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The Interplay between Text and Image: The Molon Toyin's Tale

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Abstract

The anonymous illustrated manuscript of the Molon Toyin's tale examined in this article is one of many narrative illustrations of popular Buddhist tales that circulated in Mongolia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and that have come to us in different lengths and forms. This article seeks to demonstrate that when a text and the accompanying narrative illustrations are brought together in a single manuscript, they enhance each other's productive efficacy through their respective verbal and pictorial imagery. An illustrated text cross-references between the linguistic and visual worlds of experience and lends itself to interdisciplinary approaches. To a certain degree, it also subverts any differentiation between the linguistic and pictorial signs and challenges the notion of a self-sufficient text. As in the case of other illustrated manuscripts of the Molon Toyin's tale, here, too, the author's or illustrator's main concern is to illustrate the workings of karma and its results, expressing them in compelling, pictorial terms. At the same time, illustrations also function both as visual memory aids and as the means of aesthetic gratification. Due to the anonymity of the manuscript examined in this article, it is difficult to determine with any certainty whether the orthography and graphic features of the manuscript's illustrations are conditioned by the scribe, who is most likely also an illustrator, by his monastic training and the place where he received it, or by the expectations of the patron who commissioned the manuscript.

Keywords: Molon Toyin, Queen Molun, Maudgalyāhana, Nāgārjuna, illustrated manuscript, Qing, Uighur-Mongolian script, Mongolized version, Ikh Khüree, Labay, Avīci Hell

If one looks at a beautiful book,
One will purify a defect in the eye.
If one reads a beautiful book,
One will dissolve a defect in the mind.
—Mongolian proverb¹

¹*Saikhan nomyg kharval / nüdny gem arilna. / Sain nomyg unshval setgeliin / gem sarnina.* The proverb is taken from Jalair (2001, 1:169). The translation is mine.

Introduction

Like many manuscripts, illustrated Buddhist manuscripts in Mongolia record their history through orthography, illustrations, and ornamentation in the margins of the text. They should be seen not as mere replicas but as the end results of the illustrator's interventions. As this examination of a particular illustrated manuscript of the Molon Toyin's tale will show, illustrated manuscripts of popular Buddhist tales stand as witnesses to the process of translation from a textual description in a non-illustrated text to an illustrated manuscript in which the author-illustrator interprets the events of a received narrative. At times, the author-illustrator substantially rewrites the text through pictorial themes that convey moral teachings with horrific images underlying warnings beyond mere words and offering multiple meanings. Whereas the text places the story in a distant time, the illustrator—through the acculturation of received images—brings the story home, enabling the reader to connect with the story on different levels and reinforcing its personal, moral message. An illustrated manuscript is a product of transformations from multiple exemplars of a single narrative transmitted orally and in written texts, which is absorbed into the life of a Mongolian culture and recorded in a new embellished text. The heterogeneity of sources contained in this and other illustrated manuscripts makes it impossible for us to consider such a manuscript as a singular entity.

The existing evidence suggests that circulation of illustrated Buddhist manuscripts written in the Uighur-Mongolian script began to emerge among the Mongols in the late seventeenth century, when translations of Buddhist texts, revisions of old works, and the production of new ones began. In the latter part of the nineteenth century, production significantly increased while the same format and similar graphic features were retained. For example, when one compares the seventeenth-century St. Petersburg's illustrated manuscript of a biography of the Buddha—*The Twelve Deeds* (Mo. *Arban qoyar jokiyaŋyui*)²—with a late nineteenth-century manuscript of the Molon³ Toyin's tale in Ulaanbaatar, one notices the same arrangement and similar Sino-Mongolian style of the architecture and natural scenery, which can be said to be more stylistic than iconographic. By the time the illustrated manuscript that is the focus of this article came into existence, many illustrated Uighur, Chinese, and Tibetan versions of the tale were already widely disseminated, some of which can be traced to as early as the ninth century. In China, the *Mulian Rescues His Mother* narrative belonged to the *bianwen* (transformation texts) genre of vernacular narratives that emerged as a means of popularizing Buddhist doctrine through storytelling and pictorial illustrations some

²For a description of the St. Petersburg's manuscript of *The Twelve Deeds*, see Kara (2005, 249–250). See also Poppe (1967).

³Molon (Skt. *Maudgalyāyana*), also known as Mahā Mayudgalyāyana, was one of the ten principle disciples of the Buddha Śākyamuni. The tale of Maudgalyāyana saving his mother from hell has been widely popular throughout all the Buddhist regions of Asia.

time during the Tang dynasty (618–907) and that were integral to oral and visual performances. In all likelihood, the custom of illustrating the text of didactic Buddhist narratives or pictorially depicting the text in a picture album without written words came to Mongolia from China, although it was also known in Tibet.⁴

As for the manuscript we study in this article, it is difficult to determine with certainty whether the author-illustrator of this Mongolian version actually saw the Chinese illustrated versions of the tale or some unknown, illustrated Tibetan version that imitated the Chinese architectural style and natural scenery. It is due to the popularity of all things Chinese in nineteenth-century Mongolia that under Qing influence the illustrator used Chinese-style architecture to depict Khan Molon's palace and Buddhist temples, yet incorporated traditional Mongolian clothing, hairstyles, and so on. As seen in figure 3, the illustrator of another Mongolian manuscript of the same tale also chose the Sino-Mongolian architectural style to portray Khan Molon's palace.

