The conversion of the Mongols to Buddhism marks a turning point in world history. Patronizing Buddhism to a degree no nation ever approached, the Mongols brought Buddhism to its apogee as a world religion, connecting their empire with Buddhist centers over an area that stretched from the Pacific Ocean to the Black Sea. In so doing, their predilection for Tibetan-rite tradition over the Chinese sects favored by their predecessors changed the face of Buddhism to the countenance it bears today. The assimilation of Buddhism occurred since the onset of their campaign for world dominion beginning with the investiture of Chinggis Khan in 1206, but the Mongols did not convert to Buddhism until after Qubilai Qa’an’s (b. 1215, r. 1260–1294) reign. Once effected, conversion did not happen overnight. Just as in the case of their turn to Marxism-Leninism centuries later, the Mongols converted to Buddhism before actually having assimilated its doctrine. Conversion took a generation, with Mongols first rendering the dharma in their own language and then inculcating their children. Despite their conversion, Mongols did not forswear their traditional cult of heaven and went forward venerating the two very different religions as nominally coequal until the coming of modernity.

At the Mongol Empire’s founding under Chinggis Khan (1162–1227) in 1206, the Mongols were not unfamiliar with Buddhism. Khitan Buddhists, such as Yelü Ahai and Yelü Tuhua, were prominent members of their grand confederation, which included not only Buddhists but also Christians, Muslims, Confucianists, Daoists, and peoples of other religious affiliations as well. Buddhism flourished in a semi-circle of nations on their periphery: the Uyghurs of Qocho, the Tangut of Xi Xia, the Khitans of Qara Khitai, and the Jurchen Jin dynasty (1115–1234). Not far beyond was Buddhist Tibet. Chinggis Khan had relations of varying degrees with all of these nations and kept Buddhist scribes in his administration.

Chinggis Khan was not Buddhist. For the men of the royal family, submitting to a foreign discipline, Buddhism or otherwise, was proscribed as tantamount to forfeiture of sovereignty. Mongols saw foreign religions as they saw themselves – as nations to be dealt with. For a khan to assume a foreign religion implied submission
to the religion’s head. The sole deference of Mongols was to the blue sky (tengri), that is, the vault of heaven whence sovereigns create the sensible world through signs that engender spatial and temporal order on earth. For intercession between heaven and earth, the Mongols adhered to the pronouncements of priests and priestesses whose function was to determine the auspices of rule and sanctify those auspices through sacred ritual. Within decades of the empire’s founding, however, the status of Buddhism surpassed that of every other priestly order – including the Mongols’ very own. Initially, this change of status was something of a matter of happenstance resulting from the subjugation of the Buddhist nations at their periphery. With Toluid supremacy after 1251, however, it became a matter of predilection for the Buddhist dharma.

Mongol assimilation of Buddhism was not a simple matter of individual lords exercising personal preference for religion. It constituted one aspect of a greater geopolitical modus operandi. Bent on conquering the known world, dividing its spoils amongst themselves, and keeping everything in it in the family, the Mongols patronized religions as a means to achieving peaceable order. Patronage was contingent upon services rendered. In exchange for financial support, military protection, and special tax-exempt status, the Mongols charged priestly orders with praying to heaven (the sky above) and offering blessings. In practical terms, this meant that in return for patronage they expected religious orders to work to secure Mongol prosperity and support among the populace. Services rendered were manifold. In addition to sacred ritual and teaching, priestly orders carried out a variety of profane functions. In the case of Buddhism, these included government administration, calendar reckoning, divination, medicine, business, commerce, banking, manufacturing, construction, and agriculture. The Mongols patronized religious orders generally, but not all to the same degree. Some religions were more capable than others at rendering certain services. It is in this context of competition that Buddhism gained preeminence over other priestly orders – and then Tibetan Buddhism over other forms of Buddhism. Traditional wisdom held that of religions, Confucianism was superior for ruling the state, Buddhism, the mind. By the time of the Mongol Empire, however, intellectuals had come to esteem Buddhist statecraft.

The 1209 submission of the Uyghur aristocracy brought the Mongol Empire its first infusion of Buddhist influence. Since 1204, Uyghur scribes had been serving Chinggis Khan as his secretarial corps, and this presumably brought some Buddhist influence. The submission of the Uyghur aristocracy brought Buddhism not only patronage but also power and privilege, for now the population of Uyghur Buddhists belonged to the aristocracy. William of Rubruck reports that during his journey in the 1250s the Mongols privileged Uyghur Buddhism over every other Buddhist sect. He notes too that Uyghur Buddhist prelates carried the title toyin. The term comes to Mongolian from Chinese dao ren via Old Turkic. Eventually, it came to mean ‘lama’ in general, but during the imperial era referred specifically to a monk of noble birth.

Having begun to campaign in the Tangut Xi Xia realm from 1205, by 1207 Chinggis Khan was exacting tribute from Tibet and giving audience to delegations of Tibetan monks. With Tangut submission in 1210, Tangut Buddhists entered Mongol service. Chinese Buddhism, as patronized by the Jurchen, came with the campaign against North China that began in 1211 and culminated with the taking
of the Jurchen capital, Zhongdu (present-day Beijing), in 1215. During this period, as part of establishing Mongol rule in North China, Chinggis Khan summoned the leading Buddhist clergy and enjoined them to assemble a cohort of leading monks to see to the continuity of Buddhist practice under Mongol auspices. In return for praying to heaven for Mongol success, or in other words, working under Mongol auspices, they would continue to receive tax-exempt status. At this time, two eminent Buddhist personages entered Chinggis Khan’s service and joined the Mongol fold, the Chan Buddhist monk Haiyun (1202–1257) and the lay-Buddhist Khitan polymath Yelü Chucai (1189–1243).

