

Ja Lama of Mongolia



The Life and Death of
Dambijantsan

by
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“I am no monk. I am a warrior and avenger.”
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CHAPTER ONE

FERDINAND OSSENDOWSKI MEETS THE TUSHEGOUN LAMA

Even as a college student I was keen on the history of Inner Asia and of Mongolia in particular, and I often spent hours embowered in an isolated carrel deep in the bowels of my college library poring over histories and travel accounts of the area. One day while standing in the front of the stacks dealing with Mongolia I noticed an old and worn tome with a faded dark burgundy-colored cover. On the spine in barely legible black letters was the title *Beasts, Men and Gods*. Pulling the book from the shelf I discovered that it was written by a Polish geologist-adventurer named Ferdinand Ossendowski and published in 1922. Returning to my carrel I quickly became engrossed in Ossendowski's account of how in 1920 he, a partisan of the White Russian government of Admiral Kolchak, had fled from the newly installed Bolshevik authorities in Siberia and after various adventures in the wilderness of the upper Yenisei River Basin had arrived in Mongolia. From Mongolia he and the Russian refugees whom he had fallen in with hoped to travel south through Tibet and ultimately seek asylum in British-controlled India. According to Ossendowski his party was turned back somewhere on the edge of the Tibetan Plateau after a gun battle with bandits in which he himself was wounded. Forced to return to Mongolia, he eventually ended up in Uliastai, a town in the western part of the country which during the period of domination of Mongolia by China served as one of the headquarters of the Manchu, or Qing, administration. At the time Uliastai was hardly a safe haven.

In 1911, when the Qing Dynasty finally collapsed, Mongolia had declared its independence, ending 220 years of rule by the Manchus. In 1915 China and Russia forced Mongolia to accept the so-called Tripartite

Agreement, which stipulated that Mongolia would remain an autonomous power, but under the suzerainty of China. Under the terms of the agreement Chinese troops were stationed in the cities Urga, Kyakhta, Khovd and Uliastai, and Chinese merchants and traders were allowed to resume collection of the immense debts with which they had saddled the Mongolian people prior to 1911 and on which compound interest was rapidly accruing. In 1918 still more Chinese troops were sent to Mongolia under the pretext of protecting the country from the Bolsheviks who were rapidly gaining power in Siberia to the north. In 1919 the dictatorial Chinese general Hsü Shu-teng arrived in Mongolia with still more troops. He soon declared an end to Mongolian autonomy, making the country once again part of China, and in February of 1920 the Bogd Khan, then ruler of Mongolia, was forced to declare allegiance to China. Opposition to the Chinese occupation continued and revolt was in the air when Ossendowski set foot in Uliastai in 1921. "When we arrived in that town," Ossendowski wrote, "we were at once in the sea of political passions. The Mongols were protesting in great agitation against the Chinese policy in their country; [and] the Chinese raged and demanded from the Mongolians the payment of taxes for the full period since the autonomy of Mongolia had been forcibly extracted from Peking . . ."¹

Adding to the turmoil were bands of White Russian desperadoes ram-paging through the countryside and communist spies and provocateurs stirring up the populace in preparation for a full-scale attack by Bolshevik revolutionaries. Not long after their arrival in Uliastai, Ossendowski and a companion made a reconnaissance toward the town of Khovd in search of Red Army detachments rumored to be approaching from the west. Wrote Ossendowski:

About halfway to Kobdo we came across the yurta [in Mongolian ger; the round felt tent of the nomads] of a shepherd on the shore of the small lake of Baga Nor, where evening and a strong wind whirling gusts of snow in our faces easily persuaded us to stop. By the yurta stood a splendid bay horse with a saddle richly ornamented with silver and coral. As we turned in from the road, two Mongols left the yurta very hastily; one of them jumped into the saddle and quickly disappeared in the plain behind the snowy hillocks. We clearly made out the flashing folds of his yellow robe under the great outer coat and saw his large knife sheathed in a green leather scabbard and handled with horn and ivory. The other man was the host of the yurta, the shepherd of a local prince, Novontziran. He gave signs of great pleasure at seeing us and receiving us in his yurt.

"Who was the rider on the bay horse?" we asked.

He dropped his eyes and was silent.

"Tell us," we insisted. "If you do not wish to speak his name, it means that you are dealing with a bad character."

"No! No!" he remonstrated, flourishing his hands. "He is a good, great man; but the law does not permit me to speak his name."

They took refuge for the night in the ger and were having a dinner of boiled mutton with their host when a man suddenly entered and greeted them in "a low, hoarse voice." Ossendowski continued:

We turned around from the brazier to the door and saw a medium height, very heavy set Mongol in deerskin overcoat and cap with side flaps and the long, wide tying strings of the same material. Under his girdle lay the same large knife in the green sheath which we had seen on the departing horseman. He quickly untied his girdle and laid aside his overcoat. He stood before us in a wonderful gown of silk, yellow as beaten gold and girt with a brilliant blue sash. His cleanly shaven face, short hair, red coral rosary on the left hand and his yellow garment proved clearly that before us stood some high Lama Priest—with a big Colt under his blue sash! I turned to my host and Tzeren and read in their faces fear and veneration. The stranger came over to the brazier and sat down.

There followed an animated discussion of the then-current political situation in Mongolia, during which their visitor found much fault with the Mongolian government's inability to unite again against the Chinese occupiers:

We are without action here while the Chinese kill our people and steal from them. I think that Bogdo Khan might send us envoys. How is it the Chinese can send their envoys from Urga and Kiakhta to Kobdo, asking for assistance, and the Mongol Government cannot do it? Why?"

"Will the Chinese send help to Urga?" I asked.

Our guest laughed hoarsely and said: "I caught all the envoys, took away their letters and then sent them back . . . into the ground."

He laughed again and glanced around peculiarly with his blazing eyes. Only then did I notice that his cheekbones and eyes had lines strange to the Mongols of Central Asia. He looked more like a Tartar or a Kirghiz.

Ossendowski then told the mysterious stranger of his thwarted attempt to reach India via Tibet. Upon hearing the tale the stranger "became attentive and very sympathetic in his bearing toward us and, with evident feeling of regret, expressed himself strongly: 'Only I could have helped you in this enterprise . . . With my *laissez-passer* you could have gone anywhere in Tibet. I am Tushegoun Lama.'"

Ossendowski:

Tushegoun Lama! How many extraordinary tales I had heard about him. He is a Russian Kalmuck, who because of his propaganda work for the independence of the Kalmuck people made the acquaintance of many Russian prisons under the Czar and, for the same cause, added to his list under the Bolsheviki. He escaped to Mongolia and at once attained to great influence among the Mongols. It was no wonder, for he was a close friend and pupil of the Dalai Lama in Potala [Lhasa], was the most learned among the Lamites, a famous thaumaturgist and doctor. He occupied an almost independent position in his relationship with the Living Buddha and achieved to the leadership of all the old wandering tribes of Western Mongolia and Zungaria, even extending his political domination over the Mongolian tribes of Turkestan. His influence was irresistible, based as it was on his great control of mysterious science, as he expressed it; but I was also told that it has its foundation largely in the panicky fear which he could produce in the Mongols. Everyone who disobeyed his orders perished. Such a one never knew the day or the hour when, in his yurt or beside his galloping horse on the plains, the strange and powerful friend of the Dalai Lama would appear. The stroke of a knife, a bullet or strong fingers strangling the neck like a vise accomplished the justice of the plans of this miracle worker.

Ossendowski claimed that after he became aware of the identity of the visitor he began to question in his mind whether the man was capable of the so-called miracles with which he was credited. The Tushegoun Lama then, according to Ossendowski, gave an example of the mind-reading abilities for which he was famous:

This thought had scarcely time to flash through my mind before Tushegoun Lama suddenly raised his head, looked sharply at me and said: "There is very much unknown in Nature and the skill of using the unknown produces the miracle; but the power is given to few. I want to prove it to you and you may tell me afterwards whether you have seen it before or not."

He stood up, pushed back the sleeves of his yellow garment, seized his knife and strode across to the shepherd.

"Michik, stand up!" he ordered.

When the shepherd had risen, the Lama quickly unbuttoned his coat and bared the man's chest. I could not yet understand what was his intention, when suddenly the Tushegoun with all his force struck his knife into the chest of the shepherd. The Mongol fell all covered with blood, a splash of which I noticed on the yellow silk of the Lama's coat.

"What have you done?" I exclaimed.

"Sh! Be still," he whispered turning to me his now quite blanched face.

With a few strokes of the knife he opened the chest of the Mongol and I saw the man's lungs softly breathing and the distinct palpitations of the heart. The Lama touched these organs with his fingers but no more blood

appeared to flow and the face of the shepherd was quite calm. He was lying with his eyes closed and appeared to be in deep and quiet sleep. As the Lama began to open his abdomen, I shut my eyes in fear and horror; and, when I opened them a little while later, I was still more dumbfounded at seeing the shepherd with his coat still open and his breast normal, quietly sleeping on his side and Tushegoun Lama sitting peacefully by the brazier, smoking his pipe and looking into the fire in deep thought.

"It is wonderful!" I confessed. "I have never seen anything like it!"

"About what are you speaking?" asked the Kalmuck.

"About your demonstration or 'miracle,' as you call it," I answered.

"I never said anything like that," refuted the Kalmuck, with coldness in his voice.

"Did you see it?" I asked of my companion.

"What?" he queried in a dozing voice.

I realized that I had become the victim of the hypnotic power of Tushegoun Lama; but I preferred this to seeing an innocent Mongolian die, for I had not believed that Tushegoun Lama, after slashing open the bodies of his victims, could repair them again so readily.

The next day Ossendowski and his companion decided to return to Uliastai. The Tushegoun Lama was still at their camp, but he told them that it was also time for him to "move through space." Ossendowski added, "He wandered over all Mongolia, lived both in the single, simple yurta of the shepherd and hunter and in the splendid tents of the princes and tribal chiefs, surrounded by deep veneration and panic-fear, enticing and cementing to him rich and poor alike with his miracles and prophecies."²

As was my wont when any book interested me I immediately began background investigations. *Beasts, Men and Gods*, I learned, had received rave reviews upon its publication in 1922. *The New York Times Book Review* gushed that it was "a book of astounding, break-taking, enthralling adventure, an odyssey whose narrator encountered more perils and marvels than did Ulysses himself, an account . . . in which the traveler faced danger and death in a greater variety of ways, saw more astounding things, [and] penetrated more mysteries than has any other man who had embarked upon perilous adventure in these days."³ In London the reviewer in *The Times Literary Supplement* found himself at a loss for words: "A book like this makes one regret the vulgarization of adjectives. When one epithet seems inadequate, there is nothing to do but recall some of the rushing crowd of impressions it created."⁴

The English language version of the book went into twenty-two printings in 1922 alone, selling some 300,000 copies, and the book was eventu-

ally translated into a dozen or more languages, becoming an international best-seller. Thus it was that at least a segment of the world's reading public became aware of the existence of a mysterious figure known as Tushgoun Lama who lived somewhere in the wilds of the then-little known country of Mongolia.

Given the book's high profile and sensational content, however, it is not surprising that detractors soon appeared. The book reviewers may have been bowled off their feet by the book's sensational tales and florid prose, but historians, explorers, and travelers who were more familiar with Mongolia found much in the book that was incorrect or simply unbelievable. Ossendowski's abysmal ignorance of Mongolian history and of even the most basic tenets of Buddhism were particularly striking. One of his more virulent critics even entertained "the hypothesis that there was no such person as Ferdinand Ossendowski" and that the book was a ghost-written hoax.⁵ Others, while granting his existence, doubted that he had ever been Mongolia at all and suggested that the book was a cleverly contrived fabrication. This was not true; actually Ossendowski, who had been trained as mining engineer, had been in Mongolia before the 1920s as part of a geological expedition—a detail he neglects to mention in his book—and his presence in Mongolia in 1920–21 has been confirmed by numerous accounts of others who were there.⁶

The most damning attack came from none other than Sven "the Desert Wanderer" Hedin, the Swedish explorer and cartography who at the time was probably the Occident's greatest expert on the geography of Central Asia. Ossendowski was intruding on Hedin's turf and the notoriously prickly explorer was having none of it. He soon batted off a book entitled *Ossendowski und die Wahrheit* (Ossendowski and the Truth) in which he heatedly refuted Ossendowski's claim that he had reached the Tibetan Plateau in his attempt to reach India and called into question other details of the Polish adventurer's itinerary. Even more telling was Hedin's accusation that Part v of *Beasts, Men and Gods*, entitled "Mystery of Mysteries—The King of the World," was nothing more than a retelling, and in places blatant plagiarism, of an occult fantasy earlier unveiled to the light of day by the French occultist Joseph-Alexandre Saint-Yves d'Alveidre in his 1886 tome *Mission de l'Inde en Europe* (Mission of India in Europe)

In the now-notorious Part v of his book Ossendowski told of an immense network of caverns under the surface of the earth in which no less than 800,000,000 people lived. These caves were all linked together into

a subterranean kingdom called Agharti which was ruled a supra-human entity known as the King of the World. By telepathy and other means of mind control this King of the World and his minions sought to influence the development of above-ground mankind. At some time in the future this King would emerge from his underground lair and create a new, supposedly enlightened world order on the surface of the earth.

In brief, this was the Aghartian myth propounded by Joseph-Alexandre Saint-Yves d'Alveidre which Ossendowski retold in his own book, claiming that everyone in Mongolia, from the Bogd Gegeen right on down to common herders, were aware of the existence of Agharti and its ruler the King of the World. According to Ossendowski's Mongolian informants, the King, in preparation for his final return, had already made brief appearances on the surface of the earth, most notably at Erdene Zuu and Narobanchin monasteries in Mongolia. One lama in the entourage of the 8th Bogd Gegeen told him, "The King of the World will appear before all people when the time shall have arrived for him to lead all the good people against the bad, but this time has not yet come. The most evil among mankind has not yet been born."⁷

There were numerous portals to this underground realm, many of them in Mongolia and Tibet, and apparently it was possible for select individuals to travel through them and visit Agharti. At one point Ossendowski asked the Tushegoun Lama if he had ever heard of the King of the World in Agharti. Wrote Ossendowski:

He stared and glanced at me in amazement "Have you heard about him?" he asked, as his brows knit in thought. After a few second he raised his narrow eyes and said, "Only one man knows his holy name; only one man now living was ever in Agharti. That is I. This is the reason why the Most Holy Dalai Lama has honored me and why the Living Buddha in Urga fears me. But in vain, for I shall never sit on the Holy Throne of the highest priest in Lhasa nor reach that which has come down from Jenghiz Khan to the Head of our Yellow Faith. I am no monk. I am a warrior and avenger."⁸

The existence of Agharti beneath Mongolia was certainly an amazing assertion, and the inclusion of such sensational material no doubt helped to make *Beasts, Men and Gods* an international best seller among the hoi-polloi, but more discerning readers, especially those with some actual knowledge of Asian history, geography, religion, myths, and legends soon dismissed Ossendowski's account of the subterranean kingdom of Agharti with openings in Mongolia and Tibet as utter fantasy. Confronted in

Paris by a whole posse of European Tibetologists and other scholars, he finally issued a statement admitting that “this book of mine is not a scientific work but only the romantic story of my travel across Central Asia for the large public . . . So—my book *Beasts, Men and Gods* is exclusively a literary work, based on my observations in Central Asia.”⁹ Ossendowski seemed to be implying here that not everything he wrote should be interpreted as literally true; instead, apparently, some parts of the book may have been based on “observations” enhanced by a liberal sense of literary license. *Beasts, Men and Gods* was henceforth dismissed as a serious book in most quarters, although curiously enough the Aghartian mythologem as propounded by Ossendowski took on a life of itself and is still with us today, as any search of occult literature on the internet or elsewhere will very quickly reveal.

After reading about the Agharti–King of World controversy I could not help but wonder about Ossendowski’s account of the Tushegoun Lama. Did such a person as the Tushegoun Lama actually exist or was he just another figment of Ossendowski’s notoriously fecund imagination? And if such a person did exist, had Ossendowski enhanced his account of him by concocting a sensational tale about how he was hypnotized into believing that the Tushegoun Lama had sliced open the abdomen of a Mongolian herdsman? And what about the Tushegoun Lama’s claim, as related by Ossendowski, that he had visited the apparently non-existent realm of Agharti? Even if the Tushegoun Lama actually existed, surely Ossendowski had fabricated this tantalizing little detail. The whole account of the so-called Tushegoun Lama was highly suspect.

I probably would just forgotten the whole matter if few days later I had not picked out another book from the Mongolia section of the library entitled *Mongolia and the Mongols* by the Russian ethnologist A. M. Pozdnev. Published in 1896 by the Russian Imperial Russian Geographical Society, the two-volume set is a detailed account of Pozdnev’s thirteen month-long sojourn in Mongolia and China during the years 1892–93. In the first chapter Pozdnev describes a visit to Amarbayasgalant Monastery in northern Mongolia where in the course of a conversation with a monk he heard about a man named Dambi Jantsan:

. . . 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 *gouvernement*, 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.¹⁰

Reading this, I soon realized that Podzneeŵ’s “Dambi Jantsan” was one and the same person as Ossendowski’s “Tushegoun Lama.” As a source, Podzneeŵ was almost unimpeachable. Precise in his statements and pedantic to a fault, if Podzneeŵ described such a person then he must actually exist. Thus it seemed that Dambijantsan (as his name is more commonly spelled), the so-called Tushegoun Lama, was in fact an historical personage and not one of Ossendowski’s literary embellishments.

I dug out of the library archives the available maps of Mongolia—there were very few at the time—and following Podzneeŵ’s description of his journey tried to locate Amarbayasgalant Monastery. I could not find it on any map. Did it even still exist? I knew even then that most monasteries in Mongolia had been destroyed during the communist anti-religion campaigns of the late 1930s. No matter. As I read more of Podzneeŵ’s account I began fantasizing about following his itinerary and trying to find Amarbayasgalant Monastery on the ground.

Of course I was just day-dreaming. Mongolia at that time was one of the most closed and isolated countries in the world. Only a few select scholars from the Occident and very-upscale tourist groups were allowed to visit the country and they were kept on a very short leash, largely confined to the capital of Ulaan Baatar and a few select sites like the Terelj tourism area north of the capital and the former Erdene Zuu Monastery farther out west, which had been turned into a museum. No foreigners were allowed to wander around by themselves, and a place like Amarbayasgalant Monastery, assuming it still existed, would have been strictly off limits. Little did I realize, sitting there day-dreaming in my library carrel, that several decades later I would become a regular visitor to Amarbayasgalant Monastery.

In the mid-1980s, a decade or so after reading Ossendowski, I again encountered Dambijantsan in the unlikely setting of the great-domed Reading Room of the Library of Congress in Washington, D. C. Perusing the catalog of the library’s Mongolia-related items I noticed a book

entitled *The Diluv Khutagt: Memoirs and Autobiography of a Mongol Buddhist Reincarnation in Religion and Revolution*, published in 1982. I had never heard of the Diluv Khutagt but the title was intriguing. The book was retrieved from the stacks and brought to my table amidst the hushed precincts of the reading room. Cracking the book open at random I was startled to see a chapter entitled “Dambijantsan.” A quick perusal revealed that it was the one and the same Dambijantsan described by Ossendowski and Pozdneev.

