

THE RELATIONS BETWEEN THE CHINESE  
MING DYNASTY AND THE TIBETAN RULING HOUSE OF  
PHAG-MO-GRU IN THE YEARS 1368-1434: POLITICAL  
AND RELIGIOUS ASPECTS

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The paper analyses the relations between the Chinese Ming Dynasty and the Tibetan ruling house Phag-mo-gru in the years 1368-1434, that is during the period between the foundation of the Ming Dynasty in 1368 and the decline of the political power of the Phag-mo-gru in Central Tibet in 1434. The paper is focused on the political and religious character of the relationship. The regular contacts had the form of exchanges of diplomatic missions and were a part of the traditional system of trade and tribute, which the Chinese dynasties had used for the regulation of their relations with foreign powers. By granting titles to the rulers of Phag-mo-gru the Ming Dynasty attempted to continue the Mongolian policy, but it did not have sufficient economic and military resources to enforce its policy in Central Tibet. The personal interest of Ming Chengzu (r. 1402-1424) in Tibetan Buddhism intensified mutual relations and he also maintained contacts with other Tibetan Buddhist dignitaries and local rulers from Eastern Tibet. The Chinese sources prove that the relationship with Tibet was not of a strategic character and the dominant role of the Phag-mo-gru in Central Tibet is not explicitly stated by these sources. For the Ming Dynasty Tibet was only one of the peripheral regions and the Ming Tibet policy represented a retreat from the previously gained Chinese position in Central Tibet.

The period between the years 1368 and 1434 had been marked by important inner political developments in both Tibet and China. In the middle of the 14th century Byang-chub Rgyal-mtshan (1302-1364),<sup>1</sup> who in 1322 had become one of the thirteen governors (Tib. *khri dpon*, "myriarch") of administrative units called *wanhu fu* 萬戶府 ("myriarchy" – for details see Hucker 1985: 562; Tibetan *khri skor*) established by the Mongolian Yuan Dynasty 元 (1276-1368) in the second half of the 13th century. Byang-chub Rgyal-mtshan was named the myriarch of the Phag-mo-gru administrative unit with the seat in Sne-gdong-rtse<sup>2</sup> in the region of Dbus (Petech 1990: 56). During the years 1349-1354 he

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<sup>1</sup> On his life and career see van der Kuijp 1991.

<sup>2</sup> Sometimes written Sne'u-gdong-rtse – in the lower part of the Yar-lung valley, in the vicinity of today's Rtse-thang.

revolted against the authority of the 'Khon Sa-skya family and became the *de facto* ruler<sup>3</sup> of Central Tibet. In 1365 his status was recognized by the Yuan Dynasty and thus he became the founder of the Phag-mo-gru ruling house.<sup>4</sup> The rule of the Phag-mo-gru in Central Tibet was not uncontested by other influential local competitors and these centrifugal tendencies had weakened their power. The internal conflicts had accelerated during the reign of the 5th *sde-srid* Gags-pa Rgyal-mtshan (1374-1432) and after his death Gnam-mkha' Rgyal-mtshan from the Rin-spungs ruling house gained a dominant position. The year 1434 is described in Tibetan sources as the "year of internal collapse of the Phag-mo-gru" (Tib. *phag mo gru nang zhig pa'i lo* – Tucci 1971: fol. 83) as this ruling house definitely lost its power.

The developments in China were also rapidly changing: an anti-Mongolian uprising of the "red turbans" led by Zhu Yuanzhang 朱元璋 (1328-1398) overthrew the Yuan Dynasty (Mote 1999: 517-548) and he founded the new Ming 明 Dynasty (1368-1644), becoming its first emperor Ming Taizu 明太祖 (r. 1368-1398). This dynasty attempted to resume in the institutional and ideological realm the legacy of the Han 漢 (206 B.C. – 221 A.D.) and Tang 唐 (618-906) Dynasties, which included a new definition of the relations with Tibet. The establishment of the Ming Dynasty in the year 1368 and the decline of the Phag-mo-gru ruling house in the year 1434 form a logic chronological framework for the analysis of the political aspects of the relation between the Chinese Dynasty and the rulers of Central Tibet.

