

# HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE: **Japan's involvement in the promotion of Mongol nationalism through Buddhism 1918-1939**

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## **Abstract**

This paper explores the attempts of Japan to provoke Mongol nationalism in her favor between the years 1918-1939 by influencing the practice of Buddhism in Mongol territories. For centuries Buddhism was an integral part of Mongol culture, and with the shift in the political situation of the Mongols in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century it was Buddhism that Mongol nationalism rallied around. The Japanese keenly recognized this and attempted to further use Buddhism as a unifying force to build a “Great Mongol State”, in hopes of bringing together all Mongol ethnic groups under Japan’s control. This Japanese policy undertaken in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century towards the Mongols was based on intensive academic and intelligence studies of Mongol local culture and religion in different territories. Japan’s already existing knowledge and practice of the Buddhist religion provided a firm foundation for their attempted manipulation of the Mongol brand of Buddhism that further fortified Mongol nationalism. The initial attempt by the Japanese to promote Buddhism for political ends was in Buryat Mongolia in the early 1920s. They then followed this initiative with a greater push in spreading their religious propaganda among the Eastern and Inner Mongols in the 1930s. However, despite their knowledge of the Buddhist religion, their attempt to manipulate Mongolian Buddhism for the end goal of promoting Mongol nationalism eventually failed.

**Keywords:** Buddhism, Buryat Mongols, Inner and Outer Mongolia, Japan expansionism, Mongol nationalism, Soviet Union

## **Introduction**

Historically, Mongolian Buddhism in the territories of Outer Mongolia, Inner Mongolia, Manchuria, Buryat (Buryat Autonomous Region in Russia), and Oirat (Western) Mongolia played a significant role in Mongolian nationalism in the first half of the twentieth century. “Mongolia Proper”, otherwise explained as the core territory in which Mongol ethnic people inhabited starts in the west from the eastern shores of Lake Balkash in modern day Kazakhstan to the east as far as the modern city of Harbin in Manchuria; and in the south from the Great Wall and just north of the city of Urumqi to the north until Lake Baikal in Siberia. Modern political/geographical boundaries of the region were not finalized into the borders we recognize today until 1950 when the jointly signed treaty between the Soviet Union and Communist China guaranteed the independence of the Mongolian People’s Republic and finalized its state borders; this treaty effectively separated the various Mongol tribes into inhabiting Soviet, Chinese, and Mongol territories today as it solidified the borders where each of these three countries intersected.

Mongol nationalism, although present throughout Mongol society, was not an interest of vital concern to the various Mongol tribes. However, in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, Tsarist Russian policy for expansion reached the Buryat Mongols and eventually brought them under Russian control, and by the 18<sup>th</sup> century the Buryat Mongol territory was already an inseparable part of Tsarist Russia. Historically the Buryat Mongols have lived around the lake Baikal for centuries and are considered as one of the largest ethnic Mongol groups. Moreover, in the late Qing period Chinese peasants and merchants began settling in Mongol territory in large numbers and this settlement boomed after the fall of the Qing Empire.

Therefore, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and the early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Mongols began experiencing rapidly growing pressure from Russian and Chinese political and territorial interests which continued their expansion into Mongol territories,

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thereby threatening their national and cultural interests. Growing foreign economic and political pressure resulted in the development of a nationalist movement among the Mongols. Generally, the same Mongol race, language, history and way of nomadic life largely defined Mongol nationalism throughout its history. However, given the tribal differences among the Mongol ethnics at the time, the Buddhist religion became the most effective unifying factor of Mongol nationalism in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century following the fall of the Qing Empire and its withdrawal from Mongol lands in 1911. This unification of Mongol identity centered on Buddhism was epitomized by the enthronement of the Bogd Javzandamba Khutukhtu as the Khan (King) of Khalkha Mongolia. Khalkha is the largest ethnic group of the Mongols, who lived in the area roughly encompassing the current Mongolian state. The region of Mongolian territory inhabited by Khalkha Mongols is often termed “Outer Mongolia”. Although it has been argued that Buddhism was the only available ideology to counter the rising socialist ideology in the region, this act by the Khalkha Mongols to bestow supreme power to their religious figurehead in 1911 might have encouraged the Japanese to use Buddhism in order to unify different Mongol ethnics two decades later in the 1930’s.

Knowing the importance of Buddhism in the daily life of the Mongols, its two neighbors pursued mostly friendly policies towards the Mongol religion. By encouraging Buddhism, the Manchu Empire and Tsarist Russia had attempted to strengthen their influence among the Mongols and manipulate the religion for their interests since the 16<sup>th</sup> and the 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, respectively. The Mongols, Manchu, and Russians continued to be the only active players in the region until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. With the expansion of Japan in continental Northeast Asia in the early 1930’s, the active players in the region increased by one. It was at this time that given the political, economic, and social connections between the area of Manchuria and Mongolia Proper, Japan emerged as a fourth player in the region and decided to take part in the political and cultural/religious affairs of the Mongols. When Japan occupied Manchuria, a part of which was Eastern Mongolia Proper historically, Japan pursued a policy seeking to gain the support of the local people and to use Mongol nationalist ideology in their favor. The Japanese broached an appeal to the Mongols, which intended to win over all Mongol ethnic groups starting from east to west for the end goal of exercising Japanese influence over all Mongol ethnic people in Inner Asia.

