

Chapter 16

Mongolian Buddhism Past and Present: Reflections on Culture at a Historical Crossroads

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Editor's introduction: An accomplished author and translator of Tibetan Buddhism who has lived in Mongolia for a number of years, Glenn Mullin here provides a broad and poignant portrayal of Mongolian Buddhism and of Mongolia, more generally, from before the time of the Mongol Empire to the present. Breathtaking in sweep and analytic synthesis, his account foregrounds three major waves of Mongolian cultural and Buddhist religious “blossoming” – plus a fourth wave at the time of Zanabazar in the mid-seventeenth century. This strong historical perspective includes emphasis on key historical features and junctures that have been misrepresented, distorted, or downplayed by preceding Russian and sometimes also Chinese and Western biases of scholarship, not to mention highly propagandist portrayals.

Particularly important is Mullin's use of deep historical perspective to highlight, contextualize, and throw into relief contemporary developments in Mongolian cultural and religious heritage during the present post-socialist period. He poignantly discuss key challenges faced by cultural resurgence and Buddhist religious redevelopment in contemporary Mongolia, including the continued export and loss of historic art and artifacts; the need for better government policies and greater support for Mongolia's cultural and religious heritage; historical overemphasis on Chinggis Khan as opposed to other (and less violent) Mongolian luminaries; a tendency to rely on assistance and experience from outside Mongolia or from the government rather than developing it organically within the country; and unfair advantages afforded Christianization within Mongolia vis-à-vis Buddhist initiatives that are economically strapped.

A great admirer of Mongolia, its history, and its culture, Mullin concludes by challenging Mongolians to more fully draw upon, live up to, and build upon the substantial legacy of their history in the present.

I would like to begin by stating clearly that I am a deep admirer of Mongolian culture. It has made a remarkable contribution to world culture in particular and Central and East Asian civilization in particular over the past 2,000 years, especially within the spheres of Buddhism and shamanism. I am highly aware that Mongols are a very proud people with an ancient history and may take offense at things of a critical nature said about them. For that reason, any conference discussing Mongolia under the general umbrella of “States at Risk” treads on somewhat thin ice. However, it is very important to address risk factors in order not to fall prey to them. My paper focuses on the Buddhist situation, so will only address these factors within Buddhist geopolitical and politico-spiritual contexts.

Modern Mongolia: Some Socio-Political Considerations

An interesting genre of indigenous Tibeto-Mongolian historical literature is known as the *Hor Chojung*, or Origins of Dharma in the Hor Regions. Several texts of this nature exist. “Hor” is the name generally used by Buddhist scholars in classical times (from the 13th century to 1921) to refer to the kingdoms of Central Asia that we generally think of today as being Mongolian in ethnicity.¹ It is interesting to note that the name “Mongolia” is not widely used in the *Hor Chojung* literature, even in the late nineteenth century.

Hor, of course, was far bigger than Mongolia is today. It included Buryatia and large parts of Siberia, Inner Mongolia,

¹ There are numerous texts of this genre, most of which were written in Tibetan by Mongol lamas. The most famous is Lobsang Tamdrin’s *Hor Chojung Serdeb, or The Origins of Dharma in the Hor Regions: The Golden Annals*. A modern edition was published by photo-offset by The Academy of Indian Culture, New Delhi, 1964.

much of modern-day Kazakhstan, large parts of what today lie in Chinese provinces such as Qinghai, Szechwan and Xinjiang, and just about everything north (as well as northeast and north west) of the Great Wall. For that reason I often tease my Mongol friends by pointing out that they should not celebrate 1921 as “The Year of Mongol Independence” but rather as the year that the political leaders in Urga gave away three-quarters of traditional Mongolia. The Urga leaders at the time had been recently brought to power through military advice and assistance from the Soviets, and the Soviets certainly did not have Mongolia’s best interests at heart in the creation of the Modern Mongolia borders. In fact, opposition voices such as the great Ja Lama Dampa Gyaltsen were silenced through assassination.²

