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BUDDHISM IN MONGOLIA AFTER THE COLLAPSE

OF THE YÜAN DYNASTY

by

Sechin Jagchid

The condition of Buddhism in Mongolia from the year 1368--when Toghon-temür Khan was driven out from his capital city, Tai-tu (or Khanbaligh) by the Ming Chinese forces and retreated to Mongolia--till the year 1578--when Altan Khan of the Tümed met the Third Dalai Lama, Bsod-nams rgya-mtsho, and accepted Buddhism as the faith of himself and his people--is a very interesting problem. Most historians indicate that after the collapse of the Yüan dynasty, the Mongols were cut off from their contacts with the outside world, and that consequently all the religions in Mongolia such as Buddhism, Christianity and Islam began to decline and eventually disappeared; with Shamanism, the original belief of the Altaic nomads, regaining the prestige formerly held by Tibetan Buddhism for almost a century.

During the Yüan dynasty the high priests of the Mongolian royal house were mostly lamas of the Sa-skya-pa sect, an important sect of Tibetan Buddhism. This sect declined before the collapse of the Yüan dynasty, and its theocratic regime, which was established by the early Mongol khans, was transferred to another powerful sect, the Phag-mo-grub-pa. However, at the end of the Yüan dynasty, the post of ti-shih (帝師), the "imperial instructor," was still

occupied by the head lama of the Sa-skya-pa, although the abbots of another competing group, the Karma-pa, were also highly honored by the Mongol court. The religious differences or political struggles of these sects against each other in Tibet continued but they were all cut off from Mongolia after the retreat of Toghon-tümei Khan from China and none could continue to work actively and send teachers to Mongolia. They all changed their aims and took Yen-ching, capital of the newly established Ming dynasty, as the center for preaching their faith in the "Eastern Land" (China) or for getting the support of the Chinese emperors to strengthen their own prestige. Naturally their activities in Mongolia subsided. Moreover, the Mongols were facing a threat of Ming forces from the outside and civil war from the inside. Out in Mongolia this situation was a great hindrance to the activities of the Lamaist sects mentioned above. Even so, it is impossible to say that there was no longer a Buddhist movement in Mongolia after 1368.

Shen Tseng-chih (沈曾植) and Chang Erh-t'ien (張爾田) were the first Chinese scholars to study this problem. Their findings are discussed in their work, Meng-ku yüan-liu ch'ien-cheng (蒙古源流箋證, Some Notes on the Erdeni-yin tobči). They note:

"According to the Hsi-yü Chüan (西域傳) of the Ming Shih (明史), in the seventh year of Hung-wu (洪武), the State Instructor (國師) of Kharakorum, To-erh-chi chüeh-lieh-ssu-shih pa-tsang-pu (朵兒濟·怯烈失思巴藏卜) sent his Chief Lecturer (講主), Ju-nu wang-pu (汝奴汪卜),

to the Court to present a bronze image of the Buddha and some relics. The Shih kai (史概) also mentions: 'On the 11th year of Cheng-t'ung (正統 = 1466), Yeh-hsien (也先 = Esen) asked for a title, a silver seal and ritual instruments, but this was rejected [by the Emperor]. Evidently, the instructors of the Red sect did not disappear on the north of the desert.' (Vol. VII, 1b)

Also at the same place, Chang Erh-t'ien writes as follows: "According to the book of Hua-yi yi-yü (華夷譯語), there was a decree to recognize the monk Yi-lin-chen tsang-pu (亦憐真·藏卜) as the abbot of the Wan-shou Temple (萬壽寺) at T'ai-ning (泰寧).¹ Consequently in the beginning of the Ming dynasty, the lamas were honored among the people of the Three Garrisons (三衛, in Uriyangkha). These lamas it seemed belonged to the Red sect."²

The above-mentioned notes suggest that there were indeed activities of Tibetan lamas in Mongolia after the collapse of the Yüan dynasty. Since it is still difficult to find any record of these activities in the Mongolian materials, the author has had to depend upon Chinese records.

In an entry for the Wu-hsü (戊戌) day of the second month of the 7th year (1374) of Hung-wu (洪武 = T'ai-tsu 太祖) according to an entry in Vol. 87 in the Ming Shih-lu (明實錄):

"To-erh-chi chüeh-lieh-shih-ssu pa-tsang-pu (朵兒濟·怯烈失思·巴藏卜), the State Instructor of Ho-lin (Karakorum)

of the old Yüan court, sent his instructor Ju-nu wang-shu (汝奴汪叔) to come to the Court to present a petition, a bronze image of Buddha, a relic, a white khadagh cloth,³ one jade seal, one jade stamp, four silver seals, five bronze seals, and three tablets with golden writings which were bestowed on him by the Yüan [emperors].