In Mongolia, where paper was rare and costly, and ink and paint were made through lengthy production process that required special skills, it is safe to assume that illustrated manuscripts and picture books were commissioned primarily by nobility and produced in monastic settings.⁵ Illustrations in Mongolian Buddhist manuscripts can be loosely classified into three main categories. Into the first category I place single-color and multicolor drawings, which are most commonly found in texts dealing with ritual and magic (Mo. *dom*), astrology, divination, and medicine, and are either inserted in the text or placed on a separate page. The second category consists of multicolor watercolor paintings and raised reliefs of painted images and decorative margins.⁶ Such watercolor paintings can be further classified into two principal kinds: (1) miniature paintings of Buddhist deities, often placed on the first or last page of the text,⁷ and (2) larger and more elaborate illustrations depicting themes and scenes from canonical texts and well-known Buddhist tales, inserted in Buddhist texts. The third category includes illustrations embossed on silver and copper plates⁸ and embroidered illustrations.

⁴The same opinion is expressed by Alice Sárközi (1976, 275).

⁵In addition to importing hard ink from China, the Mongols also produced their own ink. For the Mongolian indigenous method of the production of different types of ink, see Jalair (2001).

⁶The paste for making relief paintings was made by mixing and kneading the pulverized porcelain or marble, and stone powder, with sand, sugar, and water that contained some glue. This mixture yielded a thick cream-like paste. The illustrator painted with a narrow-tipped tube that allowed the paste drip along the drawing lines. See Serjee (2001, 50).

⁷According to Sazykin, the tradition of illustrating a text easily followed an example of the Mongolian xylograph edition of the Kangyur published in Peking in the first half of the eighteenth century, in which illustrated pages contain pictures at the beginning and the end of the text (see Sazykin 1988, 24:229).

⁸The nineteenth-century manuscript of the *Guhyasamājantra* embossed on silver plates and gilded with gold letters contains several pages with embossed images of Buddhist deities, which are ornamented with inlaid diamonds, corals, pearls, and other precious substances.

This article focuses on narrative illustrations, which have come to us in two different forms: with an accompanying written text or without any text. Those without a text are pictorial narratives, or picture books, whose common themes are biographies of famous Buddhist figures and popular Buddhist tales. One such book is the eighteenth-century illustrated *Biography of Nāgārjuna* currently held in a special collection of the Mongolian National Library in Ulaanbaatar (figure 1).



Figure 1. A page from the *Biography of Nāgārjuna* (fifty-one folios, 13.5 x 1.4 inches), mineral pigments and gold on cotton, 18th century. Because this picture album is devoid of any text and very little is known about Nāgārjuna's life, it is difficult to ascertain why Nāgārjuna, depicted in the left corner of the painting, is observing the birds and butterflies in the field of flowers.
Source: Mongolian National Library, Ulaanbaatar. Photo by B. S. Serjee.

Another example of the same type of illustrated manuscript that is worth mentioning are picture books of the tale of Molon Toyin's search for and rescue of his mother from hell. One such book, which belongs to the private collection of György Kara, was studied by Alice Sárközi (1976). In picture books like these, paintings function as a visual language and speak for themselves. Nevertheless, like most art, these and other narrative illustrations in Mongolian Buddhist manuscripts are in an intertextual relationship with literature. This intertextuality, regardless of whether or not the manuscripts contain written words, is demonstrated by an illustrator's recourse to a text, written or oral, as a repository of potential images.

Although both the text and the accompanying narrative illustration that depict the scenes and themes described in the text can stand on their own, when brought together in a single manuscript, they enhance each other's productive efficacy through their respective verbal and pictorial imagery. Illustrated manuscripts containing both text and images can be seen as "multi-media" (word and image) works that cross-reference the linguistic and visual worlds of experience and lend themselves to interdisciplinary interpretative approaches. To certain degree, they also subvert any differentiation between linguistic and pictorial signs and challenge the notion of a self-sufficient text. Narrative illustrations accompanied by a written text are commonly found in

manuscripts that consist of folios with two registers per frame (such as figure 2 taken from the manuscript of the Molon Toyin's tale discussed below). In some other manuscripts of the Molon Toyin's tale, like in the one presented in figures 3 and 4, illustrations are presented in separate folios from those containing the written text. This presentation suggests that the illustrator, who was most likely also a scribe, or worked in collaboration with a scribe, directly controlled the organization of the manuscript and the presentation of the text and images. Furthermore, as seen in figure 2 (a folio page taken from the Ulaanbaatar illustrated manuscript) and figure 3 (a folio page taken from a different manuscript), the representation of Queen Molun's palace bears the characteristics of Sino-Mongolian architectural style and thereby attests to cultural dispersion and transmission of this tale in different Mongolian manuscripts. Similar to other illustrated manuscripts of the Molon Toyin's tale, the illustrations in this manuscript are invariably drafts executed with brush and ink and filled in with watercolors.



Figure 2. Folio page with two registers per frame. *Source:* Private collection. Courtesy of Venerable Munkhbaatar Batchuluun.



Figures 3 (left) and 4 (right). Folio pages with separated illustration and texts. *Source:* Private collection.

The heterogeneity of illustrations and their layouts in available, Mongolian Buddhist manuscripts corresponds to the diversity of functions these images served and as well as their illustrators' intent and originality. A comparison of illustrations in different manuscripts of the same tale testifies to the plurality of pictorial rephrasing and the illustrators' freedom in choosing their graphic and iconographic elements. The fact that many Mongolian scribes were also illustrators who knew how to make different colorants from the natural and organic materials found in their natural environment tells us that they were more than copyists and literati. They knew how to make powder paints by mixing various substances such as pulverized marble, limestone, cinnabar, yogurt, liquid glue, rhubarb root, mountain goat's blood, young stag's antler, goat's brain, cow's milk, camel's milk, juices extracted from orchids, tree barks, flowers, leaves, stalks of plants, and twigs of trees and bushes (Narantuya 2002, 226–228; Jalair 2001, 135–136). The colors with which they illustrated their manuscripts were often the six basic hues: yellow, red, green, blue, black, and white. Brushes used for both illustrating and writing texts were made of one or many hairs from a rabbit, cow's ear, or ground squirrel's tail. Brush handles were made from a stalk of bulrushes (*Scirpus*),⁹ meadowsweet (*Filipendula ulmaria*), or bamboo (Jalair 2001, 131–133).

