The Study

Tibetan medicine

Enduring family legacy: from Tibet, via Transbaikalia and into Europe

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A medical dynasty

The Badmayevs and the Trans-Siberian knowledge corridor

Tibetan medicine did not come to Europe directly from Tibet; it arrived via Russia, specifically from Transbaikalia, the region east of Lake Baikal. It was a family of Burjat doctors who transferred their knowledge of Tibetan medicine, as they practised it, to the West. In the late 1850s, they opened the first Tibetan pharmacy in Europe and their medical formulas are still being produced in Europe today.

Flying to Tschita

I am flying from Ulan-Ude (Buryatia) to Tschita. The aircraft is an antique. It has remnants of 1960s elegance, with graceful upholstery and wide seats. But there are neither seatbelts nor lifejackets, and apparently only one engine works. “Don’t be nervous, a neighbour tells me, sensing the fear on my face. “If it flew to Ulan-Ude, it’ll manage to fly back.”

From Tschita, the administrative centre of Transbaikalia, I travel to Aginsk, a small town in what was formerly Agin-Buryat Autonomous Okrug. In 2008 it lost its autonomy, which continues to be a source of resentment for most Burjats. I catch a marshrutka (a shared taxi that follows a fixed route) and the driver invites me to sit upfront. He asks: “Do you like it here?” “No,” I answer honestly. “You’re crazy”, he shakes his head. “One doesn’t come here. One escapes from here.” But I am going to Aginsk for good reason: to understand how a certain family of Burjat doctors was so successful in bringing Tibetan medicine from Transbaikalia to Europe, where their medical formulas are still in use today. Who were they? What helped them achieve this unprecedented knowledge transfer? And what made Tibetan medicine, as they practised it, so special?

On the steppe

In Aginsk, on the main square, a row of busts welcome nature-loving tourists. They are all famous Burjats. There is Gombozhab Morozov, whose photographs of Laos were the first of the Tibetan capital ever to be published (National Geographic Magazine, 1905), and also Tsuyben Zhasmara and Bazak Baradin, two prominent historians and politicians. Aginsk is as different from Tschita as can be. The latter used to be a restricted-access military city; it has not experienced the same development as Aginsk. Not far from here lies Nerchinsk, where Decembrists served their prison terms. Deportation to Siberia for political disobedience, and so when travelling to this region where people were exiled to disappear, you feel as if you are heading nowhere, to the end of the world. But you would be wrong. As slender, charred trunks of blackened trees (the last of the wildfires ended only a few weeks earlier) give way to the steppe proper, new horizons open up in front of your eyes. Entering the epicentre of Buryat culture, you are immediately struck by its uniqueness.

I continue to the outskirts of Ulon, where I encounter a little ‘fairy-tale’ house and its inhabitants – a retired couple and their relatives. Over a wooden fence, a lush garden caresses the eye with a full palette of colours. Back in the house, the table bowls under plates of dumplings, tomatoes, bread, honey and preserves. Everything here is home-made, self-grown or collected from nature’s garden. The house in the city has an endless collection of jars in her kitchen cupboards. But her and her husband’s collection of books is even bigger – piled high everywhere you go. As the leaves seemingly growing out of the floors. The couple, Galtsan Tsuyrendorzhiev and his wife Tsyndyma, both doctors of Tibetan medicine. (See fig. 1).

The beginnings

The best known member of the Badmayev family is Piotr. Born in 1891 as Zhamshan, he left his steppe homeland to go to school in Iriukts. Later, he travelled to Saint Petersburg, where he entered the medical faculty. But the main reason for his going to the capital was to help his brother, who had already started the first Tibetan pharmacy in Europe. The brother, Aleksander (Burjat name Tsultim Badma), the first of the doctor dynasty, was a rather different sort of man. Back on the steppes he had been a monk in Aginsk datson, one of the main Buddhist monasteries in Transbaikalia. His medical skills brought him admiration from influential Russians, including Nikolay Muravyov-Amursky, general governor of East Siberia, Aleksander, as the story goes, helped him fight off a typhus outbreak in a Russian military garrison.

In addition to this, in 1897 Aleksander was invited to Saint Petersburg to be introduced to the Tsar. Once there, he opened a clinic and started treating patients. Yet, Aleksander’s success overwhelmed him, and he did not even speak fluent Russian. His younger brother had fewer difficulties with transitioning into this new life. Following Aleksander, he adopted Orthodox Christianity and changed his name to Piotr Aleksandrovich (after Tsar Alexander II). Most importantly, he mastered the family’s Tibetan medicine, including the art of pulse diagnosis and medicine making. When Aleksander died in 1873, Piotr expanded his practice.