The Ming Dynasty first came into contact with regions inhabited by Tibetans during the year 1369 after it had conquered the Yuan capital Dadu 大都 and was able to establish a new political authority in China. In the peripheral regions of China in the vicinity of Lintao 臨洮 and Hezhou 河州 prefectures,<sup>5</sup> which were situated in an area with strong Mongolian population, the Ming army had to fight with the remnants of the Yuan army. During this pacification campaign the Ming policy towards Tibet began to be formulated.<sup>6</sup> In the specific conditions of the establishment of the Ming Dynasty successful functioning of its foreign relations was an important factor in the legitimacy of the dynasty: the Ming rule was not a mere transfer of the "Mandate of Heaven" (Chin. *Tianming* 天命) but a return from unorthodox barbarian traditions to orthodox Chinese (Dreyer 1982: 115), which in the realm of foreign policy was represented by the Sinocentric tribute system. Although during the previous Yuan Dynasty a complex institutional system for the administration of Tibet was created, the Ming Taizu emperor had "a different perspective on governmental matters from those

<sup>3</sup> His Tibetan title was *sde srid* – "ruler, administrator".

<sup>4</sup> For more details on the situation in Central Tibet in the middle of the 14th century see Petech 1990: 85-138; Shakabpa 1988: 72-83.

<sup>5</sup> In today's Gansu 甘肅 Province (all geographical names are identified according to Tan Qixiang 1982).

<sup>6</sup> The aim of this military operation was to interrupt direct Tibeto-Mongolian contacts, although unlike the Mongols, the Tibetans did not represent a military threat for the Chinese dynasty (Luo Yuejiang 1983: 122).

of his Mongol predecessors... Under such circumstances the Ming court was faced with the necessity of establishing its own 'Ming' relationship with Tibet" (Sperling 1980: 280). In the case of the Tibet policy – as in the case of court dress and ceremonies (Serruys 1967: 488) – the emperor had recalled the precedents from the Tang Dynasty: "At the beginning of the Hongwu 洪武 [period – i. e. the years 1368-1398], the Taizu [Emperor] took the disorders [caused] by Tibetans during [the rule of] the Tang as a warning and wanted to control them" (MSh: 331, 1b).<sup>7</sup>

Due to the previous contacts with Tibet during the Yuan period, the Ming court was well aware of the political role of various Buddhist dignitaries in Tibet (MSh: 331, 1a) and thus the Emperor Taizu had dispatched an envoy with the aim of proclaiming an imperial edict (Chin. *zhao yu* 詔諭) informing them about the new political realities of China:

"In the past, our emperors and kings in the rule of China used virtue<sup>8</sup> and followed [the right] path. The people lived in peace and in harmony which even reached all the barbarians<sup>9</sup> and not one was untranquil. Formerly the *hu* 胡<sup>10</sup> [barbarians] violently usurped authority in China. For over a hundred years caps and sandals were in reversed position – could there be such a person who would not get angry? Recently the *hu* rulers lost power. In the four directions, [everywhere] like agitated clouds mighty crowds fought one against the other and people were suffering. Thereupon I commanded the generals and led the armies and completely pacified the country within the four seas [i. e. China]. The support of the subject made me the ruler of the all under Heaven [i. e. China]. The state was called the Great Ming and the reign title Hongwu has been established. According to the example of [the right] ways of the former kings I employ peace while ruling the people. Your Tibetan [empire] is located in western lands. China is now united, but I am afraid that you have still not heard about this, therefore I address you with this edict and dispatch an envoy to Tibet" (MshL: 3; Sperling 1980: 285).

The edict embodies three fundamental principles of the traditional Chinese foreign policy: 1) the main power in the all under Heaven is China and the "barbarian" periphery occupies only an inferior status;<sup>11</sup> 2) the situation in the periphery is closely interrelated to the political situation in China itself; 3) the

<sup>7</sup> The "disorders" mainly refer to the clashes between Tibetans and Chinese in the frontier regions in the second half of the 8th century during which the Tibetan army had even briefly occupied the then capital of China, Chang'an 長安. The close knowledge of the Tang-Tibet relations during the Ming can be further illustrated by the fact that when in 1452 a local Tibetan dignitary from the Khams region in eastern Tibet asked for Confucian classics, the Ming court had declined this request referring to a precedent from the year 731 when the Tang court had declined a similar wish formulated by the Tibetan king (MHY: 1526-1527; Greatrex 1997b: 94-97).

<sup>8</sup> On the concept of virtue (Chin. *de* 德) in Chinese foreign relations see Wang Gungwu 1968: 43-44; Martynov 1978: 16-36.

<sup>9</sup> In original *si yi* 四夷.

<sup>10</sup> In this context the text is referring to the Mongols.

