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SACRED SITES IN EASTERN TURKISTAN: DESTRUCTION, TRANSFORMATION, AND PERSISTENCE

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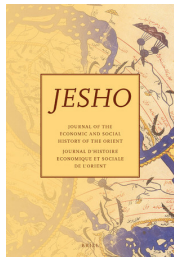
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PROGRAMME

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FIFTH JESHO LECTURE ON ASIAN HISTORY

6.00 pm *Introduction*
Paolo Sartori | Austrian Academy of Sciences

Sacred Sites in Eastern Turkistan: Destruction, Transformation, and Persistence

Rian Thum | University of Manchester

Abstract. From the 7th century to the present, observers of Eastern Turkistan, now part of the People's Republic of China, have assigned special significance to holy sites. Conquerors of the region have shown a similar interest. This lecture examines the transformations of holy sites in Eastern Turkistan under the influence of conquering and colonizing states, comparing the 11th-century transition from Buddhist to Muslim rule with the 21st-century efforts of the People's Republic of China to reshape the Uyghur sacred landscape through both destruction and transformation. This juxtaposition calls into question prevailing understandings of the 11th-century transition as a simple refashioning of existing Buddhist sites into Islamic manifestations, while placing current Chinese assaults on Uyghur cultural sites in a broader historical perspective. Together, the two examples show that holy places act as cultural arbiters, establishing routes by which change has entered Eastern Turkistan while stubbornly preserving not just older meanings, but also older ways of knowing. The examples also highlight the incommensurability of the two historical periods, suggesting that today's genocidal campaign gives new, more violent significance to the transformation of sacred geography.