

# The Role of Genghis Khan in the Promotion of Mongolian Buddhism and Mongolian Identity

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## Abstract

The region of Mongolia was known to the world for the Nomadic tribes, their war skills, and fierce conquering strategies. The influence of Mongolian Nomadic tribes was not limited to the Asian subcontinent. Their war skills had potentially set a wave of trepidation in Eurasia and other provinces of Europe. However, the nomadic tribes that were dreaded by other kingdoms both in Asia and Europe were not integrated and had fragmented existence. Over the period of time, Genghis Khan, under his dynamic leadership, made every effort to establish the Mongolian identity of the Mongols, promoted Buddhism and its teachings to the common mass. Although his characters have been often misunderstood by the majority of the people outside Mongolia, there is a need to study his role and contribution in making present-day Mongolia.

In this backdrop, this paper would analyze Genghis Khan's contribution in pioneering the creation of an integrated state, Mongolian identity, and Mongolian Buddhism.

**Keywords:** Nomadic Tribes, Conquering Strategies, Nomadic Tribes, Fragmented Existence, Integrated State, Mongolian Identity, Mongolian Buddhism.

## Introduction:

Mongolia has traditionally been known for its long history of nomadic tribes. The tasking of bringing the different tribes together was initiated only under the genius leadership of Genghis Khan. From a rudderless insignificant existence to becoming of splendiferous conqueror and warrior, Genghis Khan worked extensively on the integration of his nomadic tribe that believed in the discipline and principle of the austere military state. He then shifted his focus to other nomadic tribes followed by a stream of conquering on the settlements that

existed beyond the realm of Nomadic tribes. He laid the plinth of the great Mongolian army by uniting the people of different Mongolian tribes and other settlements that had eventually set a wave of conquest and plunder over the Pacific Coast of China, regions near to the Adriatic Sea and beyond. Thus the credit of the creation of a strong and fierce Mongolian Empire would go to Genghis Khan and his magnificent leadership and warrior skills.<sup>1</sup>

Different discourse related to Mongolian Nationalism has been argued by historians and scholars of Mongolian studies. Most of them agreed with the discursive labyrinth related to Mongolian Nationalism that dated prior to the twentieth-century and was framed on the basis of various facets that included customs, language, and religion. One can trace that their nationalism would not fit into the concept of nationalism as perceived in the modern world, as the Mongolian Empire did not imbibe the concept of citizenship and other nuances of nationalism and nationhood. They rather focused on the integration and unity of the fragmented tribe. In order to raise a strong Mongolian army, Genghis Khan realized that the unity of tribes and other settlements was a prime requisite factor. Thus he not only integrated them but also imbibed discipline, worked on the strategies of mobility and trained them to strengthen the internal security of the Mongol territory. The series of successful conquest also increased the threat of invasion by other potent dynasties and non-ally groups. Thus the challenge of raising a strong army that would take care of both Mongolian territories and continue the conquest beyond its territory was of prime importance.<sup>2</sup>

The scholars of Mongolian Studies like Mönkh-Erdene would argue that in the regime of the Qing dynasty, people from different social strata experienced a threat to their culture and language. The imposition of Chinese culture had laid an immense set back on the cultural heritage of Mongolia.<sup>3</sup> When people of Mongolia took note of the ascendance of Chinese culture that was gradually engulfing their diverse culture and linguistics, they realized that the continuation of Chinese occupancy would eventually lead to the veneering and vanishing of their indigenous cultural practices and language. The threat to Mongolian culture and language with the occupancy of Russia and the communist regime, the people of Mongolia realized that their beloved country would be reduced to 'geo-body' on the face of which their

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Genghis-Khan/Rise-to-power>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Genghis-Khan/Rise-to-power>

<sup>3</sup> Vesna A. Wallace(2015) (ed.), "Buddhism in Mongolian History, Culture, and Society", Oxford University Press.

indigenous culture would perish and the upcoming generations would not be able to know about their rich culture and linguistic practices.<sup>4</sup>

The spirit of nationalism strongly emerged as against the rising power of Chinese occupancy in the early twentieth century. Although the Communist Russian Army was responsible for battling out the Qing dynasty from Mongolia, their cultural hegemony soon became responsible for the loss and cultural decay of Mongolia culture. Thus the culmination of the Mongolian identity of Mongols took place only after the crumbling of Communism and independence from the Soviet Union.<sup>5</sup> While engaging in the task of restoring the loss and decay of their culture, Mongolians realized that they need to revisit their past and rich cultural heritage that one upon a time awed the entire world. Thus strengthening of Mongolian identity was in need to revoke the thirteen-century history that included the ethnographical and cultural identity.<sup>6</sup> This further felicitated the necessity to revisit the achievements of Genghis Khan, not the negative aspects but to explore the optimistic avenues of his excellence. It was not a pleasant and acceptable task as for Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party he was a feudal leader and for the Russian and Western Scholars, he was a barbaric conqueror and oppressor.<sup>7</sup> Thus with the reframing of Mongolian identity, there was a need to restructure the image of Genghis Khan, in order to negate the way he was perceived by the world. This was majorly done by revoking the Buddhist renaissance and the liaison that existed between Genghis Khan and his contribution to integrating Mongolia under his regime and creating a space that fostered the evolution of Buddhism and its religious principles in Mongolia.