Illustrated Manuscripts of the Molon Toyin's Tale

The existence of diverse illustrated manuscripts with moralistic tales is evidence of the popularity and wide circulation of such manuscripts in Inner Asia, especially in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Mongolia. Several possible political and social factors may have contributed to their popularity during this time. As indicated by archival material and by the accounts of Russian ethnographers, the decline of Qing authority in Mongolia at the end of the nineteenth century and a simultaneous worsening of economic and social conditions engendered social corruption and unethical conduct among lay Buddhists and monastics, especially those residing in urban areas, such as the monastic center of Ikh Khüree and its vicinity. Itinerant lamas (*badarči*), who had close connections with lay population, used illustrated texts to teach lay audiences and young monks. Thus, the external conditions that determined the production of books with moral tales at times also determined their physical form. The illustrated manuscripts of the Molon Toyin's tale, for example, depict the invisible, infernal world experienced by wrongdoers as much as they depict the visible world. Their illustrators, or authors, are concerned with the workings of karma and its results, expressed in compelling pictorial terms, which include the frightening scenes of various infernal tortures and sufferings that were as popular in Mongolia as in China. These

⁹ *Scirpus* is a genus of aquatic, grasslike species of the family of sedges, which occur in riverbanks, marshes, and lakeshores, and sometimes in waters. In Mongolia, five species of bulrushes have been included in the genus *Scirpus*.

illustrations functioned primarily as visual memory aids, but perhaps, at times, also as a means of aesthetic gratification.

In China, the story of Mulian (Maudgalyāyana) saving his mother from the underworld was interpreted chiefly as a tale of filial love, monks' care for their ancestors, and women's inclination to sin when left alone. It also has been central to the festival of the deliverance of suffering ghosts, or ancestors, held on the fifteenth day of the seventh lunar month, when, according to folk belief, the gates of heaven open and ancestors can access their living relatives and delight in their offerings. In China, the story also developed many variants; it became a part of folk operas and religious plays and provided direct inspiration for the Chinese scrolls depicting infernos. In Mongolia, the story has been seen primarily as a cautionary tale of karmic retribution, of the great suffering in this life and future lives brought about by sin stemming from a lack of devotion to the Three Jewels. But it is also a tale of filial love and the power of the Buddha's virtue and compassion.

The custom of illustrating and writing Buddhist texts by hand brought a wide range of versions and creative redactions of Mongolian Buddhist manuscripts into existence. This activity, in turn, facilitated the transformation of popular Buddhist texts, such as the Molon Toyin's tale, into Mongolian folklore and their dissemination in oral form. The existence of various manuscript and xylographic versions of the tale of Molon¹⁰ and his efforts to repay kindness to his mother by saving her from hell attests to its great popularity among Mongols. The version that will be examined here is an illustrated manuscript from a private collection in Ulaanbaatar that has recently come to light.

The tale of Molon Toyin repaying kindness to his mother was widely circulated in Mongolia along with other popular Buddhist tales, such as a biography of the Buddha (*The Twelve Deeds*), stories of the miraculous powers of the Mahāyāna Sūtras that also circulated widely in Inner Asia (such as the *Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*), legends of the Green and White Tārās, the *Legend of Čoγjid Dagini*, the Gesar epic, and so on. All of these illustrated works were moralistic and were intended predominantly for lay audiences. The Molon Toyin's tale belongs to a set of Mongolian didactic texts written in prose and verse on the subject of parents' love and the ways in which their kindness can be repaid.¹¹ These texts have proliferated in Mongolia to this very day in manuscripts, block prints, and nowadays in printed, modern Mongolian translations. The Molon Toyin's tale has even inspired prayers, such as the "Maṇi Prayer of Molon Toyin" ("Molom toiny maaniin zalbiral"), in which Molon Toyin addresses the Three

¹⁰He has been popularly known in Mongolia under different names, such as Modgalvani, Mongoljibo, and Moloton.

¹¹Some texts in this genre are the *Etseg ekhiin achiig khariulakh ës* [Manner of repaying kindness to parents], written in prose, the *Etseg, ekhiin achiig khariulakhyn shimiin khurangui* (Summary of the elixir of repaying the mother's kindness) written in verse by the monk from Amdo, Bi pa Nawang Mipam Da ba (1767–1807) and the Mongolian *Ekhiin achiig khariulsan sudar* (Sutra of repaying the mother's kindness), also written in verse.

Jewels, Ānanda, and Śāriputra, asking them, “Have you seen my mother?” and beseeching the Lord Yama, the Twenty-One Tārās, and others to lead his mother to Sukhāvātī (Khandsüren 2017).

The manuscript versions of the Molon Toyin’s tale survived in prose and verse of different lengths. Two worth mentioning are the seventeenth-century translations from Tibetan: one prepared by Altangerel Ubasi from Khalkha, and the other by the renowned translator Siregetü Gūūsi Čorĵi from Khokhhot, printed in Peking in 1708. In contrast to the translated versions, the extant Mongolized adaptations of the tale in prose and verse have been transmitted both orally and in manuscript form. As attested by the considerably larger number of preserved manuscripts of Mongolian versions of the tale than xylographic copies of the versions translated from Tibetan, it is safe to assume that the manuscript copies of the Mongolized adaptations of the tale have been more widely disseminated than xylographic copies. The oral and textual versions of the story also circulated in parallel and intersecting contexts. The manuscript under examination is a Mongolized version of the Molon Toyin’s tale, in which the illustrator often adds details to the story never mentioned in the text and thereby reframes the meaning of the narrative through his own arrangement of motifs provided by the text. Whenever possible, he Mongolizes the narrative by means of sociocultural signs, namely, stereotypical images of early twentieth-century characters, their clothing, items of everyday use, Mongolian Buddhist practices, and so on. When illustrated cultural signs are combined with the written text, which provides a narrative background for illustrations, together they stir the audience toward reading the text in a nonlinear fashion.

