

The Grand Maitreya Project of Mongolia: A Colossal Statue-cum-Stupa for a Happy Future of 'Loving♥Kindness'

Isabelle Charleux (CNRS, GSRL-EPHE/PSL)

Abstract

This paper questions the current construction of a 54 metres statue of Maitreya against a 108 metres stupa in the steppe south of Ulaanbaatar, that will stand at the edge of a new 'eco-city,' Maidar City. The Grand Maitreya Project (GMP) was initiated in 2009 by H. Battulga, businessman and MP (before he was elected president of Mongolia). The project aims to be 'one of the largest Buddhist complex in the world,' and now is a 'National project for reviving traditional Buddhist education and culture.'

I propose to use religious and art-historical approaches in order to document the 'birth' of a Buddhist project, with a special interest in the long process of conception, fundraising and promotional programme. Relying on recent studies on the entanglement of Buddhism, politics, culture, consumerization and tourism that gave rise to new cultural modalities, and on studies of colossal statues recently built in Asia, this article asks what the GMP tells us about modern Mongolian politics and public religious culture. What are the sources of inspiration and foreign references of the GMP? Is it a religious monument that will benefit from the tourist economy, a tourist attraction, or a unifying, nationalist symbol of 21st-century Mongolia?

Keywords: Mongolia, Mongolian Buddhism, material culture, colossal statue, gigantism, architecture, tourism, stupa, consumerism, business

In the 2010s, worshippers and visitors of Gandan,¹ the main monastery of Ulaanbaatar City, could admire the giant feet of a metal statue in front of the Megjid Janraisig Temple along with a large billboard presenting the 'Grand Maitreya Project' (hereafter, GMP, Mo. Ih Maidar tööl)² (**fig. 1**). The project was to build a 54 metres tall statue of Maitreya (Tib. Jampa/'Byams pa, Mo. Maidar or Asralt) standing against a 108 metres high stupa. The stupa and the colossal statue will stand at the edge of a new 'eco-city' named Maidar City, 50 kilometres south of the capital. The billboard compared the size of Rio de Janeiro's Christ the Saviour (39 metres tall), the Chinggis Khan statue of Tsonjin Boldog in Mongolia (40 metres), the Statue of Liberty (46 metres), and the Grand Maitreya, that surpassed them all in size (**fig. 2**).



Fig. 1. Golden feet of the Grand Maitreya statue in front of the Megjid Janraisig Temple of Gandan Monastery, Ulaanbaatar. © Sue Byrne, 2013

¹ Gandantegchilen (dGa' ldan theg chen gling), shortened as Gandan—the name of this monastery is a reference to both Tuṣita Heaven and Ganden Monastery in Tibet.

² The feet were exhibited there from 2012 to 2017; in 2018 only the billboard remained.



Fig. 2. Billboard comparing the size of Christ the Saviour of Rio de Janeiro, the Chinggis Khan statue of Tsonjin Boldog in Mongolia, the Statue of Liberty, and the projected Grand Maitreya. Gandan Monastery, Ulaanbaatar. © Isabelle Charleux, 2013

The GMP was conceived at a time of prosperity. Between 2009 and 2013, after a difficult transition period from communism to ultra-liberalism in the 1990s and two economic crises (in 2000 and in 2009), Mongolia experienced rapid growth fueled by the mining boom.³ A new, growing middle-class of Ulaanbaatarites purchased cars and discovered their country as tourists, and the construction sector in Ulaanbaatar, the capital city, went through a considerable expansion in both height and surface. The initiator of the project is Haltmaa Battulga (1963-), a well-known businessman and politician (after a career as a wrestler), president of Mongolia from 2017 to 2021.⁴ The Genco Tour Bureau, a branch of the Genco LLC society he founded in 1992, had financed in 2008 the construction of the colossal Chinggis Khan statue at Tsonjin Boldog (54 kilometres east of Ulaanbaatar) (**fig. 3**). Battulga also supported the creation of a ‘13th Century National Park’ (about 100 kilometres east of Ulaanbaatar), which provides the visitors (mostly foreigners, considering the high entrance fee) an ‘experience’ of life under the Mongol empire. He planned to build the Grand Maitreya in 2009 before he was elected president (in 2017), but unlike some politicians, he does not claim to be a Buddhist himself. The project aims to become ‘one of the largest Buddhist complex in the world,’ combining ‘traditional Buddhist values’ ‘and contemporary, modern architecture and new city’ (GMP Booklet). The project later became a national enterprise and is now labelled as a ‘National project for reviving traditional Buddhist education and culture.’ It obtained the support of President Elbegdorj (president from 2009 to 2017), of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, and of *gabju* Demberelyn Choijamts, abbot (*hamba lam*) of Gandan Monastery and head of the Centre of Mongolian Buddhism—although Mongolian Buddhism is decentralized, Choijamts is considered by some Mongolians to be the head of Buddhism in Mongolia (“Ih Maidar tösöl heregjij ehellee” 2011). The presence of Battulga and of these three emblematic sponsors recalls

³ After a peak of 17.3% in 2011, the GDP growth rate declined; in 2017 it was of 5.1%.

⁴ He was a Member of Parliament (2004-2008 and 2012-2016), Minister for Road, Transport, Construction and Urban Development (2008-2012) and Minister for Industry and Agriculture (2012-2014).

of the politico-religio-economical relationship known in Tibetan as *chöyon* (*mchod yon*) between the alms-giver (the donor) and the religious master.⁵

The Project's chief designer was the state-honoured artist, designer and sculptor Dorjjadamba Erdembileg (d. 2020), who was well-known for having designed the Tsonjin Boldog Chinggis Khaan Complex and the Morin Huur Tower (in project). Erdembileg designed both the Maitreya statue and the stupa with the advice of high-ranking lamas;⁶ he was surrounded by a team of artists, including some volunteers.⁷ In 2012, the British engineering company Tony Gee and Partners LLC's project was selected to build the Stupa-complex.



Fig. 3. Chinggis Khan equestrian statue of Tsonjin Boldog, 40 metres (10 metres high for the statue, 30 metres for the pedestal-complex), erected in 2008, located 54 kilometres east of the capital in Töv Province, Mongolia. © Isabelle Charleux, 2014

This study is a rare opportunity to document the ‘birth’ of a Buddhist monumental project in Mongolia in a comparative context of Buddhist gigantism throughout Asia. I propose to use religious and art-historical approaches, with a special interest not only in the visuals, the

⁵ *Chöyon* is the contraction of *chöné* (*mchod gnas*, Mo. *öglögiin ezen*), ‘patron, alms-master, lord of donations’ and *yöndak* (*yon bdag*, Mo. *tahilyn oron*), ‘offering-site.’ In Mongolian, it is more commonly known as *hoyor yos*, the ‘dual principle/law/system/order’ of worldly rule and religion.

⁶ On his ‘vision’ of the project: Önör 2013.

⁷ Vesna Wallace, personal communication, November 20, 2020.

planned structures, the models, the choices made in architecture, iconography and style, but also in the long process of conception and construction, including the fundraising and promotional programme, the accompanying rituals and the personalities involved. Due to the impossibility of doing fieldwork in 2020, I had to turn to the texts and visuals produced by the project (billboards and posters featuring artist renderings of the planned structure, booklet, official website, Facebook pages in Mongolian and English), newspaper articles, interviews, blogs, postings, and advertisements, as well as public opinion and rumours expressed in social media.

To analyse this monument in construction, I will rely on recent studies on the entanglement of religion, politics, culture, business and tourism that gave rise to new cultural modalities, and on studies of colossal statues recently built in Asia. Already before the 20th century, monumental stupas and miraculous relics fuelled popular religiosity, and pilgrimage always incorporated a dimension of entertainment and leisure (Turner and Turner 1978).⁸ This phenomenon intensified with the late 20th century transformations brought on by economic and cultural globalization. For François Gauthier and Tuomas Martikainen, 'the twin forces of neoliberalism and consumerism are penetrating and transforming the religions worldwide' (Gauthier and Martikainen 2013: xv), but although religion 'becomes sanitised, streamlined and inscribed within a hedonistic register of signification,' actors are not solely self-interested and motivated by maximizing economic profit, 'operating simply in a cynical business fashion' (Martikainen and Gauthier 2013: 81). In all Asia, Buddhist monasteries become tourist-friendly through a variety of means such as showcasing material heritage, building huge statues, or proposing religious activities such as meditation and temple-stays. In Japan, Buddhist organizations market and promote themselves through the active involvement of political authorities and entrepreneurs (Reader 2014). Debates and criticisms arise from the apparent exploitation of Buddhism as a commodity and a lucrative business resulting in de-sacralization: the alliance of Buddhism and the market is sometimes seen as a 'pact with the devil' (Bruntz and Schedneck 2020: 15). For instance, Suzuki Masataka (2013: 393) laments the fact that in 1995 a Japanese temple transformed itself into a lucrative business with the construction of a colossal Buddha, turning the sacred place into 'a kind of kitsch (vulgar, trivial or of bad taste) amusement park;' it entailed a transformation of the religious experience into entertainment and performance in order to attract the largest possible number of visitors.

Conversely, recent publications on Buddhism, business and tourism have re-evaluated these judgments and propose a more nuanced picture. Commodifying Buddhist traditions does not inherently weaken religiosity: Buddhism creatively engages with modernity, extends its influence towards the secular sphere and uses modern means, including technology and architecture, to become more attractive in the modern world, to spread the doctrine and educate people about Buddhist traditions, or simply, to revitalize a sacred place or maintain financial viability by increasing visitors' numbers and creating new sources of income. Justin McDaniel's *Architects of Buddhist Leisure* studies the new cult modalities of mega-statues, non-monastic architecture and Buddhist museums and amusement parks throughout modern Asia: these Buddhist leisure spaces blend 'the religious and the secular, the public and the private, the didactic and the leisurely to form a sensory experience that is accessible, affordable, entertaining, and educational' (McDaniel 2017: 84). More recently, *Buddhist Tourism in Asia*, edited by Courtney Bruntz and Brooke Schedneck (2020), analyses the opportunities of the

⁸ For a synthesis of the relationship of Buddhism and economy, Buddhist theories of economics, and the role of Buddhists in the modern capitalist integration of Asia: King 2016.

encounter and the 'dynamic tension' between Buddhism and tourism in a positive way (though also mentioning resistance, divergent viewpoints and contestations).

This paper tries to understand the purpose, the architecture and the sources of inspiration of the Grand Maitreya. Since the Mongolian Grand Maitreya is still in construction, it is too early to say what it will become and what visitors will make of it, but the literature produced by the project tells us what it aims to be. What are its sources of inspiration and its foreign references? Does it claim an affiliation with monumental Maitreya temples and statues of pre-socialist Mongolia, or does it have foreign, contemporary references? Which kind of devotees, tourists or customers does it target? Does it promote Mongolian Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism, or 'global Buddhism'? Is it conceived as a religious monument that will benefit from the tourist economy, as an attraction capitalizing on Buddhist tourism, or as a unifying, nationalist symbol of 21st-century Mongolia?

I propose first to introduce the history of colossal images in Mongolia, and to situate the project among the recent proliferation of giant statues and stupas all over Asia. The main body of the article will detail the structure of the stupa, the iconography and style of the statue, and the layout of the complex in a new city. Then, I will describe the fundraising and promotional process to figure out what the GMP and building process tell us about modern Mongolian politics and public religious culture.

Colossal Buddhist Sculpture in Tibet and Mongolia, 18th-Early 20th Century

The erection of colossal sculptures—between 10 and 70 metres tall—, usually carved in high or low relief, is an old tradition that started in ancient India and Sri Lanka as a visual reflection of the superhuman aspects of Buddhas highlighted in the sutras. The biggest ones were carved in rocks and cliffs along the overland Silk Road in Central Asia and East Asia between the 6th and the 11th centuries. A famous one is the big Buddha of Bamiyan (53 metres high, Afghanistan), carved in the 6th century and destroyed in 2001; the most colossal pre-20th century image is probably the 71 metres sitting Maitreya of Leshan (Sichuan, 8th century, China). While the Chinese had previously built high buildings such as towers, Buddhism, with its pagodas/stupas and images of gigantic proportions carved in the rock, systematized monumentality in the central and north Asian landscapes.

Some of these monumental sculptures represent Śākyamuni or Vairocana, but the most frequently represented Buddha is Maitreya, whose cult flourished in the first millennium CE. For Mahayanists, Maitreya presently rules as a Buddha-in-waiting in the Tuṣita Heaven, where he enjoys his penultimate life preaching the Dharma. At some time in the future, in a period of chaos and suffering, when the Dharma has disappeared, he will take rebirth as human being, attain enlightenment, and preach Buddhism. According to time and place, devotees of Maitreya either believe his descent is imminent and pray to encounter with him in their lifetime, or to secure their rebirth in the future when he will incarnate (see Nattier 1988's four spatiotemporal types: there (Tuṣita)/now, there/later (distant future), here (this world)/now and here/later). He is therefore seen as a symbol of hope for a new golden age of the Dharma.

The tradition of erecting or carving monumental statues declined in the beginning of the second millennium but was revived in 15th century Tibet, linked with the millenarian cult of Maitreya. Tibetan master Tsongkhapa (1357-1419) promoted the cult of Maitreya, held the first Maitreya festival in 1409, and named his first monastery Ganden (dGa' ldan), the Tibetan name for

Maitreya's Tuṣita Heaven.⁹ According to the art historian Olaf Czaja (2018), the worship of Maitreya replaced the Fifth Dalai Lama (1617-1682)'s promotion of the ideology of Avalokiteśvara in the 18th century.

In Mongolia, the popularity of Maitreya was linked to that of his festival, introduced in the 17th century.¹⁰ In Halh (northern) Mongolia, the first Maitreya festival was held at Erdene zuu Monastery in 1657 for the 23rd birthday of the great Buddhist master, politician and artist Zanabazar, the First Jebtsundamba Khutugtu (Javzandamba hutagt, 1635-1723, spiritual head of Buddhism in northern Mongolia and third main incarnation lineage of the Gélukpas after the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama¹¹): it was a life-prolonging ritual (*danshig*, Tib. *brtan bzhus*).¹² In the late 18th century, it took on considerable scale and largely exceeded its Tibetan celebration. This major festival, usually organized in every monastery after the Mongolian New Year, culminated with the procession of a statue of Maitreya along with the Five Treatises of Maitreya (*Byams chos lnga*) on an enormous chariot decorated with a sculpted green horsehead (or an elephant's head) and pulled by lamas in a clockwise direction around the monastery. The processional statue was not a giant image but a much smaller one. As many as thirty thousand lamas participated in the festival of Ih Hüree or Urga (on the location of modern Ulaanbaatar)¹³ in 1877.¹⁴ The aim of the festival was to hasten Maitreya's arrival on earth; it was believed that he descended from Tuṣita during the procession to manifest himself in the statue. The participants ensured their rebirth as one of his disciples when, in the future, he would appear on earth, to receive his teachings in the hopes of realizing Enlightenment.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, colossal statues of Maitreya were built in Tibet, southern ('Inner') Mongolia,¹⁵ Halh ('Outer') Mongolia and Buryatia as symbols of Gélukpa domination. They were no more high reliefs carved in cliffs, but sculptures in the rounds (an exception in

⁹ According to tradition, the royal dynasty of the Tibetan Empire worshiped Maitreya, its most famous Maitreya image being the no longer extant Dharmacakra Maitreya (Jampa chökyi khorlo ['Byams pa chos kyi 'khor lo], said to have been brought to Tibet in the 7th century by the Nepalese bride of the emperor Songtsen Gampo (Srong brtsan sgam po). It was revered as one of the holiest icons of Tibet (Alexander and Van Schaik 2011: 434-436).

¹⁰ Neichi Toin (1557-1653) and Nomyn Han Dharmarāja (alleged disciple of the Sixth Dalai Lama) introduced and promoted the festival of Maitreya respectively in eastern Inner Mongolia and in Alashan.

¹¹ Zanabazar (known to the Mongols under the title 'Öndör gegegen,' Lofty Brilliance/Saint) was recognized by the Dalai Lama as the reincarnation of the Tibetan monk-scholar Tāranātha (1575-1634) of the Jonang school and is considered to be the First Jebtsundamba; the Eighth Jebtsundamba Khutugtu (1869-1924) was the theocratic ruler of autonomous Mongolia with the title of Bogd Haan ('holy emperor') from 1911 to 1921. A *khutugtu* (Cyr. Mo. *hutagt*) is a reincarnated lama of the highest rank.

¹² According to the *History of Erdene zuu*, quoted by Tsultemin 2015: 150; also Berger and Tse Bartholomew (eds.) 1995: 174-175; Teleki and Nandinbaatar 2019: 98. On the cult of Maitreya in early 17th century Inner Mongolia: Charleux 2014.

¹³ Ih Hüree, the residence of the Jebtsundamba Khutugtu, was known to the Russians as Urga (< Mo. Örgöö, 'residence, palace').

¹⁴ See the description of the festival with the circumambulation of Züün hüree by Pozdneev 1978 [1887]: 503.

¹⁵ Inner Mongolia is now an 'autonomous region' of China.

