

Report of BuddhistRoad Guest Lecture

10 November 2021 Johan Elverskog (Dallas, TX)

WHY DID THE UYGHURS BECOME BUDDHIST?

invited lecture at the BuddhistRoad project, CERES, Ruhr-Universität Bochum

The team of the ERC project BuddhistRoad invited Professor Johan Elverskog (Department of Religious Studies, Southern Methodist University) to give a talk as part of the BuddhistRoad Guest Lecture Series. Professor Elverskog spoke on his current research project—A History of Uighur Buddhism, 800–1800—focusing in particular on the initial conversion. As such, the talk began with the question of when the conversion actually and ultimately zeroed in on the turn of the millennium where much evidence that reveals that a distinct turn away from Manichaeism occurred.

Professor Elverskog then went on to describe the larger geo-political context in which this conversion took place; namely, the Islamisation of the Karakhanids (999–1211) in the West and the Buddhicisation of polities across East Asia. He explored in particular the economic and political relations between the West Uyghur Kingdom (second half 9th c. to 13th c.), the Song Dynasty (960–1279, 宋) and the Khitan Empire (907–1125, in Chinese sources known as Liao 遼).

He then turned to Uighur Buddhist practices—such as the cult of Maitreya and confession of sins—in order to further explore the question of why the Uighurs did convert. In conclusion he drew upon the work of Peter Brown to argue that conversion is never a simple or singular event. Rather, becoming a member of a new religion is not only a process, but it is also the result of many factors— political, economic, religious, social, cultural, psychological, and technological— and also, of course, quite simply a matter of faith.

