

## *Dorje Shugden Worship in Mongolia: Way to De-Tibetanize Mongolian Gelug Tradition*

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The Asian Conference on Cultural Studies 2024  
Official Conference Proceedings

### **Abstract**

This paper explores the role of the Dorje Shugden worship community in Mongolia's national consciousness revival, exploring how religious practices intersect with the quest for cultural identity and autonomy in the post-socialist landscape. It argues that the engagement with Dorje Shugden, amidst controversies and global Tibetan Buddhist intersections, illuminates broader dynamics of religious revival and national identity negotiation. Through a mixed-methods approach combining qualitative and quantitative analyses, including participant observations and interviews within the Mongolian context, this research uncovers the multifaceted relationship between the Dorje Shugden community's practices and the broader societal attitudes towards nationalism and cultural identity. The study reveals that the Dorje Shugden community's activities are integral to understanding Mongolia's religious and national identity reformation. It situates the Dorje Shugden controversy within the historical continuum of Tibetan Buddhism's global spread and its manifestation in Mongolia, providing a nuanced perspective on the community's contemporary challenges and its contribution to Mongolia's national identity discourse. This investigation into the Dorje Shugden worship not only sheds light on the religious dimension of Mongolia's cultural revival but also on the complex interplay between tradition, modernity, and national consciousness in shaping community practices and beliefs. By documenting the resurgence of Buddhism in Mongolia through the lens of the Dorje Shugden controversy, this research contributes significantly to the academic discourse on the intersections of religion, nationalism, and identity. It offers a fresh perspective on how religious communities navigate the pressures of globalisation and local identity formation, enriching our understanding of the sociopolitical and cultural processes shaping post-socialist Mongolia.

Keywords: Dorje Shugden, Buddhism in Mongolia, Gelugpa, Mongolia, Tibetanization, De-Tibetanization

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## **Introduction**

The choice of investigating the Dorje Shugden community in Mongolia is driven by the community's unique position within both the national and religious landscapes of Mongolia. In the post-socialist era, Mongolia has witnessed a profound resurgence of Buddhism, which has been instrumental in shaping the country's national identity. The Dorje Shugden community, with its distinctive practices and theological positions, represents a focal point for understanding broader processes of religious revival, the negotiation of cultural identity, and the tensions inherent in the global intersections of Tibetan Buddhism. Despite the significant role of this community in Mongolia's religious and cultural revival, existing research has primarily focused on Tibetan Buddhism from a Tibetan perspective, leaving a gap in our understanding of how these religious practices and communities manifest and adapt within the Mongolian context (Humphrey C. , 1995); (Kapstein, 1999).

The methodology of this research is designed to provide a comprehensive and in-depth analysis of the intersections between religion, specifically focusing on a particular deity within Tibetan Buddhism, and the constructs of nationalism and national identity within the Mongolian context. The study employs a multifaceted approach, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative methods to ensure a nuanced understanding of the subject matter.

This research argues that the Dorje Shugden community's efforts in Mongolia constitute a form of "New Mongolian Buddhism" that seeks to delineate a religious identity distinct from Tibetan influences while simultaneously engaging with global Buddhist traditions. This endeavour is not merely a religious or doctrinal reformation but is deeply entwined with the aspirations for national sovereignty and cultural preservation within the broader Mongolian society. Thus, the research problem addressed herein is the dynamic interplay between religious practice, national identity, and cultural autonomy as exemplified by the Dorje Shugden community in Mongolia.

By examining the Dorje Shugden community in Mongolia, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex relationships between religion, nationalism, and identity. It offers new insights into how religious communities navigate the tensions between tradition and modernity, local and global identities, and religious autonomy and cultural sovereignty. This research not only enriches the academic discourse on Buddhism and nationalism but also provides a valuable perspective on the ongoing processes of cultural differentiation and identity formation in post-socialist Mongolia.

## **Tibetanisation in Mongolia**

The process of Tibetanisation in Mongolia, particularly under the Qing dynasty's oppression, signifies a period of both religious and cultural transformation (Smith, 2015). The Qing dynasty, which ruled from 1644 to 1912, exerted significant influence over Mongolia, affecting its political, social, and religious life (Elverskog, 2008). This period was marked by the expansion of Tibetan Buddhism into Mongolian society, a process that not only introduced new religious practices but also reshaped Mongolian identity.

The Qing emperors, themselves followers of Tibetan Buddhism, played a crucial role in promoting and legitimising the religion's expansion into Mongolia. They bestowed upon Tibetan Buddhism a privileged status, using it as a tool for governance and to establish their legitimacy over the Mongolian territories (Wu, 2022). One of the most significant aspects of

the Qing dynasty's support for Tibetan Buddhism was the policy of allowing high-ranking Mongolian lamas to be recognised and enthroned through a system controlled by the Tibetan Buddhist hierarchy in Lhasa (Vesna A., 2016). This policy not only ensured that Mongolian Buddhism aligned with the Gelug school of Tibetan Buddhism, which was favoured by the Qing, but also allowed the Qing emperors to maintain a degree of control over Mongolian religious affairs.

***Imperial Strategies: The Qing Dynasty's Control Over Tibetan Buddhism.*** Conquering and ruling embody fundamentally distinct notions. Governing a country with the aim of maintaining peace over an extended period necessitates the establishment of a dependable, long-term strategy. When a significant portion of a realm is influenced by a single religion, it becomes not just a strategic advantage but also a moral imperative to both ally with and oversee this religion. Successive generations of Manchu Emperors strived for this, with true success being realised during the reign of Qianlong, Kangxi's grandson, who managed to bring the entire Gelug school under imperial control. It's noteworthy to mention that Tibetan Buddhism recognises not just two but four supreme spiritual leaders within the Gelug tradition: two in Tibet, the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama, one in Outer Mongolia, and one in Inner Mongolia. Therefore, gaining control over these four lineages was crucial for fully integrating the Mongols into the Qing Empire, ensuring their allegiance to the Manchu Emperors over their spiritual leaders.

