

Unexpected Actors in the Great Game: The Influence of the Theosophical and the Maha Bodhi Societies on Russian and Buryat Buddhists

Ishihama Yumiko

(Waseda University)

Introduction

In July 1904, with British troops closing in, the Thirteenth Dalai Lama Tubten Gyatso (Thub bstan rgya mtsho, 1876–1933), Tibet's temporal and spiritual ruler, followed the advice of his aide, the Buryat Agvan Dorzhiev (1854–1938), and left Lhasa to move northward to seek Russian support. When he came near the suburbs of Ikh Khüree (present-day Ulaanbaatar), Khambo Lama Iroltuev (1843–1918) was received by the leader of the Buryat Buddhist community. Originally, Iroltuev had hoped to welcome the Dalai Lama in his Transbaikal region, but the Russian authorities, keen on not provoking the Qing 清 Dynasty (1636–1912) during the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905), decided to forbid the Dalai Lama to cross the border. Therefore, Iroltuev was obliged to meet with him close to Ikh Khüree.¹ Regarding the Dalai Lama, he ignored the Qing Dynasty's edicts urging him to return to Tibet and remained in Mongolia, striving to find a way out of his predicament. He was able to take this decision because a large crowd of pilgrims from Mongolia, especially from Buryatia, provided him with wealth and security.²

As my previous articles reveal, by mutually cooperating in supporting the Dalai Lama's journey, Mongolia—including Qinghai, Khalkha, Southern Mongolia, and the Transbaikal region, which had been divided by the Qing and the Russians—gained a sense of unity and several influential local community leaders, who had journeyed along with the Dalai Lama, later became national leaders. This unity led to

¹ For the activities of the Russian authorities regarding the Dalai Lama during this period, see Shaumian 2000: 88–126.

² Wada 2018, 2019.

the revival of the Tibetan Buddhist World, in which the Dalai Lama played a pivotal role. This article intends to demonstrate how the Buryats, who had been under Russian rule since the 1728 Kiakhta Treaty and separated from Tibet and Mongolia since then, chose to support the Dalai Lama in 1904 and became important actors in the revival of the Tibetan Buddhist World.

Through reading *The Theosophist* and *The Maha Bodhi Journal* (MBJ), the diary of Colonel Henry Steel Olcott's (1832–1907) experiences at the Theosophical Society, and the travel account written by Prince Ukhtomskii (1861–1921)—a Russian orientalist who accompanied the Russian Crown Prince Nicholas (1868–1918) during his 1890–1891 Eastern Journey—, together with official Russian documents (ATB, RIO, and RTS), I will first examine how the views of the Theosophical Society and the Maha Bodhi Society in India influenced the St. Petersburg Orientalists to place the Dalai Lama at the center of the spiritual world. Then, I will describe how the Russian Court came to encounter and respect Buryat intellectuals like Peter A. Badmaev (1851–1920), Khambo Lama Iroltuev, and Agvan Dorzhiev, and carefully involved them in its Far Eastern policy, appointing them as Russian agents in Inner Asia and South-East Asia. Furthermore, they shared their knowledge with them, so as to develop Buddhist studies in St. Petersburg. Finally, this paper will demonstrate how the Russian Court's devotion to Buddhism induced Iroltuev, the head of the Buryat community, to meet the Dalai Lama and the Siamese King in person.

*The Dalai Lama and Tibet as seen by the Theosophical
and the Maha Bodhi Societies*

In 1875, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891) and Colonel Henry Steel Olcott founded the Theosophical Society in New York with the intention of establishing a universal religion. They established lodges around the world dedicated to studying Asian religious traditions such as Hinduism and Buddhism as well as occultism. Since Madame Blavatsky attributed her doctrines to the teachings of Tibetan high priests, theosophists regarded “the Grand Lama of Tibet” as the center of the late 19th and early 20th centuries’ spiritual world.³ However, at that time, since the Tibetan government enforced a strict isolation policy, Caucasian explorers—who stand out from Asian people by their looks, never managed to reach Lhasa.⁴ Under such circumstances, the

³ Lopez 1998: chap. 1.

⁴ To get information about Lhasa, British India used natives living in Sikkim and Bengal to infiltrate Lhasa, determine its location, and collect academic and

depiction of Tibet and the Dalai Lama was apt to be highly imaginative.

In 1885, Colonel Olcott and Madame Blavatsky became Buddhists in Ceylon, and the Theosophical Society changed its name to the Buddhist Theosophical Society. On May 31, 1891, Anagarika Dharmapala (1864–1933), Olcott's secretary, founded the Maha Bodhi Society to restore the Buddhist temple where Buddha had been enlightened—in Bodh Gaya—and Olcott was appointed as its president.

The following year, in Darjeeling, known as the gateway to Tibet, Dharmapala performed a symbolic ceremony that is mentioned in an article published in *The Theosophist* in August 1892. On July 11th, Lama Sherap Gyatso [Shes rab rgya mtsho (n.d.)],⁵ the head of Goom [Ghum] Monastery,⁶ left Lhasa Villa, the residence of Sarat Chandra Das [1849–1917],⁷ with the relics of Buddha in hand and Dharmapala in tow. The procession passed through the city of Darjeeling and reached the residence of Rajah Thondup, the chairman of the Darjeeling Maha Bodhi Society. There, the relics' casket was presented by Sherap Gyatso to the Rajah, who handed it to the thirteen-year-old prince of Sikkim, Srid skyong sprul sku rnam rgyal [1879–1914] who later became the king of Sikkim in 1914. The article ends with the following sentence:

Mr. Dharmapala presented one of the relics and Bodhi tree leaf [from Bodh Gaya] to the principal of the Sikkim State Monastery [whose title was "Dewan Phurbu"]; the other three being destined for Tibet. These were to be carried by messenger from Darjeeling all the way to Lhasa, and delivered into the hand of the Grand Lama of Tibet [the Dalai Lama].⁸

This ceremony was probably intended to inform the Thirteenth Dalai Lama of the activities of the Maha Bodhi Society and request him to act as its patron. In fact, until 1906, *The Maha Bodhi Journal* (MBJ) listed the Dalai Lama's name "Lozang THUB-DAN GYA-TCHO, Grand Llama of Tibet" as "Patron" above President Olcott. In other words, for the followers of the Maha Bodhi Society, the spiritual leader of the

geopolitical information about Tibet. These natives were collectively called pundits. See Waller 1990.