Famous medicine from Aginsk

In fact, Aleksandr Badmayev was not the first Burjat doctor in the Russian capital. Interest in Tibetan medicine from Buryatia and Transbaikalia was evident in Russian scientific circles as early as the eighteenth century. Scholars such as Johann Georg Gmelin, Gotthilf Messmerscheid and Joseph Rehmann explored the eastern frontier of the empire and reported on their encounters with Buddhist monk-doctors.1 Buddhism, with Tibetan Medicine, had arrived in the region in the second half of the seventeenth century and the first monasteries were founded in the following century. The two main religious seats in Transbaikalia were Tsuogol and Aginsk.2 Medicine taught there was based on the theoretical foundations from the Chaggar college in Lasbaa and Lasrarg monastery in northeastern Tibet. Yet in practice there are two separate things and Burjat practitioners adapted the Tibetan pharmacopoeia to local conditions. Local doctors report that 80 percent of medicinal ingredients used in Transbaikalia are from the immediate area. Original formulas from Tibet, so the Burjats tell me, had to be adapted to the climate, diet and specific metabolism of their local patients: they were thus patient-tailored or even culture-tailored. When these lands became part of Russia and Russians began to settle here, the newcomers had little choice but to rely on local medicine. Nikolai Kirliev, a doctor and ethnographer, reported that there were fifty-two ‘European doctors’ in Transbaikalia but thousands of monk-doctors.3 The latter dominated not only in number but also in quality. Seen in this light, calling for doctors from Aginsk to aid epidemically-struck Russian garrisons seems completely understandable – proof of the medical helplessness of the colonizers and the medical efficacy of the colonized.

Knowledge of the achievements of Burjat doctors soon spread to cities in Europe, and thus to Russia. Scholars brought records of their trips and material findings back to their universities. Rehmann, for example, purchased a whole portable pharmacy. This intricate souvenir contained several dozen medicines and masses of information. In order to explain the medical system behind it, a Burjat doctor named Tsultim Tsyden was invited to Saint Petersburg. Unfortunately, he passed away without moving the project forward.4 But the appetite for medicine from Asia had been ignited.

Man of paradoxes

Piotr’s biography is better known than that of his older brother, but its evaluation is obscured by the multiplicity of his activities. He was not only a doctor but also an entrepreneur and diplomat, engaging in diplomatic, trade and intelligence missions in the Sino-Russian borderlands. Elsewhere, he lobbied to lead the Trans-Siberian railway project to Lanzhou in China. He had political nous, too, and informed the tsar about the coming fall of the Qing dynasty and the ensuing political vacuum from which Russia should benefit.

Piotr’s life presents various paradoxes. A devout Christian, he initiated construction of the Orthodox church in Aginsk, but also co-financed a Buddhist temple in Saint Petersburg – a unique project combining Tibetan and art nouveau influences, still a must-see in the city. He was a sworn royalist but did not blindly represent the interests of the state; for instance, he lobbied successfully for his fellow Burjats when Russian policies were stricter, as in the 1880s when the government started dissolving the steppe duma, Burjat self-government bodies, or when it pushed for religious radical conversion policies. Despite his many interests, Piotr was a titan in the field of medicine. In 1893 alone, he was carrying out between 40 and 100 visits per day, amounting to 17,000–20,000 each year.5 He produced medicines, engaged in passionate polemics about the scientific value of Tibetan medicine and published the first translation of the classic Tibetan medical treatise, The Four Tantras.6 Earlier attempts to translate this hermetic text had been futile, but with Piotr’s organizational talent it became possible.

... the need to return to nature and for the harmonious development of body and mind.

Fig. 1 From left to right: Tyugendolma Batomunkine, Tsyndyma Tsyrendorzhieva, Bazakzhand Batomunkin, Galsan Tsyrendorzhiev. All relatives of the Badmayevs.
The next generation

The October Revolution brought Piotr’s career to an abrupt end. As a friend of the tsarist establishment, Piotr was arrested and he died in 1920. But in his broad shadow, his career to an abrupt end. As a friend of the tsarist establishment, Piotr was arrested and he died in 1920. But in his broad shadow, his father, now a layman, did when he got home. Yet he never instructed his son in this secret knowledge, as it was too dangerous. Nikolai did inherit his father’s prescription books; though his private zhor with conditioned medical knowledge sharpened by years of (illegal) practice. The writing is all Tibetan or Mongolian, although in 1939 Burgas were forced to adopt Cyrillic script. (See fig. 3).

Broken ties: the journey continues

Not all the other Badmayevs in Uzon tell me, “but any contact with Włodzimierz in Poland? “We knew of Saran’s father stayed in Leningrad, died young or disappeared in unknown circumstances. Saran’s father stood on the land but one night he was taken by the secret police and shot on espionage charges. (See fig. 4.)

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Aginski Zhor

Włodzimierz ran a laboratory and produced medicines. He was a natural ambassador of his culture. In photographs, we see him on holiday, from the monastery of Aginsk, contains 1197 xylographic edition and translation. is among them – in manuscript, secreted in people’s homes. Every many of these books are still secreted in people’s homes. Even now and then, an elderly Burgas brings back what she or he saved from extermination. In 1936, Tibetan medicine was outlawed. Monasteries were closed and monks forced to disrobe. Many were even executed. Aginsk was shut down in 1937. It formally became a part of the country that can be entered only with a special visa; it is too far away from the centre for the authorities to leave access unrestricted. This makes it even more unusual here Burgas spent (not always the case in Burgas), the cult of high education, personified by people like Tsuybik or Zhamparan, is alive and not, and the elite knowledge corridor of the monastery tell me. “Pages fluttered in the air and spread on the ground like snow."

