

Worshipping Buddha for a Reason: The Mongol Lu Lineage and Tibetan Buddhism in 15th-century Northwest China*

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Introduction

Father Louis Schram worked as a missionary from 1911 to 1922 in the adjacent region of modern-day Gansu and Qinghai provinces. Having studied anthropology and history of religions at the University of Leiden, he was thrilled about the languages, ethnicities and religions in the culturally diversified northwest China, the crossroads that linked China proper to the vast Inner Asian land. Within his decade of fieldwork in the region, Father Schram collected and transcribed various historical myths and local legends.

One such legend concerns a pair of severed hands in contemporary Zhuanglang 莊浪, a small town seventy kilometers to the north of Lanzhou 蘭州, Gansu's political centre. Father Schram had not only heard about the hands, he also witnessed them on multiple occasions. The hands belonged to a Mongol military commander who attempted to usurp his superior, the Lu ruling house (*Lu tuguan* 魯土官), but was eventually suppressed in 1378.¹ As a punishment, the Lu leader chopped off the usurper's hands, and exhibited them to warn the locals of the consequence of betrayal.

What is most intriguing is the venue that the severed limbs were kept. Instead of being preserved by the Lu lineage or local law enforcement, the hands were housed at the Miaoyin Monastery (Ch. 妙因寺; Tb. *Tā thung Rdorje 'chang dgon*), a Tibetan Buddhist monastery. To be more specific, the “shrunk, dry, and blackened” hands were located in a hall dedicated to the Tibetan Buddhist protector Pañjaraṇātha Mahākāla,² and were “tied on a stick [and] covered with a ‘scarf of felicity’” (Tb.

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1 Li Yongfeng 李勇峰, *Guangwu lushi shipu jijiao* 廣武魯氏世譜輯校, (Gansu renmin chubanshe, 2017), 159. The usurper's name was *Chuozi* (戳只), which is highly possible the Mongolian name *Chochi*, a variant of *Jochi*. I want to thank Prof. Christopher Atwood for pointing this possibility out to me.

2 Henry Serruys, *The Monguors of the Kansu-Tibetan Frontier: Their Origin, History, and Social Organization* (Transactions of the American Philosophical Society, New Series – volume 44, part 1, 1954), 27. Although the hands went missing during the 1958 political movements, certain historical memories about them are still vividly preserved even today. The Buddhist hall that

khatag).³ In their placement, the disembodied hands took on spiritual connotations and became religious objects which symbolised the suppressed evil forces in the region.

These hands, as mysterious as they are gruesome, suggest the crucial role Tibetan Buddhism played in the local society of Zhuanglang and the governance of the Lu lineage. By the time of Father Schram's arrival in the early twentieth century, the Lu lineage of Zhuanglang (*Zhuanglang Lu shi* 莊浪魯氏) had already governed the region for nearly six hundred years. The lineage's local authority can be traced back to the late fourteenth century, when the emperors of Ming China assigned the Lu lineage's early ancestor, a surrendered Mongol officer, to implement indirect rule for the Ming empire. Thus began the Lu lineage's centuries-long rulership, of which Tibetan Buddhism was an indispensable dimension.

This article scrutinises how a Mongol lineage used Tibetan Buddhism to construct authority in post-Mongol Ming China. Previous scholars, notably Henry Serruys, David Robinson and Kenneth Swope, have conducted detailed examinations of the Mongols in Ming China from multiple perspectives, such as their economic livelihoods, positions within the administrative apparatus, ethnic tensions with Han Chinese, and their roles in frontier crises.⁴ However, the field has paid less attention to their religious lives, and scholars are less clear on the role religion played in the political actions and cultural identities for the Mongols under Ming China. This paper, in comparison, analyses the mechanisms through which the very claim of faith is translated into political power, social prerogative, and identity labels. It examines how a group of Mongols in Ming China used Tibetan Buddhism to establish political ties to the Ming court, strengthen control over local society, and construct a peculiar form of rulership tied to religious but not ethnic identity. In this regard, this article follows Christopher Atwood's intervention that situates the Mongols' religious policies in specific contexts as one way to challenge the long-held grand narrative of "Mongol tolerance".⁵ This paper contextualises Tibetan Buddhism and asks what the religion meant to the Mongols living under an established regime. Moreover, this paper makes extensive use of local materials, such as genealogies, stone tablet inscriptions and murals to provide a bottom-up story that has been less representative in the previous historiography dominated by court records and official accounts.

kept the hands was called 古隆官殿. The present-day term 古隆官, or *gur-mgon* (short for *guryi mgon po*, which refers to *Pañjaraṇātha Mahākāla*), follows the local dialect and transliterated in Chinese. See Lu Rugao 魯如皋, "Chongxiu hufadian ji 重修護法殿記", stele inscription preserved at the Liancheng Museum of the Lu clan.

3 Henry Serruys, *The Monguors of the Kansu-Tibetan Frontier*, 27.

4 In addition to the scholarship of Henry Serruys and David Robinson mentioned below, another important piece on the Ming-era Mongols is Kenneth Swope, "All Men are Not Brothers: Ethnic Identity and Dynastic Loyalty in the Ningxia Mutiny of 1592", *Late Imperial China* vol. 24 (2003), 79–129.

5 Christopher Atwood, "Validated by Holiness or Sovereignty: Religious Toleration as Political Theology in the Mongol World Empire of the Thirteenth Century", *International History Review*, vol. 26.2 (2004), 237–256.

The Lu Lineage in Early Ming

The Yuan-Ming dynastic transition in the mid-fourteenth century reformulated the power dynamics of northwest China. Although the Ming dynasty was born in the shadow of the Mongol empire and thus inherited many Mongol legacies, not all Yuan remnants were fully embraced by the newly established empire. This section examines how and why the Ming replaced Mongol princes with lower-level military leaders, such as the Lu lineage leader, as the empire's agents in the frontier region. It also paves the way for the following sections by identifying why such adjustments in power structures prompted the new military caste to turn to Tibetan Buddhism.

Changing the ultimate sovereign from a Mongol to a Han Chinese regime cast tremendous influence on the Mongols and other non-Han ethnic groups who submitted to the Ming dynasty in 1368.⁶ Although absorbed into the Ming state's imperial apparatus, the Mongols' acceptance as Ming subjects did not necessarily mean they were able to fully restore the social privileges they had enjoyed under the Yuan dynasty. Rather, the Ming selectively handled the Mongols on an individual basis. While those who attempted to resist were ruthlessly destroyed, many who were on friendly terms with the Ming were able to have their local authority recognised on the spot, though later often found their substantial power diminished or greatly checked. In many regions along its northern frontier, the Ming dynasty, from its initial occupation, implemented an uneven, yet deliberate project to assert its dominion.

Northwest China was one such place gradually taken over by the Ming. Spanning the vast steppe of modern-day eastern Qinghai and southwest Gansu, the region was considered the eastern end of the so-called Hexi corridor and the gate to the Tibetan plateau, and was thus of great strategic value. During the last days of the Yuan dynasty, the region was primarily controlled by three Mongol princes. The first one was Dorjibal 朵爾只巴, Prince of Qi 岐王, who descended from the imperial son-in-law Chikū 赤窟 of the Qonggirads 弘吉剌.⁷ This Qi prince branch had their main territorial appanage near contemporary Xining 西寧 and the Huang River 湟水 basin, was supplied by other revenue appanages in the North China plain, and, according to Rashid ad-Din, had four thousand man under their command.⁸ The second Mongol prince was Budnal 卜納剌, Pacifier of the West and Prince of Wujing 鎮西武靖王,

6 According to David Robinson, several hundred thousand Mongols and other non-Han groups remained in China or surrendered to Ming forces. See David Robinson, "Image of Subject Mongols under the Ming Dynasty", *Late Imperial China*, Vol. 25 (2004), 63.