In the first part of this paper, a brief review of historical data provides a general picture of Mongolia’s external political environment and an understanding of why a Mongol nationalist movement was developed and what led the Mongols to such reactionary moves against her neighbors’ policies. The second part of the paper explores the early period of Japan’s involvement in the Mongol nationalist movement through Buddhism in Buryat Mongol territory in the Lake Baikal region of Siberia. The third and final part of the paper, followed by the conclusion, examines Japan’s second attempt to promote Mongol nationalism by reviving and reforming Buddhism, in the name of establishing a “Great Mongol State” among the Mongols in Manchuria and Inner Mongolia in the 1930s.

## **Methodology**

This paper provides a historical account of some of Japan’s motives and actions in dealing with the Mongols in the time period of 1918-1939. It was noted from the beginning that there was very little in the English and Mongolian literature on the subject. The information presented in this paper has been collected from the analytical narratives of foreign observers and with the use of secondary sources. Supported by Topolski (1976), the gathering of data, its synthesis and analysis were based on source-based knowledge, and source-based information/data, including secondary historical sources; all have been qualitatively analyzed.

It has been the author's job to sift through and interpret the validity and relevance of secondary sources to complete this paper. Given that the primary data concerning this historical account is deficient in both the Mongolian and English languages, secondary sources were relied on to provide the context and complete this historical study. Given that access to primary data concerning this historical account in both Mongolian and English language sources has been limited and deficient, secondary sources were relied on to provide context and fill certain holes in order to complete this historical study. It is hoped that a historical scholarship using secondary sources could pull together a new perspective, the significance of which was to contribute to the study of Japan's involvement in promoting Mongolian nationalism through Buddhism.

## Discussion

### 1 – Historical Background

Historically the Russians arrived in the Baikal Lake area in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. In 1691, the Khalkha Mongol princes of Outer Mongolia who were defeated by the Oirat Mongols (Western Mongols) turned south for help and submitted suzerainty to the Manchu (Qing) Empire. Western Oirat Mongols consist of several smaller ethnic groups who inhabit the western part of Mongolia Proper. The Buryats were a part of the Mongol Empire since the 13<sup>th</sup> century; however, as Russians' eastward advances intensified in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Buryats had no choice but to sign a treaty with the Russians and become subjects of Tsarist Russia in 1689.

As political conditions drastically changed in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Mongol nationalism was first developed on a large scale. The Tsarist and Manchu authorities reversed their policies towards the Mongols and implemented a more progressive and intrusive administrative policy over the Mongol territories in Buryat, Inner Mongolia, and Manchuria. More Russians moving west aggressively pushed the Buryats out of their land. In 1902, Tsarist regulations directly attacked the social structure of the Buryats.

Similarly, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Manchu officials, afraid of Russia's further expansion into Mongol territory, reversed their previous policy of protecting the Mongols from the Chinese. Instead, the settlement of Chinese farmers accelerated in Eastern and Inner Mongolian territories. This rapid and extensive penetration into Mongol territory aimed at absorbing Mongol lands and people under the Chinese rule. The Mongols of Inner, Eastern (Manchurian), and Buryat Mongolia experienced a direct threat from the Chinese and Russian economic and political advancements, as well as their cultural expansion. There was no doubt that this rapid 'Sinification' and 'Russification' would soon lead to a shift in the Mongols political position, as well as a shift in their culture. But the Khalkhas of Outer Mongolia were in a relatively better position by being distant from foreign disturbances as compared to other Mongol ethnic groups at the time.

The outcomes of the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895 and the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905 enabled the Imperial Japan not only to occupy considerable territories in Continental Northeast Asia, but it also gained a worldwide prestige for its political and military strength. The Sino-Japanese Agreement of 1915 gave Japan certain privileges in Eastern Inner Mongolia and Manchuria. The Japanese sought to strategically and economically use Manchuria by taking control of the existing transportation systems and building of new railroads, as well as exploiting its natural resources. Thus, Japan aggressively pushed its military advancement towards East Asia competing with the strategic interests of both Russia and China.

In 1918, a year after the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, Japan sent its military to Siberia (Russian Far East) and temporarily occupied the important Maritime Province of Vladivostok and some Buryat territory of Russian Siberia.

Meanwhile, far-eastern Russia was temporarily under Admiral Kolchak's control, who was assisted by Britain, the USA, France, Italy, and Japan as well. These Western powers and Japan according to the 1918 Britain conference decided to send seven thousand troops from each country to Russia's Far East in order to oppose the new revolutionary government; Japan sent ten times as many (Phillips, 1942, p. 26). As the Japanese troops occupied Vladivostok and further advanced along the Trans Siberian Railway reaching as far as Lake Baikal in 1918, they established relations with Ataman Semyonov, not Kolchak, but his more important officer. Japan's policy of supporting the unification of the Mongols under the Narmai Mongol state under Semyonov and Baron Ungern leadership in the early 1920s, and its later attempt to build the Manchukuo state with the active participation of the Mongols in the 1930s show that Japan had an early political interest in Mongol affairs as she advanced farther west into the Northeast Asian continent. Now there was an opportunity for Japan to further pursue its expansion policy towards the nations of East Asia. This was the first time that the Buryat Mongols were recognized by foreigners as the gateway/middle-men to other Mongol groups and their territories.

