

AGWANG DORZHIEV-BETWEEN CZAR'S RUSSIA AND DALAI LAMA'S TIBET 1889-1907

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***Abstract:** Since the late 19 century and early 20 century, Tibet became more and more strategic place for British because Russian Czar's expansion into Central Asia directly threatened to India- 'the jewel in the crown' of the British Empire. As a result, British government hurried its diplomatic step toward Tibet. In 1893, Qing government signed a contract with British, without Tibetan representative, promising British special trade rights in Tibet. Under such circumstances, Dozhiev, a Buriat Lama, also a close adviser of Thirteenth Dalai Lama, urged His Holiness to seek help from Czar's Russia to prevent Tibet from British expansion since Manchu Qing was not powerful enough to protect Tibet anymore. This short paper tries to answer the questions like, what was the nature of his missions to Russia? And what was the relationship between Tibet and Russia during his missions in boarder international power relations?*

***Key words:** envoy, missions, power relations*

Introduction

Since the late 19 century and early 20 century, Tibet became more and more strategic place for British because Russian Czar's expansion into Central Asia directly threatened to India- 'the Jewel in the Crown' of the British Empire. In addition, from the British perspective, it offered a great chance to Czar's Russia for seizing Tibet, that Tibet's formal patron-Qing dynasty was too weak to protect its subject. As a result, British government hurried its diplomatic step toward Tibet. Tibet's small neighboring nations

were gradually became British spheres of influence. Since 1870s, British's attempt to establish diplomatic relationship with Tibet was rejected by Twelfth Dalai Lama and his court. In 1893, Qing government signed a contract with British, without Tibetan representative, promising British special trade rights in Tibet. Therefore, the Tibetan government became more and more upset about Manchu Qing's weak diplomacy toward British. At the same time, Czar's government was convinced that the British military activities in the region suggesting that Tibet would be seized by British very soon. The Great Game between these two powers was intensified.

Under such circumstances, Dorzhiev, a Buriat Lama, also a close adviser of Thirteenth Dalai Lama, urged His Holiness to seek help from Czar's Russia to prevent Tibet from British expansion since Manchu Qing was not powerful enough to protect Tibet anymore. He was a very special player of the Great Game.

As a Russian subject, Dorzhiev was often interpreted as an active Russian agent sent by Czar to Tibet. Especially his several times of missions between Russia and Tibet, with the letters from Thirteenth Dalai Lama and Czar, were perceived as a planned plot to lead the Dalai Lama to accept the Czar as suzerain. In Chinese scholarship like *Jindai Eguo yu Zhongguo Xizang* by Wang Yuanda, *Yingguo, Eguo yu Zhongguo Xizang* by Zhou Weizhou, *Ping Sha E tewu Dorzhiev zai Xizang de huodong* by Gu Zucheng and *Yu Naichang*, Dorzhiev was depicted as an evil agent of Czarist imperialism in Tibet aiming to turn Tibet as a colonial region of Russia.

This short paper tries to answer the questions like, who was Agwang Dorzhiev exactly? What was the nature of his missions to Russia? And what was the relationship between Tibet and Russia during his missions in boarder international power relations?

The paper has five parts; begins with introduction and research question, then goes on to introduce young Dorzhiev's early life from Buriat to Tibet. Third part is the most important one, showing a brief account of Dorzhiev's missions to Russia; which followed Younghusband expedition to Tibet and Anglo-Russian Convention. In the end, I will conclude the paper.

From Buriat to Tibet:

Agwang Dorzhiev (1853/4-1938) was born in a Buddhist Khori Buriat family at a village named Khara-Shibar, near north east of Verkhneudinsk, today's Ulan-Ude, the capital of the Buriat Republic. Up to age of eighteen, he had an ordinary household life. When he was fourteen, Dorzhiev made a pilgrimage to Urga, today Ulaanbaater, where the Eighth Jibzundamba Khutugtu-Mongolia's highest incarnate lama had his residence. He was encouraged to become lama and to take the Buddhist vows by his teacher Baldan-Choimpel. Being as a gelung, Dorzhiev left his home and made his ambitious pilgrim journey to China's sacred Wutai Mountain and Tibet. 'Having arrived safely in Lhasa, he enrolled in the prestigious Gomang Datsang at the Drepung Monastery in 1878.'¹ The British and Russian citizens were prohibited to enter Tibet at that time. Therefore, Dorzhiev, being as a Russian subject, concealed his name and said to be a Khalahk Mongol Buddhist monk.