Qianlong's era marked a turning point in this endeavour. In 1756, following an insurrection led by an Outer Mongolian prince allied with the Dzungars, Qianlong swiftly quashed the rebellion, executing the prince and his family, along with any rebels and sympathisers. This included the execution of the 2nd Outer Mongol Living Buddha's brother, a direct descendant of Genghis Khan, which incited outrage among Outer Mongolian nobles. Subsequently, the mysterious death of the 2nd Outer Mongol Living Buddha, believed by some to be orchestrated by Qianlong, signalled the end of Outer Mongolian spiritual autonomy. Qianlong decreed that all future reincarnations of the Outer Mongolian spiritual leaders would be selected from Tibetans, thereby extending his influence over two of the four spiritual lineages.

The Yonghegong Lama Temple, originally Yongzheng's palace and Qianlong's birthplace, was transformed into a monastery under Qianlong's rule. This site became a center for Tibetan affairs and housed many Living Buddhas from Tibet, Inner Mongolia, Outer Mongolia, and Qinghai. Qianlong's crackdown on the Dzungars and consolidation of power in Outer Mongolia and Tibet led him to reevaluate the system of Tibetan Buddhism's reincarnation process. He instituted a new law that aimed to depoliticise the reincarnation process, ensuring that selections were made impartially through a drawing of lots from a golden urn. This law was documented on a multilingual stone tablet at the Yonghegong Lama Temple, signifying its importance to Qing policy and its attempt to assert control over Tibetan Buddhism's spiritual hierarchy.

During my 2019 visit to Beijing, China, primarily for travel, I stumbled upon an intriguing artefact relevant to my research - an article inscribed on a 6-meter tall stone tablet within the Yonghegong Lama Temple. In a bid to ensure widespread comprehension, Emperor Qianlong ordered the inscription to be translated into four languages: Mongolian, Chinese, Manchurian, and Tibetan. The article, extensive for substantial reasons, caught my attention, prompting me to share its contents here:

We support the Yellow School to appease the Mongols. Due to its significance, we must protect it. The reincarnation system has a long history. However, in recent decades, it has become corrupted. Living Buddhas were born into the same families as if it were hereditary. I don't think this is right. Buddha was not born a Buddha. How could he be reincarnated? But if I stop the reincarnation, tens of thousands of lamas will have no leader, so I have to allow the reincarnation system to exist. However, Living Buddhas born into the same families is proof of selfishness. Buddha is selfless. Therefore, this system must be changed. I will send a golden urn to Tibet. Whenever a Living Buddha is reincarnated, authorities must put candidates' names in the urn and draw lots to decide. This is not a perfect solution, but better than the previous one, where one person gets to decide.

Qianlong was certainly not the inaugural Manchu emperor to conceptualise the strategy of replacing Mongolian influence with Tibetan Buddhism, yet his approach was the most forthright. Deciding to discard any pretence, he openly declared the strategic patronage of the Gelug school (Yellow School) as a means to quell Mongolian unrest. He openly criticised the traditional reincarnation system, questioning its validity by pointing out that the Buddha himself was not born enlightened. In place of this, he proposed a system that he could comprehend and manage: a process where all future reincarnations of the living Buddhas in Mongolia and Tibet, including the Dalai Lama and Panchen Lama, would be selected through a lottery system. Names of candidates would be inscribed in three languages—Manchurian, Mongolian, and Chinese—on ivory slips, placed into a golden urn, and drawn in a ceremony overseen by the Manchus.

This reform was more than just an administrative change; it was a symbolic assertion of control over the spiritual lineage of the Yellow School, effectively ensuring all four sacred lineages were under Manchu oversight. The implementation of this system signified the transformation of the Yellow School into an instrument of state policy for managing Mongolian affairs. The Manchu support led to widespread promotion of the Yellow School across Mongolia, bringing about significant changes in Mongolian society. This included the establishment of a hierarchical system within the religion, assigning noble titles and special status to lamas, and the construction of thousands of monasteries, funded generously by the state.

This strategic approach not only facilitated the spread of Tibetan Buddhism among the Mongols but also fundamentally altered their nomadic lifestyle and social structure. Interestingly, despite the theoretical celibacy of monks reducing the Mongolian population, this shift was not met with resistance. In the challenging environment of the Mongolian plateau, assuming the role of a lama was seen as a desirable life choice, offering both security and prestige to families.

By the early 20th century, the pervasive influence of Tibetan Buddhism had led to a profound Tibetanisation of Mongolian society. Mongols began adopting Tibetan names, medicine, calendars, and holidays. Cities were predominantly constructed around monasteries, with a significant portion of the male population becoming monks—a higher proportion than even in Tibet. By 1900, there were over 243 recognised living Buddhas across Mongolia and more than 2,000 monasteries, indicating the deep-rooted influence of Tibetan Buddhism.

Reflecting on this transformation, it's evident how the once formidable land of warriors had evolved into a society centred around monastic life. This shift represents a remarkable and

somewhat ironic turn in the history of a region known for its formidable cavalry and warriors, now distinguished by its spiritual and monastic traditions.

### **A New Era: Post-socialist Mongolian Buddhism**

The collapse of the socialist regime in Mongolia in 1990 marked a significant turning point for religious expression in the country, initiating a period of revival and reinvention for Mongolian Buddhism. This "New Era" saw the resurgence of Buddhist practices, institutions, and identities that had been suppressed under socialist rule. Central to this revival were the Gandantekchinlen (often Gandantegchilen) and Amarbayasgalant monasteries, which emerged as beacons of spiritual renewal and national identity reconstruction. The revitalisation of these monasteries and the broader Buddhist landscape in Mongolia exemplifies the country's efforts to reclaim and redefine its religious heritage in a post-socialist context.

Gandantegchinlen Monastery, located in the heart of Ulaanbaatar, has historically been one of the most significant centres of Mongolian Buddhism. Founded in the early 19th century, it survived the socialist purges of the 1930s that decimated much of Mongolia's Buddhist infrastructure, serving as a symbolic repository of the nation's religious tradition throughout the socialist period (Humphrey & Ujeed, 2019). With the advent of democratic reforms, Gandantegchinlen swiftly regained its status as a vibrant center of religious learning, practice, and community life. The monastery became a focal point for the rekindling of Buddhist education, with the reopening of its monastic schools and the initiation of young monks into the Buddhist sangha. Additionally, Gandantegchinlen's active engagement in social and cultural activities has reinforced Buddhism's relevance in contemporary Mongolian society, fostering a sense of continuity with the past while navigating the challenges of modernity.

