

## Walking to Sacred Sites: Mongols' Long-Distance Pilgrimages in the Qing Period

Isabelle Charleux

### Abstract

*In the Manchu period, Mongol herders were attached to their 'banner'—the basic territorial, administrative and military unit of Qing Mongolia. Their circuits of nomadization were reduced, and they were fined when found to cross its frontiers. While princes, great reincarnate lamas and long-distance traders (as well as some marginal categories such as badarchi/itinerant lamas and bandits) had many opportunities to travel within Mongolia and even abroad, it is generally assumed that commoners had no choice but stay in their pastures. Yet they had a main reason for undertaking long-distance travel: pilgrimage. This paper investigates the various modes of travel of these pilgrims, their equipment, organization and funding, and highlights the importance of a mode of locomotion which is rarely seen in Mongolia nowadays: walking.*

### Introduction

Mongol herders of the Qing Manchu empire (seventeenth century–1911) were attached to their 'banner' (*khoshuu*<sup>1</sup>)—the basic territorial, administrative and military unit of Inner and Outer Mongolia. Their circuits of nomadization were reduced, and they were fined when found to cross its borders. While princes, great reincarnate lamas and long-distance traders (as well as some marginal categories such as beggars and bandits) had many opportunities to travel within Mongolia and even outside of Mongol territories, it is generally assumed that commoners had no choice but stay in their pastures.<sup>2</sup> Yet they had a main reason for undertaking long-distance travel: pilgrimage. I propose to investigate the various modes of travel of Mongol pilgrims who journeyed to distant sacred places in the modern period, up to the beginning of the twentieth century. I will particularly focus on a mode of locomotion which is rarely seen in Mongolia nowadays: walking. Traditional leather boots are very uncomfortable

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<sup>1</sup> I used Christopher P. Atwood's system for phonetically rendering classical Mongolian terms and names in the text. Id., *Young Mongols and Vigilantes in Inner Mongolia's Interregnum Decades, 1911-1931*, xv–xviii. (Leiden, Boston, Köln: Brill, 2002, 2 vol.). When citing authors and book titles, I used Antoine Mostaert's system to transcribe the traditional Uyghur-Mongolian script, but I replaced 'č' and 'j' with plain 'c' and 'j'. Place names of the Republic of Mongolia are transcribed from Khalkha-Mongolian.

<sup>2</sup> On how in the early period the Qing power implemented a policy to restrict Mongols' mobility, and the techniques developed by Mongol to make use of the *Pax Manjurica* and move freely across the internal borders of the empire: Dorothea Heuschert-Laage, "Globalisation or Isolation: Regulating Mobility of Mongols during the Qing period (1636–1911)," in *Mongolian Responses to Globalisation Processes*, ed. Ines Stolpe, Judith Nordby, and Ulrike Gonzales, 21–42. (Berlin: EB Verlag, 2017).

for walking. Nineteenth-century Russian geographer and explorer Nikolai Prejevalsky (Przhevalskii) wrote about the Mongol: “His contempt for pedestrians is so great that he considers it beneath his dignity to walk even as far as the next yurta.”<sup>3</sup> Anyone who spent some time in the Mongolian countryside observed that even for a hundred meters, herders prefer riding their horses or motorcycles rather than walking.<sup>4</sup> Yet in the past, many Mongols crossed the country on foot, such as pilgrims, peddlers, itinerant artisans, *badarchi* lamas begging on their way, troubadours and bards.

I will focus here on the nineteenth and early twentieth century, a period during which pilgrimages are documented by a variety of sources such as guidebooks, biographies of great lamas, folk songs and tales, as well as stone inscriptions and certificates of donation.<sup>5</sup> But these sources do not give practical details on how the pilgrims actually traveled, prepared for their journey and reached the sacred site—their means of transportation, their equipment, the route they took and the places they stopped at along the way. This is why my main sources here are Mongol pilgrimage accounts, as well as travelogues written by Western, Russian and Chinese travelers. One of the most informative travelogues is that of the Buryat scholar Gombojab Tsybikov (Mo. Tsevegiin Gombojab, 1873–1930) who undertook the pilgrimage to Lhasa in the guise of a monk in a group of Buryat and Kalmyk pilgrims from 1899 to 1902.<sup>6</sup> Other pilgrims who left accounts of their travels include the famous Buryat diplomat-monk Agvan Dorzhiev (1854–1938) who studied in Lhasa for many years<sup>7</sup> and the Kalmyk lama Bazar-bakshi who travelled from Kalmykia to Lhasa from 1891 to 1894.<sup>8</sup> Many other less famous Kalmyk and Buryat pilgrims

<sup>3</sup> Nicholas Prejevalsky, *Mongolia: The Tangut Country, and the Solitudes of Northern Tibet, being a Narrative of Three Years' Travel in Eastern High Asia* (London: S. Low, 1876), vol. I, 60.

<sup>4</sup> Though nowadays walking becomes fashionable among citizens of Ulaanbaatar, who enjoy hiking on Bogd Khaan Mountain during week-ends.

<sup>5</sup> Isabelle Charleux, *Nomads on Pilgrimage: Mongols on Wutaishan (China), 1800–1940* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2015), 6–17.

<sup>6</sup> Gonbochjab T. Tsybikov, *Un Pèlerin bouddhiste au Tibet* (Paris: Peuples du Monde, 1992). This Russian-Buryat Tibetologist (raised as a Buddhist, and a Russian citizen) spent one year in Lhasa in 1900–1901, disguised as a Buryat lama, funded by the Imperial Geographical Society. His aim was to collect information on Tibetan monasteries, daily life, and geography. His travelogue (published in 1919) tells us with great ethnographic detail the organization of his journey to Lhasa, including the daily routine of the caravan, price of horses and sheep, taxes, itinerary and kilometers per day, explanation of toponyms, and so on. He brought back the first photos of Tibet, and 300 volumes of Tibetan texts. He also wrote a report for the Russian Geographical Society, which was published in 1903, “On Central Tibet” (see Ihor Pidhainy, “Tibet through the Eyes of a Buryat: Gombojab Tsybikov and his Tibetan relations,” *ASIANetwork Exchange* (Spring 2013), volume 20/2: 1–15).

<sup>7</sup> Dorzhiev became adviser of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama and an intermediary between Russia and Tibet. See his biography: Dan Martin and Thupten J. Norbu, “Dorjiev: Memoirs of a Tibetan Diplomat,” *Hokke bunka kenkyū* 法華文化研究 17 (1991): 12–13, 29, 48–51.

<sup>8</sup> His journal was studied and translated into Russian by A.M. Pozdnev: *Skazanie o khozhdenii v' Tibetskuiu stranu malo-dörbötskago Baaza-bakshi* [Narrative of the travel to Tibet by the Maloderbet Baaza-Bakshi] (Saint Petersburg: Imperatorskoi akademii nauk', 1897). I thank Ekaterina Sobkovyak for having sent to me a copy of this book. There are few practical details in this diary, and this is the reason why Pozdnev encouraged Tsybikov, a trained native scholar, to travel to Tibet (Anya Bernstein, *Religious Bodies Politic: Rituals of Sovereignty in Buryat Buddhism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 40.

such as Namsaraev Badma-Bazar (1882–1968)<sup>9</sup> also left accounts and manuscript diaries which are preserved in the Russian archives.<sup>10</sup> Other precious descriptions of the pilgrims' itineraries and practices in Amdo (A mdo) are given by the Buryat scholar Baradin, who also travelled as a pilgrim and stayed one year in the Labrang (Bla brang) Monastery.<sup>11</sup> Other accounts have recently been published in China, such as that of Duke Migwachir (1893–1958), a writer, traveler, artist, poet and pious Buddhist from Alashan Banner, who describes his five-month long journey with his younger brother to Tibet in 1937–1938, followed by his visit to the sacred Chinese mountain of Wutaishan.<sup>12</sup>

### Pilgrimage as a Kinesthetic Ritual: Remarks on the Current State of Research

A conventional, restricted definition of pilgrimage would be “a journey to a sanctified place, undertaken with the expectation of future spiritual and/or worldly benefit,” distinct from regular worship in time (long journeys) and space (separation from home).<sup>13</sup> The possibility of encountering novelty makes the pilgrimage distinct from other forms of ritual. Walking also allows to encounter “the landscape visually and materially” and engage “with it kinetically, sensually and imaginatively, both seeing and becoming part of the picture.”<sup>14</sup> In their edited book *Reframing Pilgrimage: Cultures in Motion*, Simon Coleman and John Eade were the first to emphasize pilgrimage as a kinesthetic ritual: the pilgrims travel between two static poles, home—the mundane, human, familiar, social, imperfect—, and the pilgrimage site—the mysterious, divine, ideal, perfect, miraculous.<sup>15</sup> Their book criticizes Victor and Edith Turner's famous theory according to which the time of pilgrimage is an extra-ordinary moment, a great liminal experience breaking with

<sup>9</sup> Namsaraev Badma-Bazar, “Khudagsha Batyn usharalta yavadalnuudhaa orolto üge” [Master of water divining of the clan of the Bata clan and his lifestory], *Namsarain Badma-Bazar Namsaraevich, Namsaraev Vladimir Badmabazarovich. Minii shüleg – bodoloim khüleg, Minii nyutag – nahanaim tüsheg* (Ulan-Ude: Izdatel'stvo Buriatskogo gosuniversiteta, 2012, n. p.). I thank Sayana Namsaraeva for having sent me her grandfather's journal.

