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Politics and Religion on China’s Mongolian Frontier

PAUL V. HYER*

There are many factors involved in the shaping of modern Mongolian history and one of the more significant aspects is that of Japanese influence, which must be considered in the discussion of virtually every field whether political, social, economic, or some other. From the turn of the century, Japanese activity in Mongolia rapidly increased, culminating in Japan’s occupation of a large part of Inner Mongolia for a decade and a half from 1931 to 1945.

One thesis proposed here is that a basic tenet of Japanese expansion was the belief that Asian peoples could be influenced or controlled through their traditional religious institutions. A case in point is Japanese policy towards Lamaist Buddhism which had long dominated Mongolian society. The following treatment of Japanese handling of a particular religious institution for the purposes of expansion and control offers insight into the objectives and methods of a significant group of Japanese officials and also offers insight into the ecclesiastical politics of Lamaist Buddhism. This account of a Japanese plan for restoring a new incarnation of the Grand Lama of Urga (now Ulan Bator) or Mongolia is based largely on interviews with individuals concerned and the absence of documentation makes it difficult to check particular details. The events summarized here may be the last, but not the least intriguing chapter in the four-hundred year history of the Jebtsundamba Khutukhtu, most famous and powerful of Mongolian Living Buddhas.

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1In pursuing research on the Chinese frontier areas the writer personally interviewed the Dilowa “Living Buddha” in July 1957 and in April 1960. Later, during a stay in Japan and Taiwan, 1963-1964, many more interviews were made with Mongol refugees and with key Japanese persons who have lived in Mongolia for many years. The Dilowa, a central figure in this report, is a rare person who made the transition from the feudalistic Mongolia of pre-revolution days to America in the Atomic Age.

Escaping from Communist arrest in Outer Mongolia in the early 1930’s he fled to Inner Mongolia which came under Japanese occupation at the
Background of the Jebtsundamba

Understanding the importance of the role of religion in Mongolian politics, particularly the institution of the Jebtsundamba, and hence the desire of certain Japanese to make use of it for their own purposes, requires some background of the Jebtsundamba's whose role in Mongolian history is analogous to that of the more famous Dalai Lama in Tibetan history. Just as the Dalai Lamas have been both temporally and religiously supreme among Tibetans, so also were the Jebtsundamba Khutukhtus supreme among the Mongols for several centuries. Historically, the Jebtsundamba is revered by Mongols as an incarnation of the Indian saint Taranatha, who first appeared in Tibet in 1537 as a hubilgan or incarnation. He became famous through various cultural accomplishments in Tibet, went to Mongolia in the early 1600's as a part of the process of assimilating Lamaist Buddhism to Mongolia and was there reborn as a Mongolian incarnation. Later this first Mongolian Jebtsundamba went to Peking, gained the favor and friendship of the Kang Hsi emperor and was recognized as the religious leader of all Mongolia; indeed as the pre-eminent figure in Mongolia during the entire period of the Manchu dynasty (1644-1911) and the early republic.

The Chinese showed great deference to the Jebtsundamba in following generations, but at the same time imposed controls, fearing the possible resurgence of a strong Mongol nation. One stipulation was that subsequent incarnations must be found in Tibet, and thus it was. Six Jebtsundambas were Tibetans, only two were Mongols. Such manipulations prompted Lattimore's comment that the "reincarnation" doctrine is more political than divine and "invented as a justification for the fact that those who controlled the political power found it convenient to select the incumbents of church office."

The Jebtsundamba, as a symbol of religious power or unity in Mongolia, weathered the storm of China's 1911 Revolution, and Russia's 1917 Revolution with their "liberations" and "counter-liberations." At the time of the Siberian Expedition of the United States and Japan (1918-21), the Jebtsundamba made an official appeal to the Japanese Government for aid
against Mongolia's two overbearing neighbors. During the early period of the Communist Revolution in Mongolia (1921), because the Jebtsundamba wielded enormous influence as head of the Lamaist Church, he was retained as a clever device of the Soviets to cloak the revolution in Outer Mongolia. However, when the last Jebtsundamba died in 1924, the Soviets forbade any search for a new incarnation and those suspected of plotting such a thing were purged.

*Origin and Purpose of Japan's Plan for a Puppet Jebtsundamba*

The issue of searching out a new *hubilgan* was not raised again for more than a decade—until Mongolia came under Japanese influence in the 1930's. The Japanese usually gave attention to the unique historical background of regions they occupied and studiously adapted policy to traditional culture and local customs. Accordingly, several groups of Japanese attempted to reinstitute a new incarnation of the Jebtsundamba in Inner Mongolia. They were obviously seeking control within Mongol society, as well as power which would be effective against external enemies—the Chinese and Russians.

This could be facilitated by gaining sanction for their policies through a new incarnation of the Jebtsundamba instituted under Japanese auspices. Those in the role of authority in a society usually attempt to justify their rule by linking it with religious symbols, sacred emblems, or legal formulae which are widely believed in and deeply engrained. Through a Jebstundamba, the Japanese hoped to invest themselves with moral or legal justification for their actions.

