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Buddhism in the Life of Ulaanbaatar: Nucleus, Trace and Bustling Urbanite

Saskia Abrahms-Kavunenko

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Summary

This article explores the interactions between Buddhist institutions and the changing physicality of Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia's capital city, over the last one hundred years. Whilst Buddhism was key to the foundation of the city, in the present day period it has become increasingly obscured by the instantiations of capitalism in what has become a busy and congested city. Once central metonymically and physically, Buddhist temples are now crowded in the urban sphere, creating logistical difficulties for the training and retaining of Buddhist religious specialists. Due to the physical constraints within the city, Buddhist lamas are generally unable to live on temple grounds. They, like other urbanites, live as other people do, paying for their own food, accommodation and other daily needs. This article pays attention to how urban developments within the city have contributed to the continued blurring of boundaries between religious specialists and the laity, examining how the challenges for contemporary Buddhist institutions reflect, and are reflected, in the changing capital.

Focus, applied concept and method

The brightly painted circular buildings that make up one of Mongolia's largest temples, Dashchoiliin Khiid, take up a relatively small section of the capital city. Before the socialist period, the temple complex comprised a significant portion of the city and housed a large standing Buddhist statue, Maitreya (*Maidar*), the coming Buddha. Alongside the permanent temple buildings that served as shrines for some of the region's most impressive Buddhist iconography were encampments that accommodated thousands of resident lamas, housing for the Mongolian nobility, and the shops of Chinese merchants. In 2016, when I entered one of Dashchoilin Khiid's administrative offices I noticed that there were a number of framed copies of old illustrations of Ulaanbaatar (then commonly named Ikh Khüree or, by foreigners, Uрга) mounted on the wall of the office. In these pre-socialist illustrations, one can see the former size and grandeur of the temple grounds. In one of the maps, drawn in 1913, the encampments that formed Dashchoilin Khiid take up much of the city to the east, pictorially larger in size than Ulaanbaatar's now biggest temple complex Gandantegchenlin (Gandan) Khiid to the west. In the south, the illustration depicts the smaller Choijin Lama Temple, which housed an important oracle, and the Bogd Gegeen's Winter Palace. Enmeshed in a valley to the south of the sacred southern mountain, the Bogd Khan Uul, sits the southern Manjusri temple, Mandshir Khiid.

The illustration demonstrates how urban space in the early 20th century in Mongolia was once dominated by Buddhism. Historically, the city owes its relatively recent foundation to Buddhism. In 1778, the roving temple encampment Örgöö, created initially by the first of the Javzandamba reincarnation lineage Zanabazar, limited its movements to the Selbe River Basin (Tsultemin 2020: 30). In 1885, the temple stopped permanently by the banks of the Tuul River (Tsultemin 2020: 30). This encampment formed the basis for Ulaanbaatar, a city which is now home to around half of Mongolia's population. In the last one hundred years, the dominating

influence of Buddhism in the city has diminished. In the beginning of the 20th century, revolution on the steppe led to bloodshed, destruction, and a radical reconfiguring of the city's structure. The terror of the 1930s saw Mongolia's monastic establishments attacked and temples razed. Dashchoilin was lucky to escape complete demolition as the socialist government repurposed the institution's colourful *ger* (circular nomadic dwellings) shaped temples to house a circus.

When I met with one of the temple's lamas and key administrators in 2016, he pointed to a small section of the map and told me that this is the amount of space that Dashchoilin currently occupies. The city has expanded around what remains of the old temple complex leaving little space for monastic residences. During the course of our conversation, the lama explained to me that Dashchoilin provides free training for young aspiring lamas from the countryside who wish to deepen their understandings and practices of Buddhism. However, as the temple is no longer large enough to accommodate them, during their training the young lamas must find their own accommodation, and pay for food and other expenses. 'This,' he says, 'is the greatest problem facing Mongolian Buddhism today.'

This article will outline the relationship between the physicality of the city, its religious institutions, and the lay population. It will describe how the urban space limits what is possible for Buddhist institutions, presenting difficulties for training and retaining religious specialists. Most Buddhist specialists live as other urbanites do, paying for housing, food, transport, and other costs. A lack of residential space means that it is hard for those Buddhist specialists who wish to devote themselves entirely to a religious vocation. Whilst many lamas in the pre-socialist period lived outside of, or sometimes outside of, temple grounds, the idea that monastics should dedicate their lives to their religious vocation within a monastic setting was expressed by some lamas that had trained abroad, locally trained lamas, and some lay people (Abrahms-Kavunenko 2015a; 2019a). Shortage of space, I was frequently told, creates problem logistically for locally trained lamas and for those who return to Mongolia after studying at monastic institutions abroad. The lack of distinction between the Buddhist laity and religious specialists also means that many lay people are sceptical of the intentions of Buddhist specialists. Much of the laity believe that some Buddhist specialists are poorly educated and that their motivations are potentially clouded by fiscal imperatives in the capitalist era (see also Abrahms-Kavunenko 2015b; 2021).