Derivative textuality, witnessed in the Mongolized versions of the Molon Toyin’s tale, was a common compositional strategy for didactic and popular Buddhist literature in Mongolia. It came about through the processes of translation, adaptation, and transposition of different variants of the story. A versified version of the tale that originated in the region of Ordos (present-day Inner Mongolia) and is now kept in the library of Gandantegchenling Monastery in Ulaanbaatar, is perhaps the oldest extant Mongolized version. It consists of some five hundred stanzas, with each stanza comprised of four lines, thus totaling approximately two thousand lines. The lines of each stanza are written predominantly in the traditional Mongolian style of lyrical composition, in which the first word of each line of a given stanza begins with the same letter. According to Ts. Damdinsüren, the language and orthography of this lyrical version—which do not mark the difference between the letters “č” and “ĵ” and only sporadically indicate the letter “n” with a dot (*tseg*)—exhibit archaic forms (Damdinsüren [1959] 2001, 227). Among Mongolized prose versions, the least disseminated one is preserved in a manuscript composed in the Mongolian language but recorded in Tibetan script. Because the transcription of the Mongolian language in Tibetan script gave rise to many linguistic errors, the text is difficult to read, which may have contributed to it being less popular. Writing Mongolian in Tibetan script served as a pedagogical tool in teaching the Tibetan writing to young monks. Therefore, it is quite

feasible that this manuscript was a result of scribal training that was combined with teachings on morality and indebtedness to one's parents.

The most circulated manuscript copies of the Mongolized prose versions of the Molon Toyin's tale were illustrated manuscripts, some of which are now kept in private collections and libraries in Europe and Mongolia. Their content comes closer to that of the Mongolian versified version than to the two translations from Tibetan previously mentioned. In Mongolized versions, Molon Toyin is called Labuy or Labay in his youth, and he departs from home to engage in trade after the death of his father. In the translated versions, he is given a different name in his youth and the mention of his departure from home for the sake of trade is absent. The versified, Mongolized version also brings a streak of black humor into a sober tale by making Molon Toyin's mother, Queen Molun, a somewhat satirical character who refuses to leave the Vajra Hell to which she had become accustomed. After being persuaded by Molon Toyin to leave that inferno, she speaks to the hell keepers: "Don't let anyone occupy my place. I'll come back later." The Mongolized versions also give a longer account of Queen Molun's misdeeds than those found in the translated versions, which pay greater attention to Molon Toyin's journey through the infernal realms in quest of his mother. In contrast to the Mongolized versions, in which Queen Molun's unwholesome actions are voiced by the narrator of the tale, in the translated versions, her transgressions are declared through the words of the Buddha, Lord Yama, and Indra. Similarly, in the Mongolized versions, it is the Buddha who assists Molon Toyin in rescuing his mother, whereas in Siregetü Gūüsi's translation, Avalokiteśvara saves her.¹²

Damdinsüren was the first to point out that Mongolized versions of the story, like that of the illustrated manuscript discussed here, show traces of Chinese influence on the content and pictorial style of the illustrations (1959, 276). We learn of Queen Molun eating pigs, geese, chickens, and ducks seasoned with onion and alcohol and other animals' bodily parts with hematomas.¹³ Likewise, in some manuscripts, we encounter the Chinese custom of burning paper at a funeral service in the scene of Queen Molun's burial ceremony. Walther Heissig pointed out that even Molon, the Mongolian word for Maudgalyāyana, has its origin in the Chinese version of his name, Mu-lien (1954, 24). On the basis of all of this, the Mongolian scholar Teserensodnom has suggested that the Molon Toyin's tale came from China long before it was translated from Tibetan (1997, 254–257). However, unless a newly discovered manuscript or some other convincing

¹²See Damdinsüren ([1959] 2001, 188–209; 1959, 258–259). Various copies of illustrated manuscripts of the Mongolized version held in the libraries and museums of Denmark, Switzerland, Hungary, Russia, and Mongolia have been studied to some degree by European Mongolists, namely, Walther Heissig, B. Ya. Vladimirtsov, László Lőrincz, and Alice Sárközi, and by Mongolian scholars such as Ts. Damdinsüren and D. Teserensodnom.

¹³A reference to Queen Molun having pigs and ducks killed for her consumption also appears in Altangerel Uvsh's translation of a Tibetan text. See Teserensodnom (1997, 255).

evidence comes to light, there is no certainty that it did so prior to the seventeenth century.

The Anonymous Illustrated Ulaanbaatar Manuscript

Let us now turn to our anonymous Ulaanbaatar copy of the illustrated manuscript of a Mongolized version of the tale. The manuscript consists of forty-six folios measuring 42 x 25 centimeters, and is written on a thin, soft, white Russian paper without watermarks, the type of paper that became available in Mongolia for the first time in the second half of the nineteenth century. Each folio of the manuscript is framed by a double red line. The upper section of the folio contains illustrations; the lower section, which contains the main text, is unevenly painted with yellow aquarelle. The manuscript lacks a title page, and its page-long colophon reveals neither the name of the illustrator, author, or person who commissioned it nor the place and time of its production, which is not unusual in manuscript reproductions of popular literature intended for the masses. The folio of the colophon, which is somewhat damaged at the bottom edge, begins with an homage to the holy teacher (*blam-a*) Buddha (*burqan*), who is accompanied by his retinue, and it continues with the author's confession of sins and his intention to engage in wholesome deeds in the future. An ornamental mark (*bir ya*) placed in the top left corner of the recto side of the first folio is one of many Mongolian variants of the stylized marks that symbolically represent the syllable *om* and that often designate the beginning of the manuscript (see figure 5).



