

VLADIMIR USPENSKY

**The Status of Tibet In the Seventeenth
– Early Eighteenth Centuries: A Mongolian Perspective**

Abstract

The conquests of Gushi Khan (1582–1655), who belonged to the Khoshut (Modern Mong. Khoshuud) tribe of the Western Mongols, led to the creation of a new state which included the whole of Tibet and Kuku Nor (Qinghai). His military campaigns brought about the supremacy of the Gelugpa School in Tibet and established, as can be determined from a later perspective, the rule of the Dalai Lamas. This coincided with the creation of the Manchu state whose rulers became emperors of China in 1644. The visit of the Fifth Dalai Lama to Beijing in 1653 and granting of titles by the emperor to the Dalai Lama and Gushi Khan was an act of mutual recognition of the conquests by both sides. The consolidation and expansion of the Qing empire and the lack of unity among the Western Mongols resulted in the end of Khoshut rule in Tibet.

Keywords: Tibet, Dalai Lama, Mongols, nomads, China, Oirads, 17th century

The seventeenth century was a turbulent and eventful time in the Far East and Inner Asia. As a result of fighting between different competing forces the whole political landscape of China and neighbouring countries was reshaped. Despite being a distant and mountainous land Tibet was nevertheless profoundly involved in the struggle and, in many cases, its leaders acted as politicians of utmost importance.

Tibet had not acted as a serious military force since the collapse of the Tibetan empire in the mid-ninth century. However the lack of military strength was largely compensated by the spiritual authority of the Tibetan Buddhist clergy. The Mongol Yuan dynasty supported Tibetan Buddhism not only in Tibet but throughout the whole empire. Even after the collapse of the Mongol rule in China in 1368, the Buddhist clergy of Tibet exercised more and more influence on both religious and temporal matters and were in

a position to represent the whole of Tibet. In the second half of the sixteenth century and in the early seventeenth century Tibetan Buddhism expanded to the north and eastwards to Mongolia and to Manchuria. Since that time Tibetan Buddhism has become a source of spiritual guidance for not only the Tibetans themselves but for all Mongolian peoples binding them together into a vast cultural area.

The Mongols of that time occupied very vast territories and did not form a political entity though their different groups regarded themselves as belonging to one Mongol world. These different groups of Mongols were related in a different way to the resurgent Manchu power in the early seventeenth century. They can be grouped into four large factions:

1. Eastern Southern (Inner) Mongolia;
2. Southern (Inner) Mongolia centered around Chakhar;
3. Northern (Khalkha) Mongolia;
4. Western Mongols (the Oirads) traditionally subdivided into four groups.¹

The Western Mongols who dominated Mongolian politics in the first half of the fifteenth century showed a new energetic push in the early seventeenth century. Moving to new territories and controlling neighbouring peoples was the essence of their activities. It was at that time that a group of the Oirads moved as far as the lower reaches of the River Volga in southern European Russia and settled there, while their other groups established their control over much of the territories later known as “Chinese Turkestan” and the whole of Tibet. The Jungars, a major group of the Western Mongols, were for a long time regarded by the Manchu rulers of China as their principal enemies.

The activities and conquests of Gushi Khan (1582–1655) of the Khoshut tribe significantly influenced the situation. His panegyric biographies are found in the works on history by several Gelugpa authors;² they originate to a large extent from the “History of Tibet”³ written by the Fifth Dalai Lama during Gushi Khan’s lifetime. In the studies on the history of this period Gushi Khan is overshadowed by his famous protégé – the Fifth Dalai Lama, and he is mostly known as the conqueror of Tibet who established the Gelugpa supremacy. However, his activities can only be understood within a general framework of the events and conflicting intentions of the different forces. Gushi Khan’s name was Töröbaikhu and home pastures were in Jungaria. The Khoshuts whose rulers traced their descent from Khabutu Khasar, the younger brother of Chinggis Khan, were said to have been a part of the eastern Khorchin Mongols who were captured and relocated westwards by Esen Taishi (d. 1455).⁴ According to Tibetan historians, since his youth Töröbaikhu demonstrated courage and cleverness. Having settled an imminent military conflict between the Oyrads and the Khalkha Mongols he received an honorary title Gushi Khan (from Chin. *guo shi* 國師 “state preceptor”).⁵

¹ For a detailed information on different groups of the Western Mongols see Okada 1987: 193–209.

