

# Buddhism Among the Zünghars

Early Contacts with Tibetan Buddhism – Galdan Boshugtu: From Dge lugs *sprul sku* to Buddhist Khan – Tsewang Rabtan: A Radical Dge lugs Buddhist – Galdan Tseren: The Climax of Buddhism in Züngharia – Buddhism in the Last Decade of the Zünghar Khanate – Monastic Institutions in Züngharia

The Zünghars are nomads who are still to be found living in various parts of western Mongolia and northern Xinjiang, albeit in very small numbers. Their language belongs to the Oirad branch of Mongolic. Buddhism has played a significant role in Zünghar society since the late 15th century, when the Dge lugs tradition of Tibetan Buddhism spread widely throughout Inner Asia. While establishing connections with Dge lugs monks, Zünghar leaders created a strong nomadic power which at its greatest extent in the late seventeenth and the early eighteenth centuries covered what is now Xinjiang, western Mongolia, eastern Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan. Zünghar troops occupied Tibet itself between 1716 and 1720 and their continued military expansion from the 1680s to the 1750s brought them into conflict with the Qing (清) empire (1644–1911). This did not end well for the Zünghars. The successful Qing conquest of Xinjiang destroyed much of Zünghar society and culture, bringing with it diseases such as smallpox, and decimating the population (Perdue, 2005, 45–48). By 1759, only 10% of the 350,000–530,000 Zünghars who were alive in 1755 remained, 30% having been outright killed, 40% were dead of disease, and 20% had fled to Russia (Atwood, 2004, 624). The Qing empire moreover intentionally modified the collective memory of Mongolian and Tibetan Buddhists by systematically censoring Zünghar history and destroying related literary sources in what amounted to not only literal but also cultural genocide.

Although there is some scholarship on the relations between the Zünghars and Tibetan Buddhism (Wakamatsu, 1994; Miyawaki, 1995), the history of Buddhism among the Zünghars remains obscure in many respects, owing largely to the dispersion of literary sources under Qing censorship. Three types of source material are available: historical and religious works composed by Mongolian and Tibetan Buddhists; Qing archives, and historiography written in Manchu, Mongolian, and Chinese; and

Russian records. The following summary is based on the available primary and secondary sources, and considers in particular the relations between the Zünghars and the Tibetan Buddhist world during the reigns of a series of Zünghar leaders:

Table 1: Zünghar leaders

|                                   |                                     |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Khara-Khula (fl. 1620–1634)       | Galdan Tseren (r. 1727–1745)        |
| Baatur Khung-Taiji (r. 1635–1653) | Tsewang Dorji Namjil (r. 1745–1750) |
| Sengge (r. 1653–1670)             | Derjaa (r. 1750–1753)               |
| Galdan Boshugtu (r. 1670–1697)    | Dawaachi (r. 1753–1755)             |
| Tsewang Rabtan (r. 1697–1727)     | Amursanaa (r. 1755–1757)            |

## Early Contacts with Tibetan Buddhism

After the spread of Dge lugs teachings in Mongolian societies in the late 16th century, in 1615 the western Mongols known as the Oirads decided to embrace the Dge lugs tradition of Tibetan Buddhism as their orthodox religion (Miyawaki, 1997, 61). According to the Oirad history written by Gawang Shirab dated 1737, a Zünghar prince named Khara-Khula sent one of his sons together with other Oirad princes to train as monks in Tibet, after which time Tibetan Buddhism played a significant role in Zünghar society (Dambipeljid & Ge-Lijei, 2014, 34). When Khara-Khula agreed to adopt *The Mongol-Oirad Great Code* (Mong. *yeke čağača*) on behalf of the Zünghars in 1640, many Dge lugs monks participated in the conference as arbitrators (Wakamatsu, 1994, 240), showing that Tibetan Buddhism was already playing a significant role in the legal system of the Zünghars. Dge lugs monks continued to come to Züngharia as missionaries during the seventeenth

century, bringing not only knowledge of Buddhist astronomy and Tibetan medicine, but their concept of reincarnation. The advantages were mutual: based on the tradition of the patron-priest relationship (Tib. *mchod yon*), Zünghar princes were eager to look for recognition from the Dge lugs school, and the Dge lugs leaders needed the military and economic support of the Zünghars. Some Dge lugs *sprul sku* (reincarnations, commonly known in Western literature as Tulku) were identified among sons born to the families of Zünghar aristocrats, conforming to a practice found elsewhere in the Tibetan Buddhist world, notably among the Mongol elites.

