Project 504RAS4001

Cultural Survival and Revival in the Buddhist Sangha
Documentation, Education and Training to Revitalize Traditional Decorative Arts and Building Crafts in the Buddhist Temples of Asia:
MONGOLIA PROGRAM

Project Mission Report February/March 2006
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Key resource persons met during mission:
Dr. Norov Urtnasan, Secretary General, Mongolian National Commission for UNESCO
Ms Luvsanjalbuu Munkhzul, Culture Programme Specialist, MNCU
Professor Jamiyan Batsuuri, President, Kharakhorum University
Ven. Lama Davaa Khishigt, head monk Erdene Zuu monastery, head of the Dambaravjaalin Foundation
Mr. Sharhuu, engineer
Ms Myagmasuren, teacher
1 Introduction

Within the framework of the Norway-funded project “Cultural Survival and Revival in the Buddhist Sangha: Documentation, Education and Training to Revitalize Traditional Decorative Arts and Building Crafts in the Buddhist Temples of Asia”, under the authority of the Director of the UNESCO Bangkok Office and the direct supervision of the Regional Advisor for Culture in Asia and the Pacific (RACAP), a local project was launched in Mongolia. The Dambaravjaalin Foundation of Erdene Zuu Monastery was contracted (reference AC05-092 / SAP.3240075587) to carry out a range of activities based in the Orkhon valley. The Orkhon valley is a World Heritage Site, and includes Mongolia’s oldest monastery, Erdene Zuu, as well the ruins of the 13th century capital of the Mongolian empire under Chinggis Khan.

For the third project implementation cycle, which preceded the March 2006 mission, the relevant activities included:

- awareness-raising training in remote Buddhist monasteries
- identification of 20 trainees
- preparation of text books and training materials
- video documentation
- conducting a three-month training course in traditional Buddhist decorative arts and building crafts

Tibet Heritage Fund (THF) is an international NGO that has specialized in the preservation of traditional settlements and cultural monuments in the wider cultural region influenced by Tibetan culture (China, India, Mongolia). Since 2002 THF has conducted a survey of the most important Buddhist monuments of both Inner Mongolia Province in China and the Mongolian Republic, and in 2004 began with the community-based restoration of Sangiin Dalai monastery in South-Gobi province. In 2006 THF published the bilingual (Mongolian and English) "Manual of Traditional Mongolian Architecture".

THF was asked to serve as mentor for the project site in Orkhon valley.

Our brief was two-fold:

- meeting with the Local Project Steering Committee for further discussions
- examine and evaluate the project activities and outcomes, with a particular focus on the quality of training and skills acquired by the trainees and the quality of and progress made on the documentation of traditional decorative Buddhist arts and building crafts

The THF Mission team consisted of:

Pimpim de Azevedo (Portugal), THF co-director
Danilo Thiedemann (Germany), carpenter
André Alexander (Germany), THF co-director
2 Meetings in Ulaanbaatar

On March 29 we visited the Mongolian National Commission for UNESCO (MNCU) and had a long discussion with Dr. Norov Urtanasan, the Secretary General, and Ms Luvsanjalbhuu Munkhzul, Culture Programme Specialist. Dr. Urtanasan explained the activities so far, and we finalized the modalities of the mission visit, as well as discussing further cooperation. We also spoke about some of the challenges regarding conservation work in Mongolia. Dr. Urtanasan expressed interest to visit the Sangiin Dalai project site sometime in the future, and requested to make use of copies of THF’s publication on traditional Mongolian architecture for the training program.

