

CROSS-CURRENTS



EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

Buddhist Revelations in Davaakhuugin Soyolmaa's Contemporary Mongolian Art

Uranchimeg Tsultemin, University of California, Berkeley

In 1990, a seven-decade socialist taboo on religion was lifted in newly transforming Mongolia, where democratic reforms and a peaceful transition to a market economy and multiparty government system were taking place. The country entered into a critical period of transition in 1992, when revisions to the constitution changed the Mongolian People's Republic into the Republic of Mongolia. While political studies of this transitional period have been conducted, along with studies of the economic boost of 2008, very little has been written about Mongolian art since 1990.ⁱ This essay explores that relatively untrodden ground by focusing on contemporary artist Davaakhuugin Soyolmaaⁱⁱ (b. 1977) (figure 1), whose work exemplifies the revival of Buddhist art and culture in contemporary Mongolia.



Figure 1. Mongolian artist Davaakhuugin Soyolmaa. *Source:* Courtesy of the artist.

The revival of Buddhism in Mongolia began immediately after 1990 with the opening of Ulaanbaatar's only monastery of the Ganden sect, an institution that survived the socialist period operating under very limiting rules and strict party control. Gandan Monastery is one of only two monasteries that were spared from the massive destruction of over 1,050 Buddhist sites nationwide by pro-Soviet Mongol revolutionaries in the 1930s, and it was the only place where some limited ritual services and a small school of Buddhist monastics operated throughout the twentieth century.ⁱⁱⁱ After 1990, Gandan expanded its activities, constructed new temples, and renovated older temples. Venerable Lama Purevbat (b. 1965), who had studied painting at Ulaanbaatar's college of art, in Dharamsala, India, and throughout his travels in the Himalayas, opened a private school for the revival of Mongolian Buddhist art. His Mongolian Institute of Buddhist Art, which initially opened and operated at Gandan Monastery (and is currently run from his private Aglag Monastery), taught students to make traditional thangka paintings through mastery of the iconometry of proportions. The Buddhist art that Lama Purevbat creates with his students has been exhibited at Ulaanbaatar's museums and is impressive, both because of its quantity as well as because of his passionate knowledge of tradition. While Lama Purevbat's own knowledge of thangka painting is based on his studies with Tibetan artists in Dharamsala, and his paintings reveal inspiration derived from Tibetan art, he claims that his ultimate aim is to revive and create Mongolian Buddhist art with a Mongolian style.^{iv}

Lama Purevbat's approach to reviving the thangka tradition based on his solid iconometrical knowledge has received unanimous support and appreciation.^v Yet, while this author fully applauds his achievements and contribution, I still wonder: Is this the only way to revive Buddhist art? Why are other contemporary artists—such as Soyolmaa—who work with Buddhist themes and iconographies relatively unknown and underappreciated? How do we analyze Buddhist images by Mongolian, Tibetan, and other Himalayan contemporary artists that do not follow thangka paintings? Soyolmaa, a Mongolian artist whose works are concerned primarily with Buddhist deities and narratives, offers us thought-provoking novelty by diverging from the thangka tradition and thereby raising the important question of what constitutes Buddhist imagery in modern society.

Soyolmaa was born and raised in Mongolia, where she continues to live and thrive. Her parents are both Mongolian artists, whose art media, subject matter, and style fall within the traditional Mongolian style of painting called Mongol Zurag.^{vi} Soyolmaa's father, Tsendendashin

Davaakhuu (1944–2001), was a painter and Buddhist practitioner who studied with a reincarnate lama called Devadamba (dates unknown). While trained in the socialist state as a painter of theater design sets, Tsedendashin Davaakhuu was active in Mongol Zurag compositions. Soyolmaa's mother, Darjaagin Uranchimeg (b. 1947), remains a prolific master of appliqué and embroidery art, whose subject matter followed socialist motifs and narratives in the twentieth century, but changed to Buddhist images once the taboo was lifted. Uranchimeg and Davaakhuu often worked together as a team by developing images first sketched by the husband and then appliquéd by the wife onto a textile. In this way, the couple followed a traditional creative process in Buddhist Mongolia in which a master artist would produce a first design, which would be further developed by a second artist, resulting in a monumental thangka created out of productive teamwork.^{vii} During the time of the socialist regime, Davaakhuu and Uranchimeg collaborated in this traditional way yet produced images with themes that were acceptable for socialist censorship. Soyolmaa's choice of a life path guided by her passion for traditional art and Buddhism was deeply influenced by her family background.

