

FALSE



LAMA

THE LIFE AND DEATH
OF
DAMBIJANTSAN
BY DON CRONER

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First Account of Dambijantsan

Amarbayasgalant Monastery, located 137 miles northwest of Ulaan Baatar, the capital of Mongolia, was built by order of the Qing Emperor Kangxi (r. 1661-1722) to house the remains of Zanabazar (1635-1723), the sixteenth incarnation of Javzandamba and the first Bogd Gegeen of Mongolia. Completed in 1736, during the reign of Kangxi's grandson Qianlong, Amarbayasgalant eventually became one of the main pilgrimage destinations in Mongolia. Like most monasteries in Mongolia Amarbayasgalant was heavily damaged by the communists during the anti-religion campaigns of the late 1930s, but the outer wall of the complex and the shells of most of the temples inside the wall remained intact, and starting in 1990 an extensive restoration project was initiated by Tibetan lama Lobsang Tenzin Gyatso Pal Sangpo. The monastery was officially reopened in 1993, and in 1996 the complex was nominated by unesco as a World Heritage Site. Currently about sixty novices and ordained monks are in residence. The monastery now hosts a fair amount of pilgrims and sightseers from other parts of Mongolia and has become a standard stop for tourist groups headed farther west to the popular destination of Lake Khövsgöl. Still, after the sightseers and tourists have left for the day and monks have retired to their quarters the monastery is often completely deserted, the silent broken only by the cooing of pigeons and the souging of the wind through the empty courtyards.

Visitors to Amarbayasgalant in the late nineteenth century would have encountered a much different scene. Over 2000 monks were attached to the monastery, and it ranked second only to Örgöö (now Ulaan Baatar) among the most important pilgrimage sites in Mongolia, with thousands of pilgrims streaming here each year from all the aimags of Mongolia. The so-called Imperial Temples, constructed during the reign of the Qing Dynasty emperors and enclosed by a wall measuring 680 feet by 575 feet, were flanked on either side by numerous temples built with donations from Mongolian pilgrims and well-wishers, in-

cluding one temple which housed an immense statue of Maitreya, the coming Buddha, described as “sixty arm-spans” in height. All of these temples outside the Imperial Wall and the Maitreya statue were destroyed during the 1930s repressions.

Among the main attractions at Amarbayasgalant were the temples containing the *sharils*, or mummified remains, of Zanabazar, the First Bogd Gegeen of Mongolia, and the Fourth Bogd Gegeen, Losang Tupten Wongchuk (1775–1813). In the 1890s services were held over the remains these two Bogd Gegeens each day at five in the morning and again between eight and nine in the evening. “To officiate at these services,” noted one visitor, “five distinguished and most honored lamas are appointed in turn, whereas all the other more humble inhabitants of the monastery do not even have the right to approach these holy objects and must confine themselves to worshipping before the door of the temple in which they are.”¹ The remains of Zanabazar and the Fourth Bogd Gegeen were removed from the temples in 1937 by communist iconoclasts and reportedly burned.² The two temples which contained the *sharils* survived and were renovated in the 1990s.

Zanabazar was the first of the eight Bogd Gegeens who from 1639 to 1924 performed a role in Mongolia roughly analogous to that of the Dalai and Panchen Lamas in Tibet. A distant descendant of Chingis Khan, he was the great-grandson of the Tüsheet Khan Avtai (1554–1587), ruler of the Tüsheet Khanate centered around what is now Övörkhongai Aimag in Mongolia. It was Avtai who met with the Third Dalai Lama in the 1580s, converted to Buddhism, and then reintroduced Buddhism into Mongolia after the long hiatus the religion had experienced after the fall of the Mongol Yuan Dynasty in 1368. Zanabazar, who at the age of four was recognized as the first Bogd Gegeen by a convocation of Mongolian nobles at Shireet Tsagaan Nuur, in modern-day Övörkhongai Aimag, traveled twice to Tibet and received teachings from both the Dalai Lama and Panchen Lama. Back in Mongolia he embarked on an ambitious monastery-building campaign, introduced new rituals, including the famous Maitreya Ceremony, now once again practiced in Mongolia (at Amarbayasgalant, among other places), and even designed new robes and hats for monks of the Gelug sect to which he belonged. A renowned polymath, Zanabazar composed hymns, studied the medicinal qualities of hot springs, and invented two new alphabets, the so-called Quadratic Script and the Soyombo Script. The so-called head symbol of the Soyombo script is now portrayed on the Mongolian flag, Mongolian currency, and literally thousands of other places.

Among his many accomplishments, however, Zanabazar is probably

best remembered for his incomparable bronze statues. “During his lifetime,” notes a modern-day art historian, he was the greatest Buddhist sculptor in Asia.” His bronze statues of White Tara, Green Tara, Sitasamvara, the Five Transcendent Buddhas—Akshobhya, Vairocana, Amitabha, Amogghasiddhi, and Ratnasambhava—and others are now the centerpieces of several museums in Ulaan Baatar. Although few if any privately owned Zanabazar statues have come up for sale recently, so-called School of Zanabazar statues—made by artists emulating the style of Zanabazar—have recently been featured at high-profile art sales in New York City. Some of School of Zanabazar pieces at these sales sold for several hundred thousands of dollars. Zanabazar’s own works must be considered “priceless.”