² For example, see Ho-Chin Yang 1969: 34–40.

³ Ahmad 2008; Martin 1997: 107–108, No. 222.

⁴ Qurča, Čang Ming 2001: 103–104.

⁵ Ahmad 2008: 151.

Since the early 1630s Gushi Khan was getting involved in the affairs of Kuku Nor and Tibet. It should be noted that this coincided with the final stage of the fighting of the Manchus against Ligdan Khan (1592–1634), the last legitimate all-Mongol ruler. This coincidence could not have been inconsequential. The genealogical link between Gushi Khan and the Eastern Mongolian rulers who supported the Manchus rather than Ligdan Khan has been treated in a separate article.⁶ The defeated Ligdan Khan moved in the direction of Kuku Nor which was occupied by his supporter Chogtu Taiji (1581–1637). However, on the way he died from smallpox.

Several Mongol rulers participated in the internal struggle in Tibet (traditionally described as a fighting between the “Red Hat” Kagyu-Karmapa and “Yellow Hat” Gelugpa School). Quite predictably the pro-Manchu forces (Gushi Khan) supported the Gelugpa while anti-Manchu forces (Ligdan Khan and Chogtu Taiji) supported their opponents. Having defeated Chogtu Taiji in 1637 Gushi Khan established his firm rule in the Kuku Nor area, relocated his subjects from Jungaria there and moved his army to Tibet.⁷ By 1642 all opponents of the Gelugpa School had been crushed. This led to its supremacy in Tibet and to the establishment, as can be determined from a later perspective, of the rule of the Dalai Lamas.

For his military exploits in favour of the Gelugpa School Gushi Khan received the title “Dharmaraja, upholder of Religion” (Tib. *bsTan-'dzin chos-rgyal*; Mong. *Šasin-i bariγči nom-un qayan*) from the Fifth Dalai Lama. He used this title in his correspondence with the Manchu rulers, and this title was acknowledged by them.⁸

The spiritual authority of the Dalai Lamas to grant titles to secular rulers had been first acknowledged by the famous Altan Khan (1507–1582) of the Tümed tribe who was the person who introduced the title “Dalai Lama”. He himself received the title Sechen Khan Cakravartin.⁹ Moreover, in Khalkha Mongolia there did not exist the title of “Khan” (*qayan*). It was first given in 1586 by the Third Dalai Lama to Abatai (1554–1588) who became an active propagator of Buddhism in Khalkha Mongolia. The Manchu emperors later recognized this title.¹⁰

The negotiations concerning the invitation of the Dalai Lama to the imperial court by the Manchus and different Mongol leaders started immediately after the promulgation of the Qing dynasty in 1636.¹¹ The first Tibetan mission sent by the victorious Dalai Lama and Panchen Lama arrived in 1642 at Mukden (Shengjing 盛京), the capital of the Manchu Qing empire at that time. Nobody could predict the collapse of the Ming dynasty in the following two years; however, the fact that the Tibetan embassy was sent not to

⁶ Uspensky 2012: 233–234.

⁷ Ho-Chin Yang 1969: 37.

⁸ Mongolian Documents I: 378; interesting enough is that in this document dated 1642 Gūüsi *noyan* is corrected to Gūüsi *qayan*.

⁹ Tsendina 1999: 61.

¹⁰ Veit 1990: 27. For a detailed table of the titles bestowed by the Dalai Lamas upon various people see Ishihama Yumiko 1992: 503–505.

¹¹ Mongolian Documents I: 191.

the Chinese Ming ruler but to the Manchu Qing ruler was not only a highly symbolic gesture but, more importantly, a recognition of the Manchu dynasty as the only legitimate government in the areas both to the north and to the south of the Great Wall. Needless to say that it was Gushi Khan who was behind this attitude of the Gelugpa hierarchs.

