Mongolian Buddhism Past and Present

Reflections on Culture at an Historical Crossroads

by Glenn Mullin

1. Opening Remarks

I offer my greetings to the venerable lamas, honorable professors, general scholars and also the observers at this conference. My thanks to the organizers for inviting me to present a paper at this gathering, and also my apologies for my physical absence. The Kalachakra initiation in Washington DC by the Dalai Lama has called me Westward for the early summer.

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 very much aware of the fact that Mongols are a very proud people with an ancient history, and easily take offense at anything of a critical nature that is 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.

2. 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 to refer to the kingdoms of Central Asia that we generally think of today as being Mongolia.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 Buriatia and large parts of Siberia, Inner Mongolia, much of modern-day Kazakhstan, large parts of what today lie in Chinese provinces such as Qinghai, Szechwan and Xinjiang, and pretty much everything north (as well as northeast and north west) of the White Wall.

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.
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 Russian and China tricked the political leaders in Urga into giving away three quarters of Hor, or 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 Gyaltse were silenced through assassination.2

Interestingly enough, when the great Russian born New York artist, philosopher and social activists Nicholas Roerich travelled through the Tibeto-Mongolian regions between 1925 and 1935, one of his “secret agendas” was to press the leaders in the dozen or so Tibetan and Mongol kingdoms to band together, push out all Chinese and Russians from their territories, and apply to the international community for recognition as a kind of “super Lamaist federation.” Although this seems far-fetched in today’s world, in fact it was very possible at the time. All dozen of these nation kingdoms had dual secular-spiritual governments, with Yellow School Lamaism as their dominant spiritual culture. Both China and the Soviet Union were weak to the point of dysfunctional, and England was falling apart in the Himalayan regions of India, all of which were Tibetan Buddhist. The formation of the League of Nations in 1919 allowed for the emergence of just such a federation as Roerich envisioned.3

Seventeenth century European maps referred to the Hor areas as “Tartaria,” or “Land of the Tartars.” For Europe, the terms Mongol and Tartar were synonyms.

This is a case of inaccurate stereotyping, of course, and most Mongols today find this name offensive. Chinggis Khan’s own father, who was himself a king, was poisoned by the neighboring Tatars. As a result, after Chinggis became king of the Mongols in 1189 he made the subduing of the Tatars a priority. However, after their surrender had been effected, there is little doubt that the Tartar population outnumbered that of the Mongols in the newly established Chinggis kingdom.

The Manchus are another problematic nation. They too surrendered to Chinggis, adopted the Mongol “standing script, and thus became “Mongol.” But seventy years of Soviet domination of modern Mongolia, and the onslaught of Soviet propaganda naming Manchus as “Chinese,” has separated these “Hor” people from their traditional cousins.

Although Mongols today are uneasy with the term “Manchu Mongols,” in reality the alliance between the Khalkha Mongols, Manchu Mongols and Tibetans that emerged in the decades following the Manchu Mongol conquest of China in 1644 served all three of these nations very well for the two and a half centuries to follow. All three were “Lamaist” nations,

2 Ja Lama is always 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 even 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.

3 The Canadian scholar John McCannon has written several articles on this geo-political aspect of Roerich’s life. Roerich sometimes receives criticism for this multi-faceted side of his life. The book Red Shambhala, a recent publication by the Russian scholar Andrei Znamenski, presently a professor in Alabama, USA, takes a cynical look at Roerich’s political visions. He is not alone in this view, and I say that as a Roerich admirer. Roerich’s secret agenda got him banned from both the Soviet Union and the USA, and almost from his new home in India.
and from the time of the Third Dalai Lama in the mid 1500s all three have considered themselves to be principally Yellow School adherents.

Very little research has been done on the treaty relationships between the various Tibetan and Hor (Tartar-Mongol) nations that emerged between the time of Kublai Khaan and the fall of Greater Mongolia in 1921. Most of what is available is distorted by political bias and propaganda (such as Russian and Chinese; or by Western scholars beholden to the good graces of these two dictatorships).4

2011 is the 100th anniversary of the fall of the Manchu Mongol rule over China, and also the year that the Khalkha Mongols and Tibetans released publicly released “declarations” that the conditions of the various treaties that the Khalkha Mongols and Tibetans had forged with the Manchu Mongols did not in any way carry over to the newly established Kuomintang regime of the Han Chinese. Some Mongolian government agencies are presenting this as a “Declaration of Independence.” In fact it really is just a “re-affirmation.” Mongolia never was part of China, just part of the Triad Alliance of Tibet, Manchu and Khalkha in the colonization of China.