Dorzhiev devoted later ten years of time to study tsanid (higher Buddhist philosophy) curriculum at Drepung, and received Lharampa degree after passing the geshe examination with the highest honor. Soon, Dozhiev was selected as a tutor for young Thirteenth Dalai Lama (1876-1933), 'to whom he remained ever devoted.'² 'For the next ten years, Dozhiev, by his own account, served as the young Dalai Lama's inseparable attendant, and His Holiness came to look upon his as his true guardian and protector.'³

As his relationship with young Dalai Lama developed, his role in Tibetan court became gradually prominent. Dorzhiev finally revealed his Buriat identity to Dalai Lama, saying that Buriat and Kalmyks countrymen were blessed to enjoy flourishing Buddhism under the Great Russian White Czar. Moreover, Dorzhiev 'wrote a pamphlet with the special object of demonstration that Chang Shambhaka means Russia, and that the Czar is the incarnation of Je Tsong-kha-pa.'⁴ Gradually, a positive image of Russian Buddhism and White Czar were remained among high lamas and laymen of Tibet.

¹ Alexandre Andreyev, *Soviet Russia and Tibet: the debacle of secret diplomacy 1918-1930s*, Boston, Brill, 2003, 21.

² Christopher P. Atwood, *Encyclopedia of Mongolia and the Mongol Empire*, New York, Facts on File, 2004, 151.

³ John Snelling, *Buddhism in Russia: The Story of Agvan Dorzhiev : Lhasa's Emissary to the Tsar*, Rockport, Shaftesbury Element, 1993, 35.

⁴ Kawaguchi Ekai, "Russia's Tibetan Policy" *The Open Court*, Vol. 1916: Iss. 6, Article 8. (1916), 374.

Envoy of the Dalai Lama

As Tibetan fear of British invasion grow, the high level of lamas and secular political leaders started to discuss the possibility of seeking new patron from outside powers. Dorzhiev knew that Russian and British had many conflicts over territory and political control over Central Asia. Therefore, he thought Czar's Russia might be able to prevent Tibet from British expansion. He urged Dalai Lama to seek help from Russia, since Manchu Qing was not powerful enough to protect Tibet against British expansion anymore. The Dalai Lama entrusted Dorzhiev and decided to seek Russia's assistance.

In 1898, Dorzhiev was sent to St. Petersburg by the Dalai Lama on first secret mission to Europe. His main task was to probe whether the Czar's Russia would offer political or military support to Tibet as he suggested. He headed to British India choosing easier sea route instead of going through overland. From there, Dorzhiev arrived in St. Petersburg, met with director of Russo-Chinese Bank and editor of *St Peterburgskiy Vedomosti* (St Petersburg News)-Ukhtomsky. Dorzhiev was arranged to meet Russian Czar-Nicholas II by Ukhtomsky. Before the meeting, he was suggested to have a proper written form of petitions from the Dalai Lama, which Dozhiev did not have this time, in order to receive assistance from Russia.

As a Tibetan envoy, Dozhiev might have attained Czar's interest to have diplomatic relationship with Tibet. However, Dorzhiev did not receive any commit from Russian Czar. On the other hand, Ukhtomsky-known as the Czar's ear, urged Nicholas II to send a representative to Tibet. However, Dorzhiev did not give a positive answer due to Tibetan specific condition that no foreigner should be allowed to enter Tibet. Moreover, anti-Western idea was very strong among Tibetan political sectors. Soon he sent a letter to the Dalai Lama via a Kalmyk nobleman, Ovshe Norzunov, and informed about his fist mission. In the letter, he said that the Russian Empire was willing to talk a great future to Tibet. In 1899, he received a reply from Dalai Lama and hastily left for Lhasa to talk Tibetan internal political issues.

