

Isabelle Charleux. *Nomads on Pilgrimage. Mongols on Wutaishan (China), 1800–1940*. Brill Inner Asian Library, vol. 33.

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We tend to think about nomads as people who are constantly on the move.

Notwithstanding the fact that this conviction is not entirely correct, a special case is when nomads are on pilgrimage, since pilgrimage is a very specific kind of travelling. It is a typical activity of the religiously inclined people of many, if not all, religions. ‘Sacred travel is frequently linked to a pious search for ultimate salvation but can also be prompted by more earthly aims, such as gaining miraculous cures, fulfilling vows, or doing penance for wrongdoing.’¹

This monograph by Isabelle Charleux unveils much more than the title suggests: it is a study of Mongolian society of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, focusing on Inner Mongolian pilgrims in Wutaishan, but against the broad background of all Mongols, with vivid description of people’s lives – nobles and commoners – deep analysis which includes data on economic situation, political events and religious practices.

The book investigates pilgrimage by Mongolian nomads to the Chinese Buddhist site, Wutaishan, in the period 1800–1940. Each of the three components of the topic deserves a short comment. Firstly, although Mongolian nomads are frequently an object of the ethnographic research, their religiously motivated activity is much less investigated. Secondly, Wutaishan as an important site of Buddhist pilgrimage has recently been the subject of several interesting studies, but thus far there has been a limited number of scholars looking at its Mongolian pilgrims. And the third aspect concerns time: the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in China the late Qing and early Republican period. The first of these periods is characterised by Isabelle Charleux as ‘generally seen as a period of decline in China and Mongolia yet one of relative peace’, and the second as the time ‘when Mongols struggled for autonomy while their land became the focus of conflicts between various foreign powers’ (p. 3). Again, while there have been numerous studies of the political and economic situation of Mongols in these

¹ Encyclopaedia Britannica online: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/pilgrimage-religion> (visited 3 Dec. 2017).

periods, or of the emergence of Mongolian Buddhist sites and writings in the earlier periods, particularly during the Yuan time or in the seventeenth century, there have been only a few works on the Buddhist activity of the nomads in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and hardly any focusing on the life of common Buddhist believers from so called Inner Mongolia and seen from their perspective. As Isabelle Charleux writes:

The specific purpose of my study is to document and analyze the reasons and motivations for such pilgrimages, the actual journeys made not only by nobles and lamas but also by ordinary Mongols, as well as their representations and ritual practices on the sacred mountain ... This book is therefore not an intellectual, doctrinal and imperial history of Wutaishan but focuses on the pilgrims themselves. (p. 4)

The monograph is a real novelty. It is based on original textual sources and secondary literature in several languages as well as on results of Charleux's fieldwork, including examination of sites on several trips and interviews with Mongolian pilgrims from different places, China and Mongolia, from 2007 to 2012. As a multidisciplinary work, it will be welcomed by researchers of different backgrounds who employ diverse methodologies: historians, ethnographers, cultural anthropologists, philologists and Buddhologists.

The book consists of an introduction, seven chapters, each ending with a conclusion, and the overall conclusion by the author, as well as three appendices, bibliography and index. The appendices contain very useful source materials: the first is a list of the main monasteries of Wutaishan from the early twentieth century; the second is a study of the Mongolian stone inscriptions of Wutaishan; and the third is a Khorchin song entitled *Utai-yin jam* ('A Road to Wutai[shan]').

Each chapter depicts a different aspect of Charleux's studies. In Chapter 1, 'The Pilgrimage Sites of the Mongols: An Overview' (pp. 28–61), she describes 'The Mongols' engagement with Wutaishan compared to other pilgrimage sites in Mongolia', with focus on their practical advantages, and proposes 'a hierarchy according to a scale of "spiritual magnetism", to use James Preson's terminology, and to the types of pilgrims' (p. 4).

Chapter 2, 'The Invention of Wutaishan' (pp. 62–104) offers 'a general geographical, spiritual and historical presentation of the site' to 'help understand how Wutaishan was chosen as a mountain of spiritual significance, first by Chinese, by Buddhists of all East and Central Asia, and then by Mongols' (p. 4). It contains a description of the gradual development of Wutaishan, at first during Yuan period to become 'a central place for the ritual protection of the empire'; and then during the Manchu time, when it was made by the Qing emperors into a 'Tibet in China' and attracted Mongolian pilgrims as much as making pilgrimage to Tibet. On the special significance of Wutaishan, Charleux remarks:

The notion of liminality developed by Victor Turner, can apply not only to the state of mind of the pilgrims but also to the place itself: Wutaishan appeared as an almost otherworldly place, where one had the possibility of establishing contact with supernatural powers, and at the same time, for the Mongols, as a familiar place. (pp. 4–5).

