

Mongolian Adaptations of Utopian and Eschatological Narratives in the Legends of Shambhala and Their Eschatological Narratives

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Abstract: Mongolian rhetorical and literary strategies of promoting the legends of Shambhala and eschatological war and preparing various versions of Shambhala proliferated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when the established moral norms, model of government, social order, and Buddhist tradition were perceived to be under threat. The yearning for an escape from the troubling times and for a Buddhist, utopian society of Shambhala became particularly pronounced in the early decades of the twentieth century, which was characterized by the percolation of new, scientific knowledge from Europe and looming Communist revolution. This paper briefly touches only on some of the ways in which certain monastic figures in Mongolia adapted and presented to their contemporaries the preexisting, eschatological discourse of Shambhala war and on Shambhala's utopian society.

The eschatological and millennial narratives that proliferated in various versions in Tibet and Mongolia or as an inspiration of the apocalyptic teachings often became the means of bringing together religious and socio-political realms within historical periods characterized by social crises, ominous political events, and conditions that at the time seemed permanent to the final phase of the *kali-yuga*. This is particularly true of the works written during the Qing rule in Tibet and Mongolia, when such narratives began to be widely disseminated. This is also characteristic of the period of political conflicts caused by Chinese

Communist revolution in the early twentieth century. These eschatological discourses connected to the ambhala war place that which is ideal, desirable, and soteriologically positive in the future and in a different spatial dimension within the human world. They also seek to reinforce certain values and convictions that must be passed down through generations.

Eschatology in the and in its later Tibetan and Mongolian variants signifies a process of the restoration of the Buddha Dharma, not its destruction; it is a process of the ethical, social, and religious development of humankind, and not its end. It is fundamentally an optimistic eschatology, which offers a triumphal vision of the Buddhist mission and Buddhist identity, perceived as quintessentially esoteric. In this eschatology, the nature of time, which is both destructive and productive, is imprinted on all events, including the apocalyptic ones, which give rise to the fortunate era of perfection (), a new phase in Buddhist history.

When one examines eschatological writings of the tradition in India, Tibet, and Mongolia, one immediately notices that their authors were more interested in the events leading to the eschatological moment than in what comes after it. The itself offers a minimal account of the anticipated golden era that follows the eschatological battle. It contains only a few, brief statements regarding the time when the entire human civilization on earth will be filled with Buddha Dharma, pleasure, and wealth, after the Barbarian Dharma is fully eradicated. In the , we are told there will be a time when grains will grow in the wild and the trees bow with everlasting fruit, when the lifespan of humans will be at first 1,800 years and gradually decline to 100 years, and when the Buddha Dharma will prosper for 18,000 years.¹ Later Tibetan and Mongolian commentators interpreted the period of the flourishing of Dharma in different ways. While Bu ston Rin chen grub (1290-1364) understood it to mean that the Buddha Dharma will flourish for 1,800 years sequentially in each of the twelve sections of Jambudv pa, and thus thrive for 21,600 years altogether, Mkhas grub rje (1385-1438) interpreted it as prospering for 1,800 years in each of the twelve sections simultaneously.² Jambadorj, the Mongolian author of the nineteenth century-chronicle, *Crystal Mirror (Bolor Toly, 1848)* interpreted it to last for 450 years during each of the four *yugas* within the twelve sections of Jambudv pa, thus amounting to 1,800 years within each section and 21,600 years in total.³ The Mongolian monk-scholar from Ikh Khüree of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Minjüür Dechin Shiirav⁴ (a teacher of Jalkhanz Khutukhtu) understood it to last for 20,000 years, thriving for 5,000 years in each of the four

1 Newman, 1987: 650-52.

2 The , Ch. 1, 1986: 155-56, v. 164, *padās c* and *d*, and vs. 168-9.

3 Jambadorj, 2006, Vol. 2, 2006, Book 3: 294.

4 Minjüür Dechin Shiirav was a teacher of the famous Jalkhanz Khutukhtu Damdinbazar and belonged to the *Vizaya aimag* of Ikh Khüree.

continents of Jambudv pa.⁵ The meager exposition on the era of perfection and the Vimalaprabh 's silence on this topic provided the opportunity for creative and varied interpretations on the part of later Tibetan and Mongolian authors.⁶