During the discussions, we were informed about the Sangha project contents, and were given the list of people that we would be able to meet during the time of the mission. We then talked about the status of Mongolia’s historic monuments, and discussed a number of Mongolia’s historic sites, including those which had sent participants to the training program. We learnt about the efforts of the local team to visit many of the country’s remote sites, giving presentations about the project’s contents and aims, and identifying participants of the training program.
3 Site visit to Kharakhorum university and Erdene Zuu monastery

On April 3 there was an early departure to Kharakhorum town. The THF team was joined by Dr. Urtnasan and engineer Mr. Sharhuu. We arrived at Kharakhorum in the early afternoon and found accommodation in a camp of traditional ger (Mongolian tent) accommodation. On arrival we were joined by Professor Batsuuri, president of Kharakhorum university and Ven. Davaa Khishigt, head monk of Erdene Zuu monastery and head of the Dambaravjaalin Foundation, completing the Local Project Steering Committee. After an introduction and a brief discussion, we began visiting all the sites relevant to the project. The first visit was to a local landmark, a giant stone lingam (see illustration). It is located on a hillside facing a mountain shaped like a part of female anatomy. The object was reportedly placed here by a senior Erdene Zuu monk in order to prevent monks leaving the monastery due to female attractions. Since then, it has become a place of pilgrimage for local people wishing to have children. A recent case of theft of the artifact prompted the authorities to erect a metal fence around the object, somewhat spoiling the natural setting. Since then, proper safeguarding of cultural relics has become an issue of local discussion.
Erdene Zuu, Mongolia’s oldest monastery, is surrounded by 108 stupas mounted on brick walls.

The Orkhon valley, cradle of Mongolian culture.
Next we visited a monument on the banks of the Orkhon river on the outskirts of Kharakhorum town. It was built by the government on a strategic site from where it is possible to appreciate the rich natural beauty of the valley. The monument is decorated with a series of huge mosaic maps showing the historic development of the Mongolian nation. Dr. Urtnasan explained that the Orkhon valley is one of the cradles of Mongolian culture.

We then visited Kharakhorum town, including a newly-constructed local temple, before proceeding to Erdene Zuu monastery (Erte.nl.jo.bo in Tibetan). The monastery is located at some distance from the newly-developing town. Built in 1586 at the edge of the ruin’s of Chinggis Khan’s capital of Kharakhorum, the monastery suffered damage and vandalism during the period of the Great Repression in the 1930s and was then closed for several decades. It was reopened in 1991 and a gradual restoration has begun already some time ago. The monastery is surrounded by a huge wall, capped with 108 stupa monuments that have been restored. We entered through the southern gate, which also had been restored. Inside, one is surprised to see a huge but largely empty compound, with just a handful of buildings all located in the eastern half.
Lama Khishigt, led us into the ger (tent) structure that currently serves as temporary assembly hall. He gave us a brief introduction of the Sangha project, and the current situation and needs particularly from the point of view of the Sangha itself. Then we were shown the model of the now-destroyed main assembly hall building, the Tsogchin Dugan (from the Tibetan terms, tshogs.chen, great assembly, and ‘du.khang, assembly hall). We also had the opportunity to go through the proposal and design for its reconstruction. This document, at over a 100 pages, can be considered already very important documentation of traditional Mongolian temple architecture. Engineer Mr. Sharhuu was part of the team compiling the document, and we were impressed by the knowledge and enthusiasm of all the people around us about this project.

The location of the Tsogchin building in the centre of the compound has been delineated by a string of ceremonial blue hatak scarves. Leaving the tent structure, we were shown the remaining pillar foundation stones in the ground that marked where the original wooden columns supporting the Tsogchin structure had stood.

We then proceeded to the place where logs had been put in storage for the reconstruction. The timber was at first, reportedly according to Mongolian custom, placed in a flowing river to flush out the resin, and then placed here for curing. Not surprisingly, the wood cracked in the process, but this does not affect the structural stability, and will be filled in later with a traditional paste prepared with hide glue.

We then proceeded to our tent camp and had dinner followed by a lively discussion.
The next day we started with a visit to Kharakhorum university, where the training is taking place. Despite their age, the university buildings are a good location for the training program, though we were explained that lack of funding prevented urgently needed maintenance and repair of the buildings.

