

PREFACE

Danzan Ravjaa first came into my life in October 1999. He arrived not quite in the literal sense, but rather in the form of a newspaper article published in *The Mongol Messenger*, my employer at the time. Every so often we ran a feature story on unique personalities in Mongolian history and the article on Ravjaa was only one in a long series. Despite the obscurity of the subject matter (I had never heard of him before) I was instantly attracted to his story and the legends that surrounded him. He was described, in no uncertain terms, as a lyrical genius, master artist and gifted songwriter. His ability to perform miracles seemed only limited to the imagination of his disciples and the Gobi people who passed on his story for generations after his death. But the greatness of his artistic abilities, said the article, was matched by a legendary temper, desire for alcohol and lust for women. Almost predictably, this conflicted personality came to an almost Shakespearean end, accepting the poisoned drink of a scorned lover. Add martyr-for-love to his list of credentials.

The wild story included a surprise finish. Apparently, Danzan Ravjaa's principal monastery had recently been rebuilt and monks were once again performing services there. Better still, a museum filled with objects owned by Danzan Ravjaa had recently opened in Sainshand. Instantly intrigued by this revelation, I was determined to one day visit the museum and the nearby monastery. For a

moment I imagined myself wandering about the Gobi, confronted by the mystical ghosts of a bygone era. I am a daydreamer after all, and it seemed like Danzan Ravjaa was one too.

An opportunity to visit the monastery and the museum arrived in February of 2000. With some time off from work I decided to take the train to China where I planned to visit some of the Tibetan villages in Gansu and Sichuan. About halfway between Ulaanbaatar and the Chinese border the train stopped in Sainshand. It was two in the morning and the temperature was minus 25 degrees Celsius. My thick down coat and insulated boots barely kept the cold out, but before long I found my way to the only hotel in town. The following day I paid a visit to the museum and was amazed to see the wealth of artifacts that it housed. Theater costumes, Buddhist art and Ravjaa's personal effects were but a few of the items on display. As the only visitor to the museum, the curator Altangerel provided a personalized tour. He went into great detail about the life and legend of Danzan Ravjaa and our conversation carried straight into lunch. Enthralled by the stories, I finally asked Altangerel where he had acquired so much knowledge about this obscure historical figure. And here is where the story got better – Altangerel explained that he was the direct descendant of Danzan Ravjaa's personal attendant. The life and legend of the great monk had been passed down through the generations until it had reached Altangerel.

Not only had stories been passed, but also the right to maintain all of his worldly possessions. Altangerel was the sixth-generation curator of these precious goods. The story was incredible, made more so by the fact that 70 years of communism had cut most Mongolians off from the distant past. Somehow, Altangerel had managed to bridge the gap of that dark era in Mongolia's history.

Over the coming days I paid a visit to the monastery (known as Khamaryn Khiid), met the monks that maintained it and clambered through a cave that supposedly cleansed me of my sins. I tasted water from a spring with healing powers, stumbled upon a dinosaur bone and mounted an unruly camel. Back in Sainshand, Altangerel showed me some of his most prized possessions, many of them too valuable to be on display in a museum that had no security system.

While sifting through all this history was a fascinating experience, much of it was lost on me as there was precious little written about Danzan Ravjaa in the English language. Any research done in Mongolian seemed either too fanciful or too academic. I struggled to make sense of all that lay before me. I guessed that other foreign visitors to the museum would be equally baffled and decided to help out by creating an information pamphlet in English. That initial pamphlet seemed to grow by the day as I kept stumbling over new sources of information. At some point my short essay had morphed into the book you are holding.

A good deal of the research conducted for this book was made during subsequent visits to Sainshand and Khamaryn Khiid. More research was conducted in Ulaanbaatar, where I interviewed experts, scholars and academics familiar with the life of Danzan Ravjaa. I also spent considerable time in the stacks of the Ulaanbaatar Public Library, digging through a vast array of books related to both Ravjaa and his contemporaries. Much of the credit for the compilation of Danzan Ravjaa's life story goes to the Mongolian researchers Ts. Damdinsuren, D. Tsagaan and the German researcher Walther Heissig.