Amarbayasgalant Monastery, situated in the northern province of Selenge, represents another pivotal site in Mongolia's Buddhist revival. Established in the early 18th century as a dedication to Zanabazar, the first Bogd Gegeen of Mongolia, Amarbayasgalant suffered significant destruction during the anti-religious campaigns of the 1930s. The post-socialist era, however, witnessed concerted efforts to restore the monastery's physical and spiritual heritage. Restoration projects, often funded by international donors and the Mongolian government, have revitalised Amarbayasgalant's architectural splendour, transforming it into a symbol of national resilience and religious renewal (Humphrey C. , 1995). The monastery's revival has not only restored its role as a site of pilgrimage and religious study but has also contributed to the broader reclamation of Mongolia's Buddhist identity, linking the present to a revered past.

The resurgence of these monasteries and Mongolian Buddhism more broadly has been instrumental in the construction of a post-socialist Mongolian identity. Buddhism's revival has allowed Mongolians to reconnect with a spiritual heritage that was largely suppressed under socialism, offering a source of cultural pride and continuity. This reconnection is not merely about the restoration of old traditions but involves the active reinterpretation of Buddhism to address contemporary needs and sensibilities. Mongolian Buddhists have engaged in a process of selective adaptation, embracing elements of the Buddhist tradition that resonate with modern values such as environmentalism, social welfare, and national unity (Wallace, 2015).

Moreover, the revival of Buddhism in Mongolia has been marked by an emphasis on establishing a distinctly Mongolian expression of Buddhism. This entails a conscious effort to differentiate Mongolian Buddhism from other Buddhist traditions, particularly Tibetan Buddhism, on which it has historically been heavily reliant. While maintaining doctrinal and liturgical ties to Tibetan Buddhism, Mongolian Buddhists have sought to emphasise the unique aspects of their Buddhist practice, including the veneration of specific Mongolian saints and the revival of Mongolian Buddhist art and literature. This focus on cultivating a national form of Buddhism not only reinforces Mongolia's cultural sovereignty but also strengthens the bonds between Buddhism and Mongolian national identity.

This era has ushered in a new chapter for Mongolian Buddhism, characterised by revival, reinterpretation, and renewal. The restoration and revitalisation of Gandantegchinlen and Amarbayasgalant monasteries symbolise the broader resurgence of Buddhism in Mongolia, reflecting the nation's desire to reclaim its religious heritage while adapting it to the demands of the contemporary world. This process of revival is not merely about recovering what was lost but about forging a form of Buddhism that is distinctly Mongolian, serving as both a bridge to the past and a path to the future. The reemergence of Buddhism as a central facet of Mongolian identity underscores the enduring relevance of spiritual traditions in shaping national narratives and individual lives in the post-socialist landscape.

***Re-establishing Buddhism in Mongolia and Dorje Shugden.*** The dissemination of Buddhism in Mongolia has unfolded along two distinct trajectories. Despite the predominance of the Gelugpa school among Mongolian Buddhists, it's observed that this tradition has branched into two divergent paths within the country. As articulated by a monk from Gandantegchinlen Monastery—Mongolia's largest Buddhist temple—during an interview:

One pivotal figure in the resurgence of Buddhism post-socialism was Guru Deva Rinpoche, a proponent of Shugden worship, which was somewhat discouraged by the Dalai Lama. Though the form of Buddhism he revitalised in Mongolia was rooted in the Gelugpa tradition, it diverged in its adherence to a specific internal dharma protector and religious teachings. Conversely, Gandantegchinlen Monastery pursued religious dissemination with support from the Dalai Lama and other Tibetan monks.

Further insights were provided in another interview:

A Mongolian proverb states, 'Once one become teacher and student, it cannot be stopped. Similarly, if you hold a tiger by its tail, you cannot let it go.' This echoes the sentiment held by many Tibetan monks that venerating the Master Lama is of utmost virtue, and following the Guru's teachings is the best path.

From these discussions, two key insights emerge. Firstly, Buddhism's propagation in Mongolia is characterised by its dual nature. Additionally, as noted by anthropologist Lhagvademchig, Mongolia's profound engagement with Tibetan Lamaism is underscored by an unwavering devotion to monastic figures, venerating them as living deities whose teachings are infallible. Consequently, an individual's religious orientation is significantly influenced by their chosen spiritual guide. This underscores the importance of examining the revival of Shugden worship by its adherents within Mongolia's contemporary religious landscape. To delve deeper into the beliefs and practices of the Dorje Shugden community—the focal point of my study—it is essential to explore the key figures and activities defining

this group, alongside societal perceptions surrounding them. These aspects will be elaborated upon in the forthcoming section.

## **Dorje Shugden in Mongolia**

**Community Building.** During my interviews, one narrative emerged with particular clarity, shedding light on Guru Deva Rinpoche's profound impact on Mongolia's religious landscape since 1991. One interviewee, reflecting on the scale of Rinpoche's commitment, shared, "*Guru Deva Rinpoche didn't just bring resources; he brought a vision for the revival of our spiritual heritage.*" This vision was manifested in his dedication to restoring Gandantegchilen and Amarbayasgalant Monasteries, with a focus on Amarbayasgalant Monastery's full restoration. Initially established in 1725 by Emperor KangXi to honour Zanabazar's manifold contributions, the monastery had faced severe destruction between 1937 and 1938 under the Soviet regime. Guru Deva Rinpoche spearheaded its revival in 1991, preserving over 10 of the original 40 temples within its historic walls.

The restoration of Amarbayasgalant was not just an act of physical reconstruction but also a revitalisation of the Gelugpa tradition, to which the monastery is intrinsically linked. Rinpoche's innovative fundraising strategies were crucial in this endeavour. He introduced the production of Bumba, a sacred ritual object, which he offered annually in exchange for donations equivalent to the value of one Buddha statue. This initiative not only generated necessary funds but also engaged the community in the monastery's rebirth. As the interviewee<sup>1</sup> recounted:

Guru Deva Rinpoche's creation of Bumba and the institution of the Bumbanii Tahilga ceremony were genius moves. They not only secured funds for the monastery's reconstruction but also reinforced our connection to the practice.

This approach exemplified Rinpoche's unique blend of spiritual leadership and pragmatic innovation, which was instrumental in re-establishing a vibrant Buddhist community in Mongolia. His efforts extended beyond the restoration projects, contributing to the cultural and spiritual reawakening of the nation.

Guru Deva Rinpoche's efforts culminated in the erection of Ulaanbaatar's largest outdoor golden statue, funded by his followers, marking the establishment of a vibrant community around his teachings.

