


Reorienting the Sacred and Accommodating the Secular: The *History of Buddhism in China* (rGya nag chos 'byung)

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he land of “China” occupies a marginal position in traditional Tibetan Buddhist historiography. For the early Tibetan Buddhist historians, “Indo-Tibetan Buddhism was the only religious system worth serious consideration, and Chinese Buddhism, Indian non-Buddhist religious philosophies, Bon, and Islam were dealt with in a polemical or (especially in the case of Islam) a frankly hostile fashion.”² In the eighteenth century, when more and more high lamas took sojourns or residency in China proper, especially at the Qing imperial capital, they were exposed “to the cosmopolitan world of imperial Beijing, where they had ample opportunity to meet followers of non-Buddhist religions of a wide range of ethnicities.”³ Therefore they were increasingly aware of the regional, imperial and global situations, and inclined to take a broader geopolitical frame and a more balanced religious view in their historiographical production.⁴ Not only was Christianity included,⁵ Islam mentioned,⁶ the origin of Buddhism in Korea (*ka'u li*) briefed,⁷ but also the history of Buddhism in China was given special attention and even occupied an independent volume.

Historiography not only reflects “objective events,” but also reifies subjectivity by providing “a field for the negotiation and renegotiation of identity”⁸ and a site for the production of ideology. In this article, I argue that, on the one hand, the growing sense of

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² Sweet 2006: 173–74.

³ *Ibid.*: 174.

⁴ Jackson 2006.

⁵ Sweet 2006.

⁶ Wang-Toutain 2005: 88.

⁷ mGon po skyabs 2013: 241.

⁸ Atwood 2014: 514.

“being the cosmopolitan elites” among the Tibetan Buddhist intellectuals added gravity to their rapidly expanding worldview and a new centre to their historiography. By producing sacred history and geography in China, they reoriented to the “Eastern Land” as a source of empowerment to accommodate the emerging preeminence of Qing power in the Tibetan Buddhist world. On the other hand, I argue that this “cosmopolitan identification”⁹ was accompanied by the concomitant religious, ethnic and regional identifications. By creating new ways of political legitimation and subordinating the Confucian deities, such as the War Lord Guandi,¹⁰ to the Tibetan Buddhist system, they contested the Confucian orthodoxy and negotiated with the imperial power centre to claim spiritual and intellectual superiority. To further examine this reorienting and negotiating process, I choose to investigate *The History of Buddhism in China* (*rgya nag gi yul du dam pa'i chos dar tshul gtso bor bshad pa blo gsal kun tu dga' ba'i rna rgyan ces bya ba bzhugs so*, or simply *rgya nag chos 'byung*), written by mGon po skyabs (c.1690–1750).

1. mGon po skyabs and the Cosmopolitan Textual Production

mGon po skyabs was born in a noble family of the Ujimcin Mongols, a subgroup of the Chahar Mongols in present day Inner Mongolia. In 1637 the Ujimcin Mongols surrendered to the Manchus and later mGon po skyabs' family was granted the ducal rank (*gong* 公) by the Kangxi Emperor.¹¹ mGon po skyabs inherited this title in 1692¹² and married into the lineal Manchu royal family in 1709. In 1715, due to unknown reasons, he volunteered to take military service as penalty. However, he was spared any serious punishment and instead he was only degraded from the rank of Gong to the rank of Taiji (台吉). Meanwhile he was appointed the “head of the Tibetan school (Tanggute Xue 唐古特学).”¹³ At this position, he “was responsible for

⁹ See Wang-Toutain's (2005) illustration of various scholarship of different traditions participated in shaping the politics at the imperial capital; also see the theorisation of Qing cosmopolitanism in the edited book (Hu and Elverskog 2016).

¹⁰ The widespread of the Guandi cult in various Chinese official and popular religions makes it difficult to justify Guandi as a pure and exclusive Confucian deity. Nevertheless, in this article I focus mainly on Qing's effort to Confucianise Guandi. Hence the term Confucian deity here refers to the divine bureaucracy and its associated divinities.

¹¹ Wang-Toutain 2005: 60; Mala 2006: 145; Uspensky 2008; Wuyunbilige 2009: 120.

¹² Wuyunbilige 2009: 121.

¹³ *Ibid.*: 122. Tanggute Xue was also called Xifan Xue (西番学) in some literatures. It was established in 1657 for the training of Tibetan language (Gangcuo 2010: 28).

Tibetan studies and translations of Tibetan and Mongol texts.”¹⁴ Besides Mongolian, Tibetan and Manchu language, he “had complete mastery of Chinese.”¹⁵ He called himself “the upasaka Gombojab from the Land of Winds, who speaks four languages.”¹⁶

Despite his Mongol origin and Manchu affinity, mGon po skyabs was well embedded in the Tibetan intellectual community of the time. He had frequent correspondences with Tibetan high lamas like kaH thog rig 'dzin Tshe dbang nor bu (1698–1755).¹⁷ In fact, many influential intellectuals of Tibetan Buddhism were not ethnic Tibetan according to today's classifications, such as Sum pa mkhan po Ye shes dpal 'byor (1704–1788) and lCang skya khutukhtu Rol pa'i rdo rje (1717–1786). However, they were enrolled in the Tibetan Buddhist education system, contracted master-disciple relationship with high lamas in Tibet, possessed the required language proficiency to write in Tibetan, and contributed to the development of Tibetan literature. As Pamela Crossley suggests, by retrospectively endowing historical entities with the contemporary concept of ethnicity or nationalism, we are liable to overlook identity as a process and misunderstand indigenous criteria of identity.¹⁸ In the eighteenth-century Qing Empire, the formation of cosmopolitan intellectuals and the sense of “being the ruling elites” intersected with regional, ethnic and religious variations. It created a grey zone for different actors to appropriate power through negotiating and adjusting ethnic and religious boundaries.

mGon po skyabs composed the text of the *History of Buddhism in China* at the requested of the Fifth Siregetü Khutugtu (1713–1751), as revealed in the colophon.¹⁹ As one of the most politically influential

In the imperial bureaucratic system of Qing, it belonged to Lifan Yuan (理藩院). Only those who were trained in the Tibetan language school were qualified to work for the government as translators or interpreters (Kanaoka 1992: 56). For example, in office of the imperial Resident Ministers in Lhasa, some positions were filled with the students from the Tibetan language school.

