
Mediating the Power of Dharma: The Mongols' Approaches to Reviving Buddhism in Mongolia

Vesna A. Wallace

The University of Oxford

The methods of the Buddhist revival in Mongolia, which began in the late 1980s, demonstrate not only what can happen to the Buddhist tradition after seventy years of suppression, but also how the tradition copes with the challenges presented to it. The features of the revival of Buddhist cultural heritage in Mongolia also reveal the ways in which the contemporary Mongols see the revitalization of the Buddhist knowledge and practices as connected to the renewal of the traditional values of the pastoral society and national identity.

Destruction of Mongolian Buddhism

It was only in the late 1980s that the Mongolian Peoples' Republic opened its door to the rest of the world and emerged from its long isolation imposed upon it by Soviet policies. During the seventy-year-long subjection of Mongolia to the Soviet Union and communist campaigns, institutional Buddhism, along with other Mongolian religions, was destroyed. The systematic destruction of Buddhist institutions was carried out from 1921 until 1941 by the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party (MPRP), which, in large part, adopted the religious policies of the Soviets. Prior to the formation of the Mongolian Peoples' Revolutionary government in Outer Mongolia, there were about 850 Buddhist monasteries with 3,000 temples, and nearly 100,000 Buddhist monks, who comprised about one-tenth of the Mongolian population of that time. Initially, the MPRP's attempts to diminish the economic power of Buddhist establishments were not violent in nature. They primarily consisted of anti-religious propaganda, which disparaged religious beliefs as "unrealistic, cruel, deceptive, and without future," while promulgating a revolutionary ideology as "realistic, true, close to life, and always supportive of workers' rights" (Purevjav and Damshjamts 1965, p. 179). The MPRP carried out its anti-Buddhist propaganda through film, radio, and printed materials, in which it accused Buddhist monasteries of being the last

strongholds of feudalism, damaging to the national productive force. The MPRP produced feature films, portraying Buddhist ideas and practices as corrupt and shameless, while promoting the people's revolution as kind, beneficial, and protective of the common people from the exploitation of high-ranking *lamas*. It also printed its first anti-religious magazine and disseminated it among the lower ranking *lamas*. Despite all of its efforts, it encountered strong resistance from Mongolia's ordained and lay Buddhists, and it soon realized that the religious beliefs of the Mongolian people could not be easily eradicated. One of the greatest obstacles the MPR government faced in its early attempts to develop a revolutionary culture was the lack of support from Mongolia's youth. The overwhelming majority of Mongolian young men were trained in Buddhist monastic institutions, and only a few thousand of them were attending the newly established public schools (Archive 1936). Moreover, during the same period, the number of Mongolian men who constituted the party's cadres was considerably smaller than the number of monks. To reverse this situation, the MPR government established several goals — namely, to weaken economically Buddhist monasteries, to decrease the number of monks, and to attract Mongolia's youth, the lower-ranking monks, and the general public to revolutionary activities. In order to achieve these objectives, the MPR government designed a series of strategic measures.

First, it imposed heavy taxes on the monasteries. Due to the imposed taxation laws, by 1938, only eleven monasteries remained open and the number of livestock owned by all monasteries combined was significantly reduced. The MPR government also imposed taxes on the monasteries' treasuries, and it demanded military taxes from the monks of a military age — that is, from the age of 18 to 45 — unless they enlisted in military service. Likewise, it instituted a law that prohibited boys under the

age of 18 from joining monasteries and forced them to attend public schools. However, parents and monasteries found ways to bypass this law, and the number of monks under the age of 18 continued to grow. Consequently, at the end of 1933, the MPR government began forcibly to take boys out of monasteries and return them to their homes. Young men at the age of 18 were given the option either to join a monastery or to remain laymen. To avoid military service, most young men 18 years of age chose the monastic lifestyle. As a result of this, from 1932-1936, the number of Mongolian monks grew. For this reason, the MPR government imposed a strict law that allowed monastic ordination for only one out of three sons in a family. Consequently, it succeeded in diminishing the number of monks and in weakening monasteries economically. In 1933, when military taxation and military service were first introduced, there were about 41,000 monks of military age. By 1940, there were only 251 monks left in all of Mongolia.