Chapter 3, 'Political and Clerical Promotion of Wutaishan in the Qing and Republican Periods' (pp. 105–156) describes strategies invented by Wutaishan clergies to attract Mongolian pilgrims. Charleux underlines threat to the Qing's sovereignty in Inner Asia created by the Tibetan Dalai Lamas and Manchu attempts to counteract Mongolian affection and respect paid to them with the notion of the Manchu emperor as the emanation of Manjusri. She recalls Mongolian visits paid to Wutaishan in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries and reasons behind them. Charleux describes the involvement of the Qing's production of imperial gazetteers and Manchu support of Chinese Buddhist monasteries. However, even more important and interesting are Charleux's observations about the unique features of Wutaishan Tibeto-Mongolian clergy and Tibeto-Chinese Buddhist syncretism which evolved in Wutaishan, as well as about the role of high-ranking lamas in empowering Wutaishan.

In Chapter 4, 'The Mongol *Imaginaire* of Wutaishan' (pp. 157–204) Charleux presents a very interesting analysis of the components of Mongolian understanding of Wutaishan. She shows successive layers of representations, images and narratives which blended Chinese, Tibetan and Mongolian elements and finally built up Mañjuśrī's image among Mongols. She also points to the process of mandalisation of Wutaishan among the

Buddhist clergies and at the same time to popular imaginary of Wutaishan in which Mañjuśrī is seen as the source of wisdom, intelligence and astrology. He is addressed as the saviour by common Mongolian believers. Charleux examines images of Mañjuśrī on Wutaishan and compares them with the depictions of the White Old Man. She also describes how Wutaishan is replicated today in the landscape of Mongolia. Concluding this chapter, she challenges Johan Elverskog's supposition that the popularity of pilgrimage to Wutaishan resulted in the nineteenth century from oral and written relations by Buddhist hierarchs who resided there. She suggests that Wutaishan could have been 'an important pilgrimage place for the Mongols in the early Qing period', becoming even more popular owing to the guidebooks and maps that developed after actual visits to Wutaishan paid by pilgrims. 'It is indeed likely that written histories and religious poetry appeared sometime after popular practices had already fully acknowledged Wutaishan as a prominent pilgrimage site.' (p. 204).

Chapter 5, 'The Mongol Pilgrims: Sociological and Economic Aspects' (pp. 205–276) brings the most interesting and highly innovative data. Here Isabelle Charleux presents the results of her studies of the 343 Mongolian stone inscriptions which were found on the steles in Wutaishan, mainly in three locations: Shifangtang, Tayuansi and Luohousi. The majority of the steles were erected between 1880 and 1935 (pp. 208–209). The author emphasises the role of archaeological sources, taking the example of the Indianist Gregory Schopen who stressed the importance of 'especially stone inscriptions that express donor's intentions and tell us what a fairly large number of Buddhists actually did, as opposed to what – according to the literary sources – they might or should have done' (p. 4).

Already in the concluding part of the previous chapter the author had asked the intriguing question: 'how can we explain that the historical peak of the Mongols' pilgrimages to Wutaishan corresponds to a period when Mongol nobles and commoners were becoming impoverished by economic stagnation, Chinese exploitation and colonization?' (p. 204). In order to answer this, she first draws a general picture of the social situation of the Mongols in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Then she places data obtained from the stone inscriptions onto this plan (with two detailed tables). Having analysed in detail the inscriptions, Charleux concludes that 'most

Mongol pilgrims to Wutaishan came from central Inner Mongolia, and half of lay pilgrims were women'. She also concludes that 'pilgrims were especially numerous during the visits of the Dalai Lama in 1908 and of the Panchen Lama in 1925' and that, 'in spite of their economic difficulties, Mongols offered significant donations in times of peace' (p. 223). However, 'according to written accounts, Mongol refugees also fled to Wutaishan to seek protection in times of trouble'. Charleux also explains that the most numerous pilgrims donated steles at Shifangtang and belonged to Shili-yin Gool League. The reason behind their pilgrimages could have been their relatives in this particular monastery or that there were links between the large monasteries in Shili-yin Gool and the Shifangtan. A particular category of Mongolian pilgrims comprised those who engaged in trade. They traveled to Wutaishan in order to sell their sheep and horses. They adopted a special kind of nomadisation which included a stop at Wutaishan.