Accordingly, the [Emperor] proclaimed in [his] decree to the Ministry of Rites (禮部), that the image of Buddha and the relic should be presented to a Buddhist temple, and that Ju-nu wang-shu (汝奴汪叔) should be accorded the embroidered monk gown, boots, and other necessities."

Also an entry for the Keng-ch'en (庚辰) day of the 5th month of the 7th year of Hung-wu (1374) in the above mentioned record, Vol. 89, indicates that:

"To-erh-chi chüeh-lieh-shih-ssu pa-tsang-pu, the State Instructor of Ho-lin (Karakorum) and Wang Wen-shu-nu (汪文叔奴), the Ping-chang (平章, = governor) of Kansu province arrived in the Capital (Nanking). The State Instructor presented an image of the Buddha, relics, and two horses. In a Royal decree [the Emperor] commanded that the image of Buddha and the relics be sent to the Chung-shan Temple (鐘山寺), that an embroidered monk gown be bestowed on the State Instructor and a silk gown on Wang Wen-shu-nu, and that both should be accorded housing, furniture, other necessities, including clothing

for their followers."

These records agree with the record of the Hsi-yü chuan of the Ming shih as quoted by Shen Tseng-chih and Chang Erh-t'ien. All these materials confirm that there was still a Tibetan State Instructor in Karakorum seven years after the collapse of the Yüan dynasty. However, it is difficult to know whether the surrender of the State Instructor, To-erh-chi chüeh-lieh-shih-ssu pa-tsang-pu or Rdo-rje bka-sis dpal-bzan-po to the Ming court affected the faith in Buddhism of the Mongolian ruling class. However, it is easy to understand that this treacherous action would greatly discourage the Mongols from trusting Tibetan lamas whom they greatly honored while they were in power south of the Great Wall.

An entry for the Chia-tze (甲子) day of the 12th month of the second year of Cheng-tung (正統 1437 or 1438), Ying Tsung (英宗) in Vol. 37 of the Ming shih-lu says:

"[The Emperor] bestowed the title of Tze-shan hung-hua ko-shih (慈善弘化國師, the State Instructor of Mercy, Benevolence, and Broad Teaching) on Ha-ma-la shih-li (哈馬剌失力 = Kamala-sīla or Kamala-sri), the title of Yu chüe-yi (右覺義 Right Explainer of Righteousness) in the Seng-lu ssu (僧錄司 Bureau of Religion and Monks) on Ta-tsang (大藏), and the titles of Chih-hui (指揮 = Director), Ch'ien-hu (千戶 Head of a Thousand), and Chen-fu (鎮撫 Governor) on Ta-lan t'ieh-mu-erh (荅蘭·帖木兒 = Dalan-temür) and others. Ha-ma-la-shih-li petitioned that

as the envoy of tributary missions, he has come to the Court and received bestowals several times. In order to facilitate visits to the Royal Residence he asked [the Emperor] to bestow a title on him. The Ministry of Rites reported the matter to the Emperor and received this decree. Also [the Emperor] bestowed one monks gown on Ha-ma-la shih-li, and a hat and a belt on Ta-lan lieh-mu-erh."

The event recorded here occurred seventy years after the collapse of the Yüan dynasty. It suggests that not only were there Buddhist monks or lamas living among the Oirads Mongols, but that they were also working actively for the Oirad rulers, and were involved in diplomatic affairs between the Chinese and the Mongols. This Kamala-sīla, who received the title of "State Instructor" from the Ming Emperor, probably was not a Tibetan monk but a Mongolian lama with a Buddhist name. If this were not the case, it would probably have been quite difficult for him to come to the Ming court as an envoy of the Oirad. The fact that he was given the high title of State Instructor by the Ming emperor indicates that he was in a relatively high position among the Oirads. However, the Oirad who appear in the Secret History of the Mongols almost disappeared in the Yüan Shih. This suggests that during the Yüan period their relation with the imperial court in Khanbaligh was not too intimate. Even so their leaders were still influenced by Buddhism, which was the faith of the Mongol khans. Therefore, even seventy years after

the downfall of the Yüan dynasty there were still high lamas working actively among the Oirad. This may also suggest that among their opposing groups, which were known as Ta-tan (韃靼 = Eastern Mongols) in the Ming materials, there might also be some activities of the Buddhist monks.