The mission of the Third Dben sa *sprul sku*, Blo bzang bstan 'dzin rgya mtsho (1605–1644), was one of the most significant. Blo bzang bstan 'dzin rgya mtsho was the student of the Fourth Panchen Lama Blo bzang chos kyi rgyal mtshan (1570–1662), who ordered him to lead a mission to Züngharia in the 1630s. It was on this occasion that he participated in the 1640 conference on *The Mongol-Oirad Great Code*. He also had close connections with the family of Baatur Khung-Taiji, who was Khara-Khula's successor. At the request of Baatur Khung-Taiji's wife, Yum Aas, the Dben sa *sprul sku* made a prophecy that he would be reborn as her son after his death. When Yum Aas gave birth to her son Galdan (later known as Galdan Boshugtu) in 1644, the Dge lugs school immediately recognized him as the Fourth Dben sa *sprul sku* (Oyunbilig, 1994, 6). Based on this connection, Galdan took the throne of Züngharia, and became one of the most influential leaders in Central Eurasia in the late 17th century.

### Galdan Boshugtu: From Dge lugs *sprul sku* to Buddhist Khan

When he was twelve years old, Galdan left Züngharia to study in Tibet. In 1656, he first met the Fifth Dalai Lama Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho (1617–1682) in the Jo khang Monastery of Lhasa during the Smon lam prayer festival (DKL, V, 363). He then traveled to Gzhis ka rtse (Shigatse), where he studied with the Fourth Panchen Lama in the Bkra shis lhun po monastery. In 1663, he received his monastic ordination from the Dalai Lama (DKL, V, 495), and returned to Züngharia in 1666 as a missionary from the Dalai Lama, who urged him to establish a Dge lugs theocracy based on “the coalition of religion and politics” (Tib. *chos srid zung 'brel*).

It is known that Galdan maintained his religious status as Dben sa *sprul sku* until 1670, thanks to a Russian document that recorded his title as Galdan Khutugtu (Ru. Goldan-kutuxta) in 1668 (Clesarčuk & Demidova, 1996, 188–189). However, Galdan's role changed fundamentally as the result of a political struggle in 1670 when Sengge, the Zünghar leader and Galdan's elder brother, was assassinated. With the support of the Dalai Lama, Galdan gave up his monastic vows and fought a civil war to avenge his elder brother's death, eliminating his enemies and taking the throne of Züngharia (Zlatkin, 1964, 229). After unifying Züngharia, he immediately shared the news of his victory with the Dalai Lama, sending a messenger together with almost six kilograms of gold (DKL, VI, 150).

In the 1670s and the 1680s, Galdan led his people to conquer the neighboring regions occupied by Muslims, including Yarkand and parts of present-day Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. In 1678, the Fifth Dalai Lama consecrated him with the title of Galdan Tendzin Boshugtu Khan (Galdan, the Dharma holder and Khan with the Mandate of Heaven) (DKL, VII, 115), in return for which Galdan sent him some rare European gifts, including kaleidoscopes and textiles from Russia (DKL, VII, 119), and in 1681 he went further, offering him land in the Tarim Basin (DKL, VII, 301–302).

Galdan's military expansion in Central Eurasia eventually brought him into conflict with the Qing empire in the 1690s. Although the Kangxi Emperor (康熙; 1654–1722) criticized Galdan for “being confused by Islam and betraying the teachings of the Dalai Lama and Tsong kha pa” (*Qing shilu*, CLXVI, 808), he must have known that he was a Tibetan Buddhist. In late 1696, the Qing army captured an embassy traveling from Züngharia to Tibet, intercepting fourteen letters sent by Galdan to other Dge lugs leaders, in which he asked for their prayers and consolation. They were translated from Tibetan into Manchu (Guoli gugong bowuyuan, 1976–1977, VIII, 403–410, 457–459, 483–489), and are preserved in the Qing archives which are now in National Palace Museum in Taipei, Taiwan.

Oirad literature contains a Tibetan poem by Galdan based on the six *pāramitās* (Tib. *phar phyin drug*), which was translated into Mongolian and in the 18th century transcribed into Todo script (the Oirad script based on the Mongolian alphabet created in 1648 by perhaps the most famous Oirad monk, Zaya Pandita [1599–1662]). It is possible that Galdan wrote this poem to seek forgiveness for the

deaths that had been caused by the campaigns against the Qing (Oyunbilig, 2016, 252).

