

# Tibetan Scholars in the Yüan Court of China Influx of the Mongols in China

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The success of Chengiz Khan (1167-1227) in conquering China facilitated his success to establish a new dynasty called the Yüan dynasty (1260-1368) to rule China for more than a century. That was political. In the cultural history of East Asia, it could bring forth a substantial effect when Buddhism integrated China, Tibet and Mongolia. This was of no less importance than the contribution of the preceding dynasties, viz., the T'ang dynasty (618-907). The Five Dynasties (907-960) and the Song dynasty (960-1279) in China. During these dynasties, Buddhism flourished under the patronage of the rulers amidst upheavals and encounter with Confucianist, Daoist and other systems of thought. The rulers of the preceding dynasties were participants of a cultural change through the ages, whereas to the Yüan rulers, Buddhism was foreign though not alien. Now we shall deal in details with the historical background of the Yüan court and the Tibetan priests patronized by the court to spread Buddhism among the Mongols.

The Mongols are referred to in the 'Secret History' (Yüan Ch'a Bi Shih) at the "Da-da (Tartars) as distinguished from the other steppe tribes or tribal unions,<sup>(1)</sup> The Yüan period marks the period of integration of Chinese with the Mongols. The Mongols with their own ideosyncracies and temperaments, manifested their adaptability in different circumstances while ruling the Chinese people. The Mongol rulers thus imbibed Chinese culture to a great extent and evidences may be cited to prove the cultural advancement of China during the Mongol rule.

Measures were adopted by the Chinese intelligentsia to safeguard their traditions and heritage inspite of the intrudence of the Mongols politically. The Yüan court also preferred to retain the merit points of the Chinese, though the latter was subjugated forcibly, such mutual understanding paved the way for the above-mentioned cultural advancement later on alien outlook towards the Mongol rulers was generated among a section of the Chinese which led to the decline of the dynasty. Thus the orthodox outlook of medieval socio-religious traits among the people of China and Mongolia continued until they came into contact with the West during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

## Invitation of Tibetan scholars to the Yüan Court

The inviting of Tibetan Buddhist priests by the Mongol rulers to preach Buddhism began during the reigns of the Grandsons of Chengiz Khan. Koden, alias Godan was the first to invite the Sakya Paṇḍita-Kun-dga-rgyal-mtshan (1182-1251) the head of the Sa-skya (tawny soil) sect,<sup>(2)</sup> Dor-ta (Docrda dargan) was sent by Koden or Godan to invite the Sakya Pandita and went to Kansu to the court of Godan in 1241 reaching the Prince's camp in 1247<sup>(3)</sup>. Sir Herbert Franke has pointed out that there exists considerable disparity in the extant versions of the letter written by Ogodai to the Sakya Paṇḍita.<sup>(4)</sup> The purpose of the invitation was to preach Buddhism to his subjects and to keep the promise of his deceased ancestors. Valuable tributes were sent along with the letter. According to Gos-lotsa-ba, Sakya Panchen (Sakya Pandita) visited the court of Godan in Kansu in 1244<sup>(5)</sup>. This incident marks an epoch of theocratic rule in China. A chronological table of the Sakya Pandita's family is given below:

Dpal-chen-Od Po		
(1150 A.D.)		
(Eldest)	(Youngest)	
Kun-dga' rgyal-mtshan (b 1182 A.D.)	Zangs tsha Bsod nams rgyal mtshan (b 1184 A.D.)	
Phyag-na (b 1239 A.D.)	Phag Pa Bla-Ma (b 1235 A.D.)	Acarya Rinchen rgyal mtshan (b 1238 A.D.)

Besides the priests of the Sakya-pa sect, scholars from the Karma-pa sect (a Tantric school of Buddhism meaning "action, service"). Kublai Khan himself personally invited Karma Pakshi, a monk of the Karma-pa sect to his court though he essentially favoured the Sakya-pa sect and Phag-pa had secured his goodwill by his talent and excellence. After Kublai Khan's reign, Tibetan preceptors of the Karma-pa sect were invited to the Mongol court and the Karma-pa sect of Tibet rose in importance in place of the Sakya sect.

## Patronization of Kublai Khan

Kublai Khan (1215-1294), successor of Godan, further established contacts with the Sakya priests by inviting the nephew of the Sakya Paṇḍita (vide table given below) called Blo-gros rgyal-mtshan alias Phag-pa (1235-1280), an expert on Buddhist doctrines of the Sakya sect and Tibetan grammar. Phag Pa not only set up a firm base for Tibetan Buddhism in China, but was also instrumental in winning the support of the Mongol rulers. He was appointed the spiritual preceptor (di-shih) of Kublai Khan, who conferred great honours upon him. As a Buddhist scholar, he provided the Mongols with a pseudo- historical legitimating theory, and also invented an alphabet for writing pre-classical Mongolian still known as the phag-pa script.

Phag-pa returned to Tibet from the Yüan court in the year 1265 and after staying there for about three years he again left for China in the year 1268.