Mongolia is a 30 metres long horizontal image of Avalokiteśvara known as the 'Great Buddha' (Ih Burhan) made from slabs, blocks of cut stone, bricks and clay sculpted between 1859 and 1864 near the Halhyn gol River in Dornod Province¹⁶). Special temples with three or four fake stories and huge central pillars were built for them, with inner galleries corresponding to each level allowing people to circumambulate the statue. Agvanhaidav (Ngag dbang mkhas grub, 1779-1838), Buddhist scholar and abbot of Urga, lists temples and builders of Maitreya statues and concludes: 'all over Tibet, the statues of Maitreya are like mountains decorating the earth.'¹⁷ These statues depicted Maitreya sitting in *bhadrāsana* (seated in the 'European' pose with two legs pendant) and turning the wheel of the Buddhist law (*dharmacakramudrā*) or, more rarely, in *padmāsana* (lotus posture).¹⁸ The tallest one was the 26.20 metres high Maitreya sculpture in the Jampa lhakhang ('Byams pa lha khang) of Tashilhunpo (bKra shis lhun po) Monastery commissioned by the Ninth Panchen Lama (1883-1937).¹⁹ In Halh Mongolia, the most famous Maitreya temple was the one built by Agvanhaidav in Urga.²⁰ Pozdneev relates that its collapsed several times, which was attributed to its Chinese style: it was said that Maitreya did not want to reside in a Chinese-style building. It was rebuilt in 1860 in a mixed Tibeto-Mongolian style (Pozdneev 1971 [1896]: 61-62). The 15 metres statue was consecrated by the Fifth Jebtsundamba (1815-1841) in 1833 (Tsultemin 2015: 144); it was seated on a lion-throne, measuring 55 elbows from the feet to the top of the hair knot (over 15.50 metres in height). The temple and its statue were destroyed in 1939.²¹

More than any other Buddha, Maitreya deserves to have gigantic images: according to texts, he has a height of 88 cubits (elbow lengths) and a length of 22 cubits (Das 2003: 42). Uranchimeg Tsultemin (2015: 143) argues that 'These dimensions appear to have served as the measurements for the monumental statues of Maitreya in Tibet and in Mongolia,' including the 15 metres high Maitreya of the Maitreya Temple in Urga.²² However, the cubit appeared to

¹⁶ It was commissioned by Prince Togtohtor (To Wang, 1797-1868) of Setsen han aimag. Children used to play inside its nostrils (Okladnikov and Moses 1985-1986; Haining 1992). It was re-consecrated on September 29, 2015 (Mongolian Facebook page of the GMP, hereafter MFP, September 25, 2015).

¹⁷ Ngag dbang mkhas grub, *Collected works of Ngag dbang mkhas grub*, TBRC, LC # 72908334, cited by Tsultemin 2015: 154.

¹⁸ An exception is the standing sandalwood Maitreya statue offered to Qianlong emperor by the Seventh Dalai Lama. This 18 metres tall image (with an additional 8 metres underground, making it 26 metres in total) still stands in the Yonghegong 雍和宫 Monastery of Beijing.

¹⁹ Czaja (2018), quoting Agvanhaidav (Ngag dbang mkhas grub, *Collected works*, vol. 1, fol. 184-185).

²⁰ Other famous examples include, in Halh Mongolia, the 16 metres Maitreya of Amarbayasgalan hiid, the Maitreya of Hoshuu hiid in Dundgov' Province, and the 9 metres (80 cubits) statue in Öndör Maidariin hiid, Sühbaatar Province (Krisztina Teleki, personal communication, November 19, 2020). All of them were destroyed. On colossal Maitreya statues and their temple in Inner Mongolia: Charleux 2006: 243-244, 251-252.

²¹ According to Chandra (2013: 35), in the late 1930s the statue was sent to Buryatia and its bronze head was preserved and sent to Saint-Petersburg. A Russian film shows the interior of the temple and the statue: *Yego zovut Suhe-Bator* ("His name is Sühbaatar"), 1952, scene at 36'46" (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zp_25pz5KM8). I thank Amgalan Sühbaatar for this information.

²² The statue being seated in *bhadrāsana*, we have to imagine it measuring 88 cubits if standing.

have been 'adjusted' differently from one place to the other: the 19th-century statues measured between 3 to 26 metres high (Czaja 2018).²³

These statues were extremely costly to make. It took several years to organize fundraising, gather skilled craftsmen and complete them. The Tashilhunpo Maitreya was made of 11,000 kilograms of copper, 229 kilograms of gold and decorated with diamonds.²⁴ The cost of the 30 metres long Great Buddha of Dornod in Mongolia was estimated at 6,000 taels of silver (ingot, unit of currency formerly used in China, equivalent in value to 38 grams of silver), collected from the families of the region; in all some 180 craftsmen were involved and 1,000 ox-carts were deployed (Haining 1992). Between 1911 and 1913, a 25.6 metres statue of Megjid Janraisig ('Eye-healing Avalokiteśvara')²⁵ was built in a temple of Gandan Monastery in Urga: it cost 100,000 taels of silver, plus 230,000 taels for the temple; the statue was made of 15 tons of copper, and decorated with 45 kilograms of gold, 56 kilograms of silver and over 400 pieces of precious stones (Batsaikhan 2016: 259-261). The promotion of a spectacular image was a strategy used to enhance the prestige of a religious site and attract crowds of pilgrims, and some of these statues became main loci of pilgrimage and eventually were important sources of income for their monasteries.

In the late 1930s, the Mongolian socialist state unleashed large-scale purges; all religious practices were banned, monks were murdered or defrocked, and the Buddhist heritage was almost completely destroyed. Except for Gandan Monastery (closed in 1938, reopened in 1944), which continued to function as a façade, and a few other buildings, the monastic city of Urga was razed to the ground to build the modern Ulaanbaatar. On the model of European cities, the socialist state punctuated the new capital of outdoor statues of its new heroes, such as Lenin, Mongolian communist leaders and famous writers.

Monumental Statues and the Mongolian Revival of Buddhism after 1990

After the fall of the socialist regime, the 1992 democratic Constitution proclaimed freedom of religions. Buddhism was revived in Mongolia; currently, it is the predominant religion with about half of the population self-identifying as Buddhist, but different rival Buddhist organizations now compete with each other and with Christian missionary groups. Many monasteries were rebuilt, mostly in cities and villages instead of their former location in the countryside.²⁶ The main one, Gandan, now has more than 800 monks; it has recently expanded

²³ In theory, one cubit is 45.5 centimetres; 80 cubits are 36.40 metres, but the cubit is 'adjusted' according to place and time; it can be based on the body length/ell of great masters and can measure 33 or 36 centimetres (Czaja 2018).

²⁴ The Ninth Panchen Lama was accused of having put too much money in it (Czaja 2018).

²⁵ The Megjid Janraisig was cast between 1911 and 1913 in order to restore the sight back to the Eighth Jebtsundamba (1869-1924) (Czaja 2015).

²⁶ On the revival of Buddhism in Mongolia and an overview of the different Buddhist centres, from the more 'Mongolian traditional Buddhist' to groups funded by international organizations that promote teachings to laypeople: Bareja-Starzyńska and Havnevik 2006; Jadamba and Schittich 2010; Wallace 2015; Havnevik 2017; Abrahms-Kavunenko 2019. These studies sometimes contrast 'traditional' monasteries and global Buddhist centres; but monasteries such as Tibetan-affiliated Gandan also have international networks connected to the Tibetan diaspora living in India or elsewhere, put emphasis on charity work and environmentalism and even organize rock concerts. Matthew King, who studied a

the area it covers with a huge assembly hall and other new buildings, including monastic colleges.²⁷ The Maitreya procession festival (Maidar ergeh ih yoslol) was revived in Ulaanbaatar and in several monasteries of the countryside such as Erdene zuu.²⁸ Gandan Monastery organizes it on the 16th of the lunar calendar.

Two categories of large-sized Buddhist statues were erected in post-socialist Mongolia. The first one includes indoor sculptures replacing ancient ones that were destroyed in the late 1930s. A new statue of Megjid Janraisig was completed in 1996 and consecrated in 1997 (it took five years to make it).²⁹ This 25-metre high statue is made of 25 tons copper, gilded with gold offered by the governments of Nepal and Japan, and contains 200 precious stones. The Megjid Janraisig statue is a political symbol: because it is considered to be the (replica of the) symbol of Mongolian independence from the Qing Empire (1644-1911) in 1911,³⁰ the Mongolian President, the Speaker of Parliament and the Prime Minister visit the temple every year and participate in a religious ceremony on the first day of the Mongolian New Year.

Another project of recreating an ancient statue is Dashchoilin Monastery³¹'s rebuilding of the Maitreya statue of Urga and its temple in a modern architecture (**fig. 4**). Dashshchoilin claims to be the heir of Züün hüree, the core monastery of old Urga.³² The project started in the 1990s and for two decades, only the rosary of the statue with giant beads (45.50 kilograms), offered by the Japanese, was made, and exhibited in the Burhan bagshiin dugan of Dashchoilin. In 2006, the Yonghegong Monastery of Beijing (also known as 'Lama Temple,' the main Tibetan Buddhist monastery in inner China) decided to sponsor the project ("Maidar burhanyg Mongol ulsad hüleen avah yoslol," 2014). In 2013, the new, 23 metres high statue was made in a Tibetan workshop near Chengdu in Sichuan, China (Lulu 2017a, 2017b). Luvsansamdan, abbot of Yonghegong and Wang Xiaolong, Ambassador of the People's Republic of China, attended the ceremony held for the delivery of the statue's feet in 2014 ("Maidar burhanyg Mongol ulsad hüleen avah yoslol" 2014). The foundations for the temple that will house the statue only began to be built in 2017, to the west of Dashchoilin, when the statue was delivered. In 2018, an international symposium on Maitreya was organized at the occasion of the ceremony for

nationalistic Buddhist revivalism (2012), prefers speaking of several different Buddhisms in Mongolia, some of them being recent creations. On Mongolian lay Buddhists critiques of the commodification of Buddhism seen as a business in Ulaanbaatar (temples' relationships with money, concerns about corruption, negative opinions about the Mongolian Saṅgha's education, motivations and morality): Abrahms-Kavunenko 2019: chapter 8.

²⁷ Additionally, over 500 monks were trained at Tibetan monastic institutions in India (they were repatriated during the 2020 pandemic).

²⁸ For an overview of the Maitreya procession in present-day Mongolian monasteries, with detailed descriptions of that of ancient Züün hüree and modern Dashchoilin: Teleki and Nandinbaatar 2019.

²⁹ It is said that the original statue was dismantled and sent to the Soviet Red Army during the Second World War so that the copper could be melted down to make bullets.

³⁰ Because it was built when Bogd Haan's Mongolia proclaimed its autonomy, it was interpreted as a symbol of independence from the Qing Empire.

³¹ Dashchoilin settled in the 1990s in two giant yurt-like structures from ancient Urga that had served as the old State Circus in the socialist period.

³² Hence its official name, Züün hüree, left/eastern monastery, versus Gandan, previously known as Baruun hüree, right/western monastery.

installing the statue, with participants from China, Korea, Buryatia and Europe.³³ The statue and the modern six-storied building should be consecrated in 2021. As Lhagvademchig Jadamba and Bold Tsevegдорж expressed, 'Maitreya arrived in Mongolia as an embodiment of Sino-Mongolian friendship' that will be flourished in future more brightly' (Jadamba and Tsevegдорж 2019: 69). The gift of this Maitreya statue reflects the Chinese use of Buddhism as soft-power in Mongolia. Mongolia is caught in the geopolitical struggle between the Dalai Lama³⁴ and Beijing, and monasteries such as the Yonghegong play an important role in 'paradiplomacy' thanks to their international connections. However, Dashchoilin is not especially pro-Chinese; its abbot, Dambajav (also vice-president of the World Fellowship of Buddhists), has met the Dalai Lama on several occasions (Lulu 2017a).³⁵



Fig. 4. Design and cross-section of the new Maitreya Temple, billboards at Dashchoilin Monastery, Ulaanbaatar. © Isabelle Charleux, 2018

The second category of giant images includes new statues built outdoor, often without any connection with a monastery.³⁶ Buddhism being an important instrument of soft power in Asia, some were erected or sponsored by foreign countries such as China, Japan and Korea. For instance, South Korea sponsored the construction of an outdoor Buddha statue behind the

³³ I thank L. Jadamba for having sent me the programme.

³⁴ The last visit of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama in Mongolia and his role in the finding of the reincarnation of the Tenth Jebtsundamba in 2016 has caused diplomatic friction between the two countries; it 'instigated full-scale Chinese activity in Mongolia through all channels, from statements, sanctions and border closures to long-term campaigns aimed at the Mongolian public' (Manlai 2020).

³⁵ Yet, due to the current sinophobia, Dashchoilin and its abbot got into trouble after photos showing Chinese officials at the 2014 ceremony were made public on a Facebook site.

³⁶ Giant statues of Buddhist protectors are also built at the foot of sacred mountains, such as the statue of Vajrapāṇi (Mo. Ochirvaan') at Otgontenger in Zavhan Province.

monastery of Zaya gegeenii hüree (Tsetserleg) in 2007-2008. In 2015, a 12 metres tall statue of young Zanabazar, the First Jebtsundamba, was erected outside the new museum dedicated to him in Övörhangai Province. Gigantism also characterizes new stupas, as well as ritual cairns (*ovoos*) (Charleux 2019: 90, 116-118).

Giant statues can be 'successful' and change the image of a place, or be a failure and be forgotten. The latter seems to be the case with the 23-metre Śākyamuni Buddha erected by the late Gurudeva Rinpoché (1908-2009) in 2006, with donations from South Korean patrons. It was built in a special material used for planes and ships supposed to last more than five hundred years. The golden statue stands alone south of Ulaanbaatar at the foot of Zaisan Hill, looking toward the Government Palace. It was initially located in a non-constructed area; now it is almost invisible among high apartment blocks and shopping malls and seems half forgotten in a badly kept garden (**fig. 5**).³⁷ Other statues are controversial. Marissa Smith documents a scandal involving suspected corruption in relation to a Śākyamuni statue in Erdenet Mining town, which was started in the 2000s, and built with the contribution of mining workers 'to help repair environmental and social harm related to the industrial pollution that their mining activity had caused locally' (Smith 2018).



Fig. 5. *Buddha statue of Zaisan Hill, now surrounded by higher buildings.* © Isabelle Charleux, 2018

³⁷ Mongolians used to visit the statue for pictures and blessings after they get married. The plan to build a Zanabazar Museum nearby has been abandoned. Zaisan Hill is famous for the monument that commemorates Soviet-Mongol friendship and brotherhood-in-arms on its top. An enormous mall now almost completely covers the hill.

While these Buddhist statues were built for politico-religious reasons—the main Buddhist reason being to earn merit, Skt. *punya*, Mo. *buyan*—, this is not the case of the 40 metres tall equestrian statue of Chinggis Khan (1150s-1227, the founder and first emperor of the Great Mongol Empire), that was erected in 2008 for touristic and nationalist purposes in the steppe of Tsonjin Boldog, two years after the much celebrated 800th anniversary of the foundation of Chinggis Khan's empire (**fig. 3**). The complex below the horse includes a visitor centre that exhibits a giant boot, a museum of ancient historical artefacts, and shops. Visitors can climb to the head of the horse through its chest and neck to have a panoramic view. Adjacent to the museum is a tourist and recreation centre, which covers 212 hectares. The statue is surrounded by two hundred yurts designed and arranged like the pattern of the horse brand marks that were used by the 13th-century Mongol groups. The cost of the complex, supported by the Genco Tour Bureau, is reported to have been USD 4.1 million. Tsonjin Boldog has become a popular tourist attraction for Mongols, who especially visit it for wedding photographs (though many also criticize it).

Table 1: Colossal images in Mongolia (over 10 m high)

	Location	Date of construction	dimensions
Sitting Maitreya (indoor)	Maidar temple, Züün hüree (Urga)	1829 (destroyed)	16 m high
“Ih Burhan” (Janraisig/ Avalokiteśvara) (outdoor)	Dornod Province, Halhyn gol District	1859-1864, partly destroyed, restored in 1997	about 30 m. long (horizontal image)
Megjid Janraisig (Avalokitesvara) (indoor)	Gandan Monastery, Ulaanbaatar	1911-1913, rebuilt in 1996	25.6 m
Buddha statue	Zaisan	2006	23 m high
Chinggis Khan equestrian statue (outdoor)	Tsonjin Boldog, 64 km east of Ulaanbaatar		40 m high, 16 th highest
Maidar Project (outdoor)		2010-	54 m statue, 108 m stupa (in construction)

The Grand Maitreya and the Tallest Statues in Asia

A symptom of neoliberal globalization (but also of megalomaniac autocrats and authoritarian regimes), that symbolizes progress and urban modernity is gigantism and the ‘madness of greatness,’ from the skyscrapers of Chicago and New York to the Burj Khalifa of Dubai.³⁸ With the rise of Asian economies, colossal statues proliferated in Asia since the 2000s: the old Buddhist taste for monumentality encountered Asian modern fashion of gigantism. These colossal images were either built by religious authorities or private companies; some were also

³⁸ This madness of greatness is obvious in the ostentatious monumentality, the irrational quest for height, the largest shopping malls and so on (Ford 2008; Koch 2018).

sponsored by politicians such as Indian Prime Minister Modi.³⁹ 107 (81%) of the 132 statues over 30 metres (the assumed height of the Colossus of Rhodes⁴⁰) listed in the world in 2019 are in Asia.⁴¹ India and China entered a competition over the tallest and the greatest number of mega-statues. In this competition, which is reflected in the title of Philip Lutgendorf's article, "My Hanuman is bigger than yours" (Lutgendorf 1994), the size of the statues tends to become taller with time and every new one should surpass its antecedents in height, sometimes in weight.⁴²

With the growth of its economy in the 2000s, Mongolia entered the competition. A Mongolian list of wondrous (*gaihamshigt*, a term that also means 'miraculous, supernatural') Buddhist statues in the world also takes size as the main criteria.⁴³ Mongolia now has two Buddhist statues that measure between 10 and 30 metres tall, and one statue over 30 metres—the equestrian Chinggis Khan, that was (in 2012) the tallest equestrian statue and the 16th tallest statue in the world (it now ranks 71st only in the Wikipedia "List of tallest statues") (**Table 1**).⁴⁴ The projected 108-metre tall stupa and 54-metre Maitreya statue on which I will focus now would be (in 2012) the largest Buddhist complex to be ever built in Mongolia and the 4th tallest statue in the world⁴⁵—the other three being statues of Buddha in China, Japan, and Burma (Editor's introduction of Bataa 2012: 109). In an alternative version proposed in 2009-2010, the monument was even taller, 216 metres, and was compared with three Buddhist mega-statues of China and Japan.⁴⁶ The final project favoured western references: Christ of Rio, and the

³⁹ In 2010, Prime Minister Modi, then chief minister of Gujarat, initiated a project for the tallest statue in the world (Jain 2017: 20).

