

Notes on the Survival of Buddhism in Communist Mongolia (1921–1989)

Introduction

Research¹ on Buddhism in Mongolia during its communist past became possible only after the collapse of the communist regime. One of the first projects to study the past and present state of Buddhism in Mongolia was conducted by scholars from Poland and Norway. Initiated by Agata Bareja-Starzyńska in 1997, it resulted in the research grant “Revival of Buddhism in Mongolia after 1990” in the following years.² In 1998 the group of scholars engaged in fieldwork for the project in the central and northern Mongolian lands consisted of Hanna Havnevik from the University of Oslo and three scholars from the University of Warsaw: Agata Bareja-Starzyńska, Marek Mejer, and Thupten Kunga Chashab, as well as their collaborator in Ulan Bator, Byambaa Ragchaa from the Library of the Gandategchenlin Monastery. The results of their work were presented in a paper published in *Przegląd Orientalistyczny* in 1999 which laid the foundation for further research. Some of the findings from that study have also been used in the present text, connecting it with the work of our celebrated colleague, Marek Mejer, whose contribution to the study of Buddhism in Mongolia should be duly acknowledged.

¹ The authors would like to thank Robert Barnett for his valuable improvements and correcting the English language of the paper. Needless to say, the authors take responsibility for all errors and inaccuracies.

² Research on the revival of Buddhism after 1990 was conducted together with Hanna Havnevik and Byambaa Ragchaa, and with the assistance of Ganzorig Davaa-Ochir, in Mongolia (1998, 2001) with financial support from the Institute of Comparative Research in Human Culture, Oslo, the Fridjof Nansen Foundation, the University of Warsaw, and the Norwegian Research Council.

1. The Destruction of Buddhist Institutions and Mass Repression

The persecution of Buddhism in Mongolia which followed the People's Revolution in 1921 intensified after the passing of the 8th Jetsundampa in 1924 and culminated with the growing power of the communists in the 1930s. The communists planned to eliminate Buddhist ideology. This resulted in the almost complete annihilation of Buddhism on the Mongolian Plateau, its proponents – the Buddhist clergy, and their material basis – the monasteries.

The research conducted by a number of Western and Mongolian scholars, including Kaplonski (2008), Teleki (see internet source: *Documentation...*), Baabar (alias Batbayar 1999), Soninbayar and Amgalan (2008), Erdenesaikhan (2013) and many others,³ has documented many details of the destruction. The number of monks and lay Buddhist believers who were murdered, particularly in the 1930s, is not clear, but estimates reach as high as the tens of thousands. Precise figures about the victims of the purges are difficult to obtain, since the governments which followed the rule of the Jetsundampa from 1925 until 1989/90 tried to keep them secret. Only after 1990 was it possible to access the archives and acquire some data. Mass graves were uncovered in several places in Mongolia, bringing to light the mass killing of monks and other elements of the dark past (Batbayar 1999: 364). However, few witnesses of these events are still with us.

The struggle of communists against Buddhism was twofold: firstly, the destruction of monasteries together with the confiscation of monastic property and, secondly, the elimination of the Buddhist clergy. In its effort to gain power over the country, the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party, being an organ of the Comintern, saw as its greatest ideological enemy the Buddhist clergy. The communists used the old method of divide and rule. Mongolian society was divided according to the social status into rich and poor (*баян, ядуу*), or feudal lords and their subjects (*феодал, ард*). The Buddhist clergy were labelled as “yellow lords” (*шар феодал*), meaning Buddhist feudal lords, and were seen as a separate group from lay citizens, who were referred to as “black” (*хар*).