<sup>10</sup> See Arash Bormanshinov, “Kalmyk Pilgrims to Tibet and Mongolia,” *Central Asiatic Journal* 42 (1998), 10, n. 43 and 44, 13, 16–17 and n. 71, 19; Alexander Andreyev, “Russian Buddhists in Tibet, from the End of the Nineteenth Century-1930,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Series 3, 11/3 (2001), 349, n. 1; Bernstein, *Religious Bodies Politic*, 64, note 10.

<sup>11</sup> His full diary was published in 2002: B.B. Baradin, *Zhizn' v tangutskom monastyre Lavran: Dnevnik buddiiskogo palomnika (1906–1907)* [Life in the Tibetan monastery of Labrang: A diary of the Buddhist pilgrim] (Ulan-Ude: Izdatel'stvo Buriatskogo nauchnogo centra, 2002). On the contrast between the positivist Tsybikov, who criticizes the corrupted and ignorant Tibetan clergy, the business-oriented monasteries, and the poverty and superstition of the populace, and Baradin's more sympathetic views of Buddhist practices: Bernstein, *Religious Bodies Politic*, 40–50.

<sup>12</sup> Miγvacir, *Mergen-i bayasqayci cayan teike: Alaša qosiyun-u barayun güng-ün iledkel šastir* [White history that rejoices the sages: Report of the Western Duke of Alashan Banner] (Höhhhot: Öbör Mongyol-un arad-un keblel-ün qoriya, 2008 [1942]), Part III. His aim was to purchase a copy of the *Kanjur* in Lhasa.

<sup>13</sup> Alex McKay, ed., *Pilgrimage in Tibet* (Richmond (Surrey) and Leiden: Curzon Press, 1998), 1.

<sup>14</sup> Avril Maddrell, “Praying the Keeills’: Rhythm, Meaning and Experience on Pilgrimage Journeys in the Isle of Man,” *Landabréfid*, vol. 25 (2011), 17.

<sup>15</sup> Simon Coleman and John Eade, eds., *Reframing Pilgrimage: Cultures in Motion* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004).

everyday life, during which pilgrims undergo a transformative experience freed from the structure of ordinary society, and during which the rules and constraints of daily life are temporarily suspended.<sup>16</sup> *Reframing pilgrimage* shows that in a world where mobility is common and even banal, such as in the contemporary Western world, kinesthetic pilgrimage leaves the shackles of the exceptional and is closer to everyday life.

Another important dimension of pilgrimages all around the world is that of penance, danger, personal sacrifice, and suffering of the body. By voluntarily enduring pain, pilgrims increase their merits and accumulate guarantees that their request would be granted. To the hardship of walking can be added multiple forms of penance such as acts of contrition, auto-flagellation, purification, crawling on one's knees with chains, carrying stones, fasting etc. which sometimes provoke convulsions, fainting, or trance (besides, dying during a pilgrimage was generally believed to ensure eternal life or a good reincarnation). Penance aims at transforming the body, which leads to the inner transformation of the soul. Penance is also increased by topography and weather, many pilgrimage sites being located in mountainous areas with difficult passes and high altitude.<sup>17</sup> In *Contesting the Sacred*, John Eade and Michael Sallnow studied the dialectic between the suffering which is voluntarily endured and the miraculous healing, which is found in many religious traditions: sufferings, sins and grace are intimately connected.<sup>18</sup>

Several scholars such as Luigi Tomasi ("*Homo Viator*") argue that the dimension of penance declined since medieval times, eroded by modern means of transportation, facilities of travelling, modern comfort, and reduced time on the pilgrimage site because of the short duration of holydays. Consequently, the pilgrim appears to be closer than before to the tourist.<sup>19</sup> Ian Reader, who studied pilgrimages to the eighty-eight temples of Shikoku in Japan, argues that modern means of transportation and organization would allow a more complete pilgrimage.<sup>20</sup> Yet since the 1970s, walking over long distances has become fashionable again on the Camino to Compostela, and these pilgrim-hikers or hiker-pilgrims generally acknowledge that they live a liminal experience: after about fifteen days of walking, their body is transformed, they look like filthy, exhausted, suffering beggars whose main concern is curing their feet and wounds. Many of them acknowledge that the arrival at Santiago is disappointing and "anticlimactic," and chose to undertake the pilgrimage several times.

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<sup>16</sup> Victor and Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978).

<sup>17</sup> See James J. Preston's scale of spiritual magnetism, "Spiritual Magnetism: An Organizing Principle for the Study of Pilgrimage," in *Sacred Journeys: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage*, ed. A. Morinis (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1992), 31–46.

<sup>18</sup> John Eade and Michael J. Sallnow, *Contesting the Sacred. The Anthropology of Christian Pilgrimage* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991).

<sup>19</sup> Luigi Tomasi, "*Homo Viator: From Pilgrimage to Religious Tourism via the Journey*," in *From Medieval Pilgrimage to Religious Tourism: The Social and Cultural Economics of Piety*, ed. William H. Swatos, Jr. and Luigi Tomasi (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2002), 1–24.

<sup>20</sup> Ian Reader, *Making Pilgrimages: Meaning and Practice in Shikoku* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005), 36.

Were long-distance pilgrimages extra-ordinary moments and liminal experiences, breaking with everyday life, for Mongols—people who have generally been characterized by mobility and “nomadism”? Or on the contrary, was not pilgrimage quite close to everyday life for nomadic herders? Did they perform acts of auto-contrition to enhance their penance?

### Terminology and Types of Mongols’ Pilgrimages

Mongolian language distinguishes ‘pilgrimage’ from ordinary worship, called *mörgöl*, by referring to its ‘size,’ plus adding a verb denoting departure, movement or travel: *yekhe mörgöl-dür yabu-* (or *khi-*, *üiled-*, *ayala-*), literally ‘to go on/to make a big bow/prayer.’ *Yekhe*, meaning ‘big’ or ‘large,’ evokes the adventure and emotional intensity inherent in long-distance pilgrimages. *Mörgö-*, ‘pray, bow, prostrate’ etymologically means ‘to butt, to hit, knock one’s forehead against something, to gore,’ and Mongols commonly say: “I pray until my forehead is pierced.” The Mongolian terminology of pilgrimage therefore uses a term of body language. By contrast, the Tibetan vocabulary of pilgrimage emphasizes circumambulation of the sacred site, generally in a clockwise direction (*gnas bskor*: ‘circuiting, going around a place’).<sup>21</sup> The main actions of Mongol pilgrimages were prostrations and circumambulations, along with constant praying (*Om maṇi padme huṃ!* and other mantras or dharanis of various buddhas, bodhisattvas and protective deities) while counting prayer beads.

Local pilgrimages (within one’s *nutug*, homeland) and pilgrimages in Mongol territory where it was possible to stop in the yurts of acquaintances or hospitable Mongols, were quite distinct from pilgrimages abroad, where pilgrims had to rely on their own. In the Qing period and the early twentieth century, Mongols used to make pilgrimages within Mongolia (the most important being Urga/Yekhe Khüriye, to worship the Jebtsündamba Khutugtu,<sup>22</sup> and Erdeni juu in Khalkha Mongolia, and Badgar Choiling Süme (Ch. Wudangzhao 五當召) in Inner Mongolia. Many other monasteries drew pilgrims from surrounding banners at the local level, especially at major festivals.<sup>23</sup> The main season for pilgrimages within Mongolia was summer (especially mid-July) and autumn. July was (and still is) the time when *naadum*, the ‘three manly games’—horse racing, wrestling and archery—were organized throughout the country. Great monastic festivals also took place in summer and generally speaking, most sacred sites were especially visited on festival days because religious activities performed on major holy days yielded greater merit than those done at another time.

Mongols also undertook pilgrimages to four main destinations abroad: Wutaishan (over 300 kilometers from Hohhot), Kumbum (sKu ’bum) Monastery in Amdo, Lhasa

<sup>21</sup> Charleux, *Nomads*, 22–25.

<sup>22</sup> Örgöö (transcribed as “Urga” in Russian), the great monastery-residence of the Jebtsündamba Khutugtu, had settled in the Tuul Valley in 1855, on the site of present-day Ulaanbaatar.

<sup>23</sup> Charleux, *Nomads*, 44–52. The term pilgrimage must not be restricted to the great Buddhist sites but can be extended to natural sites such as caves, trees, strange rocks, springs, lakes, etc., of the Mongol countryside, to the great mountains that are worshipped on a local or supra-local level, as well as, after the nineteenth century, to the ancestral shrines of the Chinggisid imperial family in Ordos.

(more than 3,000 km from Hohhot) and Beijing (to worship the Sandalwood Buddha). Some went further, to Tashilhunpo (bKra shis lhun po) and monasteries of Central Tibet, and to Bodnāth Stūpa in Nepal. Only a few pilgrims, mostly lamas, went as far as India, especially to visit places linked to the life of the Buddha.<sup>24</sup> Most pilgrims to Lhasa stopped for two months in Kumbum and Labrang in Amdo, and pilgrims to Wutaishan often combined their pilgrimage with Kumbum. ‘Going to Utai-Gümbüm (or Gümbüm-Utai)’ is one of the modern expressions used to designate a pilgrimage abroad.

