

Book Reviews

A Monastery on the Move: Art and Politics in Later Buddhist Mongolia. By Uranchimeg Tsultemin. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2021. Pp. xix + 282. \$72.00 hardcover.

Despite being marginal in North American Buddhist Studies over much of the last half-century, scholarship dedicated to the history of Buddhism in Mongolia is hardly new. Indeed, the roots of the field in early nineteenth century Europe were dependent in fundamental ways upon Qing imperial sources that were often compiled by Mongol literati. Pioneering European scholars such as Schmidt, Klaproth, and Abel-Rémusat drew upon connections with Christian missionaries resident at the Qing court. As a result, Mongolian Buddhist histories and perspectives were widely reproduced in the construction of the very notion of “Buddhist Asia” as an object of Orientalist inquiry.

More recently, transregional, mobile, and interdisciplinary turns in fields as diverse as New Qing studies, Inner Asian studies and Eurasianist studies have often centred on Mongolian religious and political histories. Similarly, a deepening understanding of social and political history in Tibetan Studies and in Buddhist Studies has led us to reconsider previously overlooked Mongolian actors, states, and institutions. Across a great many subfields of Asian studies, whenever the status of the ethno-national unit is troubled, and whenever static civilizational models are challenged, there are likely to emerge revisionist histories populated by Mongolian actors, sites, and mediating practices.

Uranchimeg Tsultemin's *A Monastery on the Move: Art and Politics in Later Buddhist Mongolia* is exemplary of such a revisionist history, with implications for fields far outside Mongolian and Buddhist studies. This is an inventive study of the multiple sites and medias in which the “religious” and “the political” were constructed in Khalkha between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries. This book is specifically concerned with the braided projects by which Mongolian elites claimed independent models of history, community, and sovereignty from, and beyond, increasingly hegemonic Tibetan Buddhist and Qing imperial forms. In addition to making many original historical arguments, this study should be read as a methodological model. Tsultemin abandons disciplinary approaches that treat text, “art,” and material culture as distinct spheres of expression. Moving beyond well-worn models of textual interpretation or iconographical description alone, she turns to histories of cultural practice as these were enacted across a mosaic of media forms and institutional spaces.

The wealth of this new book will hardly surprise specialist readers who already know its author. Tsultemin is widely published and one of the world's top scholars of Mongolian art and religious history. Like much of her previous work, *A Monastery on the Move* makes innovative use of a wide pool of material, including visual, textual, and oral sources that are only rarely considered together in the study of Inner Asian cultural history (and in Buddhist Studies generally). The inclusion here of archaeological material, such as reports from recent excavations at Saridagiin khiid (built in 1654 and destroyed by the Dzungars in 1689), is a particularly rich and novel source in this study. However, the core historical arguments in Tsultemin's book are derived not only from text and image and oral retention, but also from "myths and facts" which require comparative study so that "a fuller picture of art and politics can be gleaned" (p. 12).

Making use of counter-examples from Lhasa and Beijing, and in reference to the religio-political legacies of the thirteenth and fourteenth century Mongol empire, Tsultemin in these pages develops her reconstruction of a distinctly Mongolian conception of religious and political authority as it was embodied in the representations of the personhood of the Jebtsundamba incarnation lineage. Mirroring the periodization of Mongolian monastic chronicle, this study begins with events in 1639. At this time, amidst a welter of competing claims over Inner Asian territory by rival Mongol groups, a consortium of Khalkha Mongol aristocrats elevated one of their own as sovereign. This boy would become known as Zanabazar (1635–1723), the first of the Jebtsundambas. He and his seven successors would preside over a Khalkha population, constantly managing a complex and ever-evolving relationship with Central Tibetan authorities and successive Manchu courts. (In 1691, for example, Zanabazar organized the submission of the Khalkha to the Qing emperor Kangxi 康熙, with whom he enjoyed a close personal relationship, in the face of punishing Dzungar military aggression).