I suspect several, possible reasons for which a negligible attention has been given to the portrayal of the era of perfection in the writings related to the eschatological prophecies. One reason may be that from the Buddhist non-fatalistic perspective, the course of eschatological events is susceptible to redirection, whereas, the faraway era of perfection has its own course and cannot be presently reevaluated. Another reason may lie in the immediate objective of these prophecies, which is namely, to inspire certain transformations in the recipient. Related to this is the fact that in Tibet and in Mongolia, considerations of the felicities of the distant epoch gradually became curtailed and supplanted by a growing preoccupation with rebirth in ambhala, which is deemed empirically achievable in the foreseeable future by the power of prayer and by skill in Buddhist tantric practices. The life and conditions of the Buddha Dharma in the land of ambhala and ambhala's prominent, tantric orientation, described in various guides to ambhala and other related texts, significantly resemble those of the large Jambudv pa during the era of perfection. A closer look at the descriptions of the golden era that follows the prophesized cataclysmic battle reveals that a result of the victory of the 25th kalk king of ambhala, Raudra Cakr , over the Barbarian army is nothing other than a transformation of the entire world into the universal ambhala, ruled by Raudra Cakr by 100 years and later by his two sons Brahm and Sure a. In the Mongolian textbook of ritual prayers for rebirth in ambhala, titled *The Jewel Steps of a Fortunate Disciple: A Prayer for*

composed by the aforementioned Minjüür Dechin Shiirev, we are told that people of that era will have a pleasant appearance, will be young and vigorous, and will have all the necessities

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, 2003: 25. In support of this interpretation, Minjüür Dechin Shiirav references the "Great Commentary" on the as his authoritative source. Since the author of the is silent on this topic, justifying his silence by assertion that this topic does not require any commentary, Minjüür Dechin is most likely referencing mkhas grub rje's "Great Commentary." If so, he obviously misunderstood Mkhas grub rje's interpretation. Minjüür Dechin obviously misread the phrase from the , which reads: "twenty thousand minus hand hundred." The Sanskrit word "hand" (*kara*) in the phrase is a symbolic term for the number two. Hence, 20,000 years less 200 is 18,000 years.

6 From among the Tibetan works, the most influential on Mongolian writings on this subject were Mkhas grub rje's (1384-1438) commentary on the , the Sixth Pan chen Bla ma's (Blo bzang Dpal ldan Ye shes, 1738-1780), , and his , the works of the Seventh Pan chen Bla ma, Bstan pa'i Nyi ma (1781-1852), and Klong rdol Bla ma Nga dbang Blo bzang (1719-1794) history of K lacakra.

of life, including ornaments. There will be neither the poor nor the low, and people's sense-faculties will be equal to those of the Traya stri a gods. They will enjoy freedom, live in accordance with gentle rules, and dwell in peace. Harm, illness, demons of obstacles, disasters affecting livestock due to harsh winters, and so on will not befall them.⁷ His vision of the life in the golden era closely resembles a description of the conditions of ambhala's inhabitants found in the somewhat earlier Mongolian chronicle, *Crystal Mirror (Bolor Toly)*, composed by Jambadorj in 1848. There we are told that people born in ambhala are beautiful and have abundant food, clothing, and ornaments. Residents of ambhala live under gentle laws, and adversities such as killing, beating, disease, and cattle pestilence are unknown to them.⁸ Jambadorj's depiction of ambhala is obviously based on the Sixth Pan chen Bla ma Blo bzang Dpal ldan Ye shes's, , which, in turn, has its source in T r n tha's translation of the Nepalese text, (Tib.).

ambhala and the world of the golden era also share the same *varja* lineage and are seen as equally conducive to the attainment of awakening within a single lifetime. In his aforementioned text, Minjüür Dechin tells us that although all the teachings of kyamuni will be widely circulated in all the four continents of the Great Jambudv pa during the era of perfection, it will be the Mah y na and the Unsurpassed Yoga Tantras, such as the , , , and , that will develop in an inconceivable manner. Among them, the , which will be re-disseminated by Raudra Cakr , will be a chief *tantra*. Due to practicing these *tantras*, many will attain awakening within a single lifetime. Minjüür Dechin assures us by referencing two of his Tibetan, textual sources, that this is a reason why even Bodhisattvas in Sukh vat pray for their rebirth in ambhala,⁹ thus suggesting that a rebirth in the Vajray na-oriented ambhala is more desirable than the rebirth in Sukh vat , where a long Bodhisattva path of S tray na is only practiced. Moreover, the conditions of ambhala depicted in Minjüür Dechin's work and in other Mongolian writings also allude to ambhala as a special type of Sukh vat , as an

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, 2003: 25-27. According to the colophon, Baldan Jigmed wrote the inscription. Translated from Tibetan into Mongolian by the Third Nalandra, a monk of Dashchoinbel Datsan.