The entire group then embarked on a short site visit. Instead of Tuvkhen monastery, which was inaccessible due to snow and ice on the road, we proceeded to Tsetserleg city, district capital of Arkhangai region (to which Kharakhorum belongs). This town has a very beautiful setting, surrounded by hills and trees, and is quite sizeable for a Mongolian town. Visiting the monastery of Zayan Gegen khid, we saw the effects of 70 years of foreign domination. Founded in mid-17th century by the First Zayan Gegen, the monastery was closed and partly destroyed after the Seventh Zayan Gegen was arrested and executed in 1931. The monastery’s main assembly hall was still a ruin. Another part of the formerly huge monastic compound has been converted into a museum, the Zayan Gegen Palace Museum. The director showed us the site and asked for our advice on a structural defect in one of the Tibetan-style buildings flanking the compound. It suffers from advanced settlement in the timber frame, making an intervention both unavoidable and urgent.
On our return, we visited the project training rooms of Kharakhorum university.
We met and talked with the teachers Ms Myagmarsuren (ceramics) and Mr. Ayushijav (fine arts).
Engineer Mr. Sharhuu has also been involved in the teaching. The other teachers, Mr. Tomoracuh,
Ms Terbish and Mr. Monkherdene and Lama teacher Mr. Natsagdroj were not there as the teaching
program for this year had not restarted yet (it was still winter with freezing temperatures). We saw
three rooms, which served respectively for ceramics, carpentry and painting classes. We also were
shown objects made by the teachers, and objects created by the students last year.
For the ceramics workshop, we saw a collection of historic pieces of pottery used for temple
construction: mainly decorated roof tiles of the two main varieties, *liuli* and *heihuo* tiles. We saw a
very impressive dragon-tile, and the grey bricks used in the past to build the walls of temples. There
were both glazed and unglazed tiles. We also saw some tiles and sculptures made by the trainees,
mirrored on the historic pieces.
In the next room, used mainly as carpentry workshop room had on its wall very impressive
instruction material, in which tools, techniques and patterns had been expertly explained with very
elegant drawings. There were also traditional drawings explaining the elevations of traditional
temple buildings, and the structural systems. In the center of this room was another wooden model
of a temple, part section. Particularly the carpenter in our team, Mr. Thiedemann, was impressed by
the accuracy of the model, and the accuracy of the recreation of the traditional structural system with
many small load-distributing elements. We also saw the tools, and wooden pieces carved by the
trainees.
For the painting workshop, both here and in another classroom we saw displays of traditional
painting patterns. We also saw paintings and sketches by the trainees.
We were also told that the next project phase would include training in traditional metal work, and
were shown teaching material already prepared. These included sheets explaining a whole range of
traditional tools, as well as a number of metal products used for the decoration of monasteries (e.g.
door bangers).
Wooden model of a traditional-style temple building made during the training course.

Teachers Ms Myagmarsuren and Mr. Ayushijav speak about their experience with the trainees.
We discussed with the teachers what they thought about the project, and how the trainees reacted to the materials that they had prepared. It appeared that the teachers were very pleased with the opportunity to amass a wealth of knowledge regarding traditional crafts, and to be given the opportunity to pass this knowledge on to a class collected from all across Mongolia.

We were unable to speak to any of the trainees, as these had not yet returned to Kharakhorum. Since our own journeys in Mongolia during this time were delayed and sometimes re-routed due to ice and snow, we appreciated the fact that there were holidays during the long and rather severe winter. We can judge the trainees’ participation only from the amount and quality of objects that they fabricated during the training.

Finally, we were shown the first 70 pages of a training manual that is being produced with UNESCO assistance for the Sangha project, and we took our time and looked at it page by page. We were also shown one chapter already in completed lay-out on the institute’s computer.

The visit ended with seeing an exhibit of objects made by the regular students for their graduation. Kharakhorum university offers courses in fine arts, design, carving and other traditional crafts, such as making of musical instruments.