⁴⁰ Monumental statues often refer to the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.

⁴¹ Wikipedia "List of tallest statues." This list exists in different versions in 26 languages, but does not exist in Mongolian. Only 5 statues are anterior to the 20th century. The French version lists 320 statues over 10 metres high ("Liste des statues les plus hautes"): India has a total of 52 statues that are over 10 metres; China (plus Hong Kong and Macao), 46, Japan, 31, other Asian countries (especially Taiwan, Thailand, and Sri Lanka), 53, and the rest of the world, 135.

⁴² The great wave of construction started in Japan in the 1980s (Japan actually started to build big Buddhas in the 1920s) (Wikipedia "Daibutsu"), and in India in the 1990s (Lutgendorf 1994). China built 84% of its 32 statues over 30 metres high after 2000, and India had 77% of its 26 colossal statues built after 2010.

⁴³ Except for the Emerald Buddha of Thailand. "Buddyn shashny hamgiin gaihamshigt 10 höshöö" 2013.

⁴⁴ Editor's introduction of Bataa 2012: 109.

⁴⁵ Since 2012 new statues taller than ever were erected, and the tallest one now is the 240 metres tall Statue of Unity in India, built in 2018, which is approximately the height of a 60-storied building. An even taller statue of 251 metres is in project in India.

⁴⁶ It was compared with the 208 metres Spring Temple Buddha of Lushan (Henan, in China, 2nd highest statue in the world), the 120 metres Amitābha of Ushiku in Japan (5th highest) and the 108 metres Amitābha of Lingshan in China (11th highest). The project shows Maitreya preceded by a green horse, both standing on a round open metallic structure with kinds of wheels symbolizing the processional chariot. Below the structure are drawn Chinese style buildings, the biggest one resembling the assembly hall of Amarbayasgalan Monastery in Selenge Province (<http://www.ikhmaidar.mn/photoalbumlist/category138.shtml?sel=1305&subsel=1309>).

Statue of Liberty, and emblematic architectures of Paris (the Eiffel Tower), London, Madrid and Miami (EFP, January 15, 2015).

Was the Grand Maitreya Project influenced by other famous statues of Maitreya in Asia? The great majority of gigantic statues built in Asia is Buddhist,⁴⁷ but very few of them represent Maitreya: most of them represent Śākyamuni and Avalokiteśvara (Ch. Guanyin, Jap. Kannon). The only colossal image of Maitreya that is referred to in the texts produced by the GMP is the 32-metre Maitreya near Diskit Monastery in Ladakh (India).⁴⁸ There is another pharaonic project, still virtual: the 'Maitreya Project,' to be built in Bodhgayā (the place where Śākyamuni realized Enlightenment), India. It was planned by Lama Thubten Yéshé,⁴⁹ who founded the Gélukpa Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT) in 1975 following his first visit back to Tibet in the early 1980s,⁵⁰ and continued by Lama Zopa Rinpoché,⁵¹ co-founder of FPMT and spiritual leader of the Foundation after Thubten Yéshé's death. As Zopa Rinpoché said about the project, 'the bigger the statue, the bigger the merit we will achieve.' After a vision, Zopa Rinpoché also aimed to build a thousand statues of Maitreya around the world: 'the more Maitreya statues are built, the more successfully we will be able to reduce suffering and completely overcome them.'⁵² The projected size of the bronze image grew exponentially and was supposed to be 152 metres high: it would dwarf the Mahābodhi Temple itself. Because of local resistance, the project has been revised downwards in 2003, and FPMT now plans to construct a first statue in Kushinagar (the place in northern India where the Buddha died and where Maitreya will manifest), and, later, a second one in Bodhgayā, of a more modest size (about 42-45 metres high) (Falcone 2018).⁵³

FPMT is a globalized religious group that has more than a hundred centres and branches all over the world, teaches Buddhism to laypeople and runs charity works. It is well-implanted in Ulaanbaatar where it founded a nunnery, Dolma Ling, and a Dharma Centre, Shredrup Ling, headed by an Australian nun, that teaches Buddhism and meditation to Mongolians and Westerners. Zopa Rinpoché also contributed to the rebuilding of a temple for the education of young lamas, Idgaachoinzinlin datsan, within the complex of Gandan (Abrahms-Kavunenko 2019).

⁴⁷ Except for India where the majority of colossal images depict Hindu and Jain deities. In China and South-East Asia, other statues represent deities of Daoism and Chinese religion such as Laozi and Guan Yu, famous historical or mythical characters such as Confucius, and abstract contemporary art.

⁴⁸ Construction started in April 2006 and it was consecrated by the Dalai Lama on July 25th, 2010 (Bernstein s. d.). It appears several times on the English Facebook page of the GMP (hereafter: EFP: December 27, 2016, August 18, 2016, November 17, 2016). This statue has a mixed, invented iconography: Maitreya has the robe of a monk, a stupa in the hair but is sitting on a throne.

⁴⁹ Thub bstan ye shes (1935-1984).

⁵⁰ The project is managed by the Maitreya Project International (MPI), a branch of FPMT.

⁵¹ Thub bstan bzod pa rin po che (1946-).

⁵² Cited by Klasanova 2019. For a list of the Maitreya statues completed and in progress: <https://fpmt.org/projects/other/maitreya/>.

⁵³ The project was renamed Maitreya Buddha Project Kushinagar and Buddha Maitreya Bodhgayā. The Kushinagar statue is estimated at more than USD200 million.

The FPMT Maitreya Project already inspired the construction of a 12.50 metres statue of Maitreya in the Mongol-populated republic of Kalmykia (Russia), after Lama Zopa Rinpoché's visit in 2017 during the 'Maitreya Project Heart Shrine Relic tour.'⁵⁴ The statue was funded by public donations, including that of a well-known local businessman, and was consecrated in September 2019.⁵⁵ Half a year after, it streamed myrrh, a typical miracle of Christian icons (but not Buddhist images).

Although the FPMT Maitreya Project is not referred to by the Mongolian GMP, it certainly was a main source of inspiration. Zopa Rinpoché officially supports the Mongolian project. Besides, among the many foreign temples that have proliferated in the last few decades in Bodhgayā, a Mongolian temple, Sokpo gönpa (Sog po dgon pa), was built with government support to represent Mongolian Buddhism at the place of Enlightenment (Jadamba and Schittich 2010: 89).⁵⁶

The Grand Maitreya Project: the statue, the Stupa-complex and the city

Aim of the Grand Maitreya Project (GMP)

The aims of the Grand Maitreya Project are detailed in a booklet published in both Mongolian and English,⁵⁷ and in an article written by Bataa Mishig-Ish, former monk, Chief Advisor to the project and Vice Chair of the Board of Trustees of the Grand Maitreya Foundation (Bataa 2012). They fall into three broad areas, corresponding to its three sponsors, who represent religion, politics, and economics in Mongolia—abbot Choijamts, President Elbegdorj, and (then businessman) Battulga, as follows:

1) The official discourse emphasizes Buddhist proselytist aims, merged with educational and cultural aims. A letter introducing the project written by the Dalai Lama dated March 28, 2011 starts with: 'The aims of the Grand Maitreya Project are to revive Buddhism in Mongolia, to preserve Buddhist culture by promoting Buddhist values and education, and to serve as a centre of Buddhism in North-east Asia' (GMP Booklet). The GMP aspires to promote Buddhist culture, traditions and religion through educational activities,⁵⁸ as an 'antidote to the previous Soviet destruction of Mongolia's cultural and religious heritage,' and 'continue the mission of and be inspired by the vision of His Holiness Zanabazar' (Bataa 2012: 111-112; GMP Booklet). It is an international, inclusive Buddhist project that will create cooperation with countries around the world: not only it will 'exemplify the different features of Buddhism from many countries

⁵⁴ This worldwide exhibition tour presented the relics to be placed in the projected statue at Kushinagar (Maitreya Project International 2005).

⁵⁵ It was built on land belonging to Lagan Dargyeling Monastery in Kalmykia (Klasanova 2019). The statue is made of fiberglass, covered with a special transparent resin and varnish, and weighs 30 tons.

⁵⁶ It was inaugurated by the Dalai Lama in 2017. Bodhgayā has become the most important Buddhist pilgrimage site in the modern era and the centre of an emerging world Buddhism (Geary 2020).

⁵⁷ The same text appears in the placards presenting the project at Gandan and on the official website.

⁵⁸ Buddhist educational activities include: 'support the publication of books with educational purposes, organize cultural and art events for preserving the traditional cultural values, establish effective institutional relations with similar Buddhist institutions overseas...' (Bataa 2012: 111).

and schools of Buddhism,⁵⁹ but also it aims at creating an ecumenical place for all 'spiritual traditions' (Blumberg 2016). The term 'spiritual' is used in the English documentation for Western Buddhists, while 'religion' (*shashin*)⁶⁰ is used in Mongolian.

Social benefits are expected to result from the promotion of Buddhist ethics: the project will contribute to 'mental development, peace of mind, to teach to the young generation respect for ethics,' and 'any profit made in the complex will be dedicated to supporting humanitarian and compassionate works that meet the Foundation interests in social benefits as well as continuously enriching and developing the generous virtue [*buyan*, Buddhist merit] of the sponsors' (EFP, September 20, 2013). The GMP aims to improve the physical and mental health and happiness of Ulaanbaatar's stressed citizens, by allowing them to 'reconnect with their cultural and natural heritage in the Bogd Khan range of mountains' (Bataa 2012: 111-112). At last, the ultimate goal is bringing as much benefit to as many beings as is possible and contributing to world peace—a general aim of Buddhist colossal images, such as the FPMT Maitreya Project.

2) The second aim relates to 'country-branding': the GMP embodies the ambitions of modern Mongolia; it will restore nationalist pride by creating a clearly identifiable symbol of the nation of which Mongols will be proud. It is comparable to other iconic statues of great height that serve city or country branding.⁶¹ Like the Statue of Liberty—one of its main references—which embodies the shared values and ideology of a whole nation, the Grand Maitreya will be a new symbol of the independent nation. The Statue of Liberty is the statue most often cited as a reference for colossal statues of Asia: many countries, states or provinces, notably India⁶² and Japan, want their very own statue of Liberty, the height of which should always surpass that of the original in New York (Suzuki 2013: 366).

3) The third aim is economical. H. Battulga's initial plan was to build a major tourist attraction for international and domestic tourists and provide business opportunities and jobs for the local people (GMP Booklet). In an article that presents the GMP as a strategy to develop tourism and especially Buddhist tourism, seen as 'virtuous tourism,' the tourist sector is presented as the future 'industry' of Mongolia, after copper and gold mining⁶³ (Anirgüm 2014). According to this article, the US Statue of Liberty contributes about USD 75 million a year to the US economy: this income is comparable to the yearly income of the Tavan Tolgoi coal mine in the

⁵⁹ A post on the EFP dated September 3rd, 2013 asks for international support and participation for the foundation of 'international Buddhist monasteries.' Other texts of the project mention palaces for reincarnate lamas but do not specify the presence of monk communities.

⁶⁰ *Shashin* originally means 'teaching, doctrine, precepts.'

⁶¹ Two Facebook posts focus on the Christ of Rio built from 1922 to 1931, which incurred strong criticisms—but 'over time, it has become a symbol of the nation's economic, social, cultural, and educational significance, the symbol of Rio de Janeiro, of the city of the World Cup, and in 2007 one of the Seven Wonders of the New World' (MFP, May 15, also September 11, 2014). Mongolian newspaper articles add to the list the Taj Mahal, the Louvre, the Great Wall of China, the Eiffel Tower and the Pyramids of Egypt.

⁶² About the creation of 'Statues of Liberty' in India: Becker 2015: 145 and note 3.

⁶³ Buddhist tourism (including pilgrimage) represents about 500 million people in the world (Anirgüm 2014).

Gobi.⁶⁴ The maintenance costs of the Grand Maitreya should be covered by tourism (Dettoni 2013).

The GMP thus capitalizes on Mongolian Buddhist culture on different scales, from the individual to the national (pride) and the world (peace). Supported by the president and the Dalai Lama, it proposes a new (Buddhist, healthy and green) ethic of life in an international Buddhist site. If the main official aim is religious/spiritual, educational and cultural, as well as social (to relax stressed urbanites) and ecological,⁶⁵ tourism obviously is a main driving force. To sum up, 'The Grand Maitreya statue complex will simultaneously serve as an educational, spiritual, tourist and cultural centre for the entire world' (EFP, July 15, 2015). These aims are comparable to that of other Buddhist mega-statues in Asia.

The texts introducing the GMP do not emphasize charity works but several campaigns were organized by the Grand Maitreya Foundation, such as the campaign to raise 30 million MNT for the Hüre Maternity Hospital's Neonatal Unit in Ulaanbaatar in November 2011.⁶⁶ Due to criticism of their exorbitant cost, projects of colossal statues often highlight social benefits that are characteristic of charitable, 'engaged Buddhism' (such as providing educational, medical and charitable services to impoverished local communities) as well as economic benefits. For instance, the planned statue of Maitreya of Kushinagar 'itself is not the main purpose of the Project. The purpose is to bring as much benefit as possible, for as long as possible, spiritually, in education and health care, and economically' ('About the Maitreya Buddha Project, Kushinagar,' FPMT website); it aims at creating direct and indirect employment opportunities and attract many visitors from India, other parts of Asia, and the world (*ibid.*). Indeed, when they are well-managed, colossal statues can be a tool for attracting tourists and bring significant benefits to a region and a country.

What Does Maitreya Mean for Modern Mongols?

Why chose Maitreya, Śākyamuni's successor, Buddha of the future era, and especially its standing form? The texts introducing the GMP explain that Maitreya was chosen first because he is the Buddha of 'Loving ♥ Kindness' (Maitreya's name [*maitri*] literally means the 'Loving-One,' in Mongolian, *asral*, 'mercy, compassion'), peace and unity:

The Buddha explained that when one sees an image of love and peace it makes one think of peace. The Project's intention is that the size and beauty of this Maitreya statue will bring this sacred symbol of Loving ♥ Kindness back to the beautiful people of Mongolia and at

⁶⁴ In 2014, Mongolia planned to develop the necessary infrastructure and build large complexes to develop tourism. The City Council launched the 'Friendly Ulaanbaatar' programme (Nairsag Ulaanbaatar), which aims to increase the number of tourists to two million by 2020 and five million by 2030 (Mongolia's population is 3.3 million in 2020), and to increase the share of the tourism sector in the capital's economy to 20 percent and the number of people employed in the tourism and hospitality industry to 35,000. In 2012, more than 475,000 foreigners visited the country, but more than half, or 263,000, were illegal workers coming from China on tourist visas.

⁶⁵ In the longer term, the GMP also has ecological aims with the construction of the eco-city (see below).

⁶⁶ <http://www.ikhmaidar.mn/contentlist/category278.shtml?sel=1312>.

the same time to the attention of many people throughout the entire planet. Helping to create the needed conditions for peace on Earth (EFP, March 10, 2017).

Colossal Buddhist statues are said to have the power of drawing people and bringing them to the Dharma (Falcone 2018: 121). According to the texts of the GMP, the gigantic size of the Grand Maitreya will make it a 'universal beacon of Loving♥Kindness in Mongolia for #peace on Earth,'⁶⁷ and the complex will provide the needed conditions for Loving Kindness to manifest worldwide, and especially in the Western nations.⁶⁸ This 'beacon' will make Mongolia a centre of Buddhist Asia. Similarly, the projected Kushinagar statue of the FPMT Maitreya Project is envisaged to last at least a thousand years and be a source of spiritual inspiration and loving-kindness.

Secondly, Maitreya was chosen because he is a salvific figure: Agvanhaidav, who designed the 19th-century Maitreya Temple of Urga, wrote that building colossal statues is a way to 'invite' Maitreya to descend in Mongolia, to 'quickly lead to the Buddha-land,' to enlightenment and to Tuṣita Heaven (cited by Tsultemin 2015: 155). According to the GMP Booklet, 'This monumental construction signifies the coming of the future Buddha Maitreya, foreshadowing the accompanying success and prosperity in Mongolia and in the world. [...] When the good time is imminent, Buddhism will propagate (again) and Grand Maitreya will arrive, the time is approaching' (GMP Booklet). The coming Maitreya will bring a new golden age by making everyone understand the importance of nurturing love and faith in their hearts; mankind will be able to live in peace and harmony on earth, free from all the sufferings, divisions and wars, human life will last for thousands of years, and the sufferings of old age and death will scarcely be known ("Ih Maidar töслин танилсулда" 2014). The possibility of encountering Maitreya in this very lifetime—here/now of Nattier's typology (1988)—makes him more accessible than the transcendent Buddhas. To hasten his descent from Tuṣita Heaven (where he resides awaiting the right time for his birth on earth) is also the aim of building the Maitreya statue near Diskit Gompa in Ladakh, and of the FPMT Maitreya Project ("About the Maitreya Buddha Project, Kushinagar," FPMT website).