For this reason I also often tease my younger Mongol friends and suggest that they should insist in Mongolia’s southern border being the White Wall of China, and the southwestern border should be Tibet, and the eastern border Korea.

3. Buddhism in Mongolia: Three or Five Waves of Cultural Blossoming

According to the Origins of Dharma in the Hor Regions by the great Mongolian scholar Lozenge Tamdrin, Buddhism came to the Hor region in three waves.

The first Mongolian Buddhist wave began in the third century B.C., during the time of the Indian Emperor Ashoka, three centuries before Buddhism took root in China, and some eight centuries before it became firmly established in Tibet. Traditionally Mongolians recognize their second highest incarnate lama, Zaya Pandita, as being an emanation of Emperor Ashoka, perhaps in honor of this early connection.

According to Lobsang Tamdrin, Ashoka extended his empire northward all the way to the city of Khotan. Khotan was the westernmost region of Hor, and thus in Lobsang Tamdrin’s eyes was part of Mongolia. Emperor Ashoka was a strong Buddhist, and actively promoted Buddhism as the national religion of all lands under his rule.

From Khotan Buddhism gradually spread eastward to the Mongolian Gobi kingdoms along the Silk Road. Lobsang Tamdrin comments that even in these ancient days Hor supported a population of over 100,000 Buddhist monks.

Cave paintings along the Hor section of the Silk Road certainly bear witness to an early Mongol enthusiasm for Buddhism. The cave paintings in Dung Huang of modern-day China are an excellent example. Dung Huang at the time was part of the Mongolian patchwork of kingdoms. It was conquered by the Tibetan emperor Songtsen Gampo in the seventh century A.D., reverted to Mongolia under Chinggis Khan.

The second great wave of Mongolian Buddhism began with Chinggis Khan and his sons, and the special relationship that Chinggis established with the Sakya School of Tibetan Buddhism. Indeed, Chinggis’ grandson Kublai went so far as to have his Tibetan guru Chogyal Pakpa (known to Mongols today as Pakpa Lama) create a special form of the Tibetan Buddhist

4 An example is China Marches West, where the author Peter C. Perdue inadvertently or purposely confuses the Chinese with the Manchu Mongolia, and misconstrues the Manchu-Khalkha-Tibet alliance in the colonization of China as somehow “the Manchus are Chinese.”
script for use in all territories under his rule. This script, known as the Pakyig, continued as the formal script of choice by the Mongol emperors who came thereafter, and was in common use for Mongol Buddhist literature until the Third Wave took hold some three centuries later. In fact, one theory holds that Kublai intended to use this script for all purposes throughout his empire, and replace the Chinese and Uighar scripts with it. Only the bubonic plague brought this vision to a close.

Kublai Khan’s strong dedication to Lama Chogyal Pakpa and his brand of Tibetan Buddhism is strongly documented in The Journals of Marco Polo. Marco Polo had been charged by the Vatican Pope with the task of converting Kublai to Christianity. However, although Kublai was happy to sponsor Christians in his court and to retain them as advisors, he personally remained strongly Buddhist. Marco Polo laments this fact in his Journals, attributing his failure to convert the Khan to the superior skills in paranormal activities such as telekinesis demonstrated by Chogyal Pakpa.

Chogyal Pakpa’s biography (still not available in English translation) records the many Buddhist Tantric lineages and teachings that this great lama gave to Kublai Khan and his inner circle, a testament to the dedication that this great khan held for the enlightenment tradition.

Of note, Dr. Gene Smith, the director of the Tibetan Buddhist Research Center in NY, whose institute to date has digitized almost ten million pages of Tibetan and Mongolian texts, recently wrote to me stating that the oldest surviving manuscript in the TBRC database is a Buddhist text on the Kalachakra Tantra that was published on the occasion of Kublai Khan’s passing in 1294, to ensure the great emperor’s rebirth in the Kalachakra pure land of Shambhala.

The fall of Mongolian 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 White 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, and accordingly of Buddhist art.

Mongolia’s Third Buddhist wave, as outlined by Lobsang Tamdrin in The Origins of Dharma in the Hor Regions, refers to the coming of the Dalai Lama School of Tibetan Buddhism to Mongolia in the 1570s, and its adoption by Altan Khan as the national religion of the country. The Dalai Lama incarnation lineage was not, of course, 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, the king Altan Khan translated the “Gyatso” part of his name in Mongolian. Thus Gyatso became Dalai, and Jey Tamchey Khyenpa became “The Dalai Lama Dorjechang.”