By destroying the monasteries financially, the MPR government forced the lower ranking monks to accept secular jobs and to engage in menial work for the government. Already by 1937, a

large number of lower ranking monks worked in animal husbandry, in factories, in road and bridge repairs, in construction works, in carpentry, and transportation. From 1932-1939, it placed its special agents in monasteries to observe and control the activities of high-ranking monks, who were viewed as counter-revolutionaries and uncompromising enemies of the state. Special agents also supervised the monasteries' accounting and bookkeeping and controlled the allocation of taxes. In 1937, there were still approximately 15,000 high-ranking monks in Mongolia. Therefore, under pressure from Soviet leadership, the MPRP began a more aggressive campaign against high-ranking monks and monasteries. As a result, in 1938, 760 monasteries were either forcibly closed or demolished [Figs. 1, 2, 3]. The MPR government confiscated the monasteries' buildings, their remaining livestock, and statues and ritual implements made of silver and gold. During this period of aggression, 6,000 monks were imprisoned, 2,000 were executed, thousands of others went into exile, more than 18,000 lower-ranking monks fled to remote areas of the countryside, and tens of thousands were forcibly secularized.

By 1940, Buddhism as an institutional religion had entirely disappeared from Outer Mongolia. In 1944, by the decree of Stalin himself, Gandantegchenlin Monastery in Ulaanbaatar re-opened on the repeated requests of his General Rokossovsky, who wanted to fulfill the wish of



Copyright © 2004 Daniel C. Waugh

Fig. 1 (top left). Manjir Monastery, at the foothill of the Bogd Khan Mountain in Tuv aimag, before destruction (museum model).

Fig. 2 (bottom left). Ruins of the Manjir Monastery.

Fig. 3 (below). Ruins of Demchig Monastery in Ömnövgovi (Southern Gobi) aimag.



photos copyright © 2008 Vesna A. Wallace





Fig. 4. Reconstructed Dara Ekh (Dolam Ling) Nunnery on the outskirts of Ulaanbaatar. The nunnery was destroyed in 1937.

his Mongolian soldiers. However, the government tightly controlled the activities of the few, old remaining monks in that monastery.

Systematic and aggressive anti-religious campaigns of the MPR government succeeded in abolishing Buddhist education and knowledge and in destroying the Buddhist cultural heritage. Nevertheless, in the minds of many Mongols, Buddhism and the Mongolian nomadic tradition continued to function as symbols of the Mongolian national identity and independence. Despite the demise of institutional Buddhism, the tradition was not completely lost. According to the Mongolian lamas and Mongolian Buddhist scholars whom I had the opportunity to interview over the last seven years, during the communist period, Mongolian people in general knew considerably more about Buddhist doctrinal tenets and practices than contemporary Mongols do. It was not uncommon for people to gather secretly in Buddhist households to discuss particular points of Buddhist theory and practice. They often assembled around a table on which the playing cards or sheep bones used in traditional Mongolian games were arranged in the pretense of playing games in case an uninvited visitor arrived. Children were usually sent outside to stand guard and warn the adults at the sight of an intruder. Similarly, Buddhist healing rights continued to be secretly performed by former lamas who were invited to the home of the sick during the late hours of the night, and many Buddhist practitioners

Fig. 5 (top). Monks carrying a statue of the Buddha into the Idгаа Choinziling Datsan (College) in Gandantegchenlin Monastery, Ulaanbaatar, during its reconstruction. The building was destroyed in 1937.

