

**BUDDHIST MONASTERIES AND STATE SUPPORT IN MONGOLIA  
A BRIEF OVERVIEW**

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**ABSTRACT**

During the history of Mongolian Buddhism the State has always significant role in supporting religion and monasteries. Möngke Khan held the first religious dispute of Buddhist, Muslim and Christian monks in the 13th century and gently allowed all foreign devotees to practice their own religion and pray for the Mongolian State. This Mongolian court's relationship deepened with Buddhism during the period of Khubilai Khan (13th century), Altan Khan and Ligdan Khan (16th century, 17th century), Avtai Sain Khan (16th century), and also with the Khalkha Khans during the Manchu period. The Eighth Bogd Jebtsundamba Khutugtu became the Bogd Khaan, the theocratic king of the sovereign Mongolia (1911-1921): his realm brought the Golden Age of Mongolian Buddhism and monasteries. The only political formation that ceased Buddhism and the operation of monasteries was socialism, when only one monastery, Gandantegchenlin Monastery could run operation from 1944 until the democratic changes in 1990 when religious practices became free again.

The presentation will cite some examples from the supportive relation and fruitful cooperation of emperors, khans, nobles, statesmen with Buddhist monasteries, monk communities and monks, and also mention some present-day problems including similarities and differences. For instance, during the Manchu period monks were released from 'state oblige' including military services and taxation. In the 1930s when socialism started monks were enrolled to the army. Those monks, who did not want to perform military service had to pay military tax. Monks were registered based on their ranks, age, and incomes in the 1920s-1920 as the State and Religion become totally separated, and finally religion was ceased, and monasteries were destroyed. Religious practices became are free again in the 1990s, many monasteries were rebuilt, new monasteries were founded, and the number of monks is increased. However, as monasteries are handled equal to other organizations and enterprises they pay tax. Monks themselves have military obligation and pay different types of taxes. The presentation will raise some ideas about the old, current and future relations of the State and Monast

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The lecture provides a few examples of the supportive relation and fruitful cooperation of Mongolian emperors, khans, aristocrats, and statesmen with Buddhist monasteries, monastic communities and monks, and highlights certain present-day concerns reflecting on historical similarities and differences.

**Historical Relations**

The State had always significant role in the support of religion, clericals and monasteries during the history of Mongolian Buddhism. Möngke Khan (r. 1251–1259) organized the first religious dispute of Buddhists, Muslims, and Christians in Qaraqorum in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, and gently allowed all foreign devotees to practice their own religions and also pray for the benefit of the Mongolian State.<sup>1</sup> The relationship of the court with Buddhism deepened during the reigning period of Khubilai Khan (r. 1260–1294) having close connections with the Sakya Stream (Mong. *qoyar yosun*), and continued by the activities of Altan Khan of the Tümed (1507–1582), Ligdan Khan of the Chakhar (1588–1634), and Abtai Sain Khan (1554–1588) and other Khalkha khans during the Manchu overlordship (1691–1911), when Buddhism, especially the teachings of the Gelug Stream spread thorough the Mongol land. According to the *Qalq-a jirum*, the Code of the Manchu period, monks were released from state duties including military service and taxes. Meanwhile, the relationship of local aristocrats and monks were very close: several monks were of noble origin, reincarnations were born in aristocrats' families or on their subordinated areas, and various monasteries came into existence. After the end of the Manchu overlordship, the Eighth *Bogd Jebtsundamba Khutugtu* (1869–1924) also known as the *Bogd Khaan* became the theocratic ruler of the sovereign Mongolia (1911–1921). From a point of view his realm brought the Golden Age of Buddhism: new temples were built and previous religious activities developed. The only political system that persecuted Buddhism and restricted the operation of monasteries was socialism starting in Mongolia in 1921, which first separated state and religion, then started to suppress religion. Anti-religious views spread and they closed the monasteries for Stalin's order in 1928, then reopened them again for a while in 1932. The monks who did not want to disrobe or join the army had to pay military tax or "monk tax" as the registers of the 1920–1930s show<sup>2</sup> which were prepared to enlist the monks by marking their origin, family background, rank, education, age, and income. After the final decision of 1937, Buddhist monasteries were demolished and destroyed, and the surviving monks were forced to be lay people. Gandantegchenlin Monastery reopened in 1944 and ran operation under state control. The other very few temple building, which survived all over the country, functioned as buildings of cooperatives or museums. Due to the democratic changes religious practices became free again in 1990: former, old monks put on their monastic robes and started to rebuild certain temples of their old monasteries and revive the old monastic tradition and religious services.<sup>3</sup> It happened with great enthusiasm, mainly with the financial aid of devotees who kept their faith in their heart even during socialism. A few monasteries were newly opened, and other religions also (re-)appeared. For today, the old monks have passed away, and their disciples run the operation of the monasteries by maintaining its tradition, holding and developing religious services. In the recent years, reincarnations have been recognized again. At present their majority studies in Tibetan monastic colleges in India. Once they return home with the hundreds of other monks who also deepen their Buddhist knowledge in Tibetan colleges in India, an innovation would happen in Mongolia. In the last decade, the number of monasteries and monks stagnate. 70