In many scholarly accounts about him, and about Mongolian Buddhism generally, Zanabazar and the later Jebtsundambas are characterized as pawns set up strategically by the Géluk Buddhist school of the Dalai Lamas and Panchen Lamas in Central Tibet or by the Qing Empire centred in Beijing, Chengde 承德, or Mukden 奉天. The Jebtsundambas, in this well-worn account, were tools to advance the trans-Asian imperial ambitions of distant states and monastic seats. Tsultemin acknowledges that the Qing and the Géluk provided the Khalkha with a "quotation style," which they used over centuries to legitimize and renew their collective identity via the Jebtsundamba institution. The author also concedes that, for generations, the Khalkha were devoted to the Qing imperial project and to Tibetan-centred Géluk monastic networks ever expanding across Mongol lands. The thrust of Tsultemin's book, however, is to reveal a centuries-long counter-history of Khalkha Mongolian sovereignty that remained independent of influence from either Tibetan or Qing institutions.

For example, at the root of Zanabazar's seventeenth century claims to political and religious authority, and at the root of Tsultemin's fine book, is the figure of the mobile *ger* (yurt): a monastic-palatial base that has remained the institutional grounding for Buddhism in Khalkha Mongolia over the last three and a half centuries. The "great encampment" (Kh. Mong. *Ikh khüree*; Cl. Mong. *Yeke-yin Kūriy-e*), "Urga" (Cl. Mong. *Örgöö*), was at first a mobile *ger*-residence for Zanabazar, but gradually evolved into Mongolia's political, social, and cultural centre. *Ikh khüree*, centred upon the *ger* palace of the Jebtsundambas, moved across Inner Asia dozens of times while expanding in its size, functions, architecture, arts, and population before settling permanently in 1855.

With this and many other rich case studies, Tsultemin argues persuasively that the emergent forms of religious and political power embodied in Zanabazar was a Mongol initiative, not an act of passive submission to distant elites in Tibet or Beijing. Another notable example is the initially perplexing alignment of Zanabazar's religious authority with the Jonangpa school (a rival of the Géluk). According to Tsultemin, Zanabazar was first recognised by his Khalkha countrymen as the incarnation of the deceased Jonang master Tāranātha. This was a strategic memorialization of Yuan-era authority in the thirteenth century, since the Jonang were affiliated with the Sakya school of Pakpa and other Tibetan preceptors that had been elevated at the courts of Khubilai Khaan and his sons. All this was originally driven, Tsultemin shows, as a savvy collaborative play by the Khalkha Tusheet and Setsen khans against rival Oirat and Tümed polities. As with the rule of Abutai and Chinggis Khan himself, Zanabazar and his latter incarnations were enthroned in a traditional *ger*-based model of political power, a spatialization of power now combined with Buddhist monastic authority and the sovereign presence of an enlightened incarnation.

Thus, in the latter half of the seventeenth century when the Géluk and the Qing were extending their sovereign influence into Mongol lands, Zanabazar was promoted as a distinct kind of "theocrat" (p. 25). His psychophysical personhood embodied and united the much studied "Two Systems" of Dharmic and secular rule (Tib. *lugs gnyis*; Mong. *qoyar yos*). In a standard iconographic representation of Zanabazar, for example, he wields the enlightened sword of Mañjuśrī to cut fat from a sheep's tail to announce the beginning of festivities among his secular subjects. With mutton on his fingers, he is both a hereditary political headman and an enlightened manifestation. Likewise, Tsultemin shows, Zanabazar's ritual innovations made use of a tantric ritual and visual repertoire founded in Yogatantra systems that were distinct from the prevailing Mahāyoga-tantra and Yoganiruttara-tantra (ie. Anuttarayoga-tantra) models favoured by the Tibetan Gélukpa. Put briefly, Zanabazar was a new kind of ruler for a new era. His veins pumped Chingissid blood and his mindstream was identified with a long lineage of enlightened Indian and Tibetan Buddhist masters.