So far as the orthography is concerned, I have tried to use the most common and simple transliteration for Mongolian words

and names. Place names have changed over the years, and I have chosen to include the ones used when the reference was compiled: for example, I call Ulaanbaatar “Huree” when describing the city before the 1920s. In many cases I simply used what sounded most appropriate. Getting Danzan Ravjaa’s poetry into a form of English both readable and accurate was somewhat problematic because of the three-stage translation: it was originally written in Tibetan, converted to old Mongolian, then to Cyrillic (new Mongolian) and finally translated to English. I applaud the efforts of my translators for doing the most accurate job possible.

The majority of quotations used are taken from books of the period written by travelers including the Abbé Huc, Aleksei Pozdneyev and Col N. Przewalski, and are sourced accordingly. However, the quotes attributed to Danzan Ravjaa (taken from Mongolian history books, or from oral storytelling), should be considered as mere guesses as to what he might have said.

I must state that much of what has been recorded about Danzan Ravjaa is fiction or contradictory. There were no real journalistic accounts or records of what he was like and scant information about the activities of his monasteries. Much of the research herein was pieced together from the most reliable and reasonable sources. Much of it is simply guesswork. I note where stories and historical evidence conflict and I include discrepancies in the text or endnotes.

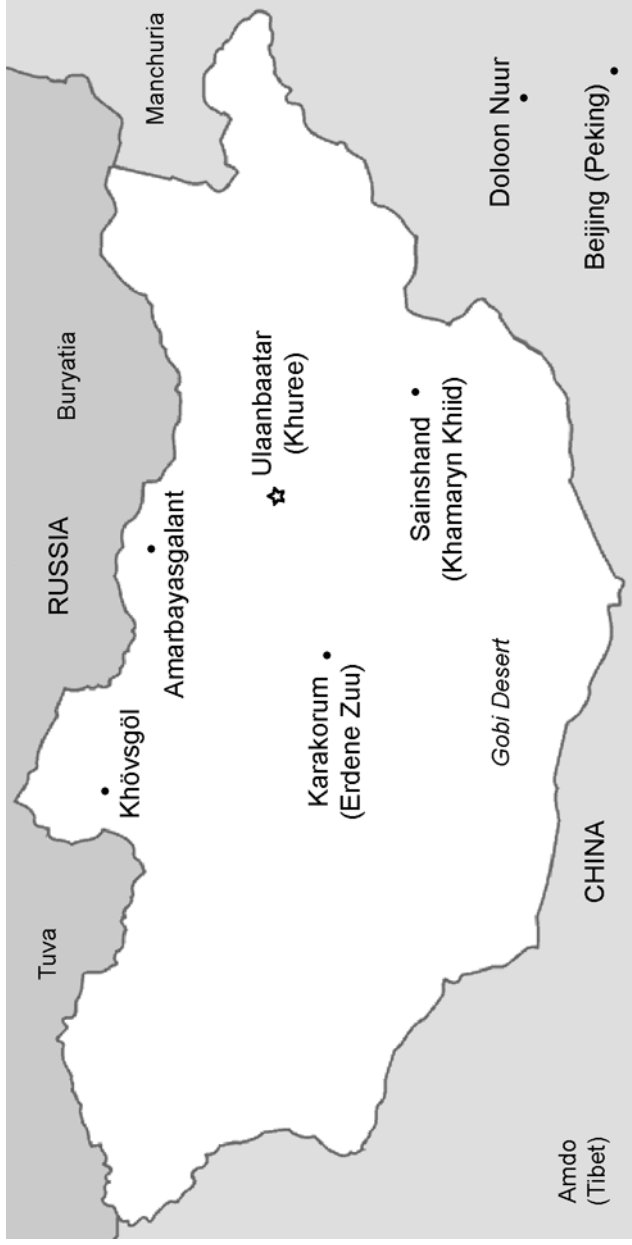
Piecing together the story of Danzan Ravjaa and writing this book was a labor of love that continued over several years. After sitting for a very long time as a stack of white papers that was passed from hand to hand, it eventually reached renowned Tibetologist Glenn Mullin. A connoisseur of all things esoteric, Glenn took an interest in the manuscript and helped to get it published for

the first time in 2006. Half the books were donated to Altangerel in Sainshand so that he might raise money for a much-needed security system for the museum.