This article is based on extensive ethnographic research carried out in Ulaanbaatar from 2009–2010 and again in 2013, 2015 and 2016. Fieldwork was conducted over a period of twenty-two months among those who regularly visited Dharma Centres (Buddhist centres oriented towards the education of the laity), worked at or visited Buddhist temples or whom I met in my daily life. The Dharma Centres I carried out formal and informal research in included (but were not limited to) Jampa Ling, an Irish funded Dharma Centre to the west of the city, and the centrally located Shredrup Ling which is funded by the internationally based Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT). With the people I met at Dharma Centres, I participated in regular classes, rituals and social events, carrying out formal interviews and having casual conversations. Those involved in these Dharma Centres were generally educationally oriented, seeking to know more about Buddhism. They came from a variety of social backgrounds, from the more affluent middle classes to those who had

endured significant periods of poverty. Most only spoke Mongolian. Other lay Buddhists and religious specialists I met while visiting temples and through ordinary connections in my daily life. These included friends, friends' friends, people I met at religious rituals at temples and in carrying out other activities. As I was based in the centre of the city living in apartment buildings, these friends and acquaintances tended to be, but were not exclusively, also living centrally. Although many were born in the countryside, most were middle class urbanites who spoke English. Most, but not all, of my interlocutors identified as Buddhists.

State of the art

A History of Buddhism in the City

The mobile temple that went on to form the nucleus of Ulaanbaatar was founded by Zanabazar, the first emanation of the most important reincarnation lineage in Mongolia, the Javzandamba lineage. Zanabazar was an important Buddhist scholar and artist whose many innovations include the Soyombo script which is now utilised pictorially as part of the Mongolian flag. Zanabazar's sculptures are distinctive in style and their unique qualities are highly revered throughout and beyond the Mongolian cultural region. As well as being an elevated artist and scholar, Zanabazar was an influential political figure in his lifetime. His moving temple Örgöö, meaning palace, was crucial in strengthening the presence of Buddhism throughout Inner Asia.

During and before Zanabazar's lifetime, most Mongolian Buddhist monasteries were mobile, with permanent temples tending to function as shrines for less easy to move Buddhist iconography (Tsultemin 2020: 27–29). Residential monastics were frequently housed in *gers* (commonly known as yurts, meaning round circular felt dwellings) rather than in permanent buildings or the kinds of extensive monastic institutions that were common in Tibetan regions. As Uranchimeg Tsultemin has shown, these mobile residences were often arranged in a circular fashion known architecturally as Khüree (literally meaning frame) organised around a central temple (Tsultemin 2020: 24). During Zanabazar's lifetime most of Mongolia was nomadic, populated by herders who moved seasonally to follow better pastures for their animals, a practice that still dominates much of rural Mongolian life today. Whilst scholars initially pointed to the abilities of mobile monasteries to follow available grazing pastures, Tsultemin argues that the extensive range of Zanabazar's Örgöö was unique in that its vast wanderings were not necessarily about providing fresh food sources for animals (Tsultemin 2020: 27–29). These peregrinations also served as a political strategy. She writes:

The frequent migration granted Örgöö and its residents advantages that a stationary monastery could not afford... Örgöö traversed the Khalkha region from Khentii in the east to Dagaan Del, which was close to the Russian border in the far north, and to Inner Mongolia, south of the Gobi Desert. These migrations across great distances must have entailed much more time, expense, and labor than local migrations. Tremendous labor resources were required to relocate many *gers*, temples, Örgöö, their numerous

residents, and all the material properties of the encampment. Some statistics give us an idea of how burdensome and costly Örgöö migrations were. According to a manuscript text, for instance, in 1777, when Örgöö moved from Khui Mandal to Selbe, a distance of about 35 miles, the trip required 20,475 camels, 178,336 oxen, and 990 loaders, in addition to 30 carpenters and 15 ironsmiths, who were employed and supplied with equipment and food for two months (Tsultemin 2020: 29).