⁵ Parentheses indicate synonyms or revisions provided by the author of this paper.

⁶ Sherap Gyatso was the abbot of Ghoom Monastery near Darjeeling up to 1905. According to a personal communication from Ryosuke Kobayashi, he was a Buryat.

⁷ A Bengali pundit who had infiltrated Tibet twice, in 1879 and 1881, and brought back many Sanskrit and Tibetan manuscripts to India.

⁸ "Buddhism at Darjeeling" bylined by F. H. Muller dated July 14 and published in August 1892, see Huber 2008: 284.

Buddhist restoration in India was still the yet-unseen Dalai Lama.

*Prince Ukhtomskii's and Crown Prince Nicholas'
Travels in Asia, 1890–1891*

In the latter half of the 19th century, Buddhism attracted the attention of Western intellectuals. In Russia, Prince Ukhtomskii was renowned as a Buddhist studies specialist. He had studied Buddhism at the Faculty of History and Philosophy at St. Petersburg University and, in 1884, was employed in the Spiritual Affairs Department for Foreign Creeds (Департамент духовных дел иностранных исповеданий) at the Ministry of Internal Affairs. This position enabled him to scrutinize the Tibetan Buddhist community, collect Tibetan Buddhist art and travel through the Transbaikal region, Mongolia and China, from 1886 to 1890. He became known as an expert in Russian Buddhism.⁹

Owing to his reputation as an Orientalist, Ukhtomskii was selected as personal secretary for Crown Prince Nicholas' (1868–1918) Eastern Journey from 1890 to 1891. A few years later, he published a record of the Crown Prince's journey (Ookhtomsky 1900), which provides the Russian Court's view about Asia.

The Crown Prince and his party left Trieste on November 7, 1890, stayed in Egypt from November 22 to December 10, then in India from December 23 to January 12, 1891. During their 32-day stay in India, they visited Buddhist holy sites like Bodh Gaya and the Theosophical Society's headquarter in Adyar near Madras (present-day Chennai). After leaving India, they visited Ceylon (from January 11 to February 11) and Siam (from March 19 to 25) where they had dinner with the Siamese royal family, and went on to Japan (from April 27 to May 19) where Nicholas II was wounded in the Ōtsu Incident.¹⁰ Finally, his party landed in Vladivostok located in the Far East of Russia on May 23. Before returning to St. Petersburg on August 16, the group took a great journey across vast Siberia interacting with Buryat Buddhists living in the Transbaikal region.

The Crown Prince journeyed with a Buddhist expert like Ukhtomskii to India, where Buddha was born, then to Siam, the only Buddhist country that escaped colonization, and finally to Transbaikal, which probably caused the members in the Crown Prince's party to become pro-Buddhist.

⁹ The Ukhtomskii Collection forms the core of the Tibetan Buddhist art collection of the Hermitage Museum today, see Snelling 1993: 47–50.

¹⁰ An unsuccessful assassination attempt on Nicholas on May 11, 1891 during his visit to Japan.

Prince Ukhtomskii's Experience in India

In his travelogue, Ukhtomskii preached Buddhist ideas, asserted that the Indian Aryan Spirit was more homogeneous to Russia than to England, and mourned the fact that India was under the rule of materialistic England. It should be noted that the party had at first been scheduled to visit Darjeeling, overlooking the Himalaya.¹¹ When Ukhtomskii referred to his unfulfilled wish to visit to Darjeeling, he wrote the following fantasy about Russian Buddhists coming from Tibet to greet the future Czar of Russia:

From Calcutta the Cesarewitch intended undertaking (according to the original plan of the journey) a most interesting trip to Darjeeling, a sanitarium in the hills (almost on the borders of Sikkim and Thibet). This is a place which, on account of its majestic beauty and the character of its population, presents an immense artistic and ethnographic interest – an interest the greater for us Russians, in that the dominions of the Dalai Lama, while nominally acknowledging the rule of China, are practically in comparatively close communication with our own Buddhist tribes, who constantly visit the learned monasteries of Thibet, live there for long periods of time, and spread the prestige of the Russian name and the reflection of Russian civilization to some of the most isolated points on the face of the globe. I could see, in my mind's eye, the picture of the Grand Duke's visit to the Indo-Tibetan frontier: amidst the silent and absorbed crowd of Lepchas (the subjects of the Rajah of Sikkim) and Bhotanese, amidst the visitors from Dashilhunbo ([Bkra shis lhun po] the chief religious centre of Southern Thibet) and Lhasa, Buriat and Tungus pilgrims from Baikal regions stand reverently and invisibly greeting their future sovereign.¹²

His fantasy was not completely baseless, because Ukhtomskii was well-aware that the Buryats of Transbaikal had in fact crossed the border into Tibet to study and make pilgrimages. Even if that was the case, this monologue was apparently also convenient for Russian imperialism: Ukhtomskii also argued that Russian Orthodoxy possessed deep spiritual affinities with Buddhism, which would allow Russia's expansion into Asia simply to occur as a "natural fusion", and he strongly opposed conquering Asia by military means.¹³

What made their trip to India even more memorable was that, at the very moment Crown Prince Nicholas's group visited Bodh Gaya, the Maha Bodhi Society was about to be established by Dharmapala.

¹¹ Nicholas's visit to Darjeeling was cancelled due to the illness of his brother, Grand Duke Georgi, see Ookhtomsky 1896: chap. 20, FN 13.

¹² Ookhtomsky 1900: chap. 20: 13.

¹³ Bernstein 2013: 43.

