



Fig. 12. Shandagu Monastery, with the writer in the foreground. (Photo by W. S. La Sor.)

A PRINCE OF THE LAMA CHURCH

Our brief glimpse at the more popular aspects of Tibetan Buddhism may have made it seem a very simple faith. The real complexity of the religion begins to appear when we look into the organization of the Church, with its countless dignitaries and officials. This forms a pyramid, at the top of which are the Lord Abbots, Grand Lamas, and Living Buddhas. Toward the end of the recent war I was sent to Shanpa, the wartime capital of Suiyuan Province in Inner Mongolia, where I found the opportunity to revive a long-standing interest in the Mongols and their form of Tibetan Buddhism, and to meet personally one of the great figures of this Lama hierarchy.

We had not been in Shanpa very long before I heard of Shandagu Temple, the home of a "Living Buddha," who was the reincarnation of a great Lama saint and the spiritual ruler of all the local Mongols. The Chinese general who told me about it explained that it was not far away, at the base of the mountains that separated the Shanpa plain from the Gobi Desert. Soon after, the Japanese unexpectedly surrendered and my special job ended. I immediately planned a trip to Shandagu lamasery, arranging to take an American chaplain who had come to Shanpa on a tour of American outposts, and who shared my interest in comparative religions.

We set out on horseback after lunch the following Sunday, and rode for several hours across country, toward the mountains. It had been raining heavily for several days, a rare thing in that semi-desert, and the irrigation ditches dug by immigrant Chinese farmers, who had recently moved in from south of the Great Wall, were flooding over into the surrounding fields. It was hard going for our little Mongol ponies, and we ourselves got badly soaked in fording the swollen creeks. To make matters worse, the change of wind that had cleared the weather came toward us out of the northwest, from Outer Mongolia, bringing icy gusts that might have come direct from Siberia.

We broke our journey at Manhui, a small village built up around a Belgian mission. Here we met an old missionary from Brussels who had

made quite a study of Lamaism, the rival faith. He was much interested to hear that we were bound for Shandagu to see the Living Buddha, and at my companion's request, he explained just what a "Living Buddha" was.

When the Mongols were converted to Lamaism by the Tibetans about three centuries ago, he told us, they wanted some holy men to correspond to the Dalai and Panchen Lamas, and the other great reincarnations of Tibet. Accordingly, their Tibetan teachers proclaimed that the souls of several Tibetan saints, long since dead, had found new homes in the bodies of various Mongolian monks. These men were given special honors, and whole monastery communities grew up around them. Their followers told everyone that they had powers of foreknowledge and gifts of healing, and their reputations struck the common people with such awe that they spoke of them as "Living Buddhas."

Whenever one of these reincarnations died, the lamas of his temple began looking for children who had been born at the time of his death. If they found one who had unusual birthmarkings or who was able to recognize some of the dead man's possessions as "his own," he was immediately hailed as being the new bodily home for the saint's soul, and was brought back in pomp to fill the throne of the Living Buddha. While still so young, the boy would naturally be in the care of a regent and tutor, but he would still be treated as a living god.

Our host told us that the present Living Buddha of Shandagu was still in this minority stage, having only been "discovered" some ten years ago. Then, it was a tremendous honor to be the Lord of Shandagu, he said, but now the monastery had fallen on evil days.

The chaplain asked what had happened to it.

"You will see," replied our host in a solemn voice. Then he changed the subject to the confused state of Chinese border politics, and the plight of the Mongols being squeezed out of their grasslands by the incoming Chinese immigrants.

Later in the evening, he sent for a Chinese-Mongolian neighbor, named Ho, who had formerly been a trader with the people of Outer Mongolia, and had been an intimate friend of the previous incarnation of the Living Buddha of Shandagu. After a brief conversation, he agreed to come along with us as Mongol-interpreter and guide.

We set out again next morning at dawn, riding first through a marginal farming area recently reclaimed by Chinese settlers, then across wasteland returned to grazing after greedy farming methods had exhausted the soil for all but coarse grass.