His disciple, Zava Damdin Rinpoche, further expanded this community within Mongolia, attracting a significant following. Unlike Gandantegchilen Monastery, which benefits from governmental funding, the monastery established by Zava Damdin Rinpoche in Dundgovi Province was constructed through private support, featuring three large temples including Mongolia's largest yurt and a three-story main temple with a golden roof and dragon-carved redwood interiors. This investment reflects the strong support network among his disciples and devotees, highlighting the resilient and expansive community fostered by their collective efforts.

In the context of community dynamics within the Dorje Shugden following in Mongolia, it becomes apparent that manifestations of devotion and the socio-economic profiles of

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<sup>1</sup> Interviewee, R3

adherents are significant. The construction of religious edifices rivalling monastic complexes, supported not just by individual devotees but also by state resources, signifies a display of wealth and commitment to more elaborate religious observances. This phenomenon perhaps suggests an underlying wealth among followers. The process of community building within this context seems to stem from personal relationships and the traditional Mongolian guru-disciple dynamic. The act of converting one's inner circle into followers not only expands the community but also reinforces the veneration towards the guru, creating a closely-knit group bound by spiritual and social ties. This network may become particularly influential if its core members are prominent societal figures, thereby attracting a wider circle of affluent participants.

A distinctive aspect of this group lies in their practices surrounding sermons and manual readings. Within the Lama-Disciple dynamic, there exists a strict protocol that forbids the sharing or discussion of the protector's teachings or texts with those outside the relationship. This secrecy is not merely a preference but a fundamental part of their Tantric commitment, emphasising the sacredness and exclusivity of their spiritual journey. To provide a concrete example, the appendix includes images of books and brochures utilised by this group. Notably, one pamphlet explicitly states that the teachings "must not be disclosed or exhibited to individuals who have not undergone proper initiation or who do not share vows with a Lama." This principle underscores the group's unique and profound spiritual cohesion.

Field observations during the "Khuree Ikh Tahilga," the annual Dorje Shugden Initiation Ceremony and Puja, reveal the ceremony as a pivotal event for this community. Attendance by notable individuals and their families, alongside the exchange of substantial offerings such as yellow silk and monetary gifts, underscores the economic capacity of participants. Notably, the offering of Baranzad khadags, a highly valued ceremonial scarf with historical significance, reflects both the devotees' dedication and their financial means, with prices reaching up to 2,000,000 Tugrigs for replicas of ancient khadags once presented to Mongolia's last king, Bogd Khan.

The observed practices suggest that a high standard of offerings and participation may inadvertently set a threshold for community membership, privileging those of considerable means. This dynamic could potentially isolate or exclude individuals unable to meet these unofficial standards, thereby shaping the community's composition to include predominantly wealthier members. This observation naturally transitions us to the subsequent theme that will be explored in the following section of this research.

***Stereotypes.*** During this study, when inquiring non-worshippers about Dorje Shugden, it was found that all practicing Buddhists and half of the non-practicing ones view this entity as a wealth deity. They believe worshipping Shugden brings prosperity in this life, but at the cost of suffering in future lives. Those who accept reincarnation as truth are particularly cautious, choosing to steer clear of this protector to avoid such peril. Amid the 2012 parliamentary elections, media broadcasts disseminated claims that Shugden devotees accumulated wealth through their allegiance to the "Demon of Deed," enjoying prosperity now at the cost of suffering in subsequent lives. This video still exists on YouTube<sup>2</sup>. Comments beneath these posts reflect a common view of Shugden as a demon associated with material wealth. This perspective has permeated modern Mongolian hip-hop culture, with artists portraying Dorje Shugden as an emblem of financial success in their work. Notably, celebrities in the arts have

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<sup>2</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=05\\_JGCGvXc0&t=43s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=05_JGCGvXc0&t=43s)



been spotted using the hashtag #shugdenstyle, accompanying images of clasped hands. This sentiment echoes in the lyrics of songs like:

- *"Only money stole my heart, I don't believe in any god, but I worship Shugden"* by FLA, Lil Thug-E, GINJIN in "Get Money"
- *"I worship money, I'm a trap Shugden, Your god bows before me"* from GINJIN's "BAIJI"
- *"Thick wallet, my idol is Shugden"* in Tsetse's "Aliv ahdAA dansaa"

All highlighting the fusion of spiritual reverence and material pursuit.

Diving into the complex world of Dorje Shugden's worship and opposition, I've sifted through 62,800 online articles. My analysis categorises these articles into three distinct clusters: those casting Shugden in a positive light, those skewing negative, and a neutral set that neither praises nor condemns.

Diving into the reasons why some cherish Shugden's worship while others shun it, I've encountered compelling arguments on both sides. Advocates for Shugden, for instance, elevate him to a pedestal for reasons deeply rooted in cultural, religious, and historical contexts. Zasep Tulku Rinpoche articulates a perception that Shugden worship is incited by the Tibetan central government to veil its own shortcomings. A fascinating angle is the belief in Shugden's affinity for Mongols, attributed to his Mongolian origins, contrasting with a perceived animosity towards Tibetans who are blamed for his demise. Supporters passionately argue that Shugden stands as the singular guardian of the Gelugpa tradition, attributing to him the power to foster wealth, virtue, and knowledge, thus elevating one's social, spiritual, and power status. They speak of secret mantras and rituals believed to alleviate internal sins and external obstacles.

Conversely, the detractors of Shugden worship lay down equally strong counterpoints. They warn of the protector's potential to foster religious fundamentalism and its adverse effects on the Dalai Lama. The crux of their argument rests on the divisive nature of Shugden, painting him as a mere worldly demon whose veneration the revered Dalai Lama has explicitly banned, deeming it harmful for future generations. A particularly stark claim suggests that although Shugden might bestow wealth in this life, such fortune comes at the cost of impoverishing the next seven generations.

The distribution of the articles themselves tells a story of divided perspectives: 21.8% highlight Shugden's positive aspects, stemming mainly from his historical significance and interviews with leaders like Zava Damdin Rinpoche. In contrast, 18.2% take a negative stance, often linking Shugden worship to political controversies, including Mongolian parliamentarians' devotion and alleged support from the Chinese government. The vast majority, 60%, maintain a neutral stance, not overtly categorising Shugden in either a positive or negative light.