Starting over with the “Introduction” to the book—written by Mongolist Owen Lattimore—who I would soon discover had himself made considerable contributions to the Dambijantsan mythologem—I learned that the Diluv Khutagt (1883–1964) had been the incarnate lama in charge of Narobanchin Monastery in western Mongolia (as noted above, it was this monastery that the Aghartian King of the World had allegedly visited in 1890). He certainly had a distinguished pedigree. According to the tradition the first incarnation of his line had been a disciple of the Buddha himself. A later incarnation in Tibet had been the famous Milarepa (c.1052–1135), author of the classic *Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa*. Still more incarnations turned up on the Ordos Desert in what is now China. The Diluv Khutagt who authored the book in my hand was the third incarnation to be born in Mongolia proper and, according to some sources, one of the fifteen incarnations in Mongolia officially recognized the Qing Dynasty.¹¹ He eventually fell afoul of the new communist government and fled to China. After a stint in Tibet as advisor to the Dalai Lama he emigrated to the United States where he ended up in New Jersey, of all places. In collaboration with Lattimore he then wrote his “Political Memoirs” and “Autobiography,” both of which were combined in one volume. Both sections of his book contain information about Dambijantsan, but the “Autobiography” has an entire chapter devoted to him—the only individual to merit such attention. He was six years old when he first met Dambijantsan, would encounter him many times in later life, and was eventually involved in the plot to assassinate him. Of the few Mongolians who left written accounts of Dambijantsan the Diluv Khutagt probably knew him best, but even to the Diluv Khutagt he remained an enigma: “He called himself a lama, but nobody knew if he really was one,” he wrote, . . . “no one knew the real truth about him.”¹²

Inspired by the Diluv Khutagt’s tales about Dambijantsan, I delved still

deeper into the stacks of the Library of Congress and soon unearthed A. V. Burdukov's *V Staroi i Novoi Mongolii* (In Old and New Mongolia). Burdukov was a Russian settler who lived for almost twenty years in what is now Uvs Aimag in northwestern Mongolia. He first met Dambijantsan in 1912 and would have many encounters with him in the following years. He provided considerable background material on Dambijantsan's life, including Dambijantsan's own version of how he spent his earlier years, and gave a detailed account of the latter's participation in the sack of the Manchu fortress at Khovd in 1912.

Also buried in the stacks was an English translation of I. M. Maisky's *Sovremenennaia Mongoliia* (Contemporary Mongolia). Ivan Maisky, who later achieved considerable renown as the Soviet ambassador to England, visited Mongolia in 1919 on a fact-finding mission for the Soviet authorities in Irkutsk, the city near Lake Baikal in Siberia just north of Mongolia. He had traveled through what are now Khovd and Uvs aimags in western Mongolia when Dambijantsan was still alive and interviewed several people who knew the elusive lama. Maisky then inserted an entire chapter about Dambijantsan into his report about of the mission, which was otherwise a mundane collection of economic statistics, census reports, and brief essays on the then-current political situation. As in the Diluv Khutagt's "Autobiography," Dambijantsan was the only individual to merit his own chapter. "The story of his man is obscure in many details so that to construct his complete biography is hardly possible at the moment, but I have managed to learn the following facts about him," he begins before recounting what was known or rumored about Dambijantsan's past. At the time, however, Dambijantsan was holed up in his fortress at Gongpochuan, in Gansu Province, China, and Maisky was unable to get any information about his current activities. Maisky suspected, however, that the lack of news was just the lull before the storm.

But there is hardly a doubt that this is only a temporary stage in the stormy career of the ambitious monk. No one in Mongolia believes that his inactivity will last long. But he is keeping out of sight, like a cat, waiting for the right moment to make his leap. Who knows, we may very well hear about this man again. Who knows what role he is destined yet to play in Mongolian history.¹³

If the Diluv Khutagt, who actually knew Dambijantsan, and Maisky, researching while he was still alive, were unable to lift the veil of mystery surrounding him, then those who came later, after his death, and tried to

make an account of Dambijantsan's life had a much harder task. George Roerich, son of famous artist, mystic, and Shambhalist Nicholas Roerich, attempted to gather information about Dambijantsan during his travels through Mongolia and China in 1927, and in his book *Trails to Inmost Asia*, he, like the Diluv Khutagt and Maisky, included an entire chapter about him entitled "Ja Lama, The Militant Priest." Here he noted:

... no one knows exactly where he came from or what his ambitions were. It is extremely difficult to piece together all the existing information about his life, so varied were his activities and so extensive were his travels. The arena of his activity was the whole of Asia, from Astrakhan to Peking and from Urga to distant India. I succeeded in collecting information about him and his life from Mongolian and Tibetan lamas and laymen whom fate brought into contact with the dreaded warrior-priest. This singular personality for some thirty-five years hypnotized the whole of Greater Mongolia. At present, some six years after the death of the man, Mongols feel an unholy dread of him, and worship him as a militant incarnation of one of their national leaders.¹⁴

George Roerich's arguably more famous father Nicholas noted in his own book about the expedition: "Ja-Lama was no ordinary bandit . . . What thoughts and dreams fretted the gray head of Ja-Lama? . . . All through the Central Gobi, the legend of Ja-Lama will persist for a long time. What a scenario for a moving picture!"¹⁵ Indeed, a movie eventually was made about Dambijantsan, and it is still occasionally shown on the Mongolian State TV.

The author and scholar Owen Lattimore, who had befriended the Diluv Khutagt and assisting him with his memoirs, also tried to gather information on Dambijantsan's life. In 1926 he journeyed on the so-called Winding Road caravan route which went past Dambijantsan's fortress at Gongpochuan in Gansu Province, China, where finally he had been assassinated. In *The Desert Road to Turkestan*, his book about the trip, he too included an entire chapter about Dambijantsan. As in the books of Diluv Khutagt, Maisky, and George Roerich, Dambijantsan was the only individual to merit such attention. Lattimore:

Already the legend of the False Lama has been elaborated beside the tent fires into many versions, but from the choice of details it is possible to throw together a picture with life in it, of an adventurer who, during those years when Mongolia echoed again with the drums and trappings of its mediaeval turbulence, proved himself a valiant heir in his day to all the Asiatic soldiers of fortune from Jenghis Khan to Yakub Beg of Kashgar.¹⁶

In 1955 Lattimore, by then a famous Mongolist, included a five-page summary of Dambijantsan's life in his *Nationalism and Revolution in Mongolia*.¹⁷ He announced here that he intended to write a biography of Dambijantsan, but for reasons unclear this project never materialised.

Still others wrote about Dambijantsan. The Danish explorer and colonist Henning Haslund visited Dambijantsan's fortress in Gansu in the late 1920s and included a chapter entitled "A Robber's Stronghold" about it in his book *Men & Gods in Mongolia* (the title may well have been an attempt to cash in on the initial success of Ossendowski's *Beasts, Men and Gods*). He attempts to recap Dambijantsan's life but relies mainly on the already published accounts of Maisky and the innumerable campfire tales then making the rounds. He had little new to add to the by-then snowballing legend. The Swedish explorer Sven "The Desert Wanderer" Hedin visited Dambijantsan's fortress in Gansu in 1934 and included a chapter about it entitled "Dambin Lama's Robber Castle" in his book *The Silk Road*. He too mainly repeated what others had already wrote. For the 1971 English translation of A. M. Pozdnev's *Mongolia and the Mongols* Professor Fred Adelman devoted six pages of the thirteen page preface to Dambijantsan, even though he is only mentioned once, as noted above, in the 749 pages of the two-volume set. In the early 1990s Dambijantsan's career got additional scholar gloss in a Cambridge University doctoral thesis by John Gaunt entitled "The Charismatic Warlord in Revolutionary Mongolia."

Thus there was no shortage of written material about Dambijantsan. It seems almost everyone who wrote about Mongolia from the 1890s to the 1930s had something to say about him. But much of what they had so say were admissions that they actually knew very little about his life. And in any case, some in modern-day Mongolia might dismiss his story as ancient history. Did anyone in current-day Mongolia still remember his name, let alone know any details of his life?

On my first trip to Mongolia in 1996 I quickly discovered that Dambijantsan had by no means been forgotten. On a horse trip in the Khentii Mountains, in Khentii Aimag in north-central Mongolia, an area not normally associated with Dambijantsan, I mentioned his name in passing to the herdsman from whom I had hired horses and who was acting as my guide. It turned out that he had been born in Bayankhongor Aimag, in southwest Mongolia, and as a youth had lived in the small town of Shine-

jinst, where he claimed that several descendants of Dambijantsan's followers lived to this day. He also mentioned places in Bayankhongor Aimag frequented by Dambijantsan, including Ekhiin Gol Oasis and Shar Khuls Oasis, and regaled me for several hours with tales about Dambijantsan's exploits and alleged magical feats.

Two years later I traveled by jeep by Gov-Altai Aimag, just west of Bayankhongor Aimag. Passing through the town of Tsogt, on a high plateau between the folds of the Gov-Altai Mountains, my jeep driver said, "This town is famous for its beautiful woman." I paid no particular attention to this, since every other town in Mongolia is famous for its beautiful women, but then he added, "Dambijantsan found two of his wives here." At that time I was unaware of Dambijantsan's connection with Gov-Altai Aimag and I had made no mention of him to the driver. "You know about Dambijantsan?" I asked. It turns out the driver knew a lot and from him I learned for the first time about Dambijantsan's activities around the town of Bayan Tooroi and elsewhere in southern Gov-Altai Aimag. On that trip, incidentally, I also visited the ruins of Narobanchin Monastery, the former home of the Diluv Khutagt.

I soon discovered that there was hardly anyone in Mongolia over the age of sixteen who had not at least heard of Dambijantsan. This was due in large part to the movie that had been made about him back in the 1980s and still occasionally re-shown on Mongolian State TV. Yet many older people, especially in the southwestern aimags, knew stories and legends about Dambijantsan which had been passed down over the decades, often times from people who had actually known him, and they had very pronounced opinions about enigmatic adventurer. Some maintained he was a lama, a *bagsb*, or teacher, who had tried to live by Buddhist principles, although not always with the best results, while others asserted that he was nothing more than a very shrewd and exceptionally cruel bandit. Still other maintained that he a pathological torturer and murderer and downright evil. One thing was sure; although Dambijantsan had been dead for almost eighty years he had certainly not been forgotten. Indeed, there were those who claimed that although his body may have died at Gongpochuan in 1922 his spirit still rode on the winds of the Gobi and continued to haunt his secret hangouts. I myself would experience the uncanny fear and dread which comes over those who now visit his former lairs.

CHAPTER TWO

DAMBIJANTSAN'S BIRTHPLACE

The accounts of the Diluv Khutagt, Maisky, the Roerichs, and others who either knew Dambijantsan or gathered information from those who did provided the basic details of what is known about his life. The findings of later researchers who had access to Mongolian and Russian archives, including a biography of Dambijantsan by Russian historian Inessa Lomakina entitled *Golova Dja-Lamy* (Head of the Ja Lama) offered still more information. Armed with these sources, I was ready to begin my own investigations into the life of Dambijantsan. It was not, however, until after I had done considerable research of my own on the ground in Mongolia that I was able to visit the purported birthplace of Dambijantsan, the so-called Malo-Dörböt (Little Dörböt) *ulus* of what in the nineteenth-century was the province of Astrakhan, part of Czarist Russia. This region is now located in the Republic of Kalmykia, part of the Russian Federation, on the west side of the lower Volga River.

By an odd concatenation of circumstances I was able to visit Kalmykia under the auspices of the Kalmyk lama Telo Tulku Rinpoche, who has been recognized as the current incarnation of the afore-mentioned Diluv Khutagt, whose memoirs were my main written source of information about Dambijantsan. Telo Tulku Rinpoche, a.k.a. Eddy Ombadykow, was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in 1972, the child of Kalmyk immigrants who had settled in the United States after World War II. Ethnically he is a Dörböt, a sub-division of the Kalmyks, the same tribe to which Dambijantsan belonged. As a boy he became a monk and studied

in a monastery in South India from the age of seven to twenty-one. Eventually he was recognized as the reincarnation of the Diluv Khutagt by the 14th Dalai Lama himself. Although no longer an ordained monk—he now has a wife and child—he currently holds the title of Shajin Lama, the highest ranking Buddhist hierarch in Kalmykia. In his role as the leader of Kalmykia's Buddhists he oversees the largest Buddhist temple in Europe, the magnificent Golden Süm, located in Elista, the capital of Kalmykia, and numerous other temples throughout Kalmykia.

He has also made several trips to Mongolia and is involved in various projects to promote Buddhism in the country of his previous incarnation. On his last day of his 2008 visit he hosted a small luncheon at the Indian restaurant in the Puma Imperial Hotel in Ulaan Baatar. Telo Tulku Rinpoche proved to be quite approachable and friendly, and he immediately recognized from my accent that we were fellow Pennsylvanians. At the first opportunity I questioned him about Dambijantsan. He said while he had heard various tales and legends of a fanciful nature about his putative fellow Dörböt he admitted that he knew very little if anything concrete about his life. Although he had paged through the Diluv Khutagt's book in a library he had not read the whole thing and was unaware that his previous incarnation had written about Dambijantsan. The man sitting to my right, overhearing our conversation about Dambijantsan, now choose to introduce himself. His name was Khongor Badmaevich, and it turned out he was the Vice-Chairman of the People's Parliament of the Republic of Kalmykia. He is a Torgut, one of the other ethnic groups which make up the Kalmyk people. Somewhat to my surprise he seemed quite familiar with the basic outlines of the life of Dambijantsan. He even asked if I was a disciple of the Dambijantsan, the Ja Lama! I said no, I was not a disciple of Dambijantsan; I was unaware that Dambijantsan currently had disciples—he was of course dead—and that in any case I was approaching his life strictly from an historical point-of-view. I asked if it was possible to come to Kalmykia and continue these historical investigations. "No problem," said, Mr. Badmaevich, "I will have the Parliament of Kalmykia issue you an official invitation to visit Telo Tulku Rinpoche for the purpose of cultural exchange."

Thus armed with a Russian visa obtained with this invitation I winged westward from Ulaan Baatar to Moscow, where I caught a flight south to Volgograd, on the Volga River.

Stepping out into the main lobby of the Volgograd airport I was greeted

by a young Kalmyk man holding a sign with my name on it. I quickly discovered that he does not speak English. He told me in Russian that his name was Genan. He had been dispatched by Telo Tulku Rinpoche with orders to deliver me up in Elista, the capital of Kalmykia, 160 miles to the south. Outside in the parking lot we met another Kalmyk named Savr, a big, hulking guy who looked like a Mongolian wrestler, and we piled into his car, a new, spotlessly clean Toyota Corolla.

Volgograd is of course the former Stalingrad, where on the vast plains surrounding the city the Soviet Red Army had cornered the Germany army during World War II and dealt it a defeat from which Nazi Germany never recovered. The name of the city has been changed but no one has been allowed to forget what happened here. Billboards in the old—and now newly popular—Socialist Realism style proclaim the upcoming celebration of the anniversary of the Soviet victory. One large billboard announces: "Volgograd: City of Heroes." Apparently we missed the city center but the environs extend for miles. It took a good hour to drive through the suburbs and small villages surrounding the city. Beyond the villages lay vast cultivated fields, the horizon disappearing beyond the curvature of the earth. The road is straight, flat, and in reasonably good condition, and the lead-footed driver soon has the Corolla cruising along at ninety miles an hour. Almost imperceptibly the cultivated fields start grading into mixed farm lands and pasture until finally the countryside turns to uninterrupted grasslands.

Probably not by accident the border of Kalmykia is near where the steppe takes over completely. Russians are people of the plowed land; Kalmyks are people of the steppe. Just across the border, near Barmantsk Lake, is the small town of Malo-Dorbot, a reminder of the old Little Dörböt administrative district that existed here in Dambijantsan's day. For two hours we drive through the perfectly flat, now-green steppe, the monotonous view interrupted only by an occasional pond or small lake ringed with tall reeds. We see no gers, the tents of nomadic herders so common in Mongolia, and very little livestock. Except for few tiny villages we pass through the land seems deserted. Yet this region, known as the Pontic-Caspian Steppe, is steeped in history. According to historian Michael Khodarkovsky it is a "pastoral El Dorado, glorified in songs and epics of many nomadic people . . ."¹

We are about a hundred miles west of the Volga, Europe's largest river by length, volume of water, and area of watershed, and the main

artery leading into the very heart of Russia. The immense Pontic-Caspian Steppe, which flanks the lower Volga on either side, covering almost 400,000 square miles, an area two-thirds the size of Mongolia itself, is one of the cradles of Mankind. Four thousand years ago it was inhabited by the near-mythical Indo-Aryans, who according to some theories, admittedly controversial, went on to conquer and colonize the Indian sub-continent. Later came the Scythians, fierce tribesmen who with their fabulous hordes of golden jewelry and ornaments continue to excite imaginations up to the present day; then Sarmatians, Goths, Bulgars, the Huns of Attila, and the Avars, proto-Mongols who had migrated west from their original homeland of what is now Mongolia in the fifth or sixth century. From the seventh to tenth centuries A.D. the steppe was dominated by the Khazars, a mostly Turkic people who founded an empire here and eventually embraced Judaism as a state religion. Then came the Magyars, forerunners of the Hungarian people, and the nomadic Pechenegs, Kipchaks, and Cumans.

With the ascendancy of the Mongol Empire in the thirteenth century Chingis Khan's grandson Batu, leader of the Golden Horde, conquered the region, establishing his capital at Serai, on the Volga River southeast of current-day Volgograd, in the 1240s. Around this time the city of Xacitarxan was founded on the Volga Delta, near where it runs into the Caspian Sea, just a few miles north of the current city of Astrakhan. In 1395 Tamurlane, the Sword of Islam, stormed through and burned the city of Xacitarxan to the ground. With the collapse of the Golden Horde in the mid-1400s the Astrakhan Khanate, founded by Qasim I and consisting of Tatar and Nogai tribesmen, was established on the lower Volga, with the rebuilt city of Xacitarxan as its capital. In 1556 Ivan the Terrible of Russia conquered the lower Volga valley and established a fortress, or *kremlin*, at the current site of Astrakhan city, just south of the old city of Xacitarxan. Armies of the Ottoman Empire invaded the lower Volga in the 1560s and in 1569 invested the city of Astrakhan. They were soon forced to retreat, and in 1570 the Ottoman Sultan acknowledged Russian control of the lower Volga River. From then on the Volga, the longest river in Europe, became an entirely Russian waterway. The last nomadic people to arrive on the Pontic-Caspian Steppes, then under the nominal control of Russia, were Oirats, or Western Mongolia, who then became known as Kalmyks. One sub-group of the Kalmyks, the Little Dörböts, lived here in these steppes which I was now barreling through at ninety

miles an hour.

As we have seen, Pozdneev as far back as 1892 stated that Dambijantsan was a Kalmyk of the Little Dörböt tribe, a descendant of the Oriats who had originally migrated to the Caspian Steppe back in the early seventeenth century. But even this simple fact about Dambijantsan's life would later be obscured behind a welter of myths. To this day some people in western Mongolia, particularly in Khovd Aimag, believe that Dambijantsan was not a Kalmyk at all but was born in Inner Mongolia, part of China.

This variant of the Dambijantsan legend may have originated with a man named Gombo, who recounted his tales to local historians in 1960. Gombo claimed that he had been born and raised in the 49th *Khoshuu* of Inner Mongolia. Dambijantsan, he further maintained, was from a neighboring *khoshuu* but their families were close and they spent a lot of time together as children. The two boys studied at a local temple and may have become novices there. They wanted to go to the Shar Süm in Beijing and study there but this project was vetoed by their parent and relatives. The two then made a secret pact to escape the land of their birth by whatever means possible. One night they commandeered some of families' horses and rode off to take up the life of runaways and drifters. They traveled north into Khalkh Mongolia and stayed for one year in the valley of upper Onon River. Then they drifted further north into Russia. Here, Gombo claimed, Dambijantsan began robbing people, often severely beating them in the process. He may also have committed murder. Eventually he was arrested and spend many years in a Russian prison. When they again met up years later Dambijantsan had prison tattoos and was missing part of his right ear, apparently cut off in prison. They parted again but later in 1912, Gombo linked up again with his old accomplice when, as we shall see, Dambijantsan camped on the Dund Tsenkher River preparing for the siege of Khovd. Afterwards Gombo remained in the Khovd area and became quite famous himself for his magical powers. Gombo's account, although taken seriously by some people, does not jive with any of the other accounts of Dambijantsan's early life. The assertion that he was born in Inner Mongolia, however, lives on.