Thirdly, Maitreya has also been chosen because 'Building large statues of Maitreya was a tradition of many great lamas of the past. At one time there were several large beautiful Maitreya statues and temples throughout Tibet and Mongolia. Almost all of these statues were destroyed (...) during the 20th century' (EFP, November 22, 2015).

However, it is not Maitreya's most common, royal iconography in the 19th and early 20th century that was chosen by the GMP, that of a Buddha sitting in *bhadrāsana* on a throne, turning the wheel of the Buddhist law, ruler of Tuṣita Heaven: the statue of the GMP is modelled after a standing bodhisattva sculpted by the First Jebtsundamba Zanabazar, who was well-known for his artistic talent.⁶⁹ For the GMP, the standing form of Maitreya appears to be more dynamic

⁶⁷ An expression that comes out over and over in the boards and Facebook pages.

⁶⁸ Published speech of the Ninth Jebtsundamba, 2011 (Fouts 2017); EFP, October 1st, 2015. Michael Fouts is the executive director of the GMP West.

⁶⁹ For Uranchimeg Tsultemin, these two main iconographies had different politico-religious roles in 17th to 19th century Mongolia. Zanabazar's standing bodhisattva carried in the Maitreya procession contributed to unify the Halh around the Jebtsundamba to establish a Buddhist 'state' in (Qing-dominated) Mongolia, while Maitreya sitting in *bhadrāsana* (the form preferred after 1800) is an enlightened 'Buddhist universal emperor, who secures Géluk dominance and the long life for the

than the sitting royal figure: 'Many Mongolian and Tibetan high lamas have taught that the *standing* Maitreya Bodhisattva's footsteps signify the coming of the golden age' (EFP, November 22, 2015); he is standing because he is arriving in our world. The chief designer of the project D. Erdembileg proposed a profane interpretation: 'The young, walking Maitreya symbolises the Mongolia of nowadays: a young democracy and economy moving forward driven by the new energy that runs through its veins' (Dettoni 2013). The statue will therefore at the same time be an invocation of Mongolian Buddhist past and a promise of hope for Mongolia's future.

Besides, as in the past, Maitreya is also worshiped for protection. The GMP markets by-products such as necklaces with the image of Maitreya: 'In addition to protecting oneself from the evils of the outside world, in the future one will develop the unique ability to meet the god Maitreya and cultivate thoughts of compassion' (MFP, February 24, 2017). A previous dimension of the cult of Maitreya—the worship for the purpose of long life (Tsultemin 2015: 146-150)—is absent of the discourses on the GMP (although the Grand Maitreya statue holds a vase of immortality).

Iconography of the Statue and Architecture of the Buddhist Monument

The complex is currently being built 10 kilometres from Züünmod City, in Ögöömör Valley near the new international airport (Sergelen District, Töv Province), on a slope of Zürh Uul (Heart Mountain), south of the great Bogd Mountain (it is said Zanabazar lived there) (Blumberg 2016). This place is particularly auspicious according to the requirements of Buddhist geomancy, since the statue faces the open steppe in the south-east and is backed by a central pointed hill surrounded by two larger rounded hills.

The Colossal Maitreya and Its Model

The statue is modelled after a 72 centimetres tall⁷⁰ statue made by the First Jebtsundamba Zanabazar, preserved in the Choijin lama Temple Museum of Ulaanbaatar, which is said to have been the very image carried in the annual Maitreya procession of Urga (**fig. 6a**) (Berger and Tse Bartholomew (eds) 1995: 175).⁷¹ Mongols view Zanabazar as their greatest artist and call him the Michelangelo of Mongolia.⁷² He was especially devoted to Maitreya and created several gilt bronze sculptures of him.⁷³ The size of the projected statue does not make reference

Jebtsundamba ruler and his community, unified around Maitreya's arrival in Mongolia' (Tsultemin 2015: 154).

⁷⁰ Its real height is 73.5 centimetres, but the texts produced by the GMP write 72 centimetres to obtain a ratio of 1:75.

⁷¹ In their study of the Urga procession, Teleki and Nandinbaatar (2019: 103) describe a 90-centimetre standing statue of Maitreya with a stupa in his hair, called Chodin Jamba (< Tib. mChod rten byams pa, Maitreya [with a] stupa) which was taken out from the Ih burhanii örgöö (Great Buddha Palace) yurt-palace situated in the Bogd Haan's Yellow Palace in the centre of Urga.

⁷² On the rehabilitation of this figure in 20th century Mongolia: Kaplonski 2004: chapter 7.

⁷³ Another, smaller sculpture of Maitreya is preserved in Gandan. The attribution to Zanabazar of a third one, kept in the Arthur M. Sackler Museum in Washington, is debated (Béguin and Aubin 1993: 120-

to Maitreya's supposed size of 88 cubits according to Buddhist texts: it will be 54 metres high, 75 times bigger than Zanabazar's statue, making it the 'tallest Maitreya in the world.' It is half of the stupa's size, which will be 108 metres tall, a highly auspicious number in Buddhism (and in Hinduism).⁷⁴ 108 thousand smaller Maitreya statues will be placed inside, and the whole area covers 108 hectares. The architecture of other colossal statues and buildings of Asia often pays importance to symbolic numbers.⁷⁵



Fig. 6a. Bronze statue of Maitreya made by Zanabazar, late 17th-early 18th century, Choijin lama Temple Museum, Ulaanbaatar, 72 centimetres (Béguin and Aubin 1993: 120, cat. 6); **6b.** Projected statue of the Grand Maitreya (Official website of the GMP); **6c.** Statue of the Grand Maitreya in construction, 2020 (MFP, March 13, 2020 and September 5, 2020)

123, cat. 6; Rhie and Thurman 1991: 141; Berger and Tse Bartholomew (eds) 1995: 280-281, cat. 100; Tsultemin 2015: 137-138).

⁷⁴ 108 is received when 12 is multiplied by 9, another highly symbolic figure. There are numerous instances of using this number in daily practice and mythology: Buddhist rosaries have 108 beads; a mantra should be repeated 108 times in order to be effective; one should ideally perform 108 circumambulations around temples and stupas, and so on. 108 is also favoured for the height of Hindu statues in India (Jain 2017: 22).

⁷⁵ Symbolic or lucky numbers are omnipresent in the monumental architecture of Asia (Ford 2008: 239, 253). At Tsonjin Boldog, the Visitor Centre under the statue of Chinggis Khan has 36 columns representing the 36 emperors from Chinggis to Ligdan. The colossal statue of Confucius at Nishan shengjing near Qufu (his birthplace in Shandong) is 90 metres high because he had 90 disciples (Murray 2018).

The late 17th-early 18th century standing Maitreya sculpted by Zanabazar, kept in the Choijin lama Temple Museum, is a youthful figure with no crown or jewelry, holding a vase of immortality water (*kuṇḍikā*) in his left hand and making the *vitarka mudrā* (argumentation gesture) with his right hand (**fig. 6a**). A prominent stupa decorates the front of his high brahmanic topknot. He stands on a lotus pedestal, in a lopsided posture (*dvibhāṅga*) balanced to his right. He wears a *dhoti* (lower garment) fastened at the waist by a sash, a brahmanic thread, and an antelope skin on his left shoulder. It is modelled on 9th-13th century Newar models, probably through Tibetan intermediaries (Béguin and Aubin 1993: 121).⁷⁶ However, Zanabazar's Maitreya statues are unique in the Tibeto-Mongol world: unlike Newar and Tibetan statues of Maitreya which depict a crowned bodhisattva, they are unadorned (no crown, necklace or jewels) and do not have the usual characteristics of bodhisattvas; instead, with the high topknot and the brahmanic thread, they show a meditating aspect of Maitreya.

The projected statue is almost identical with its smaller model (**fig. 6b**). Its topknot and hair are coloured blue, like Zanabazar's other statue preserved in Gandan Monastery. The designers of the project interpreted the brahmanic thread as being a long rosary (like that of portraits of Mongol prince-officials of the Qing dynasty): in reality it represents the thread used by Indian brahmins to hold their knees in the lotus posture during meditation. A new element was added: a lotus flower that contains a bowl, the stalk of which stems near the bodhisattva's lotus, blossoms under his left hand. Under the feet of Maitreya, visitors will be able to collect holy water; this 'nectar' will be brought up into the vase hold by Maitreya and then poured in the bowl to 'nurture all living beings' (Dettoni 2013).⁷⁷ Both the larger lotus on which stands the statue and the smaller one will have a balcony for visitors (a third scenic viewpoint, corresponding to the level of the statue's hips, will be accessible at the fifth level of the building). A number of mega-statues in the world offer a viewpoint from where tourists can enjoy the scenic view, and also feel themselves dwarfed by the statue's gigantic size.⁷⁸

The Stupa-Complex

Visitors are first supposed to visit the statue, then the six-story building, called 'stupa-complex' (*suvargan tsogtsolbor*) or 'stupa-structure' (*suvargan baiguulamj*) because it is composed of a six-storied building crowned by a stupa (**fig. 7**) (Anirgüm 2014).⁷⁹ It is surrounded by four other much smaller stupas, which is a common configuration in India, Mongolia and China (Charleux 2019: 105).⁸⁰ A Facebook page compares the Stupa-complex to five emblematic stupas of Asia

⁷⁶ See for example the 9th-10th century standing Maitreya at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Berger and Tse Bartholomew (eds 1995: 281) reproduce a Nepalese-inspired Maitreya from Narthang (sNar thang) monastery in Central Tibet, dated 1190 (but balanced to his left). This or a similar image might have served as a model for Zanabazar's work.

⁷⁷ It is called *bad [badma] tsetsgeer damjin rashaan*: the spring running from the lotus flower.

⁷⁸ On the effect of the gigantic to the body that feels 'toylike' and 'insignificant': Stewart 1993 [1984]: 71.

⁷⁹ For an early design of the project: Gerel 2012; <https://www.facebook.com/ikhmaidar/videos/797826123568260> (dated 2014).

⁸⁰ In China, it is called *wuta*, 'five stupas.'

(including Bodnath in Nepal and Borobudur in Indonesia) and four ancient and modern stupas of (greater) Mongolia.⁸¹



Fig. 7. Design of the Grand Maitreya and Stupa-complex. Official website of the GMP

I know no other example of statues standing against a stupa. In Buddhist monasteries of Asia, outdoor stupas are independent structures that symbolize Enlightenment and Buddha's spirit. Mongol stupas were of several types and size, but they were smaller than most of the buildings.⁸² It appears that the reason of building a statue leaning against a stupa is here simply technical: the designers of the project realized that the statue could not stand alone itself because of the very strong Mongolian winds.⁸³

The Stupa-complex is conceived as an eco-friendly building able to collect solar energy. Its basis is composed of a pile of eight round disks that are interrupted in the front by a great entrance hall that supports the statue; they correspond to the first five stories (**fig. 8**). Above is a bell-shaped structure (6th story). The general shape of the Stupa-complex is that of a stupa⁸⁴: the bell-shaped structure recalls the *aṇḍa* (< Mo. *bumba*, Tib. *bum pa*, main body of the stupa)

⁸¹ The 13th-century white stupa of Beijing, the Yuan period stupa of Herlen Bars in Dornod Province; the recently-built stupa of Hamar Monastery in Dornogov' Province, and a Jaran hashar (Bodnath) type of stupa (MFP, February 11, 2018).

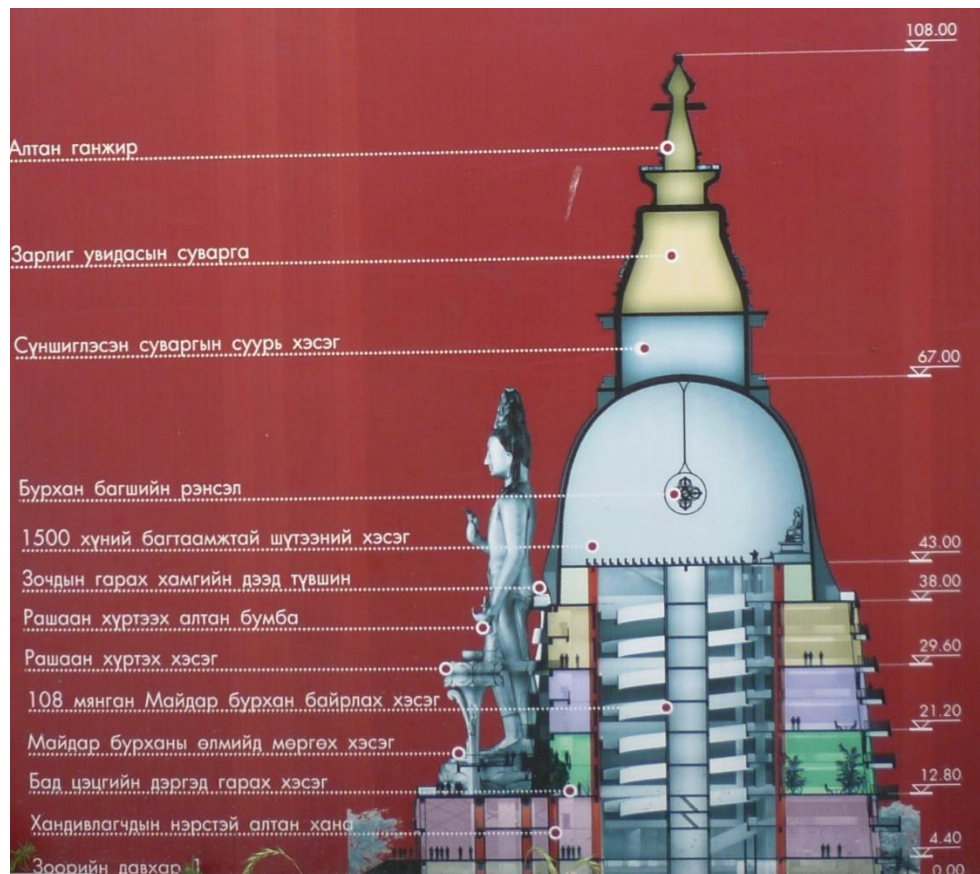
⁸² An exception was the Jaran hashar suvraga (stupa), built in 1857 on the model of the stupa of Bodnath in Nepal, in the monastery of Han öndör (Ih Tamir District, Arhangai Province). It measured between 15 and 20 metres high (destroyed) (Charleux 2019).

⁸³ According to Bataa, interviewed by Krisztina Teleki, personal communication, November 19, 2020.

⁸⁴ The Stupa-complex (stupa and building below) is often simply called 'stupa' in newspaper articles and in the Facebook Mongolian page.

of Tibetan-style stupas, but the real stupa is actually on its top—this stupa above a building is a modern fashion to which I shall return below. The booklet details the function of the six levels:

- Basement: 'technical hall;'
- 1st story: the main lobby or visitor centre;
- 2nd story: the Evergreen eco-hall (Mönh ногоон 'eko' tanhim);
- 3rd story: the Museum and Education hall (Muzei üzveriin tanhim), for exhibit and performances;
- 4th story: the Education hall (Bolovsrol, tanin medehüin tanhim), for education and knowledge;
- 5th story: the Ceremony hall (Yoslol хүндэтгелийн tanhim, hall of ceremony and respect), with a scenic viewpoint);
- 6th story: the domed 'Prayer hall' for up to 500 people (500-n lamyn hural nomyn tanhim, hall for religious services for 500 lamas).



- **Fig. 8.** Cross-section of the Stupa-complex. Billboard, Gandan Monastery, Ulaanbaatar. © Isabelle Charleux, 2013

According to the architectural drawings, at the entrance of the main lobby is a 'golden wall' with a list of donors. Inside the building, a central pillar, surrounded by a round staircase, supports the 6th story: it represents the central wooden pole, the heart of the stupa called 'life-wood' or 'tree of life' (Tib. *sokzhing* [srog zhing], Skt. *yasti*), which is usually covered with *dhāraṇīs*. 108 thousand small Maitreya statues will be placed in niches of this central pillar. The drawings show futurist corridors with curbs, windows to the outside and claustra to the inside (GMP Booklet). (**fig. 14**)

On the 6th story, the large domed hall has a statue of seated Maitreya in a Chinese temple-like structure in the north-west side (**fig. 9**). Its Mongolian names, Hural nomyn tanhim, 'hall for religious services, prayer hall' or Shüteenii heseg, 'worship section,' are modern expressions

that distinguish it from the assembly hall of the Buddhist monastery, called in Mongolian *tsogchin* (< Tib. *tshogs chen*) or *dugan* (< Tib. *'du khang*). Yet, its architecture, divided into a large central space with meditation cushions, and a peripheral corridor for circumambulation, evokes assembly halls, and its capacity (up to 500 people) is comparable to that of the largest monastic assembly halls. of early 20th century Mongolia.⁸⁵ The round dome shape evokes the Mongolian yurt. But unlike the yurt and the Tibeto-Mongol assembly hall, the hall has no skylight; instead, the dome is painted with blue sky and white clouds: it 'expresses heaven with an enthroned Maitreya Buddha statue' (EFP, May 18, 2015). The Prayer hall can probably be interpreted as a representation of Tuṣita Heaven.⁸⁶



Fig. 9. Design of the Prayer hall (*Hural nomyn tanhim*) on the 6th floor, with a statue of seated Maitreya. EFP, May 18, 2015

On top of the domed building, the stupa is built in the style of old Indian stupas known in Tibet as 'Kadampa (bKa' gdams pa) stupas.' The four smaller stupas surrounding the complex are also in the Kadampa style. The texts introducing the project explain:

The Grand Maitreya Project Stupa form is based on a stupa brought [from India] to Tibet by Lama Atisha [980-1054], the great teacher of the second propagation of the Buddhist doctrine in Tibet. Whenever Lama Atisha traveled in Tibet, he carried a wooden stupa of this style with him for his spiritual support. Kadampa stupas differ from other stupas in their form. Although they possess the same underlying elements as other stupas, the most recognizable

⁸⁵ Large Mongol assembly halls were designed for several hundred monks; the largest one was probably the *tsogchin* of Urga, Battsagaan, designed by Zanabazar, that could contain up to 2,500 monks.