Interestingly, the neutral articles, which comprise a mere 9% of Shugden-related content, largely orbit around G. Ayurzana's novel "Shugden", suggesting a cultural penetration of the subject that transcends mere religious or political discourse.

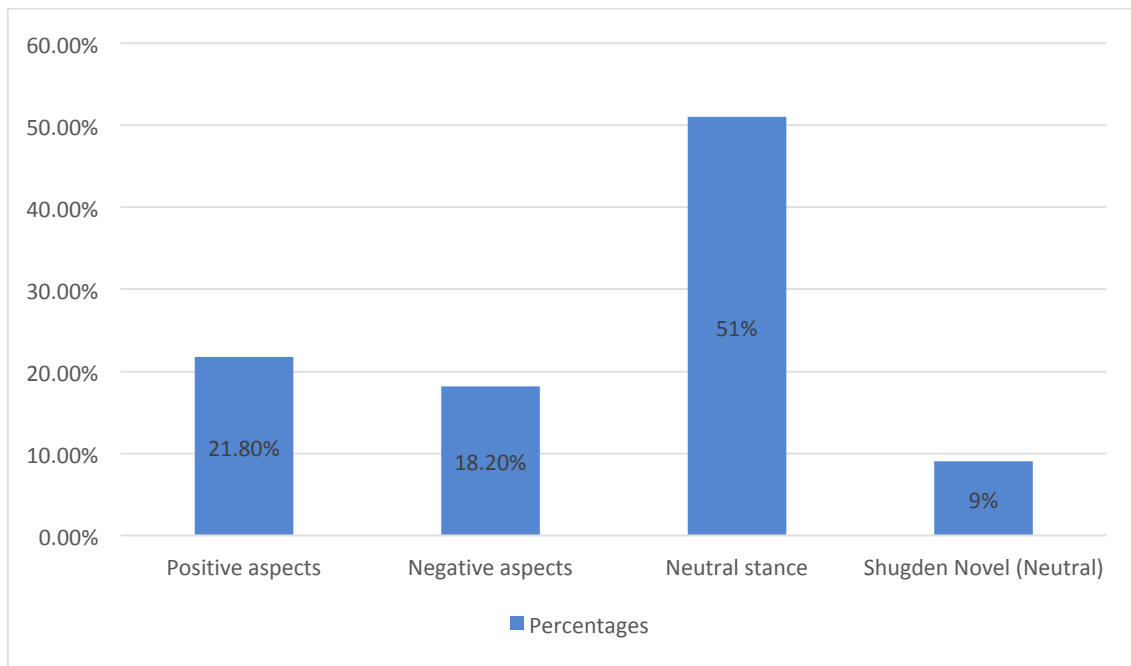


Figure 1. Online Articles

The distribution and content analysis of the articles further delineate the contours of the debate surrounding Shugden, where positive portrayals, criticisms, and neutral assessments coexist in a complex web of discourse. This discourse is reflective of a multifaceted narrative that does not merely navigate theological disagreements but also engages with deeper questions of identity, cultural continuity, and the role of religion in contemporary society.

It is clear that the stereotypes and narratives surrounding Dorje Shugden are emblematic of broader cultural and societal dynamics. They are not static or monolithic but are continually reshaped by changing contexts, media representations, and the evolving landscapes of belief and practice. The controversy and diversity of views surrounding Dorje Shugden thus offer a window into the ways in which religious figures are constructed, contested, and transformed within the collective consciousness, shedding light on the intricate interplay between tradition, modernity, and the quest for meaning in the contemporary world.

### ***De-Tibetanization***

***Embracing the Nationalism.*** During my study on the Dorje Shugden devotion in Mongolia, a compelling narrative emerged regarding the interplay between religious practice and national consciousness. The fervour of Dorje Shugden's followers reveals a deep intertwining of religious devotion with Mongolian nationalism. This synthesis is evident in the religious activities, interviews, and pamphlets produced by adherents. Notably, Zawa Damdin Rinpoche and Dandar Lharamba Rinpoche place a significant emphasis on the Mongolian state during their religious discourses, which, as they explain, delve into how Dorje Shugden and associated rituals are integral in "ensuring Mongolian traditionalism and stable political independence."

An intriguing pattern emerged from the language used during interviews with active Buddhists. Terms related to "National consciousness, being Mongolian, Mongolian customs, cultural purity, Mongolian religion, Mongolian protector, real Mongolian holy state, independent state" were mentioned over 870 times among approximately 113,400 words.

This repetition underscores a collective aspiration towards religious freedom and the strong inclination towards preserving culture within the independent Mongolian context.

The presence of a Sukhbaatar statue at Zawa Damdin Rinpoche's monastery, situated southwest of the temple dedicated to Dorje Shugden, symbolises more than the nation's capital; it embodies the Mongolian people's beliefs and their historical resilience. Since its erection in summer 1946, the statue has borne witness to significant national events. The acquisition of the original Sukhbaatar statue in 2011, saved from destruction by a high-ranking government official and student of Zawa Damdin Rinpoche, signifies a monumental effort to safeguard Mongolian pride, culture, history, and past. The official recounted<sup>3</sup>:

I was very happy when Zawa Damdin Rinpoche asked me if I could bring the statue... Mongolians should not forget their pride, culture, history, and past, but they should save and protect it. I am happy that Zawa Damdin Rinpoche is doing such a thing.

Zawa Damdin Rinpoche's teachings further illuminate the sacredness of Mongolian national consciousness, suggesting that the lineage of Dorje Shugden's previous incarnation has Mongolian roots, thereby serving as a protector of the Mongolian state. This distinction between Tibetan and Mongolian Buddhism is nuanced by linguistic practices; Mongolian Buddhists utilise Tibetan script for sacred texts but recite these texts in a Mongolian dialect, underscoring a cultural and linguistic divergence from Tibetan traditions. Zawa Damdin Rinpoche's publication efforts, particularly in providing Dorje Shugden recitation booklets in a format accessible to Mongolians, highlight his commitment to preserving the Mongolian linguistic and cultural identity within Buddhist practice.