Figure 5. The colophon to the text expressing the author's prayer and commitment to the Dharma. *Source:* Private collection. Courtesy of Venerable Munkhbaatar Batchuluun. Unless otherwise noted, this and all of the following figures are from the anonymous Ulaanbaatar illustrated manuscript.

Usage of the syllable *om* to indicate the beginning of a text reached Mongolia in the seventeenth century from Tibet, where it came into use under the influence of Indian Buddhist manuscripts. In Mongolian Buddhist texts in general, the beginning mark is found in both manuscripts and xylographs. In some cases, as here, it was also written to indicate a new chapter, section, or paragraph; at times it was also written between words to highlight an important term or phrase (see Kara 2005, 97–98). Similarly, the punctuation signs in Buddhist manuscripts appear in different red and black shapes. In the manuscript under consideration, a single, black dot (*tseg*) marks the end of a clause or sentence, or a quotation mark, and in a couple of instances, in folios 4 and 7, quotation marks are signaled with two vertical dots. We also find a single quadripartite dot in the shape of a diamond and a quadripartite dot above two vertical dots above

another quadripartite dot below to mark the end of a theme or a chapter (figure 6). According to Kara's study of Mongolian and Buryat manuscripts, these two shapes of the mark denoting the end of a theme and a chapter first appear in nineteenth-century manuscripts written by the Khalkhas and Buryats. This is yet another indicator that the manuscript was produced sometime in the late nineteenth or the early twentieth century.



Figure 6. A quadripartite marker of the end of a theme (see also figure 7, in which the marker appears at the bottom of the folio).

The remaining forty-five folios of the manuscript are dedicated to the tale that encapsulates Buddhist ethical codes through the narrative of the wrongdoings of Molon Toyin's mother, Queen Molun, the consequences experienced by sinners like her in their infernal rebirths, and her righteous son's miraculous powers and love for her. With the exception of folio 38 and a colophon page, which do not contain illustrations, each folio of the manuscript has two sections separated by a double red line. The upper section contains illustrations depicting the scenes described in the text written in the lower section of the folio. Thus, each illustrated folio provides its recipients with a dual-track narration and involves their different sense faculties with its verbal and pictorial language, similar to modern-day comic books.

The contour lines of the illustrations, made with a thin brush and black ink, are clearly visible. In some instances, the lines are not carefully executed. They show inconsistency in length, width, and shape in the areas where one expects to see consistency, and at times the draft outlines are left uncolored. The colors used for illustrations are the six basic colors mentioned above.¹⁴ Words that identify individuals, objects, places, and main events described in the main text are handwritten on the illustrations themselves, making each illustration a dynamic space filled with interrelated images and words. The purpose of the textual designators was, perhaps, to enable the uninformed reader to accurately interpret a given illustration or to enable a

¹⁴For a more detailed description of the procedure of making different colors, see Narantuya (2002, 226–227).

storyteller to narrate the tale without relying on the main text underneath. Similar to other illustrations seen in the manuscripts of the same period, the pictures here also feature not only Sino-Mongolian style in the architecture, but also in the furniture, as well as traces of Chinese and Tibetan influence on the pictorial depictions of trees, hills, and clouds.

The illustrations in the first eighteen folios portray events in this world. In these illustrations, attention is given to the main characters of the tale and their actions. In the depiction of the events prior to Queen Molun's death, the front wall of the ground floor of her palace and the front walls of temples are cut away to give us intimate visual access to the interior of her home, her actions, and the monks' temple activities. The manuscript begins with an illustration that shows the social status and wealth of Molon Toyin's family and their reverence for the Buddha and the monastic community. In the left corner of the first illustration we see a seated statue of the Buddha Śākyamuni in an open temple. In front of the statue is an altar table with nine balls of offerings and other appropriate items. Monks situated on either side of the statue and dressed in the red robes of a *gelen* (Tib. *dge slong*, a fully ordained monk) are playing various instruments and holding incense burners while the members of Molon Toyin's family, led by the father, Khan, are walking in procession, bringing offerings and silk offering scarves (*khadags*) and prostrating to the Buddha. On the right side of the image is the three-storied palace of Molon Toyin's family, built on a foundation of four layers of bricks. In front of it are two decorated Mongolian yurts (*gers*), and in the upper right corner their horses, goats, cows, camels, boars, and two elephants are pictured. The members of the family are dressed in traditional Mongolian clothing (*deel*) and boots (*gutal*). Men wear hats with ribbons and a rank button (*malgai*) on top, and they have long braided hair (*gezeg*). Father Khan is dressed in a black jacket, and Queen Molun is wearing a headdress and garment of a Khalkha married noblewoman of the nineteenth century. Thus, from the very beginning, the illustrator tells us who the main characters of the story and what their social roles and status are (figure 7).



Figure 7 (folio 1). Father Khan and the family venerating the Buddha's shrine.

In the subsequent ten illustrations, we see the traditional Mongolian utensils of daily life, such as a milk container, cups for drinking milk tea, and implements used for daily worship. Transforming the characters of the tale into representatives of Mongolian people, and depicting traditional Mongolian household items, the illustrations render the tale more relevant to a Mongolian audience. By observing the likeness of the illustrations to their own lives, Mongolian viewers do not need to imagine a connection with the story; they can directly experience it. Illustratively clothed in the Mongolian system of representation in this way, the Molon Toyin's tale became a product of acculturation, not merely through linguistic signs but also through its pictorial interpretations and adaptations. By means of indigenous Mongolian signifiers, the illustrator succeeds in translating the popular Buddhist tale into local folklore, demonstrating the well-known fact that an image is never a neutral medium of transmission (figure 8).