The Manchu territories also fell under the umbrella of Hor. They too surrendered to Chinggis and adopted the Mongol “standing script.” But seventy years of Soviet domination of Mongolia, and the onslaught of Soviet propaganda labeling the Manchus as “Chinese,” has separated these Hor people from their traditional Mongol cousins. Very little research has been done on the treaty relationships between the various Hor (Tartar-Mongol-Dzungar-Manchu) nations, and most of what is available is distorted by political bias and propaganda

² Ja Lama is typically presented as a psychopath and lunatic in Soviet-period Mongolian literature, a clear example of the Soviet dislike for him, and the propaganda campaign that they launched after his murder. Even Mongol mainstream scholars writing in the 1950s and 1960s continued this character distortion, completely overlooking the fact that he was one of the few Mongols who understood that the 1921 treaty that “created Modern Mongolia” was in fact a land grab on the part of Russia and China, with the new leadership in Urga being bought off or intimidated into submission.

(including Russian and Chinese; or by Western scholars beholden to the good graces of these two dictatorships).³

Buddhism in Mongolia: Three Waves of Cultural Blossoming

According to the *Origins of Dharma in the Hor Regions* by Lobsang Tamdrin, Buddhism came to the Hor region in three waves. The first wave began in the third century CE, during the time of the Indian Emperor Ashoka. This is some three centuries before Buddhism took root in China, and some eight centuries before it became firmly established in Tibet. Ashoka had extended his Buddhist empire northward all the way to the Silk Road, and he eventually captured the city of Khotan. Khotan was the westernmost region of Hor and thus was part of Mongolia. From Khotan Buddhism gradually spread eastward to the Mongolian Gobi kingdoms along the Silk Road. Lobsang Tamdrin states that even in these ancient days Hor supported a population of more than 100,000 Buddhist monks.

The second great wave of Mongolian Buddhism began with Chinggis Khan and his heirs, and the special relationship that Chinggis established with the Sakya School of Tibetan Buddhism. Indeed, Chinggis' grandson Emperor Kublai Khan went so far as to have his Tibetan guru Chogyal Pakpa (known to Mongols today as Pakpa Lama) create an easy form of the Tibetan script for use in all territories under his rule. This script, known as the *Pakyig*, continued as the script of choice by the Mongol emperors who came thereafter, and was in common use in Mongol Buddhism until the Third Wave

³ An example is China Marches West, where the author Peter C. Perdue inadvertently or purposely confuses the Chinese with the Manchu Mongols, and misconstrues the Manchu-Khalkha-Tibet alliance in the colonization of China as somehow “the Manchus are Chinese.”

took hold some three centuries later. Eventually the standard Tibetan script won out, however, and this is what we see in Mongolian monasteries today. The fall of Mongol rule in China, and the according rise of the Ming from Nanking, saw the retreat of the Mongols to their original territories north of the Great Wall. Eventually a lack of strong Mongol leadership, and the division of the remaining regions of the empire among the princely khans, also saw a decline of the Buddhist movement.

Mongolia's Third Buddhist wave, as outlined by Lobsang Tamdrin in *The Origins of Dharma in the Hor Regions*, refers to the Yellow School Movement that was inspired by the Third Dalai Lama's travels in the Mongol regions from 1578 under the patronage of Altan Khan. The Dalai Lama was not known by the name "Dalai" at the time. Rather, both at home and abroad he was known as Jey Tamchey Khyenpa, or "The Omniscient Master." The Third carried the ordination name of Sonam Gyatso. When he arrived in Hohhot, the then southern capital of Mongolia, Altan Khan translated the "Gyatso" part of his name into Mongolian. Thus Gyatso became Dalai, and Jey Tamchey Khyenpa became "Dalai Lama Dorjechang."

Although Hohhot is now no longer within Mongolia, having been lost to China in the treaty of 1921, the temple built by Altan Khan for the Third Dalai Lama in Hohhot in 1580 still stands today. Moreover, the Erdene Zuu temple built for the Third Dalai Lama in Karakorum by Abtai Sain Khan in 1584, has also largely survived. After the Third Dalai Lama's reincarnation was identified amongst the Mongol population of the Hohhot region, the Yellow School became the dominant sect of Mongolian Buddhism. It remains so today.