An entry for the Yi-yu (己酉) day of the fourth month in the summer of the eighty year of Cheng-t'ung (正統 1443) Ying Tsung in Vol. 103, of the Ming shih-lu, reports:

"Formerly, Ch'ieh-wang shih-chia (且旺失加 Tsha-dban sa-kya), the Deputy Commander (都督僉事) of the Ch'ih-chin (Chigin) Mongol Garrison (赤斤蒙古衛)⁴ sent the Director (指揮), Pa-tu-ma (把都麻 Padma) to present a letter to Jen Li (任禮)⁵, the Count of Ning-yüan (寧遠伯) and the Commander-in-chief (總兵官), to ask permission for [him and his people] to move to Yeh-k'e pu-la (也格卜剌 Yeke bulagh) to escape from the threat of the Oirads. Because the land was in the vicinity of Su-Chou (肅州, now Chiü-ch'üan酒泉 of Kansu province), the request was rejected by [Jen] Li. Afterwards, Ch'ieh-wang chia-shih reported that he was going to build a temple in the mountains of that area and asked for a donation for painting and the help of craftsmen. [The Emperor] sent this report to the Ministry of Rites, and it was discussed by the officials. The [Ministry] decided: The barbarians are people of

a different race. If the request of building a temple is granted then they will move in and live there, and it will create a problem for future days. Therefore, their report should be rejected. The Emperor approved this decision."

This record suggests that the Chigin Mongols located to the south of the Oirads still believed in Buddhism and that their chiefs were still trying to establish a temple to worship the Buddha in the 1440's.

An entry for the Keng-ch'en (庚辰) day of the first month of the 11th year of Cheng-t'ung (正統 = 1446), Ying Tsung in Vol.

137, Ming shih-lu, says:

"Yeh-hsien (也先 Esen), the Wa-la (瓦剌 = Oirad) Tai-shih (太師) reported that the head of his tributary mission, Kuan-ting kuo-shih (灌頂國師) the Ch'an-ch'üan (禪全 = Byams-chen) Lama deeply mastered the teachings of the Buddhism and ask [the Emperor] to bestow on him a [high] title, silver seal and a monks gown of golden embroidery. Also [he] asked for painted scrolls of five categories of Buddhas, rings, a thunder-bolt (杆), drums, lined jewelry covers, sea shells and other ceremonial instruments. This was sent to the Ministry of Rites for discussion. The Minister, Hu Ying (胡瑩)⁶ and other officials reported concerning this matter, that there was no precedent to follow, so they would have to

ask [the Emperor] to decide. The Emperor said, 'We always follow the regulations laid down by Our forefathers to appease the foreign barbarians. Since there is no precedent for the wrong demand of Yeh-hsien (Esen) why should We force Ourselves to grant his request? Do not give them to him.'

This record suggests that just when the Oirads were at their peak, their most powerful khan, Esen, was still worshipping the Buddha and honoring Monks. Also, this record provides the information that the lama honored by Esen had a Chinese style religious title of Kou-shih or Kuan-ting kou-shih. Esen asked the Emperor of the Ming dynasty to bestow on the monk not only a high Chinese title but also everything he needed in the performance of his rituals and mediation. Regardless of the fact that Esen's request was rejected by the Ming court, it still proves that this emissary, the Byams-chen Lama was an important man quite honored by the Oirad leader. Also this kind of record shows us that the missions which were sent to Ming court by Toghon and his son Esen, were usually headed by a lama. These facts lead us to imagine that besides these high lamas who usually acted as emissaries there might have been other lamas who did not involve themselves with politics but only practised their holy work as priests and preachers of the Law of Buddha.

Again an entry for the Hsin-yu (辛酉) day of the 11th month of the third year of Ching't'ai (景泰 = 1452), Ying-tsung in Vol. 223 (The Appendix of the Abandoned Emperor, Chen-li Wang 郕庆王,

Vol. 41) in the Ming shih-lu, it was recorded as follows:

"Yeh-hsien (Esen) again sent in a request for monk's hats and gowns, images of the Buddhas, tents, golden seals, silver bottles, and other ritual instruments for his State Instructor, San-ta shih-li (三塔失里 Gsang-bdag-Sri) and the barbarian monk, Sa-hui t'ieh-mu-erh (撒灰帖木兒 Sakhui-tēmür), and others. These were all rejected [by the Emperor]."

This record helps to substantiate the suggestion that has just been made. This data indicates that just one year before the death of Esen, 1452, there were not only a Kou-shih, or State Instructor, but there were also other honored "barbarian"--either Tibetan or Mongol--lamas among the Oirad people.