### **Genghis Khan and Mongolian Buddhism**

Before embracing other religions that reached Mongolia through Silk routes and their contacts with other civilizations, the nomadic tribes of Mongolia were the believers of *Shamanism*. The nomadic tribes had faith in *Mongke Tenggeri* which imbibed the concept of "Everlasting Heaven" and the heavenly spirits and deities.<sup>8</sup> It was believed that people were able to communicate with *Mongke Tenggeri* and other heavenly spirits namely *yebes*, and *diligent*.<sup>9</sup> The task of communicating with these heavenly spirits was mostly bestowed upon

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>A. K. Narain (Ed.) (1986) *The Journal of The International Association of Buddhist Studies*, University of Wisconsin, Madison, USA.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

the priests, monks, or *Khojas* who were called upon to pray for Khan and the betterment for the people of Mongolia.<sup>10</sup> These priests or *Khojas* were mostly not from Mongolia and were invited to invoke prayers and communicate with the heavenly deities. There are historical records according to which the Chinese Taoist leader *Ch'iu Ch'uchi* traveled miles across through Afghanistan to meet Genghis Khan.<sup>11</sup> A similar narrative also existed regarding Tibetan lama *Sa-skya Pandita*, the well-renowned monk of *Sa-skya* sect who was invited in the camps of *Kotan*. While coming in contact with the foreign priests, Mongolian soon realized that their religion is too primitive and disintegrated unlike other evolving religions like Islam, Buddhism, and Christianity, as their religion did not have an organized way of praying or doctrines to follow. This was one of the sole reasons why some members from the ruling class started adopting other religions like Buddhism, Christianity or Islam.<sup>12</sup> However, one needs to question the popularity that evolved for Buddhism as against other religions.

The Mongolian Khans of Yuan dynasty that was located in the territories of present-day China adopted Tibetan Buddhism over other religions and honored *-skya-pa* lamas as their supreme religious instructor. This was mostly because Mongolians found similarities between their Shamanism and teachings of Buddhism that was based on Karma and the existence of Heaven. Besides the religious similarities, they could also trace cultural similarities in the practices and teachings of Buddhism.<sup>13</sup>

There are many arguments put forward by the scholars of Mongolian Studies related to the faith of Genghis Khan. In 1962, during the third Congress of Mongolian Writers, an eminent author Damdinsüren Tsendiin who has done substantial work on Mongolia argued that European Scholars have painted a negative portrait of Genghis Khan as they read him through their lens and the negative portrayal of Genghis Khan have been presented in the entire world. A similar trend continued in the soviet regime, owing to which Genghis Khan was always looked at as a barbaric, merciless conqueror and not as a Buddhist believer who extensively worked on popularizing the Buddhist religious principles in Mongolia during his regime. Khürelbaatar Lkhamsüreniin, a Mongolian scholar had also put forward a similar view. In the essay titled “Chinggis Khan and Mongolian Buddhism”, he mentioned about

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> A. K. Narain (Ed.) (1986) *The Journal of The International Association of Buddhist Studies*, University of Wisconsin, Madison, USA.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

Genghis not as a barbaric ruthless conqueror and ruler but as a devout Buddhist.<sup>14</sup> Many other Scholars like Choimaa Sharavyn have taken forward the same argument, negating the European perception of Genghis Khan as a bloodthirsty ruler and have restated his image as a pioneer who worked on evolving Buddhism as a supreme religion in Mongolia and was also responsible for further popularizing the doctrines of the Buddhist religion.<sup>15</sup> He prioritized Buddhism over other religions because he could trace the elements of stoicism that Buddhism propagated through its principles.

## Conclusion

The restructuring of the Mongolian identity of the people of Mongolia majorly happened in the Soviet regime, as against their cultural dominance. It was during this time when Genghis Khan and his attempts to build a strong integrated nation were brought to limelight. His contribution to popularizing Buddhism in Mongolia was talked about along with seeing him as a positive figure, started as a rage against the Soviet regime. Looking at Genghis Khan as a ruler who established an integrated state and Mongolian identity based on the principles of Buddhist '*dhamma*' completely negated the European portrayal of Genghis Khan as a barbaric conqueror and broadened avenues for further development in the domain "Genghis and his Buddhism".

This study has limitations as it is broadly based upon the available contents relevant to this subject area and there is a need to conduct further study on this area of studies which will bring forth new unexplored facts.

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<sup>14</sup> Vesna A. Wallace (2015) (ed.), "Buddhism in Mongolian History, Culture, and Society", Oxford University Press.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

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