Following Zanabazar's death in 1723, Örgöö maintained its large nomadic movements until 1778, when the range of the temple narrowed considerably. During this period, it restricted its movements to the Selbe river basin, no doubt in part due to the logistics of moving such vast numbers of inhabitants, animals and materials. In 1885, Örgöö settled on the banks of the Tuul River, where Ulaanbaatar is now located.

Since Zanabazar, there have been a further nine incarnations in the Javzandamba lineage. Only two of these have been born in the Mongolian cultural region. After the Second Javzandamba's brief support for a rebellion against the Manchu Dynasty, the Qing rulers mandated that subsequent reincarnations could not be reborn among the Mongolian nobility, as they would hold too much power (Bawden 1968: 33; Even 2011: 629). As a consequence, following the Second Javzandamba, only the recent rebirth of the Tenth Javzandamba has been born in Mongolia. The other reincarnations were born in Tibet, travelling vast distances to reach Mongolia. In 1911, the Eighth in the Javzandamba lineage, the Bogd Gegeen, became the ruler of a new nation, as Mongolia declared its independence from a crumbling Qing Empire. After a series of incursions from the south and the north, culminating in the war-torn year of 1921, the Mongolian state aligned itself with Russian revolutionary forces. In 1924, after the Bogd Gegeen died, the capital was renamed Ulaanbaatar (meaning 'red hero') and the new socialist government outlawed further rebirths in the Javzandamba lineage for fear of the political power and prestige that the lineage possessed.

In the 1920s, the new government began to view Buddhism as a major threat to the socialist regime. At this time, Buddhism, along with the Mongolian nobility, held large tracts of land and other forms of wealth including human and animal labourers. The Bogd Gegeen's estate, the Ikh Shavi (or the great disciple), was the largest, enthralling around 90,000 ecclesiastical serf-disciples (known as *shavi*). This was a considerable portion of the population, which in the 1918 census recorded 647,504 people (Even 2011: 628). In 1918, the population of monastics was estimated to be around 110,000 people, almost half of the adult male population (Even 2011: 628). Although in other parts of the Buddhist world such a large proportion of the population living as monastics may have been disastrous for the size of the local population, many Mongolian Buddhist lamas did not live as celibate monks. It is estimated that only around a third of the monastic population lived in celibacy within the temple grounds (Kaplonski 2014: 105–106).

The socialist government soon began to view the power and wealth of Buddhist institutions as containing a potential threat. In the years following the Bogd Gegeen's death they began to discourage Buddhist devotional practices. As Christopher Kaplonski has argued, the repression of Buddhism can be divided into three different periods (Kaplonski 2014: 26–44). The first, from 1926–1933, was mostly nonviolent, with the government attempting to

educate and reform those within monasteries. The second period, from 1934-1937, continued to use mostly non-violent strategies such as high taxation and education programs emphasising class hierarchies as a way of discouraging people from continuing to serve and join the monasteries. In the latter half of 1937 government policies turned to violence (Kaplonski 2014: 26–44). By 1940, one fifth of the population of lamas had been killed by the state. Ritual items and artworks were burned and temples destroyed. In 1936, the number of monasteries operating in the country was 767 (Lattimore 1962: 137), by 1940 only one remained open.

As repression and violence swept throughout Mongolia, the capital city was recast in the image of a modern socialist city. Following similar patterns in the countryside, temples, such as Mandushir Khiid to the south of the city, were completely razed. Others that escaped destruction were repurposed. In the capital, the Choijin Lama Temple and the Bogd Gegeen's Winter Palace became museums. This transformation served the government in two key ways. Firstly, it removed the mystery and the occult status of the icons and people that the buildings once housed. And secondly, it served to demonstrate the 'superstition' and decadent wealth of Buddhism. The Bogd Gegeen's Winter Palace still holds many valuable items, such as a *ger* made from the skins of 150 slaughtered snow leopards. The Choijin Lama Temple, formerly used by the Choijin Lama oracle to channel spirits and advise political actors, contains frightening imagery of potential rebirths such as images of humans being eaten and defecated by traditional herding animals (*mal*). The repurposing of the Choijin Lama Temple was used by the socialist government to demonstrate the darkness and superstition that they believed Buddhism to contain. The large temples of Dashchoilin and Gandan lost their magnificent statues of the coming Buddha Maitreya and Chenrezig, the Bodhisattva of compassion, respectively. Whilst what remained of Dashchoilin's temple encampment was used to house a circus, Gandan Khiid was left partially functional to demonstrate to foreign dignitaries that religion freedoms still existed in socialist Mongolia (Kaplonski 2014: 152). In reality, very few people were able to freely visit the temple as it remained under the watchful eye of the Politburo (Even 2012). I have been told by monastics and lay people that at this time the temple was mostly visited by older women as those who were members of the party (almost all of the population) were not able to visit the temple grounds.

