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**Ancient history of the Mongols according to Gombojab,
an eighteenth century Mongolian historian**

Abstract

A Mongolian noble Gombojab (Tib. mGon-po-skyabs) knew the Mongolian, Manchu, Chinese and Tibetan languages. His translations from Tibetan into Chinese and from Chinese into Tibetan are found in the Chinese Tripitaka (*Dazangjing*) and the sDe-dge edition of the Tibetan Buddhist Canon (*bKa'-gyur*) respectively. His other works demonstrate his profound interest in the history of China, Mongolia and Tibet. This paper thoroughly analyses Gombojab's way of depicting the ancient history of the Mongols, primarily on the basis of his chronicle written in Tibetan *rGya-nag chos-'byung* ("A History of Buddhism in China") and reveals his achievements and shortcomings.

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The emergence of the multinational Manchu Qing Empire in the 17th century also resulted in the establishment of greater contacts between different peoples. It was the policy of the Manchus to accept the diversity of the peoples under their rule. By the 18th century a considerable number of individuals who knew several languages appeared among the Manchus and the Mongols. A Mongolian noble Gombojab (Tib. mGon-po-skyabs) who originated from the princely family of the Üjümüčin ayimay in Inner Mongolia. He knew the Mongolian, Manchu, Chinese and Tibetan languages. Gombojab lived in Beijing where he was the director of the School of the Tibetan language (Xifanxue zongguan). He had the title of *fuguogong* which was the sixth rank in the Qing empire. His translations from Tibetan into Chinese and from Chinese into Tibetan are found in Chinese Tripitaka (*Dazangjing*) and in the sDe-dge edition of the

Tibetan Buddhist Canon (*bKa'-gyur*) respectively.¹ His other works demonstrate his profound interest in the history of China, Mongolia and Tibet.

Earlier Mongolian histories usually began from the legendary ancestors of Činggis Khan. Interesting is that the Chinese name for the “northern barbarians” *beidi* was regarded by Mongolian historians as the most ancient name for the Mongols. In Mongolian this name was *Bida ulus*. It is said that Bōrte Činu-a, the most distant known ancestor of Činggis Khan, met people called *Bida* who made him their ruler.² However, Gombojab was the first Mongolian historian to identify as Mongols the nomadic peoples who have inhabited Central Asia since very ancient times. This is evident from his work written in Tibetan, *rGya-nag chos-byung* (“A History of Buddhism in China”),³ and his Tibetan translation of the *Da Tang Xi yu ji* (“Record of the Western Regions”) by Xuanzang (602–664).⁴

The only existing copy of the Tibetan translation of the “Record of the Western Regions” is from Üjümüčin ayimay kept now in Kyoto at the Otani University (Ōtani Daigaku) Library. As for the “History of Buddhism in China”, for a long time it remained the main source concerning the history of China available to Tibetan readers. By the way, the “History of Buddhism in China” also contains a detailed account of the Xuanzang’s travels.

To denote the Mongols Gombojab used the Tibetan ethnic names *hor* and *sog*, sometimes combining them into one: *hor-sog*. These terms have a long history in Tibetan historical writings. The word *hor* is regarded as a Chinese loan word *hu*. In ancient Tibetan texts it was used as a name for different Turkic peoples. Meanwhile, the Tibetan *sog* is regarded as a name for the Sogdians, a group of Iranian peoples who inhabited large areas of Central Asia in the 1st millennium AD.⁵ However, in the 18th century both terms were used as standard names for the Mongols.

Information about the ancient Mongols that was taken from Chinese sources is scattered throughout the text of the “History of Buddhism in China”. The Mongols are mentioned in connection with various events of Chinese history and with the activities of Indian and Chinese Buddhist monks.

