

Buddhisms in a Cosmopolitan City: Religious and Ethnic Cohabitation and Interactions in Hohhot from Altan Khan's Times to the Present (16th-21th centuries)

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Abstract

This paper examines the case of Hohhot (Kökeqota, “the Blue City”)/Guihua from its foundation in 1572 by Mongol king Altan Khan to the present-day capital city of Inner Mongolia, with a focus on religious material culture and architecture.

Hohhot appears as a fascinating case of cohabitation between various religious communities: the Tibeto-Mongol Gelugpa Buddhists, the Chinese Buddhists, the Chinese popular cults as well as (from the 19th century on) Muslims and Christians. In the early 20th century, half of its population was Chinese, the other half being Mongols plus a few “Muslims” (who were in majority Chinese). Nowadays, Mongols account for only 8% of the city population, and it is estimated that only 20% of them can speak Mongolian.

This paper first presents the urbanistic and religious development of Hohhot from the late 16th to the early 20th century: Hohhot appears as an exception to the ethnic and religious segregation commonly seen in steppe cities such as 19th-early 20th century Yeke Kūriye (Urga) and its Chinese district (Maimaicheng).

Nowadays, the main donors of the Gelugpa monasteries are not the Tümed Mongols, who in the late 19th century started to adopt Chinese cults, but the Han Chinese. Not only the “ethnic frontier” has become porous because of acculturation and inter-marriages, but also the monasteries are much less “ethnically divided” than a hundred years ago. In the 2000s a new parameter, the rise of tourism, resulted in investments of the municipality in monumental temple construction.

The monasteries' responses to the sinicization of Tümeds and the modern Han Chinese craze for Tibetan Buddhism are made of both competition and occasional cooperation, resulting in common rituals and mixed material culture with mutual borrowings. How does the fact that the majority of their donors are Han Chinese or sinicized Mongols affect the physical appearance of Gelugpa monasteries? What does the main Chinese Buddhist temple borrow from Tibetan cults and rituals to seduce Han Chinese who are fascinated by Tibetan Buddhism? Are there dialogue and interaction between the religious communities?