

Buddhist Practices among the Alshaa Khalkhas from the 1920s to the present day

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Most Mongolians embraced Tibetan Buddhism in the 17th century. However, by the 20th century, all Mongolian-inhabited areas were under a socialist regime. Religion was reformed and restricted in the 1920s and entirely suppressed by the 1930s in the Mongolian People's Republic (MPR). Some monks and nobles fled the border to the Alshaa region of Inner Mongolia and settled there. Shortly after the establishment of Inner Mongolia as an autonomous region within the People's Republic of China (PRC), the Cultural Revolution began in 1966. During this period, the Khalkha lamas who had survived the anti-religious campaign in the MPR were once again subjected to repression in China. This paper examines how Buddhism continued to exist among the Khalkhas in the Alshaa region under these historical conditions. The study is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Alshaa, including interviews with monks and local residents, as well as the analysis of local historical materials.

In 1921, Outer Mongolia proclaimed its independence under the leadership of the 8th Bogd Khaan. Following his passing in 1924, the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party (MPRP), under Soviet direction, seized control and established the Mongolian People's Republic. Striving to create a fully socialist state, the new authorities gradually moved to regulate the Buddhist clergy. Buddhism was not only a religious matter, but also a crucial part of Mongolian society, impacting areas such as economics, education, and healthcare. Consequently, the MPRP implemented policies that restricted monasteries, confiscated their property, and reduced the number of monks. By the 1930s, these policies culminated in large-scale purges. Many high-ranking monks were executed, and middle-ranking monks were imprisoned. In 1937, more than 30,000 monks were reportedly killed across Mongolia. This led to a mass exodus known as *Dürvekh khödölgöön*. According to Batsaikhan, approximately 7,500 families—roughly 30,000 people—fled to Inner Mongolia by 1932. Some later returned to Mongolia during the New Turn Policy (Batsaikhan 2021:102-103).

However, the Alshaa region remained relatively peaceful compared to other Mongolian-inhabited areas in China. In 1912, the Alshaa Banner (*Khoshuu*) was placed under the jurisdiction of the Mongolian and Tibetan Affairs Committee and was incorporated into Ningxia Province under the control of the Ma clique in 1929. In the 1920s, some liberal feudal lords in Alshaa attempted to establish a new government, which they did in 1928 under the name of the “Alshaa Political Affairs Committee” (*Alshaa Khoshuuny zasagiin yvdaliin zövlöl*). Unfortunately, after only seven months, the conservatives suppressed the new government. Subsequently, a reincarnated Lama from Alshaa Baruun Khiid Monastery governed Alshaa Banner for four years (Alshaa League Gazetteer:2011). In 1934, the 9th Panchen Lama visited Alshaa and stayed there for three months. Believers warmly welcomed him, and according to local accounts, around 30,000 people came to pay their respects. Some visitors are said to have come from Outer Mongolia, due to a legend circulating there that the Panchen Lama would lead the Shambhala War and save the Mongolian Sangha.



Map of Mongolia and Alshaa League of China

Many feudal lords and high-ranking lamas, fearing the revolution in the MPR, began to move to the neighboring area of Alshaa. Specifically, the lamas of the Tüsheets, Zasagt, and Sain Noyon Khan League (*Aimag*) (nowadays Govi-Altai, Övörkhangai, Bayankhongor, Ömnögovi Province) fled to neighboring Eznee Torguud Banner and Alshaa Khoshuud Ööld Banner (nowadays Alshaa League).

The movement of the Khalkha people to Alshaa has been documented in official Chinese publications. According to Alshaa League Gazetteers, the Khalkha relocated to Alshaa Banner between 1921 and 1933, with the current Erbegee Sum, Altantsog Sum, and Nüürgii Sum serving as the main settlement areas (Alshaa League Gazetteer:2011; 464). The Eznee Banner Gazetteers records that 150 households, a total of 400 people, moved to Eznee Banner. Records also indicate that, around 1921, approximately 30 lamas and a reincarnated Lama from Sain Noyan Khan League, Tsagaan Suvrag Süm, moved to Eznee. In 1935, they founded the Dambyn Khural Monastery (Eznee Banner Gazetteers 1998:129,168). Tübzargal provides further evidence of this migration. According to his research, 630 households, totaling 3,518 people, sought refuge in the Alshaa region in 1931. Among them, 130 households with 367 livestock and 40 households with 500 people (without livestock) were resettled in Erbegee and Badin-Jaran Sum. The remaining 173 households, comprising 881 people, relocated to Dököm and other Sums, including Shavrun (eight years old, Tib. *zhabs drung*) from Lamyn Gegeen Banner and Shavrun (29 years old) from Tüsheets Khan Banner (Tübzargal 2016:168-179).