Figure 8 (folio 3). Queen Molun seated on a low cushion, exchanging words with Labay prior to his departure from home.

The illustration in figure 9, folio 5 introduces us to the change in Queen Molun's conduct after the death of her husband and portrays Molon Toyin's departure from home for the sake of commerce. The queen no longer sits on a low cushion as we see her in folio 3; here, she is sitting in her palace on a high, wooden, Chinese-style chair in front of a long table with various dishes of food and resting her feet on a low stool. Her posture suggests that she is feeling satiated and languid after gorging on the meat of many cruelly slaughtered animals. She is represented here as the archetype of a greedy, gluttonous, and cruel woman who has abandoned Buddhist practices and ethical principles, as well as traditional Mongolian culinary and dietary customs after adopting various Chinese culinary customs described in the text as inappropriate and sinful. For example, the text and image in folio 5 (figure 9) tell of Queen Molun ordering animals to be suspended on trees and beaten so that their blood accumulates in certain bodily

areas. They are then killed and flavored with onions and alcohol merely for the sake of her pleasure. She has live fish cast into a burning pan, and live geese, chickens, and ducks (not traditionally part of a Mongolian diet) thrown into a hot pot, where they pluck out their own feathers with their beaks and place them underneath their bodies to ease their pain. When they are fried to death, she gorges on them, flavoring them with salt, onions, and alcohol. She has the chest of a pig slit open and its heart pulled out. She worships evil spirits and commits numerous sins. One wonders whether some contemporary Mongolian lamas are correct in seeing here the author-illustrator's underlying criticism of certain members of Mongolian nobility who had become enamored with all things Chinese and adopted their practices.¹⁵

In the same illustration, Queen Molun's servants are depicted as commoners, wearing nomads' black knee-high boots and simple, short jackets and commoners' hats, as they boil live birds and fish, suspend live domestic and wild animals from trees, and beat them with clubs in accordance with her commands to satisfy her perverse appetite. Their clothing and work differ from that of indoor servants dressed in portrayed in several preceding images. The pictorial representation of the servants' dress and their outdoor labors and Queen Molun's decadent condition in the palace accentuates the sharp contrast between these two social classes. The artistic expression of this illustration is situated within historical as well as social contexts. The pictorial portrayal of people and events in this illustration is filled with discrete narratives not mentioned in the text and plays an important role in structuring the story's received meaning (figure 9).



Figure 9 (folio 5). Queen Molun having her servants use cruel methods to slaughter animals for her consumption.

¹⁵ This perspective came to light in my interviews with different Mongolian monks in Mongolia in the summer of 2015.

The signs of Queen Molun's corruption detectible in this tale are further illustrated in the three folios (9–11) in which we see her chasing away monks with a stick in her hand and the family's table altar in a state of complete disarray (figure 10); her pretense to be a virtuous woman at Molon Toyin's brother II's arrival and for Molon Toyin's return home is suggested by the image of monks refurbishing the family shrine. The illustrator adds many such details not mentioned in the text, depicting her sitting again on a low cushion in front of the modest table with nothing more than a bowl of milk tea (figure 11).



Figure 10 (folio 6). Queen Molun chasing the monks away.



Figure 11 (folio 8). Queen Molun restoring the shrine and pretending to worship the Buddha upon hearing of Labay's return home from his brother.

In figure 12 (folio 11), we see Queen Molun lying sick on her bed and vomiting blood. The messengers of Yama, the Lord of Death, are pulling her with their chains and hooks. Next to this image, in the same folio, the illustrator gives us hints of her approaching fate by depicting her lying dead and blindfolded in a coffin and then naked, bleeding from her genitals and other bodily parts, as creatures of hell stab her with various implements (figure 12).



Figure 12 (folio 11). Scenes from Queen Molun's suffering in hell after her death.

The illustration in folio 13 shows birds eating Queen Molun's corpse as it lies in a coffin. Some monks recite prayers for her and another monk paints an image of the Buddha at Molon Toyin's request. Queen Molun's clothing, hat, and boots are hanging on a wooden frame next to the yurt in front of the palace (figure 13). None of these details are mentioned in the text accompanying these illustrations in folios 11 and 14. The text only informs us that Queen Molun died seven days after she lied, swearing to Molon Toyin: "If I slaughtered animals and did not perform any wholesome deed, may I get a serious disease and die from it within seven days!"



Figure 13 (folio 13). A scene depicting Queen Molun's death and funeral.

In the story, after Queen Molun dies within seven days, Molon Toyin places his mother's coffin inside the home, invites many monks to perform ritual prayers, and performs many good deeds on his mother's behalf. After the forty-ninth day since her death, he takes the coffin with her corpse to the mountain and buries it there. There he builds a home of hay where he sits to pray with single-pointed concentration for one hundred days in order to help his mother reach Buddhahood. Achieving the clear light of wisdom after practicing meditative concentration (*samādhi*) for three years on a mountain, Molon Toyin has a vision of his father in the Trayamstrimśa heaven, being venerated by the sons of gods and served by the daughters of gods. Not seeing his mother anywhere, he approaches the Buddha, asking for the place of her rebirth. In the same folio (folio 17; see figure 14), the illustrator depicts three scenes, from left to right, in which details not mentioned in the text are introduced: Molon Toyin meditating in a cave on a forested mountain inhabited by wild beasts (a tiger and wolves chasing a deer); Molon Toyin's father seated on a high throne within a celestial palace in Indra's heaven and being venerated by eight gods whose hairstyle resembles that of nobility in Chinese paintings; and Molon Toyin, standing on the right side of the Buddha seated on a lotus throne in a temple, with Ānanda and Śāriputra standing behind him (figure 14).