The new socialist city built-up around what was left of the Buddhist temples, housing for the nobility, and buildings used by merchants. A new parliament building and a central square were built, from which the city figuratively and literally radiated outwards (Myadar 2019: 59). The central square served to shift the emphasis away from Buddhism to redefine the city as a secular one which celebrated its socialist heroes. The contraction of the city's temples was met with an expansion of residential housing and the generation of new urban icons. Statues were built celebrating socialist heroes, such as the Mongolian revolutionary Sukhbaatar after whom the central square is named, along with Stalin and Lenin (see also Myadar 2019). Buildings were built to house artistic institutions, decoupled from the artistic pursuits of Buddhism which had previously defined Mongolian art. Key infrastructure, such as the central railway station (and connecting railway lines) and the central post office were built. The construction of the iconic State Department Store (Ikh Delguur), which showcased goods from the socialist world, generated a new sense of socialist cosmopolitanism, distinct from the cosmopolitanisms of previous eras. New forms of public transport were created, such as

trolley buses, to connect the city's urban residents to their workplaces, institutional buildings, multi-story residential apartment blocks, and centrally planned parks. Coal fired power stations were built to provide modern forms of light and heat for the city's residents. The expansion of electricity, or Lenin's light (*Ilyichiin Gerel*), literally and figuratively associated electricity to the western idea of Enlightenment in its transcendent and illuminating qualities (Sneath 2009, see also Abrahms-Kavunenko 2019a: 43–44).

Just as socialism was the organising principle around which the city grew from the 1920s to 1990, new forms of capitalism, corruption, freedoms, and climatic changes have influenced the city's development in the post-socialist period. Religious institutions were able to rebuild and reclaim old temples after the granting of religious freedoms in the Mongolian constitution. Temples such as Dashchoilin and the FPMT's nunnery, the Dara Ekh Khiid, reclaimed old temples and re-inhabited them. Since 1990, new Dharma Centres and temples have been built, such as Betüv Khiid in the western part of the city, which was created by the former Indian ambassador to Mongolia, Bakula Rinpoche. The Bogd Gegeen's Winter Palace and the Chojjin Lama Temple remain as museums, although some ritual activities do occur in the Chojjin Lama Temple. As Buddhism was physically re-instantiating itself into the city's urban fabric, Christian missionaries entered the country, taking advantage of the new freedom to practice religion to spread their religious ideas and practices. In the 2010 census these churches officially numbered 198, with an additional 250 estimated to exist without registration (National Statistics Office of Mongolia 2010). This is quite a large number of churches as only 2.2% of the population at that time identified as Christian, with 53% identifying as Buddhist (National Statistics Office of Mongolia 2010). In Teleki and Majer's 2007 survey, they counted 200 Buddhist temples operating in the country (Teleki 2009).

As religious institutions were building and rebuilding, the secular aspects of the city were undergoing rapid changes. Since 1990, there has been significant migration to the capital from the countryside due to a number of push and pull factors. Some former herders migrated to the capital because of a series of severe winters. Combined with the dismantling of socialist infrastructure that used to provide extra food for animals in extreme conditions and facilitate wider grazing patterns, these winters meant that millions of herding animals died in 1999–2002 and again during my fieldwork in the winter of 2009–2010 (Janes and Chuluundorj 2015). For others, rural to urban migration was initiated to find new kinds of work, education, and other opportunities. Due to these and other reasons, the population in the capital expanded from around 560,000 in 1990 to 1.35 million in 2016, a figure which accounts for almost half of the national population. In order to accommodate the growing population and changes in lifestyle expectations, apartment complexes have been built in some of the city's socialist-planned parks, and the *ger* districts (areas with several *gers* and other dwellings enclosed in wooden fences that frequently lack infrastructure such as running water) have expanded to the north, east and west of the city.

Since 1990, as the economy has experienced large fluctuations (see Bonilla 2016; Empson and Chuluunbat 2018; Plueckhahn 2020; Sneath 2018; Waters 2018), novel forms of extreme wealth among the country's elite have prompted the construction of new luxury malls and fancy apartment complexes. The city's skyline is one that changes rapidly. Since the time that I began fieldwork in 2009 to my last visit in the summer and autumn of 2016, the distinction

between the city's peripheries and its centre has grown. New private schools now educate the children of the wealthy and private hospitals treat them if they become ill. The city's worsening traffic and increasing transportation costs mean that the experiences of the centre and the peripheries are increasingly detached from one another. For Buddhism in the city, these changes have resulted in diminishing space and visibility. As the city's high-rises shoot up around the old and new temples, Buddhism becomes less central in the daily lives of the post-socialist city. This lack of architectural visibility and space, as I will describe in the next section, creates difficulties for Buddhist temples and those that wish to devote their lives to a Buddhist vocation.