He's initiative to conduct a 10-day enlightenment program for children, "Buddhist Children," embodies a strategic approach to instilling a profound understanding of Dharma, the interconnection between the state and religion, and the value of national traditions in Mongolia's youth. He stated:

We introduce children to the teachings of the Dharma, the world, the state and religion... It is to educate and train people who are resilient, courageous, goal-oriented, and active in society. This quote from Zawa Damdin Rinpoche during the interview exemplifies the program's objectives, which aim to imbue participants with a deep appreciation for Buddhist philosophy, Mongolian cultural heritage, and national identity, fostering a generation that respects and perpetuates Mongolia's unique traditions and values.

Through these findings, it becomes evident that Zawa Damdin Rinpoche and his disciples exemplify a pronounced nationalist orientation, weaving the fabric of Mongolian national identity into the very heart of their religious practice. This synthesis of Buddhism and nationalism in Mongolia not only preserves but also revitalises Mongolian cultural heritage, ensuring its transmission to future generations.

***Nationalism in Mongolia/The Cultural Purism.*** The exploration of Mongolian nationalism and cultural purism, particularly through the lens of the Dorje Shugden community's practices and beliefs, offers a nuanced understanding of how these ideologies manifest within specific religious contexts. By comparing general Mongolian sentiments towards nationalism and cultural purity with those prevalent within the Dorje Shugden community, we can discern

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<sup>3</sup> Interviewee, R4

the complexities and variances of national identity construction in Mongolia. This analysis draws upon empirical data from the Asian Barometer Survey (ABS) which collectively provide a robust framework for understanding the intersection of religion, nationalism, and cultural purism in Mongolia.

The ABS data indicate a strong inclination among Mongolians towards maintaining a distinct national identity and cultural purity. For instance, a substantial majority of Mongolians expressed pride in their citizenship, with data from “ABS, Wave 3” showing that 702 out of 1210 respondents identified as "very proud" to be Mongolian citizens. This high level of national pride is indicative of a deeply ingrained sense of belonging and identity among the populace. Furthermore, when asked about the defence of the Mongolian way of life against foreign influences, an overwhelming 540 out of 1210 respondents strongly agreed that the country should safeguard its cultural and national integrity, reflecting a widespread aspirational purism and apprehension towards globalisation's impacts.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Very proud	849	70,2	70,2	70,2
Somewhat proud	332	27,5	27,5	97,6
Not very proud	20	1,7	1,7	99,3
Not proud at all	7	,5	,5	99,8
Decline to answer	2	,2	,2	100,0
Total	1210	100,0	100,0	

*Table 1. q154. How proud are you to be a citizen of Mongolia? (ABS, Wave 3)*

Comparatively, within the Dorje Shugden community, these nationalistic and purist tendencies are intertwined with religious practices and beliefs. The Dorje Shugden practice, which has faced controversies and opposition due to its perceived exclusivity and alignment with certain nationalistic sentiments, exemplifies how religious communities can mirror broader societal trends of nationalism and cultural purism. The devotion to Dorje Shugden, often portrayed as a protector of the Mongolian Buddhist tradition, becomes a focal point for expressing nationalistic and purist aspirations, thus reinforcing the community's commitment to preserving Mongolian identity and cultural purity within a religious framework.

The empirical analysis further elucidates these dynamics by examining responses to questions about tolerance towards people of different cultures and ethnicities. The ABS data reveal a nuanced landscape of tolerance and intolerance in Mongolia. While there is a general trend towards valuing cultural purity and national identity, there is also an acknowledgment of the complexities of living in a globalised world. For example, the data on respondents' willingness to live in another country, despite strong national pride, suggests a recognition of the potential benefits and inevitabilities of cross-cultural exchange and interaction. This ambivalence reflects broader global patterns of nationalism and cultural purism, where communities navigate the tensions between preserving their unique identities and engaging with the wider world.