¹⁴ Mala 2006: 145.

¹⁵ Sweet 2006: 175.

¹⁶ “skad bzhi smra ba'i dge bsnyen rlung khams pa” (Uspensky 2008: 59).

¹⁷ Tshe dbang nor bu 1973: 737–46. Tshe dbang nor bu was an active diplomat of the 7th Dalai Lama in the Himalayas, as well as a renovator of Buddhist sites in Nepal, a power broker for the 12th Karmapa, and an acquaintance of lCang skya khutukhtu (Ronis 2009: 86–99).

¹⁸ Crossley 1999: 48–49.

¹⁹ There are debates on when this work was composed and published. Wang-Toutain dates it in 1735 (2005: 82); Vladimir Uspensky (2008: 61) and Fengxiao (2013: 8) point out that it was written in 1736; Japanese scholar Kanaoka Hidero points out that this work was written in 1746 (1992: 56). Blo bzang bstan 'dzin (2013: 6) as well as Sun Lin and Chos 'phel (2009: 24) argue that it was composed at the end or at least in the later period of the eighteenth century.

lamas at that time, the Fifth Siregetü Khutugtu was appointed the Chief Priest of the Yellow Temple (Huangsi 黄寺) in Beijing and the Jasak Da Lama of Köke qota by imperial order.²⁰ mGon po skyabs was one of his students. In the writing process, mGon po skyabs consulted many important Tibetan historical texts²¹ and also read extensively the relevant Chinese materials (*ma hā tsi na'i rgyal rabs kyi yig tshang*).²² The *History of Buddhism in China* “remained the main source concerning the history of China available to Tibetan readers.”²³ In the nineteenth century, the influential scholar 'Jam dbyangs mkhyen brtse (1820–1892) proofread and printed it in the prestigious printing house of *sDe dge* (*sde dge lhun grub steng du legs par bsgrubs*).²⁴

Guilaine Mala has summarised the five chapters²⁵ of the text and she concludes that “the use of a Tantric prophecy and non-Tantric arguments [was] made by an eighteenth-century Mongol historian to transform and reinterpret the history of China in the light of his own Buddhist beliefs.”²⁶ I further demonstrate in this article the ways in which mGon po skyabs and the cosmopolitan Tibetan Buddhist intellectuals at large practiced multiple identifications, contested the intellectual sovereignty of the Confucian intelligentsia, reversed the superior-inferior hierarchy, and meanwhile participated in the production of Qing political legitimacy.

2. Reproducing the Sacred Eastern Land of Mahācina

The *History of Buddhism in China* was started with the delineation of “China.” mGon po skyabs first took an etymological investigation: the Indians (*phags yul ba rnam*s) call China “*ma hā tsi na*,” in which *ma hā* means great and *tsi na* is the phonetic transcription of the Chinese word “*qin*,” the Qin Dynasty (秦朝, 221–207 BC). mGon po skyabs

²⁰ Mala 2006: 146; Ikejiri 2015. According to the study of Yoko Ikejiri, in the early eighteenth century, monks in Qinghai Region formed a close community. They took leading positions at the Qing court and connected the Tibetan cleric community and the central government.

²¹ mGon po skyabs 2013: 262, 373. Such as the *Blue Annals*, the *Origin of the Buddhist Dharma* and the *Buddhist History of India*.

²² *Ibid.*: 376; Uspensky 2008: 59; Sun and Chos 'phel 2009: 24. Such as the *Collection of Biographies of the Honorable Monks* (*bla chen rnam thar*, Gaosengzhuān 高僧传) and the *Catalogue of Chinese Buddhist Canons* (*sde snod gsum gyi dkar chag*, Zhiyuanlu 至元錄).

²³ Uspensky 2008: 61.

²⁴ mGon po skyabs 2013: 377.

²⁵ Mala 2006: 148–49.

²⁶ *Ibid.*: 164.

then introduced the Chinese territory: to the East, China reaches to the Eastern Sea; to the South, China is adjacent to Annam (*an nan*) and Champa (*tan theng*), both in present day Vietnam; the North and the West are surrounded by the Great Wall (*thang cheng*). mGon po skyabs further explained the administrative divisions of the Chinese territory: this vast land (*yul gru chen po*) was divided into thirteen provinces (*zhing*); but now with the increase of population, there are sixteen provinces.²⁷