7 As the last Qi prince, Dorjibal is not recorded in the prince list of volume 108 of the *Yuanshi*. His name shows up more often in Ming-era texts. See *Ming Taizu Shilu* 明太祖實錄 (Academia Sinica, Ming Shilu, Chaoxian Wangchao Shilu Qing Shilu Database), 1358. For a comprehensive study on the Qi princes of the Qonggirads, see Hu Xiaopeng 胡小鵬, "Menggu hongjila bu chiku fuma xi zhuwang yanjiu 蒙古弘吉剌部赤窟駙馬系諸王研究", in his *Xibei minzu wenxian yu lishi yanjiu* 西北民族文獻與歷史研究, (Gansu renmin chubanshe, 2004), 121–136.

8 Christopher Atwood analysed some contradictory accounts by Rashid ad-Din and compared his writings with Marco Polo's notes. See Christopher Atwood, "Chiku Kurengen and the Original of the Xiningzhou Qonggirads", in P. B. Golden et al., *Archivum Eurasiae Medii Aevi* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2015), 12–15.

who descended from Qubilai's ninth son A'uruγči 奧魯赤.⁹ The Yuan court granted this princely branch extensive military authority to prevent unrest in the vast Tibetan region,¹⁰ and, according to the *Deb ther dman po*, ordered them stationed at Hezhou 河州¹¹ in modern-day Linxia 臨夏. The third prince was Qošanḡ 和賞, Prince of Gaochang 高昌 who descended from the Uighur Iduq-qut.¹² Originally located at Gaochang, contemporary Turfan (Chin. 吐魯番) in Xinjiang, this branch moved to Yongchang 永昌 in modern-day Wuwei 武威 in 1275 due to military reasons, and thereafter settled in the region.¹³ These non-Han aristocrats could all claim a personal connection, usually by blood or marriage ties, to the Mongol khans. In other words, they were imperial relatives whose legitimacy was derived directly from the political centre. Moreover, these princes enjoyed a highly, if not fully, autonomous local governance independent from the central government.

As the Ming muscled its way into the region, the Chinese dynasty refused to let the Yuan princes retain their regional autonomy. Therefore, with the exception of the Qi prince Dorjibal who fled, those who pledged loyalty to the Ming throne, such as Budnal and Qošanḡ, were soon divested of their substantial power. Although the Ming promised them positions in local military institutions of the Guard and Battalion System 衛所, their assignments and titles were considerably nominal.¹⁴ Thus, while the Ming emperor constructed his image as a model ruler by showing benevolence toward the "former Yuan imperial family members", sharing substantial power with the Mongol princes was not a part of his political agenda.¹⁵

However, though the northwestern frontier was under direct Ming military control via the Shaanxi Auxiliary Regional Military Commission 陝西行都司, one should not assume that the Ming intended to completely replace the local administrative system with a Han-Chinese style bureaucracy. In this newly occupied and precarious territory, the Ming still needed intermediary agents to interact with and govern the indigenes. Therefore, after enfeebling the aforementioned imperial nobles who had eminent family backgrounds and deep local influence, the Ming continued to assign local affairs to indigenous non-Han leaders. But instead of those who had bonds to the

9 About the princely system, see Zhang Yun 張雲, *Yuandai tufan defang xingzheng tizhi yanjiu* 元代吐蕃地方行政體制研究, (Shangwu yinshuguan, 2017), 19–25.

10 Shen Weirong 沈衛榮, "Yuanchao zhongyang zhengfu dui Xizang de tongzhi 元朝中央政府對西藏的統治", *Lishi Yanjiu* 歷史研究, no. 3 (1988), 136–148.

11 Tshal pa kun dgav rdo rje, *Deb ther dmar po*, Chinese translation by Chen Qingying 陳慶英 and Zhou Runnian 周潤年, *Hong shi* 紅史, (Xizang renmin chubanshe, 1988), 111–115.

12 Song Lian 宋濂, "Gu huaiyuan jiangjun gaochangwei tongzhi zhihuishi sishi heshang gong fenji 故懷遠將軍高昌衛同知指揮使司事和賞公墳記", in *Songxueshi wenji* 宋學士文集 (Shangwu yinshuguan, 1937), 521.

13 Jia Congjiang 賈叢江, "Yuandai weiwuer qianju yongchang shiji 元代畏吾爾遷居永昌事輯", in *Xiyu yanjiu* 西域研究, no. 4 (2002), 16–25.

14 For a detailed examination of how Budnal and Qošanḡ were disempowered by the Ming, see Henry Serruys, "The Mongols of Kansu during the Ming", in *Mélanges chinois and bouddhiques* vol. 10 (1955), 231–238.

15 *Ming Taizu Shilu*, 1173.

Mongol ruling house, the Ming intentionally selected proxies from the lower level local nobility since they were less likely to switch back to the Mongols' side. These local agents had moderate political capital, family privileges, and local hegemony, all of which was enough to maintain effective control for the Ming but not enough to provoke rebellions that challenged the Ming's authority.

The Zhuanglang Lu lineage barely met these criteria. When the Lu patriarch Gonpo Shakya 鞏卜失加 submitted to the Ming, he was assigned as a Company Commander 百戶 in Qining Garrison 岐寧衛.¹⁶ The rank of company commander, as the title indicates, is a relatively low military position merely in command of one hundred soldiers. What complies with the Lu lineage's insignificant role in the local society is its vague lineage history. Although both Chinese and Tibetan sources claim the Lu lineage to be ethnically Mongol, the lineage's origins remain largely obscure.¹⁷ Recent scholarship suggests that the purported ancestral history in the Lu lineage genealogy is largely fictional and a significant part of these historical memories were borrowed from the records of another lineage.¹⁸ Moreover, there is no clear account of where the Han-Chinese surname Lu came from.¹⁹ Such ambiguities arguably attest to the Lu lineage's humble origins. While David Robinson claims that "[the Ming] re-confirmed pre-existing social/military status [and] reinforced Mongolian organization",²⁰ the situation in the northwest was quite different, as the old elite class was systematically replaced with upstarts of inconspicuous family background. The strategic importance of the region contributed to the majority of these differences. As a place with dense nomadic influence that the Ming dynasty was unable to fully control on its own, and a strategic region which the Mongols were eager to reclaim, northwest China required a calculated approach by the early Ming emperors.

The source of political power also changed during the dynastic transition. For the non-Han princes during the Mongol Yuan era, their privileges were hereditary; but for the newly appointed local leaders, hereditary rights had to be established anew.²¹ Yet such political difficulties did not hinder Mongol officers who had surrendered, as they soon determined the correlation between military exploits and upward mobility. Many local leaders were assigned, upon surrender, under the Ming empire's guard and bat-

16 Li Yongfeng, *Guangwu lushi shipu jijiao*, 9. Qining Garrison was a military office that the Ming created for Qi Prince Dorjibal during his temporary submission. *Ming Taizu Shilu*, 1776; LI Yongfeng 李勇峰, "Ming zhuanglang wei lushi jiazuo zaoqi lishi kaoshi: yi lidai lushi jiapu wei zhongxin 明莊浪衛魯氏家族早期歷史考實——以歷代魯氏家譜為中心". MA dissertation, Lanzhou University, 2017, 23–26.

17 For Chinese records, see Li Yongfeng, *Guangwu lushi shipu jijiao*. The Tibetan records of Lu ancestry will be examined in detail in the following section of this paper.

18 Li Yongfeng, "Ming zhuanglang wei lushi jiazuo zaoqi lishi kaoshi", 26–39.

19 Li Yongfeng, "Ming zhuanglang wei lushi jiazuo zaoqi lishi kaoshi", 20–23.

20 David Robinson, "Image of Subject Mongols under the Ming Dynasty", 71.

21 This poses a sharp contrast with the native rulers in southwest China of the day, who were titled *tusi* 土司 (native chieftain) and enjoyed more authority within their domains. See Chen Wenjun 陳文俊, "Mingdai xibei tuguan fei tusi kaoshi 明代西北土官非土司考釋", in Cang Min 蒼銘 ed., *Minzushi yanjiu* 民族史研究, vol. 11 (2014), 162–194.

talion system. But they were given low ranking military positions with Han-Chinese generals as their superiors. Moreover, their daily routine was occupied with drilling, collecting taxes or lobbying for the submission of other groups. In this vein, fighting on the battlefield for the Ming was among the few opportunities the northwest local leaders could seize upon to climb the hierarchical ladder, whereas it could take decades or even generations to ascend in the bureaucratic system.