<sup>11</sup> The metaphor of caps and sandals, the high and the low – the Yuan period serves as an example of "unnatural" circumstances.

task of the Chinese emperor is to establish peace and harmony not only among Chinese citizens but among all people, including the “barbarians”. This edict was not addressed to a particular Tibetan dignitary and probably mainly local Tibetan rulers in the Sino-Tibetan frontier regions had become acquainted with it. Chinese sources do not record any immediate reaction to this edict from Central Tibet.<sup>12</sup>

During the military campaign in 1370 when the general Deng Yu 鄧愈 conquered Hezhou, the Ming Dynasty further penetrated into territories inhabited by Tibetans. The Ming court had established contacts with the former Yuan official<sup>13</sup> He Suonanpu 何鎖南普 who was of Tibetan origin. This influential Tibetan was “one of the critical figures in both the establishment of Ming control over the Amdo-Shaanxi frontier area and the course of Ming Taizu’s contacts with Central Tibet” (Sperling 1990: 362-363). Due to his authority the Ming court was able to strengthen its position in frontier areas. The successful military operations of Deng Yu were followed by a repeated dispatch of envoys to Tibet on the 17th and 29th July 1370 (MShL: 7). Chinese sources, as in the case of Xu Yunde, state that the aim of these missions was to “proclaim an imperial edict”, but its text has not been preserved.<sup>14</sup> Four envoys – only the Buddhist monk (Chin. *seng* 僧) Kexin 克新<sup>15</sup> is mentioned by name – were given an order “to mark in the map the terrain of the mountains and rivers they have passed” (MShL: 7). A more systematic approach to Tibet supplied the Ming court with new information on the political situation in Tibet and the mission of Kexin and other envoys might have been the first impulse for the Ming to comprehend the political role of the Phag-mo-gru ruling house in Central Tibet. The first reference to the existence of the Phag-mo-gru<sup>16</sup> ruling house is recorded on the 23rd May 1372 (MShL: 17) and it proves, that it was not the initiative of the Tibetan ruler, but of the Chinese frontier offices that had played a crucial role in establishing the contacts.<sup>17</sup> According to the available sources the Ming court wanted to make use of the services of the 2nd Phag-mo-gru *sde srid* ‘Jam-

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<sup>12</sup> The Chinese sources (MShL: 3; MSh: 331, 1b) record a certain hesitation of Tibetan dignitaries, who did not show any reaction to the arrival of the first envoy and thus a new mission headed by Xu Yunde 許允德, Vice Director of the Branch Secretariat in the Shaanxi 陝西 Province (Chin. *xingsheng yuanwai lang* 行省員外郎 – Hucker 1985: 246, 597), was dispatched.

<sup>13</sup> He had hold the post of Pacification Commissioner (Chin. *xuanwei shi* 宣慰使 – Hucker 1985: 251).

<sup>14</sup> However, we may presume that the text was identical – or analogous – with the edict quoted above.

<sup>15</sup> On the life of this first Buddhist monk dispatched by the Ming court to Tibet, see Deng Ruiling 1992.

<sup>16</sup> In Chinese sources we find the phonetic transcription Pamuzhuba 怕木竹巴.

<sup>17</sup> Chinese sources do not record a particular name, it is just stated that it was someone belonging under the Guard in Hezhou (on the military garrison called Guard, Chin. *wei* 衛, see Hucker 1985: 564). In this period, He Suonanpu hold the post of Vice Commander (Chin. *zhihui tongzhi* 指揮同知) in Hezhou, who was appointed by the general Deng Yu in summer 1370, so it is probable the it was he who supplied the information on Phag-mo-gru to the Imperial court.

dbyang Shākya Rgyal-mtshan<sup>18</sup> (1340-1373, r. 1365-1373) in the settlement of the dispute<sup>19</sup> between the local Tibetan dignitaries Shangzhu Jianzang 賞竺監藏 and Guanwuer 冠兀兒 in eastern and north-eastern Tibet,<sup>20</sup> which would strengthen the Ming position in this area. Thus the Ming court had tried to utilize the authority of 'Jam-dbyang Shākya Rgyal-mtshan in order to pursue its own political aims in the Sino-Tibetan borderlands. The emperor Taizu had accepted the proposal from Hezhou and had bestowed on 'Jam-dbyang Shākya Rgyal-mtshan the title "anointed national preceptor" (Chin. *guanding guoshi* 灌頂國師) and had dispatched to him envoys with a jade seal (Chin. *yu yin* 玉印) and gifts (MSh: 331, 5b). The imperial seal had been traditionally granted to non-Chinese dignitaries when a title or an official rank was bestowed on them (Serruys 1967: 102). The jade seal granted to 'Jam-dbyang Shākya Rgyal-mtshan was the first seal given by the Ming Emperor to any Tibetan dignitary since the foundation of the Ming Dynasty. It shows, that the Ming court had recognized the political reality of Central Tibet characterized by the dominant status of 'Jam-dbyang Shākya Rgyal-mtshan and the whole Phag-mo-gru ruling house. The bestowal of the title "anointed national preceptor" represented a continuation of the Yuan policy towards the Phag-mo-gru by the Ming Dynasty,<sup>21</sup> as the Phag-mo-gru *sde srid* was granted this title already in 1365. Thus, despite the intended return to the Tang Dynasty traditions, in the beginning Ming Taizu had made use of the proven patterns in regard to the policy towards Tibet. The request for effective help from Central Tibet in the mediation of a dispute in the Sino-Tibetan borderlands illustrates, that despite the creation of administrative offices and the grant of various official ranks to Tibetan representatives<sup>22</sup> in eastern and north-eastern Tibet since 1370, the real power of the Ming court was not only very weak in the interior of Tibet, but even in the Sino-Tibetan borderland the Chinese authorities were not able to solve local disputes among Tibetans on their own and one can describe this state of affairs as the "actual impotence of China in Tibetan affairs" (Sperling 1983a: 341).