Haiyun was still in his teens when first he met Chinggis Khan in 1214. The brilliant young disciple of Dhyana master Zhongguan (d. 1220) spent the remainder of his life in Mongol service, living for extended periods among the Mongol royal family who esteemed his teaching. In the 1240s, to study political science, a youthful Qubilai had Haiyun assemble a college of eminent Buddhist and Confucian sages who instilled in Qubilai faith in Buddhism as the vehicle most capable of engendering a pacific world. When his first son was born in 1243, Qubilai gave Haiyun the honor of naming him. The name Haiyun gave was Jingim (Ch. Zhenjin 真金 ‘True Gold’). Qubilai’s younger brother, Hülegü (1218–1265) studied under Haiyun at Qaraqorum and sought Haiyun’s blessing before setting out on the campaign that established the Ilkhanate (1256–1335). After Qubilai founded the Yuan dynasty, he further honored Haiyun with the erection of the Haiyun Pagoda of Qingshou Temple in Daidu (present-day Beijing).

When the Mongols took Zhongdu in 1215, the Khitan nobleman, Yelü Chucai (1189–1243), forewent his allegiance to the Jurchen and entered the service of Chinggis Khan. Adept in astronomy, literature, music, and medicine, Chucai knew the Three Teachings – Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism – but favored Chan Buddhism. Chinggis Khan made the eminent polymath a member of his retinue and endowed him with oracular power, that is, with authority to speak for the government. On his Western Campaign (1218–1225), Chinggis Khan kept Chucai in his imperial entourage as a chief secretary. Chucai handled various matters, including calendar reckoning, making omens, and healing the sick. At one point, Chinggis Khan charged Chucai to procure the presence of a Daoist Master, Changchun Qiu Chuji (1148–1227), head of the Quanzhendao School. Chucai saw to inviting the Daoist sage and his travel arrangements from China to Chinggis Khan’s camp in the Hindu Kush, north of Kabul where he arrived in 1222. Chinggis Khan had summoned him, wishing to learn the secret of longevity and, upon meeting the Master, was so impressed with the Daoist’s teaching that he granted Daoists special tax-exempt status and asked them to pray to heaven and offer benedictions. In the aftermath, Changchun’s followers at the Quanzhendao School took advantage of their privilege by appropriating Buddhist holdings. The ensuing conflict between Buddhists and Daoists lasted decades and led to a series of debates to determine which religion was the truer.

Through the reigns of Ögödei (r. 1229–1241) and his eldest son, Güyük (r. 1246–1248), Mongol patronage of Buddhism expanded significantly, and the legacy of Mongolian Buddhism began. This change of status was due to no special intention of the Mongols but happened merely through appropriation of the institutions of conquered Buddhist nations. The Mongol world remained, by and large, traditional
and continued to rely heavily on its indigenous priestly order. John of Plano Carpini’s 1240s travelogue shows the Mongol töre ‘state’ still in the hands of böge priests. Buddhists’ power largely was limited to Buddhist affairs. At Haiyun’s request, in 1229 Ögödei gave tax-exempt status to Chan Buddhist monks. Now when the Mongols sacked a city, they spared Buddhists. When the Mongols took the Jin capital at Kaifeng in 1233, the Mongol commander, Subedei, requested permission to exact a massacre of the city, but Yelü Chucai interceded to save the population from wanton slaughter and helped refugees settle to the north. In this war-torn era, as an alternative to military service and corvée labor, men began pledging to Buddhist monasteries and other dispensation-granting institutions in great numbers. By 1237, Yelü Chucai recognized that the number of priests, Buddhist and Daoist both, had grown too large to care for and imposed an examination in knowledge of scripture to screen Buddhist and Daoist priests. Those proficient received a certificate of adherence to their vows and had to promise to dwell in monasteries. An additional boon to the Buddhist sangha occurred in 1235 with the construction of Qaraqorum. In fulfilling his promise to his father to build the city, Ögödei constructed a series of palaces, pavilions, and temples and began construction on a great pavilion, pagoda, and temple complex that Möngke would bring to completion in 1256. By the 1250s, the small city was home to twelve monasteries housing monks of the various Buddhist nations and Daoists.

Late in life, Ögödei made an inroad into assimilating Tibetan Buddhism when, in 1239, he assigned his second son, Köten (1206–1247 or 1251), an appanage over the Tangut realm bordering Tibet. In 1240, Köten sent a Tangut general, Dor-ta Darqan, with an army to subjugate central Tibet and secure a worthy teacher, a lama-preceptor. After ransacking several monasteries, Dor-ta Darqan found his man, headmaster of the Sakya Order, Sakya pandita Kungga gyaltsan (Sa skya pandita Kun dga’ rgyal mtsan, 1182–1251). Sakya Pandita (or Sa Pa) was one of the great scholars of his time and came to be considered the founder of Mongolian Buddhism. By summoning the eminent sage to his court at Liangzhou (modern Wuwei), Köten was bent on patronizing Tibetan Buddhism whether Tibetans wanted him to or not. After dallying until 1244, Sakya Pandita set out for the Mongolian prince’s camp, stopping off along the way to give teachings. Traveling in the company of two nephews, Pakpa Lodrö gyeltsen (‘Phags pa Blo gros rgyal mtsan, 1235–1280, ‘Phags pa, for short) and Chakna Dorje (Phyag na rdo rje, 1239–1267), he arrived at court only in 1246. By that time, Köten had returned to Mongolia to participate in the 1246 quriltai that would elect Ögödei’s successor. Köten went to Qaraqorum seeking the qa’anship for himself. When the honor went to his older brother, Güyük, instead, Köten returned to Liangzhou in 1247 to find Sakya Pandita and his two nephews, Phagspa and Chagna, waiting.