A Fourth Wave of Mongolian Buddhism

Lobsang Tamdrin's *Hor Chojung* mentions hundreds of other Buddhist lineages that came to Mongolia over the centuries.

However, the three waves listed above certainly played the most dominant roles in defining the character of Mongolian Buddhism.

It is perhaps relevant to speak of a fourth wave, which came with the advent of Under Gegen, a Mongol lama who travelled to Tibet in the mid-seventeenth century and became a close friend of the Fifth Dalai Lama. The two were co-students of the great Fourth Panchen Lama, Lobsang Chokyi Gyaltsen. Later Under Gegen became “lama king” of Mongolia, a role somewhat modeled on that of the Fifth Dalai Lama in Lhasa. Today he is popularly referred to as Zanabazar, a Mongolian mispronunciation of the Sanskrit form of his monastic name, i.e., Yeshe Dorje, or Jnanavajra in Sanskrit.

Zanabazar’s work came to pervade much of the Hor region, and his vision of Mongolian Buddhism flourished for more than two and a quarter centuries, until the Communist takeover of 1921.⁴ The Cultural Purges of 1928-1938, when most lamas and monks were killed or sent to gulags, marked Buddhism’s sharp decline in Mongolia. That said, Mongolian Buddhism today is largely marked by the Zanabazar footprint.

⁴ Unfortunately the Communist takeover of Mongolia in 1921 led to the death of the Eighth’s reincarnation under suspicious circumstances in 1924. The Mongolian incarnate Lama Tilopa, third highest lama in the country, apparently had one candidate recognized and enthroned in the late 1920s, although neither the Dalai nor Panchen Lama signed off on the recognition, perhaps because of their fear of the Communism that had overtaken Mongolia. Then after the Dalai and Panchen Lamas had passed away – the former in 1933 and the latter in 1937 – the Dalai Lama’s regent, Gyaltsap Redreng Tulku, recognized and enthroned a Tibetan boy as the Ninth Jetsun Dampa. Thus two children came to carry the illustrious name of “Jetsun Dampa.” The first one is said to have died in the Soviet Union in the 1950s or 1960s. Meanwhile the second candidate was educated in Tibet, and later went into India with the Tibetan refugees in 1959, when the Tibetans fled the Chinese Communist take-over. He has remained there since, and has only very recently passed away, having come back in his final days to Mongolia.

The Cultural Holocaust of 1928-1938

The Soviet-backed “Modern Mongolia” that emerged in 1921 proved to be a mixed blessing. Less than a decade later, Stalin carried Russia into a path of seemingly unprecedented mass murder, social repression, and repeated cultural purges, and Mongolia soon fell prey to the same evils. The Mongol regions directly under Russian occupation (Buryatia, Siberia and Tuva) suffered first, but this soon spread to independent Mongolia. Known by the somewhat benign term “The Cultural Purges,” the Communist destructions included the murder of most representatives of Mongolia’s pre-Communist period. Others suffered an even worse fate, being deported to Soviet concentration camps. A small museum in Ulaanbaatar documents some of the most horrific events of these cultural purges. The Arts Council of Mongolia has documented more than 1,250 monasteries and temples that were destroyed in this period, together with their libraries, art reserves, medical facilities and other treasures. One monastery in Ulaanbaatar, Gandan, was later allowed to re-open, largely as a Communist showpiece. It remained the only monastery permitted by law throughout the Communist period.

The Fall of Communism

The collapse of the Communist rule over the Soviet Union in 1989 resulted in rapid changes within Mongolia, and a democratic government quickly emerged. Circumstances transformed almost overnight. By the mid-1990s, the country had privatized most property and state assets, relaxed regulations on international travel, granted freedom of the press, and dismantled most of its state-owned monopolies. Democracy also brought freedom of religion to Mongols. Whereas Gandan was the only monastery allowed during

the Communist era, the people are now allowed to begin the process of rebuilding. To date, small replicas of approximately 200 Buddhist temples have been created across the country. All of them are tiny compared to the originals that were ravaged by the Communists almost seven decades ago, but it is nonetheless a proud re-beginning.