<sup>1</sup> Rockhill, William Woodville (ed.): *The Journey of William of Rubruck to the Eastern Parts of the World, 1253–55*. London: Hayklut Society, 1900.

<sup>2</sup> The National Archives of Mongolia and in the Archives of the General Intelligence Agency of Mongolia preserve such documents.

<sup>3</sup> Teleki, Krisztina: *Building on Ruins, Memories and Persistence: Revival and Survival of Buddhism in the Countryside*. *Silk Road 7*, Seattle 2009, pp. 64-73. (also [http://www.silkroadfoundation.org/newsletter/vol7/srjournal\\_v7.pdf](http://www.silkroadfoundation.org/newsletter/vol7/srjournal_v7.pdf)).

percent of the population defined themselves as Buddhists at the last state census, and Mongolia is considered as a Buddhist country.<sup>1</sup>

### Changes in Monks' Reputation in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

Similarly to the Manchu period, during the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, monks and monasteries had an exceptional reputation: the whole population was Buddhist. Anti-religious propaganda spread in the 1920s–1930s, thus the monks had to disrobe, monasteries were closed and finally destroyed, and monks' reputation became ambivalent. Though the majority of the Mongols still believed in Buddhism, they were not able to maintain their religious practices due to the new politics. Only Gandantegchenlin Monastery operated with a limited number of monks from the 1940s until 1990. People were afraid of expressing their faith: almost no-one was Buddhist openly, and many people became “atheist”. Significant changes happened in the 1990s–2000s, when monasteries were rebuilt, services restarted, and monks' reputation turned good again, and people could practice religion openly. The revival and revitalization of Buddhism was indeed a vital and successful process. It seems that after the 2010s, perhaps due to the presence of various types of religion and anti-religious views that remained from socialism, and the separation of state and religion, monks' reputation today is good or neutral. The Mongolian State supports all beliefs including Buddhism, and considers Buddhism the most important due to its role in Mongolian culture and history. The Mongolian Law expresses it as “The State honours Religion, Religion reveres the State” (*Tör ni shashnaa khündetgene, shashin töröö deedlene*).<sup>2</sup>

### Some Current Questions<sup>3</sup>

At present, after 1990, monasteries are considered as non-governmental organizations. Though the Mongolian society consider monks other than ordinary men, and requires them to live a different way of life than ordinary men, the State Constitution and law handle monks equal to other males. Though monasteries are handled equal to other non-governmental organizations and enterprises, they have not had tax duties regarding donations since 2007, or there is a reimbursement. However, monks as individuals have almost similar obligations toward the State as lay men.

1. Monks, similarly to other men have to complete military service for a year, except of having health problems, paying a certain amount, or helping the state in extraordinary circumstances (e.g. flood, fire). Monks mostly choose the third option, thus avoid the real use of weapons. Military obligation is against Buddhist doctrines, the military service of monks happened only during socialism in the history of Mongolian Buddhism. (Certain fights also occur during history, e.g. the Khalkha-Oirad wars in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.)

<sup>1</sup> See also Altaibaatar, J. – Erdenechimeg, O.: Mongolian Buddhist Organizations: Social and Humanitarian Activities. In: Birtalan, Ágnes – Teleki, Krisztina – Béres Judit: *Aspects of Mongolian Buddhism 2. Buddhism in Practice*. Budapest: L'Harmattan 2020, pp. 131–142.