With these historical, geographical and administrative details, mGon po skyabs obviously referred “*Ma hā tsi na*” to a concrete geopolitical entity. It significantly differed from the mythical or esoteric space “*ma hā tsi na*” occupied in previous literature. When “*Mahācina*” appeared in Indian literature of the tenth and the eleventh centuries, it implied a region or state roughly located to the north of India.²⁸ Tucci argues that as early as the seventh century the Tibetans had already known “Cina is Tsi-na and refers to a specific region adjacent to Spiti (to the northwest) and Uttarkasi (to the southeast) [of India].”²⁹ Despite Tucci’s assertion, the confusion surrounding “*Cina*” and “*Mahācina*” lingered among the Tibetans for a long time. Taranatha (1575–1634) placed “*Cina*” and “*Mahācina*” amongst a group of mythical countries in the north of Jambudvīpa on the way to the legendary Shambhala³⁰. Tibetan scholar Gendun Chopel points out that “*Mahācina*” was occasionally adopted by the Tibetans abroad to refer to Tibet.³¹

Until the mid-sixteenth century, a clear definition of “*Mahācina*” and its identification with China appeared in *A Scholar’s Feast* (*chos ’byung mkhas pa’i dga’ ston*):

The land of China is called *Mahācina*, located in the northeast of the continent of Jambudvīpa, reaching the ocean, and its territory is huge. According to the *Root Tantra of Mañjuśrī*, in the enlightened land, there is the King of Treasure. [...] the illuminating Mañjuśrī manifests as a child in this holy land, and resides in the Mount Wutai (the Five-Peak Mountain). All the Enlightened ones such as Samantabhadra reside and enjoy in the Elephant Mountain.³²

²⁷ mGon po skyabs 2013: 174.

²⁸ Cutler 1996: 43.

²⁹ Tucci 1971: 551.

³⁰ Tā ra nā tha 2008: 238.

³¹ “[I]n Ogyenpa Ngawang Gyatso’s biography, he says to a brahmin, ‘I am not a Kashmiri; I am a Tibetan coming from Mahacina.’ [...] Some people say that because, for many panditas in ancient times, the name for us, Tibet, was known as Mahacina, the references to Mahacina in the Mañjuśrīmūlatantra must refer to Tibet alone.” (Chopel et al. 2014: 356).

³² dPa’ bo gtsug lag phreng ba 2006: 711.

This narrative was possibly modeled on the story of “the King of Treasure” in China who lived for 150 years and the legend of the manifestation of Mañjuśrī as a child in China in the *Origin of the Buddhist Dharma* (*bde gshegs bstan pa'i gsal byed chos kyi 'byung gnas*).³³ However, the *Origin of the Buddhist Dharma* had not constructed the connection among *cina*, *mahācina* and China, while *A Scholar's Feast* explicitly built the connection and elaborated upon the geographical features of China. In the late seventeenth century, the Fifth Dalai Lama had a nuanced usage of the words. He used “*ma hā tsi na*” more in the sense of a political entity or territory, which often appeared in the combination “*Ma hā tsi na'i rgyal khams*” (the kingdom of *Mahācina*), while he used “*rgya nag*” more in the sense of ethnic belonging against other ethnic groups such as *hor* or *sog*.³⁴ In the *Crystal Mirror* (*grub mtha' shel gyi me long*), apparently Thu'u bkwan Blo bzang chos kyi ni ma (1737–1802) confirmed the connection between *Mahācina* and China. Under the title “*ma hā tsi na'i yul du rig byed dang bon gyi grub mtha' byung tshul*,” Thu'u bkwan introduced the history of various fields of learning and believes such as Confucianism and Daoism in “the land/territory of China;” at other places of the book he used “*rgya nag gi yul du nang pa sangs rgyas pa'i chos lugs*” to emphasise “Chinese” Buddhism vis-à-vis “Tibetan” Buddhism.³⁵

The Sanskrit etymology of *mahācina* was “discovered” in the eighteenth century. When Tshe dbang nor bu introduced the “tradition of Hwa shang from China,” he suspected that “*ma hā*” should be the Sanskrit word “great” (*chen po*), but that the origin of “*tsi na*” was not clear and the “sign” (*ri mo*) of “*tsi na*” had many different interpretations.³⁶ Intellectually well connected to Tshe dbang nor bu, mGon po skyabs could have learnt this information from the Tibetan intellectual community. It is also possible that he learnt the Sanskrit root of *mahācina* from Chinese literature. In the seventh century, both *Cina* and *Mahācina* were identified as “China”

³³ Bu ston rin chen grub 1988: 144.

³⁴ For example, “*byang na chos rgyal rigs ldan gyi zhing khams cha bsags kyi grong khyer chen po shambha la dang lha min las chad pa'i 'thab rtsod dpa' bo'i gnas hor sog gi yu / shar na 'phags pa 'jum dpul gyi zhing ri bo rtse lnga sogs ma hā tsi na'i rgyal khams mi rnams klu las chad pa rtsis dang nor gyi 'byung gnas rgya nag rnams kyi phyogs bzhi nas mdzes shing shing kai la sha'i ra bas bskor ba'i yul*” (Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho 2009: 167). It is quite obvious in this example that, “north” is in correspondence to “east,” “Shambala” to “Mahācina,” and “hor” and “sog” to “*rGya nag*.”

³⁵ Blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma 2000: 421–482. In the lan kru'u edition (1984), however, it was all put under the title “*ma hā tsi na*.”

³⁶ Tshe dbang nor bu 2006: 379.

in the *Great Tang Records on the Western Regions* (*Datang Xiyu Ji* 大唐西域记).³⁷ Nevertheless, *cina* appeared in Chinese diversely as “Qin 秦,” “Jin 晋,” “Han 汉” and “Zhina 支那.” In the mid-seventeenth century, the Jesuit missionary Martino Martini (1614–1661) traced the origin of “*cina*” to “Qin”³⁸ and it was popularised among Chinese intellectuals. mGon po skyabs was both familiar with Xuanzang’s work and the missionary work, which enabled him to relate “*tsi na*” with the Chinese word “*qin*” from their phonetic similarity.