Soyolmaa's passion manifested itself after her graduation from a painting class at the Institute of Fine Arts, when she joined her older sister in a monastic community in Ulaanbaatar. She seriously considered becoming a nun and devoting her life to Buddhist practice like her sister. She was guided by her guru, who taught her the essentials of Buddhist doctrine in addition to encouraging her to continue painting. Eventually, Soyolmaa decided to dedicate her life to painting full time. Her few years as a novice at a Buddhist monastery were, however, critical years that turned her art in a completely new direction.

Soyolmaa's art is informed by Buddhist motifs and narratives, including meditation and enlightenment, deities and iconography, and the historical Buddha Śākyamuni. Her interest in Buddhist aspects of meditation are presented as a deeply personal experience that is both transformative and detached. In *Buddha and Soul* (image 1 in the accompanying photo essay), Soyolmaa depicts a slim, youthful figure standing with hands in *añjali mudrā* (a gesture of respect and greeting), eyes closed in contemplation, and a double face. The meditator is a lone figure in a busy crowd, and his or her closed eyes and hand gesture suggest a personal experience of mental concentration that overcomes the distractions and overwhelming rush of modern society. The infinite number of people and their busy speed is represented by a surrounding crowd of numerous figures in orange and brown hues. This painting developed from Soyolmaa's

earlier *Buddha* (image 2 in photo essay and figure 2a below), in which the idea of cultivating worldly detachment to achieve an enlightened state is made even more explicit. Here, the Buddha is depicted in a more conventional form, holding his hands in *abhaya mudrā* (fearlessness) and *varada mudrā* (dispensing boons), respectively. This iconography of a standing Buddha is representative of many colossal Buddha statues erected along the ancient Silk Road, from the now-destroyed Bamiyan Buddhas of Afghanistan to cave sculptures in China and East Asia and modern statues in Mongolia. Soyolmaa's image appears remarkably similar to the 23-meter Buddha erected by the late Guru Deva Rinpoche (figure 2b below) in 2006 using donations from South Korean patrons. The golden statue was placed in a carefully selected location in Ulaanbaatar, at the foot of a hill on which a monument of a Soviet soldier commemorates Soviet-Mongol friendship and brotherhood-in-arms. Standing in the midst of a busy new development zone, Guru Deva's Buddha indeed symbolizes and delivers a message of peace and unworldly existence in a modern society that aims for material wealth. The visual contrast of this Buddha, with its gray, mundane surroundings and nearby somber statues of socialist military men, contrasts with Soyolmaa's *Buddha*, who is distinguished in the painting with a transcendent appearance, golden color, dominating size, and rays of light.



Figure 2a. *Buddha* by D. Soyolmaa. Oil on canvas, 120 x 100 cm, 2009.

Figure 2b. Buddha statue erected by the Late Guru Deva Rinpoche in Ulaanbaatar in 2006. Photo by the author, December 2017.

In *Buddha and Soul*, however, the artist's vision and understanding of Buddhahood is raised to a different level. The image is not recognizably Buddha, but the title designates that it is. The meditator's double face is the mental image that he or she generates as the result of concentration and cultivation of mind; the radiating halo suggests an unearthly experience and successful detachment. This figure is truly transcendental and is not specific to the historical Buddha Śākyamuni; instead, it offers a visual rendering of personal transformation. We may consider this painting as a modern vision of enlightenment as process, without any references to particular names and sites but rather highlighting the transformative process itself.

We can see similar ideas and the theme of enlightenment in *Face* (image 3), in which the meditator visually experiences an unusual state of existence. The red central line demarcates the peaceful absorption of mind signaled by the serene lotus flower clasped in *vitarka mudrā*, a gesture of religious discourse. In *Flowers of Enlightenment* (image 4), Soyolmaa depicts a female enlightened figure, explicitly connecting the subtlety and idea of enlightenment with her feminine identity. The flat, two-dimensional quality of this colorful painting recalls the exotic landscapes of Paul Gauguin's Tahitian paintings. The choice here appears intentional: Gauguin's vision and experience of Tahitian landscapes and people as exotic "others" triggered his distinctive style. Likewise, Soyolmaa's site of enlightenment is surreal and completely detached from the mundane world of material things. This site is bright and sunlit with a lotus flower blooming at the center of a perfectly balanced landscape of symmetrically arranged hills, stylized rocks, pond, river, and trees: a truly idyllic place for enlightenment. The dark shadows projecting onto the green lawn indicate the many sentient beings on this side of the shore waiting to reach out to the divine and join the enlightened ones. While the figure has *uṣṇīṣa* (a protuberance on the crown of the head) and elongated earlobes—two of the thirty-two marks of the Buddha—Soyolmaa sees this figure as a bodhisattva (one who defers enlightenment in order to save those still suffering), thus hinting at the idea of the process that leads to enlightenment.^{viii}

