

Tibet and the Mongols: a sacred historical union

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Abstract: The relationship between the Sacred Federation of Tibet and the Mongol Empire is a compelling chapter in the history of Asia. This article explores the intricate geopolitical and diplomatic interactions between Tibet, under the influence of its spiritual leadership, and the Mongol Empire, which sought to expand its territorial control. This paper examines the political, cultural, and religious dynamics between these two entities, focusing on the period of Mongol dominance in the 13th and 14th centuries. Through an analysis of historical documents and secondary sources, the study outlines the factors that shaped their relationship, including the influence of religion, the role of Tibetan Buddhism, and the Mongol's political strategies. It also delves into the broader geopolitical implications of their cooperation and the lasting impacts of this period on the region.

Keywords: Sacred Federation of Tibet, Mongol Empire, Tibet, geopolitical relations, Mongolian expansion, Sino-Tibetan relations, historical diplomacy, empire-building.

Introduction: The historical relationship between the Sacred Federation of Tibet and the Mongol Empire, particularly during the 13th and 14th centuries, is a fascinating intersection of spirituality, politics, and empire-building. This period represents a critical juncture in both Tibetan and Mongol history, characterized by the Mongols' expansion across Asia and Tibet's unique position as a spiritually influential, yet politically distinct, region. While the Mongol Empire, under the leadership of Genghis Khan and later Kublai Khan, sought to consolidate its power across vast territories, Tibet remained an area of both strategic and cultural importance that the Mongols carefully navigated.

The Mongol Empire, at its height, was the largest contiguous land empire in history, stretching across Central Asia, East Asia, and into Eastern Europe. The Mongols' empire-building strategy was multifaceted: they were not only conquerors but also pragmatic rulers who used religious patronage as a means of consolidating their control. In this context, Tibetan Buddhism, which was gaining prominence across Asia at the time, became a powerful political tool for the Mongols. The Mongol rulers, particularly Kublai Khan, saw Tibetan Buddhism as a way to legitimize their rule, particularly in regions where they sought to integrate different cultural and religious groups under their vast

empire.

On the other hand, Tibet was a deeply spiritual region, known for its monastic governance and the prominence of its religious leaders. The Tibetan people were led by various religious figures who wielded significant political power, with the lama or spiritual leader often also serving as the political leader. The most notable of these were the Sakya lamas, who, during the Mongol period, would become central figures in the political and religious landscape of Tibet.

The engagement between the Mongols and the Tibetan religious leaders was not only a matter of political strategy but also of religious collaboration. The Mongols recognized the authority of Tibetan religious figures, which allowed them to gain the support of Tibetans and to present themselves as protectors of Tibetan Buddhism. In exchange, the Tibetan religious leaders gained political backing from the Mongols, which helped to safeguard Tibet from external threats, particularly from the Chinese Song Dynasty and other neighboring regions. This relationship, though largely cordial, also had underlying tensions as both parties navigated the complexities of power, influence, and religious autonomy.

This historical interaction, often referred to as the establishment of the "Sacred Federation of Tibet," had profound implications for the region's political and

religious development. It allowed Tibet to retain a significant degree of autonomy while integrating into the broader Mongol Empire. Additionally, it marked a pivotal moment in the spread of Tibetan Buddhism across the Mongol Empire, influencing both Mongolian and Chinese societies. The relationship also set the stage for future political dynamics, especially in the context of the Chinese Empire's long-standing interest in Tibet.

In examining this period, it becomes clear that the relationship between Tibet and the Mongols was based on a delicate balance of religious influence and political strategy. The Mongols sought religious legitimacy, while the Tibetan religious leaders sought protection and political leverage. The legacy of this relationship continues to influence the geopolitical and cultural landscapes of Tibet, China, and Mongolia to this day. By exploring the political, religious, and cultural dimensions of the Mongol-Tibetan relationship, we gain insights into how empire-building and religious diplomacy can shape historical trajectories, especially in regions with complex political and spiritual identities.

The Mongol Empire, under the leadership of Genghis Khan and his successors, became one of the largest empires in history, stretching across vast territories from East Asia to Eastern Europe. Tibet, on the other hand, had long been a region marked by its spiritual and political independence, primarily governed by its monastic leaders. However, the relationship between Tibet and the Mongols during the 13th and 14th centuries represents a unique intersection of religion, politics, and empire-building.