We then had a Mongolian dinner party complete with some very fine (and some very unfortunate) singing. Dr. Urtnasan’s singing skills were particularly impressive.

The next day we again met with the university director and several of the teachers at Erdene Zuu, and continued discussing the training program. To appreciate the challenges facing the Mongolian Sangha in re-establishing their lost heritage, we visited a restoration project taking place in another part of Erdene Zuu, the complex of the earliest chapel halls in the south-western part of the walled compound. Apparently this was done by a contractor from Ulan-Bator working for a different religious group. It appears that Erdene Zuu monastery harbours at least two different religious groups.

We also had the opportunity to visit the monastery’s Lavran (Tibetan bla.brang, lama’s residence) building, one of Mongolia’s most important and well-preserved pure Tibetan style buildings. Even tough it is not that large, it currently serves for the monastic congregation until the Tsogchin Dugan would be rebuilt.

During our visit of the monastery, members of the local project team were able to comment on the monastery’s wall-paintings and architectural details with great knowledge and expertise.
4 Evaluation

The various teaching materials that we have seen were well-made and of high quality. The carpentry basic training included correct details of traditional joinery, and the model of a temple displayed sound knowledge of the Sino-Mongolian structural system. The ceramics material indicated correct knowledge of the intricacies of the traditional Chinese temple-roofing system, which is a complicated affair with dozens of different tiles forming a complex arrangement that reached its maturity during the Chinese Tang dynasty (if not earlier). The Mongolian people inhabiting the northern plains have absorbed Chinese construction skills since the Khünnu steppe empire, and it can be said that many aspects of Chinese art and crafts have become Mongolian. However, it appears that until the recent past (and particularly during the Qing dynasty), Mongolian patrons have relied on Chinese artisans for much of the construction of Buddhist temples, at least those built in traditional Chinese form with curved and tiled roofs. Therefore, the knowledge displayed by the Sangha project team about Chinese roof tiles was very impressive indeed.

Traditional patterns and motifs for painted decorations of temples appear to have been collected over some period of time to serve as training models. Perhaps one area where the training could be expanded in the future is to include not only new painting, but also professional cleaning of historic paintings (proper painting conservation would require very lengthy training).

The training manual, of which we had the opportunity of seeing the first 70 pages on paper, looked also very professional in its explanations and drawings. It will certainly be an important publication that deserves wide distribution. We also saw one chapter ready for printing (with completed lay-out) in digital format on the institute’s computer, and it looked very professional. During all of the discussions each of the involved local experts clearly expressed great technical knowledge of the traditional crafts.

The local project implementation group have fulfilled their tasks as spelt out in the project contract and documentation, and have contributed to realizing the aims of the entire Sangha Buddhist Revival Program.

On a personal level, we were all very impressed by the devotion of all concerned to the project, and the enthusiasm and resourcefulness.
The local project team shared our view on one critical aspect of the program – it is good to create knowledge about traditional arts and crafts among the Buddhist Sangha. But according to tradition, just like in Tibet and most areas of the northern Buddhist tradition, monks had never been much involved in construction of monasteries and painting. This had always been the domain of highly-specialized guilds of skilled artisans. That the trained monks now gain some basic knowledge of these skills will undoubtedly help them to make the right decisions in future regarding preservation of historic art and architecture, because it is they who plan, commission and oversee such works. But it was wondered whether the program could, in the future, be expanded to also train lay artisans who would actually do the work.