In addition to official records, Khorlosüren extensively documented the Alshaa Khalkha people. Her book delves into the history of 653 households in Alshaa and provides a detailed genealogy of nearly 2,000 Khalkha individuals. Although some parts of the book are composed in poetic style, they remain crucial resources for studying the Alshaa Khalkhas. The book also includes a study by Davkharbayar, initially published in a *Mongolian language journal* in 2010. He traces the history of the Khalkha people's migration to the Alshaa region back to the Qing dynasty. In addition to the aforementioned, research has also been conducted on the Khalkha people around the Mazongshan Mountains in Gansu Province, which will be omitted from this discussion.

Official records primarily document migration during the 1920s and 1930s. However, fieldwork conducted by Khorlosüren and Tübzargal also identified Khalkha lamas who moved from the MPR to Alshaa in 1940. This suggests that small-scale migration likely continued from the 1920s to the 1940s, and even into the 1960s (from the PRC to the MPR). Additionally, during the 1940s and the 1950s, some high-ranking monks, originally from Khalkha and Buryad, who had practiced Buddhism in Tibet for many years, did not return to their hometowns. Instead, they settled in the Alshaa region and continued their Buddhist

practice there. In this context, the following is a three-part examination of the reconstruction and continuation of Buddhism in Alshaa Khalkha.

Phase 1: building a new Buddhist community in the Alshaa region

The Khalkha people in the Alshaa region have successfully upheld their Buddhist faith by maintaining a strong spiritual connection with their Root Lama or reincarnated Lama, as they did in the past. Historical records and fieldwork indicate seven reputed incarnate lamas of the Khalkha lineage in Alshaa since the 1930s. Four were enthroned before relocating to Alshaa, and three were Khalkha people born in the Alshaa region. During my fieldwork in 2023, the four incarnate lamas were still alive and held in deep reverence by the people of Alshaa.

In the following discussion, I explore the lives of the four enthroned lamas and examine how the Khalkha people managed to revive the Buddhist community of Alshaa.

(1) 6th Nomch Gegeen

Luvsandambiidomei was born in 1879 in Zasagt Khan League, Tsetsen Sartuul Banner, and was recognized as the 6th Nomch Gegeen in 1884. At the age of 18 years, he pursued studies at the Choir Datsan of the Gandan Monastery in Lhasa. In 1917, he obtained the title of Gevsh Lkharamba, standing out among 30,000 Tibetan monks, after which he was appointed to important positions, such as Gesgüi (Tib. *dge bskos*). In 1938, the 6th Nomch Gegeen was invited to Gümbüm Monastery (Tib. *sku 'bum byams pa gling*, in Amdo Tibet). Later, in 1943, the seven lamas held a ceremony and built a new monastery called “Lharigünga Dashchoilin” (Tib. *lha ri kun dga bstan chos gling*, usually called *Altan Tevshiiin Süm*) on Mount Altan Tevshi (Sainnymbuu, Ts & Bat, D. 2007).

(2) 3rd Erdeniin Lama

Luvsandambinyam was born in 1920 and recognized as the 3rd Erdeniin Lama at Jonon Vangiin Banner Amarbuyantyn Khiid (Monastery) at the age of three. In 1931, he left the MPR along with other monks. In 1935, he studied Buddhist chanting, ritual, and philosophy at Gümbüm Monastery, later serving as Khamba (Tib. *mkhen po*) at both Düinkhor and Mamba Datsan (Tib. *dus 'khor grwa tshang, sman pa grwa tshang*) for three years each and founding the Khalkha Garwa (Tib. *sgar ba*) at Gümbüm Monastery. In the mid-1940s, he served as Khamba at the Altan Tevshi and Sharza monasteries in Alshaa. He was later invited to serve as Khamba in Jüd Datsan (Tib. *rgyud grwa tshang*) at Gümbüm Monastery. In 1959, it was said that the lamas at Gümbüm Monastery constructed a counter-revolutionary guardian deity, which led to their suppression¹⁹. All lamas from Inner Mongolia were sent back immediately, and Erdeniin Lama was sentenced to 12 years of reform through labor in Bayannuur League Uradyn Dundad Banner. In 1970, he returned home to his brother in Alshaa Right Banner. He passed away on December 18, 1975. He was politically rehabilitated in 1979. (Fieldnotes, June15).