There are still other versions. In 1926 Owen Lattimore was told by caravan men on the Winding Road caravan route that Dambijantsan was variously a "a true Mongol" (i.e., Khalkh or Eastern Mongol), a Russian,

or a Buryat from Siberia. "The most substantial story of all," opined Lattimore, "is that he a Chinese from Manchuria who had served in Mongolia as a herder of ponies for the princely firm of Ta Sheng K'uei."² He also relates that one of the things most remembered about Dambijantsan by those who had known or at least seen him was his habit of changing his dress every day or so from Russian to Mongolian to Chinese and back again. This constant changing of his clothes could only have added to the confusion about his origins.

Dambijantsan himself once told A. V. Burdukov that he was a Khalkh Mongol born at a place called Ashighkhorgyn Chuluu in the old Tüsheets Khan Aimag. That Burdukov, who spoke Mongolian, apparently believed this story was strange, since several other people who knew Dambijantsan commented that he spoke the Khalkh dialect of the Mongolian language very poorly. Even to this day people in Gov-Altai Aimag remember stories about Dambijantsan's poor command of the Khalkh dialect and his use of the words from the Kalmyk or Western Mongolian form of the Mongolian language. (The Diluv Khutagt dissented: "Although he came from the Volga, he spoke the Khalkh dialect very well."³) Later evidence, including letters written by Dambijantsan himself, would seem to confirm that he was indeed a Kalmyk. One source maintains that he was born near the town of Aidarkhan, somewhere on the west bank of the Volga, but again the origins of this information is unclear.⁴

Yet doubts persists. The Russian historian Inessa Lomakina, author of the Russian language biography of Dambijantsan, did extensive research in the archives of the Soviet Academy of Sciences about Dambijantsan and was able to locate a census of all Kalmyks living in the Malo-Dörböt district of the Astrakhan *Gubernia* in the mid-nineteenth century. Searching for all known variants of Dambijantsan's name she was unable to come up with any information about him or his family. "The conclusion which suggests itself," she wrote, "was that either Ja Lama [Dambijantsan] wasn't from this region or that he had changed his name."⁵ She added that in 1914, after Dambijantsan had been arrested in Mongolia, the governor of Astrakhan *Gubernia* had been ordered by Russian officials to find out if Dambijantsan was, as he was then claiming, a Dörböt from Russia, but even he had not been able to determine if the errant lama's story was true.

Of course, all the names which our subject used may have been aliases, which would account for why no trace of him or his family could be

found in the Malo-Dörböt ulus. “Dambijantsan” is a Mongolian name said to be based on the Tibetan words for “standard-bearer.” George Rorich claims this name was rendered from the Tibetan “Ten-pei Jal-tsen (bsTsan-pa’I rgyal-mtshan)” but goes on to say that Dambijantsan’s real name was “Pal-den (dPal-den)”⁶ It has been suggested that “Dambijantsan” was a monastic name, given to our subject after he began his monastic career.⁷ Other sources state that his given name in Mongolian was Davaasambuu.⁸ Dambijantsan himself told Burdukov that his real name was Dawa, which may be just a shortened version of Davaasambuu. But while Dambijantsan was ethnically Mongolian, he was born in Russia and was nominally a Russian citizen. Thus he reportedly also had the Russian, or at least semi-Russian, name of Amur Sanaev. This name would appear to be nothing more than a Russianized form of “Amarsanaa.” As we shall see, Amarsanaa was the Oirat chieftain who had led the last great Mongol revolt against the Qing Dynasty in the 1750s. Dambijantsan would eventually claim to be a descendant of Amarsanaa, and still later his reincarnation. That he was an actual lineal descendant of the Oirat chieftain seems highly unlikely, and a reincarnation a matter of speculation. If he was not related to Amarsanaa, it is really possible, as one Russian researcher maintains, that he was born into a family named Sanaev and given the name “Amur”?⁹ The coincidence seems too great. Or was this just another alias chosen to further enhance his connection with the illustrious Amarsanaa, who according to legend would return and once again lead the Mongols in revolt against the Qing oppressors? In any case, both in the 1890s and as late as 1914 Dambijantsan was known to Russians in Mongolia as Amur Sanaev.¹⁰ He also traveled under the Russian alias Ichinnorov and was said to use the Tibetan aliases of Dawa Shabrong, Shiret Lama, and Sherap Lama. After arriving in Mongolia in the early 1890s he would acquire a whole host of Mongolian aliases and nicknames.

Dambijantsan’s age is also a matter of dispute. His contemporaries had no clear idea of how old he was. Like the notorious Count St. Germain of eighteenth century Europe Dambijantsan had the curious trait of appearing ageless. The Diluv Khutagt, who knew him for a period of over thirty years, says simply, “No one knew his real age. No one knew the real truth about him.”¹¹ A. M. Pozdnev, writing in 1892, noted that Dambijantsan “was about thirty or forty years old.”¹² Yet A. V. Burdukov, who would become very well acquainted with Dambijantsan, stated that when he first met him, some twenty years later in 1912, “He looked a little over forty.”¹³

If we believe these accounts it would appear that Dambijantsan aged very little between 1891 and 1912. These discrepancies in his appearance would cause some to speculate that there was more than one Dambijantsan, and that some witnesses had confused the various characters who had assumed his name. Indeed, as we shall see several impostors did eventually appear in Mongolia, all claiming to be Dambijantsan.

After his death various researchers would claim that the Dambijantsan was born in 1860, although the actual source of this information is never quite clear.¹⁴ One Mongolian scholar, apparently using a comment of Dambijantsan's on the astrological details of his birth, would claim he was born in 1862.¹⁵ Lacking any more concrete information we will use 1860 as the probable date of his birth. This would make him thirty years old when he first arrived in Mongolia in 1890, fifty-two when he took part in the siege of Khovd in 1912, and sixty-two at the time of his assassination in 1922.

We arrive in Elista, the capital of Kalmykia, about three and a half hours after leaving Volgograd. The city is located in a depression in the otherwise level steppe. Its population is said to be just over 100,000. My first impression is of surprisingly clean, tidy, tree-lined streets backed by modest two and three story apartment houses. Telo Tulku Rinpoche's monastery has a guest apartment but at the moment it is unavailable, so I am taken to small three-story hotel on quiet side street lined with trees and lilac bushes in full bloom.

The next morning a young monk named Andzha whom I had met earlier in Mongolia called and said that Telo Rinpoche had been in India but he had just arrived yesterday with his teacher, the head of Drepung Gomang Monastery in southern India. At noon there will be a greeting ceremony for the Drepung Tripa, the official title of the lama from India, at the Golden Temple, but that the Rinpoche will be able to speak to me in his office beforehand. An hour later Andzha picks me up in his battered old Toyota and we proceed directly to the Golden Temple.

Buddhism had been largely stamped out in Kalmykia during the communist era, but in the 1990s there was a resurgence of interest among the Kalmyks. During his visit to Elista in 1998 the Fourteen Dalai Lama, hoping to revitalize Buddhism in Kalmykia and at the same time establish a beachhead in Europe, chose a location for a new temple not far from the city center. The six-story, lavishly appointed structure was finally opened

in December of 2005. As noted it is the largest Buddhist temple in Europe.

Andzha drives in the private entrance at the back of the monastery and after removing our shoes in the first floor entry hall we take an elevator to the fourth floor where Telo Rinpoche has his residence and office. From the elevator we step into a large room which at first glance seems to contain an enormous Buddhist-oriented craps table. But no, it is in fact an immense conference table, seating twenty-four, with a mandala embedded in the middle of it. Andzha adds that the main temple hall is directly below this room, and that the bottom side of the mandala, painted with the same design, can be seen in the ceiling of the hall. All the prayers offered in the main temple ascend through the mandala, he says, and concentrate themselves here in this conference room. Telo Tulku Rinpoche's luxurious office is off to one side of this awe-inspiring conference room. The redolence odor of rancid butter, mutton fat, and juniper incense common to monasteries in Mongolia, some of which have not felt a broom since before the fall of the Qing Dynasty, is noticeably absent here.

The Telo Rinpoche, the latest in a line of incarnations going back to Mangala, one of the original disciples of the Buddha, and including the last Diluv Khutagt of Mongolia, greets me warmly. He must meet the Drepung Tripa shortly but he says that afterward he will give me a guided tour of the temple. In the meantime what can he do for me? I tell him that I would like to talk to historians who might know something about Dambijantsan, who was supposedly born here in Kalmykia and who, in some circles at least, is considered an incarnation of one the Eighty-Four Mahasiddhis of India, in Dambijantsan's case the mahasiddhi known as Güwari. One of Telo Tulku Rinpoche's previous incarnations, Tilopa, was also thought to be one of the original Eighty-Four Mahasiddhis. The Rinpoche summons his secretary and instructs her to call one of the local research institutes and track anyone who can shed some light on the up-until-now shadowy existence of Dambijantsan here in Kalmykia.

We then take the elevator downstairs where the reception for the Drepung Tripa is just beginning. The Drepung Tripa, who appears to be in his sixties, enters the temple bestowing his blessings on all those who approach him. He is the head of Drepung Gomang Monastery in southern India, which was founded by Tibetans who fled Tibet after the Chinese invasion of 1959 and named after Drepung Monastery in Tibet. Gomang

was one of the several colleges at Drepung in Lhasa and the one attended by most Mongolian monks who studied in Tibet. Zanabazar (1635–1723), the first of the eight Bogd Gegeen of Mongolia and a famed artist and polymath, stayed at Gomang during his visits to Mongolia. Many other famous Mongolian lamas studied here, including Agvan Dorzhiev, the Buryat Mongol who eventually became a tutor to the 13th Dalai and who accompanied the Dalai Lama to Mongolia in 1904 when the latter fled Tibet after the invasion of the Younghusband Expedition. Dambijantsan also reportedly attended Gomang College at Drepung, at which time he may have met Dorjief. In any case, as we shall see Dambijantsan's stay at Drepung ended disasterously.

The next morning a young Kalmyk named Chogdor Sandjiev picks me up at my hotel and we proceed by car the Kalmyk Institute of Humanistic Studies. In the small library of the institute we are met by another Kalmyk in his twenties with a long ponytail and a mala wrapped around his wrist. His name is Bem. He is a student at the institute and is very fluent in English. He in turn introduces me to a short, stocky woman who must be in her seventies. She is in charge of research in the library, and she says the library has an extensive collection of materials about Dambijantsan. She is in the process of digging the relevant books out of stacks and will have them ready in half an hour.

Bem, Chogdor, and I proceed upstairs to the office of B. A. Bicheev, a professor at the institute. An stern looking man in this forties, he abruptly asks, "Why are you interested in Dambijantsan?" and without waiting for an answer adds, "Are you with the CIA?" Fifteen years ago, when I first lived in Russia, it was de rigueur to ask every American if they were CIA agents but this has gotten a bit old hat by now. "No," I reply, "and in any case, I don't think the CIA is interested in Dambijantsan."

"Well, I don't think Dambijantsan was a Kalmyk anyhow," he says. I allow that Inessa Lomakina, author of the book *The Head of the Ja Lama*, had thoroughly searched local records and archives in Kalmykia and had come up with nothing about Dambijantsan's family or birthplace, but add that there is a host of peripheral and anecdotal data indicating that he was a Kalmyk of the Dörböt tribe. Why do you think he was not a Kalmyk? I ask the professor.

"Well, it is well known that Dambijantsan lived in Astrakhan in 1917, after he was released from prison in Siberia," he says. "Astrakhan was a very difficult and dangerous place to live in at time. If he had relatives in the

countryside he would have gone and stayed with them. But he didn't. So I don't think he had any relatives here, and therefore was not a Kalmyk."

This argument does not sound entirely convincing to me. Pointing out that Dambijantsan was allegedly born near a town or village named Aidarkhan, I ask the professor if he knows of any such place. Aidarkhan, he says, and Chogdor and Bem concur, is just the Kalmyk name for Astrakhan, the ancient city near the mouth of the Volga River. None of them are aware of any town named Aidarkhan in the current territory of Kalmykia. I suspect that the sources which say Dambijantsan was born in Aidarkhan (Astrakhan) meant that he was born in the province of Astrakhan, in which the Malo-Dörböt district was located in the nineteenth century. When I mention that I might go to the city of Astrakhan from Elista the professor exclaims, "Why do you want to go to Astrakhan? Do you work for the CIA?"

Changing the subject I ask him if he knows anything about Inessa Lomikina's current whereabouts. I had attempted to track down information about her on the internet but had been unable to find anything. He says she died two or three years ago. This was sad, but intriguing. How old was she, I wondered, and what did she die of? The professor did not know. I added that there was a legend in Mongolia that anyone who tried to write about the life of Dambijantsan either did not succeed or came to a bad end. "I know about this," said the professor. "Lomakina herself wrote in an article that she prayed that she would be allowed to finish her book without anything bad happening to her." Also, Lomakina told of a Russian who in the 1920s gathered masses of material about Dambijantsan in Mongolia in view of writing a biography only to be arrested and later perish in a GULAG. His research materials disappeared without a trace. Then there was the German guy who spent twenty years amassing material for a movie about Dambijantsan. In the end the movie was never made . . .

There seemed little point in pursuing the discussion with Professor Bicheev. We went back down to the library where we were greeted by the elderly woman in charge who had said she would pull out all the materials about Dambijantsan. I had visions of a mass of unpublished manuscripts, records, and other virgin documents—who knows, maybe even Dambijantsan's birth certificate!—but was completely deflated when I saw the pile of books she had gathered together. Most of them were well known sources which I had already studied. There was Burdukov's *Old and New*

Mongolia, one of the best sources of material about Dambijantsan, but which I have in my own Scriptorium in Mongolian as well as the original Russian language edition; Maisky's 1919 *Modern Mongolia*, which I have in English translation; Pozdneev's *Mongolia and the Mongols*, which I also have in English translation; several scholarly journals with articles by Lomakina, and a few other items, most of which I had either seen or was aware of. It's soon clear that there is nothing really new here. I thanked the kindly old woman for digging out the materials and we made our exit.

The doubts of Professor Bicheev and the lack of collaborative information in the nineteenth century census reports notwithstanding, it would appear from most other available materials that Dambijantsan was a Kalmyk from what is now Kalmykia. At the very least, the people who knew him best, including Diluv Khutagt, believed he was a Kalmyk from the Volga region. Since by the time he was born Russia had asserted full control over the area he also would have been a Russian citizen, a factor which was to play a crucial role in his life. Yet he always identified with the Oirats, or Western Mongols, from whom the Kalmyks had originated, and would eventually assert that his real homeland, the land of his ancestors, was the traditional territories of the Oirats in western Mongolia and northwest China.

But that's not the final word on the origins of Dambijantsan. Given the mystery surrounding his birthplace, his age, and many of the subsequent events of his life it is perhaps to be expected that in Mongolia a supernatural version of Dambijantsan mythologem would eventually arise. This tale was told to me by a well-known and highly respected lama in Ulaan Baatar. When this lama's teacher was a young man he had as his own teacher a lama who as a boy had lived with his parents at Dambijantsan's final stronghold in the Black Gobi Desert in what is now Gansu Province, China. This lama related that Dambijantsan, despite his ferocious demeanor, liked to play with children. On sunny afternoons he would sit down outside, take off his shirt, and let a whole passel of small children climb over his body and hang on his neck. One day while horsing around in this manner our informant noticed that Dambijantsan had no belly button. He did not realize the significance at this at the time, but later he heard stories about beings who did not have belly buttons because they had not been born to a human mother and were not human beings themselves. Later in life this man came to believe that Dambijantsan was not

actually a human being.

My own informant explained to me that this belief in entities who only appear to be human beings is not uncommon in Mongolia. The telltale sign is the lack of a belly-button and the inevitable uncertainty surrounding the being's family and origins. In the past such appearances were uncommon, but they did happen, he claimed. According to persistent rumors, Dundovdulam, the first wife of the Eighth Bogd Gegeen, was one of these non-human entities (this is of course highly disputed in some circles). So what are these entities, and from where do they originate? As best my informant could explain, they are thought forms which have been manifested as material objects in the three-dimensional world by some power or force, the exact nature of which is unknown to us. They are created to accomplish some specific task, the ultimate goal of which is not always clear to human beings. As manifested entities, these beings lack the life story of a human being.

Thus the tales about Dambijantsan's birth in Kalmykia, Inner Mongolia, Outer Mongolia, China, or elsewhere were blinds, perhaps created in part by Dambijantsan himself, to hide his true, non-human origins. The uncertainty over his birthdate; the observation by some that he did not appear to age over time; the magical acts for which he later became famous, his alleged immunity to bullets and the belief, widespread during his lifetime, that he could never be killed by ordinary means were all a result of his non-human origins. Even the fact that he was eventually killed is tempered by the belief on the part of some that his material body was allowed to be destroyed because it was no longer of use to its creators but that his thought form continues to exist into the present. It might be added in conclusion that these entities no longer appear in material form in Mongolian today, mainly because the powers which produce them have disappeared or are at least in abeyance, but that in the future they may well occur again.

I do not present this theory here necessarily because I believe it; I do so only to demonstrate the incredible breadth of the tales which have accrued around the life of Dambijantan and which continue to be believed by at least some people down to the present day. But when these tales, bizarre as they may seem, are told by the light of a campfire at one of Dambijantsan's former haunts, deep in the Gobi Desert eighty miles from any other human beings, they are not so easily dismissed.

CHAPTER III

WHO ARE THE KALYMKKS?

How the people who became known as Kalmyks, originally nomads from Inner Asia, ended up in Europe as citizens of the Russian Empire, on the steppes straddling the Volga River north of the Caspian Sea, is a fascinating tale in itself. The saga of the Kalmyks is part of the larger story of the conflict between the Eastern Mongols—Chingis Khan and his Chingisid descendants—and the Western, or Oirat, Mongols. The roots of this story go back to the thirteen century when a basic division took place between the Chingisid Mongols and the Mongols who became known as Oirats.

The Oirats were originally a forest people who dwelt in the taiga and mixed steppe-woodlands west of Lake Baikal, around Lake Khövsgöl to the south, and the basins of the upper tributaries of the Yenisei River still farther west. Their name might be based on the Mongolian word *oi*, which means “forest.” We first hear of the Oirats in the *Yüan Chi*, or History of the Yüan Dynasty, where they are called *Wei-la* or *Wa-i-la*. Other thirteenth century documents refer them as the *Oira* or *Wan Oira*.¹ The Persian historian Rashid-al-Din (1247–1318) referred to the Oirats by name and said they lived in the basins of the eight rivers which combine to form the Yenisei River.² These would include the Biy Khem and Ka Khem in what is now the autonomous republic of Tuva, the Shishigt Gol and its tributaries west of Lake Khövsgöl in Mongolia, and others. The *Yüan Chi* and Rashid-al-Din both report further that in 1204 the Oirat joined with the Naiman, a tribe which lived in the northwest of current-

day Mongolia, and fought against Chingis Khan. This venture failed and in 1208 they submitted to Chingis, under whose banner they then served as auxiliaries in the great military campaigns of the Chingisid Mongols. Later, in 1260–64, they sided with the rebellion of Arig Boga against Chingis's grandson and founder of the Yüan Dynasty Khubilai. After the defeat of Arig Boga they remained more or less subordinate to the Chingisids until after the fall of the Yüan Dynasty and the expulsion of the Mongols from China in 1368.