<sup>2</sup> For details on present-day Buddhism see Abrahams-Kavunenko, Saskia: *Enlightenment and the Grasping City. Mongolian Buddhism at the Time of Environmental Disarray*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Hereby, I would like to express my thanks to Ven. Ts. Altankhuu, manager of Züün Khüree Dashchoilin Monastery who answered my questions regarding this topic.

2. Monks are not released from monetary issues, i.e. paying tax after income. Similarly to other men, every monk pay tax after their salaries provided by the monasteries (10% tax, 11.5% insurance). They are considered to have a part-time job in the monastery participating in ceremonies usually from 9–12pm. Monks' average salary is 350.000 TGR in Ulaanbaatar, thus many of them need to have an additional job in their spare time to make a living, or they live very modest. They can also chant for devotees' requests: donations have no tax, but happen occasionally. Monks are handled equal to other people even in banks: obtaining a loan is difficult due to their low incomes. Monetary issues are not part of the Buddhist doctrine, but as nowadays most of the monks live outside of the monastery walls and have a family, these questions are vital.
3. Monastic and state education is not handled equally. A degree gained in a religious college (monastic colleges of Gandan, Züün Khüree, Petub Monastery, etc.) differs from the degrees of state colleges or universities, as well as the certificate of the monks who complete their studies in the Tibetan monastic universities in India. Changes have started in this issue with accreditation. Moreover, at present young novices should participate in both monastic and state education. This state requirement is solved by visiting teachers in the monasteries with internship having disciples under the age of 16, but this requirement is a reason of why the number of novices have been decreasing in the recent years.
4. Old monasteries as cultural heritage sites: some monasteries belong under State protection, but almost nothing, or a small amount is provided for renovation, maintenance, and other issues. Among these sites we can mention Gandantegchenlin, Züün Khüree Dashchoilin, Dambadarjaa, Erdene Zuu, Amarbayasgalant, Zayaiin Khüree, and Dulmalin Khiid monasteries. The handful of temple buildings that survived in the remote countryside are not under real protection at all or are used for other than religious purposes (e.g. Ekh daginiin aimgiin dugan in Ulaanbaatar, Ünstiin Khiid in Dundgov' province, Lu güniin khüree in Arkhangai province). Meanwhile, some functioning monasteries (e.g. Erdene Zuu, Zayaiin Khüree) operate in old temple buildings which still comprise the property of the nearby „temple museum.” These temple museums came into existence during socialism, when the old, surviving temple buildings became used for museum purposes.<sup>1</sup> Whilst certain old monasteries do not have religious services and monk community anymore (e.g. Chojjin Lama Temple Museum, Bogd Khaan Palace Museum), the question of property in the case of Erdene Zuu and Zayaiin Khüree monasteries arises, which can be rethink on state level.
5. The members of the Mongolian society handle monks differently: several people respect and honour clericals, others do not respect, but criticize them, again others are

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<sup>1</sup> Lang, Maria-Katharina: Temple and Museum. An Ambivalent Relation. In: Birtalan, Ágnes – Teleki, Krisztina – Béres Judit: *Aspects of Mongolian Buddhism 2. Buddhism in Practice*. Budapest: L'Harmattan 2020, pp. 49–57.

neutral. Certain events organized under the patronship of the President or the Prime Minister of Mongolia can support changes.<sup>1</sup>

### Summary

The essential task of present-day Mongolian monks: praying for the benefit of all sentient beings, does not differ from the main aims of the monks living a century ago, or at the time of Buddha Shakyamuni. However, sometimes they face difficulties because of public and social duties. At the level of individuals (i.e. monks) military service, taxation, travel expenses, part-time job, at institutional level (i.e. monasteries) education and cultural heritage support can be rethought. Certainly, all countries ensure different possibilities for religious practices, and the relationship of the state and religions in Mongolia is very harmonic. Though 30 years have passed since the end of socialism, its views did not blow over. The appreciation of monks differs from their status of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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Interview with Ven. Ts. Altankhuu, Züün Khüree Dashchoilin Monastery, Ulaanbaatar Autumn 2019.

<sup>1</sup> For other questions see Majer, Zsuzsa: *A Comparative Study of the Ceremonial Practice in Present-day Mongolian Monasteries*. PhD thesis. Budapest: Eötvös Loránd University 2008.