¹⁹ At that time, there were 323 lamas at Gümbüm Monastery from Inner Mongolia. Among them were many high-ranking and reincarnated lamas, including Ulaan Gegeen, who served as the 83rd Khamba of Gümbüm Monastery (Delege. 1998). Additionally, it was reported that there were 12 high-ranking lamas from Alshaa.

(3) Khuvilgaan lama

Luvsandagva, the reincarnation of the Daichin Vangiin Banner, departed from the MPR for Xinjiang in the 1930s and then traveled to Central Tibet for further studies. Around 1944, he arrived in Alshaa and undertook the construction of the Tsagaan Dersiin Süm between 1947 and 1949. It is said that around 50 lamas from Daichin Vangiin Banner and Jonon Vangiin Banner gathered there. Luvsandagva passed away in 1960. (Fieldnotes, June 15)

(4) Nani Shavrun (Dashi Gegeen)

Dashtseren was born in 1919 in Jonon Vangiin Banner and was enthroned in Toli Gün Banner. In 1932, young Dashtseren and 13 other households were taken by the monastery's lamas to Alshaa, where they founded the Jigdiin Süm behind Mount Altan Tevshi. Nearly 40 lamas were reported in Toli Gün Banner and Bishrelt Zasgiin Banner. In 1965, the monastery merged with Altan Tevshiin Süm. Dashi Gegeen played a significant role in the revival of Buddhism in the 1980s, and he passed away in 1996. (Fieldnotes, June 15.)

As mentioned, in the 1940s, four reincarnated lamas successfully founded three monasteries in Alshaa. Mount Altan Tevshi, where these three monasteries are located, is in the southwest of Alshaa Banner, away from the eight great monasteries built by the Khoshuud people, but near PingShanHu Lake Mongol County in Zhangye City, Gansu Province. Some Khalkha people who escaped from the MPR resided near PingShanHu Lake. The selection of Mount Altan Tevshi, long revered as a holy mountain by the Mongols,³ was undoubtedly well thought out by the reincarnated lamas of that time.

The Khalkha people migrated to Alshaa from various Leagues and were divided into different groups, each worshipping their own reincarnated lama. In addition to constructing the new monastery, Nomch Gegeen also recognized the reincarnated lamas worshipped by different groups and built their Lavran (the palace of the reincarnate lama, Tib. *bla brang*) within Altan Tevshiin Süm. In Alshaa, the 6th Nomch Gegeen recognized the following four reincarnated lamas:

① 10th Lamyn Gegeen

Luvsanlundugshadavdambiinyam was born in 1941 in the Sartai Sum of Alshaa Banner and was recognized as the 10th Lamyn Gegeen at the age of three. He began his studies at the Gүmbүm Monastery in 1949 and participated in religious ceremonies at Altan Tevshiin Süm until 1957. However, in 1959, he was accused of involvement in "counter-revolutionary activities" at Gүmbүm Monastery and was sent back to Inner Mongolia. He then lived as a herder. From 1988 to 1989, he pursued his studies at the High-Level Tibetan Buddhist Academy of China and served to revive Buddhism in the Alshaa League. He passed away in 1996. (khorlosüren2017: P13)

³ It is a sacred mountain located 70 kilometers west of the current seat of Alshaa Right Banner, standing at an altitude of 2,600 meters—a widely known story among Mongolians about this mountain. In 1226, Chinggis Khan rested his soldiers and horses on Mount Altan Tevshi during his fifth campaign against the Western Xia. This was his final campaign. According to legend, Genghis Khan offered a three-year-old stallion as a tribute to the *tenger* on a large square stone. Afterward, the people named the stone Chinggis Khan's Altan Tevshi (Golden Board) and worshipped it reverently. Since then, the mountain has been called Altan Tevshiin Mountain.

② **9th Noyon Khutukhtu**

Tüvdennyam was born in 1948 in Mergen Zasgiin Banner. He was recognized by Nomch Gegeen as the 9th Noyon Khutukhtu and enthroned at Altan Tевshiin Süm. He passed away in 1975 during the Cultural Revolution (Soelt, S 2017:44).