The bestowal of the title and the seal on 'Jam-dbyang Shākya Rgyal-mtshan had marked the beginning of the establishment of contacts between him and the Ming Emperor Taizu. Seven month after the bestowal of the title (MShL: 20; 19th February 1373) the first envoy dispatched by 'Jam-dbyang Shākya Rgyal-mtshan had arrived at the Imperial court in Nanjing 南京. Chinese sources rec-

<sup>18</sup> For his short biography see Don-rdor – Bstan-'dzin Chos-grags 1993: 413-414. In Chinese sources one can find various forms of his name: Zhangyang Shajia 章陽沙加 (MshL: 17), Zhangyang Shajia Jianzang 章陽沙加監藏 (MSh: 330, 5b), Jiamuyang Shakejia 嘉模楊沙克嘉 (MHY: 1430). A high degree of inconsistency in the transcription of Tibetan names into Chinese is typical – and not only – for the Ming period.

<sup>19</sup> There are available no details on this local conflict.

<sup>20</sup> I. e. the area to which the Ming sources refer as Duogan 朵甘 (from Tibetan Mdo-khams).

<sup>21</sup> The Imperial court was well aware of this fact (MshL: 17).

<sup>22</sup> Satō draws our attention to the fact that "although these official ranks resembled the offices in the Chinese bureaucratic system, one may not conclude, that these people had the same duties as Chinese civil and military officials" (Satō 1981: 18).

ord his arrival as a “tribute” (Chin. *gong* 貢, *ru gong* 入貢). After the presentation of the gifts the envoy Suonan Zangbu 鎖南藏卜<sup>23</sup> and other Tibetans from Central Tibet<sup>24</sup> accompanying him were given return gifts by the emperor.<sup>25</sup> Soon afterwards the 2nd *sde srid* ‘Jam-dbyang Shākya Rgyal-mtshan had died and the next mission to the Ming court was dispatched by his successors Grags-pa Byang-chub (1356-1386, r. 1374-1381).<sup>26</sup> The envoys of Grags-pa Byang-chub had arrived with a larger group of Tibetan envoys in Nanjing on the 25th February 1375 (MSH: 33). According to Chinese sources their arrival was a direct response to the mission of two Tibetans – Nanjia Bazangbu 喃加巴藏卜<sup>27</sup> and Hanjialima 韓加里麻 – who were dispatched to Tibet with an Imperial edict<sup>28</sup> in the services of the Chinese dynasty on the 23rd February 1373. Their mission was to incite those Tibetan dignitaries who had so far not declared loyalty to the new Chinese dynasty to bring tribute to Nanjing. Numerous Tibetan representatives had accepted this invitation and had returned the official seals bestowed on them by the Yuan Dynasty and in return were given Ming Dynasty seals. This act had traditionally symbolized the establishment of a new dynasty. As the Phag-mo-gru had their title “anointed national preceptor” confirmed already in 1372, Grags-pa Chyang-chub had reacted to this latest Chinese initiative only in 1375.

The active response of Grags-pa Chyang-chub had resulted in the establishment of a new administrative unit in Central Tibet by the Ming court: on the 10th February 1375 the emperor had issued an edict establishing “the Pamuzhuba *wanhu fu*” (MSHL: 34).<sup>29</sup> Due to the dominant status of the Phag-mo-gru in Central Tibet after 1354 this administrative act of the Chinese authorities only had a symbolic and ceremonial character. The Ming court was aware of the hegemony of the Phag-mo-gru and therefore this edict should have served as a basis for harmonious and close relations between the Ming emperor and the 3rd *sde srid* and “the Ming certainly did not enjoy a political or military authority in Central Tibet” (Sperling 1983b: 194). Chinese and Tibetan sources do not record any reaction of Grags-pa Chyang-chub to this Chinese administrative act. Only as late as on the 8th March 1379 is there mentioned a tributary mission from the Phag-mo-gru to the Ming court (MSHL: 46). Thus, the formal admin-

<sup>23</sup> From Tibetan Bsod-nams Bzang-po. Chinese sources (MSHL: 20; MSH: 331, 5b) describe him as a “chief, leader” (Chin. *qiuzhang* 酋長). No other details about him are known.