Historical and spatial exposition, agents

Buddhism and Visibility

In spite of the construction and reclaiming of temples following the Democratic Revolution, the fast-paced expansion of towering city blocks and malls has diminished the visibility of Buddhism in the post-socialist period. In 2009, when visiting Bogd Khan mountain to the south of the city, one of the recently constructed pieces of Buddhist iconography, an outdoor standing Buddha statue, was visible. It stood tall, backed by trees to its south on the foothills where the Zaisan memorial stands. Zaisan is a circular socialist mosaic monument built to commemorate Mongolia's assistance to the Soviet Union in WWII. Unlike other socialist icons, such as the Lenin statue that once stood to the south of the Ulaanbaatar Hotel, it has not been removed in the democratic period. Next to Zaisan, composed of stones on the face of the southern mountain is the image of Chinggis Khan, which was once clearly visible from the city's central Sukhbaatar square. In 2009, it seemed symbolic that the statue of the Buddha stood at the foot of the more prominent presence of socialist iconography and the new envisioning of the nation through the conspicuous presence of Chinggis Khan. Upon revisiting this site in 2016, the Buddha statue, Chinggis Khan and Zaisan were all being equally obscured by new instantiations of capitalism in the city: the residential apartment blocks and shopping malls that were spreading up the foothills of the southern mountain along with the seasonal smog. This section will look at how the post-socialist Buddhist revitalisation has interacted with the changing structures and possibilities available within the structure of the post-socialist capital.

After 1990, many old Mongolian men who were lamas before the socialist period once again put on robes and started to practice in public. These lamas, some of whom had kept Mongolian Buddhist practices alive in secret during the socialist period or remembered practices from their youth, took on new students and began to reinhabit old temples or construct new ones. Some young men, and a few women, travelled to India to seek out a monastic education among Tibetans in the diaspora. In 2007, Teleki and Majer estimated that Mongolia had around 200 Buddhist institutions, an impressive increase following the repression of Buddhism in the socialist period (Majer 2009: 542). Because of the old age of the Mongolian lamas who initiated Mongolia's Buddhist revitalisation and the difficulties of

keeping on young students, around half of the temples that had been recreated in the new democratic period had closed by the time of their survey (Teleki 2009). Rural temples in particular had trouble maintaining themselves, as the rural population, upon whom the temples depended, were not always able to provide continuous economic support (Teleki 2009). As the temple's founding lamas died, the charisma of the past lost its appeal to the laity and younger students found it hard to negotiate their livelihoods and still encourage regular donations.

In 2007, there were around thirty-six temples in Ulaanbaatar (Majer 2009: 53). Some of these have closed since Majer and Teleki's survey, whilst others have opened up. Within some of the city's temple complexes there are schools or educational facilities for training lamas. This is true of Betüv Khiid to the west of the city, Dashchoilin Khiid, Gandan Khiid, the Sakya Pandita Dharma Chakra monastery, and the FPMT's nunnery, the Dara Ekh Khiid. Most temples make provisions for some kind of education for their monastics, but this tends to depend on the temple's size and orientation (Majer and Teleki 2008). Temples may be fairly large with a number of buildings in a temple complex, or can be housed in an apartment or a single *ger*. During Majer and Teleki's research they counted six temples that were being housed in *gers*, with many of these being run by a single lama (Majer 2009: 57). The number of small temples being run from apartments or *gers* tends to change frequently due to the vocational interests of those involved and the support (or lack of it) from the surrounding community. In 2007, there were an estimated 1000 lamas in Ulaanbaatar with around 660 lamas being associated with the larger temples, Gandan and Dashchoilin (Majer 2009: 57). In 2016, during a formal interview with Gandan Khiid's head librarian Lama Munkbaatar, he estimated that there were around 800 lamas associated with the temple complex. At that time, only around 300 of these lamas received a regular salary from the temple.

