

# **From empire to nation through Buddhism: The 9th Panchen Lama and the 19th Janggiya Hutagt and the demise of Buddhism in Inner Mongolia**

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Nationalism, argues Benedict Anderson, is a secular movement, which reduces the scale of imagined community from the universal religious community to a sovereign and limited political community. In this definition, religion serves as an instrument of empires, but modern nationalism prescribes a separation of religion from the state. By a logical extension, one may argue that Mongolian nationalism in the early 20th century had to deal with Buddhist imagination, by virtue of the fact that Mongols were deeply Buddhist. The transition from a religious community to a political community in Mongolia and Inner Mongolia was however complicated by the fact that top Buddhist leaders were often Tibetans, a system imposed by the Qing dynasty and later briefly sustained by the self-proclaimed successor state – the Republic of China. In other words, Buddhism in Mongolia signified not just a religious community, but also “ethnicity”, as well as “empire”. Any study of Mongolian Buddhism and nationalism in the 20th century must address the questions of Chinese and the “Tibetanness” of Mongolian Buddhism.

One of the most important transformations in Inner Asia in the 20th century was the disconnection between Mongols and Tibetans thanks to communist revolution and nationalism in Mongolia, China and Tibet. The disconnection is often teleologically projected to the past, so much so that when historians write about Tibet, they hardly mention Mongolia and Mongols, and vice versa. This disconnection is however compensated by overriding connections with China, expressed either positively or negatively. What has been lost in such “area studies” and “international relations” are the regional processes, cultural, historical, and geographical, that inform the dynamics of interconnections.

Based on archival materials, this paper aims to study the Inner Mongolian nationalist movement in the early 1930s and the role played by the 9th Panchen Lama and the 19th Janggiya Hutagt. It was a crucial moment, because it was when Tibetan Buddhism figured prominently, perhaps for the last time, in the Inner Mongolian political movement. I will argue that the political role played by Buddhist clergy like the Panchen Lama and the Janggiya Hutagt led to the Inner Mongol rejection of Buddhism as something alien and detrimental to the Mongol essence. It is a study of how that “disconnection” came about.

The exiled 9th Panchen Lama had a more dramatic impact on the Mongols in both Inner Mongolia and the Mongolian People’s Republic (MPR) than acknowledged in current scholarship. For more than 14 years during his exile, between 1923 and 1937, the

Panchen spent most of his time in Inner Mongolia while attempting to cultivate both Chinese and Mongol support to enable him to return to Tibet. In 1929, Merse, a prominent Daur-Mongol communist/nationalist revolutionary, and Prince Demchugdongrub, a young and ambitious nationalist prince of the Sunit banner, came to the same conclusion that no secular political leaders could unite the disparate Inner Mongolian tribal groups. Both agreed that the Panchen Lama, a figure highly respected by almost every Mongol, would perform a role in Inner Mongolia similar to that played by the 8th Jebtsundamba Hutagt in Outer Mongolia who united the quarrelsome princes and became the holy Khan of the independent Mongolian state in 1911. Both tried to use the Panchen Lama to rally the Mongols for the cause of the Inner Mongolian autonomy.

In the mean time, however, the Chinese Republican government, appointed the Panchen Lama as the Pacification Envoy for the Western Region, and the Janggiya Hutagt as the Pacification Envoy for the Mongolian Banners, for the purpose of persuading Mongols to abrogate their autonomous movement and identify with China. While the Panchen was astute in managing his impossible missions without offending either the Mongols or the Chinese, the Janggiya Hutagt was all too explicit in his pro-China stance.

What was apparent in this Mongol and Chinese competition over Buddhism was the understanding that Mongols were a Buddhist people and Buddhist clergy would play an effective role. At issue was, however, the question of the political community; Mongols fought for a Mongolian autonomy, while the Chinese tried to integrate the Mongols into China. The consequence of these Buddhist-cum-political missions in Inner Mongolia was a curious "effect" of Buddhist "renaissance" in Inner Mongolia, in contrast to the demise of Buddhism in communist MPR. Tens of thousands of Buddhist monks and their lay followers in the MPR, believing that a Buddhist army led by the Panchen Lama came to liberate them from the communist oppression, rebelled, and, after failure, fled to Inner Mongolia. This rebellion and the mass exodus were consequential in making Buddhism an "unpatriotic" religion and subject to severe crackdown in the MPR. In Inner Mongolia, the Mongol opposition to the Janggiya Hutagt and the departure of the Panchen Lama from Inner Mongolia in 1935, relieved Buddhism of its overt political role. In the subsequent decade of immense political crisis, the Inner Mongolian "quest" for "power" finally led to the rejection of Buddhism as "alien", as undermining Mongolian prowess, and as possibly anti-Mongol.