⁸⁶ It gives an impression similar to that of Roma's Pantheon (though the Pantheon is not a cited reference).

feature of this stupa is its overall bell-like shape. It also includes a row of doubled lotus petals along the base, a stepped harmika, a conical arrangement of thirteen bhumis surrounding the central axis, and a lotus-form top piece (EFP, May 28th, 2015).

Like the Kadampa stupa, the GMP stupa also has a pair of rings encircling the *aṇḍa* at mid-height, a twelve-cornered *harmikā* decorated with twenty antefixes, and a large umbrella topped with a golden lotus. In Tibet and Mongolia, stupas in the distinctive old Kadampa style were never outdoor monuments of masonry, but small, portable stupas of metal (from 5 to 30 or 40 centimetres high) made for the transport of relics.⁸⁷ They were commonly deposited in larger images or stupas; the biggest ones were 3.50 metres high, to be worshiped on altars.⁸⁸ Several small-size Kadampa stupas are preserved in Mongolia and may have served as a model for the Stupa-complex.⁸⁹ They are called in Mongolian *Zarlig uvdysyn suvarga*, 'Stupa of Religious Instruction/Teaching.'⁹⁰ Maitreya was especially worshiped by the Kadampa School founded by Atiśa, that lasted up to the 15th century and influenced the Gélukpa (with an emphasis on Vinaya and sutras),⁹¹ and Atiśa is often depicted in Mongolia as one of the main Indian masters (Czaja 2018). Maitreya has an indirect link, through Atiśa, with the Kadampa-style stupa, but he is not especially associated with the Kadampa stupa, and the Kadampa stupa has no connection with the stupa depicted in the hair-knot of the Maitreya images.⁹² The choice of an ancient Indian-style stupa might be a reference to the sources of 'original' Buddhism—India.

The future statue and stupa will be consecrated during a Buddhist ritual (*Mo. aravnai*, < Tib. *rapné/rab gnas*). The Dalai Lama and other great masters donated relics of the Buddha to be enshrined inside the Maitreya statue and the stupa during the consecration ritual (Lewis 2017),⁹³ but there is no emphasis on relics like in the FPMT project, that organized a 'Maitreya Project

⁸⁷ Some scholars consider that the White Stupa of Beijing built by Mongol emperor Khubilai Khan between 1270 and 1279 is of Kadampa style, but the GMP does not refer to this stupa.

⁸⁸ Hatt gives a precise description from 14 examples (1980: 193-194).

⁸⁹ One is preserved in the collection of the Mongolian Institute of Buddhist Art (Pürevbat 2005: 376); three are in the Zanabazar Museum of Fine Arts in Ulaanbaatar (<https://www.himalayanart.org/items/50255>, <https://www.himalayanart.org/items/50261>, <https://www.himalayanart.org/items/50273>).

⁹⁰ Or *Zarlig uvidarsyn suvarga*, *Zarlig uvidastany suvarga*. Monk-artist Pürevbat (2005: 164), who translates it in English as 'Stupa of Orally Initiated Dharma,' explains that at the time of Emperor Aśoka after Buddha's death was made a stupa from precious tombac from both west and east India; this *Zarlig uvidarsyn suvarga* became famous in Tibet and Mongolia.

⁹¹ Atiśa, while in Tibet at the end of his life, is said to have experienced a vision of Mañjuśrī and Maitreya debating on the Mahāyāna doctrine in Tuṣita Heaven, guarded by Vajrapāṇi. He made a sketch out of his vision and sent a message to Vikramaśīla (his former monastery in India) to commission a painting of it; the work was painted and sent to Tibet. Maitreya and Mañjuśrī discussing the Dharma became a common theme of thangkas and sculptures. Atiśa is said to have been reborn in Tuṣita Heaven as 'Immaculate Heaven' bodhisattva. On Maitreya temples and statues associated with Atiśa: Czaja 2018.

⁹² Tsultemin (2015: 141, 151-152) summarizes different scholars' interpretations of the stupa in his hair knot, and reproduces an 18th-century Mongolian thangka depicting Maitreya with two stupas above his shoulder, but none of them refers to the Kadampa stupa.

⁹³ A drawing of the booklet depicts a holy relic (*rensel*) of the Buddha in the shape of a *visvajra* (double, crossed *vajra*) in the middle of the room as if hanging from the dome. It is unclear exactly where this relic will be placed.

Heart Shrine Relic tour' to raise fund all over the world (2001-2010), including Mongolia (the relics were exhibited in Gandan for an entire week).⁹⁴

To sum up, the Stupa-complex looks like a temple but it is not. No monastics will be attached to the building. The most obvious lack is the absence of sacred scriptures, necessary for both liturgy and consecration.⁹⁵ Compulsory symbols present in every monastery such as the dharma wheel surrounded by two deer above the entrance that indicate an assembly hall, and Tibetan sacred architectural references which are also adopted by Chinese or hybrid style-temples are also absent.⁹⁶ It also lacks worship items such as prayer-wheels, altars for offerings with the usual paraphernalia, incense-burners, boards for prostrations, flags, and so on. In addition, the Stupa-complex contains a unique central figure, Maitreya, and none of the other bodhisattvas and deities of the boundless Tibeto-Mongol pantheon are represented.⁹⁷ The structure is not called temple or monastery (Mo. *sūm*, *hiid*, *hüree*), and the term Hural nomyn tanhim is not used for monastic assembly halls. The first five stories have profane functions, with emphasis on education and culture, and the general approach is touristic, with the possibility of climbing for the view. Visitors will pay an entrance fee as they do to visit the Chinggis Khan statue of Tsonjin Boldog, 'in order to support itself financially,'⁹⁸ which means that donations from visitors are not expected.

In the 20th and 21st centuries, it has become fashionable in Asia to build stupas above temples (for instance, the Great Drigung Kagyud Lotus stupa built by the Thai government in Lumbini, Nepal) and large stupas that double as a temple, with a room inside serving as a prayer hall. The tendency to transform the lower terraced bases of modern stupas into a cella and to build hollow stupas is common in Tibet (Seegers 2020), Thailand, Cambodia and Myanmar.⁹⁹ A Mongolian example is the stupa of Hamar Monastery in Dornogov' province.¹⁰⁰ Mega-statues are often hollow and accessible inside,¹⁰¹ and their a pedestal ('throne') is used as a hall. The FPMT Kushinagar statue, that may have been a source of inspiration for the GMP, will be

⁹⁴ During this tour were exhibited more than a thousand relics of Śākyamuni, other Buddhas and great masters. The relics will be placed in the temple located at the level of the 'heart' of the statue to be built in Kushinagar (Maitreya Projet International 2005). The Kalmyk Maitreya was filled with relics brought from Buddhist monasteries of India, as well as the *Kanjur* and *Tanjur* (Klasanova 2019).

⁹⁵ Every Buddhist structure must contain the three 'supports' of the Buddha's mind (stupas), speech (the sacred scriptures) and body (icons).

⁹⁶ For instance, the characteristic shapes and decorations of pillars, doors and entablatures with consecration formulas in Lantsa script, the red, orange and white colour code, and the crimson brown friezes with gilded emblems.

⁹⁷ Except, perhaps, for mural paintings depicting deities suggested on the project's simulation.

⁹⁸ According to Baatar, a monk from Gandan interviewed by Vesna Wallace. Besides, it is said that any profit made within the complex will be dedicated to supporting humanitarian and compassionate works ("Ih Maidar töслиin video taniltsuulga" 2014).

⁹⁹ It represents a transformation or a re-invention of stupa architecture and design vis-à-vis those built before the 1950s. On stupas that house a museum in modern Thai temples: Gabaude 2003.

¹⁰⁰ In the 19th and early 20th century, a few 'hollow' stupas with a room inside already existed in Mongolia: Charleux 2019.

¹⁰¹ Like the Statue of Liberty and other 19th century European giant statues such as Our Lady of France, built between 1856 and 1860 in the French city of Le Puy.

seated on a seventeen-story building, which will contain temples, exhibition halls, a museum, library, audio-visual theatre and visitor facilities. The Diskit Maitreya statue in Ladakh sits on a two-story high throne that functions as a small temple and monastic residence. The 33 metres high Guanyin of Putuoshan Island in China stands above a two-storied building with 'chapels' (the second floor displays 500 copper statues of Guanyin) where it is forbidden to make offerings and burn incense. The 100 metres Guanyin near Sendai in Japan, constructed in the 1990s, has a hollow central core with nine suspended floors connected by small bridges and stairways; each floor holds shrines to twelve smaller statues with a total of 108 (McDaniel 2017: 2-3). The Grand Maitreya therefore follows a general trend in Asia.

The Grand Maitreya Area

The Stupa-complex will be included in the Grand Maitreya Monument (Ih Maidar höshöö), a multi-purpose 'Buddhist and Cultural Complex' that will cover an area of 108 hectares (**fig. 10**). The area adopts the shape of the Soyombo (it is the first letter of the Soyombo script created by Zanabazar in 1686), the 'symbol of independence,' 'a symbol of national unity and statehood of Mongolia, found on the Flag of Mongolia and the Coat of Arms of Mongolia and many other official documents' (EFP, May 13, 2014). The complex aims to attract both Buddhists and 'ordinary' tourists—who will find all they need to fulfil their spiritual needs, and enjoy a relaxing day spent out of the city with their family (Bataa 2012: 111; Dettoni 2013). The general design evokes the FPMT Maitreya Project,¹⁰² with the mandala-like complex surrounding the colossal seated statue. It will include:

1. A spiritual and cultural area: Zanabazar temple museum and 'multi-ethnic' and inter-denominational Buddhist monasteries including internationally-built monasteries and two palaces for the Jebtsundamba¹⁰³ and the Dalai Lama. It is not clear whether there will be a permanent monastic community.
2. An educational and knowledge area: an Education centre, a library, a Meditation hall for up to 5,000 people (with meditation and retreat facilities where people can learn art, yoga or meditation), a Traditional Medicine and Astrology Centre that will offer free medical check-ups and consultancy services.
3. A commercial and public area: a customer service centre (shopping malls, restaurants, commercial establishments), a five-star 'Buddhist hotel,' a Theater/Exhibition hall, a cinema, a food court, a business service centre, various services including a bank and a tour operator, a landscaping and leisure area for kids (Maitreya's 'Green horse' facility, Eco-Lumbini Park, a zoo, gardens on either side), and sport facilities such as tennis courts (editor's introduction, Bataa 2012: 109; GMP Booklet).

The complex cannot compare to 'traditional monasteries': it is a new religious and touristic complex adapted to the spiritual, cultural and entertainment needs of laypeople. The two biggest temples, the palaces of the Jebtsundamba and the Dalai Lama, will be built in Chinese style with green tiles resembling the 'Green Palace' of the Bogd Haan south of Ulaanbaatar (also known as 'Winter Palace,' now called Bogd Haan Palace Museum). The similar palaces of the

¹⁰² See the illustration in Falcone 2018: 111.

¹⁰³ It will also be the palace of two other Mongolian reincarnations, Lamyn gegegen and Manzhushir hutagt.

Dalai Lama and the Jebtsundamba will place them on an equal footing. There is no reference to Tibetan-style Buddhist architecture.



Fig. 10. *The Soyombo-shaped Grand Maitreya area and the Palace of the Jebtsundamba. EFB January 17, 2014 and screen captions of the video posted on the MFP of the GMP, August 3, 2014*

Maidar Eco-city, City of the Future

While the initial project was a statue and stupa along with a touristic complex in the steppe, like in Tsonjin Boldog, it then evolved to become a whole city, the Maidar (Maitreya) Eco-city, that would be not only an ecological model for other cities throughout Asia, but also, eventually, the new administrative and political capital of Mongolia (**fig. 11.3**).¹⁰⁴ The project officially

¹⁰⁴ The project to move the capital city is not new. Because Ulaanbaatar has serious problems of overpopulation (1.4 million people or 45 percent of the total population of Mongolia live in Ulaanbaatar), smoke (hence its nickname, Utaan-baatar, Smoke-Baatar) and air pollution due to coal-burning and industries, scarcity of water, shortage of housing, high concentration of industries (about 70 percent of enterprises and organizations are located in the capital), traffic jam, overuse of water and power supplies, plans to move the capital city to another part of the country started in 2004. A first proposal was the site of the old medieval capital Kharakhorum (Harhorin, Övörhangai Province); then Züünmod in Töv Province in 2012, and since 2012, Maidar City (Rossman 2018: 118).

announced in 2012 was relatively modest, with religious and cultural buildings, and housing for 20,000 people. The plan grew more ambitious, and the Mongolian government took over administration of the project with the creation of the Maidar City Company: it is now recognized as a National level development project.¹⁰⁵ It was decided to expand the population to 300,000 inhabitants (a third of the population of Ulaanbaatar) and the surface area to 110,000 hectares. The project is part of new urban development around Bogd Han Mountain, that includes Aero City (or New Züünmod), a satellite city to be established along the New Ulaanbaatar International Airport. The location of the Grand Maitreya and the future city is situated in a hub: a four-lane highway connecting the airport with Ulaanbaatar will run south of Maidar City; a regional public transport system will connect it to Ulaanbaatar, the airport and Züünmod City; and Maidar City will have its own station on the main Mongolian railway line. A cable-car crossing the Bogd Han Mountain to Ulaanbaatar is also planned, passing a ski-resort on its way (Rogers 2015).

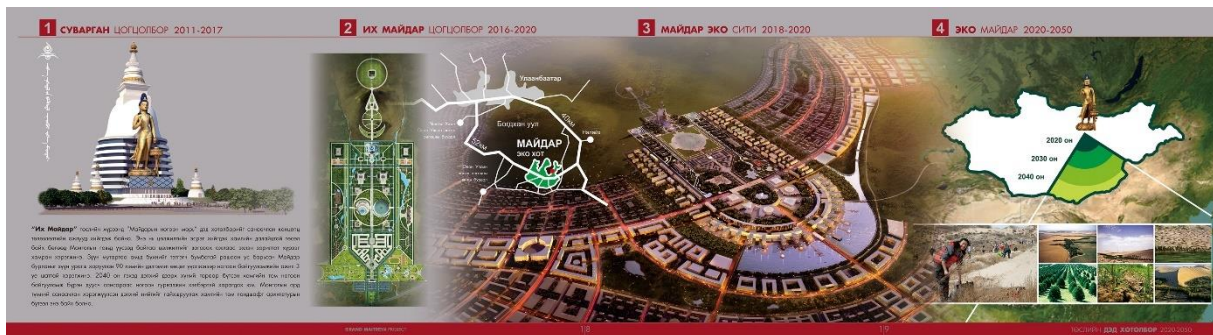


Fig. 11. *The four steps of the project: 1) Stupa-complex; 2) Soyombo-shaped Grand Maitreya area; 3) Maidar Eco-city; 4) Eco-Maidar. GMP Booklet*

In 2015, the plan proposed by RSAA GmbH, a Cologne-based practice (led by German architect and urban designer Stefan Schmitz, who designed other eco-cities projects such as China's Tianjin Eco-city in 2004), and other German firms, was selected (Rogers 2015): Maidar City will be designed as a mandala radiating out from the statue and stupa, with 'a self-sustaining urban centre that fulfils stringent environmental criteria in terms of urban planning, energy, transport and water comparable to certified German ecological standards—sustainability,¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ According to Presidential decree No 27 (February 8, 2013) the Maidar City Project is a national level development project. See the Aerocity project document, p. 236; Ulaanbaatar Master Plan 2040 made by Urban Planning Design Institute (UPDI) of Ulaanbaatar city in 2019 (p. 12). There was big pressure from the Municipality on the UPDI team to add the Maidar City Project into the 2040 Master Plan. See the development plan of greater Ulaanbaatar, with the ring of new and existing satellite cities surrounding Bogd Han Mountain linked by transportation network. I thank Amgalan Sükhbaatar, who participated in the development of the 2040 Master Plan, for this information (March 2020).