At this time, Sakya Pandita and Köten sowed a relationship that would blossom into Mongolian Buddhism as we know it. According to Buddhist hagiography, Sakya Pandita cured Köten of an illness, initiated him in the Hevajra tantra, an esoteric ritual with a sexual aspect, and the two together established a certain Yöṅ cho (yon mchod) patron–priest relationship. A contraction of yöndak (yon bdag) and chö ne (mchod gnas), in this relationship a Lord of Alms or alms-giver, yöndak (yon-bdag, Mong. öglige ejen) agrees to provide material support, military and financial, to a chö ne (mchod gnas) ‘object of veneration’ (Mong. sitügen), his priest who sees to
the temporal needs of his patron and his patron’s people. In rhetoric, it is the priest who holds ultimate authority. When worldly matters are at issue, patron and priest have seats of equal height. In religious matters, the monk sits higher. This bond is designed to pull the state into an ultimately catholic Buddhist world. Buddhist histories refer to Köten’s initiation as the Mongols’ conversion to Buddhism. Modern scholarship often refers to Köten as the first Mongol Khan to convert to Buddhism. The reality is different. Köten’s submission to Sakya Pandita was nominal. He remained a Mongol first. In real politics, the patron–priest relationship subordinated Sakya Pandita as Köten’s subject and ultimately the subject of Güyük Kh’an. Around this time, Güyük granted Haiyun authority over all Buddhist monks in the empire—except the Uyghur aristocracy, and so, nominally at least, the patron–priest relationship further subordinated Sakya Pandita under the Chinese Chan Buddhist prelate as well. Most importantly, from Köten’s perspective, establishing a patron–priest relationship with Sakya Pandita secured the submission of the Tibetan Buddhist World. At some point, Köten made Sakya Pandita a viceroy of the Mongol Empire with temporal power over Tibet. Sakya Pandita sent a letter to the Tibetan lords calling upon them to submit to the Mongols and pay tribute, which they did.

Although some sources indicated that Köten and Sakya Pandita both died in 1251, we must keep in mind the uncertainty of Köten’s death. Regardless, Sakya Pandita died in 1251. Nonetheless, the relationship established by them between Tibetan Buddhism and the Mongols lived on. Möngke gave Köten’s appanage to his younger brother, Qubilai. In 1253, Qubilai took Sakya Pandita’s nephew, the young Phagspa lama, into his retinue. Though his junior by several years, Qubilai made Phagspa his guru. In 1258, Qubilai and his wife, Chabui, underwent initiation in the rites of the Hevajra tantra, and Qubilai and Phagspa reestablished the patron–priest relationship. In time, their enactment of this bond became the foundation for future church and state relations throughout the dynastic era and a precedent cited by China for its claim to sovereignty over Tibet in modern times.

During the reign of Möngke Qa’an (b. 1209, r. 1251–1259) the Mongols promoted Buddhism over other foreign religions, such as Christianity, Daoism, and Islam, and made Tibetan Buddhism preeminent among Buddhist traditions (apart from Uyghur Buddhism). Upon his investiture in 1251, Möngke initially confirmed Haiyun’s appointment as head of Buddhist affairs. By as early as 1252, however, Möngke replaced Haiyun with a Kashmiri monk of Tibetan-rite Buddhism, Namo, as head of Buddhist monks at the ordu. In doing so, Möngke bestowed upon Namo the title Ulus-un baghshi ‘National Preceptor’ (Ch. guoshi 国师), a title adopted from Tangut Buddhism for the governance of a Buddhist state. In this moment, while the empire itself was not yet a Buddhist state, Möngke changed the face of Buddhism at the Mongol court from Chinese to Tibetan. Scholars proffer several arguments in speculation over the reason for this predilection. A weak, anachronistic argument has been made that the Mongols had an economic preference for Tibetan animal husbandry over Chinese farming. A better argument can be made for Mongol preference for Tibetan Buddhist politics of syncretism, the tradition of holding multiple disparate traditions in kind rather than imposing a single, monolithic order. A good argument can be made for the superiority of Tibetan scholasticism (as embodied by the likes of Sakya Pandita). But one argument in this vein need not be deduced. Sources show clearly that the Mongols preferred Tibetan Buddhism for its magic. Derived from
the Iranian tradition of the magi, Mongol tradition was a magic-based tradition, and Mongols regarded Tibetan and Kashmiri Buddhists as the best magicians in the world.

A sign of Mongol esteem for Tibetan Buddhism is their missionary work to spread the dharma even into parts of their realm where it was either foreign or had long been absent. Kashmir entered the Mongol world when the tammachi Sali Noyan, commander of the tamma stationed in Afghanistan, conquered the Buddhist kingdom in 1253. It is perhaps through this connect that when he established the Ilkhanate (1258–1335), Hulegu favored the West Tibetan Kashmiri monks of the Pakmodrupa (Phag mo gru pa) sect and made Buddhism the religion of court at the center of the Islamic world.25 With Muslims and Buddhists traditionally at odds, the decision was radical and destined to fail – but not for lack of trying. The Ilkhanids supported monks from multiple Buddhist groups – Uyghur, Tibetan, Kashmiri, and Chinese. The Mongols sponsored these monks to translate Buddhist scripture into Persian and Arabic. In these manuscripts, translators substituted ‘Buddha’ with ‘Allah’. The great Ilkhanid wazir, Rashid al-Din, used the teaching of a Kashmiri hermit monk to write a Buddhist catechism for Muslims.26 In his Compendium of Chronicles, Rashid al-Din stated that before acceptance of Islam, the inhabitants of Mecca and Medina were Buddhists and that Chinggis Khan was a descendent of the tribes of Noah through Japheth.27 The Mongols spent lavishly to build Buddhist infrastructure in the West. They restored ancient Buddhist centers Islam had left to ruin and constructed visually magnificent temples and monasteries of Tibetan architecture along all major routes in a string that joined East and West extending all the way to the Black Sea, Anatolia, and Armenia.28 As microcosms of the universe, these monasteries became centers for education, study of Sanskrit, manufacture, agriculture, commerce, and moneylending, and were often favored over established Islamic concerns.29

After the Buddhist reigns of Hulegu and Abaqa, increasing fissures between Buddhism and Islam produced a rift that agents could exploit for political advantage, and the Ilkhanate’s Buddhist state began to destabilize. Playing on sympathy for Islam, Hulegu’s son, Tegüder (r. 1282–1284), was able to ascend to the seat of the Ilkhan by converting to Islam. He reigned as Sultan Ahmad but did not Islamicize the realm. His successor Arghun (r. 1284–1291) returned to Buddhism, but his reign ended in chaos and religious conflict ensued. In 1295, Ghazan (r. 1295–1304) converted to Islam and Islamicized the state, ordering all Mongol elites and soldiery to convert.30