If monks, princes, traders, and beggars could travel all year round, how could herders leave their flocks and herds for long-distance pilgrimages? As I showed in a book, Wutaishan was frequented by Mongol pilgrims almost all year round: the Mongols who had left their cattle and sheep in Mongolia probably preferred going on pilgrimage during the low season for herding in winter, while the pilgrim-cum-traders who nomadized with their cattle and sheep to Wutaishan went in summer and fall in order to sell their animals on the mountain.<sup>25</sup>

The most massive movements of pilgrims aimed at worshipping the Dalai Lamas and Panchen Lamas when they travelled to Mongolia. The two-year sojourn in Urga of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama Thub bstan rgya mtsho (1876–1933), from 1904 to 1906, attracted an especially large number of pilgrims and notably Buryats; many Mongols also visited him on Wutaishan or in Kumbum in 1908. The Ninth Panchen Lama, Blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma dge legs rnam rgyal (1883–1937) traveled in Inner Mongolia between 1927 and 1935 where he performed Kālacakra initiations, each time gathering between 30 000 to more than 300 000 devotees from near and far—which are very impressive figures compared to a population of less than two million inhabitants. The Mongol princes competed with each other to invite him. He traveled from one banner to the next with seven to fifteen motor cars and an escort of more than 200 people. Processions of princes carrying incense led the way, followed by hundreds of devotees in prostration.<sup>26</sup>

In the twentieth century, long-distance pilgrimages developed with motorized transportation. Beginning in 1918, a bus company offered a regular service between Urga and Kalgan.<sup>27</sup> Pilgrims went to India and travelled back home by boat. In 1937–1938, Mongol duke Migwachir and his brother worshipped at many monasteries of Lhasa, crossed the Himalayas in a group of ten Mongol pilgrims and visited the main Buddhist pilgrimage sites of India; they went back to Beijing and Inner Mongolia by boat (via Singapore, Saigon, and Hong Kong) and train.<sup>28</sup> In 1894, Bazar-bakshi left Lhasa and took a boat back from China to Odessa through the Canal of Suez.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Charleux, *Nomads*, 30–40.

<sup>25</sup> Charleux, *Nomads*, 262–263.

<sup>26</sup> Charleux, *Nomads*, 40–44.

<sup>27</sup> Charleux, *Nomads*, 263.

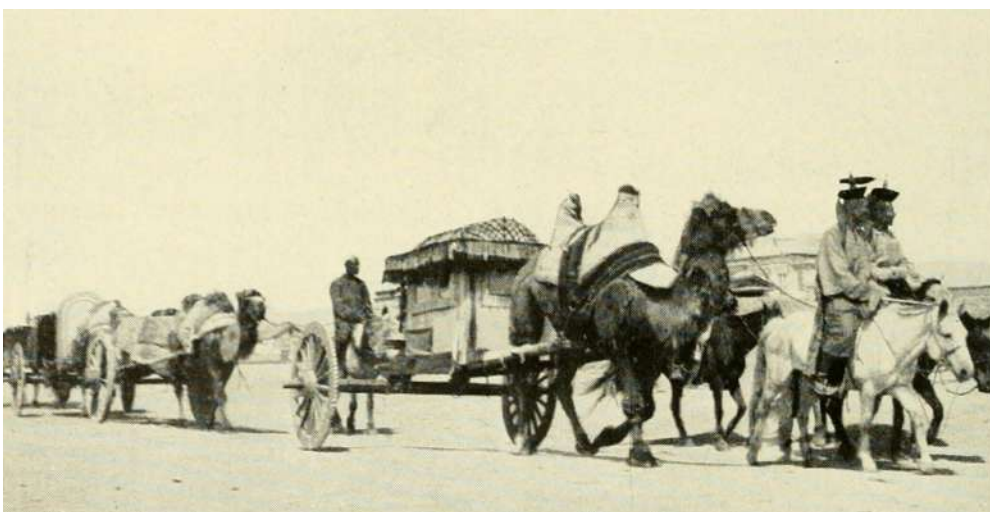
<sup>28</sup> Miyvacir, *Mergen-i bayasqayci*, 126–289.

<sup>29</sup> Bazar-bakshi, *Skazanie*, 119, 249–250.

## Different Categories of Pilgrims

The Mongol pilgrims had a variety of expectations, interests and preoccupations, ranging from penance to tourism and trade. I propose to distinguish at least six categories of pilgrims:

1. Noblemen and noblewomen, officials and high lamas travelled in caravans with their suite and family members (Fig. 1). Their motivations were as much religious as political. They went to Beijing (on official visit), Wutaishan, and a few of them, notably Western Mongols, to Lhasa. To pay for their pilgrimages, princes raised special taxes among their subjects. They traveled on camels, horses and ox-carts, with large retinues of attendants, guards and servants, carrying yurts or *maikhan* (velum tents, Fig. 2), followed by those in charge of driving carts or leading a train of several hundred sheep to supply them with provisions on the road. A small retinue would consist of less than a hundred people. In the 1910s, caravans of Mongol pilgrims with fifty or a hundred camels and sedan chairs were a common sight on Wutaishan.<sup>30</sup> In 1839–1841 the Fifth Jebtsündamba Lubsang Tsültem Jigmed (Blo bzang tshul khrims 'jigs med, 1815–1842) traveled to Beijing and then to Wutaishan with a retinue of three thousand monks.<sup>31</sup>



*Figure 1. A high lama dignitary on his travels, free from the gaze of the curious, and escorted by mounted lamas of the middle class  
(Harry A. Franck 1923)*

<sup>30</sup> Emil S. Fischer, *The Sacred Wu Tai Shan in Connection with Modern Travel from Tai yuan fu via Mount Wu Tai to the Mongolian Border* (Shanghai: Kelly and Walsh, 1923), 93.

<sup>31</sup> Aleksei M. Pozdnev, *Religion and Ritual in Society: Lamaist Buddhism in Late 19<sup>th</sup>-century Mongolia* (Bloomington: The Mongolia Society, [1887] 1978), 352.



Figure 2. Traveling tent of a wealthy Mongol pilgrim near Urga  
(A.S.Kent 1919)

2. Pilgrims-cum-traders. As in other pilgrimage places of the world, trade was a main component of Mongol pilgrimages. Pilgrims followed the trade routes that crossed Mongolia from north to south (Buryatia-Urga-Höhhöt) or from east to west.<sup>32</sup> Those going to Lhasa joined the two large yearly caravans which departed in autumn or in spring to bring monastic trade missions from Urga to Lhasa. Khalkha and Buryat pilgrims converged to Lake Kükunor and joined Mongols of Eastern Tibet. They travelled by camels, horses or yak; travelling with yaks was much slower, but those on camels had to leave them behind at ‘Napchu’ (probably Nag chu, see note 68) because of the steepness of the mountains, and continue on yaks.<sup>33</sup> Many lay and monk pilgrims purchased a dozen mules and female hinnies in Amdo and sold them in Lhasa; they could recoup all their travel expenses and even sometimes make a profit.<sup>34</sup> They also carried Chinese goods in Lhasa and brought back Tibetan goods to Mongolia. But they usually spent all their money in Lhasa and their budget was in deficit when they left Tibet.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>32</sup> On pilgrim parties of Oirad Mongol to Urga that doubled as trade caravans: Jonathan Schlesinger, “The Qing Invention of Nature: Environment and Identity in Northeast China and Mongolia, 1750–1850” (doctoral dissertation, Harvard University, 2012), 167.

<sup>33</sup> Prejevalsky, *Mongolia*, II, 184.

<sup>34</sup> Tsybikov himself bought four horses (at 18 to 50 taels apiece) and ten mules (25 to 40 taels apiece) to be sold in Lhasa (*Un Pèlerin*, 48–51, 76).

<sup>35</sup> Tsybikov recounts the “superstition” according to which travelers who bring back money will incur misfortune, because local spirits are greedy and do not like stingy people; they even take revenge on reincarnated lamas (*Un Pèlerin*, 264).



Trade was also a main component of the pilgrimage to Beijing<sup>36</sup> and Wutaishan. Many pilgrims traveled to Wutaishan with their own yurts and herds to sell animals at the great ‘Mule and Horse Fair’ and offer some others to the monasteries. They often went every year to Wutaishan and for them, pilgrimage may not have been so different from a nomadization, with all its propitiatory rituals.<sup>37</sup> The percentage of pilgrims-cum-traders was quite high in pilgrimages to Lhasa and Wutaishan. These pilgrimages abroad created the transfer of goods and wealth from the Mongol areas to China and Tibet, and appeared to have brought a substantial contribution to the economic wealth of Central Tibet in particular. Within Mongolia, trade also contributed to moving pilgrims, since great fairs gathering Chinese and Mongol peddlers were held on the main festival days of the largest monasteries.<sup>38</sup>

3. Solitary commoners or small group of pilgrims—monks and laypersons—traveling on foot, some of them performing full-length prostrations (see below).
4. *Badarchi* lamas. The term *badarchi* (lit. one with an alms bowl<sup>39</sup>) designates several kinds of itinerant monks who travelled on foot only; only the first one can be called ‘pilgrim’:
  - a. monk-pilgrims and novice-pilgrims-usually young ones, men only, travelling alone or in small parties—, going from monastery to monastery, in Mongolia or abroad, to worship pilgrimage sites and great masters. A sub-category of these monk-pilgrims travelled to Labrang and Kumbum monasteries and to Central Tibet to further their religious training, receive teachings, and encounter great masters. They traveled entirely without means and lived of alms received on the way (Fig. 3). They spent several years touring the great Tibetan centers, staying from two months to a year in each monastery.<sup>40</sup> Many of them studied in the great colleges of Drépung (‘Bras spungs) (especially in Gomang [sGo mang] College) and Séra (Se ra), and for a minority, passed the highest academic degrees. Many of these monks never returned to Mongolia. Even the monks trained in the academic colleges of Mongolia had to travel to continue their education, since they could only obtain the highest academic degrees of *rdo rams pa* and *lha rams pa* in Tibet.
  - b. monks (usually *getsüls* or *bandis*, i.e. novices and monks who had not taken the full ordination) who lived a peripatetic life begging on their way, wandering

<sup>36</sup> See James Gilmour, *Among the Mongols* (New York: Praeger, [1883] 1970), 357–358.