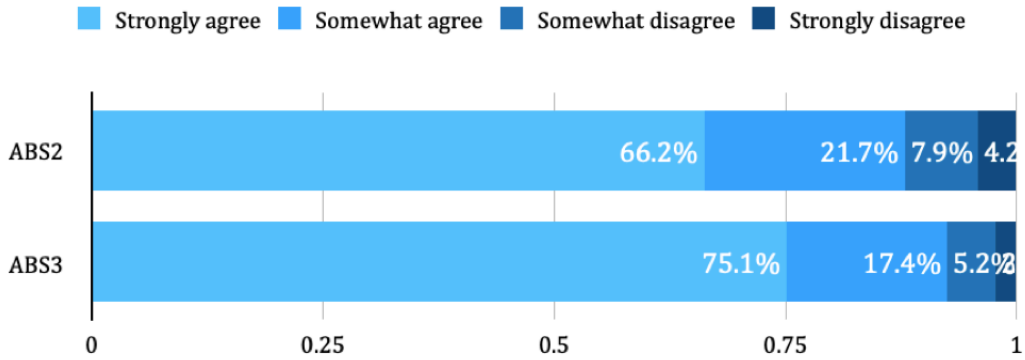


Figure 2. Should be loyal to own country

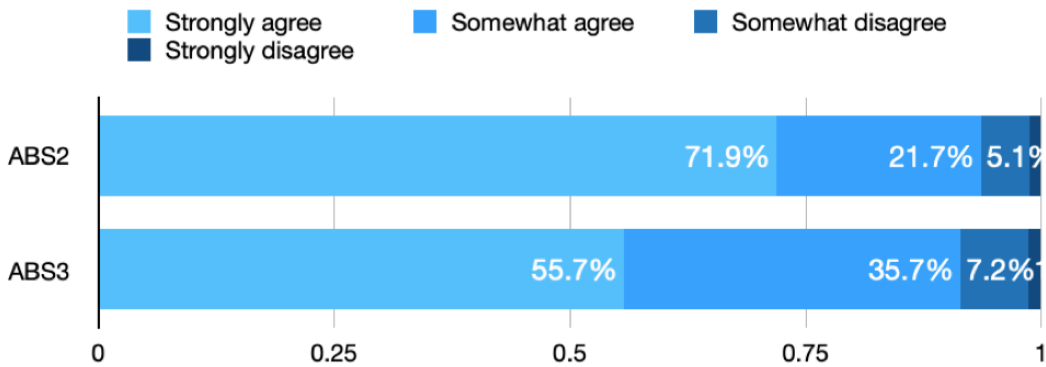


Figure 3. Defend our way of life

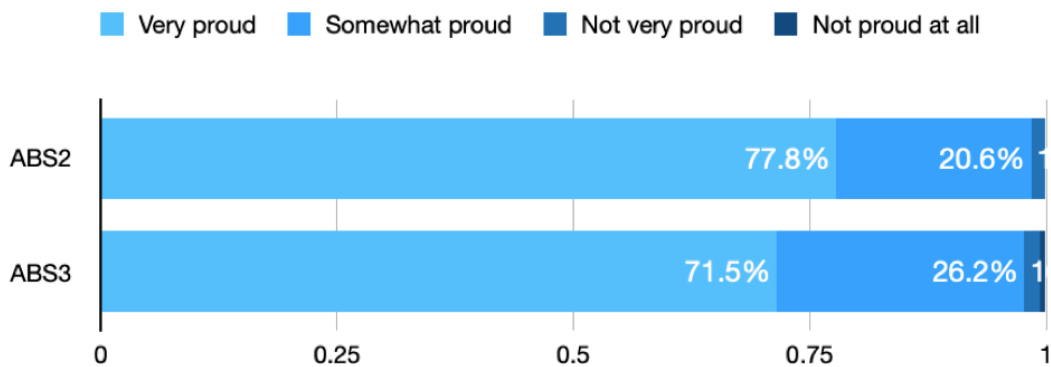


Figure 4. How proud to be a citizen of Mongolia

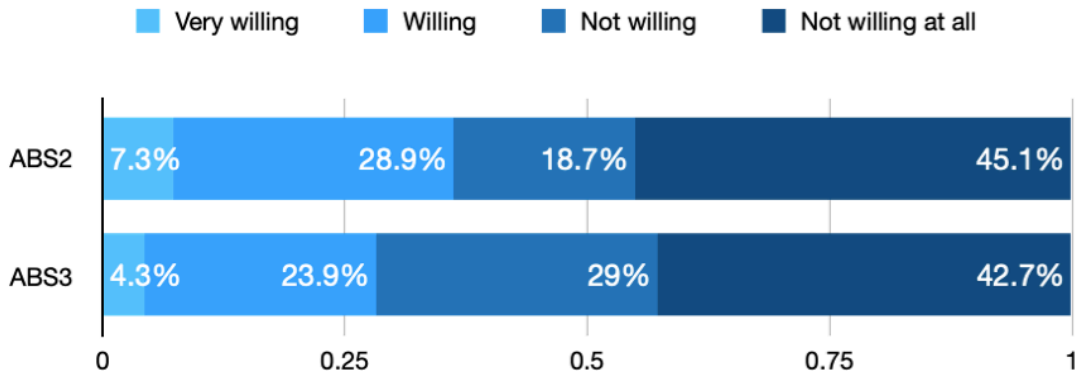


Figure 5. Will to go and live in another country

In comparing the general Mongolian populace's views with those of the Dorje Shugden community, it is clear that both groups exhibit strong nationalistic and cultural purist

tendencies, albeit manifested and expressed differently according to their specific contexts and beliefs. The Dorje Shugden community, with its particular religious practices and historical controversies, offers a microcosm through which to explore how nationalism and cultural purism are negotiated within the framework of religious identity and devotion. This comparison not only highlights the multifaceted nature of nationalism and cultural purism in Mongolia but also underscores the significant role that religious communities play in shaping and reflecting national identities.

A substantial majority of Mongolians strongly agree that their country should defend its way of life instead of becoming more and more like other countries (ABS, Wave 3 & 4). This sentiment underscores a collective desire to preserve the unique cultural and national identity of Mongolia, amidst globalisation and external cultural influences. This emphasis on cultural purism is further manifested in the notable pride Mongolians take in their citizenship, with a large number of respondents expressing that they are very proud to be a citizen of Mongolia (ABS, Wave 3 & 4). This national pride is intricately linked to the preservation of Mongolian culture and identity, serving as a foundational element of the social and political discourse within the country.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly agree	572	46,6	46,6	46,6
Agree	521	42,4	42,4	89,0
Disagree	112	9,1	9,1	98,1
Strongly disagree	14	1,2	1,2	99,2
Do not understand the question	1	,1	,1	99,3
Can't choose	7	,5	,5	99,9
Decline to answer	2	,1	,1	100,0
Total	1228	100,0	100,0	

*Table 2.* 151. Our country should defend our way of life instead of becoming more and more like other countries. (ABS, Wave 4)

The data also reveal a significant apprehension towards the inflow of foreigners, with a majority advocating for the reduction or complete cessation of foreign immigrants coming to work in the country (ABS, Wave 4 & 5). This reflects concerns over the dilution of Mongolian cultural purity and the potential economic and social repercussions of increased foreign presence. Such attitudes towards immigration are indicative of broader sentiments of exclusivism and nationalism that prioritise the interests and welfare of the Mongolian people above those of outsiders.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
The government should increase the inflow of immigrants	14	1,2	1,2	1,2
The government should maintain the current inflow of immigrants	204	16,6	16,6	17,8
The government should reduce the inflow of immigrant	689	56,1	56,1	73,9
The government should not allow any more immigrants	296	24,1	24,1	98,0
Do not understand the question	1	,1	,1	98,1
Can't choose	21	1,7	1,7	99,8
Decline to answer	3	,2	,2	100,0
Total	1228	100,0	100,0	

*Table 3. 153. Do you think the government should increase or decrease the inflow of foreign immigrants into the country? (ABS, Wave 4)*

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
The government should increase the inflow of foreigners	36	2,8	2,8	2,8
The government should maintain the current inflow of foreigners	207	16,1	16,1	19,0
The government should reduce the inflow of foreigners	607	47,3	47,3	66,3
The government should not allow any more foreigners	375	29,3	29,3	95,5
Do not understand the question	5	,4	,4	95,9
Can't choose	41	3,2	3,2	99,1
Decline to answer	12	,9	,9	100,0
Total	1283	100,0	100,0	

*Table 4. 158 Do you think the government should increase or decrease the inflow of foreigners who come to work in our country? (ABS, Wave 5)*

Religiosity in Mongolia, as evidenced by the ABS data, shows a complex relationship with national identity and cultural purism. A significant portion of the population identifies as Buddhist, which is an integral part of Mongolian cultural heritage (ABS, Wave 4 & 5). The practice and importance of religion in daily life are indicative of the ways in which traditional beliefs and practices are maintained and revered, further contributing to the cultural purism that characterises Mongolian national identity.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Roman Catholic	4	,3	,3	,3
Protestant	15	1,2	1,2	1,5
Islam	20	1,6	1,6	3,1
Buddhist	774	63,0	63,0	66,2
Other	63	5,1	5,1	71,3
None	352	28,7	28,7	100,0
Total	1228	100,0	100,0	