All the above mentioned materials are related to the Oirad Mongols. The only record found in Chinese materials concerning the religious situation of the Ta-tan or Eastern Mongols has already been quoted by Shen Tseng-chih and Chang Erh-t'ien in their book noted above. This data is recorded in the Hua-yi yi-yu as follows: "The monk, Yi-lin-chen Tsang-pu (Rin-chen bzan-po), is still in the post of abbot of the Wang-shu Temple of the T'ai-ning Garrison." This is only the evidence that at the beginning of the Ming dynasty there were still Buddhist monks living among the Uriyangkha people in South-eastern Mongolia. We lack materials dealing with Buddhist activities in the area after this period. Although it is impossible to suggest that the Buddhist movement in Eastern Mongolia had entirely stopped, it is possible that Buddhist activities in south-eastern Mongolia

were not so widespread as in the Oirad territory. This may be a result of their geographical position in relation to Tibet, or it might be a result of the political break between Eastern and Western Mongolia during this period. Later, Esen was overthrown by his opponent Alagh and the Oirad power declined. They began to retreat westward to the region between the Altai and T'ien-shan mountains. After this almost no record can be found in the Ming period Chinese materials. Consequently, it is impossible from this point to study the religious activities of the Oirad people.

For about a century and a quarter, from the year of Esen's death, 1453, to the year of Altan Khan's conversion to Buddhism, 1578, there is no detailed record of the religious activities of the Mongol people.⁷ It seems that Buddhist activity became very weak during this period. Therefore, Sanang Sechen, author of the Erdeni-yin tobči in recording the will of Altan Khan before his death writes:

"Formerly there was no Law of the Buddha; my ancestors had no scriptures and teachings [to follow], and but worshipped only the ongghuns and cheligis."⁸ (E. Haenisch's Ulan Bator edition, 79v - 80r)

From the records available one might suggest that after the retreat of the Yüan imperial household from Khanbaligh (Peking), the devotion to Buddhism of the Mongol khans and leaders of the Eastern Mongols, Ta-tan, decreased. They were not so zealous as the Oirad leaders. It is also suggested that among the Eastern Mongols Buddhism gradually disappeared and that Shamanism, the original faith

of the Altaic people still survived. Even so, it is still possible to find some slight evidence indicating that Buddhism, however, feeble, still exerted an influence among the Mongols.

First, the Erdeni-yin tobči and the Altan tobči record that at a great ceremonial gathering, the Third Dalai Lama preached the Law of Buddha to Altan Khan and other Mongol leaders, emphasizing the story of 'Phags-pa Lama and Khubilai Khan and depicting himself as the reincarnation of the 'Phags-pa Lama and Altan Khan as the reincarnation of Khubilai Khan.⁹ This is a good evidence to show that even as late as the 1570's the Mongols still recalled and honored the 'Phags-pa Lama, Imperial Instructor (帝師) of the great Yüan Dynasty. This may suggest that Buddhism as taught by the Sa-skyapa lamas still existed in Mongolia.

Second, the Erdeni-yin erike also records the story of Abadai Khan, who promoted Buddhism among the Khalkha tribes of Northern Mongolia, and said:

"Abadai Khan sent envoys to Ligdan Khan of the Chakhar to bring back manuscripts [of the holy scriptures] which were formerly written in the Mongolian [language] by the Sa-skyapa Pandita." (Ulan-Bator edition 89v.)

The arrival of the Sa-skyapa Pandita at the camp of Prince Kötön¹⁰ (1246-1247) was at the time of Güyüg Khan (1246-1248). This incident shows that till the time of Ligdan Khan (1604-1634) Mongolian translations of Buddhist scriptures made during the Mongol empire and the Yüan dynasty were still preserved and prized. Since these scriptures

were the translation work of the Sa-skya-pa lamas and their teaching of Buddhism, however much it may have declined, it still existed down to this time.

In general, after the collapse of the Yüan dynasty, Tibetan Buddhism continued to exist in Mongolia, and was honored and believed in especially by the Oirad Mongol leaders. However, from the year 1453 to the year 1566 or 1578, the activities of Buddhism greatly declined. Even so, it is still impossible to assert that the Buddhist movement entirely disappeared in Mongolia. It is a fact that in this period the Dge-lug-pa, or the Yellow Sect, established by Tsong-ka-pa, had not yet spread among the Mongols, and therefore, the continuation of Buddhist activity in Mongolia seems to have been carried on by the Sa-skya-pas, Karma-pas and the members of other sects of Tibetan Buddhism. Of course, the survival of the old Shamanistic faith is a fact beyond dispute.