## Tsewang Rabtan: A Radical Dge lugs Buddhist

Zünghar relations with the Tibetan Buddhist world significantly changed after Galdan Boshugtu's defeat in 1696. Sengge's son Tsewang Rabtan seized control. Tsewang Rabtan proved hostile to his uncle's Tibetan allies, especially to the Fifth Dalai Lama's regent (Tib. *sde srid*) Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho (1653–1705), and as a result launched a series of diplomatic and military attacks on the Dga' ldan pho brang (Ganden Phodrang) government of Tibet from the 1690s to the 1710s, while identifying himself as a faithful follower of the Panchen Lama. As a radical Dge lugs Buddhist, Tsewang Rabtan was violently opposed to Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho (1683–1706), the young Sixth Dalai Lama who was supported by Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho. He accused Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho of choosing a fake Dalai Lama and of showing disrespect to the Fifth Panchen Lama Blo bzang ye shes (1663–1737). In a letter in Mongolian sent to the Qing court in 1698, Tsewang Rabtan charged Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho and some Rnying ma monks, including Rig 'dzin padma 'phrin las (1641–1717), of manipulating the selection of the Dalai Lama's reincarnation (Zhongguo diyi lishi dang'an'guan, 2005, XI, 434–437), and asked the Manchu emperor to wage war against Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho to defend the purity of Dge lugs teachings (*Qing shilu*, CLXXXVII, 990–991).

Tsewang Rabtan's proposal to intervene in Tibetan affairs, his struggle against Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho, and his intolerance toward the Rnying ma school, eventually caused chaos in the Tibetan Buddhist world. According to Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho's testimony preserved in the Qing archives, he went so far as to consider giving up his Buddhist vows because of Tsewang Rabtan's slander. Although the Panchen Lama tried to solve the controversy by stressing the legitimacy of the Sixth Dalai Lama Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho, the young man's actions provided a perfect excuse for the Qing and the Zünghars to intervene in Tibetan affairs (Zhongguo diyi lishi dang'an'guan, 2005, XIV, 388–424).

After the Qing empire and the Khoshuts, a branch of Oirad Mongols in Kokenor, collaborated to depose Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho by organizing

a coup d'état in 1705, Lazang Khan (1703–1717) supported a new Dalai Lama named Ye shes rgya mtsho (1686–1725) in Lhasa. Nevertheless, other Khoshut princes supported another Dalai Lama named Bskal bzang rgya mtsho (1708–1757) in A mdo. This eventually led to the Zünghar invasion of Tibet. Tsewang Rabtan sent Zünghar troops to occupy Lhasa in 1717, intending to depose Ye shes rgya mtsho and bring Bskal bzang rgya mtsho from A mdo, but the plan did not succeed because Bskal bzang rgya mtsho was under Qing protection.

Tsewang Rabtan's Dge lugs radicalism polarized his image in the Tibetan Buddhist world. During the occupation of Tibet from 1717 to 1720, for example, his army destroyed many monasteries connected with non-Dge lugs traditions, and many monks affiliated with the Rnying ma school were killed. Among the Dge lugs figures he invited to Züngharia, one of the most important was the First Seng chen Dge legs rab rgyas (c. 1644–c. 1714), who had served as the seventh abbot of the tantric college of Bkra shis lhun po monastery (Blo bzang bstan 'dzin rgya mtsho, 1980, 44–52). During his stay, he lectured on Tsong kha pa's *Lam rim chen mo* (Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment), and offered different esoteric Buddhist initiations, including the traditions of Guhyasamāja, Cakrasaṃvara, and Vajrabhairava (Blo bzang bstan 'dzin dpal 'byor, 1977, 551).

## Galdan Tseren: The Climax of Buddhism in Züngharia

When Tsewang Rabtan died in 1727, his son Galdan Tseren took over the throne. Following his father's religious policy, he supported the Dge lugs school. In addition to continuing to invite Buddhist monks from Bkra shis lhun po, Bras sprungs, Se ra, and Ladakh (Kung, 2018, 44), he established many Buddhist monasteries and colleges. Zünghar Buddhist monastic communities at this time were still based on nomadic tents, but Galdan Tseren embarked on the construction of monastic buildings on a large scale, including the Gulja and Qayinuḡ monasteries in the Ili region by 1732 (Renat, 1733, Map 1). He also systematized monastic education, inviting Dge lugs monks to establish many schools of Buddhist philosophy (Tib. *mtshan nyid*), and sponsoring the printing of important Tibetan Buddhist texts, including the collected works of Tsong kha pa, Rgyal tshab rje, and Mkhas grub rje