③ **3rd Jalsarai Gegeen**

Jalsarai Gegeen was reincarnated three times in Baldan Zasgiin Banner. And Zunduijamts was born in 1941 in Nүrgii Sum of Alshaa Banner and was recognized as the 3rd Jalsarai Gegeen at the age of eight. He was enthroned at the Altan Tевshiin Süm, where he began studying Buddhism. In 1958, he was sent to Bayankhot in the Alshaa League for a 50-day course, during which he learned the ideology of the Communist Party. However, upon his return, he lodged at Altan Tевshiin Süm and lived in a house near the monastery. He lived with two elderly Lamas and continued chanting prayers until 1969. During the day, however, he also took part in collective production activities, such as building livestock enclosures. He passed away in June 2023. (Fieldnotes, June 4)

④ **6th Bandida Shavrun (Zүmbaa Gegeen)**

Lovsandambajamts, born in 1939 in Sharz, Alshaa, is a Shavrun from Ag Gүng Banner. His father was from Baldan Zasgiin Banner, and his mother was from Lamyn Gegeen Banner. Both fled to Alshaa in the 1930s to escape religious oppression in the MPR. At the age of seven, he was recognized as the 6th Bandida Shavrun and enthroned at Gүmbүm Monastery. He also held a Lavran at Altan Tевshiin Süm. After his mother passed in 1957, he went on a pilgrimage to Central Tibet, where he continued his studies. He was accused of being involved in the Tibetan Uprising during the Cultural Revolution. He is still alive²⁰. (Fieldnotes, June 4)

⑤ **5th Ejei lama**

Ejei lama is a reincarnation of the Ezenee Banner Dashchoilin Monastery. The fifth Ejei lama, Lundugjalsan, was born in 1943 in Eastern Tibet and was enthroned in 1945. He held a Lavran at Altan Tевshiin Süm. Despite not being a Khalha, Nomch Gegeen was involved in searching for reincarnation and enthronement. He studied traditional medicine from a young age and later worked at the Mongolian Hospital in Banner. Unfortunately, he lost his life in a car accident in 1980.

As described above, reincarnate lamas are the most significant figures of Tibetan-Mongolian Buddhism and strongly influence believers. For those who fled from the MPR, the profound affection and respect for the incarnate lamas, whom they had revered for generations, strengthened as they recommenced their lives in a new land.

Between the 1920s and the 1930s, those who fled the MPR to Alshaa included high-ranking lamas, wealthy herders, and nobles. However, in Alshaa, their status was reduced to that of "tsagaachid "(refugees). Alshaa Banner belonged to the Khoshuud people, and it was home to eight large and 25 smaller monasteries, all connected to the three main monasteries.

²⁰ At the time of our interview in 2023, Lovsandambajamts (Zүmbaa Gegeen) was 87 years old, but his memory remained excellent. During our conversation, he spoke freely without being prompted. When he was in good spirits, he occasionally spoke in the Lhasa dialect of Tibetan and vividly recalled what his teachers had told him.

Additionally, two khutukhtu were appointed by the Qing Emperor in Alshaa, along with nearly 30 other reincarnate lamas and shavruns. In this situation, the exiled Khalkha lamas in Alshaa sought to maintain their followers by building new monasteries and recognizing the newly reincarnated lamas.

By the 1950s, the Altan Tévshiin Süm had gathered seven reincarnate lamas from Khalkha, as well as more than ten high-ranking lamas, who had been trained for many years in Tibet and Ikh Khuree, and had attained the degrees of Lkharamba, Dooromb, and Gavj (Soelt, S 2001: 4-6). At that time, it could be said that no monastery in the entire area inhabited by Mongolians had so many high-ranking monks. Thus, the reverence and respect of believers, belonging to different groups, for their reincarnated lamas were united for the Nomch Geegen and Altan Tévshiin Süm.

Phase 2: Repression and the Protection of Buddhism Again

After the establishment of the PRC in 1949, the CCP launched land reform and collectivization across China. In Inner Mongolia, monastic estates, which had long served as important centers of wealth and resources, were confiscated and redistributed. Young lamas were also required to take part in collective labor, and many monasteries were left largely deserted. When the Cultural Revolution began in 1966, a campaign to purge the so-called Inner Mongolian People's Party was launched, which led to the suppression of ethnic culture.