Challenges and Risk Factors

The transformation of Mongolia from a rigidly controlled Soviet-style Communist police regime to an open market society has produced many amazing success stories. But there also have been challenges. I thought that it might be useful to list seven that I feel represent the most problematic of these.

1. Rank Capitalism's Contribution to the Loss of Buddhist Art

A free market society brings its own challenges, and one of these is the preservation of national treasures. During the period of the Cultural Purges, many brave Mongols risked their lives to save great works of art from the temples under attack. Then, twenty years later, during the Khrushchev "warm period," numerous museums were opened, and a request made to the general public to donate items to these as national treasures. Some were donated, while the bulk remained with the general public. As the older generation dies off, these items are being inherited by the offspring, often without the same dedication to preservation.

Although the government has implemented strong export regulations on art objects, it is difficult to enforce these regulations effectively, especially in a country where so few people are educated in identification of or care for antiquities. There is little doubt that many priceless artifacts are being lost on a daily basis.

The large land border with China is a major problem. Not only are many priceless masterpieces lost through this porous frontier, but there is the added crime of historical distortion. Mongolian masterpieces are carried first into China and then on to Hong Kong, where they are erroneously labeled as Tibetan. Tibetan art has become very fashionable in recent decades, and most Mongolian art is now sold under this label. This is a major concern for art historians. The world of Mongolian Buddhist art is still very new to Western art scholars, and knowledge of it is almost lost in its own homeland.

2. Government Impediments

Although Mongolia's 1,250 monasteries and temples were almost all destroyed in the 1930s by the Mongolian government and all of its art and literary treasures stolen, the post-Soviet Mongolian government has arguably done little or nothing to effectively assist in the rebuilding. In addition to doing little to help with the rebuilding, to the contrary, the government in many ways obstructs the re-building efforts by imposing heavy taxes on those lamas who are gathering funds for rebuilding projects. Though this is a matter of some dispute, the Hambo Lama of one temple confided in me that his community is forced to pay taxes in seven different categories on whatever funds he raises, the resultant sum being almost 30%. Former President Enkhbayar once confessed to me that he had attempted to get many of these tax categories removed, but had been fighting an uphill battle with bureaucrats.

3. The Distortion of Mongolian Buddhist History through Residual Communist Propaganda

Communist governments generally see academic activity in the field of the social sciences as a means to a political end,

and therefore as primarily having the function of political propaganda. As a result, Mongolia today staggers under the weight of more than seventy years of propaganda. It has infiltrated all levels of intellectual life and popular thinking.

One example is the distortion of the character of the immensely popular Gobi mystic Danzan Rabjaa (1803-1856). The Communists destroyed his monastery near Sainshand in the 1930s, and in the 1940s spent a fortune vilifying him. Then in the 1950s they decided that his popularity could best be used for propaganda purposes, so they presented him as a “Red School” lama who was anti-establishment and proletariat. Today, most Mongols think of him in this latter light. The reality is very different, and in fact he was the fifth incarnation of the famed Noyon Hutaght, a Yellow School graduate of Drepung Gomang Monastery who was a contemporary of Zanabazar and the Fifth Dalai Lama; and like them, he combined lineages from several different sects in his personal practice. However, Danzan Rabjaa’s main guru was the Fourth Changkya, one of the ten top Yellow School Lamas, and the tutor of the Manchu emperor. The attempt to paint him as a “Red School Lama” is propaganda.

Jeff Watt from the Rubin Museum in NY visited Hamrin Hrid two years ago, having been told that Danzan Rabjaa was prominently Red School, and that the monastery had original Red School Art from him. Watt is one of the world’s top iconographers. He was therefore surprised to discover that all the so-called Red School images in the monastery are in fact based on lineages from Sera Monastery, another famous Yellow School institution in Lhasa. We see this kind of distortion of history throughout Mongolian intellectual life and popular thought. It began as propaganda fueled by the Communists in the 1950s and 1960s, and became embodied in the writings and sayings of the state-scncctioned Mongol scholars of the period.

Another example is the anti-Manchu and anti-Tibetan propaganda of the Soviet period. Although completely uninformed of the nature of the Manchu-Khalkha-Tibetan alliance, the Communists saw the Mongol connection with these two super-powers – one economic and the other spiritual – as the deepest threat to Soviet control of Mongolia.