In this sense, mGon po skyabs’ specification of *Mahācina* and *Cina* and their final identification with China was the product of Qing’s cosmopolitanism. Blo bzang chos kyi ni ma provided further explanation on this point in his *Crystal Mirror*.³⁹ When they renamed China as *Mahācina*, they relocated the “Middle Kingdom” in Buddhist cosmology. This renaming and relocating process reflected the active participation in and appropriation of Qing’s cosmopolitanism by the Tibetan intellectuals in the eighteenth century.

3. Subordinating dao Under chos

In Chinese official dynastic historiography, Chinese rulers, be them of Han or non-Han origins, were portrayed as “Sage-kings” (*shengwang* 圣王). The idea of the “Sage-king” appeared in the fourth century BC and later was theorised in Mohist texts.⁴⁰ The Confucian political theory derived the legitimacy of the “Sage-king” from the “mandate of Heaven” (*tianming* 天命) and the “*dao* (the Way)” with an emphasis on virtuous deeds and its connection with supernatural power.⁴¹ To subordinate it under the notion of the “cakravartin-

³⁷ Zhang 1977: 451–453; Shi 1972: 450.

³⁸ *Ibid.*: 449.

³⁹ Blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma 1984: 391.

⁴⁰ Brown 2013: 143–174.

⁴¹ The “mandate of Heaven” referred to the political legitimacy based on virtue instead of birth (Puett 2002: 54–60). In reality, as Sarah Allan has illustrated, the classic Chinese texts express quite conflicting ideologies of ruling by virtue and ruling by heredity. She argues that what is unique to Chinese tradition is “the idea of dynastic cycle, in which one dynasty is founded by merit and then carried on hereditarily until a depraved last king is overthrown by a good man, who then establishes a new hereditary dynasty” (Allen 2015: 16). The idea of “mandate of Heaven” also enabled the Sage-kings to become “superhuman beings whose wisdom allowed them to recognise the celestial patterns hidden in nature and bring mankind into accord with them” (Lewis 1990: 167). The core of the *dao* in Confucian political theory normally referred to “humane government” (*renzheng* 仁政) (Tu 1985: 81–92), although throughout Chinese history violence was mobilised more than virtue in order to gain power (Lewis 1990).

king,” mGon po skyabs firstly redefined the concept “*dao*” as *dbang dha’u* (*wangdao* 王道) and *paa dha’u* (*badao* 霸道). He explained that the former implies that out of virtuous (*yon tan*) and altruistic (*lhag bsam*) intentions one achieves authority over a territory, where people depend on his virtuous and altruistic rule and glorify him; the latter indicates that motivated by desire or sensual enjoyment (*’dod pa*) one achieves power through military might (*dpung stobs*), destroying and invading the others. mGon po skyabs asserted that *dao*, both as *wangdao* and *badao*, corresponded with Buddhist *dharma* (*chos*) and path (*lam*).⁴² By this, mGon po skyabs implied that the Sage-king, following either the virtuous way (*wangdao*) or the military way (*badao*), ultimately followed the Dharma, and therefore, the Chinese Son of Heaven actually was the King of Treasure:

He has many followers and strong power. He follows the Teacher extensively. He has many allies. Barbarians surrender and victories descend. [...] [He] lives long, up to 150 years, and ascends to the land of the gods. After fully mastering the essence of Dharma, he will achieve enlightenment.⁴³

By building the connection between “following the Teacher” and achieving imperial prosperity and personal longevity, mGon po skyabs changed the political legitimation of Chinese kingship from the “mandate of Heaven” to the Buddha’s blessing. More specifically, mGon po skyabs categorised Chinese rulers within the typology of the Buddhist kingship system as “*cakravartinrājās*” ruling with the power of merit (*bsod nams*). As mGon po skyabs quoted from the *bDen smra lung bstan pa’i mdo*, “*cakravartinrāja*” was one of the four types of kingship (*rgyal po rnam pa bzhi*).⁴⁴ Although *cakravartin-kingship* was adopted by Chinese Buddhists in the sixth century and “mixed with the characteristics and traditional attributes of the Son of Heaven”⁴⁵, nevertheless, “it generally seems to be of rhetorical nature and it is expressed neither in political claims nor in ritual practices”⁴⁶. The Mongolian rulers made an exception in the fourteenth century when they were directly called *cakravartin-kings*

⁴² mGon po skyabs 2013: 177.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ The four types are *cakravartinrāja* (*’khor los sgyur ba’i rgyal po*), overlord (*rgyal po chen po*), lord (*khams kyi rgyal po*), and chieftain (*rgyal phran*). (mGon po skyabs 2013: 194).

⁴⁵ Zürcher 2013: 290. For example, the Buddhist Emperor Wu of Liang (464–549) was addressed as “Emperor Bodhisattva” (*huangdi pusa* 皇帝菩薩), “Bodhisattva who Save the World” (*jiushi pusa* 救世菩薩) and Son of Heaven Bodhisattva (*pusa tianzi* 菩薩天子).