Fig. 6 (bottom). The building after its complete reconstruction in 2003.

continued to recite their daily *mantras* and read secretly-kept Buddhist texts in the privacy of their homes. Numerous philosophical, ritual, and prayer texts were stored in wooden chests and buried underground for safekeeping. Today, many of them can be seen in Mongolia's flea markets, people's homes, and antique shops. To a scholar, they are a valuable source of information about Mongolian Buddhism of the pre-communist period, as they tell us what type of Buddhist texts were most widespread among the Mongols and what types of practices were most popular.

Revitalization of Mongolian Buddhism

Democratic changes, which started in Outer Mongolia at the end of 1980s, have facilitated the steady revival of Mongolian Buddhism. In the fall of 2000, the MPRP publicly apologized for its earlier religious persecution; and the current President of Mongolia, Mr. Enkhbayar, who at that time was the President of the MPRP, translated two books on Buddhism from English into Mongolian. By the year 2000, several of Mongolia's largest monasteries and approximately 150 temples were restored, and there were about 5,000 monks in Mongolia [Figs. 4, 5, 6]. Although since then the number of



Copyright © 2008 Vesna A. Wallace

Copyright © 2008 Vesna A. Wallace



Fig. 7. Buddhism and the celebration of national tradition: the Naadam festival at Kharkhorin, 2005, dedicated to Zanabazar (1635-1723), who was the first Jebtsundamba Khutuktu or spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism in Mongolia.

rebuilt temples and monasteries has increased, the number of Buddhist monks has diminished due to the lack of conditions conducive to the monastic lifestyle. While the largest reconstructed monasteries have secured some support from foreign organizations and tourism, smaller monasteries and temples in various areas of the countryside have been rebuilt and supported by local communities. However, a considerable number of monasteries situated in sites that no longer have permanent residents have not yet been rebuilt.

The revitalization of Buddhism in Mongolia is closely related to the Mongols' efforts in developing and strengthening their national identity and pride in their own tradition and culture [Fig. 7]. On the front page of the *Suvarga* Buddhist newspaper [issue No. 1(6), 2000], the former President Bagabandi Natsagiin encouraged the Mongolian people to cultivate their centuries-long faith in Buddhism, reminding them that their Buddhist faith had been the vehicle of their social ethics, customs, art, and philosophy. Even now, when the law of the separation of church and state is in effect, it is clear that in their attempt to define the modern Mongolian nation, the Mongols continue to conceive of their national identity as inseparable from Buddhism. Even the new flag of the Mongolian Revolutionary Party carries a Buddhist symbol of wisdom and method in the center of a red lotus.

However, the Mongols' enthusiasm and efforts to revitalize their religious and cultural traditions have not been without challenges. In 2001, 182 religious organizations were registered at the Mongolian Ministry of Justice and regulated by

the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Among them, 110 were Buddhist organizations, sixty of them were Christian, and the remaining dozen belonged to the less represented traditions of Baha'i, Shamanism, Islam, and Hinduism. When the Mongolian government conducted a survey of foreign missionary organizations two years later, in the spring of 2003, it found that 80% of them had not been registered at the Mongolian Ministry of Justice as required; and it also discovered that the number of Buddhist monks had diminished to 3,000. In an interview with the foreign press in February of 2003, D. Choijamts, the abbot

of the Gandantegchenlin Monastery and the official head of Mongolian Buddhism, expressed his belief that about 70-80% of the Mongolian population is Buddhist. Nevertheless, the most recent survey conducted in 2007 shows that there are only thirty Buddhist centers left in Mongolia, while the number of organizations belonging to other faiths has grown to 300. These numbers may not reflect the true state of affairs, as many Mongolian converts to other religions continue attending Buddhist services and requesting prayers from Buddhist lamas in their times of need, since they do not see any contradiction in keeping their Mongolian Buddhist identity while pursuing other religious goals and interests.

