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Preserving the Oral History of Mongolian Buddhism Before 1937

Krisztina Teleki: *Reminiscences of Old Mongolian Monks: Interviews about Mongolia's Buddhist Monasteries in the Early 20th Century*. (Budapest Monographs in East Asia Studies 10.) Budapest: Institute of East Asian Studies, Eötvös Loránd University, 2022.

In Krisztina Teleki's *Reminiscences of Old Mongolian Monks: Interviews about Mongolia's Buddhist Monasteries in the Early 20th Century*, the author brings to light oral narratives of old Buddhist monks who lived in monastic communities in Mongolia until 1937. In particular, in the 1930s, due to the influence of soviet ideologies, 'all of the approximately 1,000 monastic sites in Mongolia were demolished' (p. 1). Overall, Teleki provides a detailed description of the monastic life and system in Mongolia until the 1930s. This includes information about everyday life and ceremonial customs.

The author presents information about previous research that has been done in the field of early 20th century monastic life in Mongolia. The National Archives of Mongolia contain archival sources, the Mongolian Academy of Sciences' Archives of Cinema provide old photographs, and several scholars (e.g., Damdinsüren 1959; Bawden 1997; Lkham – Yeröölt 2010; Yeröölt 2012, 2014) have published works on the oral narratives of old Monks. Moreover, the author's own previous research (Majer – Teleki; Teleki 2006; 2012, 2015) includes interviews with monks, and several initiatives (e.g., the *Oral History of 20th Century Mongolia* project and *Documentation of Mongolian Monasteries*) have preserved in part the memories of the Mongolian monks from the 1910s and 1920s. Still, despite the extant attention to the situation of Mongolian monasteries before the 1930s, Teleki argues that 'the history, monastic life, and ceremonial system of the majority of the old monasteries are unknown today' (p. 1).

To fill these gaps, the text provides the transcripts of 47 interviews conducted with 34 Mongolia monks, each born between 1900 and 1930 and who served

as Buddhist monks before 1937. The monks came from various types of monasteries in various locations around Mongolia. The interviews were conducted in two different contexts: (1) by Teleki and her colleague Zsuzsa Majer in 2006, 2007, and 2009, partly within the framework of the *Documentation of Mongolian Monasteries* project (2007) and the *Monaco–Mongolia Joint Archeological Expedition* (2009) and (2) by Teleki alone in 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, and 2017. At the time of the publication of *Reminiscences of Old Mongolian Monks: Interviews about Mongolia's Buddhist Monasteries in the Early 20th Century*, all of the interviews were under publication in the Mongolian language.

All of the interviewees were over 80 years old at the time of their interviews. The majority of them had been a child monk in the 1910s or 1920s before forcibly leaving their positions in 1937 to join the army for five to 10 years, and in the 1990s they again became monks and participated in the reestablishment of Buddhism in Mongolia. Their old age at the time of their interviews provided some difficulties for Teleki and Majer. For example, due to their being only five to seven years old in the 1910s and 1920s, the monks 'could not provide precise data on the history, collectivization, and destruction of their monasteries' (p. 17). Moreover, recalling specific dates was further confused by differences between the Gregorian calendar and the old calendar used in Mongolia. Further, some of the old monks were hard of hearing or did not understand the interviewers' questions.

Overall, in the text the interviews are organised according to the location of the interviewed monk's monastery. Accordingly, six main categories divide the transcripts: Ulaanbaatar, Central Mongolia, Khangai Region, Western Mongolia, Eastern Mongolia, and Inner Mongolia. A short biography is included for each monk before the transcript (or transcripts) of their interview (or interviews). Preceding the collection of transcripts, the author includes a short section titled 'Conclusion of the Interviews'. In this portion of the text, Teleki briefly summarises some of the main findings. In general, the findings relate to several topics, including the structure of the individual monasteries and the larger monastery systems; the ceremonies and services held at the monasteries (based on Tibetan texts and the Vajrayana tradition); everyday life in the monasteries; the physical layout of the monasteries and their larger complexes; and the resumption of the old monk's Buddhist activities in the 1990s.

The book successfully contributes to the field of preserving the history of Mongolian Buddhism before the 1930s. The English-language collection of interview transcripts record the memories of old monks whose monasteries and records had been purposefully destroyed and whose activities forcefully ceased due to soviet influence in 1937. Moreover, the book, with its transcribed and translated interviews, acts primarily as a reference material concerning

a population of often forgotten monks that is diminishing in size due to their old age.

Teleki's *Reminiscences of Old Mongolian Monks: Interviews about Mongolia's Buddhist Monasteries in the Early 20th Century* is part of the Budapest Monographs in East Asia Studies book series, published by Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE) in Budapest. Launched in 2006, the book series highlights scholarly achievements by members of ELTE's Institute of East Asian Studies, including doctoral dissertations, international conference volumes, and lecture series. Past books in the Budapest Monographs in East Asia Studies book series have covered topics on religion, philosophy, history, and linguistics in China, Japan, Korea, Tibet, and Mongolia.

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