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

and cakravartin-kingship was systematised for political legitimation.⁴⁷ mGon po skyabs further placed the model of the Sage-king under that of the cakravartin-king.

mGon po skyabs applied his cakravartin-kingship to recount the political history of China, in which the legend of the Emperor Wu of Han was remodeled. Although based on *Records of the Grand Historian* (*shiji* 史记), mGon po skyabs rearranged the order of the story: the Emperor Wu of Han acquired a giant golden Buddha statue (*ston pa'i gser sku che ba zhig*) from the *hor* as tribute; the Emperor placed the statue of Buddha in the inner palace with great honor and daily offering; when the Emperor was making sacrifices on the central peak of the Five Mountains (*lhun po lnga'i ri bo dbus mar*), the auspicious phrase of "*wan su'i*" descended from the sky three times; then the Emperor killed an evil dragon in the Eastern Sea, made a sacrifice with horse and jade to stop the twenty-years long flood of the Yellow River, and expanded his power greatly with his imperial edicts (*'ja' sa*) and seals (*tham ka*) reaching the territory (*gnas pa*) of forty-thousand miles.⁴⁸

The insertion and the sequence of mGon po skyabs' story is worthy of elaboration. By inserting the tale of the golden Buddha statue in the beginning, mGon po skyabs alluded to the connection between the Emperor's Buddhist piety and his magical experiences. According to the Confucian political theory, the sacrificial ritual on the Five Mountains (*wuyue* 五岳) "symbolized the legitimacy of a dynasty."⁴⁹ Nevertheless, in mGon po skyabs' story it was overshadowed by the magical occurrence of "*wan su'i*" descending from sky. In Chinese "*wan su'i*" (*wansui* 万岁) means "long live for ten thousand years," while in mGon po skyabs' Tibetan transliteration, it faded into an empty sign of auspiciousness. Through this narrative technique, mGon po skyabs transformed the mountain sacrifice for political legitimacy and the feudal ritual to demonstrate sovereignty over territory from the Sage-king tradition into the cakravartin-king tradition, in which political legitimacy and territorial sovereignty depended on Buddha's blessing.

The second relevant instance was the Mongol-Yuan Empire. Apparently, mGon po skyabs' ethnic identification with the Mongols overlapped with his political identification with the Qing Empire and his religious identification with Tibetan Buddhism. He titled the

⁴⁷ Franke 1978: 52–54.

⁴⁸ mGon po skyabs 2013: 198–99.

⁴⁹ It was believed to be initiated by the Sage-king Shun, including every five years "sacrificing to the higher gods at his capital and sacrificing from afar to the mountains, rivers, and various spirits." It also includes an audience with the feudal lords (Puett 2002: 300–301).

Mongol-Yuan Empire as “*da’i yu’an chen po hor*,”⁵⁰ which is the combination of the Chinese phonetic “Da Yuan” (*da’i yu’an*) meaning the Great Yuan and the ethnic signifier “*chen po hor*” meaning the Great Mongolia.⁵¹ He wrote that Yuan’s territory was twice as large as Han and Tang (*mnga’ thang ni Han Thang gi skabs las nyis ’gyur gyi che la*).⁵² For political legitimacy, mGon po skyabs invented a divine origin for Genghis Khan (*jin gir*):

The family of the Genghis Khan belonged to the lineage of the God of Clear Light, like Brahma; when his mother, a beautiful widow, was mourning for her deceased husband, from the sky a light with rainbow-like hues shed on her body. With great happiness she conceived a baby and gave birth to a boy with signs of perfection.⁵³

This origin story superscripted several layers of primordial myths from different traditions. After the *Shes bya rab gsal* (*Explanation of the Knowable*) was translated into Mongolian in the seventeenth century, the Mongolian historiography of the seventeenth century, of which *Erdeni-yin Tobči* (*Precious Summery*) or *Altan Tobči* (*Golden Summery*) are examples, started to claim a genealogical succession “whereby the clan of Chinggis Khan is derived in direct lineage from the Tibetan kings.”⁵⁴ mGon po skyabs further developed this discourse to connect the Mongol ruler directly to the Indian royal lineages. This connection was openly celebrated in another work of his *yany-a-yin urusqal* (*The Branch of the Ganges*).⁵⁵ mGon po skyabs consolidated his assertion on the divine origin of the Mongolian ruler by saying that the high lamas such as the Fifth Dalai Lama also held this view.⁵⁶ As a Buddhist, mGon po skyabs highlighted the Buddhist elements in the Mongolian kingship, such as the “signs of perfection” on Genghis, which appeared also on the body of Siddhārtha Gautama Buddha at birth, as well as considering Genghis Khan as the “brother of the

⁵⁰ mGon po skyabs 2013: 206.

⁵¹ As Uspensky explains, the Tibetan ethnic names *hor* and *sog*, sometimes in combination as *hor sog*, “have a long history in Tibetan historical writings. The word *hor* is regarded as a loan word from the Chinese *hu* 胡. In ancient Tibetan texts it was used as a name of different Turkic peoples. Meanwhile, the Tibetan *sog* is regarded as a name for the Sogdians, a group of Iranian peoples who inhabited large areas of Central Asia in the first millennium AD. However, in the eighteenth century both terms were used as standard names for the Mongols” (Uspensky 2008: 59).

⁵² mGon po skyabs 2013: 206.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Franke 1978: 64; Shen 2006; Kanaoka 2007; Fengxiao 2013: 19–20.

⁵⁵ Fengxiao 2013: 61.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

Thousand Buddhas" (*sangs rgyas stong gi nu bo*).⁵⁷ Meanwhile, building on his membership of the cosmopolitan elite, mGon po skyabs blended into the Mongolian kingship the same mysterious virgin birth of Genghis Khan modeled on those of the Three Emperors of China.⁵⁸

With the model of cakravartin-kingship, mGon po skyabs turned the Han Chinese and the Mongolian rulers into cakravartin-kings and legitimated them through the political theory of Tibetan Buddhism. This theoretical frame enabled mGon po skyabs to reverse the "barbarian" image of the Mongols in Han Chinese literature and to glorify the Mongolian king as the descendent of the luminous Brahma.