A new constitutional law that guarantees freedom of religious expression has facilitated the influx of diverse religious traditions, denominations, and sects from Europe, America, and Asia. The Mongolian people's material needs and interest in the religions of the prosperous have provided fertile ground for the proselytizing activities of foreign missionaries, especially Christian missionaries, who often disseminate their anti-Buddhist views in ways that resemble those of the old communist revolutionaries, using the slogan "We give, Buddhism takes." It is for this reason that D. Choijamts stated the following in the aforementioned interview with the foreign press: "Many different religions are now entering Mongolia. However, some of them play with people's minds and give food in order to convert people. It would be better if these religious groups would explain their doctrine in a true and open manner" (*Mongol Messenger* 2003).

Conditions of Buddhist monks remain limited as certain state laws that pertain to Buddhist monastic institutions have remained unchanged since the communist period and have affected the conditions of Mongolian Buddhist monasteries. For example, in addition to land taxes, Buddhist monasteries are required to pay 20% taxes on donations received for the prayer readings requested by laity. Another such law requires Buddhist monks of military age to serve in the national army for a year. While at times some monks have been able to receive exemption owing to special requests from their monastic administrations, many have had to enlist in the military.

Although the current Mongolian government has not yet abolished these laws, it has made attempts to preserve the Mongolian Buddhist identity and to revitalize the Mongolian Buddhist tradition. To curb missionary activities in Mongolia, in 2006 the Mongolian government passed a law that prohibits foreign religious organizations from using their English language classes as a conduit for teaching their doctrines. Similarly, Christians are not allowed to pray with patients inside the building of Mongolia's largest cancer hospital in Ulaanbaatar, while both Mongolian and foreign Buddhists are permitted to teach meditation to hospitalized patients.

Even though the Mongolian constitution requires a separation of church and state and prohibits the state and religion from interfering in each other's affairs, representatives of Mongolian government have become increasingly involved in Buddhist affairs and have openly favored Buddhism over other religious traditions. Their dealings with Buddhism indicate their stand toward it as the Mongolian state religion. This attitude of the Mongolian government toward Buddhism has invoked criticism from the holders of the Mongolian Shamanic tradition, who point to the

foreign origin of Mongolian Buddhism, disparage contemporary Mongolian Buddhist *lamas* as incompetent, and hold them responsible for social problems in Mongolia.



Fig. 8. Jamsran, a protector of the Mongolian military.

The government's position toward Buddhism as Mongolia's national religion is evidenced in a number of instances. For example, Gandantegchenlin Monastery in Ulaanbaatar, which is the official, representative body of Mongolian Buddhism, has on various occasions performed religious services sponsored by the state. Similarly, the contemporary Mongolian Ministry of Defense and the Mongolian army have returned to their traditional worship of the Buddhist deity Jamsran (Tib.: lCam sring rNam sras), who has been traditionally considered a protective deity of the

Mongolian army and iconographically depicted with a red, ferocious form, holding in his hands a bare heart, which he is ready to devour [Fig. 8]. By sponsoring a ritual dedicated to Jamsran that has been carried out by monks from the Gandantegchenlin Monastery, the Ministry of Defense has re-established the old tie between the Buddhist establishment and Mongolian military.

Moreover, in June of 2003, President Enkhbayar, who at that time served as the Prime Minister of Mongolia, organized a meeting between the members of his cabinet and the Tibetan Buddhist teacher, Lama Zopa, in the Manjusri monastery located at the foot of the holy Bogd Khan Mountain. There he requested Lama Zopa to deliver a lecture on the Buddhist ways of governing the state with compassion and morality to the members of his cabinet.

These events can be seen as precursors of the possible re-emergence of the Mongolian tradition of the dual law — the religious law and the state law, which was upheld by Mongol khans throughout different periods from the 13th century until the communist period.



Fig. 9. Vajrapani Mountain in July.