Moreover, the Buddhist clergy were also divided, into “high lamas” (*дээд лам*), such as reincarnations (*хутагт хувилгаан*) and monastic authorities (*эрх мэдэлтнүүд*), and common monks, lit. “lower lamas” (*доод лам*). Since the majority of the Mongolian population were devout Buddhists, it was difficult to

³ Choibalsan: “By the 11th month of the 29th year [November 1939] the number of lamas killed was 20,356. Among them were 600 high lamas, 3,174 mid-level lamas, and 13,120 low-level lamas.” Quoted in Batbayar 1999: 369. For the history of Buddhist monasteries in Mongolia, see *Documentation of Mongolian Monasteries*, <http://www.mongoliantemples.org/index.php/en>.

create an antireligious atmosphere, especially at the beginning, in the 1920s. The division and labelling of monks as a category of oppressors was therefore used to try to encourage anticlerical sentiment. In this respect, Mongolia was following the example given by Stalin's rule in the USSR.

High Buddhist incarnations, now termed "lamas not to be trusted", "opposing lamas" or "big heads" (*итгэлгүй лам нар, эсэргүүн лам нар, том толгой*), were the first to be detained. The ordinary monks were divided according to their ranks: the *gavj* (*гавж*)⁴ or scholar monks, and the *agramba* (*аграмба*)⁵ or "middle-status lamas" (*дунд лам*). They were also classified according to their age, into groups aged between 1–18, 18–45 and over 45 years, and into "degree holders" (*мяндагтай*), usually monastery residents, and those "without degrees" (*мяндаггүй*), who were non-residents.⁶ All of them were referred to as "counter-revolutionaries" (*хувьсгалын эсэргүүн*) and "class enemies" (*ангийн дайсан*). In the 1930s ordinary monks were expelled from the monasteries and secularized, middle-status monks were imprisoned in concentration camps or prisons, and high lamas were executed (Erdenesaikhan 2013: 27ff.). Between 1921 and 1938 large numbers of these so-called "reactionaries" were tried as criminals and likewise executed. The process began with cases such as that made against Saj Lam Jamyandandzin in 1921, and the case of fifteen people, including Prime Minister Dagsomyn Bodoо, in 1922; they were executed on fabricated charges (Sandag and Kendall 2000: 33; Erdenesaikhan 2013: 9–23; Byambaa in print).

The coming years brought further terror. After the death of the 8th Jetsundampa in 1924 the communists were able to act with greater vigour, under the increasingly direct guidance of the Comintern. The Mongolian state became the Mongolian People's Republic. In the new constitution issued in 1924, human rights, including freedom of belief, were guaranteed, yet the guarantees were not observed. Special regulations regarding Buddhist monks were issued in the following years (Erdenesaikhan 2013: 26ff.), but at the Third Congress of the MPRP in 1927 the party received instructions from the Comintern to eradicate the Buddhist Church entirely (Rupen 1997: 201).

Purges by the extreme left started in 1928 and culminated in 1932 (Erdenesaikhan 2013: 34–51). The property of all "feudal lords", including monasteries,

⁴ Tib. *dka' bcu* – scholarly rank in a Buddhist monastic system (similar to a Bachelor's degree).

⁵ Tib. *sngags rams pa* – master of Tantric practice.

⁶ It was customary in Mongolia for some monks, called *badarchin*, after a few years of monastic education, to spend little time in the monasteries, other than occasionally for some religious festivals, instead being peripatetic monastics on the steppes.

was confiscated⁷ and the first 5-Year Plan was implemented. Batbayar (1999: 305) writes:

According to earlier research conducted by the Comintern, 4.1% of Mongolia's population and 45.1% of the total livestock population were classified as "feudal".

Since Buddhist monasteries were among the richest "feudal" or property owners in the country, their property had to be confiscated and their estates destroyed.

At that time 14–15 percent of the main wealth of Mongolia – livestock – was the property of the monasteries and temples (Batbayar 1999: 307).

In view of this, the collectivization of stockbreeders was introduced in the 1930s (for details see Batbayar 1999: 307–308). Moreover, the Chinese traders were expelled and a Soviet trade monopoly was implemented. Fearing a Mongolian-Japanese alliance, the communists closed down border monasteries. At the Eighth Party Congress in 1930 it was decided that monks should leave those monasteries and secularize. Repressions toward high lamas intensified.