## **2 – The First Period of Japan's Policy Towards Mongol Nationalism**

Mongolia's immediate neighbors, Tsarist Russia (later the Soviet Union), the Manchu (Qing) Empire of China, and the Imperial Japan as a rather distant neighbor, were all aware of the importance of Mongol Buddhism in dealing with the Mongols. Mongolia was geographically isolated from direct communication with all nations except Russia and China and sought new allies. In 1914, the 8<sup>th</sup> Jebtsun Damba, the political and spiritual leader of all Mongols, sent a letter to the Emperor of Japan requesting assistance in the struggle for Mongol unification. He was known as the eighth reincarnation of the first Buddhist spiritual leader of the Mongols, was a Tibetan, and was enthroned as the Khaan of all Mongols as a result of the 1911 national revolution for independence from the Qing Dynasty. This was a critical time for the survival of Mongolia's independence, as they had freed themselves from the Manchus three years earlier. The Japanese Government silently rejected this request. This was the first direct attempt of the Mongols to establish direct contact with the Imperial Japan in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Cheney, 1968, p. 44).

Ten years before this in 1904, a significant event took place in Urga, which led the Mongols to seriously consider Mongol independence from the Qing Empire. The 13<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama of Tibet (*Ngag-dbang Blo-gzang Thub-ldan*) fled to Urguu (the capital of Outer Mongolia) because of the British occupation of Lhasa in 1904. The 13<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama's visit to Outer Mongolia in 1904 had strategic significance in seeking for political support from the Mongols, as both the Mongols and the Tibetans were now free following the collapse of the Qing Empire. However, this visit by the Dalai Lama could undermine the political and religious authority of the 8<sup>th</sup> Jebtsun Damba Khutukhtu, the spiritual and political leader of the Mongols whom would later be enthroned as the Khan of the Khalkha Mongols after the 1911 national movement for independence. The Jebtsun Damba recognized the Dalai Lama's religious primacy, but resisted any challenge from the Dalai Lama to his political authority. Wherever the Dalai Lama went, Buryat, Khalkha, Oirat, Inner, and Eastern Mongols followed him, showed great respect, and paid tribute to him as a Living Buddha. The Dalai Lama's presence in Mongol territories had no direct political influence over the Mongols since the Mongols in history never looked to Lhasa for political leadership; however, thousands of Mongol Buddhists gathered wherever the Dalai Lama was, strongly proving that the Mongols had a very strong Buddhist religious tie among themselves.

This was also the time that thousands of Mongols, from different parts of Mongol territory gathered together and had a chance to chat about their political and economic conditions under the Qing Dynasty, which by this time was already weakening throughout Mongol territory. At the same time, this provoked the Mongol awareness of Chinese and Russian incursions into their lands. Such large gatherings became a conditional cause for the Mongols to express

their nationalistic sentiments. At that time China and Russia were paying close attention to the Dalai Lama's political refuge in Mongolia. More importantly, the Dalai Lama's great religious influence on the Mongols must have had some effect on the policy of its neighbors towards Mongolia and its Buddhism. This perhaps helped foreign powers to realize the significance of using Buddhism towards the Mongols in advancing their interest among the Mongol people and throughout their territories.

Historically, Buddhism came to Buryat via Outer Mongolia and Tibet in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Since then the Buryats have had a strong religious connection with both Urga and Lhasa. As Russian pressures strengthened and their interests expanded, some Buryat intellectual lamas attempted to create a Buddhist-oriented kingdom, highlighting their religious and cultural unity. One of these intellectuals was Agvan Dorjeev, who envisioned a Mongol-Tibet Buddhist state headed by the Dalai Lama (Rupen, 1964, p. 106). The idea was to create a strong Buddhist state in Central and East Asia. Agvan Dorjeev's Pan-Buddhism idea was an extension of Pan-Mongolism, but added Tibet to the Mongol areas and would bring the two nations under religious unification.

The idea of Pan-Buddhism was later promoted by the Japanese when they sent over seventy thousand troops to assist Admiral Kolchak in his counter-revolutionary campaign against the Bolsheviks in Siberia. According to Rupen, the two leading Buryat Buddhist leaders, Agvan Dorjeev and Tserenpil supported Kolchak. Agvan Dorjeev was paid twenty thousand rubles monthly by the Kolchak regime to oppose socialist and revolutionary movements among the Buryats (Ibid., p. 135). Since the Kolchak regime was funded by the Japanese, Khambo Lama Agvan Dorjeev's activities were also indirectly financed by the Japanese; such moves were aimed at winning over the Buryat Mongols and separating them from Russia by including them into the greater Pan-Mongolism initiative based on Buddhist and nomadic culture. This was the first time the Japanese attempted to expand the propaganda of "Asia for the Asiatics" involving the local Buryat Mongols.