Unfortunately, Zanabazar committed one act for which many Mongolians cannot forgive him to this day, despite his many accomplishments as religious leader, artist, and polymath. In the wake of a disastrous war between the Khalkh Mongols of Eastern Mongolia, of whom he was the leader, and the Zungarian Khanate of Western Mongols ruled by Galdan Bolshigt, Zanabazar led a mass migration of his followers to what is now Inner Mongolia in China. In 1691 he met with the Qing Emperor Kangxi at Doloonuur in Inner Mongolia, and in exchange for protection from the forces of Galdan Bolshigt and a promise from Kangxi to restore to the Khalkh their lost lands in Mongolia Zanabazar accepted the suzerainty of the Qing Dynasty, in effect making Mongolia a province of China. In 1696 Kangxi himself led an army of 80,000 against Galdan Bolshigt and the Western Mongols. By 1699 Galdan’s forces was reduced to a few hundred men, and on May 3, in what is now Gov-Altai Aimag, he died, according to some accounts by his own hand. Zanabazar and the Khalkh Mongols returned to Mongolia, but now as subjects of the Qing Emperor. China, which Chingis Khan and his sons had conquered and his grandson Khubulai had once ruled as the first emperor of the Mongol Yuan Dynasty, now dominated Mongolia. Mongolia would remain under Chinese control until 1911, when the Qing Dynasty fell. Those 220 years of subjugation by the Qing Empire are seen by some as a direct result of Zanabazar’s capitulation to Kangxi, and as a result many Mongolians resent him to this day.

Resentment against the Qing Dynasty was evident when the Russian ethnologist A. M. Pozdneev visited Amarbayasgalant in 1892. Pozdneev, the son of an archpriest in the Russian city of Orel, had studied at the School of Oriental Languages at the University of St. Petersburg and in 1876 had embarked to Mongolia with the famous Russian explorer G. N. Potanin on a three-year

expedition sponsored by the Imperial Russian Geographic Society. After returning to Russia he continued to hone his fluency in Chinese, Manchu, and Mongolian and was eventually appointed a professor at the University of St. Petersburg. In 1892 the Russian Foreign Ministry commissioned him to make what turned out to be a thirteen-month expedition in what is now the country of Mongolia and the Chinese province of Inner Mongolia. On June 27, 1892, accompanied by his wife, a scholarly assistant, and various factotums, he crossed the Russian-Mongolian border at the trading post of Khyakta, and on June 2 he arrived at Amarbayasgalant Monastery.

An indefatigable researcher, he immediately began interviewing people and perusing written documents. He first met with the two head lamas of the monastery. He found them “very learned about Buddhism,” but “ignorant, not only of the history of their own country, but even of their own monastery.”³ Interviewing two elderly monks, Pozdneev asked them how many temples were located within the original imperial wall. The monks had no idea, even though they had lived at the monastery for over forty years. “Just think how many years we have lived here but yet do not know; I guess we don’t have to!” one of the monks ingenuously explained.⁴ In talking to other monks Pozdneev was struck by the level of animosity expressed against both the Qing government and the Mongolia noblemen who sided with the Qing. “The majority of them complained bitterly about the impoverished condition of the Khalkha,” he noted, “and did not attempt to hide it, expressing their dissatisfaction with the Chinese government and its extortions.” During the winter of 1891–1892 the Mongolian countryside had experienced extreme cold and disastrous zuds, ice or snow storms which prevent animals from grazing, and large numbers of livestock had died. Many herders who kept livestock for the monastery were impoverished, but despite this the Qing government had levied some 14,400 horses to replenish the herds of the Emperor which had been decimated by an epidemic. Resentment against this requisition was still running rampant when Podzneevee visited Amarbayasgalant.

One evening Pozdneev was visited in his quarters by the secretary of the monastery administration, a man named Yondon, who turned out to be “an elegant or rather cultivated, or at least experienced lama,” in Pozdneev’s words, who had earlier served in the administration of a monastery in Örgöö and who had been at Amarbayasgalant for the last seven years. The conversation soon turned to politics:

