedures still remain relatively weak points. Current work is focused on digital and humanitarian integration, including the development of “smart borders” and customs data exchange systems that aim to accelerate trade procedures. In the field of education, branches of Chinese universities, HSK centers, and dual-degree programs are being established.

Despite the active development of relations between Kazakhstan and China, there are also certain risks and challenges. According to data from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace CAB, in 2022-2023 approximately 70.5 percent of Kazakhstan’s population had a negative perception of China, which complicates the “social acceptance” of certain projects. According to the Bureau of National Statistics of Kazakhstan, in 2025 China accounted for 19.2 percent of Kazakhstan’s exports and 29.2 percent of its imports. In the environmental sphere, a joint commission monitors the quality of water in transboundary rivers.

In my opinion, one of the most important directions of cooperation between the two countries is cultural and humanitarian interaction. Literature and culture are among the most reliable bridges that bring peoples closer together and foster mutual understanding. Chinese literature represents a vast world with deep philosophical and historical traditions. Similarly, Kazakh literature reflects the worldview and spiritual values of nomadic civilization. Therefore, translating, researching, and promoting the literary heritage of both peoples is an important way of strengthening spiritual dialogue between them.

Opportunities between Kazakhstan and China are not limited to culture alone. There is also significant potential in education and science. Today, universities and research centers of the two countries are expanding academic exchange, conducting joint research, and developing fields such as Oriental studies, Chinese studies, and regional studies. This process will further deepen mutual understanding between the two countries in the future.

Overall, relations between Kazakhstan and China should not be limited only to economic or political interests but should also be based on cultural and civilizational dialogue. Cooperation built on mutual respect and understanding will undoubtedly have a positive impact on the future of both peoples.

– **Since you assumed leadership of the institute, significant qualitative growth and modernization have been observed in its scientific and organizational activities. Today,**

scientific institutions must effectively use digital technologies, international academic communication, and information platforms alongside traditional research work. In this context, what results have been achieved in modernizing the institute's scientific infrastructure and strengthening its academic reputation?

– In recent years, the rapid development of science and technology has placed new demands and responsibilities on research institutions. During the Soviet period, scientific institutes were mainly limited to conducting academic research. Today, however, research centers must not only carry out studies but also integrate into the global scientific community, implement digital technologies, disseminate scientific results to society, and develop scientific diplomacy. Over the past six years since I became director, we have undertaken comprehensive efforts to modernize the institute's activities. These include revising research methodologies, expanding interdisciplinary approaches, increasing researchers' activity, and strengthening the institute's international image.

First of all, the institute's research activities have reached a new qualitative level. In the past five years dozens of projects have been implemented within the framework of program-targeted and grant funding. Between 2020 and 2023 several major projects were carried out under state assignments and grant programs. As a result, more than twenty monographs and hundreds of scientific articles and analytical works were published both in Kazakhstan and abroad. In 2020 alone, the Institute's researchers published more than twenty scholarly works, including articles indexed in international academic databases. This indicator demonstrates the significant strengthening of the Institute's scientific capacity and its active integration into the global academic community.

The second important direction has been the digitalization of science and the creation of databases. Within the framework of the "Archive-2025" state program, institute scholars have been identifying, analyzing, and digitizing historical documents related to Kazakhstan and the Great Steppe preserved in foreign archives and libraries. These efforts have introduced many new archival materials, manuscripts, and historical documents into academic circulation. These efforts not only contribute to new scholarly discoveries but also enable the development of a modern digital infrastructure for the preservation of historical heritage.

Thirdly, the Institute's international academic cooperation has expanded significantly. Over the past five years, the Institute has established partnerships with leading research centers around the world. In particular, cooperative ties have been formed with the Toyo Bunko State Archive and Tokyo University of Foreign Studies in Japan; Shanghai University, Shaanxi University, Wuhan University, and Peking University in China; the First Historical Archives of the PRC; the Chinese Academy of Humanities and Social Sciences; Allameh Tabataba'i University in Iran; the International Islamic University Islamabad in Pakistan; the Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences; as well as Sapienza University of Rome in Italy, the Vatican Apostolic Archive and the Vatican Library, and leading universities and major research centers in Turkey, Russia, Kyrgyzstan, and Mongolia. These agreements have made it possible to implement international research projects and to organize joint expeditions and academic conferences.

Fourthly, the Institute has also been actively engaged in promoting scientific diplomacy and the development of public scholarship. In recent years, the Institute has organized international conferences, academic seminars, summer schools, and roundtable discussions, thereby presenting its research outcomes to the broader scholarly community. For example, international conferences have been held on topics such as "The History and Culture of the Great Steppe," "Kazakhstan and the Countries of the East," and "New Kazakhstan and the Eastern World." These events have contributed to promoting Kazakhstan's Oriental Studies scholarship at the international level.

Fifthly, the Institute places particular emphasis on the training of academic personnel. In cooperation with al-Farabi Kazakh National University, the Institute implements master's and doctoral programs and systematically engages in the training of young scholars. As a result, several

master's and doctoral dissertations have been defended in recent years, contributing to the emergence of a new generation of researchers.

In conclusion, in recent years the Institute of Oriental Studies has evolved from a traditional research institution into a multifaceted scientific center adapted to the demands of the modern era. It can therefore be confidently stated that, while preserving its own scholarly traditions, the Institute has successfully secured its place within the new technological and informational landscape in the context of globalization.