<sup>24</sup> Chinese Ming sources use the term Wusizang 烏思藏 (from Tibetan Dbus-Gtsang).

<sup>25</sup> I will deal with the economic aspects (including tribute articles and return gifts) of the relations between the Ming court and the Phag-mo-gru in a separate paper.

<sup>26</sup> On him see Don-rdor – Bstan-‘dzin Chos-grags 1993: 430-431.

<sup>27</sup> Presumably from Tibetan Rnam-rgyal Dpal-bzang-po; on him see Satō 1981: 18-19.

<sup>28</sup> For the full text of this edict see MSHL: 20-22.

<sup>29</sup> The first mention of the establishment of the thirteen *wanhu fu* is already recorded in Chinese sources on the 23rd February 1373 (MSHL: 20) but it seems that at that time this idea was not *de facto* implemented. The attempt to re-create the thirteen *wanhu fu* again represents a continuation of the Yuan Tibet policy, as the Mongolian rulers had divided Tibet into thirteen *wanhu fu* after the census in 1268. For a list of these Yuan Dynasty *wanhu fu* see e. g. Shi Shuo 1994: 182-183.

istrative change had not in any way influenced the relations between the Ming court and the Phag-mo-gru and other Tibetan dignitaries who were under the authority of this ruling house.

From 1379 to 1388 there are not recorded any contacts between Ming Taizu and Gags-pa Chyang-chub, which illustrates the fragile basis of the Ming policy towards Central Tibet and the disinterest of the Phag-mo-gru in dealings with the new Chinese dynasty, which was in no position to influence their power in Central Tibet. During February and March 1388 a large group of envoys from Central Tibet, Khams and Nepal arrived at the Imperial court (MShL: 76). The arrival of this group of envoys was a result of the mission of the Chinese Buddhist monk Zhiguang 智光<sup>30</sup> (1347-1435), who was dispatched to local secular and Buddhist dignitaries in Nepal in 1384 (MShL: 65). On the way back while passing through Central Tibet and Khams the envoys of local Tibetan dignitaries had joined him and arrived in Nanjing. This group included an envoy dispatched – according to Chinese sources (MShL: 76) – by the 4th *sde srid* Bsod-nams Gags-pa<sup>31</sup> (1359-1408, r. 1381-1385). However at the time of the arrival Bsod-nams Gags-pa no longer held the office of *sde srid*. According to Chinese sources Bsod-nams Gags-pa had informed the emperor about his illness and recommended (Chin. *ju* 舉) his younger brother (Chin. *di* 弟) Gags-pa Rgyal-mtshan<sup>32</sup> (1374-1432) to take over the position of *sde srid*. The Emperor Taizu agreed with this proposal and had confirmed the title “anointed national preceptor”. The Tibetan sources<sup>33</sup> record that Gags-pa Rgyal-mtshan had assumed the position of *sde srid* already in 1385 and held it till his death in 1432. This means that the request for the confirmation of his position by the Ming emperor in 1388 had only a formal character and the agreement (or disagreement) of Ming Taizu could not alter the dominant role played by Gags-pa Rgyal-mtshan in Central Tibet. From the viewpoint of the prestige of the Chinese emperor, however, it was crucial to play the role of the highest authority in this matter in Chinese sources. This mission resulted in the regulation that the Phag-mo-gru should bring tribute once in three years (MSh: 331, 6a).<sup>34</sup> On the 27th January 1391 (MShL: 84) a larger group of envoys arrived from Central Tibet and Nepal, with an envoy from “the anointed national preceptor Gags-pa Rgyal-mtshan” mentioned in second place. The last recorded official contact

<sup>30</sup> Zhiguang was an influential Buddhist monk who had also later played an important role in relations between the Ming court and Tibet and Nepal. In 1435 the emperor Yingzong 英宗 bestowed on him the title “the son of the Buddha of the Western Heaven” (Chin. *Xitian fozhi* 西天佛子), till then the highest title given to a Chinese Buddhist monk. On Zhiguang see Deng Ruiling 1994.

<sup>31</sup> On him see Don-rdor – Bstan-'dzin Chos-grags 1993: 441-442.

