



The Khökh Süm, first temple built at Erdene Zuu by Avtai Khan

Erdene Zuu

Monastery Founded by Avtai Khan, Great-Grandfather of Zanabazar

Location: N47°11.530 – E102°50.548. Övörkhangai Aimag, on the outskirts of the sum center of Kharkhorin.

Buddhism as it exists in Mongolia today can be traced back to Zanabazar's great-grandfather Avtai Khan (1554-1587), who ruled the Tüsheet Khanate, one of the three khanates which made up the domains of the Khalkh, or Eastern Mongols, in the late sixteenth-century.¹ The Tüsheet Khanate was centered around the valleys of the Tuul and Orkhon rivers, including the area now occupied by Mongolia's capital of Ulaan Baatar. In 1580 or thereabouts Avtai traveled south, probably to what is now the Chinese province of Inner Mongolia, and met with the Tibetan lama Sonam Gyatso, who earlier in 1578 had been given the title "Dalai Lama" by the Mongolian chieftain Altan Khan, a new convert to Buddhism.² Sonam Gyatso's two previous incarnations assumed the title posthumously, and he himself became the third Dalai Lama. As a result of his meeting with Sonam Gyatso Avtai too converted to Buddhism. The Dalai Lama gave Avtai a relic of the Buddha and a statue of *Ochirvaani* (Sanskrit = Vajrapani) and instructed him to build a temple to house them, adding, "There is in your territory an area with the name of Old and New Orqon [Orkhon]. You should select an auspicious site and build it [the temple] there."³ The Dalai Lama may have been aware that several Buddhist temples had been built in the old Mongol capital of Kharkhorin (plus two mosques and a Christian church) during the reigns of khans Ögödei, Güyük, and



Central Zuu Temple (left) and Left Zuu Temple

Möngke in the mid-thirteenth-century. These temples were destroyed after the fall of the Yüan Dynasty in 1368 and the subsequent destruction of Kharkhorum by armies of the Chinese Ming Dynasty. In the next two hundred years Buddhism all but disappeared in what is now the country of Mongolia.

Avtai eventually decided to build the temple on the site of the old Mongol capital, located on the Orkhon River just below where it debouches from the foothills of the Khangai Mountains. In 1585 he sent to Khökh Khot in what is now Inner Mongolia—the city founded by Altan Khan, now known as Hohhot—for a lama to oversee the construction of the temple. This first structure was the *Khökh Süm* ((Blue Temple), also known as the *Övgön* (Grandfather, or Old Man) Süm. Shortly thereafter another temple was rebuilt from the ruins of a temple which had previously existed at Kharkhorum during the brief florescence of Buddhism here in the thirteenth-century. This became the Central Zuu Temple. Over the next several decades the Left Zuu Temple and the Right Zuu Temple were built on either side of the Central Zuu Temple. According to some sources the Right Zuu Temple was built by order of Zanabazar's grandmother, the wife of Erkhii Mergen Khan, and the Left Zuu Temple by Zanabazar's mother, Khandjamts. These three temples constituted the core of what became Erdene Zuu Monastery.⁴

Zanabazar undoubtedly spent a lot of time at Erdene Zuu. The steppe to the east was his ancestral home and he studied at Erdene Zuu as a young man. In 1653, after



his first trip to Tibet to meet with the Panchen and Dalai lamas, his followers held a *danshig naadam* at Erdene Zuu to celebrate his nineteenth birthday. These naadams, which at that time featured wrestling and archery matches (horse racing was apparently added later), were first held in honor of Zanabazar when he was five or six years old and were the forerunners of the current-day Naadam celebrations in Mongolia.⁵ At these events rulers and noblemen of all the Khalkh, or Eastern Mongol aimags (provinces), met and presented Zanabazar with offerings of food, livestock, gold and silver, and other gifts. The two winners of the wrestling matches were presented with the “nine gifts”: bolts of silk, silver, tea, leather, fox skins, one camel, one horse, one sheep, and an assortment of food stuffs.

In 1657 another large convocation was held at Erdene Zuu to celebrate Zanabazar’s return from his second trip to Tibet. At this meeting, in addition to another *danshig naadam* held in his honor, Zanabazar performed several ceremonies he had learned in Tibet from the Panchen Lama, including the circumambulation of the monastery with a figure of *Maidar* (Maitreya, the Future Buddha).⁶ This was the origin of the Maidar ceremony which would become a standard feature of Buddhism in Mongolia right down to the early twentieth-century, when it was finally banned by the new communist regime. (The Maidar Ceremony is once again being performed at Erdene Zuu; the latest one on March 18, 2005.) He also gave several days of sermons centered around the teachings he had just received in Tibet from the Panchen and Dalai lamas. In this he was assisted by Tibetan monks who had come back with him from Tibet.

