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Conference at the University of Lethbridge

Emmett Chan, Rutika Gandhi, & Maggie Mitchell

University of British Columbia, University of Lethbridge

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A Report of the Research in Religious Studies Conference at the University of Lethbridge

Emmett Chan, Rutika Gandhi, & Maggie Mitchell
UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA, UNIVERSITY OF LETHBRIDGE

On May 5 and 6, 2018, the University of Lethbridge hosted the Research in Religious Studies Conference, which allowed undergraduate and graduate students to present their work in the broad field of Religious Studies. Of the two panels, “Places to Go, Things to Do” featured three graduate students presenting their research on pilgrimage and ritual. Dr. James MacKenzie, from the University of Lethbridge, presided over the panel and discussion.

Maggie Mitchell, a Master’s student in the University of British Columbia’s Asia Studies Department, presented on her 2016 visit to Mount Wutai, one of China’s most celebrated Buddhist pilgrimage sites. Despite its millennia-long history and continued popularity as a Buddhist site, the mountain is also home to new religious practices. Here, Mitchell described a ritual she encountered at a memorial site for Mao Zedong, former leader of China’s Communist Party, within the grounds of Mount Wutai’s most recognizable temple. A pilgrim monk performing a ritual towards a statue of Mao Zedong may initially appear to contradict the mountain’s status as a Buddhist pilgrimage site. Rather than see-

ing this kind of religious innovation as a break from the site's Buddhist history, and situating it solely within the contemporary Chinese religious climate, we can instead look at this new practice as yet another kind of ritual at a site of diverse religious practice. Mount Wutai has always been a site where political leaders are created and celebrated, and a place that tells a story about a Chinese nation.

Emmett Chan, a Master's student in the Department of Asian Studies, also from the University of British Columbia presented on his fieldwork conducted in Vancouver. He explored how two Japanese New Religious Movements (NRMs) in Canada can serve as examples of how high cost rituals, in contrast to low cost rituals, make forming and maintaining vigorous religious communities increasingly difficult. The two religious groups he examined were Soka Gakkai International (SGI) and Tenrikyo. Chan presented on a total of six interviews and came to the conclusion that non-Japanese people face two barriers when converting to these respective religions. The first barrier is the difficulty associated with the central ritual. The second barrier is creating and maintaining a connection with the religion. He noted that it was interesting that the interviewees seem to take part in the ritual and perform the physical actions before internalizing the teachings. He concluded by suggesting that perhaps NRMs which allow non-members to participate in a ritual without declaring themselves a member contribute to the growing number of believers in NRMs.

Rutika Gandhi, a Master's student at the University of Lethbridge, presented her research from fieldwork she conducted in November 2017. For her fieldwork, Rutika went to Sarnath, Uttar Pradesh (India), known as the site of the Buddha's first sermon. As one of the primary sites related to the Buddha's life, Sarnath is an important destination on the Buddhist Circuit. During this presentation, she discussed her experiences and noted some of the factors that have impeded tourism development

at the site. Some of these factors included a lack of information for tourists and poor infrastructure. She also remarked that there seemed to be some divisions between the Buddhist pilgrims, the international and domestic tourists, and the local residents. However, she pointed out that the presence of Buddhist temples from various Buddhist countries in Sarnath indicate that it is still an important and relevant place for transnational Buddhists. Moreover, by analyzing her observations at the Garden of Spiritual Wisdom, Rutika concluded that the interests of the national and state government are shaping and catering to a modernized Buddhist experience for international tourists.

The discussion touched on many of the new ways that religious sites are being constructed and promoted. Dr. James MacKenzie noted how there seems to be a strong connection between all the presentations given. For instance, there was a general agreement that all three presentations illustrated the ways in which new meanings and practices are combined with Buddhist traditions in numerous ways. Participants also mentioned that all the panelists' experiences of fieldwork evoked conflicting yet harmonious aspects of modern Buddhist practice and ritual. After each presentation, audience members asked questions directed at the presenters individually. Overall, the comparability between the different presentations allowed for discussion among the participants and the panelists. It also facilitated stimulating questions and feedback that could be advantageous for further explorations on the topics.