<sup>32</sup> On him see Don-rdor – Bstan-'dzin Chos-grags 1993: 457-459.

<sup>33</sup> E. g. *Deb ther dmar po gsar ma* states that Gags-pa Rgyal-mtshan “at the age of twelve, in [the year of the] wood-ox [i. e. in 1385] he went to Sne-gdong-rtse” (Tucci 1971: fol. 78a), i.e. he became the next *sde srid*.

<sup>34</sup> MShL does not record such a regulation and it is possible, that the information in MSh is a later interpolation as the next two recorded tribute missions from Gags-pa Rgyal-mtshan had arrived in three-year's intervals.

between the emperor Ming Taizu and Gags-pa Rgyal-mtshan is the tributary mission from the 24th February 1394 (MSHL: 98).

While considering the Sino-Tibetan relations during the reign of the Taizu Emperor we must also take into account the Buddhist background of this ruler. Zhu Yuanzhang had entered the Buddhist monastery Huangjuesi 皇覺寺<sup>35</sup> in 1344 and later when he had joined in anti-Mongolian rebellions he became acquainted with Buddhist millenarian concepts. After he had ascended the throne he was thus well aware of the political potential of Buddhism and in 1372 and in the following years he had issued a set of regulations with the aim to restrict the influence of the Buddhist community on the political life (Sperling 1983b: 69-73). However, his attitude to individual Buddhist monks was positive: he had sponsored the building of Buddhist temples in the vicinity of Nanjing, he had participated in sermons and wrote a foreword to commentaries of Buddhist sūtras compiled by the Chinese Buddhist monk Zongle 宗泐 (Goodrich – Chaoying 1976: 1320). His contacts with the Buddhist monks were not limited to religious matters, he also entrusted them with administrative and diplomatic tasks. For instance in 1378 the above-mentioned Zongle was dispatched on a mission to Central Tibet and Nepal with the purpose to collect Buddhist texts and establish contact with local dignitaries (Enoki 1972). As we have already mentioned Buddhist monks (namely Kexin and Zhiguang) also played an important role in the relations between Ming Taizu and the Phag-mo-gru rulers. Unlike the Emperor Ming Chenzu 明成祖 (see below), the founder of the Ming Dynasty did not show a deep interest in Tibetan Buddhist teachings and there are no records of him discussing religious issues with Tibetan clergymen. Although in his policy towards Central Tibet Ming Taizu stressed political and administrative issues, his Buddhist background represented a common cultural basis of Sino-Tibetan relations which should not be disregarded.

During the first phase of the Ming policy towards Tibet, Taizu had successively succeeded in the establishment of contacts with various regions of Tibet (in this chronological order: starting with A-mdo and Khams and ending with Central Tibet). The influence of the Ming court in Tibetan areas was ephemeral and Tibetan sources do not attach any importance to the relations with China. The mechanism of the tribute system had secured a certain level of loyalty – which manifested itself in the dispatch of envoys – from all the Tibetan areas to the Ming Dynasty by the end of the reign of Taizu (MSHL: 108-109). The Ming court was satisfied with the formal appointment of Tibetan secular and Buddhist dignitaries to various offices and the exchange of the Yuan Dynasty seals and letter-patents for the ones issued by the Ming was perceived as a sufficient symbol of the loyalty towards the Ming. The Ming court did not pursue an active policy towards the Phag-mo-gru which would result in an effective Chinese control in Central Tibet. Although the Chinese sources do not openly state the hegemony of the Phag-mo-gru ruling house in Central Tibet, the fact that the *sde srid* was granted the title “anointed national preceptor” in 1372 and the cir-

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<sup>35</sup> In today's Anhui 安徽 Province.



cumstances of the establishment of the Phag-mo-gru *wanhu fu* in 1375 suggest that the early Ming court was aware of this. Both of these acts represented a direct continuation of the Yuan Dynasty's Tibet policy. The relations between the Ming and the Phag-mo-gru had a very formal character and the irregularity of tribute missions (in the years 1373, 1375, 1379, 1391, 1394) signals the impotence of the Chinese dynasty to pursue its interests in Central Tibet. The mutual relations were focused on ceremonial matters (bestowal of titles, tribute, return gifts) and the Imperial court only once (in 1372) attempted to use the services of the Phag-mo-gru for particular political aims.<sup>36</sup>

The enthronement of the third Ming Emperor Ming Chengzu (1360-1424, r. 1402-1424) marked the beginning of a new era in Sino-Tibetan relations which also transformed the relationship with Grags-pa Rgyal-mtshan. Ming Chengzu started his Tibet policy with an identical act like his predecessor Ming Taizu: he proclaimed an edict in which he informed about his accession and dispatched an envoy to Tibetan dignitaries on the 2nd September 1402 (MShL: 115; MSh: 331, 6a). The Emperor Ming Chengzu assigned the experienced monk Zhiguang to this mission to the regions of Gon-gyo,<sup>37</sup> Gling-tshang,<sup>38</sup> 'Bri-gung,<sup>39</sup> Stag-tshang,<sup>40</sup> Duosi 朵思,<sup>41</sup> to Nepal and to Grags-pa Rgyal-mtshan who is mentioned in the last place. This first mission during the reign of the Emperor Chengzu illustrates his priorities and the dignitaries from these regions later played a crucial role in his policy towards Tibet.