The same political tension between Buddhism and Islam existed in the Ulus of Jochi, but there the politics played out in reverse. Berke (r. 1257–1266), son of Jochi, had converted to Islam in 1257 yet supported other religions, including Buddhism. In 1291, Toqto’a (1291–1312) used sympathy for Buddhism to overthrow the existing government and established himself as khan. Once in power, he made Uyghur Buddhism the religion of the court, but in the final years of his reign converted to Islam. After Toqto’a’s death in 1312, upon seizing power from his base in Khwarazm, Özbeg Khan (r. 1313–41) purged Buddhist clerics and all who opposed the Islamization of the realm.31

In the eyes of the West, Mongol patronage of a certain religion signified submission to that religion. In his early writings, Dante saw Mongols as Buddhists...
and then later came to see them as Muslims. \(^{32}\) William of Rubruck saw Sartaq (d. 1257), son of Batu, as Christian and Möngke as Buddhist. This perception, however, was mistaken. Although they made Buddhism their court religion and promoted it above other religions, the Mongols under Möngke did not submit to Buddhism to the extent that Arab kings and European monarchs had to Islam and Christianity, respectively. By maintaining the cult of heaven (\(tengri\)) over all, they remained Mongols first. This distinction is clear from William of Rubruck’s 1255 audience with Möngke Qa’an, wherein the mighty lord told the Franciscan that, as heaven has given different fingers to the hand, so it has given different ways to men. Heaven has granted Christians their scriptures, but Christians do not keep them. On the other hand, heaven has given the Mongols priests (or soothsayers). They do what the priests tell them to do and live in peace. \(^{33}\)

Möngke may have promoted Tibetan Buddhism, but he did not go as far as to prohibit the establishment of other religions or exclude them from his patronage. Rather, Möngke tested Buddhism against competing religions by subjecting the dharma to the rigors of debate. One debate occurred in 1254, when a Buddhist interlocutor engaged with an Islamic counterpart and the Roman Catholic missionary William of Rubruck. The following year, Möngke held another debate, this to resolve the conflict that had ensued following Chinggis Khan’s promotion of the Daoism of Changchun over the Buddhism of Yelü Chucai. Möngke summoned protagonists of both parties to court, the Daoist patriarch Li Zhichang and the abbot of the Buddhist Shaolin monastery in Qaraqorum, Fuyu Zhanglao. The Buddhists were declared victorious, but dissension continued. Thus, Möngke scheduled another debate for the following year, but the premature death of the Daoist interlocutor forced its postponement. Möngke then turned the matter over to Qubilai, who organized a third debate in 1258 at his newly built summer palace city, Kaiping (renamed Shangdu in 1264). Buddhists again won, but again dissension reigned. When the dispute resulted in bloodshed in 1280, Qubilai responded by sharply curtailing the prestige and influence of Daoism, a censure from which Daoism never recovered. \(^{34}\)

Qubilai Qa’an came to power at a time of political fragmentation in the Mongol Empire. His brother Möngke’s usurpation of power from the Ögödeids caused hard feelings among the royal family. At Möngke’s death in 1259, the wealth and territory of the Mongol Empire far exceeded historical precedent. But the wealth and vastness of the empire coupled with dissension over the question of Möngke’s successor created a void of vision for the future. Rather than going to the trouble of tanistry to see who would hold supreme power and carrying on with a united bid for absolute world dominion, the Chinggisids preferred to settle into their individual uluses. The royal family knew that Qubilai, son of Tolui, had a vision for the future. This vision, however, they saw as too radical. They opposed Qubilai and forced him to fight for power.

In his youth, Qubilai had been a student of political science. While still in his twenties, Qubilai had Haiyun assemble a stable of the best political thinkers in the realm. They counseled him on the possibility of using Buddhism to create a world order that might endure in peace and justice indefinitely. \(^{35}\) As viceroy over North China, he utilized his brain-trust of Buddhist and Confucianist sages to begin a series of experiments in good government. He founded a Pacification Commission and began to transform political administration, city planning, public welfare,
Möngke’s regular administration had opposed these efforts, but, after securing power through victory in a civil war with the Toluids’ youngest brother, Ariq Böke, Qubilai Qa’an was at liberty to put his vision for the future into action.36

At the top, order changed but little. Qubilai remained a Mongol. He never fully submitted to Buddhism, and throughout his life continued to venerate the Mongol royal family’s traditional cult of heaven. He retained the Mongols’ indigenous priesthood, did not prohibit the establishment of other religions and continued to support them. Rather, change came from the ground up. Through political innovation, Qubilai transformed the relationship between sovereign and subject. To effect this change, he relied extensively on Buddhist modes of statecraft. Promoting it with unheard of generosity, his reliance on Buddhist statecraft was such that Qubilai Qa’an became Buddhism’s foremost patron in all of world history. Qubilai showered Buddhist monks and temples with favor, a practice followed by many of his successors. So great was his munificence, that it caused strain on the state finances. Literally tons of gold and silver. Thousands upon thousands of bolts of silk and gold-spun cloth. All to produce nothing but the finest works of art and architecture and to support the most learned of monks.37

In promoting Tibetan Buddhism as the state religion, Qubilai had Phagspa preside over his 1260 inauguration establishing the Yuan Zhongtong 中統 government. Thereafter, he bestowed on his guru the honorary title Ulus-un baghsi ‘State Preceptor’ (Ch. guoshi). In 1264, Qubilai sent both Phagspa and Chagna back to Tibet. Phagspa he put in charge of the newly established Bureau of Buddhist and Tibetan Affairs, with authority over Buddhist clergy in Tibet. Chagna he invested with secular power over Tsang or Central Tibet. After years at Sakya, where he wore Mongol dress and imposed Mongol ways, Phagspa returned to court in 1268. At this time, he carried out the important task of realigning the Buddhist calendar in keeping with the Chinese. On March 17, 1269, Phagspa introduced a newly invented quadratic alphabet based on Tibetan letters to accurately render all languages in the dynasty. For his achievement, Qubilai rewarded him with the title Dishi 帝師 ‘Imperial Preceptor’. The position, adopted in accordance with Tangut precedent, affords its bearer real temporal power, the right to speak with the authority of the emperor.38

