CHAPTER TEN

MONGOLIAN APPROPRIATION OF NESTORIAN SITES AND OBJECTS

Traditionally, the Mongol herders in Inner Mongolia practised a nomadic lifestyle that did not allow for the accumulation of much property other than livestock and the necessary equipment to survive in the steppe. There was, in other words, not much opportunity or necessity to physically appropriate objects from ancient sites. The Mongolian hesitation towards physically appropriating objects from ancient sites may also be guided by a number of Mongol taboos and practises. Instead of physically appropriating such objects and sites, Mongolian herders traditionally appropriated the heritage in legends, oral history and anecdotes. These practises undoubtedly contributed to the survival of much of the Nestorian heritage until the nineteenth century and until the increased migration of Han Chinese settlers in the steppe of northern China. Only when Mongol herders permanently settled in Inner Mongolia did a number of herders start to physically appropriate the Nestorian remains.

This chapter explores the appropriation of Nestorian remains and objects in Mongolian legends, storytelling and oral history. It further discusses the ceremonial appropriation of Nestorian objects by Mongolian herders and settlers. I base myself on the legends and stories documented by Lattimore, some occurrences related by other early researchers and my own field work in Inner Mongolia.

10.1 Mongolian oral history of Nestorian sites

Sven Hedin, the leader of the Sino-Swedish Expedition that started in 1927 and would involve almost all early researchers documenting Nestorian heritage in Inner Mongolia, specifically noted that Mongolian herders objected to excavating ancient graves in the steppe. The objections concerned the participation of Chinese archaeologists and fear for ‘disturbing earth ghosts’. Bergman, who was responsible for

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1 Presumably Huang and a certain ‘Prof. Yang’, see Bergman (1945) 7.
2 Maringer (1955) 307. Maringer writes in his German study of ‘Erdgeister’.
archaeological research during the Sino-Swedish expedition, noted Mongolian protests regarding the excavation of graves. According to Bergman many other expeditions had similar experiences. Indeed, Egami also noted that the “Mongols were highly averse to digging of the land for habitual and religious reasons”.

Hedin’s observation regarding the herder’s objections to excavation by Chinese archaeologists gives, in the first place, an indication of the Mongolian resentment against ‘Chinese looters’. Hedin’s second argument, regarding the disturbing of earth ghosts, is as revealing. Digging is traditionally considered a hazardous affair among Mongolian nomads, for the opening of the ground may disturb earth spirits and allow them to escape. In fact, there is virtually no activity in the life of a nomadic Mongolian herder that involves digging. Ger tents, for instance, do not require pegs or other implements that open or damage the ground. The taboo of opening the ground is also reflected at the end of the Qing period in the burial practices among nomadic Mongolians. The use of graves among Mongolians in the steppe was limited to prominent chiefs and khanas. Such practices were exceptional and also greatly complicated by the cold climate which caused the steppe ground to be frozen most days of the year. By the twentieth century ordinary Mongolians thus disposed of their dead in ‘sky-burials’. The deceased were brought to a deserted steppe, undressed and after some ceremony left to be eaten by wild animals such as wolves, foxes and vultures. Despite the current official ban on sky-burials and practical complications related to population pressures in the steppe, sky-burials still occur in Inner Mongolia. Alternatively, remains of Mongolian herders were cremated and taken to a stupa at a sacred place. As wood was most scarce, cremations were costly and therefore limited to those wealthy enough to do so. Burial, in other words, was practically non-existent among nomadic herders.

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5 Bergman (1945) 9 and 191.
7 The only practice whereby the ground, strictly speaking, is opened concerns the ‘planting’ of two poles attached by a rope to tether horses.
8 See also remarks and references made by Maringer; Maringer (1955) 306 and note 13 on the same page.
9 Remark made by a Mongolian ethnologist to me in November 2004. The ethnologist grew up in the steppe Dorbet, a sparsely inhabited region in Inner Mongolia.
10 Gai refers to early cremation at a number of Öngüt sites, see Gai (1991) 209 ff.