The 5th *sde srid* Grags-pa Rgyal-mtshan reacted to this initiative as late as in 1406, when on the 23rd February (MShL: 125) a tribute mission arrived at the Ming court. Grags-pa Rgyal-mtshan's envoy arrived together with the envoy from the "national preceptor" (Chin. *guoshi* 國師) Duanzhu Jianzang 端竹監藏 (from Tibetan Don-grub Rgyal-mtshan) from 'Bri-gung. In an appraisal to this mission from Grags-pa Rgyal-mtshan on the 21st March 1406 the Imperial court "dispatched an envoy to Central Tibet with the proclamation appointing Grags-pa Rgyal-mtshan Dpal-bzang-po of the Phag-mo-gru 'anointed national preceptor, prince who initiates transformation'.<sup>42</sup> He was presented with a jade

<sup>36</sup> During the short and complicated (Mote 1999: 583-597) reign of the emperor Ming Huidi 明惠帝 (1377-1402, r. 1398-1402) we find no records on Sino-Tibetan relations in the available sources.

<sup>37</sup> Sometimes written Go-'jo. It is located southeast of Sde-rge (Satō 1987: 58), today's Gon-gyo.

<sup>38</sup> Located northeast of Sde-rge (Satō 1987: 58).

<sup>39</sup> Located ca. 80 km northeast of Lha-sa.

<sup>40</sup> Located west of the Sa-skya monastery near the border with Nepal.

<sup>41</sup> Not identified.

<sup>42</sup> In Chinese *guanding guoshi chanhua wang* 灌頂國師闡化王. The translation of the second part of this title (i.e. *chanhua wang*) is not certain. Different authors have used various translations: "prince who spreads magical transformation" (Sperling 1983b: 158); "Prince who expounds transformation" (Greatrex 1997b: 83); "Propagation Prince of Persuasion (Ya Hanzhang 1994: 83); "rasprostranyayushchiy [gosudarevo] pouchenie knyaz" (Martynov 1978: 131). According to Chinese dictionaries (Ciyuan 1989: 1771) the term *chanhua* is explained as *kaichuang jiaohua* 開創教化, "to start with the [cultural] transformation". The concept of *jiaohua*, i. e. the positive, civilizing impact of Chinese culture on the rude "barbarians" through the person of the Emperor

seal with a dragon handle<sup>43</sup> and a letter-patent<sup>44</sup> and other gifts (MSHL: 126).<sup>45</sup> This bestowal proves the fact that the emperor Ming Chengzu had recognized the dominant political status of Grags-pa Rgyal-mtshan and he wanted to establish harmonious and mutually beneficial relations which were founded in secular and not religious terms. The bestowal of the title “anointed national preceptor, prince who initiates transformation” on Grags-pa Rgyal-mtshan established a new pattern of Ming policy towards Tibet. Successively the Emperor Chengzu bestowed six similar titles on other important Buddhist and secular dignitaries in Central Tibet and Khams.<sup>46</sup> This was a distinctive feature of the Ming Tibet policy.

The next recorded contact between Ming Chengzu and Grags-pa Rgyal-mtshan illustrates the fact that the Imperial court was focused on political and secular issues in its dealing with the Phag-mo-gru: on the 20th April 1407 (MSHL: 132-133) the Emperor had approached Grags-pa Rgyal-mtshan and other local leaders<sup>47</sup> in the Sino-Tibetan borderland with the request to rebuild the relay stations (Chin. *yizhan* 驛站)<sup>48</sup> and thus contribute to the flow of transportation on the routes between China and Central Tibet. He had distributed gifts to these rulers and had ordered the Guards (Chin. *wei*) in Taozhou 洮州,<sup>49</sup> Hezhou and Xining 西寧 to supply them with horses from military stocks which shows that the Emperor had a great interest in the proper functioning of the communication routes. It is significant that the Emperor had turned with this request not only to Grags-pa Rgyal-mtshan, whose authority did not reach to the peripheral areas but directly approached also the local representatives. The request for rebuilding of relay stations (which was repeated in 1414, see below) was the sole particular agenda in the relations between the Emperor Chengzu