According to Phillips, all Japanese agents were Buddhist monks, perhaps disguised as Mongol lamas. Phillips states, "Japanese agents, often Buddhist lama priests, went around the tribes preaching that Japan was heaven and the Japanese troops were divine avengers of earthly injustice and wickedness..." (Phillips, 1942, p. 27). This strong statement was justified by a mysterious Buddhist prophecy of the Army of *Shambala* (Mon: *Shambal*; Tib: *Tyan-p'yogs kyi Sam-bha-la*). The original idea of *Shambala* is that the Great King *Eregden Dagbo*, who resided in his Buddha-land *Shambala*, which existed in the far northern space, would someday descend to earth to destroy evil and promote the Dharma or the teachings of the Buddha. Interestingly, this mysterious prophecy was then re-interpreted by the Japanese that heaven *Shambala* was located in the east, in the land of Japan, and the Japanese troops as the Army of *Shambala* came to defeat "heretics and atheists", meaning Bolsheviks, and to restore order. Eventually all the "evils" would be destroyed by the troops of the Rising Sun and all Buddhists would be empowered (Ibid., p. 69).

But the Buryats favored Semyonov more than they did the Japanese due to Russian cultural and political familiarity that had developed for over two centuries. A year later, the Japanese put efforts in creating a "Pan-Mongol movement", which was to re-establish a "Great Mongol" Empire or "Mongol Proper". It seems that at this time the Japanese were more interested in Pan-Mongolia rather than Pan-Buddhism. It was obvious that Japan's policy was to promote nationalism amongst the Mongols through manipulating Buddhism but not to create a Buddhist state. In this matter Semyonov took the lead in gathering a group of Inner Mongols and Buryats in Chita, Siberia. Six representatives from Buryat Mongolia, five from Inner Mongolia, and four from Eastern Mongolia (extending into Manchuria), joined the meeting. Semyonov and the Japanese Major Sutsui, an adviser for Semyonov, actively took part in the conference. None from Outer Mongolia attended the meeting. Due mainly to both foreign pressure and domestic reluctance, Outer Mongolia did not send any representative to this gathering.

The conference laid down the first constitution of the Pan-Mongolian State Government and decided with a single voice that Japan, due to its strong Buddhist tradition and military strength, would be the best foreign protector of the newly established state. Semyonov promised to supply one million rubles for the new government and weapons for the new Mongolian army. Because of the costly civil war with the Red Army, Semyonov himself could not produce the money and weapons he had promised. Without Japanese support Semyonov was unable to fulfill his promises. The hesitation by Japan to continue its support of Semyonov was primarily due to its own economic difficulties, more importantly its lack of arms supply in Manchuria. This, coupled with the external pressure by the Chinese, led to Japan's decision not to continue its support of Semyonov, and consequently the Pan-Mongolia plan failed. This new government's enduring attempt to appeal to the Jebtsun Damba for political and religious leadership of a newly unified Mongol nation-state resulted in vain.

From the beginning of the establishment of a Pan-Mongolian State, the Jebtsun Damba of Urguu was suspicious of Semyonov and some Buryat leaders. On one hand, it was very clear to the Outer Mongolian leadership that this new government would not last long without direct involvement of Outer Mongolia. On the other hand it was a very complicated political situation since the new government was supported only by Japan and a makeshift conglomerate of former Tsarist (White) Russians, while both the Bolshevik Russians and the Chinese warlords adamantly opposed this initiative. Obviously, the Chinese strongly pressured the Jebtsun Damba not to join the government.

Throughout Western Buryat territory, the Japanese agents were admitted to travel without hindrance. Even after the establishment of the Buryat Republic under Soviet rule, the Japanese were still influential in terms of money and ideology. As Buryats were known during this time to play to each side of the Red vs. White Russian revolution and counter-revolution, their allegiances were often shaky and opportunistic. In accordance with the Phillips' account, many important officials of the Government of the Buryat-Mongol Soviet Republic were in fact Japanese agents, including the Bolshevik Party Secretary Yerbanov and some members of the People's Commissars. Phillips further says:

“Throughout western Buryat-Mongolia, where the Buddhist church was still strong, Japan spread her propaganda by means of lama monks. The propaganda was of two kinds: one for the dispossessed upper layers of the old regime, and one for the still superstitious elements of the Buryat peasantry” (Ibid., p. 68).

From this quote we could see that Japan's policy was to attract and favor the high class of monks and noble families suppressed by the Russians, and then provide hope for ordinary people that the creation of a new state would bring about prosperity in their traditional religion, Buddhism.