Buddhist monasteries were denounced as a "feudal and superstitious organization," and lamas were derogatorily referred to as "Cow demons and snake spirits." Under the campaign to destroy "four olds," numerous religious structures, statues, offerings, sutras, and decorations were destroyed. At the same time, people in Alshaa who could write in Cyrillic, were accused of being spies for the Soviet Union or the MPR or of being members of the Torguud Party, and became targets of violence.

Between the end of 1968 and May 1969, 254 people were accused of being members of the "Inner Mongolian People's Party" or similar organizations. Of these, 54 were injured, and 13 were killed. In Ezenee Banner, 1,399 people were persecuted, with 307 injured and 207 killed (the total population of the Banner was 8,765) (Alshaa Right Banner Gazetteers 2000: 69, Alshaan League Gazetteers 1998: 62). According to Choimbol, during the Cultural Revolution, 142 lamas were killed in Alshaa, including 12 high-ranking and three reincarnated lamas, while 87 were injured (Choimbol, Kharnud 2017: 81).

During the Cultural Revolution, of the seven Khalkha reincarnate lamas mentioned earlier, the 9th Noyon Khutukhtu and the 3rd Erdeniin Lama passed away in 1975. The other reincarnated lamas were mainly subjected to reform through labor. In some cases, elderly lamas were sent to work at the homes of their disciples, where they would chant together in the Ger late into the night. In addition, some people were unable to endure the oppression and crossed the border again to return to Mongolia.

Experiences of the 6th Bandida Shavrun

"I was accused of participating in the Tibetan uprising and was persecuted. Since I was born, I was never treated as a high-ranking lama, but I faced criticism for being a reincarnation. I want to emphasize that the Khalkha brothers only lightly pulled and pushed me; they did not

even kick me. The people involved in the revolution were of my age and did not know anything. I did not think it was terrible. Throughout the Cultural Revolution, I assisted in livestock farming and moved from house to house. While the people's attitude was not bad, I struggled with hunger, as I was not being paid. Therefore, on February 10, 1969, I decided to escape. Initially, I had no plans of heading to Outer Mongolia, but eventually crossed the Mongolian border 17 days after riding someone else's camel. There, I was arrested and interrogated by the Mongolian policemen, but I was fed well there for nearly two weeks...I stayed in Mongolia for ten years, working in construction. Although the police occasionally questioned me during that time, the leader at the place where I worked was a good man, so I did not have any fear. In 1980, I returned to Inner Mongolia." (Fieldnotes, June 4)

Bandida Shavrun 's parents were Khalkhas who arrived in Alshaa in the 1930s. However, Bandida Shavrun survived the Cultural Revolution by fleeing to Mongolia. Some people returned to the MPR in the 1950s and 1960s due to China's harsh policies. Of course, those who survived the Cultural Revolution continued their Buddhist faith by hiding Buddha statues and secretly chanting sutras.

For instance, the guardian deity (sakhuis) of Nomch Gegeen is hidden deep in the mountains. Nyantai and his older brother, monk Manj, continued to offer prayers. One day, when the headman of Sum visited their home, the younger brother, who had a mental disability, said, "You do not know that my two brothers are worshipping the guardian deity of Nomch Gegeen." As a result, both brothers were harshly punished, yet they refused to disclose the whereabouts of their guardian's deity to the Red Guard. Later, the monk Nyantai continued to offer prayers to the guardian deity while herding alone. In the 1990s, he returned the guardian deity to Nomch Gegeen. (Fieldnotes, June 7.)

Phase 3: Buddhism revived after 1978

After the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976, the Alshaa League was established in 1980 and consisted of three banners: Alshaa Left Banner, Alshaa Right Banner, and Ezenee Banner. It was transferred to the jurisdiction of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region. Following this, religious and ethnic cultures, suppressed for over ten years, began to undergo revitalization. The following is an examination of the reconstruction process of Buddhism among the Khalkha people, using the three monasteries of Alshaa Right Banner and their representative monks as examples.

(1) 7th Nomch Gegeen and Altan Tevshiin Süm

The 7th Nomch Gegeen was born on January 22, 1955, and was enthroned at the age of four. However, due to the stricter religious policies in China, he lived as a herder and had little opportunity to receive a traditional monastic education. He began working in various government departments in 1978 and initiated the reconstruction of the Altan Tevshiin Süm in 1985.