Later in his life, in 1278, Phagspa composed a primer in Buddhist teaching, a guide for the pious layman titled Shes bya rab gsal ‘Elucidation of the Knowable’, for Qubilai’s son, Jingim (1243–1286). Though said to have been composed at Jingim’s request, it was traditional Buddhist practice to educate the heir apparent as an awakened bodhisattva with a formal catechism of this type, known in Tibetan as bshad mdzod ‘treasury of explanations’, a type of compendium often written for kings and princes. Unfortunately for Jingim, having been named heir apparent in 1273, he was implicated in a court intrigue calling for Qubilai to abdicate and in 1285 preceded his father in death without ever having had the chance to apply his training. The catechism itself has survived. Originally composed in Tibetan, it was then translated into Chinese and Mongolian.39 Written in abhidharma tradition, the text, which opens with an invocation to Sakya Pandita, is composed in five parts. Part Three, a section devoted to the Animate World, gives the genesis of a Mongolian Buddhist world. In a genealogy proceeding from the deific sage-king Mahasammata
to the Solar Race of Kings to the kings of Tibet, the text goes on to say that 3,250 years after Buddha’s Nirvana, Chinggis Khan came to rule the world.\footnote{The foundation of the Mongolian Buddhist world lay in establishing Buddhist centers throughout the realm. This responsibility fell not only to the qa’an. Princes and wealthy aristocrats took it upon themselves to outlay funds for establishing Buddhist works, monasteries and temples, in their individual appanages and realms. Qubilai himself established at least three prominent Sakya Buddhist centers outside of Tibet. In 1256, while still viceroy of North China and at the same time Möngke Qa’an was completing the magnificent pagoda and great temple of Qaraqorum, Qubilai built himself a stately summer palace as a Buddhist garden paradise. Originally named Kaiping, with the establishment of the Zhiyuan government in 1264, he renamed the center Shangdu (上都) ‘Upper Capital’. There, as we learn from Marco Polo, he housed a large enclave of Buddhist faithful and clergy and placed the clergy in charge of officiating civil order. This charge entailed not only establishing spatial and temporal order and regulating ritual practice but also harmonizing Buddhist tradition with the Mongolian. Marco Polo tells us that at the beginning of fall in the Mongol calendar (August 28), Buddhist chaplains officiated the traditional Mongol mare’s milk aspersion ritual, formerly conducted, as William of Rubruck informs us, by the Mongols’ indigenous priesthood.\footnote{A second Buddhist center Qubilai established was a pilgrimage site to the earthly abode of Manjusri, the bodhisattva of wisdom, high upon a mountain terrace known as Wutai shan in present-day Shanxi Province. Qubilai’s patronage revitalized the pilgrimage site, which Sui-Tang China had made prominent and the Tanguts had maintained for the entire Buddhist world. The site drew pilgrims from as far away as India, Kashmir, Korea, and even Japan. Phagspa lama is said to have made pilgrimage to the site, where he made Qubilai an emanation of Manjusri. As an emanation of Manjusri, Phagspa bestowed upon Qubilai the epithet Sechen Khan ‘Wise Emperor’, by which he is remembered to this day.\footnote{The third Buddhist center Qubilai established was his capital city, Khanbaliq or Daidu. According to the city’s architectural plan, Buddhist monasteries in the four cardinal directions and at the four corners of the city made Buddhism the symbolic foundation of Qubilai’s world.\footnote{Within the Yuan capital, Qubilai established several Buddhist centers and erected a number of Buddhist temples and monuments – most of which have been destroyed. One of these was Candan Juu ‘Sandalwood Temple’, home of a large Sandalwood Buddha. Legend has it that the ancient Sandalwood Buddha resides only in the presence of a righteous king and possesses the magical power to walk from one king’s realm to the next. After having come to rest in the realm of Qubilai, the temple burned to the ground, around 1900, in the Boxer Rebellion.\footnote{To enliven his realm with Buddhist objects of veneration, Qubilai came to rely on the Nepalese artisan master Anige (1244–1278). Anige was discovered by Phagspa, who after a search for a worthy artist, commissioned him to erect a golden stupa in Amdo (Qinghai) in honor of Qubilai’s enthronement. When admirers judged Anige’s achievement surpassing expectations, Phagspa presented him to Qubilai, who went on to commission Anige for other works, including temples, stupas, and Buddha sculptures in Daidu, Shangdu, and elsewhere. Anige did the metalwork decoration for the astronomical and timekeeping instruments at the Daidu Observatory as well}}}}