Although Hohhot is now no longer within Mongolian territory, having been stolen by China in the questionable treaty of 1921, the temple built by Altan Khaan 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 Altai Sain Khan in 1584, had also largely survived, although it was badly damaged and the monks killed, sent to Russian gulags, or “re-educated” under instruction of the murderous Communist dictator Marshal Chobailsan in the 1930s. Later it was turned into a museum, which it remains today. The Dalai Lama Temple in Erdene Zuu is still the earliest Yellow School Temple in Mongolia.

The Third Dalai Lama passed away in Hor in 1588. Not long after his passing a Mongol child was born in the family of Prince Sechen Chokhor, one of Altan Khan’s grandsons.
Although he and his wife had both been disciples of the great Third Dalai Lama, they were rather shocked when the State Oracle in Lhasa announced that the Third Dalai Lama’s rebirth had taken place in Mongolia. They were even more shocked a year later when the search team from Lhasa identified their son as that reincarnation. This was the first time that a Dalai Lama was reborn outside of Tibet.

Eventually the child was enthroned as the official reincarnation, and was taken to Kumbum, the monastery in Kokonor that had been built a generation earlier by the Third Dalai Lama on Lama Tsongkhapa’s birthplace. Here the child spent some time learning the Tibetan language, as well as memorizing the basic Buddhist liturgies. He then continued on to Lhasa and his enthronement in Drepung Monastery.

Of note, at that time the Kumbum area belonged to Mongolia, and not to Tibet. The present Dalai Lama was born some twenty miles from the monastery, and the former Panchen Lama also somewhat nearby. The region is still predominantly Mongol, although these days it lies within the Chinese province of Qinghai. “Qinghai,” of course, is itself a Mongolian word, as is “Kokonor.”

The work of the Third and Fourth Dalai Lamas had a major impact on the enlightenment tradition of Mongolia. The Yellow School quickly became the dominant spiritual force in the country as a result of their inspiring deeds. This school remains the largest spiritual tradition in Mongolia today.

4. The Fourth Wave of Mongolian Buddhism

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

Tibetan Buddhism, for example, began its flow northward in the seventh century, when the Lhasa King Songtsen Gampo conquered large sections of west and southwestern Hor, including Khotan and Kokonor. The pace picked up with Padma Sambhava’s work in Tibet in the eighth century. Two of his twenty-five main disciples were Mongol (Sokpo Tamdrin and Sokpo Lhapel), and they carried their lineages back with them. Early traces of the Nyingma School can be found from this period.

Then, according to legend, after the Buddhist monk Pelgyi Dorje assassinated the Tibetan king Langdarma in 841, he fled to Mongolia for sanctuary, and built a monastery near Karakorum. Mongols today speak as this as Ogin Hrid, the ruins of which can still be seen.

However, the three waves listed by Lobsang Tamdrin certainly played the most dominant roles in defining the Mongol character as well as Mongolian history.

**It is relevant to speak of a fourth wave** with the advent of Under Gegen, a Mongol lama who travelled to Tibet in the mid-seventeenth century, 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 Tibetan monastic name, or Yeshe Dorje. Yeshe Dorje becomes Jnanavajra in Sanskrit, a name not easy to the Mongol tongue. It emerged as Zanabazar. Like the Fourth Dalai Lama, he also was a direct descendent of Chinggis Khaan.
Zanabazar work could rightly be called a fourth wave of Mongolian Buddhism, because it came to pervade much of the Hor region. His vision of Mongolian Buddhism flourished for more than two and a quarter centuries, until the Communist takeover of 1921. It continued until the Cultural Purges of 1928-1938, when most lamas and monks were killed, sent to gulags, or “re-educated.”

5. 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 unprecedented mass murder, social repression, and seemingly endless cultural purges, and Mongolia soon fell prey to the same evils. The Mongol regions directly under Russian occupation (Buriatia, Siberia and Tuva) suffered first, but this soon spread to independent Mongolia. One rarely meets a Mongol who did not lose several relatives during that period. Known by the somewhat benign term as “The Cultural Purges,” the Communists systematically rounded up all representatives of Mongolia’s pre-Communist period. Many were murdered with a single bullet through the head, as was done in the Soviet Union. Others suffered an even worse fate, being deported to Soviet concentration camps, where they became guinea pigs in Stalin’s program of chemical experimentation. Two of my best friends in Ulaanbaatar, today prominent members of the new democratic Mongolian government, spoke of how several of their ancestors were arrested, purged, deported and then murdered in these ways. A small museum in Ulaanbaatar documents some of the most horrific events of these cultural purges, and Mongolians are only now coming to terms with what they lost during that period.