Ukhtomskii looked favorably on this movement as shown below:

Buddha Gaya was now becoming a religious centre in the eyes of the local Theosophical Society and of Buddhists of different nationalities, who dream of building a monastery near the old temple, of opening colleges with theological and philosophical faculties, with an enlightened circle of cosmopolite zealots, the Maha-bodhi Society, with its own periodicals, libraries, and so forth; in fact, to found a whole city, a nursery of faith and knowledge in the spirit of the 'master', aimed at influencing the Brahminised world of India at taking advantage of the schism arising in it, and again leading countless multitudes into the path of the 'hermit prince.'¹⁴

Ukhtomskii was aware this society hoped to posit the Dalai Lama as their leader:

I believe it is desired that the Grand Lama should stand at the head of this intellectual and religious movement. The question, however, is whether Lhasa, self-centred and secluded, can possibly enter into any close relation with the birthplace of Buddhism. The solution of this problem is not without its political aspect.¹⁵

*Prince Ukhtomskii's first encounters
with Col. Olcott, the President of the Maha Bodhi Society*

When Prince Nicholas' party visited the Theosophical Society lodges in Benares, Bodh Gaya, Adyar, and other places, Colonel Olcott was unfortunately away on a trip to Burma. However, on January 11, 1891, Ukhtomskii managed to meet Olcott on a Russian frigate anchored in Colombo, the capital of Ceylon (present Sri Lanka). Olcott described the scene as follows:

There was lying in Colombo harbor at that time a Russian frigate on which the *Cesarewitch*, the present Czar, was making the tour of the world, accompanied by a staff of eminent men. One of these gentlemen, during the Prince's Indian tour, had called at Adyar during my absence in Burma, expressed much interest in Theosophy, and bought some of our books. I was sorry to have missed him, as also the ball at Government House, to which the new Governor, Lord Wenlock,¹⁶ had invited me "to have the honor of meeting His Imperial Highness the Czarewitch". Learning from the Russian Consul at Colombo that some of the Crown Prince's staff would be pleased to make my acquaintance, I went aboard

¹⁴ Ookhtomsky 1900: chap. 23, 60.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Beilby Lawley, 3rd Baron Wenlock (1849–1912), was the Governor of Madras from 1891 to 1896.

the frigate and spent an hour in delightful conversation with Prince Hespère Oukhtomsky, Chief of the Département des Cultes, in the Ministère de l'Intérieur (Chief of the Department of Worship, in the Ministry of the Interior), who was acting as the Prince's Private Secretary on this tour, and Lieutenant N. Crown, of the Navy Department at St. Petersburg, both charming men. I found myself particularly drawn to Prince Oukhtomsky because of his intense interest in Buddhism, which for many years he has made a special study among the Mongolian lamaseries. He has also given much time to the study of other religions. He was good enough to invite me to make the tour of the Buddhist monasteries of Siberia. He asked me for a copy of my Fourteen Propositions, so that he might translate them and circulate them among the Chief Priests of Buddhism throughout the empire. This he has since done.¹⁷

Olcott's and Ukhtomskii's friendly relationship continued after their meeting. In a book review entitled "Prince Ukhtomskii on Tibetan Buddhism and Col. Olcott's work" published in *The Theosophist*, Olcott highly praised Prince Ukhtomskii:

The illustrious Russian gentleman, at once diplomat, scholar and journalist who served as the present Czar of Russia's Private Secretary in his tour around the world, and who is one of the most learned men of the day in Buddhistic literature, has contributed a Preface to the work just published by Dr. Albert Grunwedel at Leipzig.¹⁸

In addition, he also quoted a book review written by Ukhtomskii:

The illustrious American, Col. Olcott, as President of the Theosophical Society, has for years energetically followed the plan of finding the links of the spiritual chain which binds together the countries in which Buddha is honored as a God. He travelled over Asia, made himself acquainted with the leading native Priests, and then composed a kind of creed for the Buddhists of the whole world. All things unessential and conventional, all things narrowly national and purely casual therein

¹⁷ Olcott 1910: Fourth Series (1887–1892), Chap. XVI, 288. The Fourteen Propositions is a set of doctrines that Olcott extracted from the diverse Buddhist thoughts for followers of Southern and Northern Buddhism, i.e., Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism, to be in solidarity with each other. In the article entitled "A United Buddhist World" (*The Theosophist*, January 1892), Olcott described how he met with high priests in Burma, Ceylon, Japan, and Chittagong, preaching his catechism, responding to their criticism and appealing to their brotherly love. Eventually, he had them accept this catechism. In a subsequent article entitled "Fundamental Buddhist Beliefs," the catechism's fourteen articles also listed the names of signatories from Japan, Burma, Ceylon, and Chittagong (*The Theosophist*, January 1892: 239–240).

¹⁸ This refers to Albert Grünwedel's *Mythologie des Buddhismus in Tibet und der Mongolei*, explaining Ukhtomskii's collection, *The Theosophist*, October 1900: 54–55.

were put aside.

Buddhism is ever ready to accept and assimilate into the forms of its cult all possible other forms and even rites, if they do not influence its central idea: the conception of the 'divine' Teacher! (i.e. Buddha) and the ways, shown by Him, which lead unto self-perfection, in connection with the bidding of the Master to gradually acquaint all beings with the 'Doctrine' by the following of which they can finally free themselves from re-birth and the sufferings connected with it. Only the essential part of the 'Doctrine' should be accepted as to this creed [...].

In Japan, Burma, Chittagong and Ceylon Colonel Olcott's platform of the Fourteen Fundamental Propositions has already been accepted. It remains to be seen how far Colonel Olcott's efforts in connection with the solidification of the spiritual ties between the Buddhist peoples in Indo-China, in Central China, in Korea and in Tibet will work.¹⁹

The fact that Olcott used the same adjective—"illustrious"—to praise Ukhtomskii as the one the latter had once eulogized the former with, goes to show that Olcott felt a strong bond with Ukhtomskii through their shared passion for the revival of Buddhism.