Since the Jebtsun Damba did not support the new Pan-Mongolian regime, the most important person of the new government was Neisse Gegen, a reincarnated lama of Inner Mongolia, who headed the government for a short period of time, and one of the most influential Inner Mongolian Buddhist reincarnated lamas of the time. Neisse Gegen sent a delegation to the Paris Peace Conference aiming at gaining international recognition for the new regime (Rupen, 1964, p. 135). The Pan-Mongol Government was not successful in gaining international recognition, and of even greater frustration to the Pan-Mongol Government, they could not even secure support from their brothers the Khalkha Mongols of Outer Mongolia. Such failures resulted in the withdrawal of Japanese support. This time the Gegen himself tried to re-establish contact with the Japanese but did not succeed. The Pan-Mongol Government collapsed and soon after the Gegen was captured and executed by the Chinese.

However, this was not the end, and in 1920 the Japanese tried again. The Japanese financially assisted and armed Baron von Ungern-Sternberg, a high-ranking officer of Semyonov, and sent him to Urguu, where he claimed to restore

a Great Mongol State with the Japanese assistance. The Baron placed the Jebtsun Damba under house-arrest and forced him to admit his puppet government named “Ikh Mongol” (Great Mongol). Simultaneous to Japan's reinvigorated plans to create a Pan-Mongol state, the Chinese warlord Xu Shuzheng took control of Urguu and dismantled the Jebtsun Damba government. Interestingly the Mongols, from the Jebtsun Damba himself to ordinary people, much favored the Baron since he was the key figure who freed Outer Mongolia from Chinese colonization. For his victory over the Chinese, the Jebtsun Damba awarded the Baron with the title of a Buddhist reincarnation.

Ungern-Sternberg's order to his officers proves that he was under Ataman Semyonov's guidance and they both were receiving assistance from the Japanese (Phillips, 1942, p. 35). However, the Baron's government quickly alienated the Mongols and it soon imploded. The primary reason for the failure of Baron's regime was the economic exploitation of first the Russian expatriate community in Urguu in which all expatriate wealth was confiscated by the Baron, and second, the even more ill-advised economic exploitation of the Mongols themselves; as such the Mongol sentiment for the Baron spiraled quickly downward soon after his rise to power. Soon, mainly due to the lack of Mongol support, Unger-Sternberg's troops were hopelessly defeated by the Soviet Red Army, and in 1922, he was captured by the Soviet militia and executed in the Western Mongol region. This put an end to Japan's continuing efforts in creating a Pan-Mongolian state in Buryat and Outer Mongolia; but yet again, this was not Japan's last try.

### **3 – The Second Period of Japan's Policy for Mongol Nationalism and Buddhism**

In 1931, the Japanese invaded the three eastern provinces of Northeastern China and declared them independent from China under the name of Manchukuo. The size and strategic position of the territory populated by Mongols in Manchuria gave the Mongols a greater advantage over other ethnic groups in the region when dealing with the Japanese. In 1933, the Japanese also annexed a former Inner Mongolian province and further advanced into the western part of Inner Mongolia. Without an active Mongol policy, Japan could not complete its continental expansion in Inner Asia. The Japanese chose Mongol Buddhism again to be their most favored tool to win Mongol support. In the long-run, this Japanese policy was intended to attract the Khalkha Mongols via the Inner and Eastern Mongols whilst further distancing them from Soviet influence. The policy and its implementation of Pan-Mongolism became increasingly aggressive in Inner Mongolia in the 1930s. The Japanese manipulated the Inner Mongolian nationalist movement and exploited the Khalkha refugees (who had escaped from Mongolian communist rule), and tried to sever Outer Mongolia from the Soviet's ideological and economic influence.

The Inner Mongolian nationalist movement was divided into the Ulanfu group supported by Chinese Communists and Pa'I Yun-t'I group who cooperated with Chiang Kai-shek. One of the leaders of the group supporting the Kuomintang was Prince Demchugdongrob, also known as Te Wang. Prince Te was claimed to be the last Prince of the *Altan Urag*, the Golden Clan of Chinggis Khan. He was born in the Sunid Right Banner of Inner Mongolia. In the beginning of Japan's expansion into Inner Mongolia, Prince Te was the first person with whom the Japanese contacted. Sasame Tsueno who was also a Japanese Buddhist monk, brought a letter from General Matsui Iwane and General Hayashi Senjuro to Prince Te. The letter, according to Jagchid (1999), explained Japan's desire to help the Mongols gain their independence with the assistance of Japan (p. 58).

Japanese activities among the Inner and Manchurian Mongols were carried out by the Japanese Special Service Officers and the Good Neighbor Association (*Zenrin Kyokai*). It was Sasame Tsueno's idea to create the Association, which was formally established in 1933 with the support of General Hayashi Senjuro and Mazumoro Koryo (Ibid., p. 127). Besides conducting intelligence work, the Association administered other educational and cultural (religious) programs. The Association had more than one branch in various banners of Inner Mongolia. The Good Neighbor

Association in cooperation with local administrative offices sent a number of Mongolian students, including some monks, to Japan to study. Even Te Wang sent his eldest son to Tokyo to receive education in 1939.