News of the monastery's reconstruction attracted more than 50 lamas, who gathered to participate in the project. In September 1985, a Chinese-style temple was built, followed by the construction of the Tibetan-style Tsogchin Dugan in 1989. Subsequently, Nomch Gegeen's Lavran and 18 financial units (Jas, Tib: spy sa) were built. (Fig. 1)



Fig. 1. Altan Tevshiin Süm <https://www.alsyq.gov.c>

The Altan Tevshiin Süm has 38 monks and two reincarnated lamas, the 7th Nomch Gegeen and the 6th Bandida Shavrun. As in the past, the monastery continues to conduct monastic rituals and annual events. However, because of the limited number of monks and their lack of religious knowledge, many of these events have now been simplified (a challenge faced by all monasteries in Inner Mongolia). On June 7th, Nomch Gegeen expressed his views on the current management of the monastery.

Currently, a secular life is more attractive than a monastic life. This leads some people to leave the monastery if something goes wrong. Approaching monks with encouragement, constructive feedback, and praise, rather than reprimands or physical punishment, is essential. At our monastery, we implemented a policy that allows monks who participate in daily chanting to receive a living allowance of 25 yuan per day. The Gesgüi keeps a record of the monks who participate in daily chanting; although the amount is not large, it gives the monks a small source of income (it is said that the Nomch Gegeen uses his own funds to provide stipends to monks).

In the past, each Dugan in the monastery had its own Gonir (Tib. *dkon gnyer*), resulting in ambiguity about the financial situation. However, today, only one Gonir is responsible for overseeing the subsidization of ritual supplies and managing the finances of the entire monastery, with supervision from all members. Those who want to become monks must be under 60 years of age and memorize at least three chanting sutras daily. It is not sufficient to wear a robe and claim to be a lama.

Traditionally, Gesgüi were considered to exercise the highest authority over ceremonies and discipline lamas. However, today, the management methods at the Altan Tevshiin Süm are similar to the timekeeping systems of modern companies. The decline of the authority of the Gesgüi is not limited to the Altan Tevshiin Süm but is observed in almost all monasteries in Inner Mongolia. This loss of respect for the esteemed clergy, such as Gevsh and Gonir, among the monks signals the breakdown of the traditional monastic administrative system. The new management approach adopted by the Altan Tevshiin Süm is praised locally for its stringent monastic rules and discipline. Nevertheless, Nomch Gegeen said that he is most worried about the monks' limited religious knowledge of the Tibetan language.

This situation reflects China's control of religious policy. In August 1992, the Communist Party's United Front Work Department (UFWD) and the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA) convened a Tibetan Buddhist Work Conference in Beijing that regulated religious activities that transcended administrative boundaries (Susumu, Kawada 2014). This effectively banned religious activities in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region and Tibetan areas. Similarly, there are strict regulations on monks visiting the Tibetan area for

study and practice. Therefore, monks face challenges in obtaining a traditional monastic education, leading to a decline in their Tibetan language skills and Buddhist knowledge.

However, the significance of the 7th Nomch Gegeen extends beyond Alshaa's Khalkha community. He not only rebuilt the Altan Tevshiin Süm, but also held official positions, such as President of the Alshaa League Buddhist Association and Vice President of the Alshaa League Political Conference, indicating official recognition by the PRC government. In 2007, SARA issued the 'Measures on the Management of the Reincarnation of Living Buddhas in Tibetan Buddhism.' It announced that the reincarnated lamas required approval from the government. It is said that only around ten reincarnated lamas in Inner Mongolia receive certificates. In Alshaa Right Banner, Nomch Gegeen is the sole reincarnated lama holding a 'Living Buddha Certificate.' This has led to a re-evaluation of previously revered reincarnated lamas, now considered "fake" due to lack of SARA approval. For instance, the 6th Bandida Shavrun, the subject of this paper, was criticized and attacked for his "high-ranking reincarnated lama" title during the Cultural Revolution. Still, ironically, after the relaxation of religious policy, he was deprived of the title of "reincarnated lama."

(2) Ligden and Tsagaan Dersiin Süm

The head of Tsagaan Dersiin Süm, the khuvilgaan lama, passed away in 1960, and when his reincarnation was not located, the Cultural Revolution began, and Tsagaan Dersiin Süm was destroyed. In response, the ordinary monk Ligden took it upon himself to reconstruct the monastery.