<sup>37</sup> Of course, Mongol herders of the Qing empire had to nomadize inside their banner, on relatively short distances compared to pilgrimages abroad. On Mongol trade at Wutaishan: Charleux, *Nomads*, 234–237.

<sup>38</sup> Charleux, *Nomads*, 50.

<sup>39</sup> *Badar*, Skt. *pātra*, alms bowl, donation, alms, contribution; *badar barikhu*- ask for alms, donations; *badarchila*-, to collect contributions for a religious purpose.

<sup>40</sup> Pozdneev, *Religion*, 275.

for months or years from monastery to monastery (Fig. 4).<sup>41</sup> They often were Nyingmapa (rNying ma pa) practitioners. When a *badarchi* requested overnight lodging in a lay household, he was often asked to recite or read some sacred text. Some of them were attached to a monastery and settled there in the winter months.

- c. monks officially sent by their monastery on alms rounds to collect donations, for instance to rebuild a temple. They went alone or two or three together, from yurt to yurt, spending about three months collecting alms, in spring and autumn. They carried a notice explaining the reason of the solicitation. When the economic conditions of their monastery worsened in the late nineteenth century, such activities became more frequent, and appeared to be like begging alms.

*Badarchis* played an important role in propagating news and stories in the Mongol countryside. In Mongolian folk tales, they are often humorously depicted as clever tricksters who use skilful and often unorthodox means to bring awareness into people's lives. These monk-pilgrims participated in the life and general economy of cities like Urga, which had a very poor district consisting of yurts and tents. Northeast of this district was the 'Stüpa [That One] Crawls Under' (Shirgaadag suburga, Khalkh-Mo. Shurgadag suvraga, built over an archway); *badarchi* lamas used to pass under it when they left on their pilgrimage.<sup>42</sup> We may assume it was a ritual of blessing and purification.



Figure 3. A lama student



Figure 4. A wandering lama

(Ladislav Forbath 1936)

<sup>41</sup> Pozdneev, *Religion*, 242.

<sup>42</sup> Krisztina Teleki, *Monasteries and Temples of Bogdiin Khüree* (Ulaanbaatar: Mongolian Academy of Sciences, Institute of History, 2011), 211, quoting Pürev, *Mongolyn uls töriin töv* [The center of the Mongolian state] (Ulaanbaatar, 1994), 45.

5. At last, Mongols also combined pilgrimages to other motivations to journey abroad, such as searching for the reincarnation of a *khutugtu*, or carrying the ashes of their relatives to bury them in Wutaishan.<sup>43</sup>

Pilgrims to Lhasa were not the same as pilgrims to Wutaishan and Beijing in terms of geographic origin, gender, motivations, status, and mode of travel. While short-distance pilgrimage concerned all Mongols, few of them could undertake the long and perilous trip to Tibet. Most of the pilgrims to Lhasa were either wealthy laypeople or lamas, notably *badarchis*; the great majority were men.<sup>44</sup> They went either on foot (especially the lamas) or on horse or camel back with trade caravans. The majority were Buryats, Kalmyks from the Volga and Torguts from Xinjiang (Eastern Turkestan),<sup>45</sup> as well as Khalkhas. While Buryat pilgrims first went to Urga, Kalmyks and Torguts traveled directly to Tibet by crossing Jungaria (north Xinjiang) and west Gansu. By contrast, Wutaishan attracted more ordinary pilgrims on a more frequent basis, women included<sup>46</sup> (Fig. 5). While many lay and cleric men went alone by foot or in great prostrations, there were also many families mounted on horses and camels, and the majority of them were Inner Mongols.



Figure 5. Khalkha pilgrims  
(John Blofeld 1959)

<sup>43</sup> Charleux, *Nomads*, 245–255.

<sup>44</sup> Prejevalsky, *Mongolia*, I, 72.

<sup>45</sup> On Kalmyk pilgrimages and failed attempts to reach Tibet: Bormanshinov, “Kalmyk Pilgrims,” 1–23.

<sup>46</sup> Women were also prominent travelers in Torguud pilgrim’s parties to Urga in the nineteenth century, see Schlesinger, “The Qing Invention of Nature,” 167.

## The Pilgrims' Journey

### *Practical Matters*

We have very few information on how pilgrims prepared for their journey, but like for any other travel, present-day Mongols ask a lama astrologist or check in an almanac whether the day of departure is auspicious for traveling and whether the journey will be safe.<sup>47</sup> They go to the nearest monastery to ask for blessings and obtain names of monks or relatives who could help and lodge them on their way. In the past, lay and monk pilgrims often respected certain vows such as fasting or abstinence from meat,<sup>48</sup> and hunting was generally prohibited. But some pilgrims to Lhasa carried a weapon and hunted, including lamas who temporarily broke their vows to face the difficulties of the journey.<sup>49</sup>

En route, like during a nomadization, the pilgrims made offerings, especially to the master-spirits of the land—to ask for a safe passage and avoid high-altitude sickness—and avoided pronouncing the true names of mountains.<sup>50</sup> Most of them traveled in groups of persons of the same family, encampment or monastery, often led by a lama, or in different groups who pooled their energies to help each other.<sup>51</sup> Others walked alone, but, when approaching their goal, they often joined other groups.

Like caravanners, pilgrims probably oriented themselves with the stars. They asked their way to locals, and in Tibet, they hired local guides to show them dangerous places.<sup>52</sup> Some sources mention the use of itinerary maps (from one point to another, with indications of mountains, rivers, springs and wells) but these do not seem to have been common and none of them seems to have been preserved.<sup>53</sup> Caravans and pilgrims travelling alone or in small groups did not take the same roads: while small groups of pilgrims and *badarchi* lamas looked for yurts and other inhabited areas for

<sup>47</sup> The medium of Labrang Monastery fixed the day of departure of Tsybikov's caravan: Tsybikov, *Un Pèlerin*, 48.

<sup>48</sup> Mo. *batsag*, *matsag*, *batsag-un sanwar*, Tib. *bsnyen gnas*, Skt. *upavāsatha*. Such vows were also taken by devotees on the eighth, fifteenth and thirtieth day of every lunar month and on major holy days: Pozdneev, *Religion*, 574–578.

<sup>49</sup> While some hunted, others tried to save the animals' lives, see Tsybikov, *Un Pèlerin*, 30, 67. Prejevalsky (*Mongolia*, I, 72) writes that every man in his caravan, including pilgrims, carried weapons. But according to law, nobles were explicitly forbidden to carry weapons when going on pilgrimage, see Heuschert-Laage "Globalisation or Isolation," 33. On pilgrims carrying weapons: Schlesinger, "The Qing Invention of Nature," 167 note 23, 168, 172.

<sup>50</sup> Tsybikov, *Un Pèlerin*, 52, 70.

<sup>51</sup> The study of the stone inscriptions of Wutaishan shows that many pilgrims traveled in groups. Some inscriptions bear only one name, whereas others have up to thirty, but the average group size is seven or eight names, see Charleux, *Nomads*, 215. The passports confirm that the majority of pilgrims came in groups mixing men and women, lamas and laypersons. For instance, a passport issued by the ruler prince of the Alashan Banner in 1836 gives eight people the authorization to cross the border, make a pilgrimage to Wutaishan and go back to their banner: five men (lamas and commoners) and three 'women and children'—along with eleven camels to carry people and belongings, see digitized archives of Alashan Banner, n°101-05-0098-011-0016-01.

<sup>52</sup> Namsaraev Badma-Bazar. "Khudagsha Batyn usharalta."

<sup>53</sup> Malcom Rosholt, "To the Edsin Gol: A Wisconsinite's Journey in Inner Mongolia, 1935," *The Wisconsin Magazine of History*, 60/3 (Spring 1977), 219.

board and lodging, caravanners each had their own route and tended to stay away from habitations, preferring roads which provided sufficient pasture.

Long-distance pilgrimages required money and time. Some pilgrims spent a half or a third of their entire belongings to get to a distant pilgrimage place, or even everything they owned. In the early twentieth century, the Mongol economy was still partially based on pastoral products, and the pilgrims needed cash money to undertake their pilgrimage abroad. Pilgrims sold horses and sheep in exchange for silver money before leaving, or on the way.<sup>54</sup> They carried money, grain, tea, precious metals and stones, brocades, etc. to sell or offer to monasteries. Others survived by begging. Many Mongols going to Lhasa were recruited as servants in caravans.<sup>55</sup> Once in Lhasa, some poor Khalkha pilgrims survived by begging and did not come back home, but generally speaking they were able to travel and live with a very small amount of money.<sup>56</sup>



Figure 6. Mongol pilgrims to Tibet  
(SeM/UG)



Figure 7. Mongolians in Lhasa  
(Edmund Candler 1905)

<sup>54</sup> Charleux, *Nomads*, 226–227, about the pilgrimage to Wutaishan.

<sup>55</sup> Tsybikov, *Un Pèlerin*, 264.

<sup>56</sup> Pozdneev, *Religion*, 276.