In the year 1269 Phag-pa received instructions to invent a script for the Mongols which we have just mentioned. In 1278 he wrote a brief dogmatic treatise for Zhen Jin (1243-1285), Kublai's son and heir apparent, this book dealt with the basic creeds of the Sakya sect. The work entitled "what one should know was later translated into Chinese under the name " Zhang suo Zhih lun" by Su-pa (Chin, Sha-lo-pa 1259-1314) and included in the Chinese Buddhist Tripiṭaka, Phag-pa further accomplished the prodigious task of rendering the voluminous Tibetan canon into Mongolian together with his associates after careful comparison with the Chinese versions through the imperial court. During the reign of King Yesun Temur (1324-1328) the Tibetan Sakyapa lama Shes-rab-seng-ge translated a large number of texts into Mongolian. Among other translators were son-ston, and his other noted disciples such as Dan-Pa Aluhunsali, Shalopa, Dayipa, Kabunadasi, etc. Phag-pa returned to the Sakya monastery in 1277 at the age of 42 on the occasion of the Buddhist assembly at Chu Mig in the next year. He spent his last days in Tibet and passed away in 1280 A.D. at the age of 45.

After the death of Phagpa, two other Tibetan priests called Chos Kyi 'Od-Zer and Gyuin ston-rdo-rje dpal came to the Yüan Court. Chos-kyi-'od Zer devised a kind of script for the Mongols besides translating from Sanskrit a philosophical poem 'Bodhi carya' written by Śāntideva and writing a commentary on it. Gyuin ston-rdo rje-dpal besides being the teacher of Bu-ston Rimpoche (1290-1364) expounded the Kālacakra along with other Tibetan scholars such as Shes-rab-seng-ge, Son-ston rdo-rje gyal-mtshan (one of the translators of the Kalacakra among several others) who also translated the Kavyādarśa, Avadānā Kalpalatā and other texts into Tibetan and has brother Dpan blo-brtan Pa. The later two are considered to be the founders of philological studies in Tibet. Shes rab-

seng ge is said to have copied the Tantra section of the Bka'-'gyur and the Vinaya.

## **Spread of Buddhism in Mongolia**

It seems strange that the Buddhist attitude of service to humanity won over the cruel hearts of the Mongol rulers. Apparently the magic rituals and doctrines of the Tibetan esoterics attracted the Mongol rulers as a device for administration, and on the other hand, the Tibetan scholars considered it profitable to associate themselves with the Mongol rulers from the political point of view. During the Yüan period, many scholars from Mongolia came to China and took up the work of translating Buddhist texts into Mongolian after receiving imperial orders. Some of these were honoured with the highest religious title of "Guo-shih" (Imperial Preceptor). The Uighur script derived from the Syriac, was extensively used for translation into Mongolian. The use of this dialect for Buddhist texts became prevalent after the Uighurs founded a kingdom in the 9th century and texts in Uighur were printed in Beijing in 1330.

One of these Mongolian scholars was Kaludanasi, who was conversant with Buddhist philosophy and all the local dialects. He had studied Buddhism and Tibetan under Phag-pa at imperial orders and later took up the work of translating Sanskrit and Tibetan sūtras into Mongolian which was completed in 1294.

Another noted Mongolian scholar was Bilannashili from Kanmmla. He received the title of Guo-shih in 1331. In the year 1312 he received imperial orders to translate Buddhist texts. He translated a number of well-known sutres, such as the Leng-Yan Jing (Suraṅgama-samādhī), Da Cheng Zhuang Yan Bao Da Jing (Kāraṇḍa Vyūha sūtra) the Da Nie Pan Jing (Mahāparinirvāṇa sūtra) and others.

Aluhunsali (1245-1309) was another Mongolian scholar. He also learnt some local dialects from phagpa and translated Buddhist sūtras.

Translations of Buddhist texts continued during the reign of Emperor Buyantu Khan (Ren Zong/1312-1320) who ordered, the entire Tripiṭaka to be copied in golden letters. The Classic of Filial Piety (Xiao Jing) was also translated into Mongolian by imperial orders with a preface by the Emperor Objaitu Temur (Cheng Zong) (1295-1307). Buddhism thus spread to Mongolia by means of translations. The work of translation was completed later in the reign of Legs Idan Khutuktu Khagan (1604-1634) by numerous scholars under the guidance of Kun-dga-od-zer. Sir Charles Eliot has remarked "It looks as if the first growth of Mongolian Buddhism was part of a political system and collapsed together with it" (6).

## **Buddhism in China during the Yüan rule**

On the whole, Buddhism was greatly patronized during the Yüan dynasty. Kublai Khan favoured all religions except Daoism. Buddhism especially appealed to him as a religion that would enable him to subjugate his subjects, special emphasis was laid on the printing of the Buddhist canon. During the reign of Objeitu Temur (cheng Zong) (1295-1309), the snar-than-bstan-'gyur (Narthang Tanjur) were collected and printed from Beijing at the initiative of the Yüan court after compilation by Bu-ston Rinpoche in 1410. Various editions of the Bstan-'gyur (Tanjur) and Bka'gyur (Kanjur) were subsequently prepared. During the reign of Kublai Khan, a new collection of the Chinese Tripitaka (the ninth) was published in 1285-1287, large sums of money were expended for the purpose of printing.