This is precisely how the Zhuanglang Lu lineage rose to power. While Gonpo Shakya was assigned as a low-ranking military officer in the Qining Garrison at first, he soon was transferred to be a post station officer (*yiguan* 驛官).²² Being a post station officer in early Ming was exhausting work. Many prisoners were sent to the post stations in northwest China as a form of punishment.²³ Therefore, we may infer that this was likely a punishment resulting from the betrayal of the Qining garrison leader and the ensuing dissolution of the garrison. Gonpo Shakya did not resume a military position until 1399,²⁴ soon to die in Yongle's first northern expedition.²⁵ However, one man's death in battle did not curb the Lu lineage's further pursuit of military merit. Four years after his father had died on the battlefield, Gonpo Shakya's son, Lu Shakya 魯失加, answered the call of Yongle's northern expedition again. This time the Lu lineage was fortunate. In recognition of his bravery in battle, Lu Shakya was at first promoted to Battalion Commander 千戶 and then to Regional Military Assistant Commissioner 都指揮僉事,²⁶ a superior (3A) position in the Ming bureaucracy.

Fighting for the Ming was one significant channel through which to acquire authority, but it had limits as well. In the case of the Lu lineage, we can see that the Yongle emperor's northern expeditions played a key role in the lineage's rise. With hindsight, it is interesting to note that many intra-Mongol battles – including Esen's 1449 raids, the court coup in 1461, and Altan Khan's attack of 1550 – became decisive moments for non-Han subjects to gain military merit and bureaucratic promotions in Ming China.²⁷ In other words, the Ming used the mechanism of military bureaucracy to redefine the inter-relationships between various Mongol groups. However, although the Lu patriarch was promoted along the bureaucratic path, these official titles did not directly correspond to degrees of power. For example, while a Battalion Commander was theoretically able to deploy a unit of thousand soldiers, the Lu patriarch was only granted the authority to command up to three hundred soldiers.²⁸ This poses a sharp contrast with the Yuan dynasty Mongol leader in the region whose core army

22 Li Yongfeng, *Guangwu lushi shipu jijiao*, 9, 89.

23 *Ming Taizu Shilu*, 3584.

24 Ba Zhixian 把志先, *Baxing guangpu: Gansu juan* 把姓廣譜·甘肅卷, (Shanxi chuban jituan, 2010), 23–24.

25 Li Yongfeng, *Guangwu lushi shipu jijiao*, 160.

26 Li Yongfeng, *Guangwu lushi shipu jijiao*, 9–10. Probably because of his higher position in the Ming military, Lu Shakya changed his name to Lu Xian 魯賢, a name with more Han characteristics.

27 David Robinson, "Image of Subject Mongols under the Ming Dynasty", 68.

28 Li Yongfeng, *Guangwu lushi shipu jijiao*, 9–11.

constituted at least four thousand soldiers. In this regard, obtaining high official titles did not necessarily mean the Mongol leaders had taken back local rule. In contrast, they remained under the watchful eyes of the Ming.

The Yuan-Ming transition exerted subtle, yet crucial influence over the political career of the Mongol leaders in northwest China. Firstly, Mongol princes with deep local roots and profound political influence were replaced. Secondly, the new local leaders were those who had military backgrounds yet lacked political or cultural capital for effective local control. Thirdly, despite having been granted seemingly high titles in the military system, the Mongol leaders faced great restrictions. Therefore, newly empowered leaders had to find other ways to build connections with the political centre, consolidate power on the local level, and solidify the legitimacy of their rule. Religion, in this context, became one such tool.

Building Connections with the Court

During the Yuan era, the connection between the empire's northwest and Beijing was structured around personal ties between princes and the Great Khan. But once the Ming took over, the Mongol leaders in the frontier shifted from imperial relatives to the empire's military bureaucrats. How, then, did the new military caste strengthen their ties with the Ming court? This section examines the architectural and religious features of the Tibetan Buddhist monasteries that the Lu lineage patronised to see how such bonds were built in the early fifteenth century.

Tibetan Buddhism played an important role in the fifteenth-century Ming empire, both as a religious belief and an administrative tool. This is undoubtedly a continuity from the Mongol Yuan era. Tibetan Buddhism enjoyed lavish patronage at the Yuan court. Mongol rulers made eminent Lamaist monks to imperial preceptors (*guoshi* 國師) to take charge of Buddhist affairs within the empire, granted them tax and military service exemptions, and many members of the Mongol ruling house were devoted practitioners.²⁹ Their popularity survived the dynastic transition. As David Robinson has pointed out, the Ming ruling house members maintained close relationships with Tibetan monks, attended Dharma teaching sessions, held Tibetan Buddhist rituals, and patronised sutra translation meetings.³⁰ In addition to being a religious belief or cultural phenomenon in Ming China, Tibetan Buddhism was also effectively fundamental to the Ming empire's frontier and foreign policies. The Ming court offered financial and labour support to Tibetan Buddhist communities along its western frontier for construction and cultural activities as one means to pacifying the region.³¹ Meanwhile,

29 About general policies toward Tibetan Buddhism during the Yuan dynasty, see Luciano Petech, *Central Tibet and the Mongols: The Yuan-Sakya Period of Tibetan History*, (Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1990), 33–38.

30 David Robinson, "The Ming Court and the Legacy of the Yuan Mongols", in David Robinson ed., *Culture, Courtiers, and Competition: The Ming Court* (Harvard University Press, 2008), 371–382.

31 Karl Debreczeny, "Ethnicity and Esoteric Power Negotiating the Sino-Tibetan Synthesis in Ming Buddhist Painting", PhD Dissertation (University of Chicago, 2007).

the Ming rulers relied on Tibetan Buddhism to interact with the Tibetan, Mongol and Jurchen nobility scattered across the vast Inner Asian world.³² However, what is less examined is how such religious passion at court was exploited by those at the margins, and to what extent Ming religious policy transformed frontier society. These questions are addressed in the following.

The Lu lineage constructed its ties with the Ming court through the Qutan Monastery (Ch. *Qutansi* 瞿曇寺 Tb. Gro tshang Rdorje 'chang). Qutan Monastery was one of the most important Tibetan Buddhist monasteries patronised by the Ming court on its northwest frontier.³³ In 1393, the Ming set up the Xining Prefectural Buddhist Registry (*Xining senggangsi* 西寧僧綱司) in Qutan Monastery, and entrusted the monastery abbot with full authority over Buddhist-related matters in the Xining region, including but not limited to personnel, finance, and ritual.³⁴ As Ming China's very first Buddhist office in the Sino-Tibetan borderland of which most architecture in the monastery was imperially commissioned (*chijian* 敕建), Qutan Monastery bore both political weight and religious importance. The monastery's imperial influence was confirmed by early Ming emperors, such as a commemorative plaque bestowed by Ming founder, the Hongwu emperor, as well as several huge stelae with inscribed edicts of the Yongle, Hongxi and Xuande emperors, and a tablet proclaiming "Long Live the Emperor" in golden characters. Even today, the monastery is referred to as the "Little Forbidden City in the West" by local inhabitants.³⁵

The religious significance of the Qutan Monastery and its close association with the Ming court made the monastery to a political centre of the region. For the Lu lineage, a mere eighty kilometers to their west, the vicinity to the architectural manifestation of Ming power proved advantageous. The Lu lineage thus began to connect with the Qutan Monastery as if it were bonding with the Ming court itself. The connections were built specifically in three ways: copying the monastery's architectural model, employing a similar aesthetic design, and building religious linkages.

The first way for the Lu lineage to draw connections with the Qutan Monastery was to take it as the architectural model for their own monastery, the Miaoyin Monastery, where the Lu leaders later kept the severed hands noted by Father Schram. Architects and art historians have identified numerous parallels between the Qutan and Miaoyin monasteries. When Longguo Hall 隆國殿, the biggest hall in Qutan Monastery was completed in 1427, Wansui Hall 萬歲殿, the very first building in the

32 Marsha Haufler, Faces of Transnational Buddhism at the Early Ming court, in *Ming China: Courts and Contacts 1400–1450*, 143–151.