Table 5. se6 Religion (ABS, Wave 4)

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Very religious	107	8,7	8,7	8,7
Moderately religious	451	36,7	36,7	45,4
Lightly religious	311	25,4	25,4	70,8
Not religious at all	316	25,7	25,7	96,5
Decline to answer	43	3,5	3,5	100,0
Total	1228	100,0	100,0	

Table 6. se7a Would you describe yourself as very religious, moderately religious, lightly religious, not religious at all? (ABS, Wave 4)

**The Playground.** Building upon the foundation laid in this research, this section aims to elaborate on a crucial aspect of Mongolian Buddhism's evolution—its journey towards autonomy from Tibetan influence. The historical backdrop of the Dorje Shugden controversy serves as a pivotal point of reference, illuminating the complexities surrounding the Tibetan government and the Dalai Lama's stance against this deity. International scholarship on this



subject points to the prohibition of Dorje Shugden as a measure to prevent internal religious discord, attributing the ban to perceived threats to the spiritual harmony within the Tibetan Buddhist tradition.

Central to the Mongolian perspective on this controversy is the deep-seated nationalism that characterises the country's religious and cultural identity. Mongolian devotees of Dorje Shugden, emphasising the deity's Mongolian incarnation and its historical veneration as a state protector before the socialist era, perceive this conflict as a matter of national significance. This stance is further reinforced by allegations from figures like Zava Damdin, who accuse the Dalai Lama of undermining Mongolia's national unity and religious freedom. Such assertions highlight the role of nationalism in shaping the discourse around Dorje Shugden, framing it as a protector of the Gelugpa lineage and a symbol of Mongolian religious independence.

The debate surrounding Dorje Shugden in Mongolia transcends mere theological disagreements, touching on issues of national identity, cultural sovereignty, and the dynamics of power within the broader Tibetan Buddhist world. Critics of Dorje Shugden worship often raise concerns about potential external influences, notably the alleged financial support from the Chinese government. This claim taps into historical sensitivities and contemporary anxieties regarding foreign interference, resonating with broader themes of purity and national integrity in the face of globalisation.

On the other side, Dorje Shugden's followers position themselves as defenders of Mongolian cultural heritage and religious autonomy. They contest narratives of Tibetan dominance, particularly during the Manchu Dynasty, advocating for a vision of Mongolia that is self-reliant and faithful to its own religious traditions. This discourse challenges the hegemony of Tibetan Buddhism, asserting a unique Mongolian Buddhist identity that respects historical ties to Tibet while striving for independence in religious matters.

## **Conclusion**

In concluding this exploration of the Dorje Shugden community in Mongolia, our journey through participant observation, interviews, and the analysis of broader societal attitudes via the Asian Barometer Study has revealed a complex tapestry of devotion, nationalism, and identity. The unique social group that adheres to the worship of Dorje Shugden has not only cultivated a distinct religious mission but has also aligned itself closely with burgeoning Mongolian nationalistic sentiments, aiming to carve out a national Buddhist religion that resonates deeply with the Mongolian ethos.

This paper has illuminated the intricate ways in which the Dorje Shugden community has navigated its position within the broader Mongolian religious landscape. By fostering a milieu that champions secrecy and exclusivity in its tantric teachings, the community has effectively created a dense and special enclave, accessible only to those who have formed a Lama-Disciple relationship and have been initiated into its esoteric practices. This approach to religious practice underscores a deeper commitment to preserving the sanctity and integrity of their teachings, as demonstrated through the careful control of access to their sermons and manuals. The inclusion of photographs of books and brochures in the appendix, bearing inscriptions that forbid sharing with those outside the initiated circle, further attests to the community's dedication to maintaining the secrecy of their tantric mission.

The nationalistic undercurrents that pervade the Dorje Shugden community in Mongolia are palpable. Through the lens of this research, it is evident that the group's religious mission intertwines with a fervent loyalty to the Mongolian state, manifesting in a collective aspiration to foster a Buddhism that is distinctly Mongolian. This ideological stance not only attracts individuals with nationalistic leanings but also reinforces the community's allegiance to the monastery and the broader Mongolian nation-state. Such findings underscore the pivotal role that nationalism plays in shaping the community's religious identity and practices.

The Dorje Shugden controversy, primarily a point of contention between the Tibetan government and the Dalai Lama, introduces a significant dimension to the community's narrative in Mongolia. Despite the Dalai Lama's disciples' presence in Mongolia and their advocacy against the worship of Dorje Shugden, the community persists in promoting the deity as Mongolia's guardian. This defiance underscores a broader critique of Tibetan influence in Mongolian Buddhism and articulates a compelling argument for the creation of Mongolian Tulus and the preservation of a separate Mongolian religious tradition. Such aspirations reflect a deep-seated desire for religious autonomy and the establishment of a Buddhism that is unequivocally Mongolian.

The dichotomy between worshippers and non-worshippers of Dorje Shugden within Mongolia has given rise to entrenched perspectives, framing the deity as a symbol of power and prosperity. This divergence of views, while rooted in the broader Tibetan controversy, morphs into a distinctly Mongolian issue upon transplantation, further emphasising the unique contours of Mongolian religious and national identity.

In navigating the complexities of the Dorje Shugden community's place within Mongolian society, this research has endeavoured to provide a nuanced understanding of how religious practices, nationalism, and the quest for autonomy converge to shape a distinct religious identity. As Mongolia continues to grapple with the legacy of Tibetan Buddhism and its own nationalistic aspirations, the Dorje Shugden community stands as a testament to the dynamic interplay between tradition, identity, and the forces of modernity. Future research should delve deeper into the implications of this religious and nationalistic fervour, exploring its impact on Mongolia's religious landscape and its broader societal implications.

This exploration opens avenues for further inquiry into the resilience of religious traditions in the face of external pressures and the role of nationalism in shaping religious communities' identities. As Mongolia carves out its path on the global stage, the story of the Dorje Shugden community and its quest for a distinctly Mongolian Buddhism will undoubtedly continue to resonate, offering rich insights into the enduring power of faith, identity, and the human spirit's indomitable quest for self-determination.

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