Reflecting the comments at the beginning of this article, many lamas told me that one of the key problems for retaining lamas (especially those returning from training in India) is a lack of housing and financial support. In the pre-socialist period, donations were one of the many ways that the lay population showed their reverence and support for the temples (Kaplonski 2014: 17). In the post-socialist period, the practice of donating regularly to Buddhist institutions is no longer present (see Abrahms-Kavunenko 2015b; 2021). The laity is free to choose when and how to give to the temples (if they do at all) and money to temples tends to come in infrequently in the form of payments for rituals, or donations for larger infrastructural projects such as building statues or stupas. Most Mongolian temples fund themselves from a variety of sources. These include small payments for ritual services, continuous support from international Buddhist NGOs and irregular donations from wealthy local and international donors. Whilst some lamas, especially those that provide ritual services to wealthy Mongols, can live comfortably or more than comfortably from the donations or wages that they receive, many do not. As I was told by a number of Mongolian lamas, many Buddhist religious specialists struggle to make ends meet with some relying on familial support. Given that most Mongolian Buddhist lamas live as other householders do, paying rent and helping to support a family with their wives, the pressures of leading a relatively ordinary life and continuing a religious vocation can be difficult to manage. As the cost of living has increased considerably since 1990, one lama told me he found it difficult to support his family in 'a globalised world where material needs are greater than they were

before socialism.’

In particular, monastics that return from completing monastic education in India find it difficult to integrate back into Mongolian society. When I carried out interviews with returned lamas in 2015 and 2016, many told me that one of the major problems they faced was a lack of residential and financial support. Most lamas that train in India do so for around eight years, depending on the level of education that they receive. Many leave for India in the early teens, at around 14, and stay overseas with very few return journeys back to Mongolia to visit friends and family. It was common for lamas to return only once in an eight year period, when they came back to Mongolia in the middle of their studies, after four years, to have their Indian visas renewed. Some lamas and disrobed lamas explained to me that they felt alienated when they returned, even when they did so for short periods.

As the lamas who studied in India explained, it is common for novices studying in India to stay almost entirely within the walls of the monastic institutions that they attend. There they learn Tibetan, study for long hours during the day, six days a week. They eat and sleep communally with other young training monks from different places. At the end of eight years of study, unless they decide to pursue the higher degree of Geshe training (the monastic equivalent of a PhD), they are expected to bring their knowledge back to Mongolia to help reseed Buddhism in the country. However, most find that when they return they are not expected or well supported to continue life as a celibate monastic with extensive vows. In Ulaanbaatar and elsewhere, there are very few temples to live in and their experiences in India are frequently unintelligible to friends and family. A number of friends who were former monks told me that after they returned from India they had trouble explaining what they had studied in India. Many were pressured from their family to marry, a demand which is even more intense for women who have studied in India or Nepal to become nuns. Not maintaining celibacy and still carrying out ritual practices is quite common in Mongolia, but is frowned upon within the rather strict moral codes of Gelug monasticism (in whose temples most Mongols study). I was told by several returned lamas that when they returned from India they were insistently asked to carry out rituals for efficacy, even though they had spent most of their time studying and debating Buddhist philosophy. As Lama Otgonbaatar told me when I asked him how he felt when he returned to Mongolia following his training:

Just like a monkey lost in a forest, I didn’t know what to do. Your relatives start questioning ‘Hey, you studied there for 8–9 years, what can you do?’ Then you start going down the wrong road... start with fortune telling (*mergekh tölgö tavij*), start lying, and then performing rituals whether you are capable or not... Not one lay person asked about what I learned, which is Buddhist philosophy, instead they come with requests “I want this thing done, I want that thing secured”.

The alienation that came from a lack of intelligibility for those around them of what they had studied was compounded by the lack of a supportive residential environment to stay in following their return. During training in India, novice monks are instructed that if they are going to break their vow of celibacy or other vows (including their vow to not touch money) they should disrobe to avoid bad karma and spiritual pollution. Lama Otgonbaatar explained that he was trying to construct a supportive environment in which monastics could live,

partly in response to his own experiences of returning to Mongolia. The temple that he heads in the west of the city, Sakya Pandita Dharma Chakra Monastery, was built with monastic residential quarters. As he explained:

The Buddha himself said that his teachings will spread in the North. It seems that that time has arrived. The Dalai Lama, the Sakya Lama, all are saying that they have lost their freedom in Tibet. If India befriends China, they will be finished. The Tibetans in the West will lose their cultural identity. Therefore, only Mongols are destined to inherit this wonderful tradition... That means for Mongolian lamas the time of great historic responsibility has arrived... In Southern India, there are 500 Mongolian lamas studying. We have a great hope for those lamas. The next year we will have the very first Geshe [Buddhist PhD]. We don't need temples for pujas [rituals], we need dormitories at Gandan in order to receive these wonderful practitioners. We are supposed to provide their housing and monastic living conditions.