33 On Qutan Monastery's relation with the Ming court. See Elliot Sperling, "Notes on the Early History of Gro-tshang Rdo-rje-'chang and its relations with the Ming court", *Lungta* 14 (2001): 77–87.

34 *Ming Taizu Shilu*, 3307.

35 In my personal field work experience, the locals expressed pride over such a reputation of the Qutan Monastery.

Miaoyin Monastery was completed only five months later.³⁶ As Aurelia Campbell notes, it is possible that at the practical level some of the same craftsmen were employed for both projects, resulting in architectural, iconographic, and stylistic consistencies.³⁷ The two halls also took on the same political function, expressed in the longevity tablet displayed in the Longguo Hall, which has “Long Live the Emperor” inscribed in the three languages: Chinese, Tibetan, and Sanskrit. Considering that the two halls were completed within the same year and possibly built by the same crew, it is most likely that Miaoyin Monastery also had a longevity Tablet. This theory is further supported by the hall’s name: “Wansui 萬歲”, literally meaning “May the Emperor Live Ten Thousand Years”.

Qutan Monastery and Miaoyin Monastery also present parallels in their exterior and interior design. In terms of spatial pattern, Wansui Hall shares similarity with the halls of Qutan Monastery. According to Aurelia Campbell, Wansui Hall’s three-by-three-bay ground plan with a pent roof sheltering a one-bay-wide hidden corridor is very similar to that of Baoguang Hall 寶光殿, the second hall constructed at Qutan Monastery in 1418. At the same time, Wansui Hall’s subsidiary chapels located slightly to the front left and right follow the exact arrangement of Qutan Hall, the founding hall of Qutan Monastery built in 1392.³⁸ Regarding the similarities between the two monasteries’ interiors, Karl Debreczeny suggests that Wansui Hall has an identical structure to Qutan Hall with its distinctive internal circumambulatory, and most remarkably a near identical iconographic pattern in their wall paintings.³⁹ The Buddhas of the Five Directions iconographic programme of the murals inside Wansui Hall also resembles that at Qutan Hall, and both halls display octagonal ceiling coffers painted with a mandala, as well as lattice ceilings depicting Sakyamuni and two attendants.⁴⁰

In addition to the similarities in construction and style, the Qutan Monastery and Miaoyin Monastery were also closely related in religious aspects. According to mo-

36 A date for Wansui Hall could be found inscribed on a Wansuidian roof beam. The inscription reads: “On the 26th day of the seventh month of the second, dingwei, year of the great Ming Xuande reign, the acting army and government office commander of Shaanxi Lu Shakya and, from the same household, the virtuous Xue Tian of the Li clan, generously paid money and ordered workers to construct a Buddha hall” 大明國宣德二年歲次丁未秋七月二十六日, 信官昭勇將軍陝西行都司士官指揮魯失伽同室淑人李氏薛天速發心施財命工蓋造佛殿 Translated by Aurelia Campbell with small revision by the author. See Aurelia Campbell, “A Fifteenth-Century Sino-Tibetan Buddha Hall at the Lu Family Tusi”, *Archives of Asian Art*, vol. 65 (2015), 106. “The inscription on the back of longevity tablet records the completion date of Longguo Hall: Erected on the 9th day of the second month of the second year of the great Ming Xuande reign, eunuch director of the directorate for imperial accouterments Meng Ji, Shang Yi, Chen Heng and Ruan Qiong” 大明宣德二年二月初九日御用監太監孟繼、尚義、陳亨、袁瓊立。

37 Aurelia Campbell, “A Fifteenth-Century Sino-Tibetan Buddha Hall at the Lu Family Tusi”, 105.

38 Aurelia Campbell, “A Fifteenth-Century Sino-Tibetan Buddha Hall at the Lu Family Tusi”, 97–98.

39 Karl Debreczeny, “Ethnicity and Esoteric Power Negotiating the Sino-Tibetan Synthesis in Ming Buddhist Painting”, PhD Dissertation (University of Chicago, 2007), 217.

40 Aurelia Campbell, “A Fifteenth-Century Sino-Tibetan Buddha Hall at the Lu Family Tusi”, 98.

nastic records, the reason for Lu Shakya, the early fifteenth-century Lu patriarch, to build the monastery was to preserve a sacred Buddhist statue of Vajradhara. It is said that the statue was cast in the eleventh century by Telopa, an Indian mahasiddha, and then taken to the Gro region. The Qutan Monastery was then built and later acquired by the Lu lineage.⁴¹ Lu Shakya thus built Miaoyin Monastery to materialise a long-lasting religious connection between the Lu lineage's domain and the Qutan region. While it is possible that this narrative in the monastic history was invented post facto to strengthen the religious connection between the two monasteries, Lu Shakya indeed wished to construct such a relationship. Immediately after the Monastery was built, monks from Qutan Monastery were frequently invited by Lu Shakya to teach the Dharma at Miaoyin.⁴² Lu Shakya must have cherished the arrival of these Qutan monks whose reputation and profound Buddhist knowledge could greatly contribute to the development of Tibetan Buddhism in his own domain.

It is exactly through Qutan Monastery that the Lu lineage successfully built a connection with the Ming court. In the Lu lineage genealogy, there are intriguing records that the Lu lineage was in possession of an imperial edict issued to Qutan Monastery in 1411. The imperial edict was in fact addressed to Penden Zangpo, the abbot of Qutan Monastery at the time, requesting him to identify and recommend eminent monks in the region to the court.⁴³ One may wonder why the Qutan monk would give away such a valuable document to the Lu lineage. In his search for the right candidate, the existing primary sources suggest that the eminent monk Penden Zangpo recommended to the Ming court Lodrö Gyaltsen, Lu Shakya's brother.⁴⁴ As soon as the Miaoyin Monastery was built, Lodrö Gyaltsen received two imperial edicts from the Xuande emperor. Praising Lodrö Gyaltsen's profound understanding of Buddhist Dharma and his accomplishments in pacifying the region, the imperial edicts also confirmed the Lu lineage's ruling position in Zhuanglang's Tibetan Buddhist community.⁴⁵ In this regard, the lineage obtained authority sanctioned directly by the Ming court to preside over the local religious community. Moreover, the imperial edicts functioned as a certificate which qualified Miaoyin Monastery as a tributary monastery, meaning that the monastery had acquired the right to participate in Ming China's tributary system. From then on, the monastery could send a delegation to Beijing periodically, paying tribute, as well as receiving tributary rewards and attendant political

41 Tai thung rdo rje bchang gi dkar chag ngo mtshar don gyi drib sung yongs su rdzogs ba'i pad dkar ljon bzang, woodblock inscription preserved in Miaoyin monastery.

42 Wei Wen 魏文, "Yuan-Ming xibei mengzanghan jiaorong beijing zhong de Lu tusi Jiazong zhengjiao shishi kao: yi Hongcheng Ganensi zangwen beiji shidu wei zhongxin 元明西北蒙藏漢交融背景中的魯土司家族政教史事考——以紅城感恩寺藏文碑記釋讀為中心", in *Xiyu lishi yuyan yanjiu jikan* 西域歷史語言研究集刊, (Kexue chubanshe, 2012), Vol. 5, 443.

43 Li Yongfeng, *Guangwu lushi shipu jijiao*, 33–34.

44 Huang Jian 黃謙, "Chici datongsi beiji 敕賜大通寺碑記", stele inscription preserved in Liancheng Museum of the Lu clan.

45 Li Yongfeng, *Guangwu lushi shipu jijiao*, 33.

capital. Such a direct channel of communication would have enabled the Lu lineage to deliver requests directly to the Ming court instead of via Qutan Monastery.

Through deliberate linkages with Qutan Monastery, the Lu lineage successfully established a religious relationship with the Ming court. Tibetan Buddhism, in this vein, was used as an effective means to strengthen the tenuous connection between the newly emerged Mongol leader and the Ming empire's political centre. Once this was done, the next step for the Lu lineage was to consolidate their power in local society.