The visit to Beijing by the Fifth Dalai Lama finally took place in 1652–1653. There is no deficiency in scholarly works discussing the true nature and the meaning of this event. This visit seems to have been an act of mutual recognition by the Manchu emperor and the Dalai Lama – who had the backing of Gushi Khan – of the global political and religious changes which occurred in the vast area of the Far East and Inner Asia during the short period from 1634 to 1644. The emperor confirmed the legitimacy of Gushi Khan's actions in Tibet and the superior position of the Gelugpa School whose rule he had established there. The emperor did it in a traditional Chinese fashion by conferring titles and granting seals. These titles have been translated and explained. The Dalai Lama's title was as follows: "Superior benevolent and happy Buddha of the Western Land, who oversees Buddha's Teaching in the world, the omniscient Vajradhara Dalai Lama".¹²

At the same time Gushi Khan received from the emperor the following title: "The Perceptive and Intelligent Guši Khan, who acts in accordance with Refinement and Righteousness".¹³

It is obvious that at the time of Dalai Lama's visit and during the lifetime of Gushi Khan Tibet was a dependency of the Khoshut Mongols. But the Khoshut Mongols as well as other Western Mongol tribes (the Oirad) were at that time independent from the Qing empire. This was officially acknowledged by the emperor Hong Taiji in 1641 in his decree demanding that the Mongols who escaped to the territory of Ming China should return and become subjects of the Manchu Qing Empire: "With the assistance of Heaven I brought under my rule all Mongol states except for the Oirads [lit.: 'located closer [to us] than the Oyrads'], and [also] Korea. At present only China remains" (*Tngri-yin ibegel-iyer: bi ögeled oyirad ulus-ača inayši qamuy mongyol ulus kiged: solongγ-a ulus bügüde-yi oruyulba: edüge γayca kitad ulus bui j̄-a*).¹⁴

According to Tibetan sources Gushi Khan gave Tibet to the Dalai Lama as a religious gift. However, such an evaluation of these events cannot be regarded as an exhaustive explanation. A new state created by Gushi Khan included the whole Kuku Nor area as well as all of Tibet, and even some parts of northern India. The whole of the so-called "Cultural Tibet" came under his rule (except for Bhutan). Gushi Khan and his successors took under their control the trade between China and Tibet, and the taxes which they collected largely contributed to the well-being of the new state.¹⁵

¹² Ahmad 1970: 184–185.

¹³ Ibid.: 185.

¹⁴ Mongolian Documents III: 309–311. The ethnic name *ögeled oyirad* is translated here just as "the Oirads" because in the seventeenth century and later "the name *Ölöd* came to be used in the almost same meaning as *Oyirad*" [Okada 1987: 211].

¹⁵ Wang Cai Huwa 2011: 160–162

Gushi Khan had ten sons and in a traditional Mongolian fashion he placed his younger son Dashi (< Tib. bKra-shis) closer to his homeland while the eldest son Dayan became the ruler of the most distant part of his domain, i.e. Tibet. This was a typical Mongolian nomadic custom: to regard the lands and countries controlled as a common property of the ruling clan. The elder sons were allotted the most distant lands while the youngest one became the keeper of the family fireplace.

The most representative precedent was the fact that the Mongol World Empire was divided between the four sons of Chinggis Khan in the following way: the elder son Jochi received the distant lands in Europe while the youngest son Tolui received Mongolia proper as his domain. The *ulus* of another son Chagatai occupied the territory of modern Central Asia, while the fourth son Ögedei was elected as the Great Khan.

However, after the death of Gushi Khan in 1655 his immediate successors were removed from exercising real power in Tibet until almost the end of the seventeenth century. The “Great” Fifth Dalai Lama tried to maintain a *de facto* Tibetan independence being surrounded by much more powerful neighbours. Through his able policy the Fifth Dalai Lama converted his position of the supreme religious leader of Tibetan Buddhism into a political position of the utmost importance. This was noticeably demonstrated by the long-lasting conflict between the Kangxi emperor and Galdan Boshogtu Khan (1644–1697) of the Jungars.

Nevertheless, the Dalai Lama was assigned responsibility for religious matters. This fact is reflected in the negotiations over border issues as the Qing empire was expanding westwards. The emperor complained to the Dalai Lama in his letter dated 1666 that the local rulers of Kuku Nor refused to negotiate with imperial envoys saying: “If you came [to talk about] religious matters, discuss them with the Dalai Lama; if you came [to talk about] political matters, discuss them with Očir Khan” (*šasin-u tula irebesü: dalai blam-a-luy-a kelelče:: törü-yin tula irebesü: včir qayan-luy-a kelelče...*).¹⁶