Therefore, we would like to recommend to UNESCO to expand the program in the future to include workshops and training for lay artisans. In fact, as NGO working in conservation of historic Buddhist monasteries in Tibetan areas of China, in India and Mongolia, we can only add that there is an acute lack of skilled artisans who feel unable to compete with low-paid labourers working for contractors operating on a larger scale. As THF has been running artisan’s training for ten years now, with several hundred graduates, some of whom having in turn become teachers themselves, we would offer our help in formulating relevant programme aspects.
Clockwise from left:
Collection of historic ceramic roof-tiles used for the training;
samples of ceramic tiles and sculptures made by the trainees;
a sample of the high-quality teaching materials prepared by the team, here a panel showing tools used for traditional metal work;
the digital version of the training manual prepared by the local project group;
Professor Batsuuri showing Ms de Azevedo samples of the painting training work, here four panels with watercolours recreating traditional decorative patterns for monasteries.
Recommendations

THF should meet the trainees and visit Kharakhorum during the next training session. We would like to get their view of the project, and their ideas and intentions about the future deployment of the skills and concepts that they have been exposed to as outcome of the training project.

Also, we would like to see the completed training manual by the local project. With this as a base, it is perhaps possible to define a set of educational targets within a fixed curriculum for the future.

Following suggestions by Dr. Urtnasan and UNESCO’s Mr. Rik Ponne, THF have donated 25 copies of our Manual of Traditional Mongolian Architecture to the local project. It is conceivable that THF gives a training presentation to the entire class of trainees as well as to the teaching staff and local steering committee about its experience in practical heritage conservation, highlighting examples from our work in South-Gobi as well as in the Tibet Autonomous Region of China and elsewhere.

We would then also be able to focus on issues raised on our Manual of Traditional Mongolian Architecture, such as the loss of traditional knowledge, and lack of skilled artisans and – a key issue – a lack of appreciation of conservation-related issues, particularly concerning rehabilitation of monasteries. Very often speed and low cost are considered priorities.

The local project steering committee also proposed to visit the current project site in South-Gobi, Nomgun sum town, where a Mongolian brick and tile production has been established and restoration of the 18th century Sangiin Dalai monastery is in progress, involving carpentry, masonry work, traditional Chinese roofing, structural reinforcement and painting conservation.

It is further proposed that the project should, in a future phase, include workshops with artisans on site of renovation projects, to address the current lack of skilled local artisans. These workshops should take place in different parts of the country. Generally speaking, one can find almost everything in Ulaanbaatar the capital, but many of the structurally-depressed regions suffer from brain-drain and lack of skills. Therefore, the decision to support Kharakhorum university as project site was very good.

In any case it is highly recommended to continue the present project. There can be no doubt regarding the integrity, enthusiasm and genuine resourcefulness of all people involved in the project.
Appendix: Reconstruction of Erdene Zuu Tsogchin Dugan (main assembly hall)

Erdene Zuu’s main assembly hall was built in 1770, but destroyed during the Soviet time (1922-1991). Within the monastic system of reformed Tibetan Buddhism as practised in Mongolia, the main assembly hall is probably the most important element within a monastic complex. Therefore, the current lack of this building clearly and seriously hampers monastic functioning. Regarding the status of Erdene Zuu as part of a World Heritage site, we are fortunate that this is still, despite a gap of almost 70 years, an active monastic site rather than an ancient deserted ruin. The functioning of the monastery is part of the heritage of the site. Therefore the reconstruction should be assisted. Regarding the modalities of such a project, we have had the opportunity of having seen the site first-hand, and the very detailed technical reconstruction plan was explained to us in great detail. The plan was explained by some of the very people who drafted it, and their knowledge and skills clearly impressed our team.

The wooden model and plan description displayed a sound understanding of the structural system, down to the traditional Chinese dou gong bracketing system. It also included descriptions of the roofing system as well as such details as carvings, painted decorations etc.

Of course, ultimately, the quality of the work also depends on the inclusion of skilled artisans, of which currently there is some shortage. But the Mongolian Sangha revival team, if acting as overseers, could probably achieve good results even if working with an Ulaanbaatar-based contractor, as in the immediate future the number of skilled artisans is unlikely to increase. Further exposure of a Mongolian mixed team of lay artisans, technical experts and Sangha members to, for example, Buddhist monastery restoration projects in Japan, could be beneficial to this project.

THF carpentry expert inspects the Model of the lost Tsogchin Dugan.