The foundation of the Mongolian Buddhist world lay in establishing Buddhist centers throughout the realm. This responsibility fell not only to the qa’an. Princes and wealthy aristocrats took it upon themselves to outlay funds for establishing Buddhist works, monasteries and temples, in their individual appanages and realms. Qubilai himself established at least three prominent Sakya Buddhist centers outside of Tibet. In 1256, while still viceroy of North China and at the same time Möngke Qa’an was completing the magnificent pagoda and great temple of Qaraqorum, Qubilai built himself a stately summer palace as a Buddhist garden paradise. Originally named Kaiping, with the establishment of the Zhiyuan government in 1264, he renamed the center Shangdu (上都) ‘Upper Capital’. There, as we learn from Marco Polo, he housed a large enclave of Buddhist faithful and clergy and placed the clergy in charge of officiating civil order. This charge entailed not only establishing spatial and temporal order and regulating ritual practice but also harmonizing Buddhist tradition with the Mongolian. Marco Polo tells us that at the beginning of fall in the Mongol calendar (August 28), Buddhist chaplains officiated the traditional Mongol mare’s milk aspersion ritual, formerly conducted, as William of Rubruck informs us, by the Mongols’ indigenous priesthood.\footnote{A second Buddhist center Qubilai established was a pilgrimage site to the earthly abode of Manjusri, the bodhisattva of wisdom, high upon a mountain terrace known as Wutai shan in present-day Shanxi Province. Qubilai’s patronage revitalized the pilgrimage site, which Sui-Tang China had made prominent and the Tanguts had maintained for the entire Buddhist world. The site drew pilgrims from as far away as India, Kashmir, Korea, and even Japan. Phagspa lama is said to have made pilgrimage to the site, where he made Qubilai an emanation of Manjusri. As an emanation of Manjusri, Phagspa bestowed upon Qubilai the epithet Sechen Khan ‘Wise Emperor’, by which he is remembered to this day.\footnote{The third Buddhist center Qubilai established was his capital city, Khanbaliq or Daidu. According to the city’s architectural plan, Buddhist monasteries in the four cardinal directions and at the four corners of the city made Buddhism the symbolic foundation of Qubilai’s world.\footnote{Within the Yuan capital, Qubilai established several Buddhist centers and erected a number of Buddhist temples and monuments – most of which have been destroyed. One of these was Candan Juu ‘Sandalwood Temple’, home of a large Sandalwood Buddha. Legend has it that the ancient Sandalwood Buddha resides only in the presence of a righteous king and possesses the magical power to walk from one king’s realm to the next. After having come to rest in the realm of Qubilai, the temple burned to the ground, around 1900, in the Boxer Rebellion.\footnote{To enliven his realm with Buddhist objects of veneration, Qubilai came to rely on the Nepalese artisan master Anige (1244–1278). Anige was discovered by Phagspa, who after a search for a worthy artist, commissioned him to erect a golden stupa in Amdo (Qinghai) in honor of Qubilai’s enthronement. When admirers judged Anige’s achievement surpassing expectations, Phagspa presented him to Qubilai, who went on to commission Anige for other works, including temples, stupas, and Buddha sculptures in Daidu, Shangdu, and elsewhere. Anige did the metalwork decoration for the astronomical and timekeeping instruments at the Daidu Observatory as well}}}}

\footnote{689}
as for the royal family’s imperial standards. He did portraiture and painted Qubilai and Chabui for the imperial temple. In 1273, Qubilai appointed Anige head of the Directorate General for the Management of Artisans. A few of Anige’s works survive. The famous portraits of Qubilai and Chabui now hang in the National Palace Museum in Taipei, Taiwan. In Beijing stands his White Pagoda of Miaoying Temple. Also extant is an icon he made of the protector deity, Mahakala.

As the god of infinite time, the dharmapala Mahakala is the annihilator of all things – even time itself. Known in Chinese as Daheitian (大黑天) ‘Great Black Heaven’ and in Tibetan as both Nagpo Chenpo (nag po chen po) ‘Great Black One’ and Gonpo (mgon po) ‘Protector’, the Mongols know the deity as Yeke Qara ‘the Great Black One’ but especially as Gombo. Personifying ferocity and intelligence, Mahakala was the tutelary genius of the Sakya order in general and Phagspa in particular. Qubilai made Mahakala his spiritual guide or yidam, and Qubilai himself became the embodiment of Mahakala, the great protector of Buddhism. People venerated Mahakala as the genius of Qubilai’s martial power. Mahakala became the tutelary deity of the Mongols at large. From the Mongols – who themselves had appropriated it from the Tangut – the cult of Mahakala passed to the Manchus, who, centuries later, built a temple complex to Mahakala in their capital city, Mukden.

Qubilai’s reliance on Buddhism was such that he placed Sakya monks in positions of authority over the affairs of the entire empire and over the peoples and institutions that had formerly held those positions and wielded their power. Many felt diminished by the Sakyapa’s meteoric rise to power, priests of the Mongols’ sacerdotal tradition, Daoists, Syriac-rite Christians, Chan Buddhists, Uyghur Buddhists, and Confucian scholars to name but a few. At court, tensions existed between Sakya prelates on the one hand and members of the Uyghur Buddhist aristocracy and Confucian scholars on the other. Upon proclamation of the Yuan Dynasty in December 1271, Qubilai’s decision to subordinate Confucian predominance to Buddhism left the Confucian estate especially aggrieved. These tensions made court life rife with intrigue that from time to time came to a head in political violence. One such incident came in 1287 when, in order to deal with a budget shortfall, Qubilai put a Tibetan Buddhist monk, Sangha (from Tib. sengge ‘lion’, also seen as Sangke, Sang-ko, and Sengge), in charge of the finances of the entire dynasty by appointing him chancellor of the Supreme Secretariat. Sangha made some headway in the matter by introducing a new devalued currency, but his implementation of austerity measures on the one hand while enriching himself and the Buddhist establishment created opportunities for opponents to attack him. Officials denounced him in the presence of Qubilai, who had him dismissed, disgraced, and executed.

Along with the Buddha and the Sangha (the Buddhist community of monks, not to be confused with the finance minister), a third element in the creation of a Buddhist state is promulgation of the dharma. In the Mongol Empire, establishing the dharma entailed translation of scripture into the languages of manifold nations. The Ilkhanate patronized translation into Arabic and Persian. The Yuan funded translation into Chinese, Tangut, Uyghur, Tibetan, and Mongolian. Mongols supported the scholars and language experts necessary to do the actual translation and explication of texts as well as the artisans requisite to print and publish it. To produce text, publishers sometimes utilized movable type but principally made use of xylography, the production
of which required skilled engravers. Numerous monasteries published texts but mass production occurred at but a few industry centers located in Daidu in the north and in the West Lake region and the cities of Suzhou and Hangzhou in the south. As the southern publishing houses were still beyond his control when Qubilai first ascended to power, the publication of Buddhist literature increased with their acquisition after the conquest of the Song dynasty (960–1279) in 1279.