Soon after the Manchurian incident, in formulating policy for Outer Mongolia, a Japanese Colonel, Mitsuji Yano, proposed the restoration of a Jebtsundamba incarnation, but it remained a paper proposal only. The real attempt to carry out a restoration plan came in the western area of Mongolia, in the autonomous state which was set up by Prince Teh after breaking away from China with Japanese assistance.

There were probably restoration discussions and plans current among traditionally oriented Mongols, unrecorded and unknown in detail, but concrete measures to set up a new Jebtsundamba came from the Japanese in two or three separate attempts. One originated in the Cultural Affairs Section of the Hsingan Bureau or Mongolian administrative office of Man-
chukuo, directed at the time by Shinjiro Takatsuna. The plan seems to have originated with and been carried out by Toku-shiro Goshima of this office with Colonel Yano of the General Staff as an advisor. Goshima contacted the An-ch‘in Living Buddha of Tibet who had been the chief intermediary between the Dalai Lama and the exiled Panchen Lama and who had come to Peking in 1938, apparently to establish relations with the Japanese. Because Lhasa, Tibet, is the fountain-head of Lamaist Buddhism, such a Tibetan connection was necessary in gaining backing or sanction for a new Jebtsundamba.

The cooperation of this Tibetan was obtained in carrying out a plan for setting up a Japanese base in Lhasa by smuggling Japanese into the country disguised as members of the An-ch‘in’s party. The Military Intelligence Organization of Japan’s Kwantung Army sponsored the Tibetan expedition which was financed by the South Manchurian Railway Company. Though the party was successful in reaching Tibet, the An-ch‘in Khutukhtu was unable to obtain approval for the proposed reinstitution of a Jebtsundamba. This may be due to the fact that the An-ch‘in became involved in a coup d’état against the ruling regency in Tibet. The Japanese agent taken into the country by the An-ch‘in had to leave the country because of suspicion regarding his identity; another had been dropped from the party just before it entered Tibet due to illness. Had this preliminary operation been successful, the engineering of a Jebtsundamba restoration would next have been attempted.

Another plan for a restoration which seems to be quite distinct and unrelated to the above operation was developed by a group centered around Colonel Kanagawa Kosaku, one of the most famous of Japan’s old “Mongol hands” and military intelligence men in Mongolia. It was Kanagawa who was particularly active in promoting the cult of Genghis Khan later in the 1940’s at Wang-yeh-miao. The Japanese faced two major problems in attempting this ambitious scheme to restore the Jebtsundamba.

First was the matter of obtaining the support of Prince Teh, head of the Mongolian Government. Next was the old problem of gaining the sanction of Tibet. For assistance in negotiations for carrying out the plan Kanagawa called in Inokuchi Sanzo from the Holonbier region of Eastern Mongolia, a man of long experience who spoke Mongolian fluently.
At this point another Tibetan, Lang Tsang, was brought into the picture. He had close contact with the Japanese army in the Holonbier region and had probably been recruited by Inokuchi, since both came to Kalgan from North Eastern Mongolia. Lang Tsang is described as an opportunist, an ambitious young Lama originally from the Labrang Monastery in Chinghai.

Lang Tsang approached Prince Teh on the proposition of a new Jebtsundamba. Prince Teh approved the idea but not without some misgivings. He said that a new incarnation would be allowed and even welcomed—as long as it was under the proper circumstances. The Dilowa Khutukhtu, a principal figure in the plan, claims that there was no significant opposition among the Mongols. Younger men with positions of responsibility in Teh Wang's government have expressed the view that the majority of Mongols would not have responded favorably to such a scheme. They feel that only the older more conservative generations would have supported the plan. This is a moot question.

Prince Teh instructed Lang Tsang that in order to be acceptable, a new hubilgan or incarnation of the Jebtsundamba must be approved by the Tibetan authorities. The Japanese could not avoid gaining sanction from Tibet for the installation of a new incarnation. Because both the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama had died and because their incarnations had not yet been found, only the Sa-kyā Grand Lama remained from whom sanction could be obtained. Lang Tsang boasted that he could accomplish this task and received a letter from Teh Wang requesting an oracle of the Sa-kyā Lama. The ranking patriarch of the Sa-kyā line, now a refugee from Tibet, affirms in an interview that representatives came to Tibet and discussed the problem of the Jebtsundamba Khutukhtu but he was young at the time and recalls nothing of the details.

The Dilowa informs us that Lang Tsang was able to obtain an oracle from the Sa-kyā for direction in finding the incarnation. He reportedly enlisted the aid of Ja-mu-yan (Chin. Chi-μu-yang), the famous Living Buddha of the Labrang Monastery in Kansu Province. The Sa-kyā's pronouncement was given in very vague terms. The Dilowa quotes him as saying: "The sign shows a new incarnation will be found in the Chinese direction, but it will be difficult to find him." When Lang Tsang returned to Mongolia in the summer of 1939, he brought
with him, besides the Sa-kya’s oracle, a letter from the Labrang Living Buddha stating: “There is a boy of dragon age in Amdo and the calendar indicates the boy must be eleven years of age.”