The Mongols were first mentioned by Gombojab in connection with Shi Huangdi (221–210 BC) of the Qin dynasty. In order to protect his country, Shi Huangdi

¹ Facts about the life and works of Gombojab can be found in the following work: J.W. de Jong, Rec. ad op.: Š. Bira, *O “Zolotoj knige” S. Damdina. Studia historica Instituti historiae Academiae scientiarum reipublicae populi Mongoli*, Tomus VI, Fasc. 1. Ulan-Bator, 1964. – TP, 1968, vol. 54, p. 173–189.

² For example, in the Mongolian chronicle *Sir-a tuiji* (“Yellow History”): *Шара туджи. Монгольская летопись XVII века. Сводный текст, перевод, введение и примечания Н.П. Шатиной*. Москва-Ленинград, 1957, p. 21, 127.

³ There exist two Tibetan woodblock prints of the *rGya-nag chos-byung*. One was made in ca. 1740 in sDe-dge, the other in Lhasa in 1946. In 1983 it was published by the Sichuan People’s Publishing House. All references in the present article are made to the sDe-dge edition. The full name of the work is: *rGya nag gi yul du dam pa’i chos dar tshul gso bor bshad pa blo gsal kun tu dga’ ba’i rna rgyan*.

⁴ “Да Тан си юй цзи” Сюань Цзана в тибетском переводе гуна Гомбожава. Предисловие Ш. Бира. Улан-Батор, 1973 (*Monumenta Historica*, tomus 6, fasc. 2).

⁵ Hoffman, H. *The Tibetan names of the Saka and the Sogdians*. “Asiatische Studien”, XXV, 1971, S. 440–455.

pushed the Mongols to the north and built a Great Wall (*lcags ri*) on the border.⁶ In this case the Hu people, which is the generic name attributed by the Chinese to several northern peoples, were identified as the Mongols.

More information is found about the wars of the Wudi emperor (140–87 BC) of the Han dynasty against the Mongols, i.e. the Xiongnu people. Gombojab narrated the story in a following way: “[Wudi] combining soft and severe measures gathered under his power many subjects. He assumed that the Mongols could be harmful for the future generations [of his dynasty] because their bravery and strength were great. So he attacked them with an army. It is said that he did not achieve much because some times he was victorious, and some times defeated... In the booty captured from the Mongols there was found a big golden statue of the Buddha. It was placed in the inner palace and was greatly honoured and venerated. This was the first time when Buddha’s image appeared in China.”⁷

This story in the “History of Buddhism in China” had a great impact on subsequent Mongolian historians, including modern historians, who came to the conclusion on the basis of this story that the Mongols had been Buddhist long before the Tibetans and even earlier than the Chinese. A famous lama-scholar of Mongolian origin, Sum-pa mkhan-po Ye-she dpal-'byor (1704–1788) included this story into his major historical work *dPag-bsam ljon-bzang* (“The Wish-fulfilling Tree”).⁸ It was written in 1748, i.e. only 12 years after the work of Gombojab. In many ways the story about the golden statue of the Buddha was retold in later Mongolian and Tibetan histories.

However, Gombojab did not write that all the Mongols had always been Buddhists in such ancient times. Later he wrote about some cases of persecution of Chinese Buddhist monks by Mongol tribal leaders, like a Xiongnu ruler Helian Bobo (381–425).⁹

Gombojab wrote about the “Five Northern Barbarian Clans” (*Wu hu*)¹⁰ as “Five Mongolian Clans” (Tib. *hor rigs lnga*).¹¹ It is a reasonable translation, as he always translated the Chinese ethnic name *hu* as Tibetan *hor*, i.e. the Mongols.

Gombojab regarded as Mongols several rulers of the 1st millennium AD who had originated from different Turkic tribes. It seems that he regarded the general Chinese ethnic name for the Turks, Tujue, as the name of a Mongolian tribe. Gombojab wrote about Xuanzang that in the beginning of his travel to India he arrived to the “Ye hu Kho han, the ruler of the Tujue Mongols (*thu kyu we sog po'i rgyal po ye hu kho han*).”¹² This Mongolian ruler is mentioned once again in connection with a contemporary Indian Buddhist monk Prabhakaramitra (Guang Zhi; 565–633). Gombojab made an

⁶ *rGya-nag chos-byung*, f. 14b:4–5.