4. Transferring Political Legitimacy From the Seal to Merit

The Confucian political legitimation of the Sage-king was signaled by the possession of the "Seal transmitting the State (*chuanguoxi* 传国玺)." ⁵⁹ The official dynastic historiography polished a consistent historical narrative on the authenticity of the Seal to legitimate the authority of the imperial throne. In the early Qing period, the anti-Manchu activists spread the rumor that the Manchu Emperor was illegitimate because they did not receive the authentic Seal. As a reaction, the Qianlong Emperor formulated a counter-discourse in the *Inheritance of Heirloom composed by the Emperor* (*Yuzhi Chuanbaoji* 御制传宝记), declaring that legitimation by virtue was more important than by the Seal.⁶⁰ Against this background, mGon po skyabs reconstructed the story of the Seal:

After the First Emperor of Qin took control of "all under the Heaven," and then he got it [the precious jade] and made a seal out of it. Minister Lisi wrote on the seal eight characters "shou ming yu tian ji shou yong chang" (受命于天 既寿永昌). In Tibetan, it can be paraphrased into eight words "gnam gyis bskos pas, tshe rgyun yun ring," which means regardless of whatever happens, one is guaranteed the position of the grand king through the merit one has accumulated, the life span of the king and royal lineage will continue forever steadily. [...] The so-called eternal swastika is a Bon sign but also means enlightenment or Buddhahood.⁶¹

⁵⁷ mGon po skyabs 2013: 206–207.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*: 207.

⁵⁹ Na 1970: 42–46; Li 2005: 22–23.

⁶⁰ Xiao 1989: 124.

⁶¹ mGon po skyabs 2013: 210–11.

mGon po skyabs explained the meaning of the swastika because he retitled the Seal in Tibetan as the “Precious Seal with the Swastika of Eternity” (*mi 'gyur g.yung drung rin po che'i phyag rgyar grags pa'i tham ka*). By stamping the swastika on the Seal, he also stamped Tibetan discourse on the Chinese official historiography. Moreover, when introducing the origin of the jade, he claimed to have checked with Tibetan and Uyghur (*yu gur*) records.⁶² The symbolic and textual testimony convincingly transplanted the Seal into the Tibetan religious and linguistic tradition.

More significantly, he diplomatically mistranslated the meaning of the eight Chinese characters on the Seal into eight Tibetan characters. In Chinese, it means “nominated by Heaven, the Emperor lives long and the Kingdom lasts forever.” In Tibetan, it means “nominated by Heaven, it is long-lasting.” It seems that the eight Tibetan characters corresponded to the eight Chinese characters not only in numbers but also roughly in meaning. However, mGon po skyabs connected the long-lasting life span of the emperor and the empire directly with merit instead of Heaven. As a result, the political specificity of the Chinese “*tian*” was lost in the Tibetan translation of “*gnam*.” It was a significant replacement because in Tibetan Buddhist tradition political legitimacy is more derived from merit than Heaven.⁶³ In this way, mGon po skyabs reaffirmed the conversion of the Chinese “Heavenly son” to “cakravartin-king,” and successfully turned the narrative of the Seal into the reiteration of the significance of ruling through merit to attain longevity and prosperity.

This new means of legitimation was actually a preparation of mGon po skyabs to legitimate the Qing Emperor. He argued that the

⁶² *Ibid.*: 210.

⁶³ “Heaven” is conceptualised in various ways in Tibet. In popular beliefs, the benevolent gods (*lha*) occupy the upper world of heaven, mountain spirits (*gnyen* or *btsen*) and the earth lords (*sa bdaq*) dwell in the middle zone of earth, and the human world can be connected with the “heaven” through mountains, the rope of light, and rainbow path for empowerment (Sumegi 2008: 23). It partly led to the political theory of Tibetan kings descending from the heaven (Powers 2007: 142; Tucci and Samuel 2000: 222–26). King Khri srong lde brtsan’s inscription mentioned the concept of “*gnam chos*” (law of Heaven) (Tucci and Samuel 2000: 15). The Tibetan kings were titled “*lha btsan*,” which signals some relation to the heaven. The widespread legend of “Dharma falling from the sky” (Stein 2010: 154–155, 220–29) also hints to the divine character of the heave. However, under the influence of Buddhism, “heaven” is generally considered as the celestial and formless space of higher planes for atman, buddhi, and manas; in contrast, “all under the Heaven” refers to the four lower planes, “usually reckoned as the lower mental, the astral, the etheric, and the physical” (Nath 1998: 757). Thus, compare to the systematic theorisation by Confucian scholars and the constant reiteration in Chinese historiography, the relation between Heaven, its mandate, and political legitimacy is fragmentary in Tibetan tradition.