As the city has expanded, increasing physical limitations have been placed on the possibilities for certain kinds of Buddhist revitalisation, especially those that stem from global Buddhist expectations. Temples in the urban environment attract more regular streams of income from the laity. However, urban temples also lack the space and consistent financial support to create residential quarters with food and other essentials for resident lamas. For Mongols that study in India, this lack of monastic housing makes it difficult to maintain their ordination in the ways they have been trained to do: that is, to be able to devote all of their time to the study and practice of Buddhism.

Donative Support and Trust

Aside from those who regularly attended Dharma Centres' educational classes, most lay Buddhists that I spoke to irregularly visited temples. Many told me that they went to temples to carry out specific rituals at certain times in the year, for instance during the Luna New Year (Tsagaan Sar) or if someone had a specific problem or illness. Visits to temples tended to follow similar patterns. People would generally visit to ask for help with a problem, and this involved visiting the small shops (or counters) that sold prayers for ritual efficacy (see also Abrahms-Kavunenko 2015b). Having paid for prayers from a set price list or optional donation (depending on the temple) a person receives a receipt, stating the prayers that will be read and when, with their name printed upon the docket. Other activities at temples included circumambulating around sacred objects or the temples themselves, spinning prayer wheels, feeding the birds (before this was banned), doing prostrations, getting advice from a specific lama, touching sacred objects and sitting in on Buddhist prayer services. Most people told me that after they had visited temples they felt renewed. Some explained that they felt as though they had removed some kind of blockage or lightened their energy (see Abrahms-Kavunenko 2019a: 142–158).

Whilst some lay Buddhists that lived nearby told me that they visited temples to imbibe the ambience, most lay Buddhists that I spoke to visited temples when they needed ritual efficacy. This could be, for example, if they were experiencing financial problems and needed a

financial ritual carried out, such as the *dallaga* ceremony (see Abrahms-Kavunenko 2019b; 2020), or if they were about to do an important exam, get married, go on a big journey, or if they had experienced a particularly vivid dream, or had an illness. Some told me that they visited temples before a child's first hair-cutting ceremony, inquiring about a good date to get married, or after a person's death to receive advice on how the deceased's body should be treated. Most explained that, whilst they generally enjoyed their visit they did not really understand what was happening inside temples (for further discussions on ideas of knowledge and ignorance in Buddhism see Abrahms-Kavunenko 2015a).

Whilst most people described their experiences of visiting temples positively, reporting that they believed it to be efficacious, many also expressed some form of scepticism about Buddhist institutions. Critiques of temples or individual lamas tended to be about two key problems: the proper education of lamas and financial remuneration for ritual services. Firstly, as described in the previous section, because of a lack of residential quarters it can be hard for temples to support local lamas to receive extensive training and education and difficult for highly educated lamas returning from India to retain their monastic ordination. Secondly, whilst most Mongols told me that they did not think that it was problematic for lamas to be householders with their own families, as this is seen as being a distinctly Mongolian tradition (see Jadamba and Schittich 2010; Abrahms-Kavunenko 2015b), the lack of differentiation between the laity and religious specialists means that Buddhist specialists need to be paid. Many lay people told me that whilst they felt that there were many good lamas, they were not sure about all of the lamas or those at particular temples. These concerns often centred around whether or not the lamas were carrying out rituals for fiscal, rather than 'genuine' (*jinkhene*) or 'true' (*ünen*) motivations.

As the city's temples have contracted and the distinctions between lamas and the laity have diminished, financial aspects of lamas' lives have come under scrutiny. In Mongolia, how a person makes money is thought to influence them spiritually and some kinds of vocation are thought to carry with them particular kinds of spiritual danger, especially if not carried out with the right kind of motivations. As Højer (2012) has written regarding the working environment of pawnshops (*lombard*), a person's employment can result in them being afflicted by bad energy (*muu energi*). It is often believed that those working on mine sites or those who make their living disturbing the ground or destroying the land can likewise be afflicted with bad fortune (High 2013). In spite of these orientations, the inclusion of money in ceremonies or the use of ritual efficacy to assist in the accrual and maintenance of wealth is not generally negatively viewed (see Abrahms-Kavunenko 2019b; 2020). Similar to the kinds of problems that Manduhai Buyandelger uncovered when she carried out research on shamans in Mongolia (Buyandelger 2013), Mongolian Buddhist lamas are in a double bind when it comes to donations. On the one hand, if they do not appear successful they will not attract donations. On the other, if they ask directly for money for ritual services they will be considered to be primarily motivated by fiscal intentions, and will not be sought out for ritual services. Much like Parry's account of *dan* (freely given donations) in India (1986), spiritual pollution can be generated if the religious specialist carries out a ritual with improper motivations. Unlike Parry's Hindu example, in Mongolia this pollution is generally thought to be a problem for the religious specialist rather than the person seeking ritual efficacy, however the ritual may not work if the lama is improperly motivated and poorly educated.