During the early period of the occupation of Manchuria, the Japanese forced young lamas to serve in its military in Manchuria. They soon realized that this was an ill-advised move, as any anti-Buddhist activity would work against their policy and drive the Mongols away from the Japanese. The Mongols of Manchuria were just as important in this situation as the Mongols of Inner Mongolia in terms of their role in Japan's further expansion into Continental North/Inner Asia. If at any time they felt disaffected by Japanese policy, they could easily turn either to Outer Mongolia or to China and pose a perpetual threat to the increasing strategic interest of Japan's expansion and territorial control in the region. Therefore, the Japanese prohibited the Chinese immigration into Mongol territory and worked towards strengthening Mongol support by treating its religion in a more "special" way. Thus, when Japan invaded Inner Mongolia, it implemented a more friendly policy towards the lamas and monasteries. Because of the political influences of monasteries in Mongol areas, the Japanese pursued a policy to "Japanize" Mongol Buddhism.

According to Gubler, the Pan-Buddhist movement in continental Asia was legitimized by the establishment of the "Buddhist Association of Japan and Mongolia" (*Nichi Mo Bukkyokai*) in Tokyo in 1938. This association was later reorganized as a more inclusive organization named "The Buddhist Association of Asia under Japanese Leadership" (Gubler, 1968, p. 28). Another association that carried out significant scholarly works on the study of Mongolian culture and religion was the "Association for a Good Neighborhood" (*Zenrin Kyokai*). Besides various government funded associations, some religious sects also took a crucial part in research and study projects. On this Jagchid (1999) provides a clear account stating:

"This Japanification policy was run by the Koyazan sect, with roots in the Japanese Shinganshu sect. Koyazan was a tantric Buddhist sect that had many similarities to the esoteric Buddhism of Tibet; it dispatched many monks to visit Mongolian monasteries and conduct research into Mongolian religious beliefs and practices" (p. 271).

Another Japanese Buddhist sect that carried out the religious policy of Mongol Buddhist reform was Omoto-kyo, which was established during the Meiji period, headed by a Buddhist priest and intelligence agent named Ideguchi. Ideguchi, according to Katsumi, was the leader of the group and had a missionary plan to spread the teachings of the Omoto-kyo sect among the Mongols. Another individual who undertook the role of a religious missionary was Higashi Honganji, a Japanese priest of esoteric Buddhism. While studying Buddhism in Mongolia, Honganji became a lama of Mongolian Buddhism.

Similarly, Gubler (1968) also mentions that a number of Japanese Buddhist priests lived in Mongol monasteries, learned the Mongolian language, and dressed as Mongol lamas. Katsumi (1999) also supports this fact, reinforcing that it was true that some Japanese Buddhist monks temporarily lived in Mongol monasteries and acted as if they were Mongol lamas. These Japanese monks conducted surveys of Buddhist temples and monasteries and their activities. Obviously, their "missionary" work resulted more in scholarly works and intelligence information gathering than religious conversion.

Japan's Buddhist propaganda was carried out on the basis of a careful study of Mongol culture and religion, which led to the forcing of the local people to adopt some aspects of Japanese culture. In this case it was obvious that Japanese Buddhism was the tool that worked to influence Mongol religion and culture. These extensive research works were generously funded by the Japanese government, specifically by the Ministry of Education, in the early period of Japan's expansion. In later years during the war, these types of research projects were funded by such organizations as the Manchuria Ethnology Association organized in 1941 and the Northwest Institute established in 1943; both



organizations were located in Manchuria. According to Katsumi (1999), many researchers dispatched by the Ethnological Institute, which was funded by the Japanese Navy and Army, came to Inner Mongolia and Manchuria to conduct a number of research projects. Although we mainly discuss Japan's policy to attempt a reform of Mongol Buddhism in the pre-war era, it appears that even during the war this process of using Mongol Buddhism for information gathering by the Japanese continued, which implies that this policy was both deliberate and organized throughout its lifespan.

It was difficult for the Japanese to impose their new religious reform policy on the higher ranking and more influential lamas, who were reluctant to accept Japan's propaganda in promoting Japanese Buddhism as a superior sect of the Buddhist faith. Thus, the Japanese decided instead to recruit young lamas in their twenties and send them to Japan for religious education and training. These young lamas were sent to Shingon University at Mt. Koya, where they studied various religious subjects of Shingon Buddhism. This school for young lamas was called *Koa Mikkyo Gakuin*. The curriculum included instruction in everything from an elementary Japanese language program to complicated religious content and training, which was to be completed within three years (Gubler, 1968, p. 47). These young lamas were then expected to return to Mongolia and reform Mongol Buddhism.

Due to their limited ability (mainly due to language and cultural differences) to teach Mongolians in Japan at the time, the number of Mongol students sent to Japan for Buddhist training was relatively small. The local government services in Inner Mongolia and Manchuria recruited those who qualified. As an example, only thirty young lamas from Manchuria were enrolled in the program in 1934 (Ibid., p. 49). The majority of these students returned earlier than expected. For various reasons, the dropout rate among the Mongol students was roughly thirty percent. Those who remained for two or three years completed the program, with a few continuing their studies conducting research in Japan after completing the three-year program. However, the outcomes of the religious reform policy of the Mongols did not live up to the expectations of the Japanese. As Jagchid (1999) mentions, most of the lamas who went to Japan did not change their religious beliefs; the number of students was insignificant and the length of the program was not sufficient enough to convince these young lamas to change their religious values and day-to-day practices. The cultural and linguistic difficulties while in Japan, coupled with the lack of an incentive to reform their own understanding of Buddhism led to the failure of this religious "study abroad" program.

