

Chinggis Khan as the reincarnation of Vajrapani: the effect of Tibetan Buddhism on Mongol perceptions of their ancestors

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This paper focuses on the cult of Chinggis Khan on the basis of historical and contemporary textual sources, as well as on the basis of ethnographic observation of current practices. Chinggis Khan has been represented in different ways and through different symbols for the Mongols in different historical periods and socio-political contexts. If one looks at Chinggis Khan with a shamanic charisma (*sulde* or *suu jali* in Mongolian) described in the Mongolian earliest historiography *The Secret History of the Mongols* written in the 13th century, one would find a figure quite different from the one mentioned under the same name in the genealogical writings transmitted from the 17–18th centuries: in the later sources Chinggis Khan had become a Buddhist personage who was not only defined as a reincarnation of Vajrapani but embodied Buddhist values.

Although Buddhism was regarded as the state religion by Kubilai Khan in the Yuan dynasty, as soon as the dynasty collapsed in the 14th century it lost its privilege in the Mongolian society in which Shamanism had been enjoying great popularity at a grass-root level. Altan Khan reintroduced the religion (Gelugpa sect) into Mongolian areas in the 16th century. The Tibetan Buddhism was spread very successfully with strong support from the Mongolian native leaders. In the 17th century when Mongols were confronting the challenge from the Manchu rival, their elites, like great contemporary historian Sagang Sechin, tried to emphasize Chinggis Khan's lineage by rewriting Mongol history. Sagang Sechin of Ordos (one of Mongolian six *Tumens*, administrative and political unit at the time) reconstructed Mongol history with a Buddhistic rhetoric and narrative pattern, in his *Erdeni-yin Tobchi*, one of the main sources for the Mongolian historiography at that time.

During the Qing dynasty, Manchu rulers employed special strategies to demartialize Mongols in order to maintain their rule over the people. The propagation of Tibetan Buddhism was one of them. Although the regime allowed the cult of Chinggis Khan to remain in the Ordos, its structure and functions were modified according to principles of Tibetan Buddhism which was the hegemonic ideology in the Mongolian areas in that period of time. This significant transformation of the cult did not only include the modification of the Mongolian shamanic worship into more a Buddhist one, but also changed the scope of the participants and the origin of the sacrifice. The main body of the participants of the cult originally consisted of the members of the Mongol royal family from various parts of Mongolia and they did participate in order to settle political and social issues including power inheritance with the blessing of their great ancestor's *sulde* (Soul, charisma). During the Qing Dynasty, the main participants were the native people, at beginning the Darhads (clergy who conduct the cult for permanent mourning of Chinggis

Khan) and later the common native Ordos Mongols seeking the blessing from the soul of Chinggis Khan.

During the Republican period, the Chinese government intervened in the Mongol native cult as well as in the Buddhist religion. Especially during the World War II when the Inner Mongols were split in their political choice for dependence on Japan or China, the central government (Kuomintang) supported a proposal to move main objects of the ritual to Qinghai (Koknuur) to prevent any risk of these being seized by the Japanese. These had their own Mongolian agents who stood in a pro-Japanese line as a means to seek for independence. The cult was moved to the Kumbum monastery where a Mongolian lama performed a ceremony to restore the cult in the new environment. Many high officials including Chiang Kai-shek offered sacrifice in worship of Chinggis Khan, who was identified as a hero of the Chinese nation at that time. This very identification was an aspect of the controversy on who Chinggis Khan was.

The ritual of Chinggis Khan has been added some new dimensions in the recent decades: Chinggis Khan has become a god-like figure blessing all praying people, Mongols or non-Mongols, and the cult site has become an attractive tourist-site, in the current days when the market and money rules are penetrating every corner of social life of Inner Mongolia. Lamas from the monasteries still help in the ceremonies, participating in the whole process of the ritual.

In brief, this paper discusses the way in which Chinggis Khan has been Buddhified, especially from the 17th century onwards. Buddhism has affected the Mongolian view of their great ancestor, with other political, ideological and social factors reflecting the policy of the Qing regime toward the Mongols. This kind of process did not only happen in the dynastic period of the Manchu rulers but also in modern nation-state context. This paper gives a historical outline of how the cult of Chinggis Khan was reshaped again and again, in various political contexts, in which the Buddhist religion played an important role in transforming the function and the nature of the cult in a subtle way. Finally, the author addresses the more recent transformations of the cult reflecting the complicated interwoven relations among state, religion and market, in the construction of the ethnic identity of Mongols and of the Chinese nation as well.