Another important issue examined in this chapter is the problem of the Mongolian burials at Wutaishan. In spite of legal regulations making such burials complicated for Mongols, the belief that burial at Wutaishan will help their 'deceased relatives to immediately reach the kingdom of Shambhala or Sukhavati's Pure Land' (p. 240) resulted in a 'great number of Mongols journeying to Wutaishan carrying the bones or cremation ashes of their deceased parents etc.' (p. 245). Various graves are described in the article. Moreover, the custom of some elderly and ill Mongols of travelling to Wutaishan in order to die there is also presented.

Charleux describes the practical side of the Mongolian pilgrimage, from astrological calculations through obtaining necessary documents to the equipment carried and ways of travelling. The journey to Wutaishan took from ten days to five years. On the way Mongols who suffered from different weather, food, language, customs and who were often cheated by the Chinese, could, however, also encounter special inns and shops established for them, with Mongolian language services. Concluding data on Mongolian pilgrimage in this chapter Charleux proposes a typology of pilgrims according to their status, mode of travel, aims and expectations (p. 275).

Chapter 6, 'The Mongols on Wutaishan: Interactions and Encounters' (pp. 277–337) offers description and analysis of the encounter of Mongolian Buddhists with Tibetan and

Chinese Buddhists as well as with Chinese popular religion. Here the author challenges Johan Elverskog's idea of the role of Wutaishan in the recreation of a Mongol identity. One of the particular aspects of Wutaishan life described here is the Great Sixth Month Festival with its *cham* ritual dance. It was a moment to build up *communitas* between all pilgrims and monks. Other festivals are also mentioned. Charleux includes a table with the ritual calendar of Xiangtonsi and Pusading to illustrate similarities and differences of practices between the monasteries. She also analyses 'devotional gestures', meaning mainly prostration and circumambulation, as well as offerings and donations and worship of reincarnations, saints and ascetics. Another point of common interest was icons, painted or sculpted by Chinese artists and purchased by Mongolian pilgrims.

Finally, Charleux challenges Elverskog's hypothesis about Wutaishan as 'a key place of *communitas* among Mongols and between Mongols, Manchus, Tibetans and Chinese' and applies the Turnerian model to the Wutaishan situation. She concludes that it is possible to 'speak of peaceful cohabitation, religious tolerance and curiosity for "the other" rather than a robust *communitas* in Turner's terms' (p. 331). She states that, regarding Mongols, 'there is no evidence allowing us to validate Turner's theory of the crossing of social frontiers, of *communitas* between rich and poor, high lamas and penitents' (p. 333). Likewise she sees no evidence for *communitas* between Mongols, Manchus, Tibetans and Chinese; and she points to at least one obstacle – the language of communication. Besides the Chinese shopkeepers who learnt and spoke some Mongolian, Chinese monks who knew Mongolian, or the limited number of learned Mongols fluent in Tibetan and Chinese, the rest could not converse with each other.

In Chapter 7, 'Mongolized Wutaishan and Mongol Wutaishans: Appropriations and Substitutions' (pp. 338–378) the author's starting point is that 'the Wutaishan pilgrimage site is not a static place but one in perpetual transformation' (p. 338). Charleux describes natural numinous sites of Wutaishan and how they were incorporated into Buddhist practices on the spot, as well as how they were transported to different spots in Mongolia to serve there as 'small Wutaishans'. She has been observing the revitalisation of these practices in Wutaishan since 1980. On the other hand Charleux, emphasises the human contribution in creating the Wutaishan site.

In her overall conclusions, Charleux summarises the important points of her monograph. She underlines modern changes in Wutaishan, resulting from political and cultural changes, and shows new dimensions of the sacred Buddhist site. The site, however, is now de-Mongolised. Charleux writes: 'the distinct Mongolian flavor of Wutaishan has practically vanished'. Mongolian inscriptions, which formed the core of this volume's textual study, are today inscribed with Chinese characters. The Mongolian inscriptions analysed by Isabelle Charleux are new Mongolian primary sources. It can be noted that the author also often used Chinese secondary works, which regrettably do not always provide details about their sources. In certain passages of general historical description the author does not give her sources.

Concluding the review, it is necessary to stress the richness of data included in this book, as well as Charleux's interesting and often provocative analysis and conclusions, which may instigate further discussion on the role of Mongolian pilgrims in Wutaishan, as well as on their impact on the Qing empire. The Tibetan and Mongolian nomads who created a 'little Tibet' in central China are disappearing from the world. The book is a must for Mongolists but it will supply an abundance of material too for world historians, cultural anthropologists and specialists on religions and arts as well as for Asia lovers.

Agata Bareja-Starzyńska

University of Warsaw