¹⁰⁶ The biggest problem is water; rain water that flows down from the surrounding hills will be collected, cleaned and channeled as drinking water into a lake (which will also serve as recreational area).

low carbon emissions,¹⁰⁷ environmental protection and social harmony...' It will have media, tourism and financial industries as well as museums, a movie theatre complex, shopping districts, race-tracks, religious centres, and 'more affordable property prices.'¹⁰⁸ The complexity of the project grew in size and ambition over time, now including a university campus,¹⁰⁹ and a 50-hectare area for international film industry.¹¹⁰

As Maitreya is the Buddha of the future era, Maidar City will be 'the City of the Future,' 'faithful to the spirit of Maitreya': 'Historically, Mongolians live in harmony with nature. This has instilled environmentally-friendly values that would challenge the negative impact of industrialization and build a city that protects nature, integrates it into the city and generates good and sustainable living conditions' ("Maidar EcoCity" flyer 2018). The statue and Stupa-complex are central to the new project: turned toward the arid south-east, Maitreya with not only be a 'universal beacon of Loving♥Kindness' but also will turn the Gobi green again: 'From the statue will emanate at a 90 degree open angle of influence, a green area zone that will stop desertification of the Mongolian Gobi.... by 2040 the biggest man-made green zone in the world will find its final shape' (EFP, September 2, 2013)¹¹¹ (**fig. 11.4**). The last stage of the project plans to plant 'thousands to tens of thousands of trees each year' and promote environmentally friendly activities and projects in Mongolia (EFP, May 2, 2015). We here observe a commonplace discourse on a 21st century utopian ecological city projecting an image of economic prosperity and (elite-defined) modernity to both domestic and international audiences.¹¹²

Organization and Fundraising of the Grand Maitreya Project

The project is managed by 'The Grand Maitreya Foundation' (GMF, Ih Maidar San), a non-profit, non-governmental organization established in September 2009 (Battulga is Chairman of its Board of Trustees). The Chief Advisor of the GMP, Bataa Mishig-Ish, 'is committed to both the spiritual and the economic viability of the project' (editor's introduction, Bataa 2012: 209).

¹⁰⁷ RSAA planned renewable power sources (solar energy and wind and wind farm), but eventually realized that coal prices were cheap, hence in the beginning power will be up to 50% renewable, and 100% within thirty years (Rogers 2015).

¹⁰⁸ Construction was supposed to start in 2014 and take ten years, but only started in 2019. In the first stage (hospitals, schools, kindergartens, emergency departments, and so on, USD 2 billion), Maidar city should have 80-100,000 residents by 2030. In the fourth stage the city will have 300.000 inhabitants on a surface area of 110,000 hectares ("Maidar EcoCity" flyer 2018). The architect Amgalan Sūkhbaatar is sceptic about the respect of the international standards of a green city: 'it is just on the paper. It is the kind of branding for further investment' (email, March 2020).

¹⁰⁹ To relocate Ulaanbaatar universities, with a capacity of 5,000 students (Enh-Üjin 2018).

¹¹⁰ "Mongol Ulsyn Yerönhiilögch H. Battulga Ündesnii kino üildveriin shav tavih yoslold oroltsoj ug hellee" 2019.

¹¹¹ The southern areas of the city have been ear-marked for agricultural use. "German City Planners Contributing to New Mongolian City;" Rogers 2015; "Maidar EcoCity" flyer 2018.

¹¹² There is an extensive literature on utopian cities and monumental architecture linked to modernity, progress and national identity, from Brasilia to Astana. See Ford 2008; Vale 2008; Mako et al. (eds). 2014; for recent studies in authoritarian context: Smith 2008; Koch 2018.

International Buddhist figures of Mongolia, India/Tibet and the United States support the project: the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, Choijamts (abbot of Gandan), the Sixth Jhado Rinpoché Tenzin Jungne,¹¹³ 'Kuten La' Thupten Ngodup,¹¹⁴ and American Buddhist teacher Robert Thurman (president of the Tibet House in New York City) are honourable members of the Board of Trustees and advised the project's directors. In addition, great masters such as Lama Zopa Rinpoché of the FPMT, the Eighth Arjia Rinpoché Lobsang Tubten Jigme Gyatso,¹¹⁵ the Ninth Jebtsundamba Jampal Namdrol Chokye Gyeltsen,¹¹⁶ and H. Baasansüren, abbot of Erdene zuu support the project, and Western Buddhists such as Dr. Barry Kerzin and American star Steven Seagal are its ambassadors in the US.

Exhibits and Promotion

The GMP is a private sector initiative; construction is funded by donations.¹¹⁷ Total costs were originally set to reach over USD 230 million—of which 32 million for the statue and the stupa (Dettoni 2013). The Mongolian Facebook page of the GMP (open on October 1st, 2010) and the English Facebook page¹¹⁸ (open on September 2, 2013) together with the Grand Maitreya

¹¹³ Ja do rin po che bsTan 'dzin 'byung gnas, 1954-, master of Kālacakra, one of the most highly esteemed Tibetan lamas in the Géluk lineage today. He came to Mongolia in 1991 at the invitation of Bakula Rinpoché to teach at the Zanabazar Buddhist University, and gave many consecrations in Mongolia. In 2004, his lay students founded the Javzandamba (Jebtsundamba) Centre that teaches Buddhist philosophy and mediation using Western pedagogical methods (Havnevik 2017: 118).

¹¹⁴ Thub bstan dngos grub (1957-), official State Oracle of Tibet, abbot of Nechung (gNas chung) Monastery.

¹¹⁵ A kya rin po che bLo bzang thub bstan 'jigs med rgya mtsho (1950-), former abbot of Kumbum (sKu 'bum) Monastery, was born in a Mongol family of Eastern Tibet. He now lives in the United States, where he founded in 2000 the Tibetan Centre for Compassion and Wisdom. He regularly comes to Mongolia, promotes an engaged Buddhism and funded a clinic for children with cancer in Ulaanbaatar.

¹¹⁶ 'Jam dpal nram grol chos kyi rgyal mtshan (1936-2012), born in Tibet. The Dalai Lama recognized him as the reincarnation of the Eighth Jebtsundamba (or Bogd Haan) to develop the Jonang tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. He lived in India and visited Mongolia in 1999 but was not granted a visa for ten years because of Sino-Mongolian relations and local political pressure. He eventually received Mongolian citizenship in 2010 and was officially enthroned as the Ninth Jebtsundamba, head of Mongolian Buddhism in 2011, but passed away in Mongolia the following year. See the official letter expressing his support for the GMP (MFP, November 11, 2011).

¹¹⁷ The main supporting private foundation is the Indra Future Foundation. H. Battulga initially invested money in the project but in 2012, the GMF had to launch a subscription by selling small statues (Vesna Wallace, personal communication, November 20, 2020).

¹¹⁸ The English Facebook page is completely different from the Mongolian page. It was especially active between 2015 and 2017. Between information on the progress of construction, it mostly posts news about the Dalai Lama, artworks, great Buddhist events in the world such as Kālacakra empowerment rituals or Buddha's birthday, the visit of the Dalai Lama in Mongolia in 2016, Buddhist maxims about peace and compassion, and messages of love.

channel on YouTube,¹¹⁹ the official website¹²⁰ and Twitter are the main showcases and promotional tools of the project; they allow us to study the whole process of fundraising, the rituals of consecration, the main personalities involved, and the differences of discourses and strategies towards Mongolians and foreigners. The Mongolian Facebook page posted hundreds of photos of proud donors (families and companies) posing with their statue and certificate, relays other pages such as Shirchin Baatar's from the Bay area (California), promotional videos, TV and internet audiovisual programmes about the project, and newspaper articles.¹²¹ A radio emission called 'The Grand Maitreya radio programme' is broadcasted twice a week on 'Lavain egshig.'¹²²

Gandan Monastery, where the feet of the statue were exhibited for a while, has a GMP Information Centre to advertise the project. Another Information Centre was established near the State Department Store (MFP, May 2, 2013); in 2013, it was moved to the main square (Chinggis Haan/Sühbaatar). This showroom¹²³ housed a copy of the gigantic head of Maitreya as well as a maquette and posters introducing the future construction (**fig. 12**). The smaller Maitreya statues available at different donation levels (see below) were also displayed there. This showroom, with all the posters of the future interior, actually functioned as a temple-like Buddhist centre for laypeople; it is a kind of surrogate of the future Stupa-complex: there, visitors come to worship the head of Maitreya, attend the monthly lectures,¹²⁴ teachings, Buddhist prayers and official ceremonies, learn about the project, make a donation and take photos in front of a replica of the statue's head.¹²⁵

The GMF presents the project in various great events of Ulaanbaatar and the countryside, such as the Ulaanbaatar 2017 National Tourism Exhibition, the Danshig Naadam (sporting festival) and the great Uрга *tsam* (masked dance ritual). It also sponsors religious and non-religious events such as Buddha's birthday at Gandan Monastery, international conferences, and

¹¹⁹ Promotional videos show Mongolia in the era of progress, with mining, oil extraction, and satellites, needing a strong symbol comparable to the great monuments of the world. It is reminiscent of the films on Mongolia on the path of progress of the socialist period (<https://www.youtube.com/user/ikhmaidar>).

¹²⁰ The official website was inactive for at least sixth month and reactivated in Fall 2020, with a message explaining that construction activities restarted. It is now possible to make online donations. The English version is not available.

¹²¹ The great majority of news posted on the Mongolian Facebook page does not concern the project, but ritual activity and news of Gandan and the Öndör Gegeen Zanabazar Cultural Foundation, astrological prescriptions for the Lunar New Year, messages from the Dalai Lama, infos about the COVID-19, radio programmes of 'Lavain egshig,' international Buddhist celebrations, and explanations of the meaning of rituals and deities. Photos of donors are plenty, but very few news concern the progress of construction. For instance, most of the messages of 2015 are messages of love, wishes, Buddhist thoughts; only on August 18, 2015 are posted information about construction of the Grand Maitreya.

¹²² 'Conch's Melody,' first Buddhist media launched in 1992.

¹²³ It is called Ündesnii бүтээн байгуулалт Их Майдар тösliin medeelliin töv.

¹²⁴ All kinds of lectures are organized, such as lectures on parental responsibilities and parent-child relationships on Buddha's mother day (November 10, 2014).

¹²⁵ In January 2015 it was moved to the 11th floor of the Olympic Plaza Centre, located south of Bayanmongol in Bayanzürh district (MFP, January 21, 2015). A third one opened in 2018 at the Tsagaan Sar exhibition of the Hunnu Mall (MFP, February 4, 2018).

organizes charity works. It proposes derivative products such as a Grand Maitreya yearly Calendar, amulet necklaces with an image of Maitreya, and images of the Stupa-complex in glass. In 2012, the GMF worked with Motion Frame to launch a 108-episode Maitreya comic series for children and youth.



Fig. 12. Donors holding their statue in front of the giant head, in the GMP Information Centre, Sükhbaatar Square, Ulaanbaatar. MFP, December 2, 2014

The Grand Maitreya Foundation appeals ‘to Buddhists all around the world to support this project’ (GMP Booklet). The fundraising campaign destined to American donors was launched in 2014, targeting native Mongols and American Buddhists. An office of the GMP was opened in Santa Fe, New Mexico in 2015. A Mongol named Shirchin Baatar raises funds from Mongolians living in the US in the Bay area (California), to allow them to ‘participate in the great unity that unites the Mongolian people’ (MFP, February 25, 2014). In February 2014, the GMP was presented at Arjia Rinpoché’s centre in Oakland (EFP, February 22, 2014). The project is also introduced to scholars and general audience at the University of California, Berkeley, on the occasion of conferences, of the ‘Asia Week’ series of events, and of exhibitions of Mongolian artists (MFP, September 26, 2015; October 5, 2015).

Different Levels of Donations

The GMF proposes four levels of *handiv* (donations, contributions) that are largely unaffordable for an ordinary Mongolian family (**fig. 13**).¹²⁶ Two other smaller donation levels are proposed

¹²⁶ According to the brochure, the MFP (September 2, 2013; English version, February 27, 2014), the official website (<http://www.ikhmaidar.mn/section/supportproject.shtml?sel=1316>) and boards

on the Mongolian Facebook page and the website. Advertisements explain how to register as donor by visiting the project Information Centre in person or through a representative, online on the official website of the GMP, by phone, or even by SMS.

1. MNT 10,000- MNT 50,000 (in 2020, = USD 3.50-17.50): to contribute to the *sünshig* (see below) of the Grand Maitreya statue. The names of the members of the donor's family and children will be entrusted to the protection (of Maitreya).
2. MNT 50,000-MNT 500,000: the names of the donor and of his/her children are immortalized on the 'golden wall' at the entrance of the Stupa-complex;
3. **'Family donation'** (*örh ger büliin handiv*): above MNT 500,000 or USD 350,¹²⁷ for a pair of gilded 27 centimetres Maitreya (statues), consecrated according to the Buddhist ritual. One will be given in a glass protecting cloche to the family along with a certificate of contribution (*erhiin gerchilgee*); it will be kept at home as a souvenir for life. The second one will be placed (*zalah*, 'invited') into the Stupa-complex in the name of the family; it will allow to immortalize the donor's name for generations ("‘Ih Maidar’-yn dallaga” 2015). The second image is called *sünshig*¹²⁸: the donors therefore offer small statues to consecrate the stupa-complex.
4. **'Donation of respect'** (*hündetgeliin handiv*): above MNT 3 million or USD 2,000: the names of the family and of their children will be written on one of the 1,188 golden rosary bead (of 14 centimetres in diameter) that will be offered to the body (*lagshin [biye]*) of the Grand Maitreya, and will be preserved from generation to generation.¹²⁹ This donation (as the two following amounts) also includes the pair of 27 centimetres statues of Maitreya along with a certificate of contribution (as above).
5. **'Donation of corporate'** (collective contribution, *baigullaga hamt olni handiv*): above MNT 15 million or USD 10,000. A 54 centimetres high statue gilded with 54K pure gold (100 times smaller than the colossal one) will be consecrated and offered on behalf of the contributors (a collective, a firm, an organization), who will receive a certificate of sponsorship (*batlamj*).
6. **'Donation of exclusive'** (no amount): to sponsor the creation of the jewelled golden stupa that will be placed on the top of the head of the colossal image.

The 27-centimetre statues are not in metal but in a kind of resin using a modern technology; they are made in Mongolia by a monk-artist of Gandan.¹³⁰ The statue to be kept at home on the family altar is comparable to pilgrimage souvenirs, such as paintings and prints of a miraculous icon or of a pilgrimage place (Charleux 2015: 172-177 and fig. 3; Charleux 2019: 108-115): these served not only as souvenirs but also as objects of worship and substitutes of the pilgrimage. The home statue links the donors to the future construction which will enshrine the brother image and their name: it materializes this special link as well as the karmic connection thus created with Maitreya.

The second statue will be enshrined in descending order in niches of the central pillar of the Stupa-complex. 'Only 108,000 families' will thus 'have the privilege of having a Maitreya Buddha statue at the complex': the statues represent each family that had contributed to the project.¹³¹ The donors will form a community of donors of the Grand Maitreya. When the

(photographed in 2018 in Gandan) in both Mongolian and English. The English translation is partial and inaccurate.

¹²⁷ Value of the MNT probably in 2012. In 2016, the amount in dollars of the 'Family donation' changed to USD 200 (EFP, January 19, 2016). In 2020, MNT 500,000 = around USD 177.

¹²⁸ Statues are one of the categories of objects inserted inside stupas during their consecration ritual.

¹²⁹ The English text translates that the rosary bead will be given to the family.

¹³⁰ Vesna Wallace, personal communication, November 20, 2020. The 54-centimetre statues are made in Japan (MFP, June 5, 2015).

¹³¹ "Grand Maitreya Project English video presentation."

Stupa-complex will be completed, the donors are encouraged to come and find their name and statue in the central pillar. After registration, they receive a 6-digit number, and they will be invited to enter their number and password on one of the electronic screens surrounding the pillar (**fig. 14**). The names of their family member written on the certificate will appear on the screen, and the location of ‘their family Buddha’ will be lit up with a laser showing the name of the donor. It is possible to add names of other family members (GMP Booklet; MFP, June 7, 2016).