Mongolia's presidents have also engaged in the rites of mountain worship on behalf of the Mongol state. In this post-Soviet period of revitalization of the Mongolian national and Buddhist identities, Mongolia's former President Bagabandi, like his predecessor, once again publicly recognized the Otgontenger mountain in Zavkhan aimag of the mid-western region of Mongolia as a Buddhist holy site and decreed that it is to be ceremonially worshipped every four years for the sake of the protection of the Mongolian State. The Otgontenger mountain is also known as Vajrapani Mountain due to the widespread belief that the Buddha Vajrapani actually resides there [Fig. 9]. The blue, wrathful form of Vajrapani, known as the Lord of Secrets, was incorporated into the religious and political domains of the Mongols' lives in the 16th century, and since then it has permeated Mongolian folklore, literature, art, and rituals [Fig. 10]. Vajrapani has been traditionally considered by the Mongols as a powerful guardian against the enemies of the state and Buddha-Dharma, as the one who not

only crushes obstacles in the form of enemies, heretics, and demons but also enforces religious and state laws. Through the renewed ritual worship of Vajrapani Mountain, he has been reinstated by the Mongolian government as the protector of the Mongol state, and Mongolia has been once again recognized as the land of Vajrapani, which, together with Tibet, the land of Avalokitesvara, and China, the land of Manjusri, forms the unified landscape of the three well known, Buddhist protectors (*rigs gsum mgon po*) in the Mongols' imagination (Barsbold 2004, p. 46).

The snow-capped Vajrapani Mountain is the highest peak of the Khangai mountain range and is famous for the healing mineral springs on its northern side, for 400 types of medicinal

Fig. 10. Statue of Vajrapani near the mountain.



Photos copyright © 2008 Vesna A. Wallace



plants that grow there, for the five kinds of purifying juniper incense believed to be infused by blessings of Vajrapani, and for the healing golden sand near the lake that surrounds it. It is to this lush and pleasant place that the Mongols invited Vajrapani to reside permanently among them and where they began to worship him with offerings on behalf of the state from 1779 until the communist time [Fig. 11]. In the year 2003, in the restored

Fig. 11. Offerings at Vajrapani Mountain.

ceremonial worship, the former President Bagabandi offered a large bowl of *kumis* (fermented mare's milk) to the mountain on behalf of the Mongolian state. Having placed a bowl of kumis on the lake surrounding the mountain, he and his retinue consisting of government officials and Buddhist monks waited to see whether the bowl would float toward the mountain or would return to the shore of the lake. If the bowl floats toward the mountain, it is the sign that the Buddha Vajrapani accepted the offering, that the country will prosper and its borders will be safe. In the summer of 2007, the current President Enkhbayar also participated in the same ceremony, and in the same year he commissioned a large *thangka* of the Buddha Vajrapani embroidered in silk, which is to be displayed on the front side of the mountain in the repeated ceremony in 2010. The work of embroidery and the donations of the threads of silk have been requested from the residents of Mongolia's twelve districts (aimags), whose participation in creating the image is to symbolize the unified effort of all Mongolian people to preserve the Mongolian Buddhist tradition and protect the state. The commissioned image is to bring merit and security to the state and prosperity to the nation. It depicts Vajrapani in his blue, ferocious form, accompanied above by Avalokitesvara on his right side and Manjusri on the left, and by three great Mongol khans below — Chinggis, Qubilai, and Ögödei, the three paradigmatic figures of stately strength and power. The figure of Chinggis Khan is placed directly below Vajrapani in the center of the painting to reinforce the traditional Mongolian Buddhist view of Chinggis Khan as the first Mongolian emanation of Vajrapani, as the one who laid the foundations for the spread of Buddhism in Mongolia by initiating a *guru*-disciple relationship with Tibetan Sa skya Pandita Kun dga' rGyal mtsan (Sakya Pandita Kunga Gyaltsen) from a distance and by eliminating taxes for Tibetan monks. This identification of Chinggis Khan, the originator of the Mongolian nation, with Vajrapani, the protector of Mongolian Buddhism and state, has also been emphasized in the writings of contemporary Mongolian scholars and Buddhist authors. For this reason, it can be seen

as yet another attempt on the part of the Mongolian political leadership and intelligencia to reaffirm the inseparability of Mongolian Buddhist and national identities.