Establishing Roots on Local Soil

Tibetan Buddhism became a vehicle through which northwestern Mongol leaders affiliated themselves with the Ming court in the early fifteenth century. At the same time, it also morphed into a tool for non-Han leaders to solidify their local influence. This section examines how the Lu lineage used Tibetan Buddhism to preside over a multi-ethnic local population that followed various Tibetan Buddhist sects in the mid-fifteenth century.

When the Lu patriarch was appointed military leader of Zhuanglang, the population they ruled was quite diversified. The Lu lineage governed at least three distinct groups of subjects. The first, of course, was the Lu lineage's original subordinates who constituted of the main body of the troops led by the Lu patriarch in the Qining Garrison. The second group consisted of surrendered Mongol communities who were ordered to settle in Zhuanglang upon their submission.⁴⁶ The third group comprised the Zhuanglang natives who had dwelled in the region since at least the Mongol Yuan era. It is highly likely that these Zhuanglang natives greatly outnumbered the first and second immigrant groups. This complex of constituencies begs this question as to how the Lu lineage, whose control only dated back to the fourteenth century, manage to firmly establish their local authority?

To penetrate into Zhuanglang local society, the Lu lineage utilised Tibetan Buddhism, a religion that had enjoyed popularity in the region for centuries. By the eleventh century, Lamaism was already quite influential in present-day southern Gansu and eastern Qinghai under the patronage of the Tibetan rGyal-sras. Tibetan Buddhism continued to enjoy patronage by the Tanguts in the twelfth century. In the thirteenth century, its local influence was greatly bolstered when the Mongol Prince Köten chose to meet with Sakya Pandita, one of the most powerful hierarchs of Tibet at the time, in nearby Liangzhou 涼州. In this region, many Tibetan Buddhist monasteries simultaneously functioned as political arbitrators, religious mentors, estate managers taxation collectors, and corvée enforcers.⁴⁷ Therefore, winning support from the Tibetan Buddhist community became quite decisive for the new local rulers.

46 *Ming Taizu Shilu*, 754.

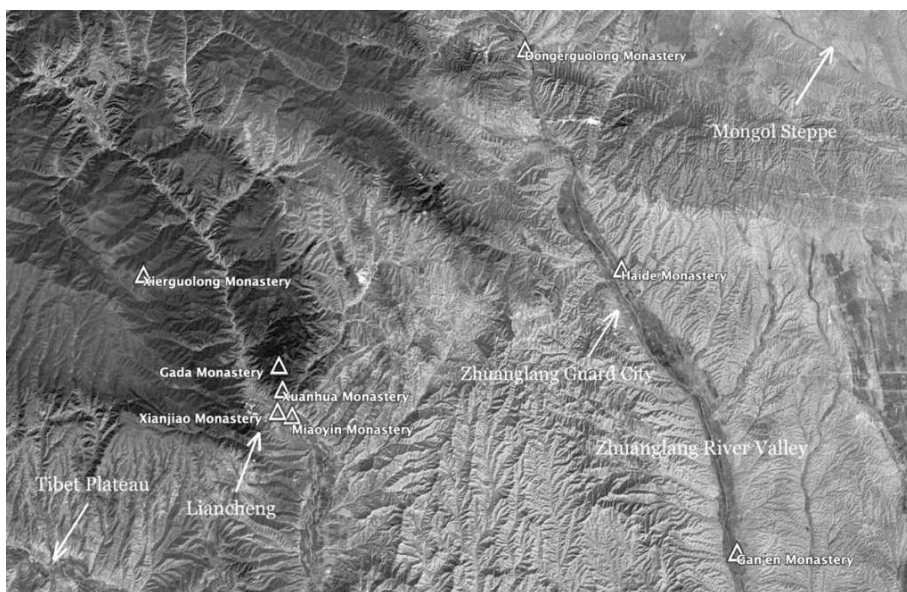
47 Paul Nietupski, *Labrang Monastery: A Tibetan Buddhist Community on the Inner Asian Borderlands, 1709–1958*, (Lexington Books, 2010), 53–113.

The first way the Lu lineage appealed to the local Buddhist community was to provide financial and labour support for monastery constructions. Throughout the Ming era, the Lu lineage supported the construction of at least eleven monasteries in the area, most of them built in the fifteenth century (Table 1). As patron, the Lu lineage had great control over the communications between these monasteries with the Ming court, ranging from major affairs such as construction projects and clergy appointments to minor issues pertaining to court-bestowed Buddhist canons and tea.⁴⁸ The Lu patriarchs even had their own likenesses portrayed in the monasteries’ murals to highlight their identity as patrons of the religious site.⁴⁹ This program of patronage was accompanied by the extension of lineage power into the religious realm. When Lu Shakya became the region’s secular leader, he succeeded in having his brother appointed as the religious leader. In a broader context, the distribution of secular and religious authority between two brothers in one generation was a common strategy that northwestern non-Han leaders employed to build local influence, and it proved quite effective for the governance of areas with big Tibetan Buddhist populations.⁵⁰

Table 1: Tibetan Buddhist Monasteries under the Lu Lineage’s patronage during the Ming⁵¹

Monastery	Founder (Lu)	Time
Gada Si 尕磋寺	Lu Xian 魯賢	Yongle, no specific year
Xianjiao Si 顯教寺	Lineage member	Yongle, 9 th year (1411)
Baoyan Si 寶嚴寺	Lineage member	Yongle, 16 st year (1428)
Miaoyin Si 妙因寺	Lu Shakya 魯失加	Xuande, 2 th year (1427)
Haide Si 海德寺	Lineage member	Zhengton, 12 th year (1447)
Xuanhua Si 宣化寺	Lineage member	Chenghua, 18 st year (1482)
Gan'en Si 感恩寺	Lu Lin 魯麟	Hongzhi, 5 th year (1492)
Dong erkuolong Si 東耳廓隆寺	Lineage member	Wanli, 40 st year (1619)
Xi erkuolong Si 西耳廓隆寺	Lineage member	Chongzhen, 5 th year (1632)
Baoshan Si 寶善寺	Lineage member	Ming, no specific year
Ta'er Si 塔兒寺	Lineage member	Ming, no specific year

48 Li Yongfeng, *Guangwu lushi shipu jijiao*, 34-35.
49 Luo Wenhua 羅文華, “Gansu Yongdeng Liancheng Lutusi shusi kaocha baogao 甘肅永登連城魯土司屬寺考察報告”, *Gugong Bowuyuan yuankan* 故宮博物院院刊, no. 1 (2010), 65, 77.
50 For examples, see Zhang Wei 張維, “Gansu Qinghai tusizhi 甘肅青海土司志”, *Gansu minzu yanjiu* 甘肅民族研究, No. 1 & 2 (1983), 109-128.
51 Guo Yongli 郭永利, “Shilun Gansu yongdeng liancheng mengguzu tusi lushi jiazuo de zongjiao Xinyang 試論甘肅永登連城蒙古族土司魯氏家族的宗教信仰”, *Qinghai Minzu yanjiu* 青海民族研究, no. 4 (2002), 76-77. Zhao Pengzhu 趙鵬翥, *Liancheng Lu tusi* 連城魯土司 (Gansu minzu chubanshe, 1994), 93-96.



Map 1: Tibetan Buddhist Monasteries under Lu Lineage patronage

Map 1 indicates the location of eight out eleven aforementioned monasteries under Lu lineage patronage. The spatial distribution of these monasteries demonstrates how the Lu lineage extended their influence by religious means. From the map, it is clear that several monasteries that were constructed in the early fifteenth century, such as Gada, Xianjiao, Miaoyin, all located in the vicinity of Liancheng 連城, Lu lineage's major residence. But in the mid and late fifteenth-century, as is shown through the construction of Gan'en and Haide monasteries, the lineage's religious authority had already expanded to the Zhuanglang River valley, the major route that connected Lanzhou, the political center of the region, to the eastern end of the Silk Road. As traders and travellers passed through the valley, their donations to the monasteries would have added to the Lu lineage's wealth and their communication with each other would undoubtedly help the spread of the Lu lineage's reputation. That Haide Monastery was located within the walled city of Ming's Zhuanglang Guard 莊浪衛 also points out the fact that the Lu lineage was using religious means to interact with the Ming's military system. Moreover, the map also shows that by the seventeenth century, the Lu lineage's religious expansion had already turned northward. The two Erguolong monasteries were located in places of relatively higher altitude with the Dong erguolong Monastery on the steppe. The northern part of Lu lineage's dominion was primarily inhabited by nomads, and late Ming materials record that five hundred herders

were governed by the Erguolong Monastery.⁵² The Lu lineage's late Ming religious strategy should be contextualised in the changing geopolitics of Inner Asia. By then, many Mongols of the Mongol steppe had begun to move southward to establish religious connections with central Tibet's religious hierarchs. Expanding the religious realm toward the northern steppe, in this regard, would incorporate the Lu lineage into a trans-regional political-religious network.