⁷ *Ibid.*, f. 15b:6–16a:2.

⁸ *'Phags yul rgya nag chen po bod dang sog yul du dam pa'i chos byung tshul dpag bsam ljon bzang zhes bya ba*. His *gsung-'bum*, vol. 1, f. 289b.

⁹ *rGya-nag chos-byung*, f. 38a:4–6; *Lives of Eminent Korean Monks (The Haedong Kosung Chon)*. Translated with an Introduction by P.H. Lee. Cambridge, Mass., 1969, p. 41.

¹⁰ Xiongnu, Zehu, Xianbi, Di, Qian.

¹¹ *rGya-nag chos-byung*, f. 17b:3.

¹² *Ibid.*, f. 54b:3.

interesting philological comment: "In Chinese histories it is said that the Mongols call their ruler *kho-han* and his wife *kho-thun*. This is the distortion of the Mongolian *qayan* and *qatun*. Correct for the *ye-hu* is *yeke* which means 'great'."¹³ Thus Gombojab reconstructed the title of this ruler as *Yeke qayan*, i.e. the "great Khan".

In fact, this is the Chinese transcription (*ye hu ke han*) of the Turkic *jabyu qayan*. This was the title of the supreme ruler of the Western Turks.¹⁴ The Chinese pronunciation of the characters changed within a thousand years, but historical phonetics did not exist in the days of Gombojab.

Despite this mistake, Gombojab was one of the most distinguished philologists of his time. His attempt to improve old Chinese transcriptions of foreign names was followed by the editors of dynastic histories which were printed anew under the Qianlong reign. Some old Chinese transcriptions of many Khitan and Mongolian names in the *Liao shi* ("History of the [Khitan] Liao Dynasty") and the *Yuan shi* ("History of the [Mongol] Yuan Dynasty") were "corrected" in accordance with modern Mongolian and Manchu.

Interesting enough is the fact that Gombojab regarded as Mongols the Indo-European nomadic tribes named in Tibetan as *sTag-zig* (< Tadjik). In his translation of the Xiuanzang's travels Gombojab wrote about this *jabyu qayan* as "Tagzig ye-kho-khan".¹⁵ The ethnic name *Tagzig* has a long history in Tibetan texts. It was used to denote peoples living to the west of Tibet. Many times this ethnic name occurs in the famous Tibetan and Mongolian epic of "Gesar". It is said about the *sTag-zig* people in the introduction to Gombojab's translation: "they eat meat and blood, they like killing. They live in felt yurts and they move from one place to another in search of grass and water for their cattle".¹⁶ This is a typical Chinese definition of nomadic people, so Gombojab identified them as the Mongols because they were nomads.

A story about the Indian king Buddhapakṣa (Sangs-rgyas-phyogs) is also found in the "History of Buddhism in China." This king is said to have liberated the holy places of Buddhism including the city of Varanasi from foreign invaders. It is said that the holy sites were captured by a "Tagzig Mongolian ruler Khunimvapt".¹⁷ However, the Indian king was assisted by the Chinese emperor and was able to repulse the invaders. This story occurs in several other Tibetan sources,¹⁸ but Gombojab was the first to call these invaders the "Mongols" (*sog-po*). As for the king Buddhapakṣa, he was not identified by modern scholars.

Gombojab regarded as a Mongol the military governor An Lushan, who rebelled in 755 against the Tang.¹⁹ In fact An Lushan's father was a Sogdian, i.e.

¹³ Ibid., f. 53b4-5.

¹⁴ Древнетюркский словарь. Ленинград, 1969, p. 222.