From the conversations with Ukhtomskii and from Russian newspapers, Olcott learnt there existed in Russia a group of Buddhists called Buryats and that their head was highly respected by Russian intellectuals. In his article entitled "Buddhism in Siberia," published in *The Theosophist*, Olcott quoted the article in *St. Petersburg Magazine* that praised D. G. Gomboeff (n.d.), the then Khambo Lama of the Transbaikalian districts, and remembered Ukhtomskii had referred to him when they met at Colombo:

He is a man with a good deal of tolerance for every other religion with broad view and great intellectual development [...]. Besides a perfect knowledge of Mongolian and Tibetan literature, D. Gomboeff possessed also the knowledge of the ancient Pali language [...]. I think this Hambo-Lama must be the very man about whom Prince Ouchtomsky [...] told me when we met at Colombo. He spoke of him as an enlightened and very admirable monk, showed me his photograph [...].²⁰

*The Russian Court's Interactions
with Prominent Buryat Buddhists (from 1891)*

Prince Nicholas came face to face with Siberian Buddhists during the final leg of his world tour in 1891: one week after their arrival at Vladivostok, Prince Nicholas participated in the groundbreaking ceremony held for the Trans-Siberian Railway, a symbol of the Russian

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ *The Theosophist* April 1892: vol. XIII, no. 7, 441.

Empire's expansion into the Far East.²¹ His party left Vladivostok on May 20 and on June 10 (22 in the Julian calendar) arrived in the Transbaikalian region, where the Buryat community's leading figures had an audience with Nicholas.²²

Actually, Ukhtomskii seemed to set great store by Buryatia. Indeed, he devoted a considerable number of pages and illustrations to the region in his travelogue.²³ He also inserted illustrations of it into descriptions of China, then unrelated to Buryatia.²⁴

The Buryats' encounters with Prince Nicholas' party opened up a new era when Buryat people started to play an active role at the Russian Court.

The Buryat Iroltuev had an audience with the Crown Prince at the Shulutskii datsan (Шулутский дацан) in Buryatia in 1891. As Nicholas was interested in Tibetan medicine, Ukhtomskii took Iroltuev to St. Petersburg in 1895 and appointed him nurse to the royal family and nobility. In the same year, Iroltuev was elevated to the rank of Khambo Lama by the Russian authorities.²⁵ In 1896, Iroltuev became the first Buryat to officially participate in a Russian Czar's coronation²⁶ and, the next year, he was awarded the Order of St. Stanislav III.²⁷

The reason why Buddhists such as Iroltuev were accepted in St. Petersburg was largely due to the fact that St. Petersburg boasted the most prominent group of Buddhist studies specialists, later known as the St. Petersburg school of Buddhist studies. It included Fedor

²¹ Ookhtomsky 1900: chap. 39, 474.

²² For the dates see *ibid.*, 477 and 478. The National Museum of the Republic of Buryatia (Национальный музей Республики Бурятия) has a group photo dated June 17, in which Prince Nicholas was surrounded by Buryats, see *Министерство культуры российской федерации* [Ministerstvo kul'tury rossiiskoi federatsii / Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation] 2012: 23. This reference refers to the program of a cultural exhibition held in conjunction with APEC in Vladivostok in 2012.

²³ The captions of these illustrations are "Buriat Women," "Buriat Tent with Altar and Royal Seat, presented to the Cesarewitch," "Chief Lama of the Buriyats." (Gomboev's picture), "Actors in the Buriat 'Tsam' i.e. Religious Dance," "Mystic Dance of Lamaïtes" and "Buriat School-Children", Ookhtomsky 1900: 497–510.

²⁴ The captions of illustrations inserted into accounts of China are "Lamaserei (Buddhist Clergy House) from a Tibetan Picture," "Buriat Lama," "Amazones in Transbaikalia," "Kalmuck Lama," "Buriats," photographs of Tibetan Buddhist bronze sculptures, "Lama Country," "Pilgrims on the way to Lhasa," "Greeting with Hadaks (Khata)," "Exterior of Temple of Lamas," "Lama Monastery in Eastern Siberia" and "Chief Lama-God of Mongolia, i.e., the Eighth Jebtsundamba Khutugtu", Ookhtomsky 1900: 325–345.

²⁵ Чимитдоржин Д.Г. [Chimitdorzhin D. G.] 2010: 91–98.

²⁶ Tsyrempilov 2022: 203–228.

²⁷ This Order's certificate is on display at the Museum of the History of Buryatia.

Shcherbatskoi (1866–1942) and Sergei Oldenburg (1888–1940), who were roughly the same generation as Ukhtomskii and, like him, had been trained in St. Petersburg. They also trained Buryat intellectuals like Gombozhab Ts. Tsybikov (1873–1930) and Bazar B. Baradin (1878–1937) at St. Petersburg University, both of whom conducted a field survey in Tibet and Amdo (Amdo, northeastern Tibet) in the early 20th century and wrote ethnographies.²⁸ These Buryat intellectuals are now honored in the Republic of Buryatia as founder of Buryat national identity through Buddhism.

*Badmaev's Involvement in Russia's Northeastern
and Central Asia Policy*

Buryat intellectuals not only contributed to the development of Buddhist studies in Russia, but also to the Russian Empire's Northeastern and Central Asia Policy. The Buryat, Petr A. Badmaev (1851–1920), an expert in Tibetan medicine and an official in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Asian Department, presented his Northeastern and Central Asian policy guidelines to Alexander III (1845–1894) in February 1893. His plan was as follows: the Russian authorities were to give money and goods to Buryat merchants who traded with Tibetan and Mongol people, then make them to spread anti-Qing and pro-Russian propaganda, and finally incite Tibetan and Mongol people to lead an uprising against the Qing Dynasty. Moreover, Badmaev proposed that the Trans-Siberian Railway was to be extended to Lanzhou 蘭州, in the Amdo Tibetan region, an important strategic point for Tibetan Buddhists.²⁹ Badmaev's aim was that Mongol, Tibetan, and Chinese nobles and high priests would spontaneously pay a solemn visit to St. Petersburg and eventually submit to Russia. When his ambitious proposal had been approved by the Czar and Finance Minister Sergei Witte (1849–1915), two million rubles were handed out from the National Treasury. Badmaev established a trading house in Chita (Чита, on the Trans-Siberian Railway route) and opened nine post offices along the road between Kiakhta and Ikh Khüree in June 1895.³⁰

Badmaev's ambitious plan was probably adopted by the Russian authorities as a means of countering the Pundit Project set up by the British in India, which involved recruiting agents from Sikkim and

²⁸ Bernstein 2013: 34–60.