The Chingisids, shorn of their Chinese empire, retreated to their old capital of Kharkhorum on the Orkhon River. In 1372 and again in 1388, huge armies mustered by the Ming, who had replaced the Mongols as rulers of the Celestial Empire, crossed the Gobi Desert into Mongolia, hoping to stamp out any chance of a Chingisid revival. The 1388 invasion, consisting of over 100,000 Chinese troops, crushed the Mongols in a decisive battle south of Lake Buir in current-day Dornod Aimag, after which the reigning khan, Töqüz Temür, was assassinated by a disgruntled relative. In 1399 an Oirat commander killed one of the successors to Töqüz Temür, an event which signaled the decline of the Chingisid Mongols and the ascension of the Oirats.

Yet for the Mongols as a whole the rise of the Oirats would pose a problem. According to the unwritten laws of the steppe only a Chingisid, a descendant of Chingis Khan, could be anointed as Great Khan, ruler of all the Mongols. This stricture was so inviolate that even the great Amir Timur (Tamerlane), whose military exploits rivaled those of Chingis himself, never dared to take the title of Great Khan for himself but instead tried to legitimize his rule in the eyes of his followers by marrying the Chingisid princess Saray Mulk-khanum, the daughter of Khazan, the last ruler of the Chagatai Khanate founded by Chagatai, Chingis's second son.³ Thus the Eastern Chingisid Mongols considered themselves to be the only legitimate rulers of the Mongolian people and viewed the Oirats as upstarts and usurpers who must forever remain their subordinates. Yet the Oirats would soon throw up great leaders who created empires which rivaled and surpassed the power of the Eastern Mongols. They would attack China itself and even dreamed of restoring the Yüan Dynasty which the Eastern Mongols had allowed to crumble away in their hands.

By 1434 the Oirat chieftain Toghhan, after half a century of internecine Mongol warfare, had melded the four main tribes—the Torgut, Dörböt,

Khoshut, and Choros (sometimes known as the Khoit) of Western Mongols into the first Oirat Empire. At its height in the mid-fifteenth century the Oirat realm stretched from Lake Baikal west to Lake Balkash in what is now Kazakhstan, and from Baikal south to the Great Wall of China. Included in the empire was much of current-day Mongolia and the Zungarian Basin, the slopes of the Tian Shan, and the oasis city of Hami in what is now Xinjiang, a province of China. In the early 1440s Toghan's son Esen assumed control of the Oirat Empire. Although the ruler of a huge swatch of Inner Asia, as an Oirat he could not claim to be the Great Khan of all the Mongols. In an effort to legitimize his rule Esen married off his daughter to Toghto-Bukha, a descendant of Chingis Khan, who then assumed the more-or-less ceremonial title of khan, while Esen ruled as hegemon. Soon he would challenge the Ming dynasty itself.

The immediate source of conflict was over trade relations. The Oirats wanted free and open trade with China, while the Ming Dynasty rulers tended to consider commercial relations with the so-called barbarians of the steppe as beneath them.⁴ (One Ming emperor's disdain for the nomads to the north went so far as to issue an order that the Chinese characters for "barbarian" be written as small as possible in all official records.⁵) Also, according to one source, Esen was promised a Ming princess as a wife by the Ming emperor Yingzong. When the bride was not forthcoming Esen used this as a pretext to invade China.⁶

The twenty-one year-old emperor Yingzong thirsted for military glory, and under the baleful influence of a court eunuch named Wang Zhen he unwisely decided to himself lead an army into battle and confront the Mongols before they could reach Beijing. On August 4, 1449, the Ming army with Yingzong at its head left the capital and headed west toward Datong. After sixteen days it became apparent that the badly organized and ill-equipped force was incapable of confronting the Oirats under Esen. A retreat was ordered, but on September 1 Esen's forces cornered the Ming army at a place called Tumu, sixty some miles north of Beijing and twenty-five miles or so beyond the Great Wall in what is now Hubei Province. Almost the entire army of 50,000 Chinese was annihilated, and most humiliatingly of all emperor Yingzong was taken prisoner. His advisor the eunuch Wang Zhen was cut down on the field of battle, according to one version of the story dispatched by disgruntled Chinese soldiers who realized too late they had been led like sheep to the slaughter.⁷

A month or two later Esen was camped in the suburbs of Beijing. Al-

though a master of steppe warfare he was unable to master the siege tactics necessary to overpower the walled and fortified capital. His royal hostage was of no help either. Yingzong's younger brother Prince Cheng had assumed the vacant throne and taken the title of Jingtai Emperor. Esen had hoped to gain great concessions in return for the person of Yingzong but now the Ming court was in no hurry to get him back. After Ming reinforcements from other cities began converging on Beijing and the Mongol horses had eaten most of the available grass around the capital Esen decided to return to the more hospitable steppes of Mongolia. Eventually Esen released Yingzong, but upon the latter's return to Beijing he was placed under virtual house arrest in an out-of-the-way palace in the southeast corner of the Forbidden City and ignored, while his younger brother continued to rule. Yingzong did eventually retake his throne, but the details of these events are outside the scope of our narrative.

For a brief moment while the Oirats were camped outside Beijing it appeared that Esen was about to retake the throne of China lost by the Chingisids in 1368 and install a new version of the Yüan Dynasty. Esen's success was short-lived however. He had not been able to take Beijing, had not received the anticipated massive ransom for Yingzong, and in fact had very little to show in the way of plunder for his great victory on the battlefield at Tumu. Yet he had become so emboldened by his military feat that in 1453 he had his Chingisid son-in-law assassinated and he himself assumed the title of Great Khan of all the Mongols. As an Oirat he had no right to make such a claim; some considered him an usurper and in 1455 he himself was assassinated by disgruntled Mongols. The Oirat Empire depended on large part on the person of Esen, and with him gone it rapidly began to disintegrate.

The Eastern Mongols, who as descendants of Chingis Khan claimed to be the only legitimate rulers of Mongolia, were still in the throes of a long period of internal strife. Mandagul Khan, the twenty-seventh successor of Chingis Khan, was killed in a struggle with his great-nephew Bolkho, and after Bolkho himself was assassinated his five year-old son Dayan was placed on the throne. Khan Mandagul's widow Mandukhai took the little boy under her wing and acting as his de-facto regent assumed command herself of the Mongol armies. Later she took the extraordinary step of marrying him, the son of the great-nephew of her deceased husband, thus making herself *khatun*, or queen of the Eastern Mongols. Under the

leadership of Khatun Mandukhai —now a much revered and venerated figure in Mongolian history—the Eastern Mongols were able to subdue the then disorganized Oirats and by the 1490s reassert the supremacy of the Chingisids. "It is to her that tradition gives credit for having overthrown Oirat supremacy and restored the hegemony to the eastern Mongols," proclaims historian of the steppes René Grousset.⁸

Dayan Khan's grandson Altan Khan (r. 1543–83), who ruled the Tümed Mongols on the steppe north of the Ordos Desert, in what is now Inner Mongolia, continued the struggle against the Oirats, pushing them northward and westward of his domains. Meanwhile Dayan Khan's son Geresenje had taken as his inheritance much of what is now the country of Mongolia. When he died these lands were parceled out to his descendants and eventually became the Tüsheet, Zasagt, Setsen. and Altan khanates.

By the 1550s the combined forces of the Eastern Mongols had driven the Oirats out of central Mongolia, recapturing the ancient Mongol capital of Kharkhorum in 1552. The Oirat retreated to the west of the Khangai Mountains, but continued pressure by Altan Khan of the Khalkh (please don't confuse him with Altan Khan of the Tümed) at the beginning of the seventeenth century pushed them still farther west, beyond the Altai Mountains into the valleys of the Black Irtysh, Ili, and the Imil, in what is now Xinjiang in China, and onto the steppes of southern Siberia in what is now Russia.

But now, as if to counteract their diminishing influence, a charismatic new leader arose among the Oirat. This was Khara-Khula, who dreamed of recreating the Oirat Empire which had flourished under Esen in the fifteenth century and even retaking the throne of China which had been so improvidently squandered by the Chingisid Mongols. Khara-Khula belonged to the Choros, one of the four tribes which made up the Oirat Confederation. He began his rise to power around 1600 and by 1606, faced with rising power of the Khalkh Altan Khan to the east, the other three confederates—the Torgut, Dörböt, and Khoshut, accepted his leadership.

By 1608–1609 he and the Oirats confronted Altan Khan and halted the westward advance of the Khalkh. Skirmishes continued for the next decade, until in 1619 all-out war broke out between Khara-Khula and Altan Khan. At first Altan Khan prevailed, but the Oirats fought back and by 1725 had driven the Eastern Mongols out of the Zungarian Basin in what is now Xinjiang. This would remain a Oirat stronghold until they were

completely defeated by forces of the Qing Dynasty in the 1750s.

While the other three confederates had accepted Khara-Khula's leadership against Altan Khan they were not happy with the subordinate position they had assumed in the Oirat Confederation. Faced with both the rise of Khara-Khula, who threatened their independence, and the continuing incursions into their traditional grazing lands by the Eastern Mongols, some chose to leave Inner Asia altogether. Thus began the great migration westward of the people who would become known as Kalmyks. It was among these Kalmyks that Dambijantsan allegedly would emerge.

The Torgut who lived in the upper Irtysh River in what is now Xinjiang Province of China were particularly susceptible to pressure from the Altan Khan centered just to the north in what are now the Mongolian aimags of Khovd and Bayan-Ölgii. Hearing of rich pasture land to the west the Torgut chieftain Kho-Urlük had sent out scouts west to search for new grazing lands as early as 1608. Starting in the summer of 1615 some 15,000 Torgut began moving westward toward the steppes south of the Siberian towns of Tara, Tiümen, and Tobolsk. In the early 1630s the Torgut, along with a contingent of Dörböt and a smattering of dissatisfied Choros and Khoshut, moved still farther westward to the Pontic-Caspian Steppe north of the Caspian Sea. The Torgut alone who migrated may have numbered over 200,000. These new arrivals quickly overcame the disorganized nomads already inhabiting the area and by the beginning of the 1640s occupied the entire Caspian Steppe from the Emba River in the east to the Terek River in the west, including the rich basin of the lower Volga River, the biggest tributary of the Caspian Sea.

These are the people who became known as Kalmyks, a word about which there is some dispute. It would appear that the word Kalmyk was used to describe Oirats as far back as the fourteenth century by Arab geographer abn Alvardi.⁹ This was of course long before the migration to the West of the people now known as Kalmyks. Some popular and even scholarly literature continues to refer to the Western Mongols, or Oirats, who did not migrate to the West as Kalmyks. I adapt here the usage proposed by Khodarkovksy and "reserve the name Kalmyk only for the group of Oirats who came from Jungaria to roam the Caspian steppes in the early seventeenth century."¹⁰

For the next hundred years or so the Kalmyks nomadized on the steppe

north of the Caspian Sea while gradually acceding to the overall authority of the Russian government. In 1724 they officially accepted Russian suzerainty. By the 1740s, however, relations between the nomads and the Russian empire began to deteriorate. One of the main bones of contention was the continuing encroachment of Russian colonists into the Kalmyk pasture lands. Cossacks from the Don River began emigrating to the lower Volga, followed by Russian and Ukrainian settlers. They built towns, established industries, and began plowing up the traditional Kalmyk pasture lands. By the mid-1740s some 10,000 Kalmyk families no longer had enough livestock to support themselves. Many were forced to work for commercial fishing operations and other Russian-owned industries. Between the years 1764 to 1768 alone more than one hundred new settlements of Russian and Ukrainian colonists were established on the lower Volga. The Kalmyks who attempted to maintain their nomadic lifestyle were shoved off onto arid, inhospitable desert-steppe far from the major rivers.

Another contentious issue was the forced recruitment of Kalmyk cavalymen into various Russian military campaigns. When they had first arrived on the Caspian steppe the Kalmyks were more than willing to help the Russians in campaigns against other nomads who were competing with them for pasture lands and from whom they could expect considerable booty, the traditional motivation for steppe warfare. As the Kalmyks became more and more impoverished they were less and less eager to fight those with whom they had no real beef and from whom no immediate treasure would be forthcoming. The matter came to a head when the Russo-Ottoman War broke out in 1768 and empress Catherine II tried to impress 20,000 Kalmyk cavalymen to fight the Ottoman Empire and its minions. The Kalmyks could only provide 10,000 men and after disputes with the Russian army commanders many of these deserted.

Then there was the dispute over religion. The Kalmyks had continued to practice the Tibetan form of Buddhism which they had brought with them from Inner Asia. They maintained close ties with Tibet and regularly sent embassies to the Dalai Lama. Kalmyk lamas went to Tibet for training and Kalmyk noblemen and others who could afford it (the roundtrip often took several years) made pilgrimages to Lhasa and other religious sites in Tibet. As their political and economic situation deteriorated, however, the Kalmyks came under more and more pressure to convert to Russian Orthodox Christianity. According to Khodarkovsky:

The Russian government encouraged conversion by all possible feasible means. Those Kalmyks who chose to convert and settle down with the Don Cossacks were put on the military payroll and for the next few years were paid a higher salary than the cossacks. On other occasions, the [converted] Kalmyks were granted tax exemptions for three to five years. The Kalmyk *tayishis* [noblemen] who chose to convert were rewarded with handsome salaries and could live in towns or settlements especially built for them.¹¹

When Donduk-Dashi Khan (r.1741–61) attempted to build a Buddhist temple in Astrakhan, the largest city on the lower Volga, he was told by the Russian government in St. Petersburg that “it was not appropriate to build a temple for idol worshipping in the empire of Her Majesty . . .”¹² Traditional-minded Kalmyks in general were deeply offended by these assaults on their religious beliefs. Kalmyk noblemen, infuriated by what they viewed as the subversion of their Buddhism-based society, even burned down the settlements of some Christian converts. Russo-Kalmyk relations were quickly reaching their nadir.

As early as 1747 some Kalymks, intensely disillusioned with life in Russia, had raised the possibility of leaving the country altogether and returning to their original homeland in Inner Asia. The sentiment picked up steam throughout the 1750s and 60s. In 1771, at long last, the Kalmyks had had enough, and they decided to return to Inner Asia. Thus began the tragic epic of the Kalmyk Migration, what Khodarkovsky calls “the last known exodus of a nomadic people in the history of Asia.”¹³

In late 1770 the nobleman Tsebek-Dorji had addressed the issue in a speech to the governing council of the Kalmyk Khan:

Look how your rights are being limited in all respects. Russian officials mistreat you and the government wants to make peasants out of you. The banks of the Yayik and Volga are now covered with cossack settlements, and the northern borders of your steppes are inhabited by Germans. In a little while, the Don, Terek, and Kum will also be colonized and you will be pushed to the waterless steppes and the only source of your existence, your herds, will perish. Ubashi's son has already been ordered given as a hostage, and three hundred from among the noble Kalmyks are to reside in the Russian capital. You can see your situation, and in the future you will have two options—either to carry your burden of slavery, or to leave Russia and thus end your misfortunes. Dalai Lama himself selected two years in which a migration to Jungaria could be undertaken. These two years have arrived. So your present decision will determine your future.”¹⁴

Ubashi Khan and Louzang Jalchin, the head lama of the Kalmyks,

agreed that the moment had come to act. At this time the majority of the Kalmyks, including most of the Torgut, were on the east side of the Volga. The Dörböt and Khoshut, along a few Torgut, were on the west side. Ubashi Khan himself had moved to the east side of the Volga in the autumn of 1770. The decision to leave Russia had been made, but Ubashi wanted to wait until the Volga was frozen over so the Kalmyks on the west side could cross over and join the exodus. Events forced his hand. Rumors of the planned departure of the Kalymks had leaked out and there was a chance the Russians would take military action to stop them. Then Russian authorities called up 10,000 more Kalmyk cavalryman for service with the Russian army. This was the last straw.

On the morning of January 5 all the Kalmyks on the east side of the Volga—31,000 families, some 150,000 men, women, and children—mounted up and headed eastward to Inner Asia. Various detachments of Cossacks, Russians, and Bashkirs (Moslem tribesmen) were sent to halt the escaping Kalmyks and force them to return to the Russian dominions, but they were outnumbered and eventually returned empty-handed. The Kalmyk horde reached the banks of the Emba River, where they camped while awaiting Spring and fresh grass. Yet more detachments of Russian troops were set out after the Kalmyks but they too were rebuffed. The Kalmyks moved on and by early June had reached Lake Balkash in what is now Kazakhstan. Here they encountered their hereditary enemies the Kazakhs, who were thirsting for revenge for earlier Kalmyk attacks against them. Outnumbered and surrounded, the Kalmyks only managed to escape by means of an unexpected night-time breakout and a forced march onward. Most of their sheep herds they had brought with them were lost in the fighting and soon famine set in.

By the time they reached the Ili River in what is now Xinjiang Province in China over 100,000 Kalmyks had died from fighting, famine, and lack of water. The survivors, numbering at most 50,000, were greeted by Qing officials and given emergency aid of tents, wheat, rice, sheep, and other commodities. The Qing viewed the return of the Kalmyks as a huge propaganda victory, demonstrating to other nomads the advantages of living under Chinese rather than Russian rule. The Qianlong emperor found even greater significant in the return of the Kalmyks. His mother Hsin-mao was celebrating her 80th birthday in 1771 and in her honor Qianlong had commissioned the construction of an enormous temple in the Qing summer resort of Jehol (current-day Chengde). The Putuoazon-

gcheng Temple, as it was called, was supposed to be replica of the Potala in Lhasa. Then came news of the return of the Kalmyks, coinciding with the dedication of the temple. Qianlong caused a stele to be erected at the temple with an inscription on it in Chinese, Mongolian, Tibetan, and Manchurian which read in part:

Our vassals over the border all believe in the religion of Sakyamuni. Jehol was the spot where our grandfather the Emperor K'ang-his [the Kangxi Emperor], pacified and appeased them, and there he granted them audiences . . . Now the temple is finished in time for a great national event [Hsin-mao's birthday] that is to be celebrated by all, in a unique manner . . . In addition to this, the Torgot [Kalmyks, including the Torgut], who have lived in Russia for some time, have returned for religious reasons. The whole of their tribe—which numbers many ten-thousands—arrived just at this time, after wandering about for more than six months. Here is a connection that is mystic.¹⁵

Ubashi himself was invited to Jehol and sumptuously wined and dined by Qianlong. He was told he could keep his title of Khan but in fact his people were divided into separate banners and dispersed throughout Xinjiang. They were now under Qing jurisdiction and Ubashi was their ruler in name only. Despite Qianlong's honeyed words, the Kalmyks quickly discovered that Qing rule was anything but benign. As Khodarkovsky puts it, "The Kalmyks had escaped Russian tentacles only to be ensnared in Chinese ones."¹⁶ (The immense pile of the Putuozongcheng Temple, which is actually little more than a hollow façade, looms over the city of Chengde to this day; Qianlong's stele is still prominently displayed out front.)

In the meantime, Russian Empress Catherine II I was infuriated that 150,000 of her subjects had managed to escape her domains. She issued ultimatums to the Qing government demanding the return of "these rogues and traitors" but they were ignored.