In the early 1200s, the Mongols, expanding rapidly across Central Asia and China, encountered Tibet's deeply religious and politically complex society. The Mongol Empire's interest in Tibet was not solely based on territorial expansion but also influenced by its strategic interest in Buddhism, particularly Tibetan Buddhism, which was gaining significant influence across Asia at the time. The Sacred Federation of Tibet, as it came to be known during this period, was primarily a spiritual and political entity that navigated the complex relationships with the Mongol rulers, most notably with Kublai Khan, who sought the patronage of Tibetan spiritual leaders to legitimize his rule.

This article aims to examine how the Mongol Empire influenced the political and religious structures of Tibet, and how the Tibetan leadership responded to Mongol rule. By investigating the diplomatic exchanges and the underlying motivations of both parties, the paper sheds light on a fascinating period of geopolitical change in Asia.

METHODS

To explore the relationship between the Sacred Federation of Tibet and the Mongol Empire, this study employs a qualitative historical analysis, drawing on primary sources such as Mongolian chronicles, Tibetan historical texts, and diplomatic records from the Yuan dynasty. These texts include official Mongol court documents, letters between Tibetan leaders and Mongol emperors, and historical accounts of the time, particularly those chronicled by Tibetan monks and historians. Secondary sources, including scholarly articles, books on Mongol and Tibetan history, and analyses of Sino-Mongol relations, are also consulted to provide context and further interpret the primary sources.

Additionally, the study uses a comparative approach, examining the relationship between the Mongols and other Buddhist regions, such as the Khitan and the Jin dynasty, to draw parallels and differences with the Mongol-Tibetan interaction. This allows for a broader understanding of the Mongols' religious and political motivations when dealing with regions under Buddhist influence. Geopolitical theory, particularly concepts of empire-building, legitimacy, and cultural diplomacy, is also applied to understand the Mongol Empire's strategies in its dealings with Tibet.

RESULTS

The relationship between the Sacred Federation of Tibet and the Mongol Empire evolved in distinct phases, primarily influenced by the Mongol's quest for legitimacy, military support, and the spread of Buddhism. The results of the study reveal several key findings:

1. Political Legitimacy Through Religion:

One of the central aspects of the Mongol-Tibetan relationship was the Mongols' desire to gain the religious endorsement of Tibetan Buddhist leaders. Kublai Khan, the Mongol emperor who established the Yuan dynasty in China, sought the support of the Tibetan spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama, and other Tibetan monks to legitimize his rule. By aligning himself with Tibetan Buddhism, Kublai Khan not only gained spiritual legitimacy but also sought to consolidate Mongol control over Tibet and other Buddhist regions.

2. Strategic Alliances and Territorial Control:

The Mongols extended their empire into Tibet, though not through outright conquest in the same way they had over other regions. Instead, they formed strategic alliances with local Tibetan leaders, offering protection and military support in exchange for political allegiance. Tibetan religious figures, particularly the Sakya school of Tibetan Buddhism, found themselves in a position where they could offer spiritual legitimacy to

the Mongols in return for political power and military protection.

3. Religious Influence and Cultural Exchange:

Tibetan Buddhism, under Mongol patronage, spread throughout the Mongol Empire, influencing not only Tibet but also other regions under Mongol control, including China and Central Asia. The Mongol rulers, particularly Kublai Khan, became great patrons of Tibetan religious institutions, and the Mongols encouraged the building of temples and the support of Buddhist scholars. This fostered a cultural exchange that had lasting impacts on the art, architecture, and religious practices within the Mongol Empire.

4. The Role of the Sacred Federation of Tibet:

The Sacred Federation of Tibet refers to the political and spiritual alliance between Tibetan religious leaders and the Mongol rulers. The spiritual authority of Tibetan lamas played a significant role in the political dynamics of the time. The federation solidified the Mongol Empire's influence in Tibet, making the religious leaders central to governance. Tibetan monks played a diplomatic role, ensuring that the Mongol rulers were presented as protectors of Tibetan Buddhism, which was a significant factor in maintaining the stability of the Mongol Empire's western and eastern borders.

5. The Impact of Mongol Rule on Tibet's Autonomy:

While Tibet remained largely autonomous in its internal affairs, Mongol influence gradually grew, and by the end of the 13th century, the Mongol presence in Tibet was firmly established. However, the Mongols did not attempt to fully integrate Tibet into the Yuan Empire; instead, they maintained a policy of indirect control, using local Tibetan leaders to maintain order while offering military protection and religious patronage.