²⁹ Labrang Monastery (Bla brang bkra shis 'khyil), where many Buryats went to study Tibetan Buddhism and went on pilgrimage, is close to Lanzhou.

³⁰ See ATB: 49–75 for documentary sources and Андреев А.И. [Andreev A. I.] 2006: 70–75.

Bengal and sending them to Tibet to gather information. Possibly, the Russians used the same method to obtain information and sent Buryats into Tibetan territory. Moreover, at that time the Russians dreaded Tibet might fall into British hands, just as Sikkim, a country adjacent to Tibet, had recently done (in 1890).

Eventually Badmaev's project was forced to stop, because in the mid-1890s the Russian Empire, wary of Japan's emergence, shifted its interest from Central Asia to the Far East. But it had already achieved great results. Buryat agents, disguised as pilgrims sent on a mission by Badmaev to Tibet, succeeded in contacting a Buryat who was close to the Dalai Lama.

In the spring of 1895, two Buryats, Ochir Zhiguzitov and Dugar Vantinov, who had been sent to Lhasa by Badmaev, realized that many of their compatriots had studied and settled there. Among them, Dorzhiev had risen to become the debate partner (*mtshan zhabs*) of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama himself. In 1898, Dorzhiev, on his way back home from Tibet to Buryatia, reached Tianjin 天津, where Ukhtomskii summoned him to St. Petersburg and organized his audience with Nicholas II. Thus, the Russian Court had secured someone who had access to the Thirteenth Dalai Lama's Court, ahead of British India.³¹

The Russian's Court Encounter with Siam (1891–1900)

On his 1891 world tour, Prince Nicholas stopped at Bangkok, the capital of Siam, and on March 9 (20 in the Julian calendar), had dinner with King Chulalongkorn (1853–1910) and his family.³² Since the King of Siam was trying to win over Russia to prevent Britain and France from invading his country, the relationship between Siam and Russia had developed smoothly. For a start, Siamese Prince Vajiravudh (1881–1925), Siam's future king, attended the coronation of Nicholas II in 1896, and King Chulalongkorn himself visited St. Petersburg and on June 15, 1897, established official diplomatic relations between Russia and Siam. In the following year, Prince Chakrabongse Bhuvanath (1883–1920) went to Russia to study military affairs.

Prince Ukhtomskii's New Encounter with Col. Olcott at Colombo

The coronation of Nicholas II (1896) also set the stage for another important bilateral relationship. At that time, Li Hongzhang 李鴻章 (1823–1901), the delegate of the Qing Dynasty, and the Russian foreign

³¹ Андreeв А.И. [Andreev A. I.] 2006: 76–105.

³² Ookhtomsky 1900: chap. 30, 224.

minister concluded on June 3 a secret Russo-Chinese pact in St. Petersburg, meant to resist Japan's territorial expansion. With this pact, Russia obtained the right to build a railroad from Chita to Vladivostok through Qing territory—later known as the Eastern Qing Railway (*Dong Qing tiedao* 東清鐵道). In the process of implementing this secret agreement, Ukhtomskii was appointed as president of the Eastern Qing Railway and went to China. On his way to China, he met with Olcott at Colombo, in Sri Lanka, for the second time, just before King Chulalongkorn's visit to St. Petersburg.

According to the April 23, 1897 entry in Olcott's diary, this meeting was arranged at his own request and was completely non-political. Olcott spent the whole day with Ukhtomskii, and the latter left Sri Lanka later. He took him to the Kotahena Temple to see Jinawarawansa (1851–1935), a Siamese princely priest, to Mrs. Musæus Higgins, and to the Sanghamitta Girls' School, before visiting Sumangala, the Maha Bodhi Society's president. Olcott got along well with Ukhtomskii's aide, Prince Wolkonskii (1860–1937), because Wolkonskii's aunt had been acquainted with Blavatsky in 1884. Ukhtomskii was so delighted that he gave Olcott a cordial invitation to make the grand tour with him and personally discuss with the chief priests the resemblances and differences between Northern and Southern Buddhism.³³

Here, it is worth noting that Jinawarawansa was on Olcott's side. Jinawarawansa, alias Prince Prisdang (1851–1935), a grandson of Rama III (1787–1851), had submitted to King Chulalongkorn a reform proposal to modernize his country, but it had incurred the King's wrath, resulting in the King banning him from his country. The previous year (1896), the Prince had become a Buddhist monk in Ceylon and changed his name to Jinawarawansa.

*The Distribution of Buddha Relics Tightening Russia's
and Siam's Relations*

On January 20, 1898, one year after Ukhtomskii and Olcott had met, William Claxton Peppé (1852–1936), a British engineer, excavated Buddha's remains from a stupa dating back to King Ashoka's era (268 B.C.–232 B.C.), at Piprahwa, near the Nepalese border. Jinawarawansa heard about this discovery while on pilgrimage and paid Peppé a visit. He advised him these holy relics should not be treated merely as "things" but as objects of worship and that it would be appropriate to offer them to the Buddhist King Chulalongkorn, so that Buddhists around the world could worship them. British India, though

³³ Olcott 1935: vol. 6, chap. 11, 177–180.

uncooperative with the Maha Bodhi Society's activity but out of consideration for Hindus, accepted this proposal to ease Buddhist feelings. Buddha's remains were offered to King Chulalongkorn.³⁴

Since the Maha Bodhi Society had not yet succeeded in achieving their goal of building a Buddhist temple in Bodh Gaya because of the resistance of Mahant, the Hindu landowner of Bodh Gaya,³⁵ the Buddhist revival movement had already lost momentum at that time. However, this century's discovery re-energized Buddhist solidarity.