Both Mongol Buddhism and Shingon sectarian Buddhism share some similar teachings and practices based on various esoteric elements. Despite these similarities, the Japanese priests faced difficult resistance from the leaders of local Buddhist monastic institutions who did not desire any type of reform to the traditional way of their religious life. As the Japanese tried to push their religious reform policy harder, they faced more conservative and reactionary attitudes from the higher Mongol lamas, who favored the protective side of Japan's reform policy, rather than the "purification" elements of it.

In May 1943, the "Second Conference for the Restoration of Mongolian Buddhism" took place in Kalgan (today's *Hohhot*, the capital city of Inner Mongolia). The First Conference had taken place a year earlier and proved less significant and unproductive. Local officials, high-ranking lamas, and chief Japanese advisors attended the second conference; their main objective was to avoid Japanese intervention in religious affairs and to emphasize the importance of the traditional religious system. A goal of the conference was to establish the Secretariat Office of Lamas' Affairs (*Lama-yin Tamgyin Gazar*) to regulate and manage religious affairs. The Office consisted of several of the most influential Mongol reincarnations and high lamas. Interestingly, a Japanese military officer, named Yukei Kogan, was appointed to the position of advisor to the Secretariat Office. Yukei Kogan was the head of the local intelligence bureau and a Buddhist monk (Jagchid, 1999, p. 297). The conference resulted in a symbolic outcome

rather than a practical one given that the influential Mongol lamas wanted to keep running their religious affairs in an independent and traditional way without compromising their spiritual authority.

In the process of “Japanification” of Mongol Buddhism, various Buddhist sects both Japanese and Mongol (to a lesser degree) carried out extensive education and training programs for the purpose of ‘cultural unification’ with the end goal of strengthening Japan’s new order in East Asia. In the summer of 1940, along with the Buddhist reforms, the Japanese extended Shintoism to the newly occupied territories, one of which was Changchun, the capital of Manchukuo where the spirit of *Amaterasu Omikami* was transferred, and a new Shinto shrine was erected to symbolize Japan’s control over Manchukuo (Holtom, 1947, p. 169). The principal of bringing in other races as subjects of Japan, along with compassion for Buddhism, was incorporated into Japan’s expansionism policy. Therefore, Japan’s religious policy towards the Mongols was well prepared as different religious sects were actively involved.

After 1937, the Japanese further advanced in Inner Mongolia spreading propaganda about a “renaissance of Buddhism”, which was an attempt to reorganize Buddhist monasteries. This propaganda, also included a declaration of a “Holy War” against Communism (Rupen, p. 227). This Japanese policy was supported by the wishes of the most influential lamas, and was purely initiated for the purpose of changing the structure of monastic institutions and their monks’ way of life. For example, Japanese monks worked to persuade Mongol lamas to engage in farming. To the livestock handling Mongols this was surprisingly unusual and contradictory to their spiritual teaching and daily life rituals and practices.

Historically, the most interesting and significant project the Japanese aimed at implementing was finding the next reincarnation of the 8th Jebtsun Damba, the spiritual leader of all Mongols. Regarding this matter a more in depth study is required to further provide a detailed account of Japan’s direct involvement in selecting the next incarnate of Mongolia’s highest religious leader in that period. If this project worked out, the Japanese could have greatly benefited in convincing the Mongols that they had the legitimacy to influence Mongol Buddhism. The Japanese sought the support of the 13<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama to persuade Mongol lamas and lay Buddhists of their intentions:

“In the worst class is the manner of working among the Red [Communist] people. They do not allow search to be made for the new Incarnation of the Grand Lama of Urga. They have seized and taken away all the sacred objects from the monasteries. They have made monks to work as soldiers. They have broken religion, so that not even the name of it remains” (Ibid., p. 228).

This type of influential statement of Mongol and Tibetan religious leaders became the core-guiding principal for the Japanese in their search of the 9<sup>th</sup> Jebtsun Damba in Tibet. However, the death of the 8<sup>th</sup> Jebtsun Damba in 1924 removed all obstacles for the Mongolian People’s Party (MPP – Communist Party of the People’s Republic of Mongolia) and further strengthened the socialist regime in Outer Mongolia. This was the end of the strong political, economic, and religious position of Mongol Buddhism in Outer Mongolia. In the same year, the Outer Mongolian MPP Government officially announced that there would be no further reincarnation of the Jebtsun Damba in Mongolia. All Mongols since the 16<sup>th</sup> century looked towards Urguu, the capital city of Outer Mongolia as called before 1924, and specifically the Jebtsun Damba for spiritual and political leadership (the revolutionary government changed the name of the capital city of Mongolia to Ulaanbaatar, literally meaning Red Hero, in 1924). Therefore, given the unification powers of Mongol Buddhism among the scattered Mongol tribes, the 9<sup>th</sup> Jebtsun Damba incarnate would be the only political figure with the ability to pull all Mongols towards unification. Therefore, finding the ninth reincarnation would give the Japanese enormous political and religious influence over the Mongols. Consequently, a group of high lamas and Japanese advisors were sent to Lhasa, Tibet in order to find a new reincarnation. The highest lama among the delegates was the Dilowa Khutukhtu, who was one of the most influential incarnate lamas of Outer