Concerning Christianity, the Roman Catholic Church had been very active in Khanbaligh, Hangchow and other places south of the Great Wall, but it made no progress in the home land of Mongolia. It was impossible for it to compete with Nestorianism which had a long historical record in Central and North Asia. But Nestorianism also did not continue its growth to modern times. However, having a number of believers among the khatuns, generals, ministers and many other important members of the Onggud, Kereyid and Naiman tribes, it was possible for Nestorianism to continue to exert some influence even after the end of the Yüan dynasty. Consequently, some scholars

indicate that the name of a young Mongol khan, Magha-Gürgis in Mongolia,¹¹ and Ma-ku-k'e-erh-chi-ssu (馬古可兒吉思) in Chinese¹² is a Christian name, Marco Gorgis or Mar Gorgis. Recently, Prof. Hidehiro Okada has written an interesting paper on this problem, Virgin Mary in 15th Century Mongolia¹³ in which he has made many valuable suggestions.

Secondly, as for Islam, most Chinese materials refer to Batula of the Oirad (or Wa-la) as Mahmud. Besides, the name of the head of the Oirad envoys to the Ming Court in 1447 was Pir Mohammed (皮兒馬里麻).¹⁴ These facts show that there was a group of Oirad Mongols who were followers of Mohammed. Even later, just before Dayan Khan's re-unification of Mongolia, one of the powerful leaders of Western Mongolia was Ismail¹⁵ by name. These records suggest that Islam co-existed with Christian Nestorianism and Buddhism in the Shamanistic Mongol society. This stream of Islam might be the origin of the Islamic som of the Alashan Banner of Western Inner Mongolia.

NOTES

1. T'ai-ning (泰寧 or 大寧) was one of the three Uriyangkha garrisons that were established by the Ming emperor, Hung Wu, in the year 1389. The late Prof. Sei Wada made a very detailed research of these three garrisons. See Studies on the History of the Far East (Mongolia), p. 107-424.

2. Here the so-called "Red Sect" is a loose term for all sects besides the Dge-lug-pa, and does not really mean the Snying-ma-pa.

3. Khadagh is a piece of silk with Buddhist designs. It is used as a present to honor the receiver and to bring him peace and a blessing from the Buddha or heaven.

4. The Chigin Mongols (赤斤蒙古) occupied the area now called 'Yü-men (玉門) hsien and An-hsi (安西) hsien of Kansu province. It is said that the Ch'ih-chin (赤斤 = Chigin) Lake of Yü-men hsien is the place where the garrison was stationed.

5. Biography of Jen Li, Ming Shih, Vol. 155.

6. Biography of Hu Ying, Ming shih, Vol. 169.

7. Only the Erdeni-yin Tobci recorded that, in the year 1566 the Khutukhtu Sechen Khung Taiji of the Ordos tribe invaded Tibet, and that on his way home he brought back three teachers of the Law of Buddha and promoted their activities among the Mongol people.

8. The Chinese translation of ongghon and chelig is tü-shen (土神), the 'lords of earth' which means "local deities."

9. See Meng-gu yüan-liu ch'ien-cheng Vol. 7, 9a and Altan tobci (Nova), Scripta Mongolica I, Harvard-Yenching Institute, 2nd Sect., 180-185.

10. Ködön was son of Ögödei Khan and was dispatched as commander-in-chief to West China and Tibet by his father. See Yüan shih, Vol. 107, 7r. T'u Chi (屠寄) in his Meng-wu-erh shih-chi (蒙兀兒史記) Vol. 37, wrote a brief biography of him.

11. Makha or Magha Gūrgis, see Altan tobci (Nova). 2nd Sect. 151, and Chinggis-khaghan-u chidagh, 45.

12. This young khan is found in the Ta-tan chuan, Ming shih 327, 9b. and 10b. in different names as Ma-erh-k'e-erh (麻兒可兒) and Ma-ku-k'e-erh-chi-ssu (馬古可吉思).

13. Bulletin of the Institute of China Border Area Studies
No. 1. Chengchi University, Taipei, 1970.

14. Entry for Chia-chen (甲辰) of the 11th month of the 12th
year of Cheng-t'ung (正統 1447) Ying-tsung (英宗) 160, Ming
shih-lu.

15. See Chinggis khaghan-u chidagh 49v., and Ta-tan chuan of
the Ming shih 327, 13b - 14a.