Numerous Buddhist monasteries were also built during the Yüan dynasty. Large sums of money were also expended for the building of monasteries and as grants for them. These monasteries built within Beijing and outside the city between 1270 and 1354 are Dahuguo Renwang Ssu, Shengshou Wanan Ssu Dalong Xiangji Qing Ssu, Dajue Hai Ssu, Da Shou Yüan Zhong gud Ssu, and Shu Xiangssu. In the Shou An Shan Fo Ssu built in 1321, a bronze statue of the Sleeping Buddha was carved. After these monasteries were built a number of about three hundred monks are said to have been stipulated for each monastery, and large plots of land were donated for monasteries by the imperial court. A census taken at the end of the thirteenth century records over 42,000 Buddhist temples and 213,000 monks in China <sup>(7)</sup>. Injunctions were also issued for the chanting of Buddhist texts in the monasteries. The shamanistic element added to the popularity of Tibetan Buddhism. During the Yüan period, a number of politically motivated secret societies claiming connection with Buddhism also became very active such as the Maitreya society, the white cloud society and White Lotus society. Buddhist, shamanistic and confucian rituals were simultaneously performed during the Yüan dynasty.

## **Sino-Tibetan relations**

The priest and patron relationship that began with Kublai Khan and Phag-Pa, continued in the subsequent period between the Manchu Emperore and the Dalai Lama till the end of the Qing dynasty in 1911. The relationship between Goden and the Sakya Pandita has been described as that between lord and subject, while that between Kublai Khan and Phag Pa has been described as that between patron and lama by T.W.D. Shakappa.<sup>(8)</sup> The patron-lama relationship helped to develop a spiritual-temporal alliance with Tibet which has been maintained over the centuries. After the supremacy of the Sa-skya sect through the centuries, while attempting to depose the less influential sects, it finally declined with the fall of the Yüan dynasty and the installation of the Ming dynasty in 1368. The Gelugpa

(School of Pure Discipline) took the place of the sa-skya in the Ming dynasty, the name being changed by Tsong-Kha Pa from the 'Kadam sect (Teachings of Atisa) introduced by Atisa in 1039. The Ge-Lugupa or 'Virtuous order originated at the Gaden (Dga'-ldan) monastery near Lhasa set up by Tsong Kha-Pa, who was an eminent philosopher of medieval Tibet. The Gelugpa sect soon acquired supremacy over all the other sects, maintaining it for several centuries till the present day. It spread from Tibet to Mongolia, emerging as a powerful theocratic government.

While comparing the viewpoints of various Chinese and Western scholars from different sources on the impact of the Tibetan priests in the Yüan Court Sir Herbert Franke,<sup>(9)</sup> has noted that a majority of the scholars have recorded negative assessments about them. The reason was that the common people were indignant about the huge sums of money spent by the Mongol rulers in honouring the Tibetan priests and the costly rituals which these priests apparently caused the Mongol rulers to indulge in. The nationality of the priests apart from being Buddhist further aroused severe criticism from these scholars. In the opinion of Sir Herbert Franke himself who however, expresses doubts as to whether the Tibetan priests actually ruined the national economy, though he holds them partially responsible for the early down fall of the Yüan dynasty, Sir Charles Eliot also agrees with this view.<sup>(10)</sup> It may be added that without the Tibetan priests of the Yüan Court, the story of Chinese history in the medieval period would have been a totally different one.

## NOTES

- (1) "The secret History of the Mongol Dynasty" (Yüan Chao Bi Shin) Translated and Edited by Dr. Wei Kwei Sun. Published by the Department of History, Muslim University, Aligarh, with a Foreword by Professor Muhammad Habib. Pg 12.
- (2) The Sakya teachers are believed to have taken Mañjus'ri as a source of their inspiration. It is based on the Tantric Buddhist ritual of 'Marga' and 'Phala' in the fruitful path of 'Marga-phala' as enunciated by the Indian teachers Vasuputra and Virupa. Their principal deity was cakra-ṣamvara.
- (3) The Blue Annals, Part Two by George N. Roerich, Published by the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal 1949. Pg 577-78.
- (4) China under Mongol Rule Edited by John D. Langlois. Jr., Princeton University Press, Article entitled 'Tibetans in Yüan China' by Herbert Franke Pg 304 fn. no. 38.
- (5) The Blue Annals by George N. Roerich Part One Pg. 211.
- (6) Hinduism and Buddhism by Sir Charles Eliot Vol. 3 Pg. 357.
- (7) Encyclopedia of World Religions by G. T. Bettany, Bracken Books, London. Pg. 326.
- (8) Tibet-A Political History by Tsepon W.B. Shakabpa, New Haven and London. Yale University Press 1967. Pg. 71.
- (9) Same article as f.n. no. 4 Pg. 326-28
- (10) Hinduism and Buddhism by Sir Charles Eliot Vol. 3 Pg. 357.