Translating, explicating, and mass producing Buddhist literature for each nation in the empire took a concerted effort. The Mongols assembled a diverse stable of distinguished sages from the Buddhist nations of the realm. Included among them were scholars of Chinese, Tangut, Uyghur, and Tibetan nations. Themselves incipient as a Buddhist people, Mongol scholars contributed little to this corps. Sanskritists such as the Uyghur Karunadas (Skt. Karuṇadasa ‘servant of compassion’) were necessary to maintain Sanskrit as the standard medium of Buddhist expression. Because Mongols were disseminating the Vajrayana Buddhism of Tibet, the majority of scholars either were of Tibetan extraction or (as the Uyghur Karunadas) at least lettered in Tibetan Buddhist tradition. The intellectual hub for this coterie was the Sakya School, which carried on a tradition of excellence in learning established by Sakya Pandita. Exemplifying the tradition was the eminent textual scholar and translator, Buton Rinchen Drub (1290–1364), who catalogued Buddhist texts, composed an important history of Buddhism (chos ’byung, 1322), and explicated the important cosmographic treatise, the Kalacakra tantra.50

During the reign of Qubilai (1260–1294), translation into Mongolian was something of an ad hoc phenomenon. Sonom-gara (Tib. bsod nam ‘merit’ + Skt. kara ‘maker’) translated Sakya Pandita’s aphorisms, the Subhasitaratnanidhi (Tibetan Lek shé [Legs bshad] ‘elegant sayings’, Mongolian Erdeni-yin sang ‘treasury of jewels’), from Tibetan into Mongolian specifically for the edification of Qubilai.51 A mandala-treatise written by Phagspa was translated specifically for Köten’s son, Jibik-Temür.52 Around the turn of the fourteenth century, however, publishing houses began to mass produce translations of Buddhist literature.

Translation into Mongolian was spearheaded by the monk Chosgi odsir (Tib. Chos kyi ’od ser, fl. 1305–1321). Of uncertain extraction, one might deduce from biographical information and his extant works that Chosgi odsir was an Uyghur born in Tibet and trained under the Sakyapa. In addition to Uyghur, he was learned in Tibetan and Mongolian letters. Around 1305 he translated Santideva’s famous didactic poem Bodhicaryavatara together with a verse auto-commentary (which would later be included in the Buddhist canon).53 In 1312, by decree of Emperor Ayurbarwada (1311–1320), 1,000 copies of his translation and commentary were block-printed at the Great Temple of the White Stupa in Daidu, where they were ‘distributed to the many’ (olan-a tīgūgilbe).54 Another extant translation of his is a hymn to the Sakyapa protectress Mahakali. Chosgi odsir was handsomely rewarded for his efforts and eventually set up in a monastery in Daidu as head of a circle of translators. A disciple of his, Sherab Sengge (Tib. shes rab seng ge ‘lion of wisdom’), translated numerous important works into Mongolian. These include the Pancaraks, Golden Light Sutra, and Chosgi odsir’s Tibetan translation of the Twelve Deeds of Buddha.55

Translation has direct benefit for teaching the literate, that is to say, to the elite, but even greater indirect benefit to the entire populace. Dissemination of the dharma
brought merit to those involved in the process of its creation. Hearing scripture inculcated Buddhist teaching as well as reading it for oneself did. What is more, the very existence of scripture held benefit as a talisman, for the Buddhist world saw it as a sign of peace. Especially irenic was the publication of a Buddhist canon, the reading of which constituted a potent magical ritual for instilling peace. In promotion of comity, Yuan emperors funded the publication of canons for the peoples of the various Buddhist nations under their sway. These included a Tangut canon (Xixia zang, completed in 1302), two separate Chinese Buddhist canons, the Puning canon (普寧藏, which was lost in a fire) and the Qisha canon (磧砂藏, still extant), and the 1312 Tibetan canon (bka’ gyur) and commentary (bstan ’gyur) compiled and published in manuscript form at Narthang Monastery in Tibet. The efficacy of this magic is clear in the 1340 Inscription of Arugh, Prince of Yunnan, wherein residents of Yunnan erected a stele inscription memorializing the prince’s contribution of 150 pieces of silver to Kunming monastery for an annual reading of the Buddhist canon in the name of peace.56

In the wake of Qubilai’s transformation of the Mongol Empire, succeeding generations of Mongols were born into a Buddhist world, and the Mongol conversion to Buddhism was complete. In their conversion, Mongols adopted Buddhist names, a common name being Sambuu (from Chinese sanbao ‘the three jewels’). They gave their children over to monasteries to become monks. They couched their propaganda in the moralistic idealism Möngke Qa’an had eschewed. And we might presume that they lived their lives in accordance with Buddhist teaching as well. A telling sign of their conversion to Buddhism is the rewriting of the history of their patron, Chinggis Khan. In the Yuan shi (History of the Yuan Dynasty), published during the Ming dynasty around 1370, the eulogy of Chinggis Khan says that in 1266 he received a new title, Lawgiving Martial Emperor. This new title marked the recreation of the Mongol world in Chinese dynastic tradition. Then, in 1309, he received the expanded title Lawgiving Martial Emperor for whom the Dharma and Heaven Opened the Way to Good Fortune. This title marked the recreation of the Mongol world as a Chinese-Mongolian-Buddhist world. In this relationship between dharma and heaven, just as the priest held ultimate authority over the patron in the patron–priest relationship, so the dharma superseded heaven. The relationship is evident in a passage from the 1346 Buddhist Inscription of Qaraqorum. The passages states that the power of Buddhist faith creates, ‘the capacity of the Great Holy Man to regard the ‘Four Seas’ (i.e., the World) as anthills, to regard the ‘Eight Limits (of the Earth)’ as a pinch of soil, to put the whole universe in a bag, and to roll up the rivers and mountains as a mat.’57

Eventually, as the power of the emperorship became more formal than real, Mongol sovereignty was subordinated to the dharma. Illustration of this subordination is the Vajrabhairava Mandala, a large silk tapestry dated ca. 1328–1329, now kept at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. Below the mandala’s central deity, the Conqueror of Death, Yamantaka, in the painting’s lower-right corner, sit in prayerful supplication from right to left the emperors Toq-Temür (r. 1328–1329, 1329–1332) and Qoshila (r. 1329), and their respective wives in the same posture to the left. Such representation would have been unthinkable to Qubilai Qa’an and his predecessors. Recounting the Mongols’ conversion, the Fozu lidai tongzai (佛祖歷代通載) of 1333 says that Chinggis Khan ruled from the North over many
nations with many languages as a king who turns a wheel of iron. Qubilai, following his brother, Mongke, on the throne of emperor and king, subjected many nations and territories and powerfully extended his frontier. He adopted the teachings of the Buddha and transformed his people in accordance with the law. Consequently, Buddhism flourished twice as much as before.