Mongolia (he escaped the Communist oppression of Buddhism in Mongolia in the 1930s and defected to Inner Mongolia after nearly being executed by the communist authorities in Outer Mongolia). The 13<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama offered his spiritual guidance to the joint Japanese and Mongol Buddhist plan of finding the 9<sup>th</sup> reincarnate of the Jebtsun Damba. Jagchid (1999) explains that the Japanese arranged and financed the entire 1935 trip to Lhasa and its grander plan of implementation (p. 271). However, probably due to the strong opposition from the Outer Mongolian government, and opposition by the Chinese and some Inner Mongolian nationalist leaders, such as Te Wang, the search plan for the 9<sup>th</sup> Jebtsun Damba was not completed. Perhaps as a result of this search, the Tibetan authorities found the 9<sup>th</sup> Jebtsun Damba in Tibet in order to attract Mongols. But no outside government, not even the Japanese paid a great deal of attention to this matter, due to the insignificance of the issue at that time. In 1942, the Japanese promoted the reincarnation of another high lama, the Noyon Khutuktu Danzanravjaa, in Outer Mongolia who was a very influential reincarnate lama in southern Mongolia. Japan's support in promoting his reincarnation is a very interesting research subject, which requires a more in depth study as well. The Japanese put him at one of the largest Inner Mongolian Temples on the border with Outer Mongolia (Ibid., p. 271). However, this reincarnate held far less spiritual leverage to attract the Mongols of Outer Mongolia under his political influence. Only local Inner Mongols were happy to have a new reincarnation of the high Khutuktu, because it brought a purely spiritual significance to them at the local level.

As the years progressed into the late 1930's and early 1940's, the Japanese implemented educational, organizational/structural, and reincarnate reforms in Mongol Buddhism in order to further their political, economic, and territorial interests in the region. They first sought to reform Mongol Buddhism through re-educating young Mongol lamas both in Mongol territory and in Japan, then to structurally change the hierarchical structure of the Mongol Buddhist church by establishing a new oversight office, and third attempted to influence the search and political/religious positions of key reincarnates such as the Jebtsun Damba Khutuktu, the Dilowa Khutuktu, and the Noyon Khutuktu. In the end, however, given the regional nature of Mongol Buddhism, a regional religion that transcends political borders, the consolidation of power by the Bolsheviks in Russia and the Mongolian People's Party in Outer Mongolia, and the chaos in China at the time, the Japanese policy of using Buddhism to further its interests proved to be too diverse and unmanageable in consolidating political power in the region.

## Conclusion

Buddhism in Mongolia played a very significant role in promoting nationalism amongst different ethnic groups of the Mongols in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century as her dominant neighbors farther advanced into Mongol territories. In reaction to Russian, Chinese and later Japanese strategic interests and territorial expansions, the Mongols developed nationalist movements throughout Buryat, Eastern (Manchurian), Inner Mongolia and Outer Mongolia. These nationalist movements coincided with Japan's advancement in Inner Asia and they, to a large extent, manipulated such movements and even promoted them for their political and cultural policies towards the local Mongols in the 1920s and 1930s.

We examined in particular Japan's role in attempting to provoke Mongol nationalism in her favor, by promoting Buddhism in the above mentioned Mongol territories. Buddhism was an integral part of Mongol nationalism and the Japanese attempted to strategically use Buddhism for their political agenda in continental Northeast Asia. In the first part of the paper, I provided a brief historical account of Mongolia's external political context and the causes of nationalist sentimentalism and movements amongst the Mongols. The second part of the paper examined how the Japanese first approached the Buryat Mongols in the early 1920s and attempted to manipulate Buddhism in reviving

nationalism. Through such provocative nationalist activities based on Buddhism among the Buryat Mongols, Japan sought to expand its political influence in the region and at the same time hoped that such actions would stop the Bolshevik expansion in the Far East.

The third part of paper investigated Japan's policy towards supporting Buddhism and reforming monastic institutions in Eastern (Manchurian) and Inner Mongolia in order to promote the newly established government of the "Great Mongol State" under Japan's guidance in the 1930s. Such political and cultural moves, Japan expected, would offer the Mongols especially those in Outer Mongolia who experienced brutal religious oppression at that period, an alternative to Communism.

This study shows that Japan's attempts failed not only to win extensive support from the Mongols in different regions, but also to ease the political pressures from both the Chinese and Russians (the Soviet Union). Nevertheless, Japan aimed at spreading its political and cultural influence amongst the Mongol ethnic groups such as the Buryat, Inner, Eastern and Outer Mongols. A very significant part of such objective was about promoting nationalism by supporting the local religion-Buddhism among the Mongols so it could in return endorse Japan's expansion policy and encourage anti-socialist feelings amongst the Mongols.

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