After two hours of rough riding, we came to a small but deep river, the Wu-chia Ho, and on crossing this by a primitive ferryboat, we entered the true desert. Low dunes dotted with clumps of sagebrush gave way to stretches of bare gravel and soft sand, until the vegetation vanished altogether, leaving only sand. Hot winds as from a blast furnace rose from the sun-baked ground, making a sharp contrast to the cold of yesterday. We felt oppressed by the heat and the sense of desolation.

Then suddenly we caught sight of a cluster of great white buildings looming in the distance against the dark, reddish mountains. They shimmered in the haze above the hot sand, and seemed to be changing in shape. The nearer we got, the larger they became, though their outlines still wavered through the hot air. Sometimes for a moment we could almost see them clearly, then another heat wave moving across the desert would blur their lines. It seemed like the mirage of an enchanted city, certainly a fitting home for a great saint and prince of the Church.

We rode up a gradual slope of sand and gravel to the main buildings, which stood on a terrace at the base of the cliffs, and were met at the gate by the host-monk. A stout, jovial Mongol in scarlet robes, he welcomed us --through Ho--, then led us into the guest-courtyard, and helped to tether our horses, before ushering us into a small, square building of purely Tibetan architecture at the rear. (Obviously the Mongols had borrowed their formal architecture, as well as their religion, from Tibet.)

Here, the host-monk announced, we were to be received in audience by the present Living Buddha of Shandagu, Tobdung Wanchuk, the Hambu Gegen, tenth reincarnation of the Tibetan poet-saint Milaraspa.

While pondering these high-sounding titles, relayed to us by Mr. Ho, we seated ourselves cross-legged on silken rugs on a side dais below the empty throne. Before each of us a lama attendant placed a small individual table of carved and gilded wood. Others brought us large wooden boxes of parched millet, and some clarified butter in silver-rimmed porcelain cups. All these things we were supposed to mix with our tea, which they served us in silver-lined bowls of some richly-grained

dark wood. When we had each mixed a brew to our taste, we sat back and looked around us, admiring the magnificent furnishings of the room.

The throne itself was richly carved and gilded and had the three cushions of yellow silk appropriate to Mongol royalty. Above it hung a temple banner mounted in heavy brocade, depicting Tson Kapa, the founder of the Yellow sect (to which this temple belonged), surrounded by the nine former reincarnations that had preceded the present Living Buddha. These were so idealized that it was impossible to guess what manner of men they had been. The artist had concentrated on the golden yellow hats and capes which indicated their exalted position, and had made no attempt at actual portraiture.

On each side of central banner hung six more Tibetan-style paintings, showing Milaraspa, the "first existence" of the Shandagu incarnations back in the 11th century. Each one had a central portrait of the poet-saint in a nonchalant pose, inviting inspiration, set against a mosaic of brightly-colored scenes illustrating his life and writings. Through all these paintings the spirits of the Living Buddha's predecessors dominated the room, impressing us with the long tradition.

On a ledge below the paintings the monks had displayed various gifts presented by previous visitors to the spiritual lords of Shandagu. Among them we saw foreign clocks, rare vases full of fading artificial flowers (the Mongols seldom saw real ones), a jade-studded scepter in a glass case, and some teacups and bowls of delicate china.

At sight of all these, we hesitated to present our own meager gifts, a roll of silk, a small porcelain figure of the Buddha of Wisdom, and some hard candies wrapped in cellophane --included at the last minute when Father Schramm told us the Living Buddha was still just a boy. Knowing the mercenary reputation of the lamas, I wondered if the former offerings had been deliberately set out to shame guests into giving more.

Our random gazing was suddenly interrupted by a flurry of maroon and crimson robes as a new group of inquisitive monks gathered around us, firing questions at us through Ho. Some of these late comers could speak a little Chinese, and when they found I could too, they spoke to me directly. Everyone seemed to be talking at once. It sounded like a flock of magpies. Many of them could never have seen a foreigner, they were so curious about us. Our cameras puzzled them, and our strange clothes interested them, but our features amused them very much.



Fig. 13. One of the lama temples, surrounded by monks' residences. (Photo by W. E. Hill.)