On December 16, 1899, the remains were handed over to Phraya Sukhum Naiwinit, governor of Nakhon Si Thammarat Province, at Gorakhpur, India. After welcoming celebrations at various places, like Phatthalung and Songkhla in Siam, on March 16, the remains reached the mouth of the Chao Phraya River near Bangkok. Since British India requested the Buddha relics to be distributed to Buddhist countries under British rule at that time, on January 9, 1900, King Chulalongkorn presented the Buddha relics to delegates from Ceylon and Burma at Wat Pho (Bangkok). However, prior to this offering, King Chulalongkorn voluntarily sent some of the remains to Russian Buddhists.³⁶

In fact, already in 1899 Ukhtomskii asked the Siamese Prince Chakrabongse, who was in Russia to learn about military affairs, to confer the Buddha relics to Russian Buddhists. Chakrabongse returned to Bangkok on July 1 and on August 23 took the remains to St. Petersburg. Why were Buddha's remains conferred to the Russian Buddhists before to anyone else? Hypothetically, in accordance with the June 23, 1899 Russian-Siamese Friendship Treaty between Nicholas II and King Chulalongkorn, the latter intended to create a friendly relationship between the two countries. Out of consideration for British India, this gift was kept secret till February 26, 1900. Then, on March 4, sixty Russian Buddhists, almost all Buryats, including two Kalmyks and four lamas led by Ukhtomskii, publicly received the relics from Prince Chakrabongse.³⁷

Undoubtedly, Ukhtomskii's deep knowledge of Buddhism contributed to fostering their friendship.

Khambo Lama Iroltuev's Pilgrimage to India (1900–1901)

All those events, the growing friendship between Ukhtomskii and Olcott, the success of Buryat intellectuals at the Russian Court, the

³⁴ Murashima 2022 provides detailed information about this gift based on Siamese archives.

³⁵ Togawa 2016.

³⁶ Murashima 2022: 216.

³⁷ Ibid., 225.

establishment of diplomatic relations between Russia and Siam, and the distribution of Buddha relics to Russia all contributed to Khambo Lama Iroltuev eventually making a pilgrimage to India and Siam. Through his contacts with intellectuals in St. Petersburg, Iroltuev must have been aware that Buddha was also a historical figure and, as a Buddhist, he naturally wished to go on a pilgrimage to India, Buddha's birthplace.

Iroltuev's itinerary was as follows: on December 16 (29), 1900, he landed in Colombo and arrived in Calcutta on February 7, 1901. And on February 11, he started his pilgrimage to the holy land.³⁸ After visiting holy sites like Rajgir, Bodh Gaya, Varanasi, Shravasti, Kapilavastu, Lumphini, Kushinagar and Vaishali, on March 13, Iroltuev left Calcutta for Bangkok to express his gratitude for the receipt of Buddha's remains, and then travelled back to his native Siberia, via Japan.³⁹

The original travel plans provided he was to go to Tibet to meet the Dalai Lama, but as we will see below, he had to abandon this project to avoid suspicions on the part of British India.⁴⁰

European Orientalists Supporting Khambo Lama Iroltuev's Pilgrimage

According to the article "The Great Llama of Eastern Siberia," published in *The Maha-Bodhi Journal*, in May 1901 Iroltuev had enlisted the help of European Orientalists to make his pilgrimage into British India. It says:

Grand Lama's Sanskrit name is Vagendra Dharmadhara. He is the head of the Buriat Buddhists of Eastern Siberia, and the Chief of 15,000 Buddhists monks, and he is known as a scholar and esteemed by Orientalists like Professors Sergius d'Oldenbourg and Sylvan Lévi of St. Petersburg and Paris. In London he met Mr. Tawney, Librarian of the India Office.⁴¹

Vagendra Dharmadhara is the Sanskrit translation of Iroltuev's Tibetan name, Ngawang Chozin (Ngag dbang chos 'dzin). Oldenburg and Sylvain Lévi (1863–1935) were then leading orientalists and Charles Henry Tawney (1837–1922) was an English Sanskrit scholar. The Mongolian Institute of Buddhism and Tibetology (Институт Монголоведения Буддологии и Тибетологии) in Verkhneudinsk (modern Ulan-Ude, Buryatia) keeps a letter from Tawney to a man

³⁸ RTS, paragraphs no. 37 and 50.

³⁹ Iroltuev's arrival date at Calcutta is based on MBJ, March 1901: 103; all other dates are based on MBJ, May 1901: 5.

⁴⁰ RTS, no. 50, December 22, 1900.

⁴¹ MBJ, May 1901, 5.

named Maheja asking to support Iroltuev's pilgrimage to Buddhist sites.⁴²

According to *The Maha Bodhi Journal*, before starting for India via Turkey and Ceylon, Iroltuev travelled to St. Petersburg, then to Germany, France, and England, and again returned to Russia⁴³ carrying with him several introduction letters from Paris and London.⁴⁴ This implies Iroltuev had carefully prepared his pilgrimage to India by travelling first around European countries to collect letters of introduction from leading Orientalists like Tawney, Oldenburg, and Lévi.