Similarly, Sharavjidorj, who converted to the Nyingmapa (rNying ma pa) school of Buddhism while he served as Mongolia's Minister of Defense until the winter 2007, has used his political connections and his own funds to facilitate a restoration of the sacred site of Shambhala and temples in the nearby Khamryn Khiid monastery in Dorngovi aimag. Believed to be situated exactly below the Pure Land of Sukhavati, the Shambhala site is seen as the epicenter of spiritual energy, the future refuge of the believers and the sole connection to the Buddha-Dharma at the time of the impending dangers of the conflict of global proportions. Nowadays, as a constant flow of pilgrims from different regions of Mongolia and even from other parts of the world rushed to Shambhala for the sake of empowerment and merit for rebirth in Sukhavati, this isolated part of Mongolia has been already transformed into an important center of the Buddhist world.

The aforementioned events and re-emerging views point to the fact that Buddhist ideals have already begun to enter Mongolian political discourse as well as to inform the creation of identity in the modern Mongolian state in its search for moral politics.

Moreover, in contemporary Mongolia, one's affiliation and loyalty to the Revolutionary Party and one's publicly professed Buddhist identity



Fig. 12. Ger erected by the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party at the gates of Gandantegchenlin Monastery in Ulaanbaatar during the elections of 2004. The party's symbol of the red lotus and the sign of wisdom and compassion in its center can be seen on the tent.

are no longer seen as contradictory. On the contrary, members of the Mongolian parliament and of other governmental bodies have openly received Buddhist initiations and have advertised their individual sponsorship of Buddhist rituals and rebuilding of Buddhist temples, stupas and statues. The fact that they have often publicized these activities during elections to demonstrate their efforts in restoring the Mongolian Buddhist tradition indicates the growing importance of Buddhism in the Mongolian public life and its close association with Mongolian national pride [Fig. 12, facing page].

This connection between the renewal of Mongolian Buddhism and Mongolian national pride emerged in the early phase of the democratization of Mongolia. An example that attests to this fact is the reconstruction of the giant statue of the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara in the form of the Migjed Janraisig (The Opener of the Eye of Wisdom), which was first built in 1913 in the Gandantegchenlin Monastery under the auspices of the 8th Bogdo Gegen to commemorate the Mongols' independence from the Qing dynasty and the renewed Mongolian national identity that will be characterized by peace and wisdom embodied in Buddhist teachings. The statue was destroyed in 1937, and in 1942 the dismembered statue was used by the Soviets for making bullets needed in World War II. As soon as democratic changes began in Mongolia, Mongolian intellectuals, enthused with the prospects for reviving the Mongolian cultural heritage, established the Mongolian cultural fund in 1988 and initiated the rebuilding of the statue. Under the decree of the first democratically elected Mongolian President Ochirbat and with financial help from the Mongolian government, individuals, and foreign Buddhist organizations, construction of the statue was completed in 1996. More than 50 artists worked on the casting of the statue from 20 tons of pure copper brought from the Mongolian Erdenet Mountain [Fig. 13]. The statue is gilded with sterling gold and studded with more than 2,000 kinds of precious stones found in the Mongolian soil. The altar of the statue is made of cedar wood brought from the Khangai and Khentei mountains and studded with gems also found in the Mongolian land. The interior of the statue is filled with 27 tons of various types of medicinal substances, 334



Fig. 13. The giant Avalokitesvara statue in the main temple of Gandantegchenlin Monastery, Ulaanbaatar.

volumes of Buddhist scriptures donated by the XIV Dalai Lama, 2 million small books of *mantras*, one entire Mongolian ger with all of its furniture, fiddles made of horse-mane, robes of famous Buddhist saints, and with nine types of precious stones. Thus intentionally made of native Mongolian materials and filled with items characteristic of the Mongolian nomadic lifestyle and Buddhist culture, the statue has once again stands as a memorial of Mongolia's national independence and as a symbol of the distinct Mongolian Buddhist identity.