This great exodus of the Kalmyks inspired Thomas de Quincey (1785-1859), the eccentric English author perhaps better known for his *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, to pen an ode entitled *Revolt of the Tartars*, which begins with an exegesis of the whole episode:

There is no great event in modern history, or, perhaps it may be said more broadly, none in all history, from its earliest records, less generally known, or more striking to the imagination, than the flight eastwards of a principal Tartar nation across the boundless steppes of Asia in the latter half of the last century. The terminus a quo of this flight and the terminus ad quem

are equally magnificent—the mightiest of Christian thrones being the one, the mightiest of pagan the other; and the grandeur of these two terminal objects is harmoniously supported by the romantic circumstances of the flight. In the abruptness of its commencement and the fierce velocity of its execution we read an expression of the wild, barbaric character of the agents. In the unity of purpose connecting this myriad of wills, and in the blind but unerring aim at a mark so remote, there is something which recalls to the mind those almighty instincts that propel the migrations of the swallow and the leeming [sic] or the life-withering marches of the locust. Then, again, in the gloomy vengeance of Russia and her vast artillery, which hung upon the rear and the skirts of the fugitive vassals, we are reminded of Miltonic images—such, for instance, as that of the solitary hand pursuing through desert spaces and through ancient chaos a rebellious host, and overtaking with volleying thunders those who believed themselves already within the security of darkness and of distance.¹⁷

As we surmise, Dambijantsan was a member of the Dörböt tribe. The Dörböt, who in the early years of the Kalmyk occupation of the Caspian steppe roamed the westernmost stretches of the Kalmyk realm, along the River Don, a tributary of the Azov Sea, had in 1743 been moved en masse further east to the steppes bordering the west bank of the Volga River by Donduk Dashi Khan, who had been granted power over them by the Russian government.¹⁸ Residing as they did on the west bank of the Volga, most if not all of the Dörböts remained behind after the great migration of the Kalmyks back to Zungaria in 1771.

In retaliation for the exodus the Russian government on October 19 1771 stripped these remaining Kalmyks of “the last vestige of their political independence” and ordered that they all remain of the west side of the Volga River year-round.¹⁹ Thus it was on the Caspian Steppes on the west bank of the Volga that Dambijantsan, as we have posited, was born in 1860. As noted, he may have been born into the Sanaev family, but this is by no means certain. From his very earliest age he must have been aware that he was one of the “left behind people,” and that the vast majority of his fellow Mongols were off somewhere to the east in Inner Asia. He would spend most of his life trying to reconnect with these people.

CHAPTER FOUR

EARLY LIFE

At the time Dambijantsan was born, at the beginning of the 1860s, Tibetan Buddhism, despite the continued pressure to convert the Kalmyks to Russian Orthodoxy, was still prevalent in Kalmykia, the land of the Kalmyks. In all likelihood Dambijantsan was born into a family which adhered to Buddhism to one degree or another. The first news we hear of him is that at the age of seven he was supposedly enrolled as a novice in a Buddhist monastery in Dolonnuur, in what is now the Chinese province of Inner Mongolia. Maisky heard this story while in western Mongolia in 1919, when Dambijantsan was still alive. Dolonnuur was firmly in the orbit of the Eastern Mongols, the Chahar of Inner Mongolia and Khalkh of what was then considered Outer Mongolia, and at first glance it appears strange that a young Dörböt from the Volga River in Russia would have gravitated there. Kalmyks wishing to enter a monastery outside of Kalmykia, we would think, would have been more drawn to western China, including the modern-day provinces of Xinjiang, Qinghai, and Gansu, the traditional strongholds of the Torgut, Dörböt, and other Oirats, both those who not migrated westward in the early seventeenth century and those who had returned in the great exodus of 1771. Fred Adelman, in his introduction to Pozdneev's *Mongolia and Mongols* makes precisely this objection, and John Gaunt in his doctoral thesis on Dambijantsan repeats it: "it would be unlikely to find a Volga Kalmuk at Doloon Nuur, as they were not oriented toward Inner Mongolia's monastic net."¹

The French scholar Isabelle Charleux, an expert on Inner Mongolian monasteries, has a different view: “There were many monks and students [at Dolonnuur] from all of the Mongol world, given the reputation of the Dolonnuur monasteries that attracted people from very far away . . . The Dolonnuur monasteries were not only connected with the Khalkh Mongols, but also with the Inner Mongolians of Alashan and Kholun Buir . . . Also the migrant population of the Chahar banners included many Oirat Mongols. If Dambijantsan’s parents were especially fond of the Dolonnuur monasteries—because they knew a lama there, because of the reputation of the monasteries, etc.—they would have sent their child there.”²

A Russian researcher adds that Dambijantsan’s parents moved to Inner Mongolia “for all the usual reasons”—presumably they were traders—when he was a very small boy, which would explain how the seven-year old boy ended up there.³ Therefore it is entirely possible that this entry into Dambijantsan’s curriculum vitae was not simply a later invention meant to burnish this reputation among the Khalkh Mongols but that he actually was enrolled as a monk at Dolonnuur at an early age. In any case, this is the last we hear of his parents.

Dolonnuur (*doloon* = seven, *nuur* = lake; Seven Lakes) is located in the grasslands (now suffering from increasing desertification) 210 miles north of Beijing, about fifty-two miles beyond the first major pass leading to the Mongolian Plateau. The area is much hallowed in Mongolian history. Fourteen miles from the current town of Dolonnuur is the site of Shangdu, originally established in 1256 as the headquarters of Chingis Khan’s grandson Khubilai. After Khubilai founded the Yüan Dynasty he made what is now Beijing the primary capital of his empire, but he retained Shangdu as his summer capital, where he and his court retired each year to escape the enervating heat of the North China Plain. Shangdu was destroyed in the so-called “Red Scarf Rebellion” of 1358, a precursor to the upheavals which led to the fall of the Yuan Dynasty in 1368 and the rise of the Ming Dynasty. Later the city became known to some as the Xiancheng, or Apparition City, since people claimed that at certain times the old city as it was in the days of Khubilai appeared suddenly before their eyes and then disappeared just as quickly, leaving only the ruins as we see them today. Shangdu is also remembered as the subject of Coleridge’s much celebrated poem “Xanadu”:

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan

A stately pleasure-dome decree:
 Where Alph, the sacred river ran
 Through caverns measureless to man
 Down to a sunless sea . . .

The ruins are now a popular tourist attraction and the area still serves as a summer getaway, only now not for Mongol potentates but for Beijing's middle classes. More important to our story, however, it was at nearby Dolonnuur that in 1691 a fateful meeting took place between the Kangxi emperor of China and Zanabazar, the First Bogd Gegeen of Mongolia and the nominal head of the Khalkh Mongols.

When we last left Khara Khula he was organizing the four tribes of the Oirat into the Oirat Confederation. He died in 1634 and his son Baatar-Khongtaiji then assumed the throne. In 1635 the Dalai Lama officially recognized Baatar-Khongtaiji as the leader of the Oirats and gave him the title of Yerdyen.⁴ By 1640 Baatar-Khongtaiji's realm became known as the Zungarian Khanate.⁵ The name derives from the Mongol *zuun gar*, "left hand," or "eastern side"; although the Oirats dwelt in the western end of the lands inhabited by Mongol peoples, the Choros tribe to which Khara Khula and Baatar-Khongtaiji belonged was the easternmost of the Oirat confederation and thus on the "left hand" looking southward, as the Mongols always oriented themselves.⁶

Following a long internecine struggle between Baatar-Khongtaiji's offspring, replete with fratricide and rivers of blood, Galdan, probably the youngest of his eleven or so sons, seized the reins of the Zungarian Khanate. Under Galdan the Zungarian Khanate eventually encompassed a huge swath of Inner Asia, including the western edge of current-day Mongolia, the current-day Chinese province of Xinjiang, including the Silk Road cities of Hami, Turpan, and Kashgar, the legendary cities of Bukhara and Samarkand in what is now Uzbekistan, and the eastern part of current-day Kazakhstan. Although little remembered today, during Galdan's reign the Zungarian Khanate was a formidable adversary of both Czarist Russia and Qing-Dynasty China.

Galdan would become one of the role models of Dambijantsan, and we will return for a more detailed examination of his career in good time. Suffice it to say here that in 1688 Galdan, hoping to add the territory of the Khalkh Mongols to the Zungarian Empire, invaded what is now the country of Mongolia. Meeting little opposition from the disorganized

Khalkh, his army first trashed the great monastery of Erdene Zuu, built on site of the old Mongol capital of Kharkhorum, and the monastery at Khögnö Khan Uul (now known as Khögnö Taryn Khiid), just to the east. Advancing farther eastward into the Khentii Mountains north of Ulaan Baatar, Galdan's men then demolished Saridgiin Khiid, the monastery which had been established by Zanabazar himself and intended to be the center of Buddhism in Mongolia. Zanabazar, his brother the Tüsheet khan Chakhuundorj, the leaders of the other Khalkh khanates, and, according to one source, at least 30,000 of their followers fled southeastward before the advance of Galdan's troops, eventually reaching the edge of the Mongolian Plateau near Dolonnuur, land of the Chahar Mongols, who had already accepted the authority of the Qing Dynasty. Here the Khalkh Mongols, by now almost destitute, threw themselves at mercy of the Qing emperor Kangxi.⁷

Dolonnuur was at that time already an important monastic center, with no less than twelve incarnate lamas in residence. The town, strategically located at the edge of the Mongolian plateau, was also a busy Chinese-Mongolian entrepôt. Because of deposits of copper ore nearby it became a center of mining and smelting, and its factories were well-known for their weapons, and later its workshops became better known for the bronze Buddhist artwork of the Dolonnuur School.

The Kangxi emperor, apprized of the arrival of the Khalkh Mongols in his domains, decided to meet with their leaders and if possible bring them into the fold of the Qing Dynasty. He left Beijing on May 9, 1691 and made his leisurely way north, stopping to do a spot of hunting on the way. From May 29 to June 3 Kangxi finally meet with Zanabazar and the other Khalkh leaders in Dolonnuur. A great banquet was followed by a display of Qing might in the form of cannons, newly acquired from Jesuits in Beijing, the firing of which caused the Mongols "to tremble with fear and admiration," at least according to Qing sources.⁸ The upshot of all this was that 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. The country which Chingis Khan and his sons had conquered and his grandson Khubilai had once ruled as the first emperor of the Mongol Yüan 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 consequence of Zanabazar's capitulation to Kangxi, and as a result many Mongolians resent him to this day. Dambijantsan himself would devote the greater part of his life to undoing what Zanabazar had done and restoring the independence of Mongolia.

But that was all in the future. In 1691, In honor of his meeting with Zanabazar and the capitulation of the Mongols, Kangxi ordered the construction of what would become the Khökh Süm, or Blue Temple. (One prominent Mongolian incarnation, the Kanjurwa Khutagt (1914–1980), maintains that on the contrary Mongol nobles built the temple in honor of Kangxi, a telling interpretation of events from a Mongol viewpoint.⁹) The Khökh Süm was completed around 1700 and it eventually began the center of a sizable monastery. About a half mile away, the Shar Süm, or Yellow Temple, was built between 1729 and 1731 and it too became the foundation of a monastery. Both monasteries were overseen by a line of incarnate lamas known as the Jangjya Khutagts. Sedendonub, the first Jangjya Khutagt, was instructed by Kangxi himself to “spend the chilly wintertime in Peking and in the summertime heat govern here and the direct the local clergy.”¹⁰ The Jangjya Khutagts maintained residences at both the Blue Temple and the Yellow Temple. The second Jangjya Khutagt, Rölpe Dorjé, was described by one scholar as “an intimate of the Qianlong emperor and thus perhaps the most powerful Tibetan hierarch in the Qing Empire.”¹¹ Dolonnuur's importance as a monastic center was underlined by the fact that the Third Panchen Lama visited here during his trip to China in 1780. The Panchen Lamas along with the Dalai Lamas were the highest ranking incarnate lamas in Tibet. The Panchen Lama arrived in Dolonnuur on the 20th day of the 6th month, and according to hagiographic Tibetan accounts was greeted by one million people, although this is almost certainly an exaggeration. In any case, while in Dolonnuur the Panchen Lama reportedly “performed a purification ritual that pacified the restless demons of Mongolia.”¹² He also gave Yamantaka initiation to the Jangjya Khutagt and read prayers dedicated to the sacred land of Shambhala, a realm for which he had already written a guidebook entitled *Shambhala Lamyig*.

From Dolonnuur the Panchen Lama proceeded to the Qing Summer Resort at Jehol where he was amazed to discover not only a huge replica of the Potala in Lhasa, already alluded to, but also a replica of his own Tashilhunpo Monastery in Shigatse. This complex of temples and facades, known as the Xumifoushou Miao (Happiness and Longevity

Temple of Mt. Sumeru) was hurriedly constructed in 1779 and early 1780 by order of the Qianlong emperor. In front of it he had placed yet another stele declaring that the complex had been built to provide the Panchen Lama with “a restful place for meditation.”¹³ The Xumifoushou Miao too is now a major tourist attraction. Unfortunately, the Panchen Lama never returned to Tibet from this trip. From Jehol he proceeded Beijing to where he contracted small pox and died in late November of 1780.

The Russian ethnographer A. M. Podzneeov visited Dolonuur in 1893. By then the monastic center seems to have lost some of its luster. The Yellow Temple had some 400 monks and the Khökh Temple some 500, not a lot compared to monasteries in Lhasa in Tibet and Örgöö (now Ulaan Baatar] in Mongolia. The fourth Jangiya Khutagt, who died in 1891, spent most of his life in Beijing and had not visited Dolonuur in fifty years. Podzneeov was by that time a very seasoned traveler in Mongolia and China but even he was shocked by conditions in Dolonuur: “It would be hard to imagine anything dirtier and in greater disarray than Dolonuur’s street and alleys. The street in all Chinese cities are normally narrow and dirty, but here they are even narrower and dirtier . . . In the rainy season these ditches used as thoroughfares are so full of water and mud that some of the streets become literally impassable.”¹⁴

Presumably this was more-or-less the same Dolonuur Dambijantsan would have experienced in the late 1860s when he arrived there at the age of seven and became a novice monk.

The beginnings of Dambijantsan’s monastic career are unclear. He may have taken the preliminary vow known as *Rabjun*, which is given to young boys when they first enter a monastery. In addition to learning to read and write Mongolian, he probably began to study at least written Tibetan, since at that time most Buddhist texts were in the Tibetan language, and he would have received lessons in elementary Buddhism teachings, including the doctrines of the Gelug, or Yellow Hat, sect, one of the four main divisions of Tibetan Buddhism and the one to which the Dalai Lama belonged.

From his fellow Mongolian students, many of them from Khalkh Mongolia, the young boy who had been born in Russia may have imbibed the anti-Manchu sentiment then growing among a people ever-increasingly impoverished by their Qing masters. And perhaps he even got a sense that all was not well in the Qing Dynasty itself, then still reeling from the

disastrous Second Opium War of 1856–60. In 1860, the year Dambijantsan was born, British and French forces had entered Beijing and sacked the Summer Palace, then forced on the Qing government to sign the so-called Peking Convention, which opened several Chinese ports to foreign trade, gave foreigners the right to travel in the interior of China, allowed Christian missionaries into the country, and, perhaps most importantly, legalized the importation of opium, the mainstay of British trade at the time. It was a blow from which the Qing Dynasty would never really recover. The emperor Xianfeng, totally mortified by China's defeat in the Opium War and the onerous settlement forced on him by the foreign powers, died a broken man a year later at the age of twenty-nine. One of his concubines would lead a coup *état* and subsequently rule China for the next forty-seven years as the Empress Dowager Cixi, overseeing the slow but inexorable decline leading to the final extinguishment of the Qing Dynasty. When the Qing Dynasty finally did fall, in 1911–12, Dambijantsan would be in western Mongolian, leading the fight for Mongolian independence.

Maisky and George Roerich both allude to Dambijantsan's youthful sojourn in Dolonuur but give no details.¹⁵ According to one of his Russian biographers he excelled in his studies and was soon marked out for advancement in the lamaistic community. Talented and ambitious young monks were inevitably drawn to Lhasa, the wellspring and lodestone of Tibetan Buddhism, so it is not surprising that Dambijantsan would have set his sights on the Tibetan capital. There was a problem, however. Although a Kalmyk, he was apparently a Russian citizen, and most foreigners, including even Buddhists from Russia, were not allowed into Tibet. The earlier fraternal ties the Kalmyks had enjoyed with Tibet had ended at least a hundred years ago. But as a Mongolian-speaking Kalmyk studying in Dooloonuur he might well have been able to pass himself off as a Khalkh from Mongolia. As such he would have been allowed to travel to Tibet and enroll in a monasteries there. Dambijantsan's propensity for assumed false identities might well have begun at this point.

In any event, we soon find Dambijantsan in Lhasa, the capital of Tibet and home of the Dalai Lama, enrolled in the Drepung Monastery, one of the "Great Three" monasteries of Tibet, along with Sera and Gandan. Drepung (literally "rice heap") Monastery had been founded in 1416 by Jamyang Chöje Tashi Pelden ("Dashi-baldan" in Mongolian accounts),

born in Tibet near Samye Monastery, and a close disciple of Tsongkhapa, the founder of the Gelug sect. He was believed to be the eleventh appearance of Javzandamba, the line of incarnations of which Zanabazar, the First Bogd Gegeen of Mongolia, was the sixteenth. In addition to Drepung, he established more than one hundred other monasteries, retreat centers, and hermitages all over Tibet.¹⁶

Drepung, located at the base of Gambo Utse Mountain about five miles west of the Potala, was once reputed to be the largest Buddhist monastery in the world, with as many as 8,000 monks in residence. The second, third and fourth Dalai Lamas lived at Drepung—this was before the completion of the Potala, later the residence of the Dalai Lamas—and their bodies were entombed here. Zanabazar, the First Bogd Gegeen of Mongolia stayed at Drepung during his visits to Tibet in the years 1649–51 and 1655–56. Drepung was divided into colleges (*dratsangs*) which specialized in a particular teaching or hosted monks from some specific area in the Buddhist world. One college, for example, hosted monks from Kham, in eastern Tibet. Gomang College was famous for its Mongolian monks, and it was here that Dambijantsan gravitated.

Drepung in general was renowned as an institute of higher learning, with many monks studying for fifteen or twenty years to achieve the Buddhist equivalent of a doctorate degree. Any monk aspiring to reach the pinnacle of Buddhist teachings could fulfill his ambitions here. According to George Roerich, Dambijantsan spent “many years” at Drepung. Unfortunately we do not know who his teachers were, what specific teachings he specialized in, or what initiations he might have taken. His years at Gomang College were not wasted, however. “People who knew him well,” according to Roerich, “affirm that his knowledge of Buddhist metaphysics and secret Tantric teachings was unusually vast and it seems he enjoyed a high reputation among the high lamas of Mongolia.”¹⁷

Given his apparent talents, Dambijantsan might have gone to become a teacher himself at Drepung or some other monastery and eventually become a high-ranking lama in the Buddhist hierarchy. It was not to be. According to Roerich, “From his youth, he manifested an ambitious, impetuous, and cruel character.” This aspect of his character now came to the fore. “It is generally said,” continues Roerich, “that he killed his roommate in the monastery because of a dispute and had to flee Lhasa in order to escape from the stern monastic law. This fact is generally known in Tibet and Mongolia.”¹⁸

Obviously any advancement in the monastic world was now impossible. A new stage of Dambijantsan's life was about to begin. As Roerich notes, "It seems the murder was the crucial point of his life for from then on begins his life as an errant warrior monk, full of wonderful adventures, messianic prophecies, and cruel deeds."¹⁹

Later in life, when he was living in Mongolia, Dambijantsan regaled A. V. Burdukov with tales of his earlier travels, including sojourns in India. Maisky and Roerich also heard tell of these Indian travels. It is never quite clear when he went to India, but we might surmise that after killing his roommate he might have found it wise to remove himself to the Indian subcontinent and thereby escape severe punishment for the crime of murder from the monastic and perhaps civil authorities in Tibet. Dambijantsan, already deeply steeped in metaphysics and tantric teachings, would have found himself at home among the various yogis, fakirs, magicians, and itinerant savants of India, and would have ample opportunities for learning and expanding the wide variety of talents he would exhibit in later life. He would become legendary for his skills at hypnosis, clairvoyance, mind-reading, fortune telling and other arcane arts which were the stock and trade of India's holy men. What talents he may have had in these areas would have been further honed during his stay on the subcontinent. By the early 1930s, almost a decade after his death, these Indian adventures had become an accepted part of his curriculum vitae. Henning Haslund picked up the story circulating around the campfires of Mongolia that Dambijantsan "himself asserted that he acquired in India the supernatural qualities of the fakirs."²⁰ Beyond this we can add nothing about Dambijantsan's alleged Indian interlude.