The implication of the Labrang Khutukhtu’s action in interjecting himself into the affair was obvious. He hoped to be able to select and install an incarnation which would extend his influence and open new sources of wealth. Lang Tsang also seemed to be promoting the scheme in order to associate himself with the power and wealth which inevitably flowed to the court of a high Khutukhtu. Teh Wang was displeased with this new turn of events and disapproved the opportunistic arrangements made by Lang Tsang. Thus, this attempt to install a new Jebsundamba was also unsuccessful.

It is at this stage that the Dilowa Khutukhtu from Outer Mongolia became involved in the plan. When he escaped from Outer Mongolia in 1931, he had hoped that the Japanese would serve the needs of the Mongol nation. However, he was disillusioned by the actions of some of the Japanese officers and advisers and, although he preferred Japanese rule to Chinese or Russian, he had a long-cherished desire to make a pilgrimage to Tibet. However, leaving the Japanese area was not an easy matter. Though he had been successful in secretly negotiating with the British in Peking for a visa to Tibet, an opportunity to leave had not yet arisen. The Dilowa mentioned to Sain Bayar, a trusted lieutenant of Prince Teh, his desire to go to Tibet. Sain Bayar knew of the Jebsundamba plan and conceived the notion of helping the Dilowa by means of this plan to get to Tibet.

Lang Tsang, the Tibetan, had failed in his attempt; moreover, the Dilowa Khutukhtu was the most logical choice to implement a restoration. He was from Outer Mongolia and had been very close to the Jebsundamba in the past. Prince Teh approved this new proposal partly for his own reasons. Sain Bayar convinced the Japanese of the advantages of working through the Dilowa. As an important Outer Mongolian Living Buddha he would have the approval and cooperation of most Mongols who were united religiously through Lamaism, though divided politically under China, Russia, and Japan.

This points up one of the main reasons for Japanese interest in the plan, namely, Pan-Mongolism. Both Japanese and Mongol sources agree that this was a factor involved in the proposed reinstitution. One Russian remarked, “The Chinese
emperors disappeared from the stage of political events but the Living Buddha continues to be a center for the Pan-Asiatic idea."

Unensechin (Pao Kuo-Yi), son of Sain Bayar, informs the writer that "the Japanese plot was to set up the new incarnation of the Jebtsundamba as a strong appeal to the Mongols as a whole, especially to the Mongols in Outer Mongolia. . . . Under the flag of the Jebtsundamba, Mongols were to be persuaded to fight for a Pan-Mongolia." In Mongolian government circles Prince Teh deferred to the Dilowa declaring that he was neither opposed to the plan nor enthusiastic about it, but that without fail the Sa-kya Lama must be contacted if the plan were pursued. The Dilowa Khutukhtu was "authorized to persuade [the] Dalai Lama to announce the new incarnation of the Jebtsundamba in Inner Mongolia," and one of the children of the ruling princes was to be the choice, possibly one of the children of Teh Wang. According to Japanese intelligence sources the youngest son of Prince Teh was to be the new Jebtsundamba.

Regarding his departure for Tibet in the fall of 1939, the Dilowa remarks, "The Japanese evidently thought they could use me as an agent." As it turned out his expedition was short-lived. When he arrived in Hong Kong he was arrested and flown to Chungking. A high lama companion (Da Lama) was allowed to continue his journey to Lhasa. The Dilowa was unsuccessful in persuading the Nationalist Government to allow him to complete his pilgrimage to Tibet. Instead, he was placed under detention and remained the better part of World War II at Omei-shan, a temple center in Ssuchuan. Apparently, there were no further attempts on the part of the Japanese to restore the Grand Lama of Mongolia after the failure of the plan noted here.

In conclusion it may be noted that though we are unable to observe what might have happened had the Japanese been successful in setting up a new Jebtsundamba, we can see in this case an example of an age-old problem—the role of religion in the struggle for power. Religion, in this case Lamaism, by the use of powerful emotional sanctions, can strongly inhibit necessary changes. Ultra-conservative Mongols with vested interests maintained that because Lamaism had traditionally acted as a conserver of attested social values, it should not be changed, that instead the status quo should be maintained. Con-
versely a new Jebtsundamba and a Lamaism controlled by the Japanese could so prepare public opinion that it would be easier to break down traditional barriers and give the new order an ethical justification.

Just as Japan modernized the most rapidly of all Asian countries, while at the same time clinging tenaciously to such traditional institutions as the emperor system, so also in the Lamaist World of Mongolia the Japanese pushed rapid reform while at the same time trying to preserve, reinstitute, or develop such traditionally oriented institutions as the Jebtsundamba Living Buddha of Urga, the Emperor Pu-Yi (P’u-i) of the Ch’ing Dynasty, or a nationalistic state cult of Genghis Khan at Wang-yeh-miao. These institutions, of course, would no longer be the same. They would be traditional forms given new meaning in Japan’s Greater East Asia.