Khalkha and Inner Mongol pilgrims had to obtain a travel permit or passport from the administration of their banner.<sup>57</sup> Buddhist high-ranking monks seemed to have travelled very freely across banner boundaries through inter-monastery networks,<sup>58</sup> but nobles and officials could not travel outside their banner without imperial authorization;<sup>59</sup> otherwise they incurred heavy fines. Many passports (*jam yabukhu temdeg*) for authorizing pilgrims to cross their banners' boundaries were preserved in Inner Mongolia<sup>60</sup>. Groups of pilgrims requested a group passport from the civil authorities: on these were written the number of people, their names, their banner, their rank (if applicable), the number of riding and pack animals, the number of weapons such as muskets and guns, and the time, destination and purpose of travel. Generally speaking, pilgrims' passports for monks and commoners were easily obtained, but the procedure was longer for members of the nobility, whose mobility was strictly controlled: one had to request permission well in advance to make a pilgrimage to places such as Urga, Wutaishan, or Lhasa to the head of the league, who sent a report to the Lifanyuan (the Board of Government of the Outer Regions). "If the *Lifanyuan* had no objection, the matter was transferred to the Board of War and, finally, it was up to the Board of War to issue a permit. . . . If the original itinerary was changed, both the *Lifanyuan* and the Board of War had to be informed."<sup>61</sup> Quoting a Manchu document, Schlesinger adds that "while requests were never denied, they had to be made nonetheless – and the emperor had to be informed of these movements."<sup>62</sup> After the demise of the Qing dynasty, Inner and Outer Mongol pilgrims seem to have been able to cross borders relatively easily: according to Owen Lattimore, in 1941 "pilgrims and casual travelers move without hindrance across banner frontiers."<sup>63</sup>

From the second half of the eighteenth century on, the Buryats and Kalmyks, being subjects of the Russian empire, were forbidden to enter Tibet.<sup>64</sup> Incurring exclusion as foreigners and severe punishment, they nevertheless made secret pilgrimages as late as the 1920s (when they were not sent back at the border), concealing their identity by saying they were Khalkha. Both Agvan Dorzhiev in 1878 and Tsybikov in 1899–1900 called themselves Khalkha to enter the forbidden country.

<sup>57</sup> On special formalities for Oirat Mongols: Schlesinger, "The Qing Invention of Nature," 166, note 20.

<sup>58</sup> Monks had to obtain a passport from their monastery. The Shabi office (the office of the Jebtsündamba Khutugtu's estate) readily delivered free travel permits to go to Wutaishan and Tibet to lamas belonging to the Shabi estate, see Alexander Andreyev, "Indian Pundits and the Russian Exploration of Tibet: An Unknown Story of the Great Game Era," *Central Asiatic Journal* 451 (2001), 171.

<sup>59</sup> Officials, even princes and dukes, had to ask for a leave of absence (*chilüü guyu*).

<sup>60</sup> Notably in the archives of Alashan. See also examples cited by Schlesinger, "The Qing Invention of Nature," 165–168.

<sup>61</sup> Heuschert-Laage, "Globalisation or Isolation," 33.

<sup>62</sup> Schlesinger, "The Qing Invention of Nature," 165.

<sup>63</sup> Owen Lattimore, *Mongol Journeys* (London: The Travel Book Club, 1942), 189.

<sup>64</sup> On the refusal of the Russian government to issue passports and the obstacles placed in their way by Chinese authorities: Bormanshinov, "Kalmyk Pilgrims," 2, 20; Alexander Andreyev, "An Unknown Russian Memoir by Agvan Dorzhiev," *Inner Asia* 3/1–2 (2001), 27–40.

*Difficulties*

Travelers' accounts show a major difference between journeys in the Mongolian-speaking world and those abroad. Buryat pilgrims still felt almost at home when they arrived in Urga. What made the difference was hospitality: in Mongolia, walking pilgrims could travel with no other means than their backpack; they enjoyed the hospitality in yurts of other Mongols and received food and offerings en route from alms-givers.<sup>65</sup> Monks who could prove their status stayed in the guest quarters of larger monasteries as long as they followed the strict rules; they were immediately integrated into the monastic activities for the duration of their visit and participated in rituals and chanting.<sup>66</sup> In Outer Mongolia, the highest officials, the *ambans* in Urga and the military governor in Uliyasutai, were responsible for making the roads safe.<sup>67</sup> When traveling in Tibet, pilgrims enjoyed hospitality in some Mongol-populated areas,<sup>68</sup> notably in Kumbum Monastery where they often had relatives. After the Tsaidam Basin, they really were in a foreign land. But before arriving in Lhasa they were greeted by Mongol lamas sent by the Khalkha monks of Drépung, who organized their lodging.<sup>69</sup>

Traveling through Chinese territory to reach Wutaishan or Beijing entailed great hardship for Mongols, who were afraid of being cheated by Chinese. Although many traveled with their own tent and herds, they could not live completely self-sufficiently. These had to buy fodder and fuel and even pay to water their animals, as well as pay taxes. But many Shanxi traders and shopkeepers learned to speak Mongolian and tried to facilitate their travels by running inns every 20 kilometers to Wutaishan, and also welcomed pilgrims in poor farmhouses. As for princes and officials, they were welcomed at the foot of the mountain by monks who led them to their Wutaishan monastery: these monks, called *ombo lama* (fund-raising monk) arranged their sleeping in inns and served as translators in case of problems.<sup>70</sup>

The dangers of the road, the physical hardship and the financial cost were limiting factors for Mongols travelling to Lhasa. This was a main reason why pilgrims often travelled in groups and with trade caravans, or converged and agglutinated on the main roads with other pilgrims. Noblemen and wealthy reincarnations, loaded with alms, were frequently attacked or ransomed by brigands on the way, and frightening tales from their returning compatriots circulated about the rarefied air, or the attacks of the Goloks and the Black Tanguts (Amdo Tibetans).<sup>71</sup> Prejevalsky wrote that "In February

<sup>65</sup> "Foot-travelers, for the most part, trust to the hospitality of the inhabitants of the districts through which they pass for lodgings", see Gilmour, *Among the Mongols*, 121.

<sup>66</sup> Pozdneev, *Religion*, 275–276.

<sup>67</sup> Schlesinger, "The Qing Invention of Nature," 167.

<sup>68</sup> Tsybikov's caravan lodged in yurts of acquaintances at Nagchu, 275 kilometers from Lhasa. Those who planned to return from Lhasa following the same route left there some of their animals and provisions, see Tsybikov, *Un Pèlerin*, 71.

<sup>69</sup> Tsybikov, *Un Pèlerin*, 75.

<sup>70</sup> Charleux, *Nomads*, 257, 273–274.

<sup>71</sup> Tsybikov recounts of the numerous swindles, thefts of animals, attacks and other misadventures, notably on his way back, see *Un Pèlerin*, 51, 268–273.

1870, a caravan which left Lhasa 300 strong, with 1,000 beasts of burden, in a violent snow-storm, followed by severe cold, lost all the animals and fifty men besides. One of the survivors related to us how, when they found that their beasts were dying by the score every day . . . only three men were kept alive . . .”<sup>72</sup> While crossing the Tsaidam, Tsybikov’s caravan was ransomed by a local brigand, who levied a tax of two sapeques per pilgrim to ‘protect them.’<sup>73</sup> In the mid-1920s, Chinese scholar politician Ma Hetian met two Mongol lamas in Ejin Gol returning from a pilgrimage to India, part of a group of seventeen men and a number of camels and horses. Carrying heavy loads, they had crossed Kukulnor and Tibet; three of them had died of malaria. It took them a total of seven years, chiefly on foot, except for a short train ride.<sup>74</sup>

On the road pilgrims were usually in a hurry. They visited main monasteries along the way and stopped only if needed. Pilgrims travelled between 30 and 50 kilometers a day, but travelling with flocks and herds took much more time. Tsybikov’s caravan had covered the 1,850 kilometers from Kumbum to Lhasa in about a hundred days (including 15 full days’ rest and 17 stops of one day each—walking or riding between 15 and 70 kilometers a day).<sup>75</sup> Agvan Dorzhiev made the journey from Urga to Lhasa in 90 days.<sup>76</sup> The Mongols stayed two or three months in Lhasa, and one or two months in Wutaishan; they usually made the vow to come back in this lifetime or a future one. As in many pilgrimages all around the world, the return journey was generally made in a hurry.<sup>77</sup>

On their return from a pilgrimage, nobles were greeted by a congratulatory speech that became a genre of oral literature.<sup>78</sup> Long-distance pilgrimages were also seen as dangerous because pilgrims were not protected by the local deities of their homeland. The Buryat pilgrim Namsaraev Badma-Bazar returning home from a three-year pilgrimage in Tibet, did not directly arrive at his family yurt. He stayed at a distance of it and made a fire for three days, to purify himself from the pollution of travelling, and become familiar again to his *nutug* and with the deities of the land and water.<sup>79</sup>

### Walking Pilgrims

Whatever the means of transportation, pilgrimage is a physical adventure. The significance and merit of the journey varied according to the mode of transportation. The pilgrimage was probably less significant for mounted pilgrims than for penitents

<sup>72</sup> Prejevalsky, *Mongolia*, vol. II, 185–186.

<sup>73</sup> Tsybikov, *Un Pèlerin*, 51.

<sup>74</sup> Ma, Ho-t’ien *Chinese Agent in Mongolia* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1949), 14–15.

<sup>75</sup> On the road to Lhasa, the caravans stopped for two weeks in the Tsaidam so the animals could regain their strength, see Tsybikov, *Un Pèlerin*, 64.

<sup>76</sup> Martin and Norbu, “Dorjiev,” 70 n. 180.

<sup>77</sup> Tsybikov’s is one of the rare travelogues that details the journey back from Tibet. He tells how pilgrims make prostrations and incense offerings in the direction of Lhasa to say goodbye and vow to come back, see *Un Pèlerin*, 266.