Ligden was born in 1937 and brought from Khalkha to Alshaa by his parents when he was two years old. He came to the monastery as a novice monk when the Tsagaan Dersiin Süm was constructed. His teachers included a high-ranking Lama from Baldan Zasgiin Banner, and a Buryad Lama with a Dooromb degree from the Labrang Monastery. He said:

In 1959, Alshaa underwent significant changes and I was forced to leave the monastery and spend my days herding with my mother. The head of the Sum visited our home and said, "Since you are no longer a lama, you should get married," and even introduced me to a marriage partner. I had no intention of marrying and was confused. In 1960, my mother asked me to return to the monastery and offer milk to the lamas (khuvilgaan lama). During this visit, the lama gave me a khadag and said, "Please take good care of this khadag. I will soon leave this world, but we will meet again, so do not worry. However, I am concerned that the monastery's water offerings may dry when I am away. Please remember to offer water regularly." At that moment, I agreed, but as my house was far from the monastery, I doubted that I could fulfill this responsibility. However, soon after, I had the opportunity to work as a herder in a public corporation (Negdel). This herding continued for nearly ten years. Throughout this period, I dedicated plenty of time to chanting sutras and deepening my contemplation.

In 1980, when other monasteries began to be rebuilt, I visited the ruins and stood there alone for a long time. The monastery lay in ruins, and I had not yet found a reincarnated lama, so I was worried that I, who had no money, could rebuild the monastery alone. However, as the lama had foretold, local herders came forward to help with the construction, and approximately 20 lamas, over 60 years old, gathered to commence chanting the sutras. (Fig. 2) Subsequently, I participated in the enthronement of the lama's reincarnation. (Fieldnotes, June5)



Fig. 2. Tsagaan Dersiin Süm

He firmly believed in the enduring power of the lama's prophecies. According to his account, before the lama passed away in 1960, he left a will for the monks, saying, "I will not go far. I am going to Khar Gelüg's home, so I will see you again." Following this explicit will, they located a reincarnated lama in 1980 and offered him a mandala in 2007. However, they did not obtain a 'Living Buddha Certificate' from the Chinese government. In other words, the law deemed the khuvilgaan lama an "illegitimate" reincarnated lama.

Additionally, the Tsagaan Dersiin Süm, rebuilt through the efforts of Ligden and others, was not officially recognized as a religious institution, operating as a Mani chanting site (a place for chanting the Mani mantra) for the Altan Tévshiin Süm. Currently, there are around ten lamas at Tsagaan Dersiin Süm, and during events, about 20 monks from Altan Tévshiin Süm join to conduct Buddhist services.

(3) Perinlei and the Khüremt Monastery

The final monk I want to mention in this paper is Perinlei, a young monk in his thirties. Unlike the other monks I have talked about so far, he is a third-generation Khalkha who fled from Mongolia.

Perinlei was born in 1989 in Yabrai Sum, Alshaa Right Banner. His grandparents were from Lamyn Gegeen Banner. His grandfather had five brothers, four of whom were lamas who moved to Alshaa in the early 1920s. He graduated from the Inner Mongolia University of Finance and Economics in 2011. That same year, he went to Labrang Monastery in eastern Tibet to study the Tibetan language and Buddhism. Subsequently, he enrolled at the Inner Mongolia Buddhist School and studied there for three years.

Khüremt Monastery (Fig. 3), where he is based, was originally part of the Alshaa Right Banner Buyan Ündeslegch Monastery. Its head lama was the Üizen Shavrun of Buyan Ündeslegch Monastery. It is located 390 km from the Buyan Ündeslegch Monastery and is nominally a monastery for the Khoshuud people. It is said that many lamas from Khalkha congregated there after 1930. The Khüremt Monastery was destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. However, the monks hid as many of their Buddha statues and other items as possible and are said to have continued chanting without stopping. From 1978, Üizen Shavrun (1936-2024), Nyantai, and Nymaa (Perinlei's grandfather) helped to rebuild the monastery.

Perinlei says that he has been attending the Khüremt Monastery's religious ceremony since childhood. During his summer vacation at university, he visited the monastery and witnessed about 20 lamas, the youngest being over 70 years old, holding a ceremony. Touched by his grandparents' deep respect for the monastery, he decided to become a monk to protect and uphold its tradition.