Ming Emperor vied for the Seal with large quantities of soldiers, horses, labour and wealth, but still failed,⁶⁴ because the Seal could not be achieved by force. In contrast, he argued that Yuan received the Seal as a gift because the Mongols firmly believed in the Three Jewels. He further attributed the fall of the Mongol power to Ligdan Khan's collaboration with the Tibetan ruler of gTsang to harm the Gelug School.⁶⁵ The contrasting examples emphasised that the Seal with Swastika favored those following Tibetan Buddhism especially the Gelug School. With this premise, he started to demonstrate why Qing got the Seal without much effort: firstly, the Qing Emperor was the incarnation of Mañjuśrī; secondly, the Qing imperial court built up a patron-client relationship with the Gelug School.⁶⁶ Therefore the dharma guardian Mahakala (*srung ma gur mgon*) requested the Mongolians to submit their Seal to the Qing court.⁶⁷ Consequently, the Qing Emperor became the sovereign of all under the Heaven who turns the wheel of merit and power (*gnam 'og pa yongs la bsod nams dang stobs kyi 'khor los sgyur ba chen po'i dbang phyug*).⁶⁸

In this way, the Seal, the symbol of sovereign power deeply ingrained in Confucian political theory, was transplanted into the Buddhist theory of cakravartin-kingship. The Qing Emperor, who was denounced as illegitimate by Han Chinese anti-Manchu intellectuals, became a fully legitimate cakravartin ruler, the manifestation of Bodhisattva.

5. Taming the Chinese War Lord into a Dharma Protector

Generally in Buddhism the legends of taming foreign deities are pervasive. In Tibetan Buddhism in particular, absorbing local cults was a mission of accomplished Tantric masters. The tamed local deities, widely including *yul lha*, *gzhi bdag*, and *sa bdag*, were often assigned to the category of Dharma Protector (*chos skyong*; Skt. *dharmapālas*) due to its ambiguity in definition and variety in manifestations.⁶⁹ In the eighteenth century, the Civil Lord (*wensheng* 文圣), the founder of Confucianism, Kongzi (*kong tse 'phrul gyi rgyal po*) was turned into a lesser deity of divination in Tibetan

⁶⁴ mGon po skyabs 2013: 212.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*: 213.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*: 215.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*: 216.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*: 215.

⁶⁹ Martin 2001: 9. Nebesky-Wojkowitz (1996) demonstrates the fuzzy categorisation of the protective deities. Mills (2013: 185–89) illustrates the non-standardised monastery-based categorising system.

Buddhism.⁷⁰ Paired with the Civil Lord, the War Lord (*wusheng* 武圣), Guandi (关帝) in Chinese, or Ku'an lo'u ye in Tibetan, underwent similar transformation:

In China, the grand Dharma protector called Ku'an lo'u ye who is in total charge of religious and governmental affairs, was bound with a vow by this monk [Ye shes blo gros]. [Ku'an lo'u ye] took the position of a high military officer of the Great Han Dynasty when it was declining. He ran out of power and fell into the hands of the enemy. Like the great world protector King Ashoka, who with deep internal sorrow, suddenly passed away and turned into a water dragon, [Ku'an lo'u ye] generally did not commit any mistake in his thoughts and deeds; only seized by continuous hatred, he died and turned into a snake (*zhing skyong gi klu*) for four hundred years. [...] The master asked the reason, gave [the snake] a Dharma teaching, conferred on [the snake] the five vows of a lay devotee, and appointed him as the Dharma protector. Then he became a Dharma protector in charge of the harmonious running of the political and religious affairs according to the Dharma, and he was fair in judging good from bad. He followed Wan cheng kung cu (*wencheng gongzhu* 文成公主, c.a. 623–80) to Tibet. rDzong btsan shan pa⁷¹ and the famous Ge sar military king are all him [his manifestations].⁷²

Ku'an lo'u ye was the phonetic transliteration of Guan Laoye (关老爷). *Laoye* in Chinese normally was used as honorary title addressing governmental officials. Thus Guan Laoye, meaning Officer Guan, highlighted the position of War Lord Guan Yu (关羽 162–220) in the celestial bureaucracy. Guan Yu, with courtesy name Guan Yunchang (关云长), was a military general in the period of the Three Kingdoms and is widely known for his bravery and loyalty. The virtue of loyalty matched well with the Confucian ethics of being loyal to the sovereign. Thus Guandi cult was officially promoted. By the sixteenth century, the Wanli Emperor of Ming Dynasty (r.1572–620) elevated Guan Yu to the position of *di* (帝, emperor)—“Sage Emperor Guan the Great God Who Subdues Demons of the Three Realms and

⁷⁰ Lessing 1957: 111; Tseng and Lin: 2007. Ferdinand D. Lessing, from the prayer (*Kong tse gsol mchod hadod yon sprin spung*), discors that Confucius is portrayed as having “two faces and two hands in which he holds certain symbols and makes the symbolic gestures of giving protection. His headgear and other ornaments are described all in keeping with the rules governing the appearance of other Lamaist deities” (1957: 111). This image appears similar to the typical image of Dharma protector.

⁷¹ It possibly refers to Grib rDzong btsan who was said to be “a present from the Chinese princess Wen-cheng” (Hazod 2007: 573–74) and one of the many manifestations of Guandi in Tibet (*Ibid.*: 574, n. 7).

⁷² mGon po skyabs 2013: 268–69.

Whose Awe Spreads Far and Moves Heaven" (*Sanjiefumo Dashen Weiyuanzhentian Zun Guansheng Dijun* 三界伏魔大神威遠震天尊關聖帝君).⁷³ The Ming army brought Guandi cult to Korea and the Korean state sacrificial system incorporated Guandi in the seventeenth century.⁷⁴ The Ming court also spread the Guandi cult among the Mongols and Manchus.⁷⁵

In 1652, the Shunzhi Emperor (r.1644–61) reissued the title of *di* to Guandi.⁷⁶ The Qing court invested "a massive effort to Confucianise Guandi" through compiling the hagiography of Guandi.⁷⁷ In the eighteenth century, court iconography and rites explicitly featured the presence of Guandi.⁷⁸ The promotion of the Guandi cult was also mobilised at local levels. From the mid-eighteenth century, a Guandi Temple (Wumiao 武廟 or Temple of Military Culture) was established in every county capital under the management of the bureaucratic system and sacrifices were performed to Guandi twice a year throughout the empire.⁷⁹ In popular religion, Guandi was worshiped as one of the Daoist Trinity (Sansheng 三聖).⁸⁰

