

## Tibetanization and Mongolian Buddhism

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It is commonly recognized that the Mongols practice Tibetan Buddhism, or for those inclined to the hermeneutics of the lineage, the Dge-lugs-pa. Yet in both cases there is an unresolved dialectic between either an ethno-national identity or a theological orientation and an imagined national Buddhism. Thus what does it mean to “be Buddhist” if you’re Mongol, a third generation naturalized American, a lesbian and working for Microsoft in Beijing?

Of course, such an example raises the issue of transnational Tibetan Buddhism, and more specifically, the tension between modern de-nationalized Buddhism and imperial *cum* national samgha boundaries of identification. And it is not only academics who have been grappling with these issues as of late. Indeed the issue of Tibetanization, as well as modernization, has roiled the Mongolian samgha as it has tried to redefine itself, especially in a nationalist context, over the last decade. Curiously, however, this is nothing new. If anything, the history of Mongolian Buddhism has been one of grappling with the issues of transnationalism, lineage identification, accommodation and cultural transformation. The aim of this paper is therefore to juxtapose three critical periods of Mongol engagement regarding the issue of Tibetanization. By investigating the literature from the pre-Qing, mid-Qing and the 1990s, I hope to bring forth not only a clearer definition of Mongolian Buddhism vis-à-vis Tibetan Buddhism, but also what this may actually tell us about the larger issue of what it means to be Buddhist.

This is obviously a rather tall order; however, by focusing on language, it is hoped that many of these issues will be illuminated. The choice of language is obviously not arbitrary, for underlying the issue of language are modes of resistance and assertions of new narratives of not only political but also religious identification. Thus one poses the question: what is embedded in the oft noted – yet never really investigated – fact that the Mongols use Tibetan as a liturgical language? The inevitable analogy is with the Catholic use of Latin; yet if we take it one step further, keeping the work of Anderson and Hastings in mind, one must wonder: if the eclipsing of Latin led to the rise of nation-states, what would the reverse process reflect? The Manchu emperor Hung Taiji was unambiguous in his view: the Mongol adoption of Tibetan Buddhism “vitiating their cultural identity.” The emperor’s view on the implications of Tibetan Buddhism was also shared by Mongol scholars during the mid-Qing, as witnessed especially in the work of Mergen Gegen who created a new liturgical cycle in Mongolian. His plan failed and the Qing program of Tibetanization was a stunning success, so much so that Mongol Buddhist leaders today argue – perhaps counter intuitively – that they should keep Tibetan and not return to Mongolian as it had been in the pre-Qing period. Clearly, the issue of language and its attendant narratives of identification have shaped the shifting definition of Mongolian Buddhism.

Therefore, in order to begin our understanding of Mongolian Buddhism, and its transformations, we need to begin unravelling how the Mongols have understood and interpreted the process of Tibetanization. Fortunately, an abundance of material from the three periods under investigation have recently been made available: most notably the *Jewel Translucent Sutra* from the pre-Qing period; the newly published *gsung-'bum* of Mergen Gegen (Hohhot: 1999) for the mid-Qing; as well as the imperial correspondence from the "Dalai Lama archive" recently published by the Nr. 1 Historical Archive of China (Beijing: 2002). In addition to these materials, I will be relying on the large corpus of published Buddhist materials that I have collected in both Mongolia and Inner Mongolia over the last four years in order to evaluate the contemporary debate.

By providing an historical overview of the Mongol interpretation of Tibetanization, it is hoped that a more nuanced understanding of Mongolian Buddhism and its engagement with Tibet and Tibetans may appear. Such a definition grapples with the historical shifts and cultural transformations that shape any form of Buddhism, and thus may elucidate the larger issue of being Buddhist in the transnational context.