Figure 14 (folio 17). Scenes depicting Molon Toyin's meditation, his father in a celestial palace, and Molon Toyin in the presence of the Buddha Śākyamuni.

In the following folios, the illustrator brings us into his vision of the world of gruesome images and foreboding omens of the tragic fate of Queen Molun. In folio 19, the illustrator depicts the intermediate state between death and rebirth, a place devoid of the light of the sun, moon, and stars, where numerous souls are awaiting rebirth and where they are already being formed in the colors and shapes of the animals in which they will be reborn. There are also those who died from drowning or having been

stabbed by knife, cut by axe, crushed by vehicle, or run over by horse or committed suicide (figure 15).



Figure 15 (folio 19) (left). Suffering of beings in a Stabbing Hell, witnessed by Molon Toyin.

Figure 16 (right). A fragment from a scene depicting the tortures in hell. Choiji Lama's Museum. *Source:* Photo by the author.

As in China, explicit images of anguish in infernal realms were widely circulated in Mongolia, especially in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in various illustrated books, one of which is Tsevelvanchigdorj's (Tib. *Tshe spel Dbang phyug Rdo rje*, 1836–1894, also known as Erdene Bishrelt Mergen Bandida) picture book, *A Book of the Images of Hell*, and in paintings displayed in temples.¹⁶ Figure 16 shows a scene from a series of paintings of hot and cold hells displayed in Choiji Lama's temple in Ulaanbaatar. The public display and distribution of such images facilitated a collective understanding of hellish experiences. It is possible that some of those served as artistic inspiration for the illustrator of our manuscript.

Folios 20–40 depict the gruesome sufferings of beings reborn in the eight types of hot hells (*qalayun tamu*) and in the eight types of cold hells (*küiten tamu*)¹⁷ visited by Molon Toyin in search of his mother, starting with the hell called “Reviving,” where the ground is a burning hot iron, depicted in the center of the illustration. Those burned and torn into pieces by fire die only to be revived and experience the same suffering all over again. In both the text and image, emphasis is given to the conditions in each infernal realm, the types of tortures inflicted on beings born in those infernal realms, and on the various forms of suffering they experience (folio 20; see figure 17). While the words indicating Molon Toyin, the types of hells, and the guardians of the hells are written on

¹⁶An incomplete xylographic copy is held in the Ernst collection in Switzerland, and the book is described in detail by Sárközi and Bethlenfalvy (2010).

¹⁷ The idea and topography of hot and freezing cold hells is not unique to Buddhism, as one also finds similar references in the early Christian texts, such as the third-century apocryphal text attributed to Saint Paul's vision.

the illustrations themselves, as seen in figures 15, 17 and 18, the suffering beings portrayed in these illustrations are anonymous, perhaps because it is only the condition of each individual hell that matters to our illustrator. He intends to communicate horror and elicit fear and compassion in the audience through direct, visual perception of the chillingly horrific and explicit images of tortures and frightening hell beings that carry them out and at the same time articulate doctrinal concerns.



Figure 17 (folio 20). Scenes from different hells visited by Molon Toyin in search of his mother.

When we compare the illustrations of infernal realms given in this manuscript with those seen in another, anonymous manuscript containing exactly the same narrative and probably from the same period, we find that each illustrator offers his unique vision of the same themes. For example, a comparison of the illustration of the Hell of Blood (*čisün tamu*) in our manuscript (figure 18) with that of the exact same version of the Molon Toyin's tale from a different manuscript (figure 16) demonstrates differences in the creative imagination and artistic skills of two distinct illustrators. In figure 18, beings suffering in the Hell of Blood, depicted in the far right side of the folio, are swimming in their own blood as their torturers are stabbing them with trident weapons. To the left of the Hell of Blood is the Hell with Black Rulers (*qara šoyumtu tamu*), and in the far left corner of the folio is Molon Toyin, portrayed as a full figure standing on a cloud and holding a staff and begging bowl in his hands, asking a guardian of hell about his mother.



Figure 18 (folio 22). Scenes from the Hell of Blood, Hell with Black Rulers, and Molon Toyin asking the guardian of hell about his mother.

In figure 19 belonging to a different manuscript with the exact same narrative, we see a more crudely executed illustration. Those born in the Hell of Blood are also depicted in the far right corner of the folio, swim in their individual pools of blood but are not tortured with tridents. Their facial expressions appear calm in comparison to those in figure 18. To the left of the Hell of Blood is one of the cold hells. Perhaps due to the illustrator's lack of artistic talent, the suffering beings in this cold hell appear to be smiling. In the upper left corner, Molon Toyin stands on a cloud that covers the lower part of his body, with his palms raised.



Figure 19. Folio page from another illustrated manuscript, depicting the suffering of beings in hell. *Source:* Private collection, Ulaanbaatar.

Folios 40–44 depict Molon Toyin finding his mother in Avīci Hell (*ayusi tamu*) and the Buddha’s intervention in saving Queen Molun (folios 40–41; see figures 20 and 21). In the left corner of figure 21, the illustrator depicts Molon Toyin in the presence of the Lord Yama listening to the guardian of the underworld who reads from the record of her deeds, the Buddha giving blessings to the guardians of Avīci Hell, who worship him with folded palms, while the bleeding Queen Molun, held with a chain around her neck by a guardian of hell who is about to cut off the chain with his axe, exits the gates of Avīci Hell.