Ironically, not long after the Mongols had grown accustomed to the Buddhist world they had created that world turned against them. In May 1351, workers enlisted to rebuild the flood-damaged Grand Canal, facing economic hardship, natural disaster, and the Bubonic Plague, donned red turbans and red clothes, and rebelled. These ‘Red Turbans’ fought under the leadership of the White Lotus Society (Chinese Da bai lian she 大白蓮社), a Buddhist millennial group created to usher in apocalypse when the coming of the end is plain to see. Although by 1354 the Mongols had put down the initial rebellion, by 1355 the Yuan dynasty was in shambles. Rebellion resumed under the leadership of a former monk, Zhu Yuanzhang (1328–1398). Having retaken the South, in 1368 Zhu drove his forces north to Daidu. On September 14, 1368, his armies forced the reigning Yuan emperor, Toghan Temür (b. 1320, r. 1333–1370), to flee. That same year, Zhu Yuanzhang founded the Ming dynasty (1369–1644) and reigned as the Hongwu emperor. In the aftermath, Confucian scholars blamed the Yuan collapse on Toghan Temür’s personal deficiencies, in particular for being too preoccupied with tantric sex to attend to the business of his empire. A later Mongol chronicle, the Altan tobchi, presents Toghan Temür as lamenting the loss of the Yuan capital, saying that he lost his poor Daidu while propagating the laws of religion, while becoming accustomed to the religion.

Though the Yuan dynasty would continue to reign in the north until 1635, by the end of the fourteenth century, Mongol power had largely collapsed everywhere. Yet, despite the decline of Mongol patronage, the Buddhist establishment survived. As evidenced by their retention of the position of Imperial Preceptor, the Chinggisids continued to support Sakya Buddhism in the Northern Yuan. During the Mongol-Oirat wars of the mid-fifteenth century, Esen Khan (1407–1455) promoted Buddhism and tried to use it to establish tribute relations with the Ming. The Chaghadaid Ulus, which had patronized Tibetan Buddhism since the death of the Ögedei, Qaidu in 1301, continued to do so to varying degrees into the fifteenth century.

In the wake of Mongol collapse, the world stood transformed from the aristocratic dominion imposed by Chinggis Khan and the soteriological dominion imposed by Qubilai. By the fifteenth century, vast soteriological dominions reigned supreme, Christianity in the West and North, Islam in the Center, and Buddhism in the East. When first they established their patron–priest relationship in 1258, Qubilai was forty-three years old and Phagspa but twenty-three. While Phagspa would exercise impermanence in 1280 at the age of forty-five and Qubilai became a Buddha in 1294 at age seventy-nine, the two together, Qubilai and Phagspa, are remembered as founders of a new world order. Their coming together as patron and priest established the precedent for all subsequent Tibetan-Buddhist dual regency church-and-state governments. In 1378, they were reincarnated in the bodies of Altan Khan and his guru, Sonam Gyatso, the third Dalai Lama, and thereafter, one reigning monarch and chief priest after another.
NOTES

1 Cleaves 1955, 402.
2 Baumann 2013, 234.
3 TMM, 139–141, passim.
4 Sagaster 2007, 379–381.
5 Sagaster 2007, 381.
6 EMME, 48, 117, 278.
7 de Rachewiltz 1962a, 1962b; TOA.
8 TMM, 8–14.
9 EMME, 528.
10 As reported by William of Rubruck (TMM, 184).
12 Petech 1990, 8; Sagaster 2007, 383.
13 Sagaster 2007, 384.
14 Petech 1990, 8.
15 EMME, 321.
17 Petech 1990, 5.
18 Sagaster 2007, 385. If Köten did not die in 1247, then this occurred in 1249. If not, then it must have occurred in 1246 or 1247.
19 Sagaster 2007, 386. Again, here we are assuming that Köten lived this long.
20 Petech 1990, 10.
21 Petech 1990, 15.
23 EMME, 48.
25 Sperling 1990.
26 Jahn 1956, 122.
27 Prazniak 2014, 669.
28 Prazniak 2014, 653.
29 Prazniak 2014, 661.
30 EMME, 50.
31 EMME, 50, 206–207.
32 Baumann 2015.
33 TMM, 91, 187–197.
34 Sagaster 2007, 389.
35 Sagaster 2007, 382–383.
37 Sagaster 2007, 392.
39 Kara 2016, 43.
40 Hoog 1983, 42.
41 Polo 1929, 300–327.
42 Debreceny 2011, 1–23.
43 Charleaux 2015.
44 Steinhardt 1983, 151.
45 Franke 1978, 72–76. For a precedent to the Yuan Sandalwood Buddha in the Jurchen Jin, see Tillman and West 1995, 161. For its destruction in 1900, see Charleaux 2014, 1.
46 EMME, 13–14.
47 Jing 1994.
49 EMME, 488.
51 Kara 2005, 44; see also Bosson 1969.
52 Kara 2005, 42.
53 Kara 2005, 274.
54 Cleaves 1954, 55, 86.
55 Kara 2005, 46.
56 Kara 1964; Cleaves 1965.
57 Cleaves 1952, 32.
58 EMME, 610.
59 Bawden 1955, 57–58.
60 Serruys 1963, 187.
61 EMME, 87.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


EMME, See List of Abbreviations.


TMM, See List of Abbreviations.