Dorzhiev's first secret mission illustrated Tibetan active diplomacy to seek patron-protector. It was a direct product of Tibetan fear of British

invasion. Czar's Russia might have political and religious interest to Tibet. However, Czar did not commit anything to the Buriat lama-also a Tibetan envoy. Czar's passive response already revealed that Dorzhiev's first mission was not a Czar's Russian planned plot to colonize Tibet as Chinese scholarship pointed out.

After arriving in the holy city, he soon realized the complex political situation inside the Tibet. The political opinion was split into three ways. Firstly, there was a pro-Chinese faction claiming that Tibet must not reject the kindness of the Manchu Emperor. The second faction, pro-British, argued that the make close relationship with Indian government in order to avoid British invasion. The third faction, pro-Russian, disagreed the ideas from other factions, insisted that the Russian was powerful enough to protect Tibet from foreign invasion. With Dorzhiev's influence, the third faction won ultimately. As a result, the Dalai Lama decided to send Dozhiev again to St Petersburg with obligatory gifts and official letter.

In 1900, Dorzhiev set off from Lhasa to St Petersburg again, travelling through India and China. The exact nature of his second mission was blurred. However, it indicated that 'the Tibetans in general wished to maintain their policy of isolation, they were now more positively interested in obtaining Russian protection.'⁵

On 30 September 1900, Dorzhiev was received by Nicholas II in the Imperial summer residence of Livadia near Yalta. According to a Soviet Diplomat, L.E. Berlin, the Czar emphasized the 'necessity of establishing liaison with Tibet and mutual exchange of information', and promised 'support and protection to Tibet, though in rather vague terms.'⁶ In return for the Tibetan presents, Nicholas II gave a gold watch to Dorzhiev for the Dalai Lama and other valuable gifts, and told him to go back Tibet as soon as possible with those gifts.

After having returned to Lhasa, Dorzhiev was welcomed by the Dalai Lama and his ministers with great joy, affirming that Tibet finally found her patron, which was powerful and more reliable than China.

In order to conclude a formal treaty with Russia, Dorzhiev was sent by the Dalai Lama to Russia for third time in 1901, 'accompanied by three

⁵ John Snelling, *Buddhism in Russia*, 64.

⁶ Alexandre Andreyev, *Soviet Russia and Tibet*. 31.

high Tibetan dignitaries-consular representative Losang Khechok, his assistant Gyaltzen Puntsok, and Ngawang Cho-dzin, a consular secretary.⁷ The nature of Dorzhiev's third mission to Russia was to reaffirm the rapprochement between Tibet and Russia, and it was the culmination of his diplomatic missions.

Dorzhiev's third mission to Russia aroused great interest to the public, and his delegation was warmly welcomed by Russians from the port of Odessa all the way to St Petersburg. The Russian press was full of positive detailed news and editorial comment about the Buriat lama's mission. 'The 17 June edition of *Novoye Vremya* spoke in saber-rattling terms of Russian advances in China, then went on:

Under the circumstances, a [Tibetan] rapprochement with Russia must seem to him [the Dalai Lama] the most natural step, as Russia is the only power able to counteract the intrigues of Great Britain, who has long been endeavoring to obtain admission, and only awaits an opportunity to force an entrance...⁸

On 23 June 1901, Dorzhiev was received by Nicholas II at the Grand Palace in Peterhof. After receiving a letter and gifts from the Dalai Lama, Nicholas II gave his autographed letter and gifts to Dorzhiev in return for the Dalai Lama. Czar expressed, in the letter, 'his strong hope that, given the friendly and fully well-disposed attitude of Russia, no danger will threaten Tibet in her fortunes hereafter.'⁹

Dorzhiev remained in St Petersburg and discussed with Russian top officials including the diplomats-Count V.M. Lamsdorf and N.G. Gartvig, the director of the Asiatic Department of the foreign ministry, mainly about possible Russian consulate in Tibet.