The artist often depicts the aspect of meditation in which the body is transformed. *Gumuda* (image 5) features an introverted gaze, suggesting the necessary focus on the mind that enables one to concentrate on the body's chakra energy centers. In this painting, a human body in contemplation is associated and merged with *kumudu* (Mongolian: *gumuda*; Latin: *Nymphoides indica*), a water flower in India and Sri Lanka that blooms at night. In this painting and in *From Faraway* (image 6 and figure 3a below), the moment of concentration and the introverted gaze

are identified with night, with the moon and sun coming together as the pictorial metaphors of eternity, continuity, and the wheel of time, thus recalling the same idea behind the constant presence of the sun and moon at the top of nearly all traditional thangka paintings (figure 3b). In other words, the artist's own perception of Buddhist concepts and motifs have inspired new visual forms; while they adhere to traditional Buddhist iconographies and their meanings, they also present the personal interpretations of the artist.



Figure 3a. *From Faraway* by D. Soyolmaa.
Oil on canvas, 100 x 84 cm, 2010.

Figure 3b. *SitaTara*, thangka attributed to
Zanabazar (1635–1723), early 1700s.
Bogd Khan Palace Museum. Courtesy of
the Tsultem Family Archive.

This approach to visualizing and personifying Buddhist concepts in boldly creative compositions can be also seen in *Song of the Night* (image 7), at the heart of which is the idea of the bodhisattva's compassion. Soyolmaa dedicates several images to this theme, including *Janraisig* (Tib. *spyān ras gzigs*; Skt. *Avalokiteśvara*) (image 8 and figure 4 below), *Tārā* (image 9), *At Night* (image 10), and *Green Tārā* (image 11). *Avalokiteśvara*—known in early India as *Padmapāni*, in Tibet as *Chenrezig*, and in China as *Guanyin*—is worshipped across Asia for the

bodhisattva's infinite compassion. Avalokiteśvara is known to have shed tears out of compassion for sentient beings. Out of her tears and love, Tārā was born; in *Janraisig* (image 8), we see Tārā on the white body of the bodhisattva just below the pair of hands clasped in prayer. Traditionally, Avalokiteśvara takes a variety of forms, from the simple figure of Padmapāni to the four-armed Śaḍākṣara, and to the tantric form of a thousand-armed, eleven-headed, thousand-eyed bodhisattva. The last form is particularly known as the manifestation of boundless compassion and of Avalokiteśvara's supreme wish to reach out to help and protect all sentient beings. It is this act of compassion and the much-desired reaching out to all those longing for help that we see visualized in Soyolmaa's *Janraisig* (image 8). In this representation, Avalokiteśvara has taken a feminine form in her conventional white color and is manifesting multiple faces to see each and every being in need of help and compassion. Numerous hands reaching out to the bodhisattva are dramatized with gestures and exaggerated shapes and colors, suggesting that the entire human race needs the deity's protection.



Figure 4. *Janraisig* by D. Soyolmaa. Oil on canvas, 80 x 50 cm, 2011.

Soyolmaa depicts *Green Tārā* (image 11) using traditional iconography: the goddess is seated with her main lotus attribute, wearing a five-leafed crown, and stretching her hand in a boon-granting *varada mudrā*. Unlike traditional frontal depictions of Tārā, however, in Soyolmaa's image the goddess is turned toward four sentient beings seeking her help, one of whom is offering a *khadag* (blessing scarf) to the deity as an outward form of veneration. Tārā belongs to the lotus family of Avalokiteśvara, her spiritual progenitor, and that affiliation is artfully relayed via Soyolmaa's color choices, as white (Avalokiteśvara's color) and the lotus flowers dominate the composition. The contrast between the white (including the puffy clouds) and the gloomy gray tones and dark rainy colors is deeply meaningful, as the gray and dark colors connote the sadness and despair of sentient beings who approach the deity in veneration and expectation for help. Such depictions of deities explicitly turning toward devotees and connecting with them in their veneration is not common, as the main meditational *yidam*^{ix} are typically depicted facing forward at the center or top of traditional thangkas. Visualizing Green Tārā as moving toward humans is the artist's own vision and her own experience; it brings the deity more into the human realm, rather than presenting her as an abstract, divine concept. This image, while following tradition in some respects, once again reveals the very personal experience of Soyolmaa, her private visualization reminding us of the true creativity based on practice and dedication also seen in the work of great Buddhist artists of the past. The practice enables the artists to augment their reading and interpretation of *sādhana*s, or visualization texts, with their own new forms and uncommon compositions. Even when Soyolmaa depicts a single deity (as in image 12), her *Green Tārā* is different and unique with its abstract colors in the background, bold color combinations, and symbolic juxtapositions—a truly private vision.