I wrote this book largely because it was fun and fresh. In a world where it seems everything is “been-there-done-that,” I managed to find a piece of history almost unknown to Westerners. It simply seemed like a story too interesting to ignore. In the future I hope that more extensive information in English will be made available on Ravjaa’s complex philosophy, his poetry, his operas, his artwork and the world in which he lived. And to anyone who reads this book, I hope that you will one day have the chance to visit Khamaryn Khiid and be touched by its soul.

Michael Kohn
San Francisco, July 2009

MONGOLIA



INTRODUCTION

The year is 1937; the place is Dornogobi Province, Mongolia. The following is a dramatized account based on real events.

The stars over Khamaryn Monastery twinkle like diamonds strewn across the inky heavens. The earth below is silent and hot, still radiating heat hours after the setting of the Gobi sun. Silhouettes of temple rooftops rise and dip across the night skyline. This would be an otherwise peaceful scene for Lama Tuduv as he sits awake that night. But the young Buddhist monk has weighty subjects on his mind. His monastery is in danger; his life is in danger, as are the lives of all the other monks at Khamaryn Khiid.

It's 1937 and Communist oppression is building not only at Khamaryn Khiid but all across Mongolia. Warnings have already been sent to the monastery that it will be shut down. Soldiers have harassed the monks, accusing them of 'counter-revolutionary activities'. Lama Tuduv and his fellow monks can see the writing on the wall; their monastery will be destroyed and they must save what they can before it's too late. Their Buddha Danzan Ravjaa had predicted all of this.

Since a young age Lama Tuduv had been sworn to the defense of Danzan Ravjaa and he is determined to protect the monastery's

sacred relics at all costs. Fortunately, he is not alone. All the monks at Khamaryn Khiid are willing to lay down their lives to protect the monastery.

Carefully, cautiously, Tuduv and several assistant lamas begin the arduous task of removing the sacred objects from the White Temple, preparing to bury them in the desert. Moving and burying dozens of crates seems like an impossible goal to Tuduv but there are few alternative options. Wiping sweat from his brow, Tuduv banishes such thoughts with a grunt and continues his work.

By the light of a small oil lamp the red-cloaked monks can make out the sacred relics of the temple. Piles of Buddhist manuscripts and sutras, masks and costumes used in sacred rituals, theater props used in plays, artwork delicately sculpted and painted by master craftsmen, and valuable objects brought from foreign lands. Despite its name, the White Temple is not a place of worship; rather it's a museum of sorts, founded by Ravjaa to show off his finest possessions. The center of the building contains its most unique object, the mummified remains of Danzan Ravjaa, the master poet, artist, pedagogue and saint who had founded Khamaryn Khiid some 120 years earlier.

It's no accident that most of this priceless treasure is already packed into wooden crates. The categorizing and recording of items had already been prepared for just such an emergency evacuation. With the utmost care and silence, Tuduv opens one of the crates and inspects it, studying the items inside. The significance of each piece had been made known to him by his father Ongoi, who had instructed Tuduv from birth on the history of Danzan Ravjaa and Khamaryn Khiid. Tuduv's ancestors, dating back four generations to his great-great-grandfather Balchinchoijoo, had always assumed responsibility for the relics left behind by Danzan Ravjaa. The

family legacy weighs heavily on Lama Tuduv's shoulders as he ponders the days ahead. The soldiers will soon make their move to destroy the monastery and the monks will be unable to defend it. There is no time to lose.

Stealthily, the monks carry the crates out of the temple and begin their trek into the desert. The stars have shifted considerably by the time Tuduv and the others reach a steep ravine cut into the desert floor. Sunk out of sight from the enormous plains, the ravine is the most logical place around Khamaryn Khiid to hide the treasure-filled crates. With the full moon rising overhead they dig a hole and together chant a mantra asking forgiveness for digging in the sacred earth. When it's deep enough, the monks place the box in the hole, covering it with rocks and soil.