<sup>78</sup> See, for instance, Henry Serruys, “A Genre of Oral Literature in Mongolia: The Addresses,” *Monumenta Serica* 31 (1977): 555–613.

<sup>79</sup> Namsaraev Badma-Bazar. “Khudagsha Batyn usharalta”, n.p.



performing great prostrations and for pilgrims traveling on foot for months and years, enduring the hardships of the road and sometimes falling ill, getting robbed or even dying along the way. Since traveling in a caravan is well-documented,<sup>80</sup> I will here focus on pilgrims who went on foot or in great prostrations.

Pilgrims made a vow to walk or prostrate, in order to fulfill an aim (cure their father or mother for instance). Although traveling alone on foot over a long distance was generally seen by outsiders as a sign of poverty,<sup>81</sup> in Buddhism it was first and foremost a form of penance and a way to obtain greater merit, or fulfill a vow.<sup>82</sup> We can assume that traveling on foot was seen as particularly praiseworthy for this horse-riding people.

In Mongolia, monasteries had a stele or a sign requiring anyone to dismount one's horse, sometimes as far as one kilometer from their entrance.<sup>83</sup> Still today, as a sign of piety, modern Mongol devotees going to a temple fair usually walk for at least the last few hundred meters.

On average, Mongol pilgrims to Wutaishan walked 30 or 35 to 45 kilometers a day; it could take more than a year for Buryats and Khalkha pilgrims to reach Lhasa. Walking pilgrims were generally commoners, but some high clerics chose to walk too. For instance around 1878, the head lama (*jasag lama*) of Wutaishan went on foot to Tibet, in spite of his old age, because Buryat lama Jangchup Tsültrim Pelzangpo (Agvan Dorzhiev's main tutor) told him that "To make pilgrimage to Tibet sitting in a sedan chair held up by men would be meaningless."<sup>84</sup> Even princes could take the robe of a penitent.<sup>85</sup> Mounted pilgrims also dismounted at some places: in the 'celestial sands' of Alashan, pilgrims to Lhasa dismounted their camels because they believed that crossing that part of the Gobi on foot gave merit equal to the recitation of the eight thousand verses of the *Prajñāpāramitā sūtra*.<sup>86</sup>

Western travelers' accounts have plenty of examples of encounters with walking pilgrims. Pozdneev met in Khalkha Mongolia several *badarchi* lamas with a *duldui* (staff, cane), either on their way to worship at Amarbayasgalant kheid or coming from it, loudly

<sup>80</sup> On Mongol journeying in caravans: Lattimore, *Mongol Journeys*, 137–163, and "Caravan Routes of Inner Asia: The Third 'Asian Lecture,'" *The Geographical Journal* 72(6) (December 1928): 497–528; Martha Avery, *The Tea Road: China and Russia Meet Across the Steppe* (Beijing: China Intercontinental Press, 2003). On the equipment of caravans (tools, kitchen utensils, bowls and containers, sacks, bags and pockets for foodstuffs and medicine for animals, fire transporters, hammers, cords etc.): Christel Braae, *Among Herders of Inner Mongolia: The Haslund-Christensen Collection at the National Museum of Denmark* (Lancaster and Oakville, CT: The Carlsberg Foundation's Nomad Research Project and Aarhus University Press, Aarhus), 2017, 364–367, 403, 435–437.

<sup>81</sup> Gilmour remarks that "a vast amount of foot travelling is done. A large proportion of the travelling on foot is that of poor men who go on religious pilgrimages", see *Among the Mongols*, 121.

<sup>82</sup> In Tibetan pilgrimages in general, walking or progressing in great prostrations is the norm, but in the pilgrimage to Amnye Machen, many Gologs make the pilgrimage on horseback, see Katia Buffetrille, "The Great Pilgrimage of A-myes rma-chen: Written Traditions, Living Realities," in *Mandala and Landscape*, 75–132, ed. Alexander W. Macdonald (New Delhi: D.K. Printworld, 1997).

<sup>83</sup> Pozdneev insists that in Mongolia pilgrims must approach a monastery on foot, see *Religion*, 58–59.

<sup>84</sup> Martin and Norbu, "Dorzhiev," 12–13, quoting Agvan Dorzhiev's 1923 autobiography.

<sup>85</sup> Haslund-Christensen, *Men and Gods in Mongolia (Zayagan)* (London: Trench, Trubner & Co 1935), 308.

<sup>86</sup> Tsybikov, *Un Pèlerin*, 29.

intoning Tibetan prayers; in the Khangai he met with two pilgrims, a man and a woman, on their way to Beijing to worship the Sandalwood Buddha.<sup>87</sup> Westerners often made note of the great exhaustion of the pitiable pilgrims. Buddhist scholar John Blofeld met an old Mongol who had walked all the way from northern Manchuria, spending over two years on the road.<sup>88</sup> Swiss traveler Walter Bosshard wanted to help a pitiable monk-pilgrim in Dörben Kheükhed Banner (Ulaanchab League) on the way to Wutaishan; he had walked for five months from a monastery in Manchuria. He was lying on the road, his back leant against a bundle to protect him from wind and rain; his robe and shoes were in tatters and his monk's hat so worn that one could not distinguish its color. But he refused to ride in Bosshard's car: "I want to do my pilgrimage on foot. How could I let myself be driven in such a car and give up all the virtues I have accumulated up to this day? . . . Your devil's car cannot increase the number of my virtues!"<sup>89</sup>

Pilgrims on foot were often described as poor mendicants. Some walked in a state of stupor. Haslund-Christensen met a pilgrim going to Urga who seemed to walk and sleep at the same time.<sup>90</sup> He mentions "emaciated wanderers who spent years of their lives in penitential journeys from one Buddhist holy place to another":

Alone or in small groups they crawled along across steppes and deserts, over mountains and rivers, overcoming all obstacles that met them on their way. When the route lay through unpopulated and barren country its length was doubled, for food and water had to be carried with them, and every time the pilgrim had measured out a few hundred yards he had to return over the same stretch to fetch the indispensable provisions. . . . Such pilgrimages often take years and frequently the frail body does not reach its goal. The thought that Death may meet them on the way has no terror for the faithful, for the soul that is set free on such a journey rises to a higher plane than that on which he lived during his time on earth and the ultimate goal draws nearer. . . . Many times in dismal and Godforsaken regions I have come upon such dying pilgrims. And I have tried to still the hungry conscience of the well fed by filling them up with my superfluity of material goods. They have accepted them with friendly but impersonal gratitude. They have sat by my fireside, covered in rags but which a soul made whole. I have listened to their words and understood that these expressed what was for them a deep and sincere truth. And I have sat there and watched them resume their agonizing course towards that enticing distant goal, followed their tardy disappearance.<sup>91</sup>

Stories of bodhisattvas or saints appearing on the road to help miserable pilgrims were common. Modern Inner Mongols say that Mañjuśrī sometimes appears to

<sup>87</sup> Aleksei M. Pozdnev, *Mongolia and the Mongols*, vol. I (Bloomington: Mouton & Co., [1896] 1971), 33, 399.

<sup>88</sup> John Blofeld, *The Wheel of Life: The Autobiography of a Western Buddhist* (London: Rider & Co., 1959), 88.

<sup>89</sup> Bosshard, Walter, *Sous la yourte mongole: À travers les steppes de l'Asie Centrale* (Paris: Amiot-Dumont [1950] 1954), 199–201.

<sup>90</sup> Henning Haslund-Christensen, *Tents in Mongolia: Adventures and Experiences among the Nomads of Central Asia* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner [1932] 1954), 172.

<sup>91</sup> Haslund-Christensen, *Men and Gods*, 28.

accompany and protect the exhausted and sick,<sup>92</sup> which recalls the many stories about encounters with apparitions of Kōbō Daishi on the Japanese Shikoku pilgrimage or encounters with Santiago on Europe's Santiago de Compostela pilgrimage.<sup>93</sup>

### Full-Length Prostrations

Many lay and monk pilgrims chose to go on pilgrimage making full prostrations every third step (*unaju morgü-*, lit. 'to fall down and bow') without interruption until reaching their destination (Fig. 8).<sup>94</sup> They dropped to the ground with arms stretched out in front, and marked the place their body had reached. After rising, they walked three steps, with the third step reaching the previously drawn line; from here they made a bow, stretched out flat on the ground, and so on. The Scottish missionary James Gilmour (1843–1891), who travelled in Mongolia in the manner of a *badarchi* lama in the 1870s, describes the technique of a Mongol lama:

He had a piece of wood in his hand, and with it marked the ground as far forward he could reach, then got up and walked forward to the mark, taking care, however, to keep a good way inside it. He was constantly muttering something or other, both when upright and then prostrate.<sup>95</sup>



Mongolian pilgrims on their toilsome way to Bogdo Kure (the Cloister of God)

<sup>92</sup> Information from U. Hurelbaatar and U. Ujeed, repeated by other pilgrims. Chinese Chan master Xuyun who reached Wutaishan in great prostrations in 1882–1883, was saved by a beggar who was none other than Mañjuśrī when he was almost dying of cold (Charleux, *Nomads*, 268).

<sup>93</sup> Reader, *Making Pilgrimages*, 10–11.

<sup>94</sup> According to Ekaterina Sobkovyak, prostrations also were legal punishments: “Mongolian Buddhist Monasteries – the isles of sedentariness in the nomadic world and their administration,” paper held at the international conference “Mobility and immobility in Mongolian societies,” September 11–13, 2018 at the University of Bern – published in this volume (as in the European Middle-Ages, pilgrimage was also an afflictive sentence imposed by the courts).