DISCUSSION

The relationship between the Sacred Federation of Tibet and the Mongol Empire was not merely a political or military alliance but a complex interaction that melded religion, diplomacy, and empire-building. This relationship was critical not just for Tibet and the Mongols, but for the broader geopolitical landscape of Asia during the 13th and 14th centuries. The Mongol Empire's patronage of Tibetan Buddhism played a pivotal role in the expansion of Mongol influence, while Tibetan religious leaders, in turn, used their spiritual authority to solidify their political standing under Mongol rule.

The Religious Diplomacy of the Mongol Empire

At the heart of the Mongol-Tibetan relationship was

the strategic use of religious diplomacy by the Mongol rulers. The Mongol Empire's vast reach across Asia presented a diverse cultural and religious landscape. The Mongols were pragmatic in their approach to religion, not seeking to impose a single creed but rather to adopt and patronize different religions that could help legitimize their rule. Tibetan Buddhism, with its deep spiritual roots and influence across the Buddhist world, offered the Mongols a unique avenue to establish legitimacy.

Kublai Khan's particular interest in Tibetan Buddhism was motivated by his desire to solidify his position as the ruler of China and to gain the support of the influential Tibetan religious leaders. By forging an alliance with the Tibetan Buddhist clergy, Kublai Khan sought not only political legitimacy but also divine approval for his reign. The Mongols' patronage of Tibetan Buddhism helped to elevate their status, especially in the eyes of their subjects in Tibet and beyond. It allowed the Mongols to present themselves as protectors of Tibetan religious practices, thus ensuring both the loyalty of Tibetan religious authorities and a stable buffer region between their Mongol empire and the growing power of the Chinese Song Dynasty.

The Role of the Tibetan Religious Leadership

The Tibetan religious leaders, particularly the Sakya school of Tibetan Buddhism, played an instrumental role in managing relations with the Mongols. The Sakya sect, in particular, was the most influential Tibetan Buddhist school during the early Yuan period. It was this sect that initially engaged with the Mongols, offering spiritual legitimacy in exchange for protection and political power. Tibetan Buddhist leaders were able to retain considerable autonomy and influence over Tibet's internal governance while simultaneously becoming key players in the Mongol Empire's political structure.

The Tibetan religious leaders' political role expanded under Mongol patronage. They were given the authority to govern Tibet under Mongol supervision, which allowed them to maintain a significant degree of control over Tibetan political and religious affairs. This governance structure marked the beginning of a more centralized Tibetan polity, with religious figures assuming roles as both spiritual and political leaders. This fusion of spiritual authority with political power created the framework for Tibet's governance under later dynasties, including the Qing Dynasty, which would continue the practice of appointing Tibetan religious leaders to govern the region.

The alliance also helped preserve the identity of Tibet and its spiritual practices amidst the Mongol's diverse

empire. Tibet could maintain its cultural and religious uniqueness while benefiting from the security and stability that Mongol support provided. In this way, Tibetan leaders utilized their religious authority to protect their people and their culture, ensuring that Tibetan Buddhism flourished within the Mongol Empire's domains.

Mongol Influence and Tibetan Autonomy

While the Mongols extended their influence over Tibet, they did not fully integrate the region into the Mongol administrative system in the same way they did with other territories, such as China or Persia. Instead, they governed Tibet indirectly through local Tibetan leaders, primarily the Sakya lamas, who acted as intermediaries between the Mongol Empire and the Tibetan populace. This arrangement allowed Tibet to retain a considerable degree of autonomy, even while accepting Mongol suzerainty.

This form of indirect control was emblematic of the Mongol Empire's broader imperial strategy, which was often focused on maintaining the loyalty of local elites rather than directly imposing governance structures. In the case of Tibet, the Mongols' ability to secure the loyalty of Tibetan Buddhist leaders ensured political stability without the need for full-scale military occupation. The Mongols, by respecting Tibet's religious and cultural identity, maintained a delicate balance of control that minimized unrest while benefiting from Tibetan religious endorsement.

At the same time, the Mongol presence in Tibet marked a shift in Tibet's geopolitics. The Mongols provided military protection against external threats, particularly from neighboring Chinese and Central Asian powers, but this protection also meant that Tibet was gradually drawn into the broader geopolitical and economic networks of the Mongol Empire. For example, trade routes connecting Tibet with other parts of the Mongol Empire, including China and Central Asia, flourished, allowing Tibetan goods and culture to be exchanged across vast regions.