At some point in time in the early 1880s Dambijantsan may have gone back to Russia. In any event, he somehow managed to attach himself to the 1883–85 Inner Asian Expedition of Russian explorer and zoologist N. M. Przhevalsky (1839–1888). Przhevalsky's earlier 1870–1873 expedition had been first serious Russian attempt to penetrate the maidenhead of virginal—at least from the Russian viewpoint—Tibet. On this first try he reached the northern edge of the Tibetan Plateau and the vicinity of the headwaters of the Yangtze River before being forced to turn back. A later expedition in 1879–80, this one authorized by the Czar and backed up by a formidable detachment of armed-to-the-teeth Cossacks, got to

within 150 miles of Lhasa before encountering a large contingent of the Tibetan army. In the ensuing stand-off Przhevalsky finally backed down. "Let someone else, a luckier traveler than me, proceed farther into Asia. I have done everything I could do and that was possible to do," pouted the disheartened explorer.²¹ Russians, unlike the English a few decades later, were not yet ready to shoot their way into Lhasa.

Interestingly, upon his return to Russia Przhevalsky prepared a memorandum in which he proposed pushing the Russian border with Mongolia down to about the latitude of Örgöö, now Ulaan Baatar. Russian geographers, it seems, had opined that the mountains and mixed forest-steppe from the vicinity of Örgöö northward were really a continuation of Siberia, and thus based on landforms the border should run along the crest of Bogd Khan Uul (mountain) just south of Örgöö, beyond which lies the treeless steppe, desert steppe, and deserts of Mongolia proper. Thus Örgöö would then be in Russia. Przhevalsky had a religio-political motive for this proposal:

In future, should the English want to penetrate into Tibet from India, it is very likely that the Dalai Lama would move his residence to Urga, towards his most ardent believers there, the Mongols. Then, by possessing Urga and patronizing the Dalai Lama, we would be able to influence the entire Buddhist world.²²

Przhevalsky was surprisingly prescient here. As already mentioned, in 1904 the English Younghusband Expedition did invade Tibet and the 13th Dalai Lama did flee to Örgöö. Of course Przhevalsky's proposal to move the border south had not been taken serious and at the time Örgöö was still the capital of Mongolia and not a Russian city.

Przhevalsky's 1883–1885 expedition started at Kyakhta, the entrepôt on the Russian-Mongolian border, proceeded south, presumably through Örgöö, to the Gobi Desert and then westward to the eastern spurs of the Tian Shan Mountains in Xinjiang. The expedition then veered off to the sources of Yangtze River and Qinghai Lake in modern-day Qinghai Province, China, continued on westwards to Khotan, on the southern edge of the Takhlimakán Desert, and finally northward to the huge lake of Issyk Kol in modern-day Kyrgyzstan. Thus the three-year-long expedition traversed a huge swatch of Inner Asia but did not enter Tibet proper.

Dambijantsan reportedly accompanied the expedition as one of its eighteen armed escorts. At this time he was traveling under the Russian alias Irinchinov. A photograph of the escorts showing Dambijantsan at

the far left is, according to one researcher, “the first pictorial record of the charismatic adventurer that can be traced hitherto.”²³ Dambijantsan was already familiar with Inner Mongolia from his stay at Dolonuur, and assuming that he joined the expedition at its beginning in Khyakhta he now would have had ample opportunities to spy out the land of the Khalkh, the current-day country of Mongolia. At this time, however, he was just a hired-hand traveling under an alias and had not yet assumed the role of Ja Lama, the descendant/incarnation of Amarsanaa come to free the Mongols from the yoke of the Manchus. Yet we may assume that the ambitious adventurer had his eyes wide open, and was even at this point plotting his dramatic reappearance in Mongolia as the leader of a liberation movement.

There are unsubstantiated rumors that Dambijantsan had earlier accompanied the expedition of Russian explorer Grigory Nikolayaevich Potanin (1836–1920), who traveled through western Mongolia in the years 1876–77, with stays in the towns of Khovd and Uliastai (Potanin Glacier, which flows off Khuiten Uul, the highest peak in Mongolia, in Bayan-Ölgii Aimag, is named after the Russian explorer). This claim is part of Dambijantsan lore repeated to this day in Khovd Aimag, although there does not appear to be any written documentation to support it. In any case, Khovd City and Uliastai would later play important roles in the Dambijantsan saga, and it is quite possible that he visited them before he assumed the role of Ja Lama.

As we have seen, however, there were disparate accounts of how Dambijantsan spent the late 1870s and 1880s. According to the informant Gombo, alluded to earlier, Dambijantsan spent many of these years in Russian prisons, serving time for robbery and perhaps even murder. According to his version of events Dambijantsan escaped from prison just prior to his arrival in Mongolia in 1890 and was thus a wanted man when he suddenly appeared among the Mongols claiming to be a descendant and/or reincarnation of Amarsanaa. Did he end up in a Russian prison after his alleged participation in Przhevalsky’s 1883–1885 expedition, or is Gombo’s account simply erroneous? The prison story, although repeated to this day by people in the western aimags, appears to have no source other than the dubious claims of the man named Gombo.²⁴ As we shall see, however, Dambijantsan eventually did end up in prison. The tale of his imprisonment prior to 1890 might well have been a distortion of later events.



While it is easy to imagine a gun-toting Dambijantsan as part of an armed escort on expeditions to the remote fastnesses of Inner Asia, or even as a convict in a Russian prison, it is a bit more difficult to picture him as a lawyer with a briefcase stalking the halls of a courthouse. Yet while in Mongolia in 1927 painter, mystic, Shambhalist Nicholas Roerich, father of already mentioned George Roerich, would hear that Dambijantsan, “no ordinary bandit,” was “a graduate of law from Petrograd University.”²⁵ For a moment a vision rises before us of Dambijantsan, a Kalmyk Mongol from the sun-drenched Caspian Steppes, striding the cobblestone streets of Peter the Great’s gray, gloomy city by the Gulf of Finland. Inessa Lomakina, Dambijantsan’s indefatigable Russian biographer, took the time to track down even this flimsy lead and came away with a different picture:

I couldn’t believe it at all [that Dambijantsan had studied law in St. Petersburg], so I decided to consult the historical archives of St. Petersburg, where the records of the university is stored, in order to check on whether this information was true or not. Fortunately, there was the card index of all the students who studied at that university before the revolution. I searched very carefully for any of the names which the Ja Lama may have used but didn’t find any. Moreover, I looked through all the personal files of students, entrance application forms, graduation certificates of the gymnasium, college graduation diplomas, exam papers, course papers, application forms for the higher education courses, etc. . . .²⁶

She found nothing and by the end must have seriously regretted Roerich’s off-hand comment about Dambijantsan’s studies in St. Petersburg. Thus whatever else Dambijantsan was guilty of in his long and eventful life he cannot be accused of being a lawyer.

Dambijantsan himself claimed that he “served as one of the Ta Lamas or Heads of Department in the Chang-skya Khutughtu [Jangjya Khutagt] yamen at Peking, a learned ecclesiastical institution entrusted with the fixing of the calendar and other astronomical and metaphysical questions.”²⁷ The Jangjya Khutagts were as we have seen incarnate lamas connected with the monasteries in Dolonnuur where Dambijantsan may have studied as a boy. The fourth Jangjya Khutagt, who would have been alive at the time in question, was very seldom in attendance at Dolonnuur and lived almost full-time in Beijing.

The Songzhu Monastery in the old Imperial city was his full time residence in the capital. This ancient Chinese monastery, which specialized in printing sutras during the Ming Dynasty, was converted into a Tibetan monastery in 1712 by the Kangxi emperor. In 1724 it was given to Rölpe Dorjé, the second Jangjya Khutagt, and served as the residence of the subsequent Jangjya Khutagts. It did not appear, however, to have been a “learned ecclesiastical institution” of the kind where Dambijantsan supposedly served. The Yonghe Gong was the main academic monastery of Beijing, with various colleges that dealt with astronomy and calendar making, medicine, and various esoteric studies, and this may be the institution to which Dambijantsan made mention. Whether he was actually one of the Ta (or Da) Lamas there is another question altogether. Since the position would have acquired considerable academic credentials he could have held the post only after his studies at Drepung. But after his stay at Drepung he was wanted for murder in Tibet, and this would seem to preclude him from holding a high position in a Tibeto-Mongolian Buddhist institution in Beijing. Either officials in Beijing were unaware of his past, or he had just made up this episode about being a Da Lama in Beijing to further burnish his reputation after he began a famous man in Mongolia.

We have covered most everything known about the first three decades of Dambijantsan’s life. Up until 1890 he had, in effect, been in training for his future role. At the age of thirty or so he was about to assume a new persona: the descendant of Amarsanaa returning to the land of the Mongols in order to free them from their Qing oppressors.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE LEGEND OF AMARSANAA

How Dambijantsan spent the late 1880s remains unclear, but in the spring of 1890 he suddenly appeared near the city of Kulja, on the Ili River in what is now Xinjiang Province of China. Whatever he had been doing in the previous years he was now transformed. He was no longer an aspiring member of a monastic community, nor an itinerant drifter, nor a hired-hand with Russian expeditions, nor an alleged thief and outlaw. Instead he made a startling announcement to all who would listen: he was the grandson of the Oirat chieftain, Amarsanaa, who had led the last great revolt against Qing rule, and he had returned to take up the struggle once again and free Mongol peoples from the tyranny of the Qing Dynasty.

The Ili Basin where Dambijantsan chose to reappear in his new guise was part of the New Frontier (*xin jiang*) added to the domains of the Qing Dynasty China after the defeat of Amarsanaa in 1757, but separated as it was from the rest of Xinjiang by formidable geographical barriers it constituted a distinct domain of its own. Also, as one geographer points out, the Ili Basin is of “special interest as the historical divide between the eastern and western halves of Inner Asia.”¹ As such it was more oriented toward the west, towards the vast steppes and deserts that stretch off to the shores of Caspian Sea, than to mountain-rimmed basins and depressions to the east. The Ili River was the easternmost of the rivers known to the Türks who inhabited the region in the sixth century as *Jetisu*, or “Sev-

en Rivers.“ Later this area would become known as Semireche, Russian for Seven Rivers. Bounded on the west by the Talas River and the east by the Ili, and including the Chu and other rivers in eastern current-day Kazakhstan, “Semireche is an area where sedentaries and nomads have met at various points in history—coexisting, overlapping, or competing—because it lends itself to both ways of life . . .”²

The Ili River itself begins about thirty miles east of the current-day city of Yining (also know as Ili, Yili, Kulja, and Gulja), at the confluence of the Kax and the Künes rivers. Both of these rivers, which flow roughly parallel through the Ili Basin, begin about 150 miles farther east, originating from glaciers sheathing 18,044-foot Erenhaberg Shan (*shan* = mountain), a peak located at the nexus of the of the Tian Shan Range and the Borohogo Shan Range. The Tian Shan, which bisects Xinjiang east to west, culminates in the 22,949-foot peak of Khan Tengri, about 260 miles west of Erenhaberg Shan. This formidable range separates the Ili Basin from the huge Tarim Basin and Taklimahan Desert to the south. From the peak of Erenhaberg Shan the Borohogo Shan Range extends west to the Zungarian Alatau Mountains on the current-day border between China and Kazakhstan. With peaks of up to 11,000 feet, this range separates the Ili Basin from the immense Zungarian Basin to the north. The Ili River itself flows 388 miles west from the confluence of the Kax and Künes rivers, emerging from the double prongs of the Tian Shan and the Borohogo Shan and flowing out into the Khusundaka Steppe before finally debouching into the land-locked, 6,562-square-mile Lake Balkhash in Kazakhstan.

Up to sixty miles wide near the current border with Kazakhstan, well watered by rivers flowing off the flanks of the Borohogo Shan and Tian Shan ranges, with fertile riverine bottomlands bordered by rich grasslands ramping to the mountains on the north and south, the Ili Basin was a prize that was coveted and fought over by nomads for at least 2500 years. Many of these nomads, after rising to power in this fecund land, eventually migrated elsewhere and founded great dynasties and empires. The people known as Scythians, or Saka, may have inhabited this area as early as the seventh-century B.C.³ After they were dislodged by the Yuezhi in the second century B.C. they emigrated to northern India where they eventually founded a Indo-Scythian kingdom. The Yuezhi, an Indo-European people described by some sources as having reddish or blonde

hair, established their capital in the Ili Basin. With a population of some 400,000 people (apparently adults), they were capable of mobilizing a mounted army of 100,000 archers.⁴ The Yueshi were in turn displaced by the Wusun and moved westward to found the Kushan Empire in what is now Afghanistan and northern Pakistan.⁵ The Kushan Empire, straddling the great trade routes between India and Inner Asia, became one of the major vectors for the dissemination of Buddhism throughout what is now Xinjiang and Transoxiana and on into China. The Wusun, who replaced them, occupied the Ili Valley and set up a capital on a tributary of the Ili River believed to be the current-day Tekäs River. At one time they numbered some 120,000 households with 630,000 individuals, including 188,000 men capable of bearing arms.⁶ As such they were a power to be reckoned with in Inner Asia. According to one Chinese annalist, "Of all the [people] of the Western Regions, the Wusun looked the most peculiar. [They] have cerulean eyes and red beards and look like Mi monkeys are their descendants."⁷ The Wusun were eventually defeated by the Xiongnu (Hunni), who then presumably occupied the Ili Valley, although little is known about their presence in the region. By the seventh century A.D. the western branch of the Khökh Türks occupied the Ili Basin, and still others, including Sogdians, the Khara Khitai, and Uighurs would also make their homes here between the eighth and thirteenth centuries.

With the rise of the Mongol Empire the Ili Basin came into still greater prominence. In 1209, Barchug, the Uighur ruler of Uighuristan, centered around the capital city of Khocho, near current-day Turpan in eastern Xinjiang, recognized the rising power of the Mongols and prudently allied himself with Chingis Khan, thus avoiding the terrible fate of so many who opposed the Mongol khan. In appreciation, Chingis gave him one of his daughters in marriage and even referred to him as his "fifth son."⁸ Eastern Xinjiang thus secured the Mongols moved on to western Xinjiang and the Ili Basin.

Chingis Khan, founder of the Mongol Empire, died in 1227. Before his death he bequeathed his realm to his four sons, with Chagatai, the second oldest, receiving a huge swath of Inner Asia from Turpan in the east to the oases cities of Bukhara and Samarkand in the west, including Lake Issyk Kul in current-day Kyrgyzstan and Ili Basin. The Chagatayids eventually established their capital at Almalik in the Ili River valley, near current-day Yining. The exact location of the former Chagatayid capital of Almalik is unknown, although some local sources maintain it was near the current-

day market town of Yakxamba Bazaar, about 20 miles west of Yining.

After the death of Chagatai in 1243, for the next 150 years or so, until the latter part of the fourteenth century, his descendants would continue to occupy Ili Basin and surrounding territories. As geographer Svat Soucek points out, "Semireche and the adjacent territories, from the Talas river all the way to the upper course of the Ili, together with present-day Kyrgyzstan . . . developed a special identity, that of a Mongol homeland, to the extent of acquiring a new name, Moghulistan—in other words, Mongolia."⁹ In the late 1370s and 1380s Amir Temur, a.k.a. Tamurlane (1336–1405), made several successful forays into Moghulistan and finally forced the Chagatayid princes to allegiance to him, turning Mogulistan into a fiefdom of the Scourge of God.

After Tamurlane's death in 1405 the Chagatayids in Moghulistan enjoyed a brief resurgence. In addition to Uighurstan they added Kashgaria—the oasis cities of the western Tarim Basin—to their domains and appeared poised to once again dominate Inner Asia, or at least the eastern half of it. Yet at the same time other peoples were coming to the fore and challenging the Chagatayids for their territories. These included the Kazakhs, who asserted themselves in the western part of the Seven Rivers, the Kyrgyz in the Issuk Kul region, and the Oirats, who soon appeared in the Ili Basin. It is the Oirats, from whom Dambijantsan's people the Kalmyks came, that interest us most.

During the reign of the Chagatayids in Moghulistan, the Oirats, whose origins I have traced earlier, had been nomadizing in the Zungarian Basin and Tarbagatai Mountains to the north and in the western reaches of current-day Mongolia. In the 1420s we find Esen, son of Toghan, founder of the first Oirat Empire, raiding the Ili Basin, where he took as prisoner the then reigning Vais Khan. After Vais Khan offered up a sister to Esen as a bride he was released, but the Oirats kept a foothold in the region. By the 1450s the Ili River Valley had been incorporated into the Oirat Empire, which at its height was said to stretch from Lake Baikal in the east to Lake Balkash in the west, including much of the Seven Rivers region.¹⁰ After Esen's assassination in 1455 the first Oirat Empire disintegrated. For the next hundred and fifty years the Ili Basin and adjacent regions would be fought over by various tribes of the Oirat, surviving Chagatayid princes, resurgence Timurids, Kazakhs, and Kyrgyz. (It was in this period, by the way, that we see perhaps the most brilliant florescence of the Chagatai

lineage, although admittedly not in our immediate area of interest; Babur (1483-1530), founder of the Mughal Dynasty in India and author of the *Baburnama*, was a descendant of both Tamurlane and Chagatai.¹¹

By the early 1600s we find the Khoshuut, one of the tribes of the old Oirat Empire, roaming in the steppes along the Irtysh River in the Zungarian Basin and what is now eastern Kazakhstan. Up until this time the Oirats had apparently adhered to the ancient animist and shamanic beliefs of their forefathers. In the early 1620s or thereabouts one of their chieftains, Baibagas, converted to the Gelug sect of Tibetan Buddhism. In his zeal he converted other Oirat chieftains: Khu Urluk of the Torgut; Dalai Taiji of the Dörböt; and Khara Khula of the Choros. The Oirat leaders very quickly became zealous Buddhists, and they soon began sending their sons to study in the great Gelug monasteries of Tibet. They also did not hesitate to project their beliefs into the political realm. Baibagas's brother, Gүүш Khan, who had carved out a khanate around Khökh Nuur and the Tsaidam Depression, in current-day Qinghai Province, China, rode into Tibet in the late 1630s to defend the 5th Dalai Lama from the King of Tsang, the secular ruler of much of Tibet, who was persecuting the Gelug Sect. In 1642 he overthrew the king and proclaimed the Dalai Lama both the spiritual and temporal leader of Tibet. Not until 1959, when the current Dalai Lama went into exile, was the theocratic system established with the help of Gүүш Khan interrupted.

The Oirats who migrated to the Caspian Steppes in the 1630s took their newly acquired beliefs with them, resulting in a conclave of Tibe-to-Mongolian Buddhists which would continue on in Europe down to the present day. The Golden Temple (Gaden Shedrup Choeckhorling), opened on October 5, 1996 and consecrated by the 14th Dalai Lama on November 30, 2004, is reputedly the largest Buddhist temple in Europe, and noisy contingents of Kalmyks Buddhists have in recent years attended Kalachakra initiations given by the Dalai Lama in locations as far-flung as Graz, Austria, Toronto in Canada, and Amaravati in India. It was this Buddhist culture into which Dambijantsan was born in 1860.