<p>ТӨСӨЛД ОРОЛЦОХ БОЛОМЖ</p> <p>Огноо мөрийн оролцоо, хамгийн сайн ажлаар бүтээгдэх буй уг бүтээн байгуулалтад хэл бүтээн оролцоо хувь нэмрээ оруулж, үүний үед буйн аюулгүй тэгшитгэл хурдан боломжтой. Үүний бүтээн байгуулалтын өртгийн тооцоог үзэх үүсвэр дараах 3 төрлийн хэргийг оруулж боломжтой.</p> <p>27 см</p> <p>Батламж</p> <p>Гэрт тань залагдах</p> <p>Цогцолборт залагдах</p> <p>27 см өндөр алтан шармаг оролцоог хос Майдар бурханыг ойндуулан, олонд болон өрхийн тэргүүний нэрийг бичиж суварганд зална.</p> <p>ОРХ ГЭР БУЛИЙН ХАНДИВ</p> <p>350\$ † (Бүтээн үзэх төлбөр өм дотор ба түүнээс дээш тэргүүтэй тэмцэж мөнгө хэргийг)</p> <p>Олонд болно зөвхөн.</p> <p>350\$ Үзэх үзсэн уран цуглуурын төхөөрөлдөө 27 см алтан шармаг Майдар бурхан бүтээн үзсэн.</p> <p>† (Бүтээн үзэх төлбөр өм дотор ба түүнээс дээш тэргүүтэй тэмцэж мөнгө хэргийг)</p> <p>Тухайн үзсэн уран цуглуурын төхөөрөлдөө 27 см алтан шармаг Майдар бурхан бүтээн үзсэн.</p> <p>† (Бүтээн үзэх төлбөр өм дотор ба түүнээс дээш тэргүүтэй тэмцэж мөнгө хэргийг)</p>	<p>19 см</p> <p>Батламж</p> <p>19 см өндөр алтан шармаг оролцоог хос Майдар бурханыг ойндуулан, олонд болон өрхийн тэргүүний нэрийг бичиж суварганд зална.</p> <p>ХҮНДЭТГЭЛИЙН ХАНДИВ</p> <p>2'000\$ † (Бүтээн үзэх төлбөр өм дотор ба түүнээс дээш тэргүүтэй тэмцэж мөнгө хэргийг)</p> <p>Олонд болно зөвхөн.</p> <p>Зөвхөн тэдгээр: 34 метр Майдар бурханы лэгийн (бөмб) орхж 2000 ширхэг алтан шармаг оролцоог бүтээн үзсэн бүр дээр хамгийн сайн ажлаар бүтээгдэх буйн аюулгүй тэгшитгэл хурдан боломжтой.</p>	<p>54 см</p> <p>Батламж</p> <p>54 см өндөр алтан шармаг оролцоог хос Майдар бурханыг ойндуулан, олонд болон өрхийн тэргүүний нэрийг бичиж суварганд зална.</p> <p>БАЙГУУЛЛАГА, ХАМТ ОЛНЫ ХАНДИВ</p> <p>10'000\$ † (Бүтээн үзэх төлбөр өм дотор ба түүнээс дээш тэргүүтэй тэмцэж мөнгө хэргийг)</p> <p>Олонд болно зөвхөн.</p> <p>Аж ахуй нэгж, байгууллагын албан хаагчид бүтээн үзсэн 10,000 бурханыг оролцоог бүтээн үзсэн бүр дээр хамгийн сайн ажлаар бүтээгдэх буйн аюулгүй тэгшитгэл хурдан боломжтой.</p>	<p>54 см</p> <p>Батламж</p> <p>54 см өндөр алтан шармаг оролцоог хос Майдар бурханыг ойндуулан, олонд болон өрхийн тэргүүний нэрийг бичиж суварганд зална.</p> <p>ХЭЗГААРЛАГДАМЛ ХАНДИВ</p> <p>† (Бүтээн үзэх төлбөр өм дотор ба түүнээс дээш тэргүүтэй тэмцэж мөнгө хэргийг)</p> <p>Их Майдар сүмийн хамгийн дээд тэргүүний эрдэмтэн алтан шармаг бүтээн үзсэн.</p>
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Fig. 13. Four levels of donation (top); ‘Family donation’ and ‘Donation of respect’ (bottom). GMP Booklet and official website of the GMP

This second statue is called *sūnshig* (or *shūnshig*, < Tib. *zungzhuk* [*gzungs bzhug*]), a term that designates the relics and *dhāraṇīs* that are inserted inside a stupa during the consecration ritual.¹³² In Tibet and Mongolia, deposits of consecration inside statues and stupas are usually

¹³² In the Tibetan expression, the word *gzungs*, *dhāraṇī*, serves as a collective name for all types of relics (Bentor 1994: 19). In Mongolian, the term *sūnshig* is also used for consecration artefacts inserted by

not visible, and the term *sünshig/zungzhuk* is not employed for images that are consecrated and exhibited. The 108,000 statues inside the Stupa-complex are reminiscent of the ‘ten thousand’ small Buddha statues surrounding the Maitreya statue of old Urga (Pozdneev (1971 [1896]: 62),¹³³ and of those surrounding the Megjid Janraisig statue; they were commonly found along the walls of Buddhist temples of Mongolia, Tibet and China. The modern practice of proposing donors to purchase a statue to be enshrined inside a colossal image or in its pedestal can be observed in China and the Himalayas. For instance, in the large meditation hall located inside the throne of the 52 metres Great Buddha Dordenma near Thimpu in Bhutan, 100,000 statues of 20 centimetres and 25,000 of 30 centimetres are placed along the walls; donors can offer these statues to the temple, which serve as consecration deposits of the big image.¹³⁴ Another example is the modern, ecumenical Buddha Tooth Relic Temple and Museum of Singapore, a Buddhist cultural complex founded in 2007 by monk Shi Fa Zhao: donors can offer for 5,000 SGD (about USD 3,700) a Buddha image that is placed in a niche of the walls of the main chanting room (McDaniel 2017: 141).

The donations are immortalized by certificates, photographs posted on Facebook, and by the recording of the names of donors inside the stupa (the equivalent of stone inscriptions) and on the rosary beads. This subscription process is reminiscent of the old tradition of Buddhist fundraising. In the pre-socialist period, monasteries used to send monks from yurt to yurt throughout Mongolia to collect money for the construction or restoration of their temples and stupas. These monks introduced the reason for the solicitation to the rich and poor by showing their monastery’s official letter and encouraged donations, in kind (bricks of tea, cattle, skins...) or in cash. The donation created a special link between the donors and the monastery, where they would be welcomed in the future.¹³⁵ The donors were offered a certificate of donation (*temdeg[t] bichig*) with their name and the amount of their donation, and these were also recorded on booklets, steles, or stupa inscriptions in the monastery. For instance, each of the stupas of the wall of Erdene zuu, erected between 1730 and 1803, has an inscription with the names of their donors.¹³⁶ In the 19th and early 20th century, for important donations, the names, amounts and purpose of donations of pilgrims to Wutaishan monasteries were recorded on more than 350 stone inscriptions that are still visible in their courtyards. In addition, certificates imitating stone inscriptions with a similar text were given to donors to bring back home.¹³⁷ The recording of donors’ names and donations therefore relates to ancient practices.

lamas in various types of objects (a car, a secular building) during a consecration ritual (I thank Amgalan Sükhbaatar for this precision).

¹³³ Pozdneev does not specify their iconography. The motif of ‘ten thousand’ (meaning: a large number of) images, generally of Śākyamuni or Amitāyus, is common in Tibetan imagery.

¹³⁴ I thank Kunsang Namgyal-Lama for the discussion we had about these small statues. She also mentioned to me the hall inside the colossal statue of Samantabhadra at Emeishan Mountain (China).

¹³⁵ On the practice of collecting donations on a large scale to build or restore a monastery: Charleux 2015: 138-144.

¹³⁶ The stupa-wall was built with donations from the four Halh *aimags*, the Ih Shav, Bayad, Dörvöd and Urianhai (Ochir and Hatanbaatar 2011: 22). This practice is also common in Tibet (Seegers 2020).

¹³⁷ For a study of stone inscriptions and certificates of donations imitating them: Charleux 2015.

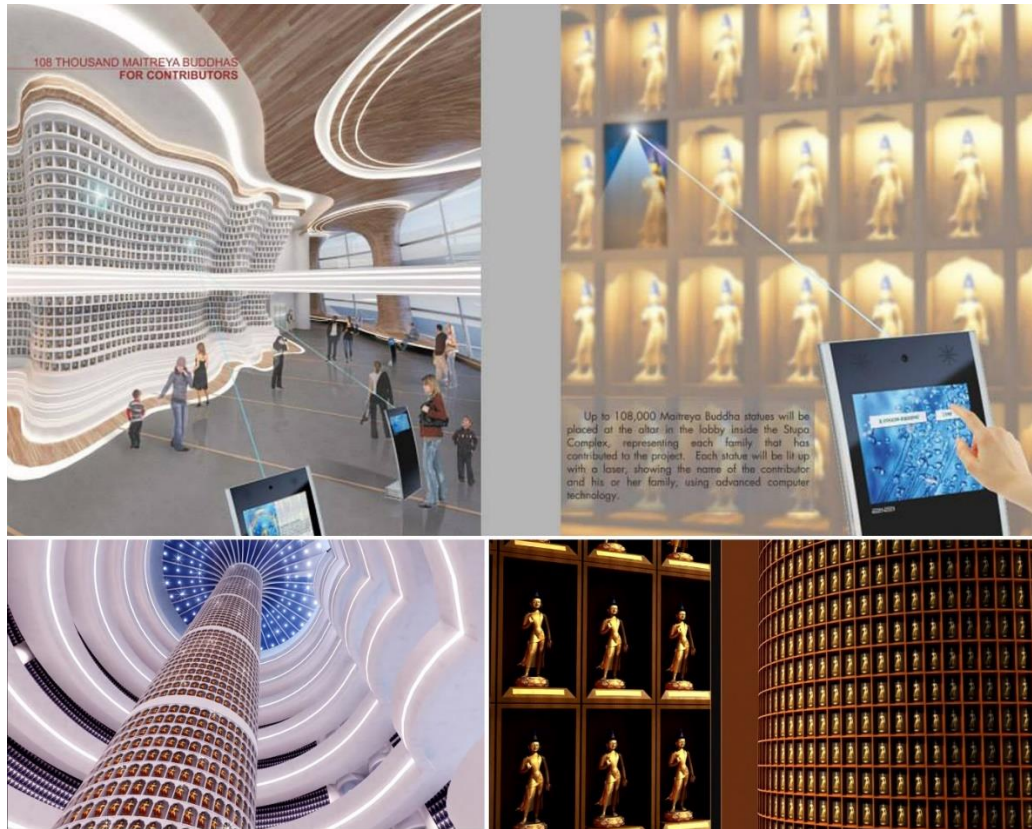


Fig. 14. Interior of the Stupa-complex, with the electronic screens and small statues in niches in the central pillar. GMP Booklet (up) and screen captions of the English video “Grand Maitreya Project Introduction” posted on Buddhistdoor Global, April 12, 2017 (<https://www.buddhistdoor.net/news/first-phase-of-mongolias-grand-maitreya-project-to-be-completed-this-summer>) (bottom left) and of “Ih Maidar tösliin video taniltsuulga” 2014 (bottom right)

However, I have not heard of miniature replicas of the main pilgrimage icon or any other significant item offered in exchange for donations in the past. The fund-raising monks offered donors small gifts such as silk scarves, images or pills that were not related to the amount of their donation: the *öglög* (‘alms, gift, donation,’ Skt. *dāna*) must be an unselfish, sincere gift, free from the bounds of reciprocity in order to produce merit.¹³⁸ However, the texts of the GMP do not put emphasis on merit-making (by contrast with the FPMT Maitreya Project [Falcone 2012: 153-154]). The GMP donation is not called *öglög* (Buddhist donation), but *handiv* (contribution),¹³⁹ a term not used in a Buddhist context, and the donor is called *handivlagch*, ‘contributor’ (in a Buddhist context, the donor is usually called *öglögiin ezen*, translating Tib. *yöndak*). Similarly, the anthropologist Saskia Abrahms-Kavunenko observed that urban

¹³⁸ Donations are one of the pious deeds to produce merit (*buyan*), the accumulation of which allowing rebirth on a higher level of cyclic existence (as a god in a pure land for instance) for oneself or a living or deceased relative.

¹³⁹ ‘Donation, contribution, offering, alms.’ Bawden’s dictionary [1997: 427] writes that it has a Tibetan origin but does not give it. The Tibetan term for donation is *zhendep* (*zhal ’debs*) (I thank Kunsang Namgyal-Lama for this information).

Mongolians donate money to temples as payments for highly valued ritual services but do not view donations as a way to make merit.¹⁴⁰ The compulsory donations of the pre-socialist period have now been replaced by the idea of paying for ritual services, or for a statue and a certificate as immediate counterparts to the 'donation.'

Photos of Donors Holding Their Statue

Gandan Monastery periodically organized collective ceremonies of consecration of the smaller statues (Melmiin giisen ödör, 'eye-opening ceremony') (**fig. 15**). On July 6, 2017, at the Idgaachoinzinlen College of Gandan, donors received statues consecrated by the Dalai Lama (probably when he visited Mongolia the previous year). The Information Centre located on the main city square organized similar ceremonies on Lunar New Year's Eve and Buddhist festival days, such as the 1,000 Maitreya statue consecration ceremony (Maidar burhan aravnailah yoslol).¹⁴¹ The honorary members of the project made important contributions, such as Jadho Rinpoché who offered a 54 centimetres statue (MFP, June 5, 2015).

Many Mongolians living abroad, especially from the Mongolian Association California's Bay area and from Chicago made donations.¹⁴² There are even donors from Japan. Sponsors also include many private and public Mongolian and foreign companies,¹⁴³ media organizations,¹⁴⁴ as well as cultural centres, universities,¹⁴⁵ museums¹⁴⁶ and other public institutions,¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁰ Saskia Abrahms-Kavunenko (2015) links this phenomenon with lay criticism of monetizing religious services with fixed prices for rituals, the professionalization of monks who often are not properly educated or do not follow extensive vows, new economies of global Buddhism (including the growing importance of charity), and increasing secularization.

¹⁴¹ MFP, November 18, November 23, 2013; February 5, November 12, November 13, November 28, 2014.

¹⁴² Shirchin Baatar's Facebook page records several dozens of these contributions (MFP, March 27, 2014, April 23, July 21, July 19, 2015). In 2015, Rashmyagmaryn Altantitem lam, the head of the Mongolian Maitreya Buddhist Centre in Chicago contributed to the Project by inviting a statue in his centre (MFP, January 27, 2015). In 2015-2016, the English Facebook page of the GMP posted numerous fundraising messages for the Grand Maitreya Project West (with a link to the Fundly.com website, <https://fundly.com/grand-maitreya-project-west>, now inactive, along with a dozen personalized messages mentioning the donors' names to thank individual contributions.

¹⁴³ Such as the State Bank, Art Metallica LLV; Beijing shougang design and engineering Co., Ltd, Ulaan tolgoi hairhan LLC, Ulaanbaatar Cinema LLC, Mongol Gold Company, Nomyn Holding, Genco Group, and many others. See <http://www.ikhmaidar.mn/page/811.shtml?sel=1304&subsel=1322>.

¹⁴⁴ Ulaanbaatar Broadcasting System, MH25 television channel, Mongol TV, NTV, Eagle news TV, Shine Delhii, Ollo, UTV, Öglöönii sonin, Zaluu.com, News.mn, Time.mn, Unen.mn, Mongolia National Broadcaster and others. See <http://www.ikhmaidar.mn/page/811.shtml?sel=1304&subsel=1322>.

¹⁴⁵ Such as the National University of Mongolia and the Mongolian Academy of Sciences.

¹⁴⁶ Bogd Haan Museum, Choijin lama Temple Museum.

¹⁴⁷ Mongolian wrestling house, Mongolia National Circus, Central Palace of Culture, Mongolian Post.

monasteries,¹⁴⁸ Buddhist organizations, NGOs, and various associations.¹⁴⁹ Russia and the Republic of Buryatia also officially support the project.

The Facebook page publishes hundreds of photos of contributors holding their statue and their certificate, with their registration number (**fig. 15, fig. 16**). Individualized messages of thank are published for 'family' and 'honorary donations' (written in capital letters), such as:

On this auspicious day, B. Hosjargal and his younger brother B. Hos-Erdene participated in the # HONORARY donation with the registration number 010205 from the Bayanmongol branch of the Grand Maitreya Project, and did a good deed by dedicating the Buddha (Maitreya image) to their father Tsegmidiin Baatarhüü. May the innumerable good deeds (*buyan*) accumulated by your family grow and prosper (MFP, October 16, 2015).

Grandmother Tseveendorj Maya with the registration number 18154, invited to her house, at the request of her daughter a 'family [donation]' 27 centimetres Maitreya from the Great Maitreya Foundation (MFP, May 11, 2016).

Donor I. Enhmanlai and Mother Sh. Itgelt with the registration number 17106 participated from Hanbogd district of Ömnögov' province and invited their Buddha Maitreya (image to their home) (MFP, May 11, 2016).



Fig. 15. Poster for a consecration ritual of the Maitreya statues, showing photos of donors. MFP of the GMP, November 18, 2014

¹⁴⁸ Gandan, Züün хүree Dashchoilin Monastery, Javzandamba hutagt Centre, and Puntsoglin Monastery.

¹⁴⁹ Mongolian Association of protection of the environment, Mongolian Student Union, Mongolian Philosophical Association and others.

Some of these dedications use the 'classical' vocabulary of the Buddhist gift that produces innumerable merit (*buyan*) for the donors, their family and their relatives. One also reads that the 'invitation' of the statue to the *hoimor* (the back side of the home where is located the altar) brings vital energy (*hiimor*) and ensures good fortune (*buyan zaya*) for the future (MFP, January 23, 2015). Seeing these messages and photos of happy and proud donors on Facebook certainly stimulates more donations. Similarly, John Marston, who studied Youtube representations of the pilgrimage of Cambodians to Bodhgayā, highlighted the role of videos recording monetary contributions, which are shown 'to capture the imagination of potential future participants' (Marston 2020: 116).



Fig. 16. Donors holding their statue. MFP of the GMP, June 28, 2016 (top left); February 16, 2015 (top right); August 8, 2012 (bottom left); July 4, 2017 (bottom right)

Progress of the Construction

Phase One of the project was supposed to start in 2009 but was delayed due to the economic crisis.¹⁵⁰ The statue was made in bronze and brass, in several pieces, in China, like most of the ancient¹⁵¹ and modern colossal Mongolian statues. In November 2010, the mechanical shovels

¹⁵⁰ Phase Two (construction of the stupa complex) was supposed to begin in 2018. Phase Three is the construction of Maidar Eco-city.