4. Post-Colonial Syndrome

Three years ago my good friend Professor Bob Thurman visited Mongolia, and at that time the then First Lady, the wife of President Enkhbayar, organized a press conference. The question of Tibetan versus Mongolian Buddhism came up, because Thurman is well known as a professor of Buddhist studies, and also as the director of Tibet House in New York City, while at the same time being one of the main students of the great Mongolian lama Geshey Wangyal.

One of the journalists asked him, “You have done a lot to promote Tibetan Buddhism in the West. Why do you not do more for Mongolian Buddhism?” My recollection is that Professor Thurman replied, “Mongols have to do more, not us Westerners. Instead of always talking about the war-mongers of Mongolian history, such as Chinggis Khan, you should look more to the hundreds of great wise men and sages in your history. Celebrate them in your media. The world will respond. Nobody outside of Mongolia likes Chinggis Khan. He murdered millions of innocent people.” Naturally this shocked the audience. But there is truth in it.

5. The Tendency to Look Abroad Rather than at Home

Although it is wonderful that so many young monks and nuns are studying in the Tibetan monasteries of India, and so many Tibetan lamas come and teach in Mongolia, this in itself

creates something of a danger. Mongolian Buddhism went underground during the Communist period, and many of its unique lineages were preserved in this way. A major concern many of us have is that these lineages are being lost rather than sought out and used to revive the unique qualities of Mongolian Buddhism. The reasons for this include the large number of charismatic Tibetan lamas, their easy accessibility, the offer of scholarships for them to study in India, the difficulty of seeking out and training under these “hidden” Mongolian lineage holders, and other such considerations.

6. The “Leave it to the Government” Attitude

Under Communism, any public work worth doing was in principle expected to be done as a government initiative. In fact, if it was not a government project, it was probably prohibited. The effort to rebuild Buddhism has suffered considerably from this legacy. This pattern differs considerably from the Mongolian tradition of the past. Kublai Khaan, for example, personally built many hundreds of temples, sponsored many great Buddhist artworks and publications, and patronized thousands of monks and nuns in their study and practice. During the Communist era, the policy was that only the government should do public works. In the New capitalism, this has transferred to “Let someone else do it -- and hopefully a foreign-sponsored NGO.”

7. The Foreign Christian “Buyers of Souls”

Buddhism is an eclectic tradition, and preaches the equality of all traditions. Buddhist refuge in Tibeto-Mongolian liturgy often opens with the words, “I look for inspiration to all enlightened masters past present and future of all ten directions of the universe.” Thus it attempts to avoid the pitfall of sectarianism.

That said, the presence in Mongolia of well-funded foreign Christian evangelical missionaries from Korea and America does present a serious problem to the rebuilding of Mongolia's traditional culture. The reality is that there is not an even playing field. The Mongolian Buddhist infrastructure was utterly destroyed by the Communists. This includes not only temples, monasteries, libraries and artworks, but in addition all Buddhist educational institutes. In addition, when the Soviets exited from Mongolia in 1990, they left behind them a devastated economy and material infrastructure. It has not been easy for the handful of traditional spiritual leaders to keep pace under these conditions with foreign Evangelical Christians, who pour millions of dollars a month into the country.

Conclusion

Mongolia has a great Buddhist history stretching back to the pre-Christian era. Like all civilizations, it has experienced successes and downturns with the passing of the centuries. It is presently at a difficult crossroads.

Buddhist prophecy states that if every nation does its best in these times, the state of Shambhala will emerge and will bring about 1,000 years of golden civilization. The Kalachakra Tantra taught by the Buddha speaks of a land far to the north as being pivotal in the fulfillment of this prophecy. Many of the later Kalachakra texts identify this Northern Land as being Mongolia. In other words, according to the prophecy, the world will do well and enter a thousand years of a golden age if Mongolia revitalizes itself and manifests its enlightenment powers; otherwise, we face a thousand years of darkness.

Mongols have written more books on Kalachakra and Shambhala than any other peoples. It is therefore important that they now rise to the occasion of fulfilling this great destiny.