In the recent decade, the Arts Council of Mongolia has documented more than 1,250 monasteries and temples that were destroyed in this way, together with their libraries, art reserves, medical facilities and other treasures.

Then a rather curious event occurred in 1943. Rumors emerge that the American vice-president Henry Wallace would be visiting Moscow to discuss agricultural aid that the American government had given to the Soviet Union, and that he had requested to see Ulan Ude in Buriatia and Ulaanbaatar in Mongolia. Wallace had been a friend and student of Nicholas Roerich, and through Roerich had developed an interest in Mongolia and Mongolian Buddhism. Stalin, wanting to give the impression that there was religious freedom in the Mongol lands, and sent out the order that a monastery should be opened in each of these two cities. A few dozen surviving monks had to be found to fill them.

5 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 ever since, and is now an elderly man in his late seventies.

6 Unfortunately Wallace’s spiritual leanings later hampered his political career. His famous “Dear Guru” letters to Roerich were derided in the press, causing a major embarrassment to the Democratic Party to which he belonged, and costing him his presidential aspirations.
Thus it came to pass that two monasteries were re-opened in the Mongol territories during the Stalin / Chobailsan era. One of them was Gandan Monastery in Ulaanbaatar, and stayed open throughout the remaining five decades of the Communist era as Mongolia’s only monastery. All other attempts to re-open temples or monasteries were quashed by the Ulaanbaatar government.

6. 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. Things 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.

Now, almost two decades later Mongolia is a different country altogether. Young Mongolians now study in universities all over the globe, where previously they had been restricted to institutions in Soviet-bloc countries.

Democracy also brought freedom of religion to Mongols. Whereas Gandan was the only monastery allowed during the Communist era, the people were now allowed to rebuild some of what had been destroyed. To date, small replicas of approximately 200 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 beginning.

In addition, whereas during the Communist period the few monks permitted by the government were under the complete control of the secret police, especially in terms of education and travel, there are now somewhere between three and five hundred monks and nuns training in the great Tibetan monasteries of India.

7. 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 failures.

I thought that it might be useful to list a half dozen that I feel represent the most problematic of these.

A. 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 these as national treasures. Some were donated, while the bulk remained with the general public. As the older generation died off, these were 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 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, although most dealers and buyers cannot tell the difference between Tibetan, Mongolian, Bhutanese or other Central Asian schools. And because the name “Tibetan art” is fashionable, most Mongolian art is now sold under this label. Recently in New York I saw one piece of this nature that had been sold by a respectable art dealer for some $80,000. Although a piece from Central Mongolia, it had been falsely marketed as “Eastern Tibetan,” and brought an accordingly price.

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, where seventy years of Communism relegated it to a minor cultural footnote.

B. Government Structures

Although Mongolia’s 1,250 monasteries and temples were destroyed in the 1930s by the official government ruling the country at the time, and all of its art and literary treasures were stolen by that same government, the present Mongolian government has done little or nothing to assist in the rebuilding.

We can look at Tibet as a contrasting situation. The CIA estimated that the Chinese government stole an equivalent of eighty billion dollars in the form of precious metals and jewels in the various statues, stupas and so forth that had accrued over the centuries in Tibetan temples. After the introduction of market economy in the 1980s, the Beijing government at least gave back a small part of the stolen wealth, under of policy of “rebuilding religious scenic sites.”

Mongolia had twenty percent of that number of monasteries and temples, so we can assume that a considerable amount was stolen from them, probably somewhere between ten and twenty billion dollars worth of precious metals and jewels.

In addition to doing nothing 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. The Hambo Lama of one temple confided in me that his community is forced to pay taxes in seven different categories, the resultant sum being almost 30% of whatever funds he raises. 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.

C. 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.
Perhaps the best example is the great nineteenth century Gobi mystic Danzan Rabjaa. The Communists destroyed his monastery in the 1930s, and in the 1940s spent a fortune vilifying him. Then in the 1950s they decided that his popularity could be used for propaganda, so they presented him as a “Red School” lama who was disliked by the Yellow School heads in Urga, and was really an anti-establishment proletariat kind of man. Today, most Mongols think of him in this latter light.