As one examines the sequence in which certain aspects of the Mongolian Buddhist tradition have been reintroduced since the late 1980s until the present, one discovers the aspects of the Mongolian Buddhist tradition that have been conceived the most important on the national and individual levels and whose reintroduction has been considered the most urgent. It becomes obvious that along with the restoration of the public symbols of Mongolian Buddhism such as Buddhist statues, stupas, and



Fig. 14. Young monks in a classroom of Erdene Zuu Monastery, Kharkhorin, Övörkhangaï aimag 2004.

temples, monasticism was also considered the most relevant for the revitalization of the Mongolian Buddhist tradition. However, the rebuilding of Buddhist monasticism, which once was the embodiment of Mongolian Buddhist learning, has required an adequate training of new Mongolian monks and lamas in Buddhist doctrine, ritual, and meditation [Fig. 14].

Due to the absence of learned teachers, the Mongols' monastic training has been in great part dependent on the Tibetan educational, monastic institutions in India and Tibet and on the Tibetan teachers who have been invited to Mongolia from India and Tibet. This dependence on the Tibetan Buddhist system of monastic training has begun to transform the Mongolian Buddhist monastic tradition in various ways. For example, during the first decade of monastic revival, the rituals and liturgies that were performed in the monasteries were characterized by the features unique to Mongolian Buddhist tradition, and are now replaced by distinctly Tibetan rituals and liturgies. This loss of the unique elements of the Mongolian Buddhist tradition has exposed the monastic institutions that have developed close relations with Tibetan Buddhists to criticism and has given rise to anti-Tibetan sentiments among Mongolian Buddhist nationalists. Mongolian Buddhist nationalists like Gurudev, the contemporary incarnation of Zava Damdin, and their followers, look with suspicion at the infiltration of Tibetan Buddhism into Mongolian monasticism, interpreting it as an attempt of the Tibetan government in exile to weaken Mongolian Buddhism and take over the Mongolian land. According to these Mongolian nationalists, the power of the Mongolian state lies in the strength of the Gelukpa (dGe lugs

pa) school of Mongolian Buddhism; and when the Mongolian Gelukpa tradition is enfeebled, Mongolia becomes subjugated by foreign powers. Since their arrival in Mongolia, Tibetan Buddhist missionaries have predominantly served as teachers of Buddhist philosophy in monastic colleges and Buddhist centers within Mongolia's capital. Unlike Mongolian lamas, they are rarely seen traveling in Mongolia's countryside for the sake of performing rituals for Buddhist laity. Most of them stay in Mongolia for shorter periods of time, as they often have no affinity for Mongolian customs and their applications to monastic Buddhist life. However, Tibetan Buddhist missionaries in Mongolia were the first to make Buddhist teachings available to the general public through public lectures, TV and radio programs, magazines, and books translated into modern Mongolian. Ironically, Mongolian lamas, who used to perform rituals and prayers primarily in the Tibetan language for lay communities, began to adopt the Tibetan missionaries' methods of offering teachings to the populace almost a decade later.

Encountering the danger of losing the Mongolian youth primarily to Christianity whose teachings and literature have been available in the Mongolian language, Mongolian lamas have been forced to change their ways and meet expectations of the laity. In hopes of convincing Mongolian youth that Buddhism can be a contemporary, hip religion and not a relic of the past, in 2006 on the day of the Buddha's enlightenment, Gandantegchenlin Monastery hosted a rock concert on its grounds, and its abbot D. Choijamts inaugurated the concert with his opening speech [Fig. 15].