¹⁵¹ 18th and 19th century statues (such as the Maitreya of Uрга) were generally made of gilded copper in repoussé in several pieces by Chinese bronze smiths, notably in the famous workshops of Dolonnor in

started digging the foundations.¹⁵² In August 2012, monks performed the ritual to take possession of the soil (ceremony to ‘lay the foundation stone,’ *shav tavih yoslol*) during which they placed sutras wrapped in blue silk scarves (*hadag*) in the foundation pit (MFP, August 8, 2012). The head, chest and various detached parts of the statue arrived on the site (MFP, January 9, 2013).¹⁵³ The feet were moved to Gandan Monastery, where a ‘ceremony of inviting the feet’ was organized in July 2012 (MFP, July 6 2012). Photos of Mongolian devotees worshipping the feet, knocking their head on the toes and putting golden leaves on them circulated on Facebook (EFP, February 22, November 16, December 30, 2016).¹⁵⁴

Construction work started in October 2013; the worker team installed the lotus pedestal, set up scaffoldings, and the different parts of the statue started to be assembled around a 200 tons-iron support structure. Nechung Oracle Thupten Ngodup, Jhado Rinpoché, Zopa Rinpoché, and Arjia Rinpoché visited and blessed the site (EFP, May 12, September 29, December 3, 8 and 13, 2015), as well as the Ninth Jebtsundamba during his 2011 visit to Mongolia (Fouts 2017). The complex was supposed to be completed in 2016 (Önör 2013).

On August 4, 2014 the foundation stone of the Palace of the Jebtsundamba was laid. A small *naadam* and a *tsam* dance ritual were organized for the occasion. The ceremony was attended by abbot Choijamts, the Eighth Lamyn geegen Danzanjambalchoijishenin, Odser Rinpoché and Nechung Oracle Thupten Ngodup.¹⁵⁵

In 2015, the GMP announced that over USD 12 million (of the 32 million total cost) had been spent on construction; 16,280 families had registered and about 3,000 had ‘invited the Buddha’ (‘family donation’ or above) (MFP, April 23, 2015). In early 2016, it was estimated that the construction of the complex was only 35% complete and that it was necessary to raise additional funds (Blumberg 2016; MFP, February 5, 2016). The following year, the GMP announced that the complex was set to be completed by 2018¹⁵⁶ for an opening in 2020, but construction stopped in 2017, and false information saying that donations will be refunded due to the suspension of the project was published on news websites and fake Facebook pages. The GMP emitted a communiqué refuting this news and confirming that construction work continued

Inner Mongolia. The GMP Maitreya may have been made in one of the large Tibetan workshops around Chengdu in Sichuan.

¹⁵² The main reinforced concrete foundation is 1.2 metres thick, with over 4,000 cubic metres of improved concrete: ‘enough mortar to build a 12-story house.’ More than 700 Mongolian construction engineers and technicians have completed the installation of more than 700 tons of steel under the supervision of foreign consulting engineers (MFP, August 18, 2015).

¹⁵³ Photos of these rituals were regularly published on Facebook and in newspaper articles.

¹⁵⁴ The feet were briefly displayed in Bayangol Hotel in Ulaanbaatar (EFP, December 24, 2015) along with the smaller Maitreya statues available at different donation levels (EFP, June 5, 2015).

¹⁵⁵ “2014.8.4 Ih Maidar tsogtsolbort Bogd Javzandamba hutagtyn Örgöönii shav tavih hündetgeliin arga hemjeenii medee.”

¹⁵⁶ EFP, April 10, 2016. The reposting of old photos on the Facebook pages is confusing. For instance, in 2016 the English Facebook page of the project posted undated photos of the 2012 ‘ground breaking & consecration ceremony’ (with a photo showing the Nechung Oracle with a shovel in hand) (August 12 and September 14, 2016) and of the 2014 *tsam* (April 20, 2016) as if these two events happened in 2016.

(MFP, June 15, 2017).¹⁵⁷ The GMP then seems to have run out of money and the whole team parted ways. Construction work restarted in mid-2020; the statue is now almost completely assembled and workers started to build the steel frame and concrete structure of the Stupa-building. The consecration of the statue is programmed for 2021 (MFP, October 6, 2020).

Few people in Mongolia had the occasion of visiting the site, but many saw photos posted on the Facebook page, that show a crude, coarse face of Maitreya quite different from Zanabazar's statue (**fig. 6c**).¹⁵⁸ There are numerous positive and negative reactions to the project on social media and online articles, including reactions about the waste of money. Many Mongols have asked the meaning and purpose of this project. Some stress that the statue was built thanks to citizens' donations but will become a tourist monument: 'Who will earn from this, who is going to fill their pockets with the profits from tourism? President Battulga!' 'Why is this Buddhist statue made for, what will be its use? Will this complex improve the life of citizens?' 'Why call the new city with a religious name, will it become a central city of Buddhism?'¹⁵⁹

Conclusion

Unlike the Maitreya sitting in *bhadrāsana* of Dashchoilin which is more akin to ancient model, the Grand Maitreya statue associated with a Stupa-complex is a new concept. 19th and early 20th century colossal statues in Mongolia were all built indoors, and the standing Maitreya bodhisattva as well as Kadampa-style stupas have never been built on a grand scale. It is a new kind, in Mongolia, of polysemic, ambiguous structure; it lacks fundamental elements of a Buddhist temple, and the fundraising process does not use the Buddhist vocabulary of merit-making. Visitors will pay an entrance fee and the Grand Maitreya was conceived by H. Battulga as part of a tourist circuit that includes the Chinggis Khan of Tsonjin Boldog. However, the religious nature of the project is unquestionable. Buddhist high-ranking lamas made the promotion of the project and performed rituals of taking possession of the soil, and the statue and stupa will enshrine relics and be consecrated. Lay devotees worship the feet of the statue, and attend teachings, prayers and rituals at the showrooms which function like a temple. These religious activities as well as lectures on secular topics organized in the showrooms answer the various religious and secular needs of the lay public.

The Grand Maitreya and its surrounding complex share many common features with Buddhist mega-statues that recently proliferated all over in Asia. They are outdoor statues combining cement and metal, built in a secular environment, outside traditional monastic compounds. It is generally possible to climb them through inner staircases and their top offers a fantastic view. Many of them are built in the countryside,¹⁶⁰ on a hilltop or a mountain, and are visible from

¹⁵⁷ It informed that in reality, a total of 12,396 people (instead of 18,000 according to the news websites) had registered as donors for the project, of which 2,577 have donated MNT 500,000 or more.

¹⁵⁸ As with the Chinggis Khan statue of Tsonjin Boldog, to save money, large sheets of metal were assembled together, giving the impression of sharp facial features.

¹⁵⁹ I thank Amgalan Sükhbaatar who forwarded me Facebook posts about the GMP.

¹⁶⁰ Others, such as Hyderabad's Hussain Sagar Buddha in India, are located in a city and are parts of a bigger project of modernizing it (Becker 2015: 176). See also monumental projects in Central Asia to glorify local heroes such as Tamerlan, which are part of gigantic urbanistic projects reflecting the megalomania of rulers.

afar, from various vantage points (such as the Buddha of Lantau Island, Hong Kong). Their architecture pays importance not only to giant dimensions but also to symbolic numbers. They belong to complexes that include, often in their pedestal and hollow interior, spaces for religious, cultural and entertainment activities (a museum, cultural exhibitions, a cafeteria, etc.), and sometimes, a temple.¹⁶¹ However, in contrast to mega-temples that also appeared about twenty years ago in India, Taiwan, and China, and promote their own sectarian rituals and approaches, their space is primarily, if not exclusively, dedicated to the lay public (McDaniel 2017: 13). These complexes often are founded by influential political figures or businessmen and are included in a political religious agenda. They can be erected on fundraising projects gathering individuals and private companies.¹⁶² Many are consecrated by religious leaders during spectacular ceremonies that draw crowds (Lutgendorf 1994: 215) (the Dalai Lama consecrated a number of them such as the Hussain Sagar Buddha and the Diskit Maitreya), but Buddhist clerics are rarely involved in their construction and management.¹⁶³ Like the GMP, the aims of their foundations is often multiple: building a national symbol, asserting Buddhist identity, promoting universal Buddhist values, accumulating merits, protecting a place (against natural disasters or an aggressive neighbour), and for world peace in general. For instance, the 'Tokyo daibutsu' (Big Buddha) in bronze (13 metres high and 32 tons), was built in Jōren-ji (Itabashi) in 1977 to appease the souls of the victims of the Second World War and the great Kanto earthquake of 1923. The Maitreya of Diskit in Ladakh, that faces north towards the disputed border with Pakistan, was erected with three main functions in mind: protection of Diskit Village, prevention of further war with Pakistan, and to promote world peace. In Mongolia, the Great Buddha (Avalokiteśvara) of Dornod Province was built after a series of disasters befell the Setsen han aimag in the first half of the 19th century (Haining 1992).

These Buddhist mega-statues have an ambiguous status, between the religious and the secular, the past and the modern, the local (local/national Buddhism) and the global (international Buddhism, ecumenism). They proliferated with the rise of the middle-class and domestic tourism, and are part of Buddhist public culture. McDaniel argues that these sites are new types of Buddhist spaces destined to laypeople, located outside traditional monastic compounds, dedicated to religious culture and leisure; they are 'designed to be spectacles' (McDaniel 2017: 171). Interestingly, even statues that are not consecrated and are located in an amusement park with no religious activities around or on a roadside can receive worship and small offerings (Jain 2017: 24). Mega-statues are open to all people regardless of their religion and do not require any religious knowledge or allegiance of faith. Visitors can choose to participate in Buddhist activities such as prostrating and making offerings, or they can just relax, enjoy the view and do shopping. These sites often become major tourist spots and are profitable investments that boost the local economy, such as the Hubei Dripping Water Guanyin, that cost USD2,539,000 and had drawn over 10,000 visitors per day (Shen 2019). But others are failure

¹⁶¹ For instance, the 76-metre concrete temple tower and 37.4 metre Shiva of Murudeshvara in the Karnataka (Jain 2017), and the projected religious shrine and cultural complex in Kutch (Gujarat), with a 30-metre statue of Lord Jhulelal, a museum, a meditation centre, an auditorium, and a cultural and arts-and-crafts centre, as a symbol of Sindhi identity.

¹⁶² Globalized fundraising like the GMP is not uncommon. For an example of impressive sums of money raised from locals and Indians living in the US for the consecration of a colossal Hanuman statue in India, with contributions ranging from USUSD20-USD1,950 in 1987: Lutgendorf 1994: 214.

¹⁶³ Many of these statues in Asia are constructed by businessmen, and clerics are rarely involved (McDaniel 2017: 8). This is not the case of the GMP.

on the long term. McDaniel studies the combination of the many factors that cause their success or failure, and highlights that the religious offer (opportunities to listen to sermons and perform basic rituals) makes visitors come again and again, while simple tourists visit the place only once or twice (2017: 3-5). He concludes that these Buddhist tourist sites also subtly diffuse a Buddhist message and encourage people to learn more about Buddhism without membership requirements (McDaniel 2017: chapter 3 and p. 147). They also resonate with stories of giants from local oral traditions and modern popular culture (Stewart 1993 [1984]: 86; Becker 2015: 187).¹⁶⁴ They can diffuse a slightly different message to local 'devotees(-tourists)' and foreign 'tourists(-devotees),' through differences in translations. Similarly, the Dalai Lama's Tibetan government in exile has opened an attraction at its headquarters in Dharamsala which is part museum and part shrine—in English it is called a museum, in Tibetan, a Shrine Room.

But first and foremost, the GMP is a touristic and nationalist project that references well know international tourist attractions such as the Statue of Liberty and Eiffel tower. It embodies a Mongolian modernistic future and (at the time of its conception) economic success. The government seeks to capitalize on spiritual tourism to boost the economy of the country, and build a new modern symbolic structure in a smart city destined to be the new capital of Mongolia, named after the Buddha of the Future. The Grand Maitreya aims to become a symbol of the unity of the Mongolian people and of national history, but here it is Buddhist history that is referred to, since there is no reference to Mongolia's 'traditional cultural markers' (such as Chinggis Khan, the yurt and other references to the 'nomadic civilization') (MFP, October 6, 2020).¹⁶⁵ It promotes Buddhism as a part of Mongolian identity—not exactly pre-socialist Buddhism, but a modern Buddhism with Mongolian characteristics, referencing Zanabazar's art and the Eighth Jebtsundamba's Green Palace. It makes no reference to Tibetan artistic styles and architecture: Mongolian Buddhism is seen as an autonomous tradition, different from Tibetan Buddhism. The GMP takes model on the architecture, organization and fundraising process of other Asian outdoor colossal statues sponsored by 'contributors' rather than old-style merit-making Buddhist donors, in line with the new economies of global Buddhism (Abrahms-Kavunenko 2015). The GMP is presented as an 'ecumenical place' for all 'spiritual' traditions,' but for the moment, only Mongolians and international Tibetan Buddhists are involved in the project. It is first and foremost to finance its construction that it was marketed to domestic and American Buddhists (both of Mongolian extraction and others).

With its project supported by China, Dashchoilin stands in competition with the Grand Maitreya Project supported by Gandan and the Dalai Lama. It may be noted that the texts published by the GMP do not mention the rebuilding of Urga's Maitreya Temple by Dashchoilin Monastery. Yet, Lhagvademchig Jadamba recounted that after he went to see the GMP Maitreya statue a few years ago, a monk told him a prophecy (Tib. *lung bstan*) which says Mongolia will be prosperous after two Maitreya statues will be erected respectively south and north of the Bogd Han Mountain: 'now the Maitreya statue in the north (referring to Dashchoilin Monastery's

¹⁶⁴ In their oral traditions and epics, Mongols imagine their great heroes and ancestors such as Chinggis Khan and Geser khan as giants who left huge footprints or erased the top of a mountain by using it as an anvil. Tsonjin Boldog is said to have been the spot where Chinggis Khan left his (giant) whip.

¹⁶⁵ One of the aims of the GMP is 'to preserve nomadic peoples' cultural heritage that are considered to be one aspect of world development' (EFP, September 20, 2013).

Maitreya) is completed so we need to erect the other [GMP] statue.’¹⁶⁶ Both are supposed to be consecrated in 2021.

The monumentality of mega-statues gives them such a presence that they seem to take on lives of their own, beyond the control of their makers and marketers. They can be hijacked and acquire new meanings and functions, especially in the age of social medias and blogs (Becker 2015: 147-149; McDaniel 2017: 5-6). Because they occupy public space, controversies may arise over them, and they sometimes encounter resistance and opposition, including anxiety over tourism and the marketization of religion.¹⁶⁷ Their presence and multiplication are a form of colonization of the landscape.¹⁶⁸ The colossal Maitreya project of Bodhgayā faced strong protests, and the new plans to build it at Kushinagar encountered even fiercer resistance.¹⁶⁹ The opponents were not only local farmers, but also international Buddhist figures, who were shocked by the size and the cost of the project in the face of Indian poverty, and criticized it as a symbol of Buddhist excesses.¹⁷⁰ In addition, Tibetans criticized the face of the prototype as being ‘too Chinese’,¹⁷¹ and believed that the project relied too heavily on Chinese funders. There are also examples of Mongol constructions that failed because they were ‘too Chinese’¹⁷² (the GMP does not mention the fact that the statue was made in China). The Mongolian GMP was subject of rumours, criticisms and false information, partly because the project was delayed, but did not face local resistance (yet). In any cases, it will be interesting to observe what Mongolians will make of their Grand Maitreya.

¹⁶⁶ Lhagvademchig Jadamba, personal communication, January 2021. According to him, this monk was ‘probably Batbold lama who is from Bayanhongor Province. President Battulga is from Bayanhongor Province.’

¹⁶⁷ They can also turn against their founder and become sites of protests (Becker 2015: 188).

¹⁶⁸ Especially in multi-confessional countries where communities are ‘embodied by their images,’ which is not the case of Mongolia. In India and Indonesia, tensions and controversies stemming from intolerance and nationalism recall the widespread fear in Europe of minarets (Goldman 2017). In the China of Xi Jinping, the Buddhist presence has become too visible and many recently-built Buddhist statues have been demolished (Shen 2019). Others were ‘transformed’ by ‘plastic surgery,’ meaning that they acquired a new, non-Buddhist face and identity (“Mingdi ‘gaizao foxiang’” 2019).

¹⁶⁹ Besides, rumours of a curse on the project circulated after bad omens that happened in 1998. Falcone studies the failure of the project as a ‘non-event,’ the ‘cultural biography of a thing that never materialized’ (2012). In 2008 the new focus was not the statue but the development of Maitreya Healthcare project: mobile clinic network with, in time, a hospital (Falcone 2018: 131). Although the GMP might have been inspired by the FPMT project, it probably does not want to be associated to it because of this ‘curse.’

¹⁷⁰ In public, Tibetan-in-exile leaders supported the project (Falcone 2012: 156-164).

¹⁷¹ Though it was designed by a British artist (Falcone 2012).

¹⁷² Such as the above-mentioned 19th century Maitreya Temple of Urga. More recently, a Maitreya statue in Inner Mongolia was damaged by an earthquake, which was interpreted by the fact that ‘its face had the wrong proportions and was “too Chinese-looking”’ (Humphrey and Ujeed 2013: 20-21).

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Biography

Isabelle Charleux obtained her Ph.D in History of Art and Archaeology at Paris IV-Sorbonne University, Paris, and taught Chinese art history and archaeology at Sorbonne University for eleven years. She is presently director of researches at CNRS (National Centre for Scientific Research, France – Group Societies, Religions, Laicities, École pratique des Hautes Études/PSL). Her research interests focus on Mongol material culture and religion (Mongolia and Inner Mongolia) and Mongols' pilgrimages in Mongolia and abroad. She published *Temples et monastères de Mongolie-Intérieure* (Paris: Comité des Travaux Historiques et Scientifiques & Institut National d'Histoire de l'Art, 2006) and *Nomads on Pilgrimage: Mongols on Wutaishan (China), 1800–1940* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2015).

E-mail: isacharleux@orange.fr