In 1930, in the case known as "Against the 38 counter-revolutionaries" (*38-ийн эсэргүү хэргэл*), many important lamas, such as Egüzer khutagt Galsandash, Ikh Khüreenii Nomch Biligt Erdene Mergen, Tsorj agramba Luvsanchoinzin, Dilav khutagt Jamsranjav, and Manzushri khutagt Tserendorj, were accused and the majority of them sentenced to death (Tsogt-Ochir 1992, Byambaa 2013). In the 1930s, especially after Stalin had firmly established his rule in the USSR in 1936, Mongolia followed directly the Soviet antireligious policy and began forcing monks to secularize. Already in 1934, a law was issued by the government allowing monks to get married.⁸

The Great Purge started in September 1937. In 1938 it was reported to Stalin:

By July 20, out of 771 temples and monasteries, 615 have become ash heaps. Today only 26 are functioning. Out of the total of 85,000 lamas, only 17,338 remain. Those who were not arrested have decided to turn lay (Batbayar 1999: 363).

The number of arrested monks was too high for the overcrowded prisons, so mass shooting was then organized. There were, as well, large numbers of monks sent to Soviet gulags (Batbayar 1999: 364).

Since the 1990s Mongolians have started to publish figures on the trials and mass killings of monks. On 25 December 1990, according to Presidential Decree No 56,

⁷ In the confiscation campaigns "according to incomplete data 9.7–10 million tögrög worth of property was confiscated up until the spring of 1932" (Batbayar 1999: 306).

⁸ In 1994 this law was waved by the President of Mongolia. See Bareja-Starzyńska and Havnevik 2006: 225.

the Mongolian State Commission for Rehabilitation (Монгол Улсын Цагаатгах Ажлыг Удирдан Зохион Байгуулах Улсын Комисс) was established. This was followed by the founding of the Research Center for Victims of Political Persecutions (Улс төрийн талаар хэлмэгдэгсдийн судалгааны төв) on 24 March 1993.

The Center published four volumes, known as White Books, containing records and testimonies of state oppression. Among the Appendices to those volumes⁹ there is one devoted to false accusations levelled against monks, edited by Erdenesaikhan (2013), entitled “Reasons for the Destruction of the Monks”. It presented the findings of the Research Center for Victims of Political Persecutions, in particular the work of Zorigtyn Lonjid. From his research, it is clear that in the archives there is detailed evidence about the deaths of 25,146 monks between the years 1937 and 1940 (2013: 148–152).¹⁰

The anti-Buddhist purges of the 1930s also resulted in the almost complete destruction of Buddhist material structures and objects: temples with their holy images and liturgical objects were looted and destroyed. The majority of the Buddhist sacred texts were burnt. By the early 1940s, the battle against the Buddhist Church was won by the communists.

After the Battle: the Remains of Buddhist Heritage and the Attitude of the Mongolian State to Buddhism

In the late 1970s, some scholars concluded that,

[b]y all available evidence, Buddhism no longer exists as a political, economic or spiritual formation in the Mongolian People’s Republic (Moses 1977: 265).

And:

[Buddhism] disappeared as it did, with little evidence that there will ever be a revival (Moses 1977: 265).

The successive constitutions of the MPR (1924, 1940, 1960) all guaranteed human rights and freedom of belief, but in reality, the antireligious policy was in force. Ordinary Mongols had no freedom on an everyday basis in any aspect of their lives.¹¹ Communist Mongolia was a satellite country of the Soviet Union

⁹ The four volumes are: *Улс төрийн талаар хэлмэгдэгсдийн дурсгал Цагаан ном* – vol. I, 2010, vol. II, 2012, vol. III, 2013, vol. IV, 2014.

¹⁰ In the conference proceedings of *Lam nar sum khiidiin khelmegdel ba tsagaatgal sedevt erdem shinjilgeenii бага khural* the number of confirmed deaths of people persecuted by the State in 1937–1940 was estimated at above 29,000. See Soninbayar and Amgalan 2008: 5.

¹¹ Observations by the authors. Byambaa Ragchaa (b. 1958) lived in Mongolia during the last decades of the MPR, and Agata Bareja-Starzyńska has visited Mongolia regularly since 1982.