

The way of the world

*You've no right to be sober –
The world doesn't agree with that.
You've no right to be decent –
The world is consumed with pride.
– Danzanravjaa, 1856*

Simon Wickham-Smith

At the age of just 53, in 1856, the 5th Noyon Khutughtu, Danzanravjaa, lay dying at the monastery of Boyiniyin Süme in southern Mongolia. His poetry, which had made him so popular among the ordinary people and so disliked by some of the clergy whom he blatantly mocked, now turned to a savage critique of the world. One of his most celebrated poems, from which this verse is taken, is called 'The Way of the World' (*Yertönts avgain jam khemeekh orshiv*): over the poem's 14 sections, Danzanravjaa presents a commentary on the hypocritical, deceitful, alluring, engaging, bizarre and rotten nature of the society in which he lived.

But Danzanravjaa was far from being a bitter monastic. His life and his work were, in some ways, the making of modern Mongolia. He was born in the winter of 1803, in the Gobi Mergen district in what is today the Khuvsgul province of Dorno Gobi. His mother died very early in his life and he was raised by his father, Dulduyitu, a wandering singer, with whom he would go begging and singing. After their only horse was attacked and eaten one night by a wolf, his father presented him to the monastery of Onggiyin Ghool, where he was placed under the tutelage of the lama Ishdoniilundev. He was a precocious and brilliant scholar and poet, writing verse from an early age and excelling at his studies. In 1811, the local Nyingma Buddhists proclaimed him the reincarnation of Jamyangoyidubajamsu, the 4th Noyon Khutughtu; this lama had been murdered by the Manchu overlords and it was only the intervention of the 10th Dalai Lama which now saved Danzanravjaa from the same fate.

Following the completion of his studies and, in 1821, the death of his beloved father, Danzanravjaa dedicated himself to meditation and to the poetic and educational projects for which he is best remembered. He determined to establish a temple for himself and spent some time wandering the eastern Gobi to discover the right site. He finally came upon a poor herdsman, named Balshinchoijoo, asleep in a field and took this as a sign that this was where the monastery should be built. Balshinchoijoo ended up building the monastery, named Khamar, acting as attendant and companion to Danzanravjaa; even today, it is his descendents who preserve the lama's legacy.

Having established Khamar, Danzanravjaa set about creating a place where not only religious and spiritual education would be encouraged, but also more mundane, popular types of education. He set up a school where talented young children could, regardless of background or gender, receive a free general education, established Mongolia's first museum, and set about administering the entire district of the eastern Gobi, on many occasions receiving representatives of foreign powers. In short, Danzanravjaa's suzerainty was fixed by the effort and understanding with which he treated the monks within the monastery and the laypeople without.

All of the 80 or so buildings at Khamar were destroyed by Choibalsan's purges during the 1930s. Over the last 15 years or so, a monk named Baatar has sought to re-establish two of the original structures.

In a valley just north of the temple complex, Danzanravjaa built Mongolia's first theater and set up its first theater company. He designed all the sets and costumes, wrote all the scripts and music and supervised and taught the actors how to perform. To give an idea of the complexity of these plays, his best-known drama, *The Moon Cuckoo* (*Saran Kökügeyin Namtar*), took 120 performers several weeks to stage.

Despite his educational achievements, Danzanravjaa's legacy – indeed, maybe the reason for his continuing popularity among ordinary Mongolians – lies primarily in his poetic works. He wrote poetry throughout his life, on an enormous range of subjects, all executed with such linguistic subtlety and dexterity that one scholar, Walther Heissig, has compared his work with that of Goethe.

The quantity and quality of his works is such that it would be impossible here to give an accurate overview. What can be said, though, is that his work emphasizes love for the natural world and for the vast expanses of the Gobi. His love of horses far surpasses that of the average Mongolian: he uses the horse, and the vast distances of the Gobi, as a way of illustrating the spiritual path of a Buddhist practitioner. His own spiritual practice extended to long retreats in a specially-designed doorless *ger*. Moreover, his frequent references to his lovers, to intimacy and to ecstasy, evoke similarities with western spiritual writers such as Jalaluddin Rumi or St John of the Cross.

Danzanravjaa is also often compared with the 6th Dalai Lama, Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho, who also wrote poetry¹ and who also lived what, on the surface, could be called a strangely dissolute life for a Buddhist lama. That Danzanravjaa was a lama of the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism meant that his vows ruled out neither marriage nor alcohol: there are many stories concerning his love of alcohol and women – he took two wives and often refers to himself as 'the boozier' (*sokhtakhu*) – and these themes appear frequently in his poems.

Of course, there is a tradition of maverick lama-poets throughout the Tibeto-Mongolian Buddhist world – Milarepa, for instance, Drukpa Kunley, the 6th Dalai Lama, Gendün Chopel and Chögyam Trungpa. Danzanravjaa's significance lies in his ability to connect on many levels with those around him. He enjoyed a certain respect within the establishment – even though he made enemies by criticising their hypocrisy and pretence and lack of spiritual effort – while, at the same time, he was loved by the laypeople who appreciated his realism and compassion as much as his love of wild parties.

The circumstances of his death are uncertain. There is a strong possibility that he poisoned himself, so profoundly was he at odds with the establishment and with the world at large. Nor can murder be discounted. His awkward relationship with the Manchus, primarily due to his opposition to their desire to rule Mongolia, might well have been one reason for his murder. Other suspects included the widow of a local ruler, whom Danzanravjaa is supposed to have insulted. But whether he committed suicide, was murdered or whether he simply succumbed to illness, we will never know. That he was only 53 when he died, however, shows the great loss which Mongolian culture suffered and how much more he could have achieved.

