

CENTRAL ASIA

CAROLINE HUMPHREY and HÜRELBAATAR UJED:

A Monastery in Time: The Making of Mongolian Buddhism.

xiii, 426 pp. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2013. £21. ISBN 978 0 226 03190 3.

doi:10.1017/S0041977X14000263

Humphrey and Ujeed's captivating anthropological study of the Mergen Monastery and its tradition is a result of extensive and collaborative fieldwork located in the south-western region of Inner Mongolia, commonly known as Urad. It is an important contribution to Mongolian and Buddhist studies and is especially timely given the growing interest in Mongolian Buddhism. One of the merits of this book is the authors' ability to integrate the anthropological method and perspective with historical and archaeological data and textual evidence. The project is multilayered and covers two temporal frameworks: a historical one that concerns the formation, renaissance, tribulations, demise and revival of the Mergen tradition from the early eighteenth century to the present, and the one that covers nearly seventeen years of the authors' field research. The book provides an excellent exploration of the socio-historical, economic and religious underpinnings of the Mergen lineage of reincarnations, a nuanced discussion of the religious life of Mergen Monastery, its religious and political roles under the Qing, and the importance of the monastery in creating and maintaining Mongolian-language-based Buddhism.

Humphrey and Ujeed open the discussion with a set of questions that arose in the course of their research into the Mergen tradition, known to be exceptional in the Mongolian Buddhist world for its conscious rejection of Tibetan liturgy and the creation of its own vernacular rituals. In the subsequent ten chapters they set out to answer questions regarding the cultural sources that percolated into the Mergen tradition, the ways in which the Mergen Monastery's monks were able to retain the aesthetic of the Mongol liturgy when it was abandoned elsewhere, the meaning of that localized form of practice for the contemporary Buddhists of that region, and the manner in which the monastery stayed together despite its repeated destruction and internal intrigues. Chapter 1 opens with a description of multiple ritual festivities held at Mergen Monastery in the summer of 1995, at which Urad Mongols sang the songs of Mergen Gegen and promoted a Mongolian cultural form of Buddhism.

The religious and social life of the Mergen Monastery is centred on the works of the Third Mergen Gegen, Lubsangdambijalsan (1717–66), who translated and composed liturgical texts, historical and medical treatises, musical songs, and numerous ritual texts. These were a part of his "vernacularization" of Mongolian Buddhism, which drew its inspiration from Neichi Toin's line of local practices, which began in the early seventeenth century. Chapter 2 shows the Third Mergen Gegen laying the foundation for the aesthetic and political subjectivity of his followers under the Qing, while breaking away from Neichi Toin's proselytizing style and creating a vision of the past of "great Mongol people" to create an inclusive, moral community. His artistry in performative and poetic forms that would accord with the Mongolian stylistics, poetics and local Urad melodies, and his concern for rendering the authenticity of religious content into Mongolian were central to his endeavours. His vernacularization of Tibetan Buddhism allowed for the development of culturally sensible Mongolian Buddhist practices at a time when literary productions in most Buddhist societies remained accessible only to monks and literate nobility.

Chapter 3 is dedicated to the Mergen Monastery as a subject in a spatial and temporal landscape with social life, organization, economy, incarnate lamas, and rituals. The next chapter delineates the influence of the power of Mergen Gegen's poetry and moralistic teachings on the writings of early-nineteenth-century nobles trained in the Mergen tradition. This is followed by an anthropological account of the *sülde* ritual associated with the deity of Muna Khan Mountain as it was performed in 1998. Taking the *sülde* ritual as an example, the authors demonstrate the efficacy of such a ritual in producing visions of a divinized Mongolian polity and in bringing about "a psychic experience" of the power it extols. Contrasting the differing ritual assemblages linked to Muna Khan, Chinggis Khan, and Hasar, to which the Third Mergen Gegen wrote invocations, the chapter makes a case for co-existing yet diverging notions of political order indicated by these rituals.

The authors turn to the life story of the Eighth, and last, Mergen Gegen, Galsangdambijalsan, outlining his political and meritorious religious activities. With the intention of improving the condition of his people, Mergen Gegen set up productive trade enterprises in which lamas and lay youth jointly worked in supporting the needs of the people. As this positively positioned him in the eyes of the Communists when they came to power in 1949, he managed to remain a monk and become an active and trusted member of the influential religious and political committees until the Cultural Revolution (1967–68), which changed everything for him and for Mergen Monastery. The authors further introduce the reader to the twentieth-century lamas of Mergen Monastery and to their interpretations of the tradition, as the authors set the lamas' stories in their historical and harmful situations and transformative experiences.

The remaining chapters shed light on the remarkable transformation of Mergen Monastery, which Humphrey and Ujeed witnessed during their fieldwork in 2005. Separated from its previous lay community and surrounding territory by its inclusion in an urban municipality, forced to compete with other Inner Mongolian monasteries for sporadic state funds, and conceptualized as a "cultural relic", the monastery could no longer recruit young monks in the Urad area. Once the Muna Mountain was closed to pasturing, local people moved away. These attest to the different transformation of Mongolian Buddhism in China from those in independent Mongolia and in the Russian regions of Tuva, Kalmykia, and Buryatia, where the revitalization of Buddhism has resulted in the establishment of numerous Buddhist lay and monastic organizations, the emergence of Buddhist education for monks and laity, the reinstatement of sacred sites, and the rebuilding of temples and the restoration of sacred objects.

This brief review cannot do justice to the accomplishment of this meticulously researched and theoretically sophisticated work, packed with information. It is a "must read" for students and scholars of Mongolian Buddhism and for anyone interested in the present state of Mongolian studies.

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EAST ASIA

MORRIS ROSSABI (ed.):

Eurasian Influences on Yuan China.

(Nalanda-Sriwijaya Series.) xviii, 234 pp. Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2013. \$49.90. ISBN 978 981 4459 72 3.

doi:10.1017/S0041977X14000275