In addition to establishing their authority within the local Buddhist community by assigning lineage members as the region's top clergy, the Lu lineage patronised various Tibetan Buddhist schools to maximise their influence. Albeit that the dominating sect in the region changed over time, the Lu leaders always allowed space for other sects. In the late fourteenth century, the Sakya school had greater influence in the Zhuanglang region.⁵³ Therefore, both Xianjiao and Gada, the two monasteries patronised by the Lu lineage early on, were all Sakya monasteries.⁵⁴ But this did not preclude the Lu lineage from supporting Tibetan monks of other sects, such as Geluk and Kagyu, to preach in the region.⁵⁵ While the aforementioned Miaoyin Monastery was built as a Kagyu monastery,⁵⁶ it was converted into a Geluk monastery in the late fifteenth century, when the school began to rise to power.⁵⁷ Yet icons of other sects were retained in the monastery's murals and non-Geluk masters were continuously being worshipped.⁵⁸ Instead of maintaining an exclusive relationship with a single sect, the Lu lineage treated multiple sects more or less equally. In hindsight, such open attitudes toward Tibetan Buddhism prevailed in the Sino-Tibetan borderland region. For example, Dönyö Dorje, the king of Beri also adopted relatively egalitarian policies in his early reign.⁵⁹ For the Lu lineage, adopting religious policies that transcended ethnic, sectarian and political boundaries suited the circumstances in fifteenth century northwest China, where conversions from one Tibetan Buddhist sect to another was a common phenomenon.

Finally, the Lu lineage relied upon Tibetan Buddhist monasteries to control the local economy. This is mainly because that the monasteries in northwest China had

52 Liang Fen 梁份, *Qinbian jilue* 秦邊紀略 (Qinghai renmin chubanshe, 1987), 94.

53 This is most likely because Zhuanglang was close to Liangzhou, the place where Kōten met with Sakya Pandita, the Sakya school leader.

54 Xia Chunfeng 夏春峰, "Gansu Liancheng Miaoyinsi jiqi xiangguan siyuan tanyan" 甘肅連城妙因寺及其相關寺院探研, *Xibei minzu daxue xuebao* 西北民族大學學報 No. 6 (2003), 65–66.

55 Drakgonpa konchog tenpa rabgyé, Wu Jun 吳均 transl., *Anduo zhengjiao shi* 安多政教史, (Gansu minzu chubanshe, 1989), 127–128.

56 Wei Wen, "Yuan-Ming Xibei Mengzanghan Jiaorong Beijing Zhong de Lu Tusi Jiazong Zhengjiao Shishi Kao", 460.

57 Wei Wen 魏文, "Gansu hongcheng ganensi kaocha baogao" 甘肅紅城感恩寺考察報告, in Xie Jisheng 謝繼勝 ed., *Hanzang fojiao meishu yanjiu* 漢藏佛教美術研究 (Shoudu shifan daxue chubanshe, 2010), 366.

58 Wei Wen, "Gansu Hongcheng Ganensi jiqi bihua yanjiu 甘肅紅城感恩寺及其壁畫研究", M.A. dissertation (Capital Normal University, 2009), 62.

59 Peter Schwieger, "Towards a Biography of Don-Yod Rdo-Rje, King of Be ri", in Helmut Eimer, et al. eds., *Studia Tibetica et Mongolica* (Indica et Tibetica Verlag, 1999), 247–260.

the ability to accumulate massive amounts of human and land resources. In Hezhou, for example, there was a tradition for each family to send a son to the monastery to become Tibetan Buddhist monk.⁶⁰ A newly discovered source from Qutan Monastery also demonstrates how local people would donate their land to the monasteries.⁶¹ Thus, through the monasteries they patronized, the Lu lineage gained access to a large portion of the local economy.

At the same time, the Lu lineage used their endorsements from the Ming court to secure monastic wealth. The imperial edict issued by the Xuande emperor to Miaoyin Monastery in 1427 is an excellent example. The edict begins with the emperor's praise of Tibetan Buddhism for spreading good deeds among frontier dwellers and thus maintaining the region's stable social order. Then, it indicates that the monks who are affiliated with the monastery shall be permitted to conduct Dharma practices as they wish. The most important part of the imperial edict for our analysis is the third section. Here, the edict makes an explicit statement that no one, especially the local Han officials and garrison soldiers, are allowed to disturb this religious community, strictly prohibiting any incursion into the monastery's property – incl. buildings, lands, mountains, forests, gardens, material wealth, and livestock – on pain of severe punishment.⁶²

Many imperial edicts bestowed to monasteries under Lu patronage include the same content that iterates verbatim their absolute rights over a wide array of property. Such an explicit statement was most likely motivated by the fact that Zhuanglang had settled a large Han-Chinese military population in the fifteenth century. But with these imperial edicts, the great wealth the monasteries accumulated was rendered out of reach. Such an immunity, as a special form of autonomy, constitutes one important aspect of local society. As Paul Nietupski points out, the application of divine power to the physical realities of economics or territorial sovereignty were arguably very real in this region.⁶³ By controlling religious institutions that were not only rich, but also protected under imperial orders, the Lu lineage found a strategic way to assure their continued local influence.

Tibetan Buddhism thus became the vehicle through which the Lu lineage established their power in local society. They entrenched their authority by commissioning

60 Liu Dianneng 劉電能 & Shen Wenxue 沈文學 eds., *Hezhouzhi jiaozhu* 河州志校註, (Gansu wenhua chubanshe, 2017), 345.

61 In 1370, a farmer voluntarily gave his land to Qutan Monastery but requested to sign a contract with the monastery that allowed him and his descendants to legally farm the land in perpetuity. Such behaviour, if not coming out of religious dedication, should be understood as one way to avoid paying land taxes. Because of the tax deduction or exemption the monasteries enjoyed, many people were willing to “donate” their lands to the monasteries while in fact continuing to farm the land. See Suo Duanzhi 索端智, “Cong minjian diqi yinxin wenxian kan qutansi jianzi ji qita 從民間地契印信文獻看瞿曇寺建寺及其他”, in *Zhongguo Zangxue* 中國藏學, no. 4 (2016), 143–147.

62 Li Yongfeng, *Guangwu lushi shipu jijiao*, 33.

63 Paul K. Nietupski, “Understanding Sovereignty in Amdo.” In Roberto Vitali ed., *Trails of the Tibetan Tradition: Papers for Elliot Sperling* (Amnye Machen Institute, 2014), 222.

the religious complex's construction, supporting the development of various Tibetan Buddhist sects, and maintaining hegemony over the monasteries' political and economic affairs. In her research on the interaction between religion and local society in Ming dynasty northern Shanxi, Wang Jinping argues that the patronage from Ming imperial princes provided a mechanism that stabilised local religious society. Because of the princes' active roles in protecting the religious communities, many temple-centred local societies survived from the Mongol Yuan era into the first half of the Ming.⁶⁴ In this regard, we can see a similar process in northwestern Ming China, where religious life was maintained by the Mongol leaders' patronage.

An Indigenous Notion of Power

Tibetan Buddhism not only took on utilitarian functions for the northwestern Mongol leaders to redefine their relationship with the Ming court and local society. In important ways, however, it also changed the way they understood themselves. This section investigates how Tibetan Buddhism became an indispensable part of the identity politics of the Lu lineage and how they formulated the constructed self-image into an indigenous notion of power that eventually culminated in a peculiar form of rulership in the late fifteenth-century northwest China.