The reality is very different. Danzan Rabjaa was the fifth incarnation of the famed Noyon Hutaght, a contemporary of Zanabazar and the Fifth Dalai Lama, and a Yellow School graduate of Drepung Gomang, a principal Yellow School Monastery. And like Zanabazar and the Fifth Dalai Lama, he combined lineages from many different sects in his personal practice. His main guru was the Fourth Changkya, one of the ten top Yellow School Lamas, and the tutor of the Manchu emperor.

Jeff Watt from the Rubin Museum in NY visited Hamrin Hrid two years ago, having been told by how Danzan Rabjaa was prominently Red School. Jeff is one of the world’s top iconographers. He was therefore surprised on his arrival to discover that all the so-called Red School images in the monastery are in fact lineages from Sera Monastery, another famous Yellow School institution in Lhasa.

We see this kind of distortion of history in all aspects of Mongolian intellectual life and popular thought. It began as a line fed by the Communists in the fifties and sixties, and became embodied in the writings and sayings of the state-sanctioned 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. One still hears this kind of silly propaganda being voiced by older Mongol scholars.

D. Post-Colonial Syndrome

Three years ago my good friend Prof. 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 Prof. Thurman is well known as a professor of Buddhist studies, and also as the director of Tibet House in NY. 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.”

Prof Thurman replied, “Mongols have to do more, not us Westerners. Instead of always talking about the warmongers and bandits of Mongolian history, such as Chinggis Khaan, 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 Khaan. He murdered millions of innocent people.”

Naturally this shocked the audience. But there is truth in it.

Prior to the Soviet colonization of Mongolia, Chinggis Khaan did not get much attention in Mongolian art or literature. A day in the National Library demonstrates this simple fact.

The reality is that Chinggis has received more attention from the Mongols in the twenty years since the fall of Soviet domination over Mongolia than he did in the 800 years before then. Everything from vodka, beer and restaurants is now named after him.
Prof. Thurman called this a bad habit, something counterproductive to Mongolia’s acceptance as a great civilization in the world.
I call it “post colonial syndrome.”

E. 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.

Some of the reasons for this are the large number of charismatic Tibetan lamas, their easy accessibility, the offer of scholarships to study in India, the difficulty of seeking out and training under these “hidden” Mongolian lineage holders, and other such considerations.

F. The “Leave it to the Government” Attitude

Under Communism, any public work worth doing should be done as a government initiative. In fact, if it was not a government project, it probably was prohibited.

The effort to rebuild Buddhism has suffered considerably from this. Whereas in centuries past Mongolian social and business leaders directed a considerable amount of their income to developing public facilities like temples and monasteries, these days they are more interested in buying a hundred thousand dollar vehicle to flaunt their wealth, taking a gambling holiday in Korea, or sending their wife on a clothes and jewelry shopping expedition in Singapore.

This differs considerably from the great Mongol leaders 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.”

G. Finally, the 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 very much avoids the pitfall of sectarianism.

That said, the presence in Mongolia of well-funded Christian evangelical churches does present a serious problem to the rebuilding of traditional culture.

The reality is that there is not an even playing field. The Mongolian Buddhist infrastructure was utterly destroyed by the Communists, with nothing left. This includes not only temples, monasteries, libraries and artworks but in addition all Buddhist educational institutes, so that today not even the broken walls of many still exist.
In addition, when the Soviets left Mongolia they left behind them a devastated economy and material infrastructure. The decade that followed was terrible for most Mongolians, and has created a legacy of broken families, debt, alcoholism and other social ills.

It has not been easy for the handful of Buddhist monks who were allowed to exist under Communism’s police regime to compete under these conditions with Evangelical Christians pouring millions of dollars a month into the country.

At one meeting I had with former President Enkhbayar, I suggested a twenty-five year ban on all foreign religious activity in the country. The Mongols need that basic breathing space to revitalize their society and regenerate the essence of what they once were before the holocaust, without the distraction of these spurious and generally ill-motivated organizations.

8. Conclusion

Mongolia has a great Buddhist history stretching back for to the pre-Christian era. Like all civilizations, it has experienced ups and downs 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, a thousand years of golden human 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.

Nicholas Roerich, who pushed for the unification of the Altai-Himalayan lamaist nations in the 1920s, was a strong believer in the Shambhala prophecies. He learned them from his Mongolian lama teacher, the great Agwan Dorjiiev, the head lama of Buriatia Mongolia.

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.

Glenn Mullin is the author of more than two dozen books on Tibeto-Mongolian Buddhism, including translations of many important works by the early Dalai Lamas, especially the First to Seventh in the line of reincarnations. Many of these have been translated into a half dozen languages around the world.