¹⁵ "Да Тан си юй цзи", op. cit., p. 154a (= f. 11b:1).

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 150d (= f. 3a:3-4).

¹⁷ rGya-nag chos-'byung, f. 64:3-6.

¹⁸ See, e.g.: *Tranltha's History of Buddhism in India*, Lama Chimpa and Alaka Chattopadhyaya. Simla, 1970, p. 138-139.

¹⁹ rGya-nag chos-'byung, f. 69a:5.

Indo-European, while his mother was a Turk. His surname An was commonly used to refer to Sogdians.²⁰

Also Gombojab regarded as a Mongol Li Cunxu, who proclaimed the Later Tang (Hou Tang) dynasty in 923.²¹ This person was Turc of the Shato tribe. His father was given the Chinese family name Li as an award from the emperor for suppressing a rebellion in the 2nd half of the 9th century.²²

The last great Mongolian state before Činggis Khan was, according to Gombojab, the Khitan Liao state. Gombojab eulogised the Khitan state and its rulers: "They maintain their lineage from the emperor Yandi, and their clan was like a great Sāla tree... They greatly spread Buddha's Teaching." He says that the Khitan Liao state was as great as Tang or Song, but "distant peoples are unlucky in maintaining their power (*mtha' mi dbang la skal ba ni med dug*)." For these reasons the Liao state was finally destroyed by the Jurchen Jin state.²³ He did not forget to mention the fact that the Western Liao state was captured by the Naimans who in their turn were crushed by Činggis Khan.

Many words of praise were written by Gombojab about Yelui Chucai (1189–1243), whose Mongolian name he gives as Chu Mergen. He mentioned the Khitan origin of this outstanding statesman. According to Gombojab, the main task of Yelui Chucai was to establish a Chinese-style legal system in the newly-formed Mongolian empire.²⁴ This view is also shared by past and modern historians.

When writing about the Mongols, both ancient and contemporary, Gombojab was always sympathetic about his compatriots. Having taken the information from Chinese sources, he never shared the traditional view of Chinese historiography which regarded the Mongols as barbarians.

It is obvious that Gombojab regarded all nomadic peoples of the past as ancient Mongols. In some cases he was correct, in some cases not. However, there still exist many questions about the ancient peoples of Central Asia as well as about the origin of the peoples who live there today. Generally speaking, Gombojab's approach to the subject of the ancient history of the Mongols was a scholarly one and it should be regarded as a great achievement of traditional Mongolian historiography.

Chinese characters

An Lushan 安祿山
beidi 北狄

²⁰ Beckwith, Ch.I. *The Tibetan Empire in Central Asia*, Princeton, 1987, p. 142.

²¹ *rGya-nag chos-byung*, f. 18b:6.

²² Е Лун-ли. *История государства киданей (Цидань го чжи)*. Перевод с китайского, введение, комментарий и приложения В.С. Таскина. Москва, 1979, p. 349.

²³ *rGya nag chos 'byung*, f. 19b:1–5.

²⁴ Ibid., f. 21a:5–6.

Da Tang Xi yu ji 大唐西域記
Dazangjing 大藏經
Di 氏
fuguogong 輔國公
Guang Zhi 光智
Han 漢
Helian Bobo 赫連勃勃
Hou Tang 後唐
hu 胡
Jin 金
Khitan 契丹
Li Cunxu 李存勖
Liao shi 遼史
Liao 遼
Ōtani Daigaku 大谷大學
Qian 羌
Qin 秦
Qing 清
Shato 沙陀
Shi Huangdi 始皇帝
Song 宋
Tang 唐
Tujue 突厥
Wu hu 五胡
Wudi 武帝
Xianbi 鮮卑
Xifanxue zongguan 西番學總管
Xiongnu 匈奴
Xuanzang 玄奘
Yandi 炎帝
ye hu ke han 葉護可汗
Yelui Chucai 耶律楚材
Yuan shi 元史
Zehu 羯胡