The same year he ordered the construction of a huge *ger* (the traditional felt tents of the Mongols) on the site where Avtai Khan had erected his own *ger*. Zanabazar’s *ger*, known as the *Bat-Ölziit*, was forty-five meters in diameter, fifteen meters high in the middle, and could hold up to 300 people. In 1658 a convocation of Mongol leaders, apparently attended by Zanabazar, was held in the *Bat-Ölziit ger*, and later Zanabazar had it moved to Örgöö (now Ulaan Baatar), where it served as a temple devoted to his great-grandfather, Avtai Khan. It was still in Örgöö in 1892 when the Russian ethnographer Pozdneeve saw it. “Ordinary Mongol yurts [gers] standing next to it seemed toy-like by comparison,” he noted.⁷ What eventually happened to this *ger* is unclear.

In 1688 the Zungarian Mongols under the leadership of Galdan Bolshigt invaded Khalkh Mongolia and soon reached Erdene Zuu. A Manchu diplomat who was passing through the area at the time sent this report to Beijing:

Galdan’s army has thoroughly plundered all the people surrounding Erdene Juu [Zuu] and has reached the place called Black Orkhon. It is only one day’s jour-



Stone foundation of the *Bat-Ölziit Ger*



Stone sockets for the pillars of the *Bat-Ölziit Ger*



ney from where the Jetsundamba Khutukhtu [Zanabazar] was. The Khutukhtu, with the [Tüsheet] khan's son, wife, people, lamas and disciples, in all more than three hundred persons, fled away by night. The Khalkhas abandoned all their yurts, their vessels and tools, their horses, camels and sheep, and fled, night and day alike, in all directions. I do not know where the Tüsheet Khan is. Some say that Galdan himself is with the army, and that nearly ten thousand soldiers are advancing in various ways . . . It is quite true that they have killed Khalkhas, forced nobles to surrender, set fire to temples, and destroyed scriptures and images.⁸

Zanabazar and his followers fled to China where the Qing emperor Kangxi gave them refuge. He did not return to Erdene Zuu until 1701. In the intervening years the monastery had apparently been abandoned and some of the temples had been damaged. Zanabazar immediately set about re-consecrating and repairing the temples, and the monastery soon became active again. The last report we have of Zanabazar at Erdene Zuu is in 1711, when another danshig nadam was held in his honor.

By the late eighteenth-century Erdene Zuu Monastery had at least sixty-two temples and hundreds of other buildings. The first version of the wall which surrounds the monastery was built between 1804 and 1808 and contained ninety-two stupas. When the Russian ethnographer A. M. Pozdnev first visited Erdene Zuu in 1877 this wall had almost completely collapsed, although the stupas remained. When he returned in 1892 a large portion of the current wall had been built but apparently there were still only ninety-two stupas. Thus the current wall with its 108 stupas, one of the most notable features of the monastery and certainly the most photographed, was completed sometime thereafter.⁹ The wall as it now stands measures 1315 feet (402 meters) on each side. Each of the individual stupas was paid for, according to Pozdnev, "by alms-givers



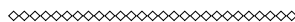
Stupas and wall around Erdene Zuu



Tombs of Avtai (left) and Gombodorj



Tomb of Khandjams



and worshippers of Buddha of the most diverse calling, from princes of the first class to the most ordinary Mongolian common people, distinguished at the time by their having surplus means.”

The entire complex was severely damaged during the anti-Buddhist campaigns of the late 1930s and today only eighteen temples remain. The main complex, including the three Zuu temples, is now a museum. The Tibetan-styled Laviran Temple towards the back of the compound has been reopened once again and now serves as the center of a functioning monastery for a small community of monks.

The Khökh Süm, the first structure built by Avtai, still exists. The small, un-signposted building can be seen between a complex of large stupas and the Tibetan-styled Laviran Temple. Both Avtai, Zanabazar’s great-grandfather, and Gombodorj, his father, were buried at Erdene Zuu. Their tombs, heavily damaged during the 1937 upheavals, have been restored and can be seen directly in front of the three Zuu temples, Avtai’s on the left and Gombodorj’s on the right. Zanabazar’s mother Khandjamts was also buried at Erdene Zuu, although outside the monastery walls. Her stupa-tomb, constructed by order of Zanabazar and his brother Chakhuundorj in 1674, can be seen just beyond the northeast corner of the monastery.

The Dalai Lama Temple, in front of the wall surrounding the three Zuus, was built by Zanabazar’s brother Chakhuundorj to commemorate his visit to Tibet in 1673. Among other items, the temple contains six thangkas depicting Sonam Gyatso, the Third Dalai Lama, who had converted Avtai Khan to Buddhism.¹⁰ Near the center of the monastery grounds can be seen the circular stone foundation of the so-called Bat-Ölziit ger built by order of Zanabazar in 1657 and later moved to Uрга.

Museum officials say there are at least five works of art at Erdene Zuu directly attributed to Zanabazar and numerous others from the so-called School of Zanabazar, which consists of works by artists who attempted with varying success to emulate his style. As of this writing only one alleged work by Zanabazar, a small statue of Mahakala in the Right Zuu Temple, is on public display, although museum officials promise more will be shown soon. The more notable of the School of Zanabazar works include a large Vajrasattva in the Tsampa Temple, in front of the three Zuu temples; a Mahakala statue in the Left Zuu Temple; and a small bronze stupa in the Central Zuu Temple.



The Dalai Lama Temple



Vajrasattva, probably School of Zanabazar



Mahakala by Zanabazar (?)