In 1495, the fifth patriarch of the Zhuanglang Lu lineage, Lu Lin 鲁麟, built Gan'en Monastery (Ch. 感恩寺 Tb. Kan ngen si). Two stele inscriptions, one in Chinese and the other in Tibetan, were inscribed by him to commemorate the monastery's construction. Unlike most bilingual inscriptions in this region, these two stele inscriptions have completely different contents. While the Chinese inscription highlights the importance of compassion and kindness, a narrative quite standard for a Buddhist monastery at the time, the Tibetan inscription is nothing like a monotonous eulogy. In contrast, it is much richer in content and elucidates how the Lu lineage understood the relationship between religion and power.

The Tibetan inscription of Gan'en Monastery is divided into two parts: the first provides a brief introduction to the background and reason for the erection of the stele, while the second part is a *deb ther*, a specific genre in Tibetan historiography for chronicle writing. Although the inscription was carved in 1525, it is clearly indicated that a certain portion of the texts referenced a Miaoyin Monastery stele inscription, most likely written half a century earlier in 1471.⁶⁵ Therefore, the content of the 1525

64 Wang Jinping, *In the Wake of the Mongols: The Making of a New Social Order in North China, 1200–1600* (Harvard University Asia Center, 2018), 215–267.

65 The Gan'en Monastery inscription states that the inscription took the Tibetan inscription in ta'i thung za'i, namely Miaoyin Monastery, as the basis for factual records and historical narrative (*tai thung zavi rdo ring gi yi ge gzhir byas*). After its 1427 first-stage construction, Miaoyin Monastery was greatly expanded in 1471. While many Buddhist halls were newly constructed, it is highly possible that the Lu lineage also erected a stele to record their patronage. Nowadays only one Chinese inscription written in 1449 for the Miaoyin Monastery was preserved in the textual form while the original stele was destroyed. However, considering the fact that the Gan'en Monastery stele was bilingual with two inscriptions carved in both sides, it is most likely that the

inscription, particularly the *deb ther* section, should be understood as a projection of Lu lineage leaders' ideas in the mid to late fifteenth century.

The *deb ther* portion of the inscription begins with what is called *chos 'byung* in Tibetan historiography. A *chos 'byung*, in its simplest sense, is a religious history of Buddhism. The *chos 'byung* in the Gan'en Monastery inscription portrays a thread of Buddhist dissemination from India, through Tibet to the Mongols, and rephrases their respective royal chronicles into a Buddhist narrative. This echoes the common format for *chos 'byung* writing of the day. According to Leonard van der Kuip, an upsurge in interest in Indo-Tibetan religious history is visible in various *chos 'byung* after the twelfth century.⁶⁶ In the late thirteenth century, when Phagpa wrote *The Explanation of the Knowable* (Ch. 彰所知論 Tb. Shes bya rab tu gsal) for Prince Chinggisim, he created a new orthodox Buddhist history by adding sections about the Mongol khans to the narrative, particularly the account that portrays Chinggis Khan as the Dharma-wheel turning king with the Mandate of Heaven.⁶⁷ The Indo-Tibet-Mongol trajectory of Dharma succession was thereafter adopted by many annals and chronicles, including the Gan'en Monastery inscription.⁶⁸ This is evident in the final section of the *chos 'byung*, in which Qubilai, as the emanation of Vajrayana, invited, guarded, and spread Dharma seeds for Sakya Pandita, the reincarnation of Manjushri.⁶⁹

In the Tibetan inscription on the Gan'en stele, the *chos 'byung* portion is followed by a genealogy of the Lu lineage's Mongol descent. The genealogy begins with one early ancestor named Sorqan, who once served Chinggis Khan,⁷⁰ and then traces Sorqan's descendants from Chila'un, Chimbai and Öljeitü in the thirteenth century, to

1449 Chinese inscription had a corresponding Tibetan inscription as well, written either around 1450s or after 1471 monastery reconstruction, and that the Tibetan inscription served as a reference for the 1525 Gan'en Monastery Tibetan inscription. For the full texts of the Gan'en inscription, see Wei Wen, "Gansu Hongcheng Ganensi kaocha baogao", 399. In this paper I change *tavi* and *zavi* to *ta 'i* and *za 'i* to follow the wylie Tibetan spelling rules. This applies to other transliterations of Tibetan texts in this paper as well. For Miaoyin Monastery's 1471 reconstruction, see Luo Wenhua, "Gansu Yongdeng Liancheng Lutusi shusi kaocha baogao", 67.

66 Leonard van der Kuip, "Tibetan Historiography", in José Ignacio Cabezón & Roger R. Jackson eds., *Tibetan Literature: Studies in Genre*, (Snow Lion Publications, 1996), 46.

67 For the main content of Shes bya rab tu gsal, see Constance Hoog, transl. and annot., *Prince Jin-Gim's textbook of Tibetan Buddhism: the Ses-bya rab-gsal (Jñeya-prakāśa) by 'Phags-pa Blo-gros rgyal-mtshan dPal-bzan-po of the Sa-skyapa*, (Brill, 1983).

68 Wei Wen, "Yuanming xibei mengzanghan jiaorong Beijing Zhong de lutusi jiazu zhengjiao shishikao", 446–449.

69 Wei Wen, "Gansu Hongcheng Ganensi kaocha baogao", 402, lines 1–10. In fact, Sakya Pandita was invited by, and had the meeting with Prince Köten, instead of Qubilai. When Sakya Pandita passed away in 1251, Qubilai was not the great Khan yet. The Lu lineage evidently simplified the historical narrative in the inscription to create a grand union between politics and religion.

70 The Tibetan text was written as "tshur kan zhes pa'i wang", the so-called Wang of tshur kan. Here Wang most likely refers to 王, the Chinese term for King, and tshur kan should be the transliteration for the Mongol word Sorqan, written in Chinese as 鎖兒罕. For the Tibetan text, see Wei Wen, "Gansu Hongcheng Ganensi kaocha baogao", 402, line 12.

Toqon in the late fourteenth century who surrendered to the Ming.⁷¹ From this brief ancestral list proceeds a bifurcated narrative: on one level, the inscription sets out the offices the Lu lineage members successively took in the Ming bureaucracy and their administrative and military exploits. On another level, it portrays the Lu patriarchs as dedicated Buddhists and patrons and enumerates their devoted offerings and Dharma practices, such as carving Buddhist grottos and building Buddhist halls, commissioning sutra printing, and inviting eminent lamas for ritual blessings.⁷² This section of the inscription also functions as a *dkar chag*, the genre for monastic history in Tibetan historiography. From the perspective of stylistic structure and rhetoric, the inscription is coherent in terms of regular sequence and intra-textual resonance.

It appears that this Tibetan inscription conveys three important messages. The first is that the Lu lineage positioned Tibetan Buddhism higher than being Mongol, as self-identification markers. Previous scholarship tends to use the Mongol ancestry portion of the inscription as evidence to examine the long-term debate over the origin of the Monguors, the ethnic group designated as Tu zu 土族 in Chinese.⁷³ However, I argue that claiming Mongol origin was not the real purpose of the Tibetan inscription. If it were, they would have put more emphasis on their ancestors' glories, provided a full genealogical account instead of only a few names, or simply used Mongolian as written language. In contrast, the identity of a Tibetan Buddhist seems much more meaningful to the Lu patriarchs of the late fifteenth century. As indicated in the inscription, the Lu leaders claim to have established themselves in the frontier region of the Jambudvīpa continent called Datong ("dzam gling sa'i thig la tha'i thung"),⁷⁴ and their mission, as the border guardians of the Buddhist realm, was to facilitate the spread of the Buddha's teachings in both Chinese and Mongol lands ("rgya sog go'i yul du chos ai(yi) dar bsam nas").⁷⁵ In this regard, the image that the Lu lineage wanted to construct was not primarily one of Mongol descent, but that of devoted Tibetan Buddhists who took on an intermediary duty in the eastward dissemination of Tibetan Buddhist doctrines. In other words, the Lu lineage members did not deny their Mongol ancestry, but more importantly highlighted their Tibetan Buddhists identity. Thus, the religious aspect replaced the ethnic aspect in the Lu leaders' prioritised self-identification.