The consolidation and expansion of the Qing empire was changing the power balance and the role of the Khoshut rulers. The annexation of the Khalkha Mongolia in 1691 and the final defeat of Galdan Boshogtu Khan in 1696 caused Khoshut princes of Kuku Nor to pay a tributary visit to the Kangxi emperor in 1698 and to receive Manchu-style titles from the emperor.¹⁷ A more ambitious Khoshut ruler Lhabzang (Lajang) Khan easily resumed his authority as a supreme ruler of Tibet. The execution of the regent Sangye Gyatso in 1705, the dethronement of the Sixth Dalai Lama Tsangyang Gyatso (1683–1706), and the installation of the Dalai Lama of his choice did not receive the approval of the Tibetans but were much praised and supported by the Kangxi emperor. In 1709 he sent to Tibet his representative with a task to “assist” Lhabzang Khan to manage Tibetan affairs. This was the first Qing administrator to reside in Tibet.

It seems that the reason for the hostile attitude of Lhabzang Khan towards the Sixth Dalai Lama was not only the inadequate behavior of the latter and his desire to lead

¹⁶ Mongolian Documents VII: 82.

¹⁷ Ho-Chin Yang 1969: 43.

a secular life rather than become a fully ordained monk. Rather, his hostility came about when he discovered that the regent, Sangye Gyatso, did not believe that the descendants of Gushi Khan were automatically entitled to the position of protectors of Buddhism in Tibet. That is why Lhabzang Khan installed a Dalai Lama of his choice and even persuaded the Kangxi emperor and the Panchen Lama to approve his actions.

The Jungar invasion in Tibet and the murder of Lhabzang Khan in 1717 caused the Kangxi emperor to launch a military expedition to drive the Jungars out of Tibet. The armies which marched to Tibet were joined by the Mongol chieftains, especially the Khoshut Mongols who were keeping captive the young Dalai Lama who was accepted by all Tibetans. By supporting the alternative Dalai Lama Lhabzang Khan's relatives demonstrated their disapproval of his authoritarian policy.

The year 1720 – when the Manchu army came to Lhasa and enthroned the new Dalai Lama in the Potala Palace – is regarded by traditional Tibetan and Mongolian historiography as the date of the establishment of Qing rule over Tibet. Though the emperor invested the participants of this campaign with rich gifts and high titles, not all Mongolian chieftains were satisfied with this. Some of them claimed that the emperor promised them that someone from the descendants of Gushi Khan would be chosen as the “King of Tibet”. But in Lhasa the Khoshut Mongols chieftains found themselves on the lowest position after the Manchu and Tibetan officials. When the Kangxi emperor died in 1723 his successor Yongzheng decided to withdraw troops from Tibet for financial reasons. This prompted one of the Khoshut chieftains, Lobsang Danjin to relinquish his Manchu title and demand the same from his associates and to make an attempt to unify the Khoshut Mongols with the aim to restore their control over Tibet. Eventually he attacked a Chinese garrison and received no reinforcement from the Jungars. The retaliatory action taken by the Manchu-Chinese troops resulted not only in the military defeat of Lobsang Danjin's troops but also led to the destruction of Buddhist monasteries and mass killings of the monks, some of them being very prominent. Though later the Yongzheng emperor ordered the rebuilding of these monasteries, the results of this “pacification” of Qinghai were accepted and the Khoshut Mongol's right to rule over Tibet was not recognized anymore.¹⁸

Conclusions

The relations between the Khoshut Mongols and Tibet demonstrate a special case in the general pattern of relations between a nomadic and a sedentary society. The general case is that nomadic societies cannot exist for a long time isolated from the sedentary societies because for their living they need products they can obtain from their sedentary neighbours only in exchange for cattle or by robbery. Throughout their history nomads

¹⁸ On these events see Ho-Chin Yang 1969: 47–50; Katō Naoto 1993.

made little distinction between these two ways. Histories of China and Russia provide extensive material for illustrating such relations.

With Tibet it was a somewhat different case. Due to its natural conditions the Tibetan economy simply could not produce hardly any products for which there was a strong demand from Mongol nomads. It could produce only spiritual products and was rich only in one thing – the Buddhist Dharma. This is especially true about Central Tibet. When the dispute about the legitimate Dalai Lama reached intense agitation in the last years of Lhabzang Khan, the dwindling amount of Mongolian donations caused immediate anxiety in the major Tibetan monasteries.¹⁹ However since religion was a factor of a special importance in Inner Asia, religious domination could have become a source of political and even economic power. This was well understood by the Manchu emperors who adopted the role of defenders of Buddhism from the descendants of Gushi Khan.

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