Soyolmaa is also known as a painter of *ḍākinīs*, those “sky dancers” who are deities of benevolence and female energy. She is specifically interested in Kurukullā, who is depicted in red, according to tradition, with four arms, holding a bow and arrow made of flowers in one pair of hands and a hook and noose of flowers in the other pair. Soyolmaa's *Kurukullā* (image 13) follows this iconography yet portrays a benign and even attractive face on the otherwise semi-wrathful goddess. Not only is Kurukullā's face feminine and personalized; the seductive femininity of her body is also distinctive. Soyolmaa is interested in those abilities of Kurukullā that are best described in the following Nyingma liturgical verse:

Culmination of the pristine awareness and compassion of all conquerors,
 Well arising as the bliss-emptiness—Goddess of Power,
 Controlling all beings of the three realms with a charming form;
 Homage to the *Ḍākinī*.^x

As she did with Avalokiteśvara and Tārā, Soyolmaa presents her approach to Kurukullā in *At Night* (image 10 and figure 5 below), where she depicts the deity as visually present among ordinary people, safeguarding, protecting, and watching their well-being.



Figure 5. *At Night*, oil on canvas, 70 x 100 cm, 2007.

Transformation of the self by cutting through the ego and other obstacles (such as ignorance, greed, and anger) is at the center of the teachings of a well-known Tibetan practitioner named Machig Labdrön (1031–1129), who was the main holder of a particular Chö practice (Patrul Rinpoche 1998, 296–307). Chö practitioners inhabit graveyards to contemplate cutting through the belief in a self in order to perceive the world as inherently empty and illusionary. This practice is commonly known as “offering body.” Tibetan Buddhist teacher Sarah Harding explains that Chö practice, “with a stunning array of visualizations, song, music, and prayer... engages every aspect of one’s being and effects a powerful transformation of the interior landscape,” aiming at a complete severing of attachment to the ego (Harding 2003, “Preface”). Machig Labdrön is usually depicted as a *Ḍākinī* with a raised leg in a dynamic motion of the egoless body and in the vision of *Ḍākinī* as enlightened female energy. This tradition can

be seen in Soyolmaa's modern depiction in *Chod* (artist's spelling; image 14), in which—again in a personalized style, new iconography, and creative form—the artist delivers the essential message of the transformation process.

Soyolmaa reads *sādhana* texts that are translated by her sister from the Tibetan originals and published in Mongolia.^{xi} She also comments on these *sādhanas* in her own notebook, raising questions and making interesting observations about her own visions and conceptualizations of Buddhist ideas. In *The Sun* (image 15), her depiction of popular Mahayāna deity Marīcī, for example, we see a shining goddess of dawn as she is described in a *sādhana* text that the artist copied into her notebook:

Rise, rise, ignite the spark!
The sun of happiness—rise!
The daughter of the sun—rise!^{xii}

As Soyolmaa further comments, if the sun's rays are shadowed, it is only due to clouds; the sun does not cease to shine because of those shadows. Likewise, the short verse, as she notes, does not indicate the end of the vision and the visualization of the deity. Soyolmaa's own words and her art, including *The Sun*'s radiant Marīcī, testify to the artist's own broad visualization of the goddess and her deliberate intention not to remain limited to the text. Marīcī's color is dominant with bright and warm hues of yellow, and her benevolent face is kind and spotted with freckles, which make her appear girlish and humanized; however, her multiple arms hold Buddhist attributes, such as *vajra* and lotus, suggesting that she remains a supernatural being. Marīcī's body is artsy and disproportionate, seemingly seated in her chariot as prescribed in conventional iconography, yet the abstract color rhythm of the background adds a mysterious, unearthly ambiance. We have seen how great Buddhist artists of the past—such as the seventeenth-century Mongolian Zanabazar (1635–1723), the Tibetan Chöying Dorje (1604–1674), or the mid- to late thirteenth-century Chinese Muqi Fachang, among many others—produced creative visions of the deities with unusually rendered Buddhist themes.^{xiii} Soyolmaa's art suggests a similarly creative contemporary approach.