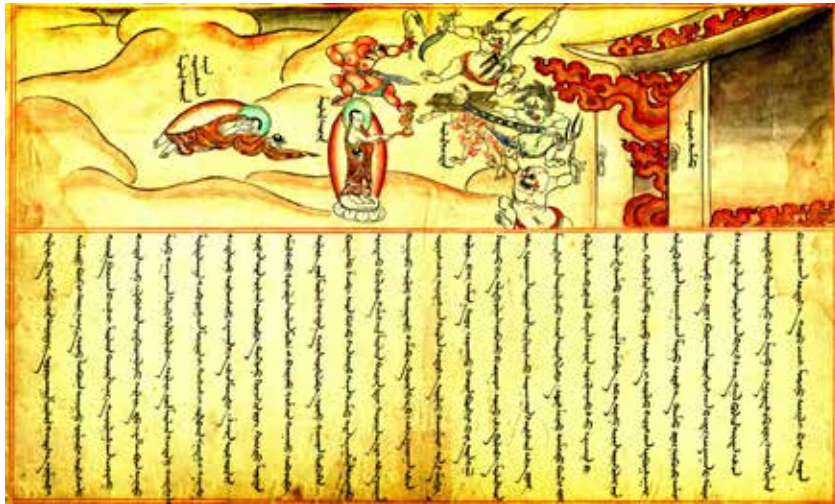


Figure 20 (folio 40). Molon Toyin lying on the ground in despair and the bleeding Queen Molun in chains, with the Buddha Śākyamuni in the center.

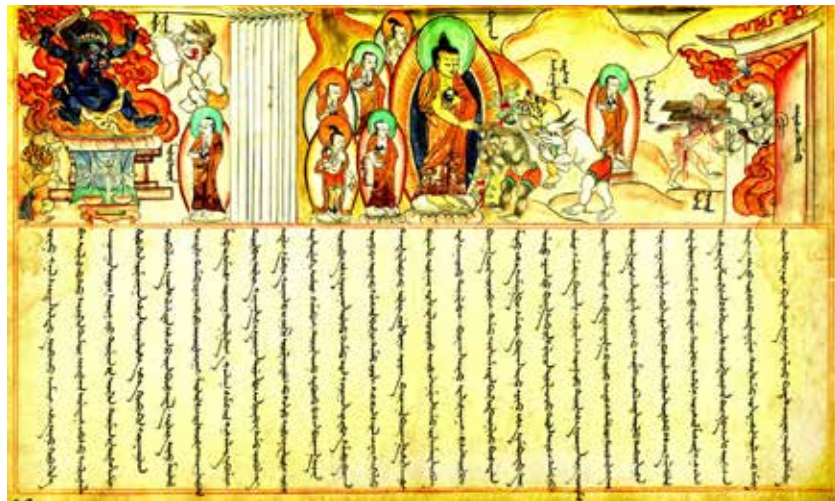


Figure 21 (folio 41). Buddha Śākyamuni’s intervention in saving Queen Molun from Avīci Hell.

The last image in folio 45 (figure 22) illustrates the satisfying conclusion, depicting Queen Molun's birth from a lotus in the Buddha-field, emerging in the presence of the Buddha Śākyamuni, who is seated on a lotus-throne, surrounded by the retinue of his disciples, some of whom are shaven monks, while others are garbed in yogis' clothing with their hair arranged in topknots.



Figure 22 (folio 45). Queen Molun's birth from a lotus in the Buddha-field, emerging in the presence of the Buddha Śākyamuni.

The lower section of each illustrated folio contains the text, handwritten with brush and black ink in the Khalkha penmanship characteristic of the nineteenth century, a time when the deterioration of fine penmanship (*khichengüi*) became apparent, thus confirming the period of the manuscript's production. We find here the frequent misplacement of the dot indicating the medial "n" and inconsistencies in marking the initial "n" with the dot and the final "γ" with two dots. The tail of the words designating the final "n" is a thick, descending line, with a short and curvy upturn to the right. The grapheme for the final "a" and "e" (*tsatslaga*) has the shape of a long diagonal line with a short hook. These stylistic details are all typical of nineteenth-century Khalkha manuscripts written with a brush.

Conclusion

Although the textual and visual elements of the manuscript that we have examined historicize it and suggest its territorial origin, they do not inform us whether this anonymous text is a product of composition, redaction, or the result of hidden forms of textual copying. The same may be said for the other, aforementioned manuscript of the same tale that was recently made available on Facebook, and in general for every anonymous manuscript of the derivative texts of popular Buddhist tales, which used old sources to create new ones and circulated in multiple oral variants that can no longer be

traced. Likewise, on the basis of the aforementioned elements, we cannot know whether or not they are a result of translative copying. In other words, it is impossible to determine with certainty whether the orthography and stylistic features of the illustrations in Mongolian manuscripts are conditioned by the scribe, who in our case could also be the illustrator, by his monastic training and the place where he received it, or by expectations of the patron who commissioned the manuscript. But its features still can frame its aesthetic properties and influence our reception. As John Lydgate has suggested, the process of physically writing and illuminating manuscripts is analogous to the complex processes of textual transformation that constitute more flexible conceptions of authorship (Lydgate 1906–1935; Fisher 2012, 36). The implication of this statement is that every scribal and illustrated copy should be deemed not as a mere duplicate but as an enacted textual and visual transformation and, therefore, as authorial—the scribe or illustrator is not an impersonal medium of transmission but often an organizer and redactor of the text. In literary studies, manuscripts have long been read as compilations that have multiple sources of textual transmission. In the case of illustrated manuscripts, the plurality of their sources is textual and visual. As attested by illustrated Mongolian versions of the Molon Toyin’s tale, manuscripts are by nature variable, whereas xylographs remain static, as is the case with the two previously mentioned, printed translations from Tibetan.

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