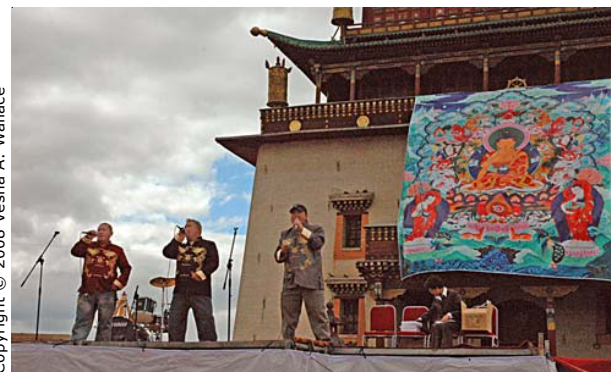


Fig. 15. Guruvan Buduun rock group at the Saka Dawa rock concert sponsored by Gandantegchenlin Monastery in Ulaanbaatar and held in front of the main temple.

However, Buddhist monasteries and centers are no longer the sole agents in the dispensation of Buddhist teachings; influential intellectuals, artists, and a new class of successful businessmen have been taking an active role in reviving Mongolian Buddhism. Through their efforts, Mongolian Buddhist art and comprehensible translations of Buddhist classics have been made accessible. For example, the famous Mongolian author and social commentator Baabar, who was once an archenemy of Buddhism and now considers himself as Mongolia's Buddhist variant of Martin Luther, organized a translation of the renowned Tibetan classic *Lam Rim Chenmo* into Mongolian from various languages by bringing together a team of the best Mongolian translators. By the year 2007, with the financial support from Mongolian businessmen, he printed and gave away 30,000 copies of the text with the hope to deliver altogether 500,000 free copies to 500,000 Mongolian households constituting the entire Mongolian society. Likewise, the nomads and small town residents across the Mongolia's steppes and deserts have been offering their resources and volunteer labor in building stupas and temples in order to transform their home regions into the restored territories of Dharma [Fig. 16]. In the meantime, newly proclaimed Siddhas, *yoginis* and emanations of Buddhist deities have been emerging in various parts of the country, and the rumors of their extraordinary abilities have been publicized throughout Mongolia.

These are only a few of many examples that evidence the endeavors of all strata of Mongolian society to shape the Mongolian land, culture, and national identity in accordance with their envisioning of Mongolian Buddhism. It remains to be seen how the re-emerging Mongolian Buddhist tradition, which is caught in between different political ideologies, modernity, and foreign missionary zealots, will solve its predicament in a country with social and economic problems and to what degree the state and Buddhist church will continue to collaborate in the pursuit of common interests.

Acknowledgments

This article is based on the lecture presented at University of British Columbia in Vancouver, in April of 2008, which was sponsored by the university's Institute of Asian Research and by

the Silkroad Foundation. I wish to thank Professor Julian Dierkes for organizing the lecture.

About the Author

Formerly a professor of Buddhist Studies in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, **Vesna A. Wallace** has recently been appointed to the newly-created Numata Chair of Buddhist Studies at The University of Oxford. She has published several books and a series of essays on Indian Buddhism and has been conducting field and archival research on Mongolian Buddhism since the year 2000. She has widely lectured on Mongolian Buddhism and is currently working on two books related to Buddhism in Mongolia. She can be reached at <vesna.wallace@orinst.ox.ac.uk>.

References

- Archive 1936
The Archive of Public Security Organizations, Fund of Religion. 1936. Ulaanbaatar.
- Barsbold 2004
U. Barsbold. *Otgontenger Uulyn Takhilga ba Ochirvaany Burkhan*. Ulaanbaatar, 2004.
- Mongol Messenger* 2003
The Mongol Messenger. 2003. Issue of February 19, 2003.
- Purevjav and Damshjamts 1965
S. Purevjav and D. Damshjamts. *BNMA-d Sum Hiyd Lam Naryn Asuudlyg Shiydverlesen Ny*. Ulaanbaatar: Ulsyn Kheveleliyn Khereg Erkhlekh Khoroo, 1965.
- Purevjav 1978
S. Purevjav. *Mongol dakhi sharyn shashny khuraangui tüükh*. Ulaanbaatar, 1978.



Fig. 16. Rebuilt stupas at Erdene Zuu Monastery, Kharkhorin.