Suddenly the chattering stopped, and the monks stepped reverently aside as Tobdung Wanchuk, the Living Buddha, entered with his guardian, carrying a black and white pekinese under his arm. He was a short, slender, rather vapid-looking boy of twelve, bareheaded, but wearing a splendid vest of scarlet and gold brocade, with outer robes and skirt of crimson serge, and a pair of handsomely-worked tartar boots with upturned toes. His dress rather than his manner identified him as a prince of the Church. We were not particularly impressed. Privately we concluded that he looked very ineffective, and was probably merely a tool in the hand of his sharp-looking regent.

When he had seated himself informally on a cushion below the throne, with his little dog beside him, we presented our gifts, and asked Ho to express our pleasure at meeting him. He just stared at us with an empty expression and made no reply.

While his guardian and the other monks politely praised the buddha figure, which to them was particularly valuable because of the rarity of porcelain in Mongolia, the boy picked up some of the candies, and with a half smile on his dull face, held them up to the light to examine their bright colors. The crackle of the cellophane wrappings seemed to delight him especially. We felt sorry for him. Even if he were more intelligent than he looked, he was little more than a child, and we hated to think of him doomed to spend a life of ceremonial and ritual appearances, without any opportunity for games or normal companionship with children of his own age.

When the audience --such as it was-- was completed, the Living Buddha came down from his dais and was escorted out by several attendants to prepare for services in the main temple. We followed more leisurely, with some of the Chinese-speaking monks, while Ho, having fulfilled his purpose, went to visit a friend in another building.

The main temple was a two-story, block-like structure, also in Tibetan style. It was severely plain externally, except for a dark red strip, set with round ornaments in real gold, around the top of the whitewashed wall. It stood on a terrace faced in stone, with stone steps leading up to the recessed porch. On either side of the great doorway huge frescoes of the Four Kings of Heaven were brilliantly painted in red and yellow, blue and green, with details in gold, making a transition to the color-rich interior.



Fig. 14. (top). Scene in a monastery courtyard: two lamas bring water to the temple.



Fig. 15. (center). The writer borrows a camel for a ride in the Gobi.

Fig. 16. (right). Uruk, the host-lama, a young Mongol nobleman, standing in front of the entrance to a yurt. (Photos by W. E. Hill.)



We entered the building to find a large main hall lined with columns of bright red lacquer. The four central ones, larger than the rest, rose to the four corners of a well in the roof, which admitted light to the windowless interior. From the ceiling between two of these, hung the temple's name-board. Painted in gold, on blue, this showed its title, "Monastery of the Completed Reincarnation" (referring to its Living Buddhas), written in three languages -- Mongolian, Chinese and Tibetan. We thought the last of these, "Gundul Ling," the richest sounding. Pronounced in deep bass by the Living Buddha's aged tutor, it sounded like the rumble of distant thunder.

As we strolled around examining the fine brocade-mounted paintings on the walls, the Living Buddha entered with his attendants. He walked rather proudly under an enormously tall, broad hat of yellow silk, like those worn by his predecessors in the painting in the throne-room, and for the first time he had an almost regal look. Ascending another gilded throne, at the far end of the hall, where one would normally expect to see an altar, he seated himself cross-legged on the yellow cushions and nonchalantly picked up his bell and ritual scepter (*dorje*), to preside over the service in the dual role of officiant and chief deity.

Meanwhile the other lamas filed in, taking their seats on the long prayer benches that extended the length of the hall, facing each other across the center aisle. Each had his tea-bowl, which was constantly refilled by boy attendants who walked up and down the aisle carrying huge jugs, as well as a sheaf of pages from their holy scriptures, in Tibetan. (One of the monks confided to me that they could only read this foreign script phonetically and could not understand it, but they still got merit by reading it.)