Khara Khula of the Choros, as we have seen, was the father of Baatar Khongtaiji, founder of the Zungarian Confederation. Baatar Khongtaiji established his main capital on the Imil River near current-day Tacheng, on the Chinese-Kazakhstan border, but he spent much of his time camped in the Ili River Valley.¹² We have also seen how Baatar-Khong-

taiji's son Galdan seized control of the Zungarian Khanate in 1676. In 1678 the 5th Dalai Lama, who apparently wanted to use him as a counterweight against the increasingly powerful Qing Dynasty, gave Galdan the title of *Boshigt*, "Khan by Divine Grace," and thus legitimized his rule of the Zungarian Khanate. As an Oirat, and not a Chingisid, or descendant of Chingis Khan, he had no real right to take the title of khan for himself.¹³ (His name, Galdan, comes from the Tibetan *Dga'ldan*, defined as the "Tushita Paradise of the Maitreya Buddha."¹⁴ Between 1678 and 1680 he was apparently headquartered at Kulja, near the old Chagatayid capital of Almalik in the Ili Valley, during which time he annexed Kashgaria and Uighurstan, including the oasis cities of Kashgar and Khotan, Turpan, and Hami.¹⁵

When we last left Galdan Bolshigt in 1688 he had invaded Khalkh Mongolia and driven Zanabazar, the First Bogd Gegeen of Mongolia, and his followers southeast toward the Chinese borderlands. In 1690 news reached Beijing that Galdan Bolshigt and a force of some 30,000 men had reached the Khülün Nuur (Dalai Nuur) area in what is now Inner Mongolia and were proceeding southward along the Khalkh River. On July 26 they overran the first Qing outposts. At first it appeared to the emperor's advisors in Beijing Bolshigt that the insolent Oirat actually intended to march on Beijing itself. Actually up to 20,000 of Galdan's men deserted on the march south and the remainder were near starvation. But in early August the Kangxi emperor himself accompanied an army north pass the Great Wall via the Gubeikou Pass seventy miles north of Beijing. Kanxi himself soon complained of illness and returned to Beijing, but General Fuquan (the Prince of Yu and Kangxi's half-brother) led the army north through the Mulan Hunting Grounds, the private hunting preserve of the Qing emperors.

Just south of the current-day town of Saihanba the forested ridges of northern Hebei end with dramatic abruptness and the terrain suddenly changes to rolling, treeless steppes. Not coincidentally, here is also the current-day border between Hebei Province and Inner Mongolia. About ten miles north of the border, on a broad flat expanse of steppe broken only by a conspicuous hill of reddish rock known as Ulaan Butong in Mongolian (Hong Shan in Chinese; "Red Mountain," or in a more figurative rendering "Red Urn") the two armies collided on September 3. The Qing had cannons, a relatively new innovation, and one which would seem to give unquestioned superiority to the Qing. At two o'clock in the after-

noon the Qing army commenced firing artillery. Across a broad swamp the Mongols lined up their camels as barricades against the artillery and stood their ground, returning a heavy barrage of musket fire. A French Jesuit in the Qing court by the name of Jean F. Gerbillon had accompanied the Qing army from Beijing and later gave an eyewitness account of the battle. Toward evening commander Tong Gougang, uncle of Kangxi, was killed by Mongol musket fire, a devastating blow to the morale of the seemingly superior Qing army.

At nightfall the fighting ended and each army returned to their camp. There had been no clear victor, but nevertheless “Generalissimo” Fuquan sent a dispatch to Beijing claiming the Mongols had been decisively defeated. In fact, further engagements over the next day or two again ended with no clear victor. The tenacious Mongols simply refused to give up. In order to break the stalemate Fuquan called in a high-ranking lama to begin negotiations with Galdan. An agreement was reached whereby Galdan could return to Mongolia after swearing an oath to his “war-god” (probably the Tibeto-Mongolian deity Mahakala) that he would never again invade Qing territory. Thus ended the Battle of Ulaan Butong.

Fuquan was left with the unenviable task of informing the Kangxi emperor that Galdan had not been defeated and captured but had instead been allowed to return to Mongolia. Elated by the earlier dispatch in which Fuquan had claimed a victory, Kangxi and his advisors were infuriated when they found out what actually happened. The oath of a renegade like Galdan, they said, was worthless; he would simply regroup and attack again. Fuquan was ordered to stay put until scouts who were sent reported that Galdan had actually returned to Mongolia, and then he was ordered back to Beijing. He reached the capital on December 22 and was made to wait outside the city walls while his fate was decided. Finally he was court-martialed, dismissed from his military command, removed from the council of princes and advisors, and docked three years’ salary. Many of his officers were also fined and demoted. Stung by his rough handling by Kangxi, Fuquan was down but not out. He retired to his luxurious home in Beijing and became a literary patron, famous for entertaining writers and poets in his well-appointed garden.

In 1691, as we have seen, Zanabazar, the First Bogd Gegeen of Mongolia, met with Kangxi at Dolonnuur and forfeited Mongolian independence in exchange for the assistance of the Qing in expelling Galdan from the

Khalkh domains. But not until 1696 would Kangxi once again confront Galdan. This time he was determined to stamp out the Zungarian upstart. Three separate armies totaling some 73,000 men, one accompanied by Kangxi himself, headed north into the heartland of the Khalkh in an attempt to corner Galdan. On June 12, 1696 the 14,000-man army led by General Fiyanggü confronted Galdan and 5,000 of his men at a place called, in Chinese sources, Jao Modo, near the Tuul River not far south of current-day Ulaan Baatar (Jao Modo is apparently a Chinese corruption of *zuun mod*, Mongolian for “100 Trees.” Whether this refers to the current town of Zuun Mod, capital of Töv Aimag, just south of Ulaan Baatar, is unclear.) This time the Mongols could not withstand the Manchu cannon fire. Galdan’s men were massacred, his own wife killed in the battle, and Galdan himself managed to escape with only forty or fifty of his own men.

Galdan fled west and finally holed up in what is now Gov-Altai Aimag. He had only 300 men with him and posed little threat to the Qing Dynasty, but the mere fact that he had twice escaped from Qing armies had infuriated Kangxi, who became even more determined to finally defeat and hopefully capture his nemesis. In the spring of 1697 two more Qing armies were dispatched to western Mongolia and once again Kangxi himself accompanied one of them. There are some indications that by now Kangxi considered tracking down Galdan as a kind of sport, like the hunting he had practiced at his immense Mulan Hunting Preserve, only with Galdan as the prey and not wild animals. He was denied the pleasure of finally bringing Galdan Bolshigt to bay. On April 4, 1697, Galdan suddenly died under circumstances which remained cloudy. Some said he committed suicide; others said his Buddhist teachings would have forbidden this (he had been recognized as the incarnation of an important lama as a youth, which would put an added onus on suicide). Still others, including Kangxi himself, believed he was poisoned by his close advisors after he refused their entreaties to surrender. In any case, Kangxi, still not satisfied, demanded the ashes of his body, which had reportedly been cremated by his followers. According to Chinese accounts, in the fall of 1698 Kangxi was finally mollified by seeing Galdan’s ashes scattered on a military parade ground in Beijing, where they were scattered to the four winds. Interestingly, to this day oral legends in Khovd Aimag discount this version of events, and some sources maintain that he was buried where he died, a place marked by an ovoos in current-day Gov-Altai

Aimag. Still other legends claim that Galdan's body or ashes were buried at an owoo on the side of Tsambagarav Mountain, west of Khovd City.

Dambijantsan would later claim Galdan Boshigt as one of his role models, and just north of Tsambagarav Mountain he would attempt to create a miniature state which he may have dreamed would be the foundation of a new version of the Zungarian Khanate. And Dambijantsan's death would become just as shrouded in controversy and legend as Galdan Boshigt's own end.

With the elimination of Galdan Boshigt and the expulsion of the Zungarians from Khalkh Mongolia Zanabazar and his Khalkh followers were free to return to their homelands. The Zungarian state was by no means crushed however. His nephew Tsevan Ravdan (r. 1697–1627) quickly seized the reins of the Zungarian realm and rallied the Oirats of the Zungarian Basin to this banner. This new Zungarian state stretched from Hami in the east, on the current-day boundary of Xinjiang and Gansu, to the Seven Rivers Region in the west, including the old realms of Uighuristan, Kashgaria and the Ili Basin. Like so many Inner Asian chieftains before him, Tsevan Ravdan set up his headquarters in the Ili River Valley, probably near Kulja.

The aging Kangxi emperor was for the moment content to consolidate his gains among the eastern Mongols in Khalkh Mongolia, the current-day country of Mongolia, and did not immediately take up the struggle against the Zungarians in the west. But his ultimate goal was to “exterminate” (*jiaome*) the Zungarians, to “wipe out the evil so as to have eternal peace.”¹⁶ In 1715 a Qing army move beyond the western garrison city of Jiaguyuan, at the westernmost extension of the Great Wall, and occupied Hami, then ruled by a Moslem *beg*. Moving on from Hami, the Qing generals hoped to set up a garrison at Barkol, on the northside of the Tian Shan, which could be used as a springboard for further advances into the Zungarian Basin. They also advanced along the southern flanks of the Tian Shan, and by 1718 they had occupied Turpan, where the ruins of the Han and Tang dynasty cities of Gaochang and Jiaohe could be seen, reminders of former Chinese occupation of the area (major tourist attractions, they can still be seen there today). The now emboldened generals envisioned marching on Ravdan's headquarters in the Ili Basin far to the west, but for the time being were content to seize in Urumqi, a city just north of a major pass through the Tian Shan and now the current-

day capital of Xinjiang Province. And they were soon forced to abandon Urumqi and retreat back eastward.

This first attempt to wipe out the Zungarians and add their domains to the Qing Empire ended with the Kangxi emperor's death in 1722. His son and successor, the Yongzheng emperor, was at first more interesting in consolidating his shaky hold on the throne than engaging in risky military adventures in far-off Zungaria. In 1724 he signed a peace treaty with Tsevan Ravdan which temporarily halted hostilities, and Tsevan Ravdan's own death in 1727 resulted in another stalemate. His successor, Galdan Tsering (r. 1727–1745) soon fell out with the Yongzheng emperor. All other Mongols had submitted to the Qing, Yongzheng pointed out to Galdan Tsering's envoys, only the Zungarians refused to submit. His own father had defeated Galdan Bolshigt but had failed to bring the Zungarians to heel. As historian Frank Perdue points out, "the Qing goal of universal peace among humans led the Qing to endorse elimination of those humans who obstinately refused to knuckle under to the view. Humans who chose to resist the Qing terms remained human, but they had to pay the costs of their choice: 'righteous extermination' (*zhengjiao*), designed to return the world to a rational order."¹⁷

In the summer of 1729 two expeditionary forces, the West Route Army with 26,500 men and North Route army set out from Beijing with the ultimate goal of converging on the Zungarian headquarter in the Ili Valley.¹⁸ Not until 1731 did the West Route Army retake Urumqi, still 400 miles short of the Ili Valley. Meanwhile the North Route Army had proceeded to Khovd, in current-day Khovd Aimag in Mongolia, where they began construction of a fortress. In July of 1731 the Qing army numbered some 20,000 soldiers marched from Khovd westward towards the Zungarian Basin and the Ili River Valley beyond. The Zungarians had been tracking their advance, however, and prepared a surprise. At Khötön Lake, in current-day Bayan-Olgii Aimag, the Qing army was ambushed and nearly annihilated; only 2,000 survivors made it back to Khovd. The Qing general in charge of this debacle, Furdan, was then ordered to start construction of what was to be a huge fortress at Khovd. Intended to measure some 4.3 miles in circumference, with walls 16.5 feet high, the fortress was to eventually house a garrison of 16,000 men.¹⁹ Eventually this ambitious plan was abandoned, but a more modest fortress was established at Khovd. The reader should be alerted that in 1912, after the Qing Dynasty collapsed, Dambijantsan would play the leading role in

dislodging the Qing holdouts here and demolishing the fortress.

Meanwhile the Western Route Army had been driven out of Urumqi by the Zungarians and driven the whole way back to Barkol. The news of this defeat coupling with the disaster at Khölon Lake thoroughly demoralized the not-too-stable-to-begin-with Yongzheng. He sued for peace and sent ministers to the Zungarians to negotiate a boundary between their two realms. Galdan Tsering wanted the border drawn along the western end the Khangai Mountains, which would have put most of modern-day western Mongolia, including Khovd, where the still extant ruins of the Khovd fortress are located, in the Zungarian sphere. Yongzheng favored the Mongol-Altai and Gov-Altai Mountains as the border, very roughly the current-day boundary between Mongolia and China. No agreement was reached, but Galdan Tsering dispatched a mission to Beijing for further discussions on this, trade relations, and other matters. Yongzheng, however, transmigrated before any further settlement could be reached. He alone had spent upward to 60 million taels of silver (2,280 tons) in his campaigns against the Zungarians and had failed to subdue or eliminate them. It would be left to his successor, the Qianlong emperor, to finally extinguish the Zungarian state and virtually exterminate the Zungarian people.

For the next fifteen years or so an uneasy peace reigned between the Qing and Zungarians. In 1739 a formal truce was signed and formal trade relations agreed upon. Commerce soon thrived, with Inner Asian Moslems acting as middlemen in caravan traffic which revitalized the ancient Silk Road routes. But the lull in tensions did not lessen the basic antagonism between the two cultures was not, as Frank Perdue points out,

Peace with the Zunghars did not genuinely soften Qing altitudes. The Qing regarded these barbarians as greedy, violent, and untrustworthy. The Qing believed, however, that the emperor's grace would soften them to they would accommodate to imperial dominion. Barbarians by nature had 'insatiable desire' and 'shameless greed' but by controlling their actions and 'cherishing' them, the Qing could tame them. Tying the Zungar elites to the interior with trading link would make them less inclined to attack the frontier.²⁰

Galdan Tsering transmigrated in 1745. The ensuing succession struggles shattered whatever unity the Zungarians enjoyed among themselves and left the door open for Qing intervention. Out of the chaos which ensued

would rise Amarsanaa, of whom Dambijantsan would eventually claim to be was a descendant and/or incarnation. All the various strands of Oirat-Zungarian history, including their struggles against the various Chinese dynasties down through the ages, would come together in Amarsanaa, only to be torn asunder when the Zungarian State was extinguished forever. For a brief moment in time Dambijantsan would try to reunite them in his own person.

Amarsanaa was a son of a Khoit nobleman. The Khoit were a minor tribe subordinate to the Dörböts (Dambijantsan's tribe), themselves subordinate to the Zungars (or Choros), who under Khara Khula had claimed control over the Oirats as a whole. The rise of the Zungars to prominence in the Oirat confederation is one reason, as we have seen, that some Dörböts choose to emigrate to the Caspian Steppes, where they became part of the larger grouping known as Kalmyks. Thus by claiming to be an incarnation of Amarsanaa Dambijantsan was realigning himself with the Oirats who had remained behind in Inner Asia.

Amarsanaa mother's was Boitalak, the daughter of Tsevan Ravdan, who as we have seen had become *taishi* (chieftain) of the Zungars after the death of his uncle Galdan Bolshigt in 1697. Boitalak had earlier, in 1714, married Danjung, the eldest son of Lazang Khan, himself the grandson of Güüsh Khan, who had put the Dalai Lama on the throne of Tibet in 1642. After Danjung was killed in Tibet around 1717 Boitalak married a *taishi* from the Khoit tribe and Amarsanaa, born in 1723, was the fruit of this coupling. The Qing emperor Qianlong would later maliciously suggest that Amarsanaa was conceived before Boitalak's second marriage and thus being illegitimate could not himself claim to be *taishi* of the Khoits. Qianlong was certainly not an unbiased observer, and most historians have dismissed this slur.²¹

Amarsanaa would have been twenty-two when Galdan Tseren, the ruler of the Zungarians, transmigrated in the early fall of 1745. In his will Galdan Tseren passed over his oldest son, nineteen year-old Lama Darja—who was considered illegitimate by some—and named his second son, fourteen year-old Tsewang Dorji Namjal as his successor. The boy soon revealed himself to be a notorious *n'er-do-well*. Damchø Gyatsho Dharmatala, in his *Rosary of White Lotus, Being a Clear Account of How the Precious Teachings of Buddha Appeared in the Great Hor Country*, a monumental nineteenth-century history of Buddhism in Mongolia,

states that Tsewang Dorji Namjal's "favorite ways were to roam around in the villages, drinking chang [barley beer], seducing girls and indulging in carnal pleasures."²² Even the staid, sober-minded author of that Tsewang Dorji Namjal's entry in the encyclopedic *Eminent Chinese of the Ch'ing Period* points out that he was "more interested in killing dogs than attending to affairs of state."²³ Finally fed up by his antics, in 1750 a group of noblemen led by his older brother Lama Darja seized him, put out his eyes, and sent him to Aksu, on the northern edge of the Tarim Basin in what is now Xinjiang, where he was held captive and eventually executed.

Lama Darja became the new Zungarian taishi. His new position was precarious; the Oirats nobles despised him because of his low birth—his mother had apparently been a commoner with whom Galdan Tseren had coupled with only briefly. Soon a plot was spawned to depose him and place his remaining younger brother, perhaps nine years old at the time, on the throne. Davatsi (a.k.a., Dawaci), the leader of the conspirators was the grandson of the famous—in Tibet notorious—Tseren Dondub, a general who under the command of Tsevan Ravdan invaded Tibet in 1717 and trashed numerous Red Hat (Nyingma) monasteries, including Dorje Drak and Mindroling. When I visited Dorje Drak, on the north side of the Tsangpo River between Chitishö and Dranang, in 2003, the monks there were still grouching about this Oirat incursion, even though the monastery which had been rebuilt after its destruction by Tseren Dondub was in turn destroyed by the Red Guards in the late 1960s. The current monastery was rebuilt yet again after that.

The plots was soon revealed and Lama Darja and Davatsi came to blows. Davatsi was quickly defeated and with only about a dozen followers—among them Amarsanaa—fled westward to the Kazakh steppes, where they found refuge among the Kazakh Middle Horde led by Sultan Ablai. The Sultan, perceiving that a civil war between the two Zungarian factions would inevitably weaken the khanate, and thus be to the advantage of the Kazakhs, encouraged the two rebels, even giving Amarsanaa one of his daughters as a wife. The emboldened Amarsanaa soon sneaked back to the Tarbagatai Mountain region north of Ili where his tribe the Khoit were living and managed to round up an army of a thousand men. This force, along with some Kazakh troops sent along by the Sultan to aid the rebellion, marched on Kulja, in the Ili River Valley, where Lama Darja was holed up, caught him by surprise, and on January 13, 1752 dispatched him to the Heavenly Fields. Lama Darja's little brother, in whose name

the banner of revolt had been raised, was now bypassed, and Davatsi himself—who was after all a direct descendant of great Baatar Khongtaiji, founder of the Zungarian State—assumed the title of taishi of the Zungars.

Davatsi, however, proved to “a drunken and incompetent ruler,” as one commentator has described him, and he and Amarsanaa soon fell out.²⁴ There were rumors that Amarsanaa demanded that he and Davatsi divide the rule of the Zungarians between them, a proposal which Davatsi flatly rejected. Davatsi was the descendant of the great Baatar Khongtaiji; Amarsanaa the son of a minor Khoit nobleman. There was no question of them sharing power as equals. Very quickly the two became deadly enemies. In 1754 Amarsanaa, along with a following of some five thousand soldiers and 20,000 women and children, broke away from the Zungarians under Davatsi and fled to Khovd, in current-day western Mongolia, where as mentioned the Qing had established a fortress. Here he struck what one historian terms his “fateful Faustian bargain.”²⁵ He now swore allegiance to the Qing emperor, just as Zanabazar had done in 1691. In return the Qing would assist him in seizing control of the Zungarian state and recognize him as sole ruler of the Zungarians with the Qing as suzerains. Forgotten, as least for the time being, was the traditional enmity between the Zungarians and the Qing. It was the Qing under emperor Kangxi who of course had hounded to his death the greatest Zungarian khan of all, Galdan Bolshigt. In light of later events, it would appear that Amarsanaa was just biding his time, using the Qing for protection against Davatsi, until he could himself return to Zungaria and seize control of the khanate. For the moment however Amarsanaa played his role as a devoted Qing subject. With the ostensibly loyal Amarsanaa now in his pocket Qianlong saw at long last a way of finally ridding himself of the Zungars and extending the Qing empire westward into what is now the province of Xinjiang. He, the loyal grandson, would complete the task began by Kangxi and Yongzheng and finally subdue the Zungars, the last large group of nomads on China’s borders still maintaining their independence. Ironically, a Oirat, Amarsanaa, was the key to his plans.