Despite all these Russian active responses, Dorzhiev eventually failed to conclude any formal agreement with Czar's government due to shifting international power relationship. Beside the British rivalry, Czar's Russia was more concerned about growing new power-Japan and its expansion in Northeast Asia. Moreover, the relationship between British and Japan gradually came closer regarding with their common enemy-Russia.

⁷ John Snelling, *Buddhism in Russia*, 74.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

⁹ Alexandre Andreyev, *Soviet Russia and Tibet*, 34.

Therefore, Czar's government hesitated to give any formal commit to Dorzhiev. Russia could offer little beyond the diplomatic support and moral encouragement to Tibet.

Younghusband expedition to Tibet and Anglo-Russian Convention

As for the British, Lord George Curzon, the new Viceroy of India, changed 'British policy towards Tibet from patient waiting to impatient hurry.'¹⁰ Two times of attempts, in 1900 and 1901, to direct communication with Tibet were both rejected by the Dalai Lama. He already concerned about the Buriat lama-Russian subject in Tibetan court, also a high political advisor of the Dalai Lama, and considered him as an evil Russian agent behind the Dalai Lama's anti-British policies.

Inevitably, Curzon was more and more convinced that Dorzhiev's mission to Russia would ultimately place Tibet under Russian protectorate. Especially, Dorzhiev's third mission was widely reported that a secret agreement was already made between Tibet and Russia.

In 1903, the Lord Curzon ordered Colonel Francis Younghusband, jointly led by John Claude White, the political officer in Sikkim, to send a military expedition to Tibet. The force arrived in Lhasa on 3 August 1904. Dorzhiev knew that Tibetan army could not defend His Holiness from the British modern machine guns and well equipped military.

The Dalai Lama fled to Urga in Mongolia along with Dorzhiev. From there, Dorzhiev left for St Petersburg again in March 1905, hoping that Russian government could take Tibet under its protection from British and China. However, catastrophic defeat in Russo-Japanese war, Czar's government could not offer any kind of assistance to Tibet in this historical turbulent time.

Meantime, the dramatic rise of Germany in Europe since 1900s eventually led both Russia and Britain to come closer and to settle down their century long Great Game in Central Asia. Anglo-Russian Convention was signed at last by both sides on 31 August 1907, recognizing China's claim for suzerainty over Tibet. Moreover, the convention also 'engaged to respect the territorial integrity of Tibet and abstain from all interference in her internal administration.'¹¹

¹⁰ John Snelling, *Buddhism in Russia*, 103.

¹¹ Alexandre Andreyev, *Soviet Russia and Tibet*, 47.

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On 25 December 1909, the Dalai Lama returned to Lhasa and took up his residence again at the Potala.

Conclusion

Dorzhiev was a very interesting player in the Great Game. Being as a Russian subject in Tibetan high court, he was convinced by British as an active Czar's agent sent by Russian government to Tibet. Interestingly, all of his missions to Russia were, on behalf of Thirteenth Dalai Lama, to seek Tibetan new protector.

The nature of Dorzhiev's missions was obvious, to use Czar's Russian power to counterbalance the immediate threat from British invasion. It was a direct product of the Great Game. Dorzhiev ultimately failed to conclude any kind of formal agreement between Russia and Tibet. And his missions became meaningless to both countries at the end of the Great Game-Anglo-Russian Convention in 1907.

Meantime, Russian passive response already revealed that Dorzhiev's missions were not the Czar's Russian planned plots to colonize Tibet as Chinese scholarship pointed out. Czar's Russia eventually rejected active Tibetan diplomatic missions under the pressure of shifting international power relationship.

Dorzhiev 'worked entirely in the interest of the Dalai Lama and of Tibet in general.'¹² He was a sincere Buddhist. Later, he devoted the rest of his life to develop Buddhism in Russia.

¹² Agvan Dorjiev , Dorjiev : memoirs of a Tibetan diplomat. Translated by Thubten Jigme Norbu; Dan Martin, Tokyo, Hokke bunka kenkyū, 1991, 4.

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