A time of brutality

Aginsk monastery witnessed some very dramatic times in the 1930s. In the first years after the revolution, Burgas, which for 900 years had been a centre of Buddhist cultivation and study, was broken too; Leningrad and Aginsk were forced to disband. In 1931, Saran Bazarzhapova is Włodzimierz’s niece. Of her four uncles, only one in Poland and one was deported to Krasnoyarsk, a Stalinist centre in the gulag system. Włodzimierz prepared his medicines according to a recipe from a particular monastery, instead of the so-called Aginski Zhor – or prescription book – as this genre of compendium is known, flourished among the Buddhist medical doctors of the 17th century. In medical formulae with indications, dosage and modifications of contents. Aginski Zhor, from the monastery of Aginsk, contains 1197 individual recipes. Not all of them were used very often, but their number shows the ingenuity of local medicines. Located in pondland surrounded by tall larches, Aginsk monastery was. Joining through long corridors, radical communist sweep past the stately architecture from the landscape, you expect to encounter a cluster of new ad hoc in the rural-Siberian style, mixed with Chinese influences. But Aginski is different; its building embodies a different spirit. Today, the monastery has the serenity of truly old places, yet it appeals also to younger generations. In the break of over half a century, Tibetan medicine is being taught here again. (See fig. 2).

The Study

The Trans-Siberian knowledge corridor

What was necessary for the Trans-Siberian knowledge corridor to function? It needed pioneers, daring spirits who did not shy away from publicity, who felt the spirit of the time and grasped possibilities. It required great stamina to survive. It also needed strength of character to practice medicine underground. For many people, never returned, but thankfully Nikolai’s parents did. It required great stamina to survive. It also needed strength of character to practice medicine underground. For many people, never returned, but thankfully Nikolai’s parents did. It required great stamina to survive. It also needed strength of character to practice medicine underground. For many people, never returned, but thankfully Nikolai’s parents did. It required great stamina to survive. It also needed strength of character to practice medicine underground. For many people, never returned, but thankfully Nikolai’s parents did. It required great stamina to survive. It also needed strength of character to practice medicine underground. For many people, never returned, but thankfully Nikolai’s parents did. It required great stamina to survive. It also needed strength of character to practice medicine underground. For many people, never returned, but thankfully Nikolai’s parents did. It required great stamina to survive. It also needed strength of character to practice medicine underground. For many people, never returned, but thankfully Nikolai’s parents did. It required great stamina to survive. It also needed strength of character to practice medicine underground. For many people, never returned, but thankfully Nikolai’s parents did. It required great stamina to survive. It also needed strength of character to practice medicine underground. For many people, never returned, but thankfully Nikolai’s parents did. It required great stamina to survive. It also needed strength of character to practice medicine underground. For many people, never returned, but thankfully Nikolai’s parents did. It required great stamina to survive. It also needed strength of character to practice medicine underground. For many people, never returned, but thankfully Nikolai’s parents did. It required great stamina to survive. It also needed strength of character to practice medicine underground. For many people, never returned, but thankfully Nikolai’s parents did. It required great stamina to survive. It also needed strength of character to practice medicine underground. For many people, never returned, but thankfully Nikolai’s parents did. It required great stamina to survive. It also needed strength of character to practice medicine underground. For many people, never returned, but thankfully Nikolai’s parents did. It required great stamina to survive. It also needed strength of character to practice medicine underground. For many people, never returned, but thankfully Nikolai’s parents did. It required great stamina to survive. It also needed strength of character to practice medicine underground. For many people, never returned, but thankfully Nikolai’s parents did. It required great stamina to survive. It also needed strength of character to practice medicine underground. For many people, never returned, but thankfully Nikolai’s parents did. It required great stamina to survive. It also needed strength of character to practice medicine underground. For many people, never returned, but thankfully Nikolai’s parents did. It required great stamina to survive. It also needed strength of character to practice medicine underground. For many people, never returned, but thankfully Nikolai’s parents did. It required great stamina to survive. It also needed strength of character to practice medicine underground. For many people, never returned, but thankfully Nikolai’s parents did. It required great stamina to survive. It also needed strength of character to practice medicine underground. For many people, never returned, but thankfully Nikolai’s parents did. It required great stamina to survive. It also needed strength of character to practice medicine underground. For many people, never returned, but thankfully Nikolai’s parents did. It required great stamina to survive. It also needed strength of character to practice medicine underground. For many people, never returned, but thankfully Nikolai’s parents did. It required great stamina to survive. It also needed strength of character to practice medicine underground. For many people, never returned, but thankfully Nikolai’s parents did. It required great stamina to survive. It also needed strength of character to practice medicine underground. For many people, never returned, but thankfully Nikolai’s parents did. It required great stamina to survive. It also needed strength of character to practice medicine underground. For many people, never returned, but thanks...