Tsultemin argues persuasively that these were Mongol initiatives that widely influenced Buddhist cultures across Inner Asia. As was too often the case, scholars have continually misattributed these inventions to the Tibetans or to the Qing court. Other examples include: Yuan-era canon building, the Qoshuut-driven elevation of the Dalai Lama's government, Khalkha Buddhist state building as instrumental for Qing imperial formation, and the explosion of historical and autobiographical writing in Inner Asia. Nevertheless, even as the third to the ninth Jebtsundambas were drawn exclusively from Tibetan populations and became thoroughly enmeshed in the Géluk-Qing international, independent Mongol memories and modes of theorizing and displaying power endured. One key outcome was the theocratic sovereignty claimed by the Eighth Jebtsundamba, known popularly as the Bogd Khaan (1870–1924). During 1911 to 1919, he was the “secular” and “religious” ruler of a Mongolian nation state asserting a precarious autonomy in the ruins of the Qing empire and prior to the founding in 1921 of the Mongolian People's Republic, Asia's first experiment in state socialism.

Rather than any specific period or any particular Jebtsundamba, a complex construction of “Mongolness” emerges as the protagonist of *Monastery on the Move*. The largely unexamined conceit of this book is that a transhistorical Mongolness endured over the centuries-long scope of its analysis—one drawn from thirteenth century precedent, articulated anew in the seventeenth century, and abiding continuously (explicitly or sub rosa) until its fullest articulation in the Mongolian nation-state. Tsultemin relies most often on the oral archive to illuminate what she takes to be the shared “Mongol” foundations of the fragmented art-historical, archaeological, and textual record. She argues for the importance of oral histories, which are “different from myths” because they are “parts of ‘collective or social memory’ that are maintained in epics and long-term narratives by pastoral nomads” (p. 11), and, apparently, also in Buddhist monastic literature and aristocratic ritual tradition. By appealing to oral history, disjointed quotations from widely dispersed ritual traditions, statuary excavated from forest floor, and deities fixed into the sparse visual record, come together to tell a unitary story about “Mongolness” independent of Tibetan and Qing influence, and independent of place, time, or community of expression.

In using oral history from the ground up as a corrective to the top-down textual sources and visual cultures normally privileged in Buddhist Studies, Tsultemin seems at times to be anticipating the evidence as she moves towards the grand conclusions she draws. The aim of this study is to determine what counts as “Mongolian Buddhism,” or in her words, “what is really ‘Mongolian’ in the arts and architecture of *Ikh Khüree* during the era when the ‘Qingification’ of shared artists, styles, and productions was intentionally carried out to establish the unified and cosmopolitan Qing Empire” (p. 8). To illuminate that story, Tsultemin sometimes uses terms of comparison that, being derived from the available oral tradition, tend to obscure historical specificity: For

example, in describing Zanabazar's adoption of the *ger*, she concludes "it was a necessary ingredient in constructing an architectural space that was seen and built as central in the Khalkha Mongol understanding of power and authority" (p. 32). What, one wonders, is "the" Khalkha Mongol understanding of power and authority that somehow propelled but also remained outside events in the three centuries covered by this book? Moreover, what is meant by "the secular" in the different historical contexts examined in this study, or by something else called "religion," or both in the context of "art" and "the political," all beyond any particular historical relations to site, community, or practice?

I do not mean to find fault with this book, whose ambitious project is to newly connect an abundance of previously neglected sources. This is an insightful study of Mongolian histories and materials hitherto largely overlooked in Buddhist studies and Inner Asian cultural history. It makes a compelling case for enlarging existing histories about the northerly frontiers of the Qing Empire and Géluk monasticism. And it insists upon clearer, historically grounded accounts about where and when, and if, "Buddhism" and "the political" are to be found in the textual, visual, and oral record. Readers will be left thinking about the wider implications, well beyond what it has revealed about the life of Zanabazar, his synthetic vision of Buddhist government in seventeenth century Khalkha, and the ever-changing memorialization of that vision in the following centuries.

In these specific ways, *A Monastery on the Move* extends the work of Vesna Wallace, Caroline Humphrey and Hürelbaatar Ujeed, Isabelle Charleux, Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz and others who have long studied the late-imperial worlds of Mongolian Buddhism. It adds substantially to the social and cultural history of Buddhist institutions that connected the Sino-Tibeto-Manchu-Mongol frontiers after the seventeenth century. By her effort, Tsultemin aims for "the long-destroyed *Ikh Khüree* to live again in our imagination and our knowledge" (p. 12). There is no doubt that it will, emboldened now by this richly illustrated study that is sure to become a classic reference in its field.

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