

# NEW RESEARCH ON SACRED PLACES IN CENTRAL ASIA

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Yasushi Shinmen, Minoru Sawada, and Edmund Waite, eds. *Muslim Saints and Mausoleums in Central Asia and Xinjiang*. Monde Caucasiens et Tatar – Asie Centrale et Haute Asie, vol. 3. Paris: Jean Maisonneuve, 2013, xvi + 242 pp. ISBN 978-2-7200-1187-0.

This volume is a long-awaited contribution to the study of sacred places (*mazars*) in the Ferghana Valley and Xinjiang, and also serves as a starting point for comparisons between the sacred places of Central Asia and other sacred places around the world. The essays are based on studies presented at the International Conference on Mazars in Ferghana and Xinjiang held in Tokyo on 26 and 27 November 2005, and have been updated to reflect the scholars' analyses and additional research since then. Most significantly, the volume seeks to integrate both historical and anthropological approaches to the study of sacred places, an endeavor which is necessary when considering the sacred places of this region where traditional written sources must be combined with oral accounts as well as other non-traditional sources. All the articles are in English making the work of scholars from China, France, Japan, Kazakhstan, Russia, and Uzbekistan accessible to an English-speaking audience and in some instances for the first time. Notably several of the authors incorporate Chinese historical sources that often go unmentioned in English-language scholarship.

The volume is divided into four parts with sections devoted to "Classification," "Sources and Literature," "Case Studies, Prophets, Imams, and Sufis," and "Mazar Ritual Activities and Gender." There are 42 pages of photographs and diagrams in an appendix, which adds a vital visual element to the individual articles and allows the unfamiliar reader an opportunity to visualize the sacred sites under discussion.

Five of the authors collaborated in the summers of 2004 and 2005 on a joint Japanese-Kazakh-Uzbek project extensively surveying the shrines of the Ferghana Valley. Minoru Sawada's article, "Towards a Classification of Mazars in the Ferghana Valley," offers a summary of their research and an attempt to divide

the different types of mazars into categories based on the religious person with whom the sacred place is associated. At the end of his article he lists 135 sacred places and provides detailed location information. Looking at the role of gender, Nadirbek Abdulahatov classifies the shrines associated with women in the Ferghana Valley into categories based on the shrines' names. He describes the natural features of many of these shrines, the motivations of the women who visit those shrines, the rituals that women perform, and the symbolic nature of the shrines. It is important to note, as in some of the other articles of this volume, that women often make up the vast majority of pilgrims to shrines whether or not the shrines are named in honor of a female. The motivations for making such pilgrimages as well as the rituals that women perform are not limited just to mazars named in honor of female saints and other historic women, as might be assumed from reading this article alone. One might wonder that the tomb of Safid Bulan is shown in figure 9.5 in a photograph attributed to the author, since men are clearly and emphatically restricted from entering that space.

As a complement to Abdulahatov's article, Rahilä Dawut, presents a detailed picture of pilgrimage among women in Xinjiang. She also makes a classification system for the mazars she considers in her fieldwork. Her explanation of the motivations behind female pilgrimage and her detailed description of ritual practices at mazars are particularly rich. She points out that while many of the shrine custodians are male, the majority of the pilgrims are female. Also, she mentions important connections to Buddhism and Nestorian Christianity.

Ashirbek Muminov's article, "The Sacred Places of Central Asia," outlines the major obstacles in studying those shrines, provides a lucid description of the

significance and value of their study, and notes many of their important and unique features. Yayoi Kawahara focuses his article on the specific shrine place of Qutayba ibn Muslim in the Ferghana Valley. He seeks to understand the situation of the mazar based on his research in 2004, as well as introduce some of the oral traditions and historical documents associated with the shrine. Kawahara describes both some of the oral legends he collected during his interviews at the shrine and the historical documents that the shrine custodian had given him permission to view. This article highlights the necessity to incorporate both oral and written sources found at the mazars when trying to understand the historical and contemporary significance of shrine places and the way that they were regulated and maintained both within larger political systems and by locals. Yasushi Shinmen and Yoyoi Kawahara also situate the mausoleum of Buzurg Khān Tora within the history of the region based on their fieldwork at the shrine. This article is valuable in that it traces the historic significance of Buzurg Khān and his travels and attempts to track how this relates to his shrine in local lore and society.

Some of the articles look at the intersection of religion and politics. Alexandre Papas' article emphasizes the importance of closely reexamining the policies and activities of the 17<sup>th</sup> century religious and political leader, Āfāq Khwāja, in order to understand the religious landscape of Eastern Turkestan today. Jianxin Wang expands on the significance of mazar worship for the Uyghur people of Xinjiang, providing a detailed description of ten major shrines in the Turpan Basin. Wang intertwines a discussion of what is considered specifically Uyghur Islam and culture with the distinct political situation in Xinjiang. Five of the ten shrines have official legal status, while the other five are more just "sight-seeing" places since they lack the appropriate buildings or officials that would allow them to register.

Thierry Zarccone revisits the question of classification with the specific case of determining how to describe Sulaiman Too in the city of Osh. He refers to it as an "atypical mausoleum" since it does not contain what he considers a true mazar. He looks to historical references and suggests that the term *qadam-jāy* or "place of arrival" is better suited to describing this major pilgrimage destination in the Ferghana Valley. He also discusses Sulaiman Too as a place of the cult of jinns.

Because the mountain itself is sacred and pilgrims follow a specific path stopping at predetermined stations along the way, Zarccone explains that Sulaiman Too is a prime example of an "itinerary-pilgrimage" with a planned route, in contrast to other shrine places that emphasize the centrality of circumambulation of a mausoleum or sacred object.

Trying to divide sacred sites into categories can be problematic because many of the sites have changed over time, and as noted by the authors of these articles, the ways in which people view and utilize the sites overlap. This is not always immediately obvious to the researcher. Subsequent studies could potentially overlook the complexity and diversity of such sites if too much emphasis is placed on rigid classifications, which might then diminish the shrines' significance. The benefit of establishing these initial categories, however, is to provide a starting point from which we can make comparisons both within the region and beyond. Sergey Abashin uses his case study of the Mazar of Boboi-ob to tease out some of these same concerns. He argues that no single classification system will satisfy the interests of all scholars and that the sacred places under consideration are typical only in that they are diverse, multidimensional, inconsistent, and sometimes even contradictory.

Overall, the articles in this volume speak to the central significance of mazar worship in Central Asia. Cataloging the diversity and intricacies of these shrines, as well as understanding the historic trajectory of them, leads to questions about the role of gender, ethnicity, and politics in the dynamics of religious beliefs and practices. Incorporating non-traditional sources and oral accounts with traditional written sources and seeking an interdisciplinary approach, as did the authors in this volume, will set a precedent for the study of shrines and local Islam in Central Asia and Xinjiang and open up opportunities for new analyses and comparisons in other parts of the world.

#### About the author

**Jennifer Webster** is a doctoral candidate in history at the University of Washington. She expects to complete her dissertation, titled "Toward a Sacred Topography of Central Asia: Shrines, Pilgrimage, and Gender in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan," in the spring of 2014.