Fig. 3. The prayer hall of Khüremt Monastery

The ordination of a young man who had graduated from a reputable university, such as Perinlei, greatly impacted the local people. Following his ordination, sixteen young men joined the Khüremt Monastery as monks. Currently, the monastery has around twenty monks, ranging in age from twenty to eighty. They are highly respected in the local community for participating in the monastery's annual events and for assisting local herders with tasks, such as shearing camels and other activities.

In 2016, Pelenlai undertook a twenty-three-day prostrating pilgrimage from Khüremt Monastery to Altan Tевshiin Süm. This tradition symbolizes the faith of young monks and reflects the influence of the Altan Tевshiin Süm. However, Perinlei is also facing a new challenge. He said: Khüremt Monastery was rebuilt in 1983, but has not been renovated ever since then, and many structures are now deteriorating. Additionally, we need to build dormitories and dining facilities for young monks and also consider fire safety. Therefore, we applied to the Religious Affairs Bureau for permission to reconstruct the monastery. Although our application was approved after several visits, we were informed that we also required consent from the Ministry of Land and Resources (*guotu ziyuan bu*) and the State Forestry Bureau (*guojia linye ju*). When we returned to the Land Administration Bureau, we were told that it would be best to renovate the existing buildings rather than expand the monastery. However, since there is only one prayer hall, the task is impossible. So, I suggested constructing a three-story building if horizontal expansion was not permitted, but this proposal was also rejected.

When we visited the Forestry Bureau, we were sternly informed that the monastery lies within a nature reserve (*ziran baohuqu*). No stones or trees could be moved, and people were legally forbidden from living there. We were stunned to learn that the law on nature reserves enacted in 2002 could potentially displace this monastery, which was built in 1890.

So far, he has visited the relevant departments of the local government six times and the autonomous government three times but has yet to obtain permission. Simultaneously, he is also worried about the funds needed to rebuild the monastery. “Monasteries with reincarnated lamas attract considerable donations, but ordinary monasteries like ours are financially challenged. Without external support, rebuilding the monastery will not be easy,” he lamented.

The Religious Affairs Bureau did not oppose their construction. However, due to land-use regulations, the renovation and expansion of the monastery required approval from several other government departments. However, during an interview conducted in 2024, the author learned that significant progress had been made regarding both the expansion and funding of the monastery. This illustrates how religious revitalization since the 1980s has involved ongoing negotiations between religious actors and state institutions.

In conclusion, this paper examines the history of Buddhism among the Alshaa Khalkha from the 1930s to the present through three phases. It shows both the transformations and continuities of Buddhist practice in the Alshaa region. As demonstrated in this study, the Khalkha people who migrated to Alshaa established a Buddhist community among the Alshaa Khoshuud. Centered around the sacred mountain of Altan Tevshi, they built monasteries and enthroned reincarnated lamas, thereby reconstructing their religious network in a new environment.

In the 1950s, seven reincarnate lamas, beginning with the 6th Nomch Gegeen, were enthroned in the Altan Tevshiiin Süm. This monastery developed into the highest-level academic monastery among Mongolian communities in the region and represented a major achievement in the Khalkha people's efforts to rebuild their Buddhist network in the new region. Unfortunately, peace in the Alshaa region did not persist for long. The Cultural Revolution, which began in China in 1966, completely suppressed ethnic cultures and beliefs. Those who had fled oppression in the MPR were targeted and criticized as high-ranking lamas, feudal nobles, and even spies. Yet this repression did not lead to the disappearance of Buddhism. Monks forced out of the monasteries hid sacred objects, continued their prayers, and secretly chanted sutras. Some reincarnated lamas also managed to escape the MPR and survive the tumultuous period.

After 1978, monks who survived the Cultural Revolution commenced the arduous task of rebuilding their monasteries. However, the reconstruction of the Buddhist communities faced many challenges. The recognition of incarnate lamas and the activities of monks were placed under strict state regulation. Despite these obstacles, local Khalkha peoples actively worked to preserve their Buddhist traditions rather than simply accepting these political constraints. From the perspective of the Chinese state administration, the Alshaa League has long been regarded as a remote frontier region. However, the history of how thousands of Khalkha migrants established their own Buddhist tradition in Alshaa before the establishment of the PRC has received little scholarly attention. The continued practice of Buddhism among the Alshaa Khalkhas, thus, demonstrates the resilience and adaptability of ethnic religious traditions, which have persisted despite political repression under two socialist states. This case shows how Buddhist practice in Alshaa has been continuously reconfigured through migration, repression, and negotiation with state institutions.

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Хураангуй

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