The older monks chanted while the younger ones kept up a weird, but --at first-- not unpleasing din, with several types of musical instruments. Some brayed on conch shells, or on small trumpets of brass, shaped like dragons; or burst their lungs over much larger, telescopic ones of copper trimmed in silver, which extended fully twelve feet in length. Others blew whining flageolets, or piped on shrill wooden whistles; while an undercurrent clashing of cymbals and booming of heavy drums maintained the rhythm, accented by sharper sounds from the skull rattles and hand-bells. As a masterpiece of ingenuity, one young lama had rigged up



Fig. 17. A great prayer-wheel in the porch of a lama temple. (Photo by W. E. Hill)

seven of these hand-bells on a wooden frame suspended from the rafters, so that he could ring them all simultaneously, giving a sharp clash with every pull on the long cord. Altogether the noise was deafening. We wondered how the boy-god's ears could stand it.

Before the din drove us out, we went on into the sanctuary through a door behind the Living Buddha's throne. Here we found a huge altar with a large gilded Buddha attended by disciples, and a slightly smaller figure of Tson Kapa with a pair of lama attendants. Behind these two sets of images stood lesser ones, placed in niches of artificial rock which formed a sort of reredos. The rich gilding on the figures of the saints and goddesses gleamed impressively from the blue-painted grottoes; while dark figures of the demon-gods, at the sides, blended with the background so we saw scarcely more than their crowns of skulls and blood-dripping tongues. The chaplain, who had never seen a lama temple, was amazed at the way the sublime and the horrible were so grotesquely blended.

Returning to the front of the building, we climbed a steep flight of rickety stairs to the second story. This consisted of a series of small, shed-like meditation rooms opening out on a central court. In the middle stood a small square structure resembling a pagoda, placed over the well in the ceiling of the prayer hall; its handsome lattice windows now swung open to let in the light below.

We glanced down on the service, which from here was slightly easier on our eardrums. The little Living Buddha still dominated the scene in his brilliant robes, which stood out among the shadows at the end of the hall, but he looked rather pathetic, smaller than ever under his great ceremonial hat. He was idly leafing through the book set before him, with a dazed and unhappy look. At the moment he was taking no real part except as an object of veneration.

Resuming our explorations, we examined a tall structure at the back, composed of a lower section faced with lattice windows to admit light to the sanctuary, and an upper chapel for the Living Buddha. Our guide called this a "holy of holies" and refused to open it for us. Opposite this at the front of the building, was another sanctuary, which we entered through a low, carved doorway. It was rather dark inside, but in the heavy shrine-cabinet over its altar, we dimly glimpsed a large image of the temple's guardian, Yamantaka, "the Conqueror of Death." This demoniac

figure with his great bull's head and thirty-six arms, silhouetted against an aura of flames, was clasping his screaming consort to him in an embrace of rage and ecstasy. The chaplain shuddered.

From here we returned to quieter aspects of Lamaism in the smaller halls on the hillside above the main temple. These were dedicated to calm, resigned-looking Buddhas, and lush, full-breasted goddesses. Handsome Tibetan-style temple banners, set in rich borders of Chinese silks and brocades, lined their walls, but I was struck by the absence of the small bronze images which are usually so numerous in lama shrines.

I remarked about this lack, and one of the Chinese-speaking Mongols who was acting as opener of temples --they are kept locked in this bandit-ridden region when not in use-- pointed down to the plain below the monastery, where an abandoned campsite of a hundred or more quonset-hut-shaped adobe shacks straddled the road.

"Chinese soldiers," he said simply. Then he went on to explain in a resigned but faintly bitter voice how the border troops quartered there recently had looted almost everything that could be carried, from most of the temples. He showed us how even their officers, living in some of the outer buildings of the monastery, shrine halls as well as dormitories, had defaced the clean white compound walls with fine-sounding Nationalist slogans, and reduced the buildings themselves to empty shells.

Now we knew what the Belgian priest had meant when he said that Shandagu had greatly changed.

Quartering troops in temples has been an accepted practice in modern China, where religion is taken lightly and temples are considered as public property, but I had noticed that the inevitable destruction is always much worse in the Mongol and Tibetan temples of the frontier regions. The border Chinese, despising the alien peoples they have so largely dispossessed, seem to take pleasure in wanton breakage and looting. The very fact that these shrines are revered to an extent incomprehensible to them, and still play an important part in the life of these other folk, appears to inspire them to greater excesses, and the presence of protesting but defenceless monks and priests only arouses their latent sadism.