8 Jambadorj, 2006, Vol. 2, Book 3. See also Bawden, 1984-85, Mon. Ser. 36 (1984-85): 459-67.

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, 2003: 26-27. See also

, 2003: 25-27. To support this statement, he references Vagindra's , written by the Second Jam dbyangs Bzhad pa, Dkon mchog 'Jigs med Dbang po, 1728-1791), and Darmabazar's *Composition of the Land of* (the 18th century).

esoteric Sukh vat of the human realm, or as Minjüür Dechin called it "the place of the highest *siddhi*."¹⁰ After all, similarly to Amit bha's Sukh vat , ambhala was brought into existence by Guhy dhipati (Vajrap i) in his form of the king Sucandra. Gachoi Lam Damba Agramba (Shes rab Rgya mtsho, Prajñ s gara, 19th-20th centuries),¹¹ in his *Precious Crystal Stairway* , *the Abode of the Siddhi*, written in 1921, refers to ambhala as a sublime of the earth, which is rotated by the Wheel of Dharma and celebrated by the illusory dance of the Sons of Jina: specifically, the seven Dharma-kings and twenty-five .¹²

ambhala is most intimately connected to a celestial Sukh vat . Hence, everyone born in ambhala is able to depart to the celestial Sukh vat at death. Likewise, those dwelling in a celestial Sukh vat can, at their will, descend to ambhala from Sukh vat and take on a physical form if their relics have remained in our world. After their work is accomplished here, they can return to Sukh vat . For instance, on the example of the Sixth Pan chen Bla ma's , where we are told that at the dawn of the era of perfection, N g rjuna will descend from Sukh vat into his remains in the noble land of India, the aforementioned Mongolian chronicle, *Crystal Mirror*, and the anonymous Mongolian text discovered in Buryatia and titled

Epoch of the Kings, and the Ways and Means of Travelling [There], predict that N g rjuna will enter his relics, which he previously turned into a stone and upon which he laid his blessings. Tsong kha pa will also enter his relics after the teacher Ringchin Choyijil steals them away from Tsong kha pa's Gandan monastery. Having entered his relics, Tsong kha pa will proceed in the form of a great *siddha*.¹³ According to the same anonymous text, N g rjuna and Tsong kha pa will accompany the Raudra Cakr in illuminating the teachings of and *tantras*, and will remain on the earth for as long as Raudra remains, that is, for 150 years.¹⁴

As evidenced by a proliferation of liturgical and ritual texts containing the prayers and for rebirth in ambhala and *'pho ba* practices of directing one's own and other's consciousness to ambhala upon death, a fixation with rebirth in ambhala became particularly pronounced in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth-centuries Mongolia. In these writings, the requirements necessary for taking rebirth in ambhala are reminiscent of those in the Pure

¹⁰ This phrase is a part of the title of his previously mentioned work.

¹¹ He was born in Khantai *sum* of Bulgan *aimag* and belonged to the Hand chin vang khoshuu of Tüsheets Khan *aimag*. He also produced works on *Lam rim*, medicine, and other topics.

¹² *Grub pa'i gnas dpal ldan sham bha lar bsgrod ba'i lam gsal bar byed ba'i rin chen shel gyi them skas shes bya ba bzhugs so*, folio 2a.

¹³ Jambadorj, 2006, Vol. 2, 2006: 294.

, MS:18.

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bolai, MS: 18-19.

Land practices. For example, in Minjüür Dechin's view, three main conditions must be met for a guaranteed rebirth in *ambhala*: 1) the accumulation of merit and gnosis, 2) a purification of the obstacles of sins, and 3) a generation of wishful prayers, or aspirations, for rebirth in *ambhala*. Wishful prayers are to be of the five types: 1) a prayer for the connection with a composition of the land of *ambhala*, accompanied by a *prayer* on the land of *ambhala* 2) a prayer for being conceived in *ambhala*, 3) a prayer for encountering Raudra there at the time of his reign 4) a prayer for listening to his teachings, and 5) a prayer for attaining awakening. One who practices in this way is promised to reach *ambhala* in a single moment during the *bar do* state by following a white light appearing in the direction of *ambhala* in the northern direction, without suffering the shock, exhaustion, and fear.¹⁵

Similarly, according to the early twentieth-century Mongolian text composed by the high lama of Ikh Khüree, Agvan Agwaan Damdinsüren (Ngag dbant Rta mgrisn Bsrud) and titled

, one must first clean one's residence and embellish it with decorations such as banners and the like. After that, one should reverently set out representations of the Three Jewels and *ambhala*, and the images of its Dharma kings and . One is to offer the mound of offerings on the altar in front of those images, sit on a cushion and practice the of K lacakra and *ambhala*, recite the eulogies to various deities and to the kings of *ambhala*, utter prayers and *mantras*, and lastly practice a '*pho ba*.¹⁶