What, then, is the function of the section on Mongol ancestry? I argue that the second important message of the inscription is that the Lu lineage's Mongol origin, an ethnic feature, was used to further claim religious legitimacy. The section on Mongol ancestry should be understood in relation to its genre, a *chos 'byung*, which positions the Mongols as mighty Dharma protectors and authentic successors of Buddha's teachings. In this regard, the prestigious Mongol origin served a religious function,

71 Chila'un was spelled as cha ni la 'un, Chimbai was spelled as Chen pa'i, and Toqon was spelled as tho kan. Wei Wen, "Gansu Hongcheng Ganensi kaocha baogao", 402, Line 13–15.

72 Wei Wen, "Gansu Hongcheng Ganensi kaocha baogao", 402–404.

73 Wei Wen, "Yuanming xibei mengzanghan jiaorong beijing zhong de Lutusi jiazuo zhengjiao shishikao", 450.

74 Wei Wen, "Gansu Hongcheng Ganensi kaocha baogao", 402. Line 18.

75 Wei Wen, "Gansu Hongcheng Ganensi kaocha baogao", 404. Line 62–63.

and its purpose was to help the Lu lineage claim justified patronage over Tibetan Buddhism. This is exemplified by the section on Qubilai and Sakya Pandita. By portraying the patron-priest relationship between the Mongol khan and the Tibetan monk, the Lu lineage wished to construct a model of reciprocity between the Dharma guardian and the carrier of Buddha's sacred teaching. Johan Elverskog argues that drawing on Buddhism for legitimacy was particularly popular among the Mongol leaders who could not claim Chinggisid blood, such as Esen Khan and Altan Khan.⁷⁶ Such a principle may also apply to the Lu leaders, who by all means were not of Chinggis' blood but still wished to construct themselves as part of a historical trajectory in which many great Mongol khans claimed authority on a theocratic basis. Such an understanding, from the perspective of Tibetan historiography, resonates with *chos-srid*, a form of sacred kingship characterised by the union of politics and religion. But as many scholars have already convincingly pointed out, the concept was interpreted differently to meet various agendas.⁷⁷ I propose that for the Lu leaders, their Mongol origin was an instrument of legitimacy drawn from Tibetan Buddhist cosmology in order to justify their local rulership.

The third important message conveyed by the inscription is the form and substance of the Lu lineage's rulership, which combined religious legitimacy derived from Tibetan Buddhism and secular legitimacy granted by the Ming court. Although religious legitimacy was claimed through patronizing Tibetan Buddhism, in the specific context of the fifteenth-century Sino-Tibetan borderland, exogenous ecclesiastical authority was not sufficient: the Lu lineage's mundane authority also required recognition from the higher secular sovereigns of Ming China. This explains why the second half of the inscription tirelessly lists the military merits the Lu lineage members achieved, the imperial rewards they received, and the significant positions and titles they were assigned by the Chinese emperor. Meanwhile, it makes sense of the juxtaposition of the Chinese and Tibetan inscriptions as they served different target audiences. Such forms of religious legitimacy, taken together with the political legitimacy bestowed by the Ming court, formed an indigenous notion of rulership that helped the Lu lineage preside over local society.

Tibetan Buddhism, in this regard, took on a decisive role in identity-making and rulership construction for northwest non-Han rulers. The most important identity that the Lu patriarch claimed was that of Tibetan Buddhists. They only further highlighted their Mongol origin because ethnic identity, according to the religious canons, also worked as a source of religious orthodoxy. In this vein, a deeper understanding of the

76 Johan Elverskog, *Islam and Buddhism on the Silk road* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 206.

77 For a detailed examination of the term and comparative cases across time and space, see Peter Schwieger, *The Dalai Lama and the Emperor of China: A Political History of the Tibetan Institution of Reincarnation* (Columbia University Press, 2015), 49–51; King Sung-so, "Principle of Religion and State and Mongolian Khans in Late 16th Century and Early 17th Century", in *Quaestiones Mongolorum Disputatae*, no. 1, (Association for International Studies of Mongolian Culture, 2007), 159–187.

self-identification of the Lu lineage members with Tibetan Buddhism calls for a reconsideration of the meaning of being “Mongol” in a comparative framework. What does being a “Mongol” mean in post-imperial Eurasia? Historians have paid much attention to the cultural interactions between the Mongols and various sedentary empires across the continent. In many cases, no doubt, the Mongols were greatly influenced by indigenous cultures. But the fact that the Mongols drew on indigenous notions of legitimacy and incorporated them into a new hybrid rulership may raise questions about the meaning of being a “Mongol”. Peter Jackson, in his *The Mongols and the Islamic World*, examines the Mongols’ conversion to Islam as the consequence of many factors, such as imperial marriage, political struggle, military necessity or simply a renarrative in later historical writing.⁷⁸ The Mongol identity, in his case, becomes a source of political legitimacy under the Chinggisid principle. In Ming China, however, such an identity could be a dangerous thing for the surrendered Mongols especially in the face of sensitive political turbulence.⁷⁹ This section has examined the construction of Mongol identity as a political method to attain not secular orthodoxy, but rather religious legitimacy. But more case studies in a comparative framework are undoubtedly necessary to fully reveal how the label of being Mongol was understood and used in a post-Mongol Eurasia.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have examined how Mongol leaders in fifteenth-century northwest China used Tibetan Buddhism to build the foundations for their rulership. While the Mongols in the capital region were considerably exposed to Chinese culture and thus acculturated to a great extent in the aspects of language, marriage network, and daily custom,⁸⁰ those in the frontier regions were not forced to undergo rapid Sinicisation.⁸¹ Their geographic and political distance from the imperial centre allowed these leaders to carve out a relatively autonomous space for themselves. And this space, for the Lu lineage, was permeated by Tibetan Buddhism.

Tibetan Buddhism was, and still is deeply rooted in the local society of present-day eastern Qinghai and southern Gansu. The case of the Zhuanglang Lu lineage demonstrates exactly how religion functioned under various local circumstances. It was a significant vehicle through which the Lu lineage acquired court endorsement, achieved hegemony in local society, and formed a peculiar version of rulership. But Tibetan Buddhism was far more than a mere political tool. On the contrary, it extensively reshaped the ways that the Lu lineage members understood themselves and

78 Peter Jackson, *The Mongols and the Islamic World* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 328–381.

79 David Robinson, “Politics, Forces and Ethnicity in Ming China: Mongols and the Abortive Coup of 1461”, *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, No. 1 (1999), 79–123.

80 Qi Wenying 奇文瑛, *Mingdai weisuo guifuren yanjiu: yi liaodong he jingji diqu weisuo daguan wei zhongxin* 明代卫所归附人研究: 以辽东和京畿地区卫所达官为中心 (Zhongyang minzu daxue chubanshe, 2011), 190–231.

81 Henry Serruys, “The Mongols of Kansu during the Ming”, 259.

defined others. Such interactions considerably changed the region's position on the spiritual map of the Tibetan Buddhist realm. As Aurelia Campbell points out, in the historical memory of the nineteenth century, the region was represented as a flourishing Tibetan Buddhist centre which motivated a great number of people and objects from all over the Buddhist realms in India, China, and Tibet to cross multiple geographic borders in order to gather at Zhuanglang.⁸² Because of the Lu lineage's effort, the region was not considered a backwater by the Tibetan frontier anymore, but a gateway for the Buddha's teaching to reach a broader audience.

When scholars talk about "the Mongols and Religions", much light is cast onto important figures, and stories are usually narrated from an imperial top-down perspective. People seldom pay attention to the less famous Mongols and their interactions with religion in local settings. Such unbalanced scholarly attention is partially due to the scarcity of primary sources, but it also indicates the dominating paradigm of the field. What this article hoped to achieve in this regard was to deflect from the "Chinese way of governing the Mongols" to emphasising the significance of the period of Ming rule for the history of Mongols in Zhuanglang. Religion, in this vein, sits precisely at the centre of this unknown history.

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82 Aurelia Campbell, "A Fifteenth-Century Sino-Tibetan Buddha Hall at the Lu Family Tusi", 92.

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