From the latter part of the above-mentioned article, we learn that Iroltuev had also taken the initiative of getting portions of Buddha relics from the Siamese King and that he wanted to visit Siam to thank the Siamese King for his gift:

The relics of His body, discovered in the Nepal Terai a few years ago, were presented by British Indian Government to the King of Siam, who had them distributed in small portions to the Buddhists of Burma, Ceylon, Japan, and of Eastern Siberia. The Grand Lama (Iroltuev), having read in the Russian newspaper reports of the distribution, sent a deputation to the Prince of Siam, who was then in St. Petersburg. The young prince communicated the matter to his royal father, the king who graciously sent a portion of the sacred relics to the Grand Lama, who is now on a friendly visit to the King of Siam.⁴⁵

Moreover, the following article reveals that Iroltuev preferred to be hosted by the Maha Bodhi Society rather than by the French Consul:

In Russia he (Iroltuev) had heard of the Maha-Bodhi Society,⁴⁶ and when he arrived in Calcutta on the 7th of February, Priest Sumedhankara, Mr. Narendra Nath Sen and Anagarika Dharmapala were waiting at the dock to receive him. The French Consul with his Russian interpreter was also waiting to receive him; but the Grand Lama preferred to accept the

⁴² "INDIA OFFICE WHITEHALL. S.W." is stamped on the front of the envelope. The telegram is dated September 28, 1900. Its contents is as follows: My dear Maheja / I take the / liberty of introducing to /you the Right Revence / Khambo-Lama (Bishop)/ of the Burjats - Vag-indra-Dharmadhara / He is going / on a pilgrimage to /(sic.), and Buddha/Gaya - Please help /him if you can.

⁴³ MBJ, March 1901, 102.

⁴⁴ The letter from Oldenburg to Iroltuev containing the information from Sylvain Lévi was included in Russian official documents. The official documents related to Iroltuev's Indian pilgrimage are kept in the RTS and RIO, RTS no. 50, December 22, 1900 and RTS no. 56.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 102–103.

⁴⁶ A possible source from which Iroltuev received information about the Mahabodhi Society is through the *St. Petersburg Vedomosti* (Санкт-Петербургские ведомости), an influential newspaper at that time, which was edited and published by Ukhtomskii.

hospitality of the Maha-Bodhi Society. Messers, Narendra Nath Sen and Neel Komal Mookherjee have shown the Grand Lama extreme cordiality during his sojourn in Calcutta. He is visiting the sacred sites and is expected in Calcutta shortly.⁴⁷

According to the report from Vasili Klemm (1861–1938), the Russian Consul in Bombay, to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Iroltuev had been given a room in the Maha Bodhi Society's building in Calcutta.⁴⁸ In other words, Iroltuev entertained a good relationship with the Maha Bodhi Society members in India.

Iroltuev's Pilgrimage from the Perspective of the Maha Bodhi Society

From the Maha Bodhi Society's perspective, Iroltuev's pilgrimage meant a great deal as evidenced here:

Since the formation of the Maha-Bodhi Society, Buddha-Gaya is being visited regularly by pilgrims from Burma, China, Japan, and Ceylon. The present visit of the Grand Lama of Eastern Siberia as a pilgrim to the Indian Buddhists shrines is an indication of the sympathy that exists between Russia and England. [...] The visit of the Grand Lama is indeed significant, since it shows the strong attachment the Buddhists of Siberia have for the holy land of the Buddhists. There have been other Indian religious Teachers, yet they were little known outside Indian territory; but the glorified name of Sakya Muni is revered by millions upon millions of people outside India. The closing year of the nineteenth century has brought the Buddhist nations of Ceylon, Japan, Burma, Siam, and Siberia together; and the cord that binds them is the unparalleled life of the great Teacher (Sakyamuni) who was born in Kapilavastu about 25 centuries ago.⁴⁹

The next month, the Maha Bodhi Society declared the following to their subscribers and friends:

For the first time in the history of modern Buddhism, within a period of thousand years, an attempt is being made to propagate the sweet and sublime doctrine of the Tathagato in non-Buddhist countries by the Maha-Bodhi Society. Ceylon, Burma, Siam, Japan, Tibet, and Arakan have all taken a share in the work of the Society, hitherto ignored and forgotten, has been added to the Maha-Bodhi map---Eastern Siberia. The

⁴⁷ MBJ, March 1901, 103; Little is known about Sumedankara and Narendra. Neel Comal Mookerjee was a close friend of Dharmapala, a Bengali who settled in Calcutta. He was the first person who supported Dharmapala's movement, see <https://mbsiindia.org/babu-neel-comul-mukherji/>.

⁴⁸ RIO, No. 37, dated February 19, 1901.

⁴⁹ MBJ, March 1901: 102.

visit of the Grand Lama to our holy land is full of significance.⁵⁰

This declaration shows that Olcott regarded Iroltuev as the Russian Buddhists' representative and thought that the Society's activities had spread to Russia.

In the same issue, another article entitled "Maha Bodhi Dharamashala" gave an estimate of a pilgrimage lodge (dharamshala) under construction that should serve as a base for pilgrims visiting Bodh Gaya.⁵¹ Until then Buddhist pilgrims visiting Bodh Gaya had stayed at the cramped lodge built in 1877 by King Mindon Min of Burma (1808–1878). As the number of pilgrims in Bodh Gaya increased due to the Maha Bodhi Society's activities, Mahant, a Hindu landowner in Bodh Gaya, appealed to the Indian government to remove Ceylonese monks from the pilgrimage lodge. As soon as the order that met Mahant's wish was issued on April 9, 1896, Buddhist countries like Burma and Japan at once protested against it, claiming it to be a case of religious oppression. Then, the Indian government withdrew it. In view of this situation, the Buddhists planned to build a new pilgrimage lodge.⁵²

Dharmapala tried to involve the Russian government in this construction project. In his letter dated May 14 to Klemm, the Russian consul in Bombay, he requested Russian financial support, arguing it was necessary to build rooms dedicated to future Russian Buddhists coming from Siberia.⁵³ According to the May 22, 1901 report from Russian Consul Klemm to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in St. Petersburg, Klemm replied to Dharmapala that "Siberia is so remote that many pilgrims would not come to India anyway, so let us wait and see what happens." He then voiced his own thoughts: "if we make a small donation towards this lodge, the Buddhists would be pleased since the Maha Bodhi Society has great influence on Indian Buddhists, but the British Indian government would be suspicious of it."⁵⁴

Since the Russian consuls prohibited Iroltuev from participating in assemblies of the Maha Bodhi Society, Olcott was unable to meet with Iroltuev face-to-face. In an undated letter from Olcott to Iroltuev, he expressed his wish to have met with Iroltuev, described his mission as "integrating diverse Buddhism from all over the world," and suggested they continued to cooperate with each other and keep in touch, beyond the language barrier, through their mutual friends, Prince Ukhtomskii and Shcherbachev. Besides, he praised Iroltuev's

⁵⁰ MBJ, April 1901: 118.