<sup>95</sup> James Gilmour, *More About the Mongols* (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1893), 102.

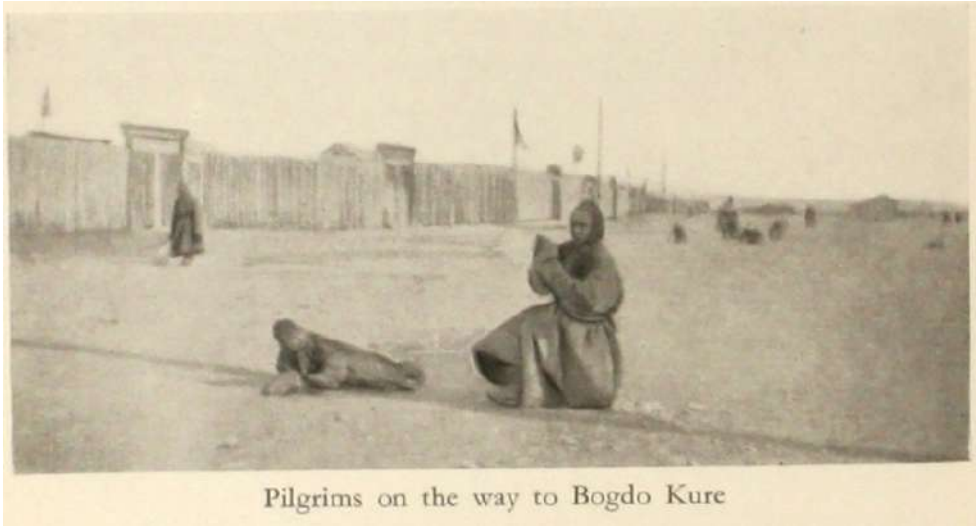


Figure 8. Mongol pilgrims on their way to Urga  
(Haslund-Christensen 1934)

It is said that they measured the whole distance with their body. According to American diplomat and Tibetologist William W. Rockhill, “Months are frequently taken in performing this highly meritorious deed, for three or four miles a day when gone over in this fashion are enough to exhaust the strongest man.”<sup>96</sup> Even more so than walking, the journey performed in great prostrations takes on as much spiritual significance as the destination itself. Full-length prostrations not only were performed to increase one’s merit but also to connect the whole body with the sacred ground, get into physical contact with the energy or blessing (*adistid*, from Sanskrit *adiṣṭhāna*, Tib. *byin rlabs*) of the sacred place and absorb its power, and cleanse the pollutions and defilements. According to Christian missionary Joseph Edkins:

[A]long the road [from Beijing to Wutaishan] may occasionally be seen more than usually devout pilgrims prostrating themselves on the ground all the way to (their destination)... To bow down and fall at full length before the images is meritorious. To do this all along the road must be far more meritorious. The pilgrim says to himself: - “I will make a vow. I will therefore prostrate myself at every third step. Though the distance is long, I shall arrive in a month, two months, or three, and I can walk back without prostrations on my return.”<sup>97</sup>

According to Swallow in 1903:

We heard many wonderful tales about the pilgrims; men had come on foot from three thousand miles away, knocking their heads on the ground—some one, and some even three times for every step they walked. Most of

<sup>96</sup> William W. Rockhill, “An American in Tibet: An Account of a Journey through an Unknown Land,” *The Century Magazine* (November) 41 (1890), 10.

<sup>97</sup> Rev. Joseph Edkins, *Religion in China; Containing a Brief Account of the Three Religions of the Chinese: With Observations on the Prospects of Christian Conversion Amongst that People* (London: Trübner & Co. [1878] 1893) 211.

them came begging their way, and had been known to die from hunger and fatigue when within sight of their Mecca.<sup>98</sup>

These pilgrims protected their hands with pieces of wood tied on with leather thongs, and their elbows and knees with pieces of cloth, and they wore a kerchief round their heads in order to prevent injury to their foreheads.

When arrived at their destination, they continued full-length prostrations to circumambulate monasteries and stupas. For instance, they made the vow to prostrate one hundred thousand times on the circumambulation path surrounding Kumbum monastery or Urga's Eastern Monastery and Gandan (Fig. 9).



*Figure 9. Pilgrims in prostrations in front of the gate of the Summer Palace (B. Sharav, early 20th century)*

Nowadays, a few pilgrims still travel this way; they can be accompanied by a young boy who carries a begging bowl and cares for their belongings, or travel alone, with a backpack or a small cart to carry all their necessities. The latter first cover the distance they plan to walk for the day, leave their cart, then walk back to their starting point and make prostrations up to the cart. If they find a place to sleep overnight, the next day they return to the spot where they made their last prostration and start again from there. A few years ago, an old woman traveling this way to Wutaishan from Naiman Banner

<sup>98</sup> R.W. Swallow, "A journey to Wu Tai Shan, one of the Meccas of Buddhism," *Journal of the Manchester Geographical Society* (1903), 182.

in eastern Inner Mongolia had her cart stolen on the way close to her destination; she then had to go back home. She made the pilgrimage again one year later, starting the prostrations afresh from home, and this time made it to the mountain.<sup>99</sup>

### The Walking Pilgrims' Equipment

The pedestrian pilgrims' equipment was similar to that of the *badarchi* lamas. It includes a heavy 'backpack' with a wooden frame to carry their luggage.<sup>100</sup> The equipment carried by the *badarchi* lamas has been described by Gochoo as "equivalent to a whole family in movement."<sup>101</sup> The average set of gear included fifty-four objects (Fig. 10):



Figure 10. Equipment of the *badarchi* lama  
(Gochoo 1970)

<sup>99</sup> Information from U. Ujeed, 2010.

<sup>100</sup> According to Braae (*Among Herders*, 579), the backpack had the advantage of leaving them free to perform prostrations; yet as mentioned *supra* and according to old photos, they performed full prostrations without their backpack (either because they had left it somewhere or because an attendant carried their luggage).

<sup>101</sup> C. Gochoo, "Le Badarçi mongol," *Études Mongoles* 1 (1970), 70–77; also, Heissig, *Geschichte*, 743–744.

- the ‘backpack’ (*‘yandag’*): a tall bag with a two-part wooden frame made of curved willow sticks (83x79 cm.);
- a tent (2x2 m.) with ten stakes;
- a ‘Tibetan cauldron’ (*Tanggud togoo*) the lid of which is used as plate and cup (23.5 cm. in diameter), and a leather bag for the cauldron, in which are stored tea, salt, a spoon, etc.;
- a felt mattress or carpet with cotton-lining (158x74 cm.) and its cover, and a goatskin to protect the mattress from dampness;
- a cotton strap with two brass rings—a rope to tighten the backpack and hold the tent in place;
- an aluminum flask for water;
- 5 kg. of food: (wheat?) flour (1 kg.), barley flour (1 kg.), meat dried for five years (1 kg.),<sup>102</sup> dry cheese (1 kg.) in individual bags; salt (in a bamboo case or goat leather bag), one or two goat leather bags for tea (1 kg.),<sup>103</sup> designed to withstand heat and humidity, and 8 empty bags (1 kg.);
- small individual bags containing herbs from Lhasa (for fumigations), herbs from Erdeni Juu Monastery, juniper from Otkhon Tngri Mountain, incense sticks, *khadag*, herbs to burn against enraged dogs and three divination dice;
- a dark-colored *deel* (robe-coat), black Mongol boots, a *joshoo* hat, a belt, underwear, rosary beads, a wide red scarf on the left shoulder, an amulet box with representation of deities, a knife,
- two staffs—to shoo away dogs when the *badarchi lama* approaches a yurt and to pitch his tent.<sup>104</sup> When dogs attacked him, he would let them bite onto one stick while crushing their noses with the other (Fig. 11–14).



Figure 11. *Badarchi shooing away dogs*  
(B. Sharav, circa 1915)

<sup>102</sup> *Bortsa*: dried beef, mutton or camel meat cut into strips or put into powder and dried. It was eaten raw, mixed with hot water, or cooked into noodle soup.

<sup>103</sup> When short of tea, Mongols use substitutes such as thyme (*ganga*) and *terelji* (a kind of rhododendron), which also have medicinal properties.

<sup>104</sup> Gochoo, “Le Badarci.”



Figure 12. An old pilgrim and troubadour  
(Henning Haslund-Christensen 1939)



Figure 13. An old pilgrim makes tea  
(Sven A.Hedin 1931)



Figure 14. Pilgrims eating and sleeping  
(B.Sharav, circa 1915)

Destitute travelers had a smaller backpack with no tent. The catalogue of the Haslund-Christensen collection on the National Museum of Denmark in Copenhagen includes a small travel tent (*jodgar*) with a square plan and seven poles for traveling



monks and pilgrims; these can also have a single pole.<sup>105</sup> In the same collection are two pilgrims' backpacks (respectively 66 and 70 centimeters high, with a frame of horseshoe-shaped wickerwork and cross-bars held tightly together with skin straps), and a tiny one with symbolic and ritual value. According to the collector's notes, the latter was made by families who wished to have a boy and "promise the Gods that the expected child will become a lama and pilgrim. As soon as the child walks, the urek [*üürge*, Khalkh-Mo. *üüreg*] is tied to his back and the family members will lead him daily on small 'pilgrimages' around the fireplace; each such pilgrimage ends in front of the altar."<sup>106</sup>

Judging from ancient pictures, it seems that Mongol pilgrims did not wear any special clothing for the pilgrimage, but another source writes that pilgrims to Erdeni Juu used special headgear, robe-coats (*deel*) and gloves.<sup>107</sup> Present-day elderly Khalkha pilgrims wear their best *deel* to undertake a pilgrimage.