His attendant Balshinchoijoo lived on and took care of Khamar monastery. Before he died, he established a family tradition, called *takhilj*, by which his descendents would preserve the history and achievements of Danzanravjaa and this tradition has survived, through the Communist decades, to the present day.

Despite his love of alcohol, Danzanravjaa continued to make a distinction between mindless and mindful behavior. We should give him the final word:

*Strung out on booze and tobacco,
The world is drunk, it takes no notice.
I'll go my own way –
Will you join with me?*

Note

1. Whereas we know for sure that Danzanravjaa was the author of the works ascribed to him, we cannot in any way be certain which, if any, of those ascribed to the 6th Dalai Lama, are indeed his.

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САЛХИАР ХӨДЛӨГЧ МОД
(TREES MOVED BY THE WIND)

TREES MOVED BY THE WIND

Салхиар хөдлөгч модны
Салаа мөчир найгана
Салж одох сэтгэл минь
Сарны гэрээс илэрхий
Clearer than moonlight.

Хойт хангайд мордовч
Хойших сэтгэл минь үлдэнэ
Ирэх жилийн эсэргэнд
Элгээ дэвтэл нь учирна
Although I've left for the northern Khangai,
My mind remains behind.
Soaked will I be in mockery
For years to come.

Ачитныхаа ачаар учирсан
Лавтай эртнийхээ ерөөлөөр
Төрөл бүхэндээ хөөулаа
Төөпөлдөлгүй жаргаа
Kindness and ancient true prayers
Have brought me benevolence.
Without delusion, all the days of my lives,
May I enjoy them both.

Амгалан сайхны агаарт
Амьдран суух болтугай!
Алаг цэцгийн ёроолд
Амраг сэтгэлээ тайтгаруултугай!
May I live
In the air of peaceful joy.
In the shade of a colorful bloom
May my loving mind be pacified.

У-ҮСГЭЭР ХОЛБОСОН НЬ
(P-OEM)

P-OEM

Уржин Очирдарыгаа
Умарталгүй залбирч
Орчлонгийн улстай
Удаан суухаа мэдэхгүй
Уршгийн туйл ертөнц
Удалбал улам булай бий
Удаан суух шуу санавал
Уужим сэтгэл бэлэрнэ
Уух залгихыг бодсон
Урамгүй орчлон
Уулгамч энхэрийн эсөөр
Уулзаж салах нь хийтэй яа
Учрыг нь эрээд үзвэл
Утгандаа хоосон чанар буй
Уужим ухаант хүнд
Улам шидийн үзэгдэл
Улигт намайгаа гэвэл
Удаан ханилчан ээхүүд минь
Утгат номын чанараар
Удалгүй бурхан болтугай
Padmasambhava of Orgyen, I
Pray to you without respite.
People in this world suffer from
Protracted ignorance.
Paltry results of existence
Proceed apace, if we ignore them.
Protracted thought
Provides the breadth of one's mind with failure.
Pissing it up, you think of gulping down, all
Passion for the world is lost.
Pleasure it is, for sure, to meet the wife who, im-
Pulsive, screams out.
Propriety, when you experience a thing,
Prejudices its quality overmuch.
People with a breadth of understanding, more and more
Perceive what they see to be magic.
Petty nuisance, you might call me –
Plenty of years my mother has loved me.
Buddha I'll be straightaway, by the
Power of meaningful Dharma.

хэмээн У үсгээр холбож Дулгуйтын
хөөгүүн залзуу Рабжаа аашлаа
shaking the mendicant's staff.

ОЛОМГҮЙ БАЛАЙГААР БИШ
(NOT BY INCONCEIVABLE STUPIDITY)

NOT BY INCONCEIVABLE STUPIDITY

Оломгүй балайгаар биш
Орон хүний ядлаар биш
Оролдсон томъёогоор биш
Олиггүй сэтгэл гайхамшил
Очирдар ламынхаа зарлигийг
Огоот хэрэглэлгүй элдвийг загнаад
Ойрынхоо улсад сурхийлсэн
Омтгой зангаа тэвчье бид
Омтгойгүй зарлигийг сонсоод
Олон амьтны аврал болтугай бид
Оорхойт энэ насны явдлыг
Оноож хулгайч мэт бариад
Орчлонд төөрөхгүй болтугай
Not by inconceivable stupidity,
Not by the way of worldly people,
Not by playing around with theories –
This wretched mind, wonderful as it is,
Quite unprepared, scorns the many
Instructions of Lama Vajradhara.
We shall abandon our careless manner,
Cavorting through nearby lands,
And, carefully, we shall follow his advice.
May we be the protector of beings.
A thief imposes his lifestyle,
Grasping here and there; but, unlike him,
May we not go astray in the world.

For further information please visit: <http://danzanravjaa.org>. Nyamgavaa's biographical film *Dogshin Khutaghtin Sakhius (Ferocious Saint Lord of the Gobi)* was released in 1998 while a biography of Danzanravjaa by Michael Kohn is forthcoming. The translation of the first half of the collected poetical works of Danzanravjaa can be accessed online at: <http://www.qamutiik.net/YNT.pdf>.