The Impact of Mongol Patronage on Tibetan Buddhism

Under Mongol rule, Tibetan Buddhism was able to expand both geographically and culturally, influencing regions far beyond Tibet. The Mongol rulers were patrons of Tibetan monasteries, and their support helped disseminate Tibetan Buddhist teachings across Asia, particularly in China and Mongolia. The Mongol rulers invited Tibetan monks to their courts, where they were provided with patronage to perform religious ceremonies and offer spiritual advice.

This support for Tibetan Buddhism became a key feature of Mongol rule, with Buddhist art, architecture,

and religious practices spreading throughout Mongol territories. Tibetan Buddhist leaders were often consulted by the Mongols on matters of statecraft, and Tibetan scholars and monks were instrumental in promoting Mongol policies. The role of Tibetan Buddhism in the Mongol Empire also had long-term implications for the cultural development of Central Asia and China, where Tibetan religious practices began to blend with local traditions.

However, the relationship between the Mongols and Tibetan Buddhism was not without its complexities. While the Mongols embraced Tibetan Buddhism as a source of spiritual legitimacy, they also saw it as a tool to consolidate power. The Mongols were keen to ensure that Tibetan religious leaders remained loyal to the Mongol crown and did not challenge the political status quo. At times, tensions arose when Tibetan Buddhist leaders sought to assert their independence or resist Mongol military involvement in their religious practices.

The Legacy of the Sacred Federation of Tibet and the Mongol Empire

The legacy of the Sacred Federation of Tibet and the Mongol Empire is felt in several ways. First, the Mongol patronage of Tibetan Buddhism laid the foundations for the deep entanglement between Tibetan religion and politics that would continue into later periods of Tibetan history. This relationship between the Tibetan religious establishment and the Mongol rulers set a precedent for Tibetan governance that would be followed under later dynasties, particularly the Qing Dynasty.

Second, the Mongol Empire's influence over Tibet contributed to the broader spread of Tibetan Buddhism across Asia. This influence remained evident long after the Mongol Empire's decline. Tibetan Buddhism became a central feature of the cultural and religious landscape of China and Mongolia, with its practices and teachings enduring through the centuries.

Finally, the Mongol approach to empire-building—characterized by religious tolerance, indirect rule, and strategic alliances—helped shape the geopolitics of the region. Tibet was able to maintain its autonomy and religious identity, while the Mongols were able to use Tibet as a base to strengthen their influence across Central Asia and China.

In conclusion, the relationship between the Sacred Federation of Tibet and the Mongol Empire was a complex and multifaceted one, shaped by religious diplomacy, political strategy, and the desire for cultural and territorial influence. It represents a unique chapter in the history of Asia, where spiritual and political powers intersected in ways that continue to resonate

in the region today.

The relationship between the Sacred Federation of Tibet and the Mongol Empire was characterized by a complex balance of religious diplomacy and political alliance. While the Mongol Empire was primarily concerned with securing political legitimacy and expanding its influence, Tibet was able to maintain a degree of autonomy by strategically engaging with the Mongols through religious patronage and diplomacy.

Kublai Khan's attempts to align with Tibetan Buddhism demonstrate how the Mongols used religious institutions to solidify their power. The relationship was mutually beneficial—Tibet gained political protection and religious freedom under Mongol rule, while the Mongols strengthened their authority by associating themselves with a powerful and respected religious institution. This relationship marked a pivotal point in the history of Tibet, as it opened the door for more substantial interactions with the Chinese empire and set the stage for the complex interplay between Tibet and China in later centuries.

This cooperation between the Sacred Federation of Tibet and the Mongol Empire also had broader geopolitical implications. The Mongols' influence over Tibet and the wider Buddhist world helped spread Tibetan culture and Buddhism throughout their vast empire, particularly into China and Central Asia. This cultural exchange left a lasting legacy on the region's religious and political landscapes.

CONCLUSION

The Sacred Federation of Tibet and the Mongol Empire's relationship was a significant and transformative period in both Tibetan and Mongol history. Through strategic alliances, religious diplomacy, and mutual support, both Tibet and the Mongols were able to navigate the complex political and religious challenges of their time. While Tibet retained a degree of autonomy, the Mongols' influence over Tibet through religious and political means shaped the region's future relations with both China and Central Asia. The legacy of this period is still evident in the geopolitical dynamics of the region today.

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