*Badarchi* lamas also carried a begging bowl, a breviary and various ritual texts—such as *Ariun sang* (a prayer for incense offerings for purification), the *Vajracchedikā*, and *Gürim* (Tib. *Sku rim*, rites to avert, repel or exorcise misfortune)—and sometimes a small portable altar. Some pilgrims carried a weapon.

What visually distinguished pilgrims from ordinary devotees were their backpacks and the multiple amulets (Mo. *buu*, < Ch. *fu* 符) they carried over their robe-coats to protect them against robbers and against the dangers of the roads and the bad weather at the mountain passes. Even the poorest pilgrims wore amulets (Fig. 6).<sup>108</sup> They prayed along the way with rosary beads and prayer wheels. Describing Mongol pilgrims, Chinese agent Ma Ho-t'ien wrote:

[E]ach wore at his neck a bronze box about an inch square with a bronze Buddha inside. The face of the image was made of gold and the body was wrapped in red and yellow silk and satin. Along with this hung another box of glass and tin with a painting of Tsong-kha-pa inside. The little bronze Buddha had been presented to them by the Dalai Lama when they went through Tibet, and hence was of special value.<sup>109</sup>

Amulet boxes (*guu* < Tib. *ga'u*) can be quite big (up to 12–13 centimeters) and heavy. They contained a miniature painted or sculpted image of a protective deity, as well as written charms and all kinds of small protective objects: a scrap of ritual scarf

<sup>105</sup> Braae, *Among Herders*, 232–233, cat. 5 and 10. The equipment of the *badarchi* is also displayed in the National Museum of Mongolia, Ulaanbaatar.

<sup>106</sup> Braae, *Among Herders*, 579–580, cat. 778–780. This catalogue also gives a wealth of information on the equipment of travelers: goat of dog skin for isolation against damp and cold (248, cat. 25), sheepskin coat, medicine bags etc.

<sup>107</sup> Lham, Pürevjav, "Erdene-Zuu Monastery as a Major Pilgrimage Center of Khalkh Mongol," in *The International Conference on "Erdene-Zuu: Past, Present and Future,"* ed. Matsukawa Takashi and Ayudai Ochir (Ulaanbaatar: The "Erdene-Zuu Project" and the International Institute for the Study of Nomadic Civilizations, 2011), 51–53.

<sup>108</sup> The following information comes from Mongol friends, from observation on the field and from the literature on amulets and amulet boxes in the Tibeto-Mongol world, see Charleux, *Nomads*, 260–262.

<sup>109</sup> Ma, *Chinese Agent*, 14–15.

that had covered a famous icon, any object worn by a revered figure (a bit of clothing, of *khatag*), leaves of sacred trees and so forth. Small ones were worn on a strap around the neck against the chest (for men and women), and larger ones were worn across the shoulder, on the right side under the arm (for men), fixed to the belt (for men) and sometimes at the back to prevent dangers coming from behind. A pilgrim could carry up to twelve boxes on his body. Those who traveled in a caravan fixed an amulet box around the neck of the leading animal. The amulet box itself, when inlaid with precious or semi-precious stones having specific qualities, and decorated with the Eight Auspicious Symbols or the wish-granting jewel (Skt. *cintāmaṇi*), also had protective properties. Worn on the outside of the coat, they were also visible symbols of wealth and status. At the completion of the journey, the largest boxes were kept on the household altar.

All the pilgrims also carried a rosary (*erikhe*) around the wrist or, more frequently, hanging from their neck.<sup>110</sup> When walking they prayed while counting beads, in order to be protected against misfortune and difficulties on the road. They also prayed with hand prayer wheels, which are not used anymore (Fig. 6).

## Conclusion

For commoners bounded to their territory, making a long-distance pilgrimage once in a lifetime was certainly an exotic journey that allowed them to cross boundaries, at least the physical ones. The walking pilgrims, especially those progressing in great prostrations, may have indeed had some kind of liminal experience according to Turner's theory. They certainly experienced, by the end of their journey, some degree of transformation through exhausting practices of prostrating and circumambulating. They could get a glimpse of Chinese or Tibetan lifestyle, eat Chinese or Tibetan food, and purchase various Chinese commodities in market towns along the way. Hence the fact that Mongols were nomad pastoralists do not mean that for them pilgrimage was close to everyday life.

The pilgrimage to Lhasa was a tremendous adventure; it was risky, dangerous and expensive, and the majority of pilgrims were men, with a great proportion of lamas. By contrast, Wutaishan attracted more ordinary pilgrims on a more frequent basis, women included. It was not a perilous adventure, and was accessible to families. The pilgrimage of commoners who traveled with their herds and flocks, and especially those who went every year and sold their beasts at the market at Wutaishan, was probably not "a great liminal experience breaking from everyday life." Similarly, the pilgrimage of princes and Buddhist dignitaries was not very different from other kinds of journey abroad. Yet any travel, including nomadization within one's *nutug*, required special precautions, rituals and taboos because the dangers were many, notably the risk of offending the *genii loci*. Travelling was also a polluting activity and pilgrims needed to be purified when back to their homeland.

<sup>110</sup> Rosaries were personal objects, and one was not supposed to use someone else's, see Pozdneev, *Religion*, 220–221.

As in other pilgrimages all around the world, pilgrimage was often combined with long-distance trade. As Dorothea Heuschert-Lange points out, being the “generally accepted reason for travelling and inter-regional mobility,” pilgrimage may often have been a pretext for travelling for other reasons.<sup>111</sup> Many pilgrims survived on begging, and the impoverishment of entire regions in the nineteenth century caused the increase of vagrancy and notably of begging monks who could pretend to be pilgrims.<sup>112</sup> The pilgrim clothing and equipment was also a perfect disguise for spies and scholars such as Agvan Dorzhiev and Tsybikov, as well as for Christian missionaries and explorers, such as Sven Hedin.

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<sup>111</sup> Heuschert-Lange, citing nineteenth-century archives about low-ranking officials who intended to go to Urga and Wutaishan, see “Globalisation or Isolation,” 34.

<sup>112</sup> Walther Heissig, *Geschichte der mongolischen Literatur, Band 2: 20. Jahrhundert bis zum Einfluss moderner Ideen* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1972), 743–744.

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### Illustrations

- Fig. 1. "A high lama dignitary on his travels, free from the gaze of the curious, and escorted by mounted lamas of the middle class." Harry A. Franck, *Wandering in Northern China* (New York; London: The Century Co., 1923), face p. 145.
- Fig. 2. "Traveling tent of a wealthy Mongol pilgrim near Urga." A.S. Kent, *Old Tartar Trails* (Shanghai 1919), face p. 86.
- Fig. 3. A lama student traveling from one monastery to another. Ladislaus Forbath, *The New Mongolia*, as related by Joseph Geleta; translated from the Hungarian by Lawrence Wolfe (London and Toronto: W. Heinemann, 1936), between p. 103–104.

- Fig. 4. A wandering lama. Forbath, *The New Mongolia*, between p. 103–104
- Fig. 5. Khalkha pilgrims, ca. 1935-1936. John Blofeld, *The Wheel of Life. The Autobiography of a Western Buddhist* (London: Rider & co., 1959), between p. 97–98.
- Fig. 6. “Tibet. Mongol pilgrims to Tibet’s sacred shrines, 1920.” Photo by: SeM/UIG via Getty Images
- Fig. 7. “Mongolians in Lhasa.” Edmund Candler, *The Unveiling of Lhasa* (London: Edward Arnold, 1905), 274.
- Fig. 8. Mongol pilgrims on their way to Urga. Haslund-Christensen, *Tents in Mongolia*, face p. 73
- Fig. 9. Pilgrims in great prostrations in front of the gate of the Summer Palace. Detail, Painting “The Summer Palace” (Khaistain Lavrin) by B. Sharav, early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Bogd Khan Museum, Ulaanbaatar. I. Charleux
- Fig. 10. Equipment of the *badarchi* lama. Gochoo 1970 [1963]: 74.
- Fig. 11. *Badarchi* shooin away dogs. Detail, painting “One day in Mongolia,” by B. Sharav (1869–1939), circa 1915, Zanabazar Museum of Fine Arts, Ulaanbaatar. I. Charleux
- Fig. 12. “An old pilgrim and troubadour” who visited the Haslund expedition at Chagan khüree. Photo: Henning Haslund-Christensen, 1939 (published in Braae, *Among Herders*, 580).
- Fig. 13. “An old pilgrim makes tea – Shande-miao.” Sven A. Hedin, *Across the Gobi Desert*, translated from German by Herbert J. Cant (London: G. Routledge and sons, 1931), face p. 125.
- Fig. 14. Pilgrims eating and sleeping. Detail, painting “One day in Mongolia,” by B. Sharav, circa 1915, Zanabazar Museum of Fine Arts, Ulaanbaatar. I. Charleux

### Author

Isabelle Charleux is director of research at CNRS (National Centre for Scientific Research, Paris), GSRL (Group Societies, Religions, Laicities, National Centre for Scientific Research – Ecole Pratique des Hautes Études-PSL, Paris). Her research interests focus on Mongol material culture and religion. She published *Nomads on Pilgrimage: Mongols on Wutaishan (China), 1800–1940* (Brill, 2015) and *Temples et monastères de Mongolie-Intérieure* (Paris, 2006), as well as scholarly articles on various topics such as miraculous icons, Inner Mongolian mural paintings, and visual representation of past and present figures of authority in the Mongol world.

[isacharleux@orange.fr](mailto:isacharleux@orange.fr)