Differing from other services that people pay for, payments for ritual services tended to be moralised among the people that I spoke to. People frequently complained to me about the transactional ambience when they visited temples. As one friend explained in 2015:

I feel bad when at Gandan they ask you for 1000 [*tögrög*, around fifty US-cents]. I feel bad because it's supposed to be a religious thing and you shouldn't have a price on things. When I go to Bakula Rinpoche [at Betüv Khiid] and Dashchoilin they don't ask how much you give. So I feel better. At least, you know, they are not after money.

Although I was told by lamas at Gandan Khiid that these price lists were due to temple taxation and accountability, many people saw specific donation requests as a sign of the temple's fiscal motivations. As most Mongols visit the temples during Tsagaan Sar when the prayer shops tend to be crowded with people seeking prayers to be read for the coming year, their experiences of visiting temples can be much like visiting another kind of store. In the larger of the prayer shops at Tsagaan Sar the sound of cash registers printing off receipts and the bustling to get served creates an impression of being in a busy shop. As a friend in his mid-twenties told me in 2009:

It's becoming like a business now; that's what I really don't like about going to monasteries at the moment. Because I know that they are helping people and so on, going to houses and driving their own cars and everything it's just not what it's about, it doesn't feel right. It just looks like a business . . . Ideally . . . I want to see a monastery that is very, very peaceful to visit and very calm, where I can stay calm and, you know, really concentrate on what I'm trying to pray because that's what a spiritual place is all about.

As a consequence of these concerns, some lay Buddhists told me that they would only visit temples where they could donate what they wanted to give or visit specific lamas that had been recommended by friends and family members. Although most urbanites visit temples for a specific service, if the interaction with temples appears to be dominated by a feeling that the relationship is transactional people can become sceptical of the motivations of the religious specialists involved. Given that most lay people visit temples for ritual efficacy because of a particular need, the idea that the ritual may not work because the lamas they are interacting with might have poor motivations or be improperly educated is a concern. At the same time, as some of the lay Buddhist population withdraws its fiscal support for Buddhist institutions, it makes it harder for lamas to support themselves, and even more difficult for the temples that are interested in building and maintaining residential quarters.

Explanatory hypotheses, potential generalisations, possible relations to other factors

Conclusion

Over the last one hundred years, Mongolia's capital has gone through three distinct periods of development. In the first, Buddhism was centralised both metonymically and literally. The temples were the basis of the city, around which other mobile and permanent fixtures were constructed. The socialist period saw a radical reconfiguring of the urban space, destroying much of the presence of Buddhism and replacing it with socialist icons, infrastructure and buildings that celebrated a new secular city. In the post-socialist period, as religious freedoms have been granted and Buddhist temples have materialised, new urban developments meant that it became impossible for Buddhism to regain its centrality in city. Overshadowed by both socialist landmarks and post-socialist building projects, Buddhist temples and religious specialists must contend with significant restrictions as they negotiate a bustling capitalist city.

Throughout the last century, Buddhism has shaped and continues to be shaped by broader economic and political trends that have significantly altered the city's urban space. These political and economic changes have radically recast Buddhism's place in the capital. Rather than being merely a peripheral or logistical shortcoming, the lack of space to house residential monastics and educational facilities has become a problem for some contemporary temples. Most Buddhist specialists must divide their time, as other householders do, between their Buddhist vocation and other aspects of their lives. For some lay Buddhists, these challenges contribute to a lack of trust in Buddhist institutions and sometimes a withdrawal of donative support, further compounding the challenges for Buddhism in the present period. As the temples have become crowded by other urban developments, less visible translocal donation networks form a more mycelial-style structure of support for the continuing presence of Buddhism in the capital. Whilst Buddhism has not been able to centralise itself in the post-socialist period, local and translocal networks that provide support continuously change and continue to grow.

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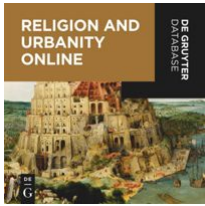
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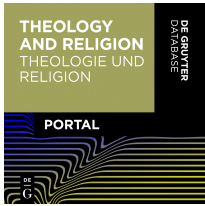
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