⁵¹ Ibid., 119–120.

⁵² About the pilgrimage lodges, see Togawa 2016.

⁵³ RIO, no. 38.

⁵⁴ RIO, no. 39.

education compared to Theravada Buddhist monks.⁵⁵

After Iroltuev left India, the Maha Bodhi Journal again published an article titled "The Great Lama of Eastern Siberia." In this article, Iroltuev expressed his sorrow at seeing Mahant's servants killing animals as offerings in the holy land, and his discomfort at being prevented from making a pilgrimage to Nepal while having to be under constant surveillance.⁵⁶

*Khambo Lama Iroltuev's Desire to Go to Tibet and the Russian Diplomacy:
Fear of British India's Reaction*

In contrast to Olcott and Dharmapala, who welcomed Iroltuev's pilgrimage as an attempt to unify the Buddhist community, the Russian Consulate in India was puzzled by his appearance. The reason is that on September 30, about three months before Iroltuev's arrival at Colombo, the then capital of crown colony British Ceylon, Dorzhiev, one of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama's close aides, had for the second time an audience with Nicholas II at the Livadia Palace in Yalta. At that time, British India had tried to contact the Dalai Lama on numerous occasions to ask him to implement the treaty related to the border between Sikkim and Tibet, in vain.⁵⁷ Therefore, the news that Dorzhiev had contacted the Russian Czar caused Britain to stiffen.⁵⁸ Furthermore, if Iroltuev, the Russian Buddhists' representative, contacted the Dalai Lama, Britain would certainly become even more hostile towards Russia.

Based on the report from Vice-Consul Schneider to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, dated January 6, 1901, the Russian consuls laid bare their distrust of Iroltuev. In short, since it was unclear whether Iroltuev would act in Russia's national interest, the Russian consul had him put up not at a hotel but at a wealthy Parsi's house and he put him under the surveillance of the consulate agent (консульского агента), named Shcherbachev, in order to prevent him as much as possible from contacting the British. Moreover, Schneider told Iroltuev how the British exploited and hated the locals and made him believe that Russians were better than the British. In his report, Schneider said that he finally

⁵⁵ RTS, no. 55. Shcherbachev was an agent and interpreter provided by the consulate.

⁵⁶ MBJ, May 1901: 4–5. This article was translated into Russian and sent to Russia by the Consulate, see RIO, no. 40.

⁵⁷ The Convention between Great Britain and China Relating to Sikkim and Tibet, signed in 1890. The convention recognized a British protectorate over Sikkim and demarcated the Sikkim-Tibet border.

⁵⁸ This news provoked Britain and led to the Anglo-Indian invasion of Lhasa in 1904 (Younghusband [1910] 1985: 67–68). It also shook Japan which was in a tense relationship with Russia since the Triple Intervention (*Sangoku Kanshō* 三国干涉) and prompted Narita Yasuteru to enter Lhasa in November 1901, see Ishihama and Wada 2020: 5.

won Iroltuev's "trust," but he didn't forget to add a few words: "Like all Asians, you cannot completely trust a lama who tells only half the truth" and "Buddhists in the region, incited by Olcott, welcomed Iroltuev, but he was not sent by the government, but an individual, and we banned him from participating in celebrations and speeches."⁵⁹ Furthermore, Oldenburg's letter warned Iroltuev that "it would be impossible for him to go to Tibet because the British were afraid of Dorzhiev, and that if he tried to go to Tibet under disguise, the British would suspect he would do so with a bad purpose." Consequently, Iroltuev's trip to Tibet was cancelled.⁶⁰

The Russian Consulate did not trust Iroltuev as a Russian citizen at all, nor did it respect Iroltuev's actions as a Buddhist because of political considerations.

Conclusion

The Theosophist and Maha Bodhi Societies contributed to the revival of Buddhism in India and brought northern and southern Buddhism close together and spread the importance of the Dalai Lama among his followers.

First, Prince Ukhtomskii, a Russian expert on Buddhism witnessed the beginning of the Maha Bodhi movement in India during Prince Nicholas' world tour and through face-to-face exchanges with Col. Olcott, the president of the Maha Bodhi Society, they shared their passion for the revival of Buddhism. Second, during the final leg of his world tour, Prince Nicholas's encounter with Buryats paved the way for Buryat intellectuals like Khambo Lama Iroltuev, Dorzhiev, and Badmaev to play an active role within the Russian Court. Third, when Russia established diplomatic relations with Siam, thanks to Jinawarawansa, the Siamese princely priest, who was a friend of Col. Olcott and of Prince Ukhtomskii, Buddha relics that had been excavated in India and owned by King Chulalongkorn, were presented to Russian Buddhists earlier than to any other country.

During this process, Iroltuev, the head of the Buryat Buddhist community learned of the revival of Buddhism in India and began to hope to make a pilgrimage to Buddhist sites and to meet the Dalai Lama and the Siamese King in person. With the help of European Orientalists, Iroltuev completed his pilgrimage to India and Siam in 1901.

Prince Ukhtomskii believed that the people from the Transbaikalian region would naturally fuse with the Russian Empire because Russian Orthodoxy was homogeneous with Buddhism, but the Russian

⁵⁹ RTS, no. 54.

⁶⁰ RTS, no. 56.

consulate viewed Iroltuev's behavior with suspicion. Ukhtomskii's way of thinking was not something that had permeated all Russians. The same is true for the Buryats. No matter how much Russian people glorified the Russian emperor, the Dalai Lama was the more attractive icon to Buryats. Therefore, when the Thirteenth Dalai Lama appeared in Mongolia with Dorzhiev in 1904, Khambo Lama Iroltuev and other Buryats rushed across the border towards the Dalai Lama like a dam that lets go.

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