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« Tibetan Buddhist Rock Art in Southeastern Kazakhstan:  
Place Biography and Cultural Appropriation ».

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*Abstract:* Using a place-biographical approach, the talk examines the evolving materiality and dynamics of cultural appropriation of Tibetan Buddhist rock art and epigraphy in southeastern Kazakhstan pertaining to the Zunghar empire. By the early eighteenth century, the Oirat Mongol confederation habitually referred to as the Zunghar Khanate (1634–1758) had come to control vast territories in northeastern Central Asia. This expansion was accompanied by the construction of Tibetan Buddhist sites across the occupied regions. Today, over two dozen remnants of Oirat heritage (monastery ruins, rock art, epigraphy, etc.) are documented in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Some of these surviving traces of Tibetan Buddhism in Muslim Central Asia have been incorporated into local Turkic ritual landscapes, where they are often associated with healing and memories of local heroes. Moreover, recent archaeological research and popular media, alongside broader historical changes since the late twentieth century, have renewed interest in former Oirat sacred geography in post-Soviet Central Asia, with some of these sites playing an increasing role among Buddhist converts, new spiritual movements, and cultural tourism initiatives. The talk argues that the lens of “place biography”—understood as the layering of socio-historical contexts, practices, and memories inscribed in and constituting a place—offers a productive vantage point for exploring how these sites acquire, transform, and lose their meanings and functions amid shifting historical and socio-cultural conditions.