Resting for a moment in the light of the moon, Tuduv breathes deeply and nods off to sleep. Dreams rush to him and in his troubled mind he sees the young soldiers setting temples alight; the whitewashed walls charred black as the elegant concave roof collapses. The soldiers then turn their guns on the rows of red-robed monks. Plumes of smoke rise in the air as they fall face-first into a mass grave. Tuduv winces in the dark as blood is shed and the precious legacy of Danzan Ravjaa – Mongolia's greatest poet and lyricist – is wiped out in a matter of minutes.

Startled awake by the nightmare, Tuduv rises to his feet and realizes that he is still safe, for the moment anyway. He chants softly to himself, praying that his visions will end, yet he knows the destruction is inevitable. Lama Tuduv and the monks return to Khamaryn Khiid in silence, arriving just before the dawn.

Each night thereafter, the monks repeat the process of filling up crates and hauling them into the desert. Laymen nomads living around the monastery are warned of the pending disaster

and respond by hiding their personal property deep in the desert. Families are digging holes in the earth and burying Buddhas all across the Gobi.

For several weeks the monks and laymen are able to secretly hide their sacred objects but in the middle of the summer the situation changes for the worse. Trucks carrying soldiers arrive with orders to take over the monastery. When the monks protest they are arrested and taken away.

Lama Tuduv is not among the 300 arrested monks. He manages to escape the chaos and the other monks have sworn to keep his identity a secret. But Lama Tuduv's lord, the Seventh Noyon Hutagt, is among those taken from the monastery. All fear that his life is in grave danger. In fact, he would never be seen again.

Lama Tuduv turns his worried heart away from the abandoned monastery and travels deep into the Gobi. He heads south and eventually reaches a *ger* (yurt) owned by his sister. Here he will stay to wait out the storm of death and destruction.

Skip ahead to 1991...

A cloud of dust billows up from the yellow earth as three men dig their heels into shovels and turn over dirt. One looks up for a moment to survey the land. A great monastery once stood not far from where the men dig. Khamaryn Khiid was a monastery of whitewashed walls and ornately painted wooden eaves, home to young students and learned scholars, a monastery with cavernous temples from which the sounds of conch shell trumpets once blew. Now there is nothing but dry barren desert and stray camels. Nothing remains of its glorious past.

Three feet below the surface, one of the men strikes something hard with his shovel. Sand and rocks are brushed away and a

wooden box is revealed. The men run their fingers over the warped wood, perhaps to absorb some of its secrets. Altangerel had been correct; with no map he had found one of the boxes buried by his grandfather Tuduv, who had died only a few months earlier. The men congratulate each other and then lift the heavy crate out of the ground and into an olive-green Russian jeep. Rolling over the low hills and gravelly earth they return home in silence.

Altangerel, trained as the latest in a long line of Danzan Ravjaa curators, opens the crate carefully as a crowd of onlookers loom overhead. Daylight floods into the box for the first time in many years. He reaches a large hand inside and extracts the porcelain statue of a Chinese princess. Her intricate design and colorful detail are a wonder for these people of the Gobi. Having lived under the veil of communism for so many years, this generation knows little of their past. But this box is proof that something amazing had occurred here many years ago.

Altangerel too is fascinated, although he has seen these objects before. Years earlier, his grandfather Lama Tuduv had dug up this very box and showed him its contents. Tuduv had described each item in detail so that when the time was right, Altangerel would be able to properly recount the legacy of Danzan Ravjaa. That time, it seems, has finally arrived.

Based on the lifelong lessons given by his grandfather, Altangerel returns to the desert and the secret places where the boxes had been buried. Altangerel digs up nearly half of the sixty-four crates. The boxes are cared for and treated with wonder, as though an ancient past had been reincarnated into a living, breathing element. Indeed, it has. The legend of Danzan Ravjaa, once just a series of myths passed around between lonely nomads of the Gobi Desert, has at last been revealed as truth.

The story of these boxes, where they came from and why, will be told in this book.