To further solidify Amarsanaa’s new-found loyalty to the Qing the emperor Qianlong granted him and his followers land along the Orkhon River, in current day Övörkhongai Aimag, then invited him down to Beijing, where he was declared a prince of the first degree. Then in 1755 Qianlong appointed him as assistant commander of the so-called

Northern Route Army, under the overall command of Bandi, an Eastern Mongol of Chingis Khan's own Borjigin clan who had held numerous important posts in the Qing administration. The army, which numbered about 100,000, was made up in large part of Khalkh Mongolians, and the Khalkh had to furnish most of the horses, food, and other supplies for the force. This was the army which would be sent to subdue the Zungarians. Thus Qianlong was using the Eastern Mongols to rid himself of the Western Mongols.

The Northern Route Army left Uliastai, then one of the Qing headquarters in Mongolia (capital of current-day Zavkhan Aimag), in March of 1755. Around the same time the Western Route Army, also numbering about 100,000 and under the command of General Yung-ch'ang, left from Barköl. The two armies linked up at Amarsanaa's own base of Bortala (Mongolian *bor* = tan; *tal* = steppe), the grasslands ramping up from the Zungarian Basin to the eastern side of the Borohogo Shan, in June of 1755. From there they crossed the Borohogo Shan and marched to Ili (Kulja) in the Ili Basin, the headquarters of Davatsi. "They met little or no resistance and took Ili without fighting. Most Sungars [sic] simply surrendered," concludes one historian.²⁶ Davatsi and a band of followers fled southwest to Gedengshan, 110 miles from Ili, where on July 2 they were finally cornered and defeated by Qing troops. He himself escaped over the Tian Shan Mountains and hid out for a while in Kashgar, on the western edge of the Tarim Basin. The Moslem *beg* of Kashgar, divining which way the wind was blowing and not wishing to alienate the Qing, seized Davatsi and turned him over to Amarsanaa in July of 1755.²⁷

That should have been the end of the Zungar taishi. Qianlong, however, realizing that he had a valuable pawn on his hands, had Davatsi brought to Beijing where he was ceremoniously paraded as a captive. Then Qianlong granted him a principedom of the first degree and a mansion in Kalgan (current-day Zhangjiaikou), on the edge of the Mongolian Plateau north of Beijing, to reside in. Despite his title and comfortable accommodations he was now of course totally powerless. Free to devote himself to his favorite pastime, drinking, he died four years later, in 1759, but his descendants were honored with the rank of hereditary prince of the fourth degree.

Qianlong, meanwhile, had ordered up special ceremonies in the monas-

teries of Dolonnuur to celebrate his victory over the Zungarians.²⁸ His elation was premature. Amarsanaa, it turned out, was not playing the role Qianlong had designed for him. Qianlong had insinuated that after Davatsi had been defeated each of the Oirat tribes would be allowing to live on their traditional lands under a ruler appointed by the Qing emperor. Amarsanaa, in reward for his part in defeating Davatsi, was appointed ruler of the Khoits, answerable of course to the Qing emperor. But now suddenly Amarsanaa revealed his much greater ambitions. Why should he now be satisfied with ruling only the Khoits, a minor tribe in the Oirat confederation? He had helped the Qing defeat the Zungars, who had previously been the dominant power among the Oirats of the Zungarian State, so why shouldn't he be the new ruler of the all of the Oirat tribes, including the Zungars? Making no secret of his ambitions he told Bandi, the commander of the Northern Route, to inform Qianlong in Beijing that he demanded to be made overall khan of the Oirats. To make his point clear, he refused to use the official seal given him by Qianlong, and instead appropriated the seal of his father-in-law Galdan Tseren, the "the last officially recognized lead of all the Zunghars."²⁹ Apprized of Amarsanaa's presumptuous demands, on August 20, 1755 Qianlong ordered that he be seized and brought to Beijing. Amarsanaa was taken into custody, but on September 24, 1755, he escaped first to the Irtysh River Valley and then to the Kazakh Steppes, where he sought refuge with his father-in-law Sultan Ablai.

Believing that the Zungarians had finally been conquered, and that Amarsanaa himself, in exile in the Kazakh steppe, no longer posed a threat, Qianlong ordered most of the 200,000-man Qing army, which was costing a fortune to maintain in Zungaria, back to China, leaving only a small detachment with General Bandi. But Qianlong had seriously under-estimated Amarsanaa's resilience. From his bolt hole in the Kazakh steppe he sneaked back into Zungaria, rallied the Oirat princes to his side, and incited a general rebellion. The small Qing detachment left behind in Zungaria proved to be no match for the newly reunited Oirats under Amarsanaa. On October 4, 1755, acknowledging his hopeless position, Bandi, commander of the Qing troops, committed suicide. Amarsanaa took control of Ili and laid claim to all of Zungaria. Very quickly he had realized his dream of being the independent ruler of the Oirats. On February 17, 1756 his followers named him the new Zungarian Khan. By late 1756 he had managed to retake Ili. Qianlong must have been beside

himself; twice he thought the Zungarians had been defeated; and each time they had managed to regroup and defy Qing authority. And now not only was Zungaria in revolt, but Mongolians in Mongolia itself, Qing territory since 1691, were opening opposing the Qing.

The situation in Khalkh Mongolia had been deteriorating for several years. The country had been stripped of the able-bodied men who had been sent to fight in Zungaria and impoverished by the huge amounts of horses, meat, butter and other supplies that had been requisitioned for the Qing armies. Then in the winter of 1755–56 disastrous *zud*, winter ice and snow storms which prevent livestock from grazing, had hit, impoverishing many herdsmen, and on top of this a small-pox epidemic had broken out. Morale was at an all-time low when word came that in Zungaria Amarsanaa had raised the banner of revolt against the Qing Dynasty. Disaffected elements among the Khalkh Mongols soon followed his example. Amarsanaa had apparently laid the groundwork for this uprising while in Mongolia helping to organize the Northern Route Army, further evidence that he had planned in advance to defect from his Qing overlords once Davatsi had been defeated. He had met with Khan Chingünjav and a nobleman named Rinchindorj and attempted to coordinate uprisings against the Qing in both Zungaria and Khalkh Mongolia. The Khalkh side of the plot was soon exposed and orders were issued for the arrest of the conspirators. Chingünjav escaped but several others were seized. The rebels were taken to Beijing where they were tortured and then publicly executed. To further drive his point home, Qianlong had both the Second Bogd Gegeen and the TüsHEET Khan brought to Beijing to witness the executions. The Second Bogd Gegeen (1724–1757), son of Dondovdorj, himself the son of Zanabazar's nephew, was forced to watch his own brother die at the hand of Qing executioners.

Qianlong had meant to impress upon the Mongolians the price to be paid for rebellion against the Qing and thus ensure their good behavior, but his actions had an entirely opposite effect. Word of the executions soon reached Mongolia, along with the rumor that the Qing intended to imprison the Bogd Gegeen in China, and in response still more insurrections broke out. Qianlong had to dispatch the Bogd Gegeen and the TüsHEET Khan back to Mongolia with orders that they to quell the disturbances, but already events had overtaken them.

In the summer of 1756 Chingünjav sent a letter to Qianlong formally

renouncing his allegiance to the Qing Dynasty. With a initial army of about 2,000 men he set up headquarters near Lake Khövsgöl, near the Russian border in what is now Khövsgöl Aimag, and from there appealed to other Mongols khans to join his revolt. He also sought aid from the Russians, apparently promising to switch allegiance from the Qing Dynasty to the Russian Czar in exchange for help in ousting the Qing from Mongolia. Initially there were uprisings all over Mongolia and numerous Qing outposts and post stations were overrun. Flush with early successes Chingünjav attempted to organize a convocation of Mongol noblemen in Örgöö where Mongolian independence would be declared. But soon the reality of what they were doing began to sink in, and many noblemen got cold feet. The Qianlong emperor was still capable of sending enormous armies, now equipped with muskets and cannon, to Mongolia to put down the insurrectionists, and many nobleman had become quite comfortable with the perks they were receiving from the Qing government. Most crucially, the Second Bogd Gegeen refused to support the insurrection. To isolate even further the Bogd Gegeen from the rebels a detachment of Qing troops put him under virtual house arrest. As a Russian diplomat who was negotiating with the rebels at the time put it, "Where the Jebсандамба Ххутукхту [the Bogd Gegeen] is, there is Mongolia, and where Mongolia is, there, too, is the Jebсандамба Ххутукхту."³⁰ Without the support of the Bogd Gegeen the revolt was doomed.

With support among the Mongol nobility having faded away, and the Bogd Gegeen uncooperative, Chingunjav's revolt failed and he himself attempted to escape to Russia. North of Lake Khövsgöl he and his party stopped to camp, believing they were safely across Russian border. A detachment of Qing troops caught up with the party early in January of 1757 and claiming that they was still on Mongolian territory seized Chingunjav and his sons. The captives were taken to Beijing and subjected to torture. According to legends now retold in Mongolia, large coins with a square hole in the middle were heated until they were red-hot and then placed on Chingunjav's back. When his seared flesh rose up through the holes in the coins it was slashed off with a razor. After these excruciating tortures he was executed in March 2, 1757.³¹

Chingunjav remains a hero to this day among many Mongolians for his for his ultimately quixotic stand against the Qing. At least he had stood up to the oppressors, unlike other Mongolian noblemen who were more interested in saving their Qing-granted titles and perquisites. When I was

researching my book on Zanabazar, the first Bogd Gegeen of Mongolia, I was told by numerous informants that Galdan Bolshigt, the Oirat, and Chingunjav, the Khalkh, were true warriors who had fought for Mongolia while others, for instance Zanabazar himself and his relative the Second Bogd Gegeen, were wimps who had only caved in to the Qing.

A monument north of Lake Khövsgöl now reportedly marks the spot where Chingunjav was arrested. The monument is on Mongolian territory, but local people still claim that back then it was Russian territory and thus Chingunjav had been illegally seized. There is also now a street in Ulaan Baatar named after Chingunjav. But while Galdan Bolshigt had a brand of vodka named after him—the ultimate accolade in modern-day Mongolia—as early of 1998, Chingunjav had to wait until 2009 to be accorded this honor.

As for the Second Bogd Gegeen, he died in late 1757 at the age of thirty-three, apparently while still under house arrest. Although in the final showdown he had sided with the Qing, or at the very least simply refused to encourage the insurrectionists, he may still have incurred the displeasure of Qianlong. There are persistence rumors that he was assassinated by Qianlong's order. Maybe Qianlong got the idea from his father Yongzheng, who according to legend had Zanabazar, the First Bogd Gegeen, assassinated at the Yellow Temple in Beijing in 1723. In case Qianlong's displeasure with the Second Bogd Gegeen would have lasting consequences. Not wanting any more Mongolian Bogd Gegeens who might become possible rallying points for Mongolian rebels, he declared that henceforth all incarnations of Javsandamba must be found not in Mongolia but in Tibet. All subsequent Bogd Gegeens, including the current Ninth, now living in India, have been Tibetans.

While he was putting down the rebels in Mongolia Qianlong had by no means ignored the situation in Zungaria. By November of 1756 he had amassed an immense army of some 400,000 men and sent it west to finally, at long last, once and for all, deal with the incurably rebellious Amarsanaa and the Zungarians. He had also found an unlikely ally in his battle against the Zungarians—Kelsang Gyatso, the Seventh Dalai Lama of Tibet. According to one historian, “[Qianlong] asked him to use his religious influence among the Oirats to rouse them to the Chinese cause and to forsake Amarsanaa. This the Dalai Lama willingly did. He asked the Oirats to stay loyal to the Chinese as part of their religious du-

ties.”³² This was quite a turnaround from the days of the 5th Dalai Lama, who had been put on the throne of Tibet by the Oirat chieftain Gūūish Khan, and who had whole-heartedly backed his one-time disciple Galdan Bolshigt, ruler of the Zungarian Empire (it was the Great 5th, it will be remembered who gave Galdan his title of *Bolshigt*, or Khan by Divine Grace). First the Second Bogd Gegeen had refused to back the Khalkh rebels against the Qing, and now the Dalai Lama was throwing his support to the Qing against the Zungarians. Those who were reading the tea leaves of Inner Asian destiny must have divined that the days of independent Mongol states were very quickly coming to an end.

The huge Qing army had no trouble seizing Ili and had soon subduing most of the Oirats, except of course for Amarsanaa. With a mere 2500 soldiers he left made a last-ditch stand against a detachment of the Qing soldiers, holding them at bay for seventeen days. Then around the end of June the ever-elusive Amarsanaa simply disappeared. Not until November 1st of 1757 did the Qing authorities find out that he had absconded to Russia.³³

It turned out that after disappearing from Zungaria Amarsanaa had fled west with about of 4000 followers, many of them woman and children. His father-in-law and erstwhile protector Sultan Ablai of the Kazakh Middle Horde had himself just recognized the authority of the Qing Dynasty and was under strict orders not to aide Amarsanaa. He could expect to find no quarter there. Instead he fled to Russia, where he sought asylum at the fortress of Semipalatsinsk. The Czar himself, not wanting any trouble with the Qing, declared that Amarsanaa could stay in Russia only if he settled in Kalymkia, far to the west, and agreed not to mount any further campaigns in Zungaria. But then Amarsanaa fell ill to small pox, the scourge of the nomads. He was transferred to Tobolsk, in western Siberia, and there the great warrior transmigrated on September 21, 1757, finally laid low not by the might of the Qing Empire but by a virus. He was only thirty-five at the time, but no one could say that his short life had been uneventful. He had stood up time and time again to the greatest power in East Asia and in the end had eluded capture. He would never be paraded as a prisoner before the jeering throngs in Beijing like Davatsi, or tortured to death like Chingünjav. He would become a fitting exemplar for Dambijantsan, the Dörböt from the Caspian Steppe who had his own grudge against the Qing.



Earlier, the Russians had misled Qing officials about Amarsanaa's whereabouts, claiming that while escaping from Zungaria he had drown trying to cross the Irtysh River. The river was diligently dredged for a month but no body was found. Finally apprized of Amarsanaa's death in Russia, Qianlong demanded that the Russian officials return his body to China so that he could make sure the surly insurgent was truly dead. "The state only needs to capture Amursana. When he has died, and his body is retrieved, the entire Zunghar affair can be called a success," pronounced Qianlong.³⁴ The Russians, who did not want to be seen as caving in to Qianlong's demands, refused to hand over the body. Instead they offered to take it to Selenginsk, in Siberia, just north of the Russian-Mongolian border, and allow Qing officials to examine it there. Qianlong became virtually unhinged by his failure to get his hands on Amarsanaa alive or dead. Throwing a furious fit, he halted all trade between China and Russia through Mongolia and even threatened to send an army north into Siberia to smote the insolent Russians. This threat was taken quite seriously. A fortress wall was built on the exposed side of Irkutsk, then the capital of Eastern Siberia, located at the confluence of the Irkutsk and Angara rivers below Lake Baikal, in anticipation of a Qing attack. The wall is long gone, but its former path is now taken by one of Irkutsk's main streets. By March of 1758 Qianlong had cooled down. The more diplomatic-minded members of his court finally arranged for a delegation of Manchus, Chinese, and Mongols to go to Selenginsk and examine the body. They determined that it was indeed the earthly coil of Amarsanaa. The question of Amarsanaa was settled, but the Oirats of Zungaria who had revolted time and time again against the Qing were just beginning to receive their chastisement.

Qianlong's retaliation against the Oirats was an early precursor to what is now called ethnic cleansing. For two years Qing soldiers tracked down Oirat men, women, and child and killed them, burned all gers they found, and seized Oirat livestock. Figures vary, but according to some sources from 500,00 to 600,000 people died in this holocaust. Some may have succumbed to illnesses like small pox which swept through the decimated population. Others managed to escape to Russia, where they were granted asylum. Again figures vary, but in the end maybe ten percent of the original Oirat population survived in Zungaria after the onslaught. One

historian puts it succinctly, “As a political entity the Zunghar khanate went out of existence forever.”³⁵

Huge swaths of Inner Asia steppe had been depopulated by the decimation of the Zungarian people. Some areas were given to faithful Qing subjects from Mongolia and Manchuria. Ironically, many of the Kalmyks who took part in the Great Exodus of 1771 from the Caspian Steppe back to China also ended up on the lands vacated by the extermination of their relatives, the Oirats.

Although Amarsanaa may have lived on in the minds of many of the surviving Oirats as a hero he was eventually portrayed as an arch-villain even among Eastern Mongols, some of whom had for a brief moment in time joined up with him in revolt against the Qing. Dharmatala, the Mongolian author of the above-mentioned *Rosary of White Lotuses*, first published in 1889, refers to Amarsanaa a “man of evil.” Although a Mongolian, Dharmatala was loyal to the Qing Dynasty—or at least was not going to say anything bad about the Qing in print—which then ruled Mongolia, and could be expected to take the Qing line regarding the Oirats. Thus he was just echoing Qianlong on Amarsanaa. According to Dharmatala, in his *Rosary of White Lotuses*, the emperor had proclaimed:

There will be no more disturbances in this land [Zungaria], and all its nobles and commoners are to remember to keep the path of peace. The deeds of that evil man [Amarsanaa] destroyed the kingdom and made it desolate. If even his bare name be mentioned—him who caused so much harm to so many—it will bring no good, and therefore his name is not to be uttered ever again.

Not content with just degrading Amarsanaa, Dharmatala assigns mystical powers to Qianlong:

In the old days there were no rains in Hothon [roughly the old territory of Zungarians, especially the Zungarian Basin], but after the Emperor [Qianlong] entered the country he issued the following order to the Nagas: “From now on, all the rains, storms, thunders etc. [in Zungaria] must follow the patterns of my own country!” Thus the land became indistinguishable from China; the whole Hothon resounded in fear and wonder!³⁶

Nagas, it should be pointed out, are serpent-like being who in Buddhist mythology rule the underworld and watery realms, thus influencing the weather. Thus Qianlong had come to rule not only the territory of Hothon—Zungaria—but also the realms of mythical beings! And twen-

ty-first century travelers to China's western-most province of Xinjiang, part of which is made up of Dharmatala's "Hothon", might well agree that it is now largely indistinguishable from the rest of China.

A whole welter of myth later grew up around Amarsanaa and his exploits. Indeed, some suggested that he had never in fact died, but had somehow discovered the secret of immortality and was living in a cave in Russia waiting for the right moment to return and lead a new struggle for Mongolian independence. He had also been granted magical powers. Using the traditional abilities of Oirat shamans, he could call down rain and snow storms to impede his enemies and summon a rainbow to hang his deel and other gear on. Buddhists believed he was an incarnation of Mahakala, the fierce warrior Bodhisattva. He himself had supposedly prophesied that he would return to Zungaria in 120 years to avenge the destruction of the Zungarians. According to this prophesy, ten years before his return "water would flow in the deserts northeast of Khobdo [Khovd], and grass and trees would return. Four years before his return, a light gray horse would appear that would ride around the region and lead the Oirat people away."³⁷

Amarsanaa himself did not reappear 120 years after he left, but in 1890, 133 years after his death, Dambijantsan did materialize in Zungaria claiming to be his descendant, and in 1911, 154 years after Amarsanaa's death, Dambijantsan would suddenly appear in Khovd, where he would lead many Mongolians into his idealized realm, the basis for what he hoped would be a new Zungarian state.