A particularly noteworthy point is that between 2020 and 2026, the institute carried out highly active work. Dozens of targeted funding programs were implemented, including major projects such as “Kazakhstan’s Foreign Policy in Eastern Countries”, “Turkological Sources and Research in China”, “Early and Medieval History and Culture of the Turkic World Based on Materials from the Vatican and Western European Countries”, and “Traditions and Culture of Post-Golden Horde Societies”.

During these three years, our scholars published 105 scientific works, 13 of which were monographs and collections of research papers. The number of published scientific articles reached 175, including 20 in SCOPUS and Web of Science databases and 33 in foreign scientific journals. At international conferences, 221 presentations were delivered. The institute’s scientific bulletin, “Kazakhstan Oriental Studies”, was included in the list of significant journals approved by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education in 2024.

Currently, the institute employs 87 staff members, with an average age of 48.3. Among them are 14 Doctors of Science, 24 Candidates of Science, and 10 PhD holders. Twelve doctoral students are pursuing their studies in the field of “Oriental Studies”. This clearly demonstrates that the institute’s human resource potential is being renewed and strengthened year by year.

– **You mentioned cooperation with the Vatican archives. What historical discoveries have these studies revealed?**

– This is one of the most significant events in our 30-year history. During his state visit to the Vatican in 2021, President K.K. Tokayev reached an agreement with the Pope on providing copies of archival documents related to the history of the Kazakh people. In May 2022, I, as the Director General, made a special visit to the Vatican, where the Institute of Oriental Studies and the leadership of the Vatican Apostolic Archives and Apostolic Library signed a memorandum of cooperation.

Under the memorandum, Kazakh scholars were granted free access to rare historical manuscripts preserved in the Vatican. In this context, a scientific project titled “Early and Medieval History and Culture of the Turkic World Based on New Valuable Materials from the Vatican and Western European Countries” was developed. Since 2024, institute researchers have conducted several scientific trips to the Vatican archives and library, identifying and beginning to analyze about 40 significant documentary sources.

These documents include correspondence between rulers of medieval Turkic khanates and the Popes, records of European travelers, and materials on diplomatic and trade relations. The most important conclusion is that the Vatican archives recognized the Turkic peoples not merely as a military force, but as a civilization with a developed economy, rich culture, and deeply rooted traditions. This discovery provides a new perspective for studying our history.

– **What is your view on the strategic importance of Oriental Studies? Why is it relevant for the state today?**

– Every branch of science arises from a certain necessity. While the natural sciences bring prosperity and improve the quality of life for humanity, the humanities seek answers to questions such as “Who were we yesterday, who are we today, and what will our future be?” In Oriental Studies, beyond its general humanitarian character, “the strategic dimension” takes a primary place.

For the two and a half centuries preceding independence, the Kazakh people had no direct diplomatic relations with Eastern countries. Five to six generations grew up largely disconnected from concepts such as “China,” “the Islamic world,” and “Central Asia.” After gaining independence, establishing diplomatic relations with these countries, studying their history, culture, mentality, and domestic and foreign policies became an urgent priority. The Institute of Oriental Studies was established to fill this gap, and over the past 30 years, it has fulfilled this mission with distinction.

For example, Kazakhstan shares a common border of about 1,750 km with China, a country of immense population. Analyzing and monitoring both China’s overt and covert objectives, its strategic initiatives such as “the Belt and Road” Initiative and “the Chinese Dream”, is a prerequisite for maintaining friendship, regional stability, and national security. Similarly, a solid scientific foundation is needed for engagement with the Islamic world, Central Asia, and South Asian countries. In short, revitalizing Oriental Studies is essential for the smooth development of friendly relations with Eastern countries, strengthening the state’s national security, correctly organizing trade, economic, and cultural-humanitarian ties, and bringing historical sources in Eastern languages into scientific circulation.

– On the 30th anniversary of the Institute, what future plans and projects are you aiming to implement? Could you also comment on the prospects of Oriental Studies and the key challenges facing Kazakh science in general?

– There are no small or trivial topics in the Institute’s future projects. The era itself, the fate of the nation, and the future of our people set new tasks for us every day.

We will continue to deepen archival research that began with the Vatican, Japan, and Western European sources. In Japanese archives, letters of Alash leaders, records of Japanese travelers and researchers about Central Asia, as well as documents in old Turkic, Uyghur, Chagatai, and Mongolian languages are preserved – all of these valuable materials are planned to be brought into scientific circulation.

We will also further intensify research on China, Iran, Arab countries, and South and Southeast Asian states. In an increasingly complex geopolitical environment, a deep understanding of Eastern countries is a strategic necessity for the state.

A major focus of our upcoming work will be the development of scientific personnel. The absence of a dissertation council within the Institute hinders our young researchers pursuing doctoral studies from timely defending their dissertations. In the near future, with support from the Ministry, we plan to establish a dissertation council at the Institute. We also plan to train young specialists in collaboration with foreign leading research centers. Expanding our international scientific connections is another priority.

In short, the multi-faceted activities of the Institute of Oriental Studies will continue to yield results year after year. As the state evaluates and adequately funds science, scholars’ opportunities and engagement will grow. We can only express gratitude to our veteran researchers who built the Institute from scratch and established its scientific schools. I am confident that in the coming years, our team will be strengthened by highly qualified young scientists, taking Kazakh Oriental Studies to even higher achievements.

– Thank you very much for this extensive and meaningful interview, Duken Massimkhanuly! We wish the Institute new achievements on its anniversary!

Interview conducted by: *Bagdat Duysenov*