Later the Second Grand Lama, acting temporal head of the lamasery in the absence of the abbot, was bitter but resigned when we passed a gutted temple building as he led us up to visit his private quarters.

"Chinese soldiers!" he muttered, with a shrug of his shoulders. This time the words had a deeper emphasis. He explained to us, however, that in spite of these depredations by the Chinese soldiers, and in spite of a Japanese attempt to win them over by presenting a fine German police dog to the Living Buddha at the time they raided Shanpa, the monks of Shandagu had remained loyal to the Governor of Suiyuan and the Central Government of Chiang Kai-shek, throughout the war. They felt that the only hope for the Mongol people was to stay on good terms with the Chinese, though that often meant humiliation. They had no real choice.

The hospitable monks tried to persuade us to stay a day or two, but the chaplain had to get back to camp, having already received orders to go elsewhere. We left rather reluctantly, and by hard riding got back to camp at sunset.

When I returned to Shandagu a month later, while on another trip with two friends from camp, the monks told us that the Living Buddha was away. We heard that he was spending a few days at his mother's camp in a nearby valley, and decided to make a special trip to see him. The tent of a Living Buddha, we thought, must be something of a spectacle. It was already late in the evening, so we spent the night in the monastery, and next morning at breakfast we were lucky enough to find a young Mongol of the Living Buddha's tribe (the Dalat Banner), who offered to take us out to see him.

Riding back along the range for about a mile, we came to a deep, narrow gorge, and turned up it. Around the second turn, we found a small strip of raised ground with three small and rather dirty Mongol tents of coarse felt, with a flock of goats grazing on the slope above them. It looked like any other Mongol camp, but our guide insisted it was the Living Buddha's. We were disappointed, to say the least.

We dismounted, tethered our horses to a forked stick, and entered the center tent, while some children sat on the fierce dogs. At the back sat the Living Buddha's old tutor, with a sheaf of scripture pages on his lap, while his exalted pupil sat below him, listening to some long-winded theological explanation. Both looked up curiously as we entered, and the old man setting down his book, half rose to offer me the seat of honor beside him, while a small attendant scurried out for some tea and cheese.

I bowed to each, presenting them with the usual blue silk scarf, or *khatag*, the Mongolian equivalent of a visiting card, and gave a small



Fig. 18. The great golden image at Shandagu. (Photo by W. S. La Sor.)

package of gifts to the Living Buddha.

I was agreeably surprised to find that our first impression of the latter had been mistaken. The little Living Buddha proved quick and intelligent, taking particular interest in the possibilities of a magnet we had given him among our presents. In his plain gray robe with a twisted purple sash for a belt, and well-worn boots, he looked like any ordinary Mongol youth from a family of moderate means.

He spoke freely to me in rather good Chinese, though he had not even admitted knowing that language on my previous visit. He was always very respectful to his tutor, and to us as his guests, when I was speaking to him directly; but when we three Americans talked together, or took time out to drink tea, he laughed and joked at our expense with his little brothers, who ran in and out of the tent, shyly giggling.

It was amusing to see his expression when he smiled. His very natural grin seemed to accentuate the sharp angle of his chin, and this with his pointed ears made him look like an elf, or imp of mischief. I concluded that his apparent dullness on the previous occasion had been largely due to shyness; perhaps he felt ridiculous at dressing with such pomp to preside over a half-looted monastery, or else he was just bored at being made to dress up formally to receive a couple of stupid foreigners. At any rate, he was very human.

As we rode away again, after receiving *khatag* scarfs and farewell presents of cheese, we decided that this interlude away from the temple must have been like a summer vacation for the boy-god, even if he had to spend part of it at his books. We hoped for his sake that he could enjoy it as long as possible, before returning to the soul-crushing pomp of Shandagu Temple.



Fig. 19. Hand prayer-wheel in action. (Photo by Reuben Goldberg.)

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