The least typical painting in Soyolmaa's oeuvre is her *Sitātatapattrā* (image 16), a painting of a young, slim lady standing with a white parasol. The lady is in white, with closed eyes, stretching her free left arm in a *varada mudrā* and standing amid the abstract colors of an

unidentifiable site. The title and the umbrella are the only indexes to what appears to be the Buddhist deity Sitātatapatrā, whose iconography prescribes a white parasol as her main attribute. Nothing in this image specifically refers to a Buddhist theme, and without its title it would not be easy to identify this image with Sitātatapatrā. How should we understand Soyolmaa’s approach in this painting, other than that it reflects the practitioner’s own experience with, and personal vision of, this deity? To have visions of deities and visualizations of Buddhist themes is common and expected in Buddhist practice. The mental image is created during the meditation praxis, and many Buddhist scholars of the past wrote texts describing their visions, sometimes creating new forms of deities, for whom they also wrote new *sādhana* texts.^{xiv} *Sādhana* texts and artworks are, after all, also visualization aids, and as Soyolmaa and many other Buddhist artists have shown, visual interpretations and renditions can (and should) take unusual forms, as they are based on individual practice and interpretations of (and thoughts about) Buddhist topics. The *sādhana* texts are the result of, and intended for, meditation praxis of Buddhist practitioners. Soyolmaa’s art is, then, arguably based on, and derivative of, her private meditation on Buddhist deities. As her own guru has encouraged her to depict these paintings of the deities in their unconventional, idiosyncratic forms and style, we may deduce that these paintings are contemporary notations of the mental images of this practitioner, the artist Soyolmaa. While her work remains less appreciated and little noticed in Mongolia, it is as legitimate and acceptable as those traditional forms of Buddhist iconographies that other artists—such as the Venerable Lama Purevbat—follow in their modern thangkas.

Uranchimeg Tsultemin is co-chair of the Mongolia Initiative at the Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, Berkeley.

Notes

- 1 My own efforts to fill this gap include Tsultemin (2002, 2008, 2011, 2012, 2015a, 2015b, forthcoming).
- 2 Mongolian names have a parent’s family name as the last name placed in front of a given first name. Thus, Davaakhuugin Soyolmaa is the correct way of introducing the artist; however, she has established herself as Soyolmaa Davaakhuu.

- 3 According to Ivan Maiskii's 1921 report, there were 2,752 monasteries in Mongolia. Research conducted in 2009 as part of the "Mongolian Temples" project under the auspices of Mongolia's president N. Enkhbayar recorded evidence and archives pertaining to 1,050 monasteries. See Maiskii (1921) and Tsedendamba (2009).
- 4 Lama Purevbat, personal conversation, fall 2007.
- 5 Lama Purevbat received the Prince Claus Award for "the uncompromising authenticity of his methods and techniques, for revitalizing an important, 'non-modern' art form, for his dedication to future generations and for cherishing local identity through traditional art and culture" (see <http://www.princeclausfund.org/en/network/venerable.html>). He published a three-volume set on Buddhist iconometry of proportions in December 2017.
- 6 On Mongol Zurag, see N-O Tsultem (1986) and Tsultemin (2017).
- 7 More information about monumental thangkas in Mongolia can be found in my unpublished manuscript "A Monastery on the Move: Art and Politics in Later Buddhist Mongolia."
- 8 Personal conversation, September 28, 2017.
- 9 *Yidam* deities are often called tutelary or meditational deities and are prescribed to the practitioner by the guru for meditation praxis.
- 10 See <https://www.himalayanart.org/items/90191>.
- 11 Mongolian Buddhist scholars wrote their texts in Tibetan, as it served as the main liturgical language in Mongolian monasteries.
- 12 "Marīcī's sādhana" in Soyolmaa's notebook, personal communication, September 28, 2017.
- 13 For Chöying Dorje, see Debreczeny (2012).
- 14 Just to stay with Mongolia, two such scholars should be mentioned. The third Dalai Lama, Sonam Gyatso, is known to have created a new form of Mahākāla for Mongols in the sixteenth century. According to his vision, this Mahākāla was a standing white form with two hands and one head. It is often depicted in Mongolian paintings. See Stoddard (1995, 211). The other scholar who should be mentioned here is Ikh Khüree's abbot, Agwaan Khaidav (Ngag dbang mkhas grub, 1779–1838), who wrote numerous *sādhana* texts based on his own visions. See, for instance, his Maitreya *sādhana* texts in Agwaan Khaidav ([1800–1830] 1972–1974, vol. 1, fol. 155–165, 281, 285). See also Tsultemin (2015c, esp. 146).

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