Ironically, Guandi, the great god who subdues demons, an imperial deity of high rank and wide popularity, was anonymised by mGon po skyabs as Ku'an lo'u ye, which does not mean anything in Tibetan. mGon po skyabs then re-identified Guandi as a Dharma protector (*chos skyong*). By drawing a similarity between Ku'an lo'u ye and King Ashoka, mGon po skyabs was able to explain away the "ethnic origins" of Dharma protectors. According to mGon po skyabs, Ku'an lo'u ye was tamed by a master (*slob dpon*) called Ye shes blo gros, who is the Chinese Zen master Zhiyi 智顓 (538–597), or Zhizhe Dashi (智者大师).⁸¹ By translating Zhiyi into Ye shes blo gros, both meaning "wisdom," the story was tainted of Tibetan elements. The story of "Buddhist monk that subdues the snake" has been

⁷³ Lu 2002: 95.

⁷⁴ Juyinwo 2013.

⁷⁵ Duara 1988: 783. Before the Manchus ascended to power, the Guandi cult had already been promoted by the Ming Dynasty in Manchuria and known to the Manchus. In 1650, shortly after the Manchus took over the imperial capital of Beijing and assumed the dynastic title of Qing, with the support of the Manchu royal house, the novel *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (*Sanguo Yanyi* 三国演义) was translated into Mongolian and Manchu languages (FitzHerbert 2015: 3; Crossley 1999: 244). By the late seventeenth century, the Guandi cult had already been so widely spread that the banner soldiers carried with them the image of Guandi to the frontier battlefield for blessing (di Cosmo 2007: 52).

⁷⁶ "Great Saintly Emperor Guan (忠义神武关圣大帝)" (Li 1986: 454)

⁷⁷ Duara 1988: 784.

⁷⁸ Crossley 1999: 244.

⁷⁹ Duara 1988: 785, 784.

⁸⁰ You 2010: 222.

⁸¹ Hurvitz 1963: 100–182; Buswell and Lopez 2013: 911–912.

standardised and well documented for Indian Buddhism.⁸² It “became the standard Buddhist approach to dealing with local gods.”⁸³ It was applied to the conversion of Guan Yu into a Dharma protector in the *Buddhist Patriarchs* (*Fozu tongji* 佛祖统纪) composed by Zhipan (志磐, ca. 1195–74).⁸⁴ mGon po skyabs listed the *Buddhist Patriarchs* as a reference, so he probably borrowed the story from Zhipan. Nevertheless, mGon po skyabs’ creatively connected Ku’an lo’u ye with Tibet. First, portraying Ku’an lo’u ye as being seized by the strong emotion of hatred to match the customary iconography of the Tibetan Dharma protectors such as King Gesar⁸⁵. Second, Tang Princess Wencheng, a symbol of the Chinese-Tibetan connection, was taken as the transition.

In fact, it was not accidental that mGon po skyabs could rapidly position Guandi in the Tibetan pantheon. The merging process of the cult of Nurgaci, Guandi, Gesar and Vaisravana had taken place at the Qing court at that time.⁸⁶ ICang skya had correspondences with the 6th Panchen Lama, “featuring the identification of Kuan-ti—Chinese god of war and patron of the dynasty—with the Tibetan warrior gods, and the epic hero Gesar.”⁸⁷ The 6th Panchen Lama dedicated various prayers to “*rgya yul gyi gzhi bdag*,” the Chinese deity Guandi.⁸⁸ The collective effort of the cosmopolitan high lamas transformed Guandi, one of the highest deities of China, into Ku’an lo’u ye, tamed into a Dharma protector, and integrated into the heavenly bureaucracy of Tibetan Buddhism as a lesser deity.

6. Conclusion: Contested Intellectual Sovereignty and Multiple Identities

This article illustrates the ways in which mGon po skyabs reoriented to the “Eastern Land of *Mahācina*” for empowerment through projecting a sacred landscape onto the land of China and inventing new sites of pilgrimage in China proper. This empowerment was both religious and political. It granted legitimacy to mGon po skyabs and the Tibetan Buddhist intellectual community. mGon po skyabs

⁸² Faure 1996: 156.

⁸³ Hansen 1993: 78.

⁸⁴ Duara 1988: 779.

⁸⁵ “Gesar’s typical iconography depicts him clothed in metal armor, [...] and wears boots and a helmet festooned with colourful flags. He rides a white wild donkey, while holding in his left hand a bowl of jewels and in his right, a weapon such as a pear or dagger.” (Kerin 2015: 49).

⁸⁶ Crossley 1999: 245.

⁸⁷ Stein 1983: 88–89.

⁸⁸ dPal ldan ye shes 199?: 740–85.

negotiated intellectual sovereignty with the Confucian orthodoxy by overlaying the Confucian political theory of the Sage-king with the Buddhist theory of the cakravartin-king as well as by converting the Chinese supreme War Lord into a lesser Dharma protector. In this process, mGon po skyabs emphasised the legitimacy and the divine origin of the Mongol rulers. Meanwhile, he highlighted the significance of contracting patron-priest relationships between the Qing emperor and the Gelug School. Therefore, mGon po skyabs played out his multiple identifications as a member of the cosmopolitan elite, a Qing subject, a Mongolian noble man, and a Tibetan Buddhist.

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