Map 7: The Zünghar khanate c. 1688

(Blo bzang bstan 'dzin dpal 'byor, 1977, 557–558). To rebuild relations with Tibet after the invasions, he sent three missions under the surveillance of the Qing empire. These were known as “tea offerings” (Mong. *manṣa* < Tib. *manṣa*), a term which originally derived from the almsgiving of tea to monastic communities in Tibetan Buddhist societies (Perdue, 2015). In the 1740s, these “tea-offering missions” evolved into a model of trans-regional trade between Züngharia and Tibet on a large scale. During their missions to Tibet in the 1740s, the Zünghars patronized the Tibetan Buddhist monasteries, including Sbras sprung, Dga' ldan, and Se ra, by offering a great deal of gold and silver. According to records in the Manchu archives, the Zünghars donated more than a ton of silver to the Dge lugs school on their missions to Tibet in the 1740s (Zhongguo diyi lishi dang'an'guan, 2010, I, 673–693, 695–699; II, 1823–1851, 1853–1859). However, they also had religious significance. When Galdan Tseren commissioned the Zünghar mission of 1743, he had them take Tsewang Rabtan's ashes with them to make into votive plaques (Tib. *tsa tsa*)

(Zhongguo diyi lishi dang'an'guan, 2010, I, 313–317). Buddhist influence among the Zünghars reached a climax in the 1740s, but it promptly declined along with the khanate's collapse in the mid-eighteenth century.

### Buddhism in the Last Decade of the Zünghar Khanate

When Galdan Tseren died in 1745, his second son Tsewang Dorji Namjil took over the throne. Following his father's diplomatic policy, in 1748 Tsewang Dorji Namjil also sent a tea-offering mission to Tibet with the Qing empire's permission, but in addition he had to deal with a political struggle with his elder brother Derjaa, who overthrew him in 1750. In 1753 Derjaa himself was killed by princes Dawaachi and Amursanaa. When Dawaachi seized power, he disbanded the monastic institutions in Züngharia in order to centralize his power (*Qing shilu*, CDLXIV, 1023). The next year, Amursanaa rebelled and invited the Kazakhs to attack, as a

result of which the famous Gulja Monastery was plundered. When the khanate collapsed in 1755, Buddhist communities were destroyed both by Zünghar refugees and by Turkic Muslims. The Gulja Monastery was burned down in 1756, and all the relics and treasures lost. When the Qing finally occupied Züngharia in 1757, they established some Dge lugs monasteries for the Zünghars in northern Xinjiang, but they also moved a group of Zünghars to Jehol (熱河; Chn. Rehe) in northern China, where the Qianlong Emperor (乾隆; r. 1735–1796) established the Anyuan (安遠) Monastery for them (Zhao, 2018).

## Monastic Institutions in Züngharia

The establishment of *The Mongol-Oirad Great Code* in 1640 consolidated the authority of monastic communities in Züngharia by protecting their social and economic privileges. What is more, the code stipulated that one out of ten Mongols should become monks. Galdan Boshugtu established three Buddhist schools, including one for tantric teachings (Tib. *sngags pa*), one for the text of the *Lam rim* (stages of the path to enlightenment), and one for prayer and ceremony (Tib. *zhabs brtan*). It is said that in the late seventeenth century these three Buddhist schools consisted of more than three thousand monks (Sum pa ye shes dpal 'byor, 1992, 990). Based on the monastic institutions constructed by Galdan Boshugtu, Tsewang Rabtan changed the school for prayer and ceremony into a Vinaya college (Tib. *'dul ba grwa tshang*). In addition, he ordered that every three households should offer six camels, forty horses, and two-hundred sheep to support the lives of each Buddhist monk and his acolyte. Because of this Tsewang Rabtan was compared to Ral pa can (802–836), one of the greatest Dharma kings in Tibetan history (Blo bzang bstan 'dzin dpal 'byor, 1977, 557).

Galdan Tseren's main contribution was to build new social and monastic institutions, creating brick buildings instead of tents. Chinese architects were employed to create towns in the Ili region, and both the Gulja and Qayinuğ monasteries were constructed in this fashion by 1732. Galdan Tseren assigned five *otogs* (camp districts) containing eight-thousand households to pay tithes to these monasteries. These five *otogs* were known as the five *jisiy-as* (literally “shift, turn”) that were scheduled to

provide taxes and services to the Zünghar Buddhist communities (*Qing shilu*, DCXCV, 795–796).

Under Galdan Tseren's rule, the Gulja Monastery hosted more than six-thousand monks at its peak. Accordingly, the five *jisiy-as* were later expanded to seven and then nine (Kicengge, 2014). Galdan Tseren also significantly promoted literacy by encouraging young monks to study classical Tibetan and written Oirad in the Todo script, and established a reward system for those monks who attained advanced religious degrees. In addition to Buddhist philosophy, he significantly promoted Tibetan medicine by training physician lamas (Chu Tingzhang, 1782, XXXIX).

After Galdan Tseren's death in 1745, Buddhist monks were actively engaged in coups led by Derjaa and Dawaachi, and came under pressure from the Qing army, which managed to persuade them to surrender by stressing their own support for Dge lugs orthodoxy (*Qing shilu*, CDLXXXVI, 82).

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