Yondon bicheechi (*bicheech* = writer or scribe) asked me mysteriously whether I had heard anything concerning Dambi Jantsan and in this connection explained to me that a certain famous lama by this name, who was about thirty or forty years old, had passed through Mongolia in the autumn of last year. He had en-

tered Mongolia at the Dzindzik guard post, had passed through Uliyasutai, then had gone by the post road to Urga, and then again by post road to Kyakhtra. He had told the Mongols that he was the grandson of Amursana. The latter had supposedly had a son, Temüsanu by name, and he was the parent of the aforementioned Dambi Jantsan, who later let it be known everywhere that he was going to free the Mongols from the rule of China and that he would soon return from the north with troops for this purpose. The bicheechi earnestly begged me not to conceal anything from him but to tell him even in confidence where or not I had seen any such troops on the march or at least where or not I had heard that they were getting ready for a campaign. I answered the bicheechi that I had heard nothing of the sort. Indeed, considering the circumstances chronologically, I doubted that this as really the grandson of Amursana, as it would have been difficult to imagine that that Amursana, who died in 1755, would have a thirty-year-old grandson. Yondon bicheechi listened to me attentively but with a shade of melancholy and a sort of doubt, and from a further chat it became quite clear to me that he and all other Mongols believe implicitly to this day in the real existence of this son of Amursana and in the veracity of all that he said, and, as an irrefutable argument to the truth of both of these things, they point out that this lama possessed a cap to which a golden ochir was affixed instead of a button.

The wearing of badges of rank like a “golden ochir” were regulated by the strict protocol of the Qing Dynasty and there were severe penalties for their unauthorized use. The implication was that if Dambijantsan possessed such a badge he must have been an important person, and that whatever he claimed must be true. Podzneeve continues:

I, of course, could not throw doubt on such an argument, and for at least an hour I listened to stories of how, during Dambi Jantsan’s journey over the post road, the people, with secret fear and hope, had greeted him everywhere, paid him the most heartfelt obeisance, and brought him rich offerings. Others told me that Dambi Jantsan himself had scattered gold among the poorer Mongols, and there was no end of entirely legendary tales. From certain details of this story I guessed that the Mongol was talking about a certain charlatan, a Russian Kalmyk from the Little Dörbet ulus of the Astrakhan government, who, upon his arrival in Urga had been arrested by the Urga consulate and after interrogation had been sent under guard back across the Russian border. The latter circumstance, while it had been known to the people, had at the time considerably aided in quelling the natural alarm of the local Chinese and Mongol authorities.

This was probably the first written account of Dambijantsan, also known variously as Dambijaltsan, Dambija, Ja Lama, Ja Bagsh, Toushegun Lama, False Lama, Avenger Lama, and Chia (Jia in Pinyin) Lama, who for the next thirty some years played a whole range of dramatic, operatic, and tragic roles on the stage of Mongolian history. His life and exploits would become memorialized in

innumerable legends and myths and eventually become the subject of a famous movie which has been seen by almost every Mongolian.

Podzneeve's account is notable for several reasons. First, it demonstrates that as early as 1892 it was known that Dambijantsan was a Kalmyk from the lower Volga River region in Russia. In the coming decades there would be endless speculation about Dambijantsan origins. He would be described variously as Russian, a Buryat from Siberia, or even a Chinese from Manchuria who learned the Mongolian language and customs while running caravans to Mongolia for the famous Chinese trading firm of Ta Sheng K'uei. All of these legends were untrue, and some may have been spread by the Dambijantsan himself in an attempt to create an aura of mystery about his actual antecedents. His habit of changing his dress every few days—Mongolian clothes one day, Russian the next, Chinese the next, and so on added to the confusion about his origins among those who met him.

Secondly, Podzneeve's account makes it clear that by 1892 Dambijantsan was already dedicated to the overriding goal of his life—the creation of an independence Mongolia free of Manchu and Chinese domination—and as a means of achieving this goal he was already claiming to be a descendant of Amursana, who as we shall see had led the last great uprisings against Qing domination of Mongolia.

Thirdly, by 1892 the Dambijantsan already had the reputation as a “charlatan,” as Podzneeve calls him, a impostor and con-man who was not in fact a lama or a legitimate freedom-fighter, and did not possess the powers, either spiritual or political, which he laid claim to. It was this reputation which would earn him the moniker “False Lama.”

Podzneeve concludes his remarks about the Dambijantsan:

... one question still puzzled me, namely, to what did Dambi Jantsan owe his success, and, by turning the conversation gradually to this subject, I soon convinced myself that the basic cause for this was the tacit discontent and at times even hatred of the people for their government and an eager, if only passive, desire to rid themselves of the oppression with which the Chinese have surrounded the lives of the Mongols. To my surprise, I learned in this connection that the people are even discontented with their own Mongol princes, many of whom, I was told, become infected with the Chinese way of thinking during their trips to court, gravitate toward China, plunder their people, and, a most terrible thing to a Mongol, even offer offense to the faith.”⁶

It was this anger and hatred against the Chinese and Manchus that the Dambijantsan hoped to mobilize in his struggle for Mongolian independence. His ultimate political goal, it was said, was to turn back the clock to the time of

Galdan Bolshigt, before Zanabazar had ceded control of Mongolia to the Qing, and recreate a new Mongolian khanate. Only when this became impossible did he turn to a life of banditry and establish around himself not a khanate but a cult in which he could give free rein to his sadistic impulses. Inside of Dambijantsan were two entities struggling for control of his existence: the Ja Lama—Buddhist practitioner and freedom fighter—and the False Lama: con-man, bandit, torturer, and murderer. In the end the False Lama would win.