As a Sukh vat of the human realm, *ambhala* is a Buddhist kingdom, governed by Dharma-kings and *cakravartins*, the royal emanations of Vajradhara in his forms of Vajrap i and Mañju r . In his *Crystal Mirror*, Jambadorj reminds us that the kings of *ambhala* are endowed with all the excellent qualities of the realized beings who achieved the bliss, inexhaustible wisdom, unimpeded mind, supernatural abilities, and magic powers (). Sucandra, the first king of *ambhala*, chose to be born in the *kya* lineage, which originated from the king Mah sammata of the first *kalpa*.¹⁷ The 25th , Raudra Cakr , an emanation of Mañju r , will also choose his birth in the same *kya* lineage.¹⁸ Minjüür Dechin's work also informs us that all the minor kings ruling over the 96 million villages of *ambhala* are actually manifestations of the Buddhas, governing in accordance with the principle of a dual

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, 2003: 50.

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myur lam zhes bya ba bzhugs so. Note that the name of the capital of *ambhala*, Kal pa is written in the title and throughout the text as " . " Agwaan Damdinsüren died in 1944.

17 Jambadorj, 2006, Vol. 2, Book 3: 295.

18 According to the , 1986, Ch. 1, v. 157, *pada d*, p, 154, the seven kings of *ambhala* will be born in the glorious line of *kyas*, and the eighth will be r Ya as. The seven are: Sucandra, Sure a, Tej , Somadatta, Sure vara, Vi vam rti, and Sure na.

law—the law of Dharma and the law of the State. At the time when the *cakravartin* Raudra Cakr ascends to the throne of ambhala in the Year of the Fire Sheep of the 22nd year of the sixtieth cycle, he will rule in the same manner, making the State and religion equally prosper. He will be undifferentiated from the Buddha in his deeds.¹⁹ Thus, ambhala is the only place in the human realm that is continually preserving the line of cakravartins, the Dharma-kings. As such, it represents an ideal, and as Minjüür Dechin calls it, an "eternally strong"²⁰ Buddhist kingdom. Its strength rests on its theocratic foundation, characterized by the unified laws of State and Dharma embodied in its rulers. ambhala is undoubtedly an ideological world, in which all the desirable features of the era of perfection seem to be perpetually present, making the life in ambhala more appealing. We are told, as the era of perfection begins to fade away, social and ethical inequalities will resurge in the world outside of ambhala.²¹ By contrast, in ambhala, the social and religious distinctions that were obliterated due to the inhabitants' conversion to the practices by Sucandra, the 1st king of ambhala, are precluded by its teachings preserved by the subsequent kings of ambhala.

In Jambadorj's *Crystal Mirror*, the prophesized battle between the army of Raudra Cakr and the army of the Barbarians' leader Kmati is not driven by nationalistic or racial sentiments, as it appears in the early twentieth-century Mongolian writings. Jambadorj interprets the word Maka (Mecca) to mean "Mongol", and "those Muslims (Mong. *lal. Tib. kla klo*)," he says, are all "Mongols", whose "false view will increasingly proliferate after this period;" and as a result, "the majority of the countries of Jambudv pa will adhere to the views of Islam."²² It is possible that Jambadorj's interpretation comes from his misunderstanding of the usage of the Tibetan ethnonym *sog po*, which in some contexts designates Mongols, but is also used as a synonym for a "Muslim" in other contexts, as for instance, in Bu ston's annotations and in the Tibetan translation of the , a word commentary on the and the .²³ Like other authors before him, starting with the author of the and the , Jambadorj fails to adequately explain the false views of Muslims that separate them from Buddhists, other than their dietary customs, the manner in which they kill their livestock for food, and their faith in the god Bishmillā. "In accordance with their false theory," he says, "they eat meat of the livestock that did not die on

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, 2003: 19-22.

20 In the Mongolian , translated by Charles Bawden, ambhala is referred to as "eternally strong." See Bawden, 1984-85, Mon. Ser. 36 (1984-85): 473.

21 , 1986, Ch. 1, v. 166.

22 Jambadorj, 2006, Vol. 2, Book 3: 292.

23 The commentary on the , Ch. 1, v. 154, Peking ed. #2065, Vol. 47. See also Newman, 1987: 596-97, and p. 533, ft. 5; Tucci, 1940: 94, which interprets the *sog po* in this way: "In some places there are Muslimans, that is, *sog pos*" (*la la na mu sur man zhes pa sog po yod*).