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has had a long tradition in China. It can be also illustrated on the term *laihua*, “come [to China] and be transformed [through the impact of Chinese culture]”, i. e. to become sinized. On this concept see Schwartz (1968: 281, 284, 286) who translates *hua* as “transformed” and *jiaohua* as “teaching and transforming”. Therefore I translate *chanhua wang* as “prince who initiates transformation”. Tibetan sources record this title either in phonetic transcription into Tibetan (*konting gu shri tshan ha'i dbang*) or in the form “prince increasing transformation” (Tib. *sprul pa spel ba'i rgyal bu*).

<sup>43</sup> Chin. *chiniu yuyin* 螭紐玉印. A jade seal was of a higher rank than a golden or silver seal during the Yuan and Ming dynasties (Huang Yusheng 1995: 81).

<sup>44</sup> Chin. *gaoming*. On this documents appointing non-Chinese leaders in recognition of their political status see Serruys 1967: 347-348. These letters-patent were issued not in Chinese but in the language of the particular non-Chinese ruler (Serruys 1967: 357).

<sup>45</sup> This bestowal is also recorded in other Chinese source (MSH: 331, 6b; MHY: 1530). Tibetan sources also mention this act: *Rgya Bod yig tshang* (Stag-tshang-pa Śri-bhu-ti-bhadra 1979: 347) states, that the Emperor had presented Grags-pa Rgyal-mtshan with the title *konting gu shri tshan ha'i dbang*, a golden seal (Tib. *gser tham*), a decree (Tib. *lung*) and gifts (Tib. *lag rtags*). *Deb ther dmar po gsar ma* (Tucci 1971: fol. 79) mentions only the golden seal (Tib. *gser gyi dam kha*).

<sup>46</sup> For details see Schuh 1976; Sperling 1980; Sperling 1983a; Sperling 1983b; Satō 1987.

<sup>47</sup> Most notably from the above-mentioned Gon-gyo and Gling-tshang.

<sup>48</sup> The system of relay station was established by the Mongols.

<sup>49</sup> In the south-west part of today's Gansu Province, near today's Lintan 臨潭.

and Grags-pa Rgyal-mtshan. All the other contacts were limited to the ceremonial presentation of tribute and the dispatch of Chinese envoys with gifts for the 5th *sde srid* Grags-pa Rgyal-mtshan.

The first recorded tribute mission from Grags-pa Rgyal-mtshan after he was granted the title “anointed national preceptor, prince who initiates transformation” arrived on the 13th January 1409 (MSHL: 140). The tribute mission included several envoys of Tibetan dignitaries from Central Tibet who were under the authority of Grags-pa Rgyal-mtshan. Besides an envoy from the 5th *sde srid*, the group included envoys from Bsod-nams Bzang-po (1380-1416), the abbot of the Phag-mo-gru seat monastery in Gdan-sa-mthil, from Nam-mkha’ Bzang po,<sup>50</sup> the *rdzong-dpon* (“governor”) of Sne’u-rdzong,<sup>51</sup> from the military dignitaries Banzhuer Zangbu 板主兒藏卜<sup>52</sup> and Lasiba Cuerjia 刺思巴促兒加, from Sanglijie Shijia 桑里結失夾, the *rdzong dpon* of Bsam-grub-rtse,<sup>53</sup> from Zhuozha 卓札, the *rdzong dpon* of Jiezhugu 節竹古,<sup>54</sup> from the bla-ma from Gung-thang<sup>55</sup> ‘Od-zer Bzang-po,<sup>56</sup> from Dga’-bde Bzang-po<sup>57</sup> and Dngos-grub Rgyal-mtshan,<sup>58</sup> and from Rin-chen Rgyal-mtshan, a bla-ma from the Gnassnying monastery.<sup>59</sup> This group represents the largest mission from territories subjected to Grags-pa Rgyal-mtshan to the Ming court and it shows that the bestowal of the new title had secured the loyalty of Grags-pa Rgyal-mtshan.

Another tributary mission arrived at the Ming court on the 11th March 1413 (MSHL: 152-153; MSh: 331, 6b) as a result of the dispatch of the eunuch Yang Sanbao 楊三保 to Central Tibet.<sup>60</sup> On his way back to China Yang Sanbao was joined by the envoy from Grags-pa Rgyal-mtshan, his nephew Zhajie 札結. After arriving at the Ming court Yang Sanbao was immediately ordered to again set out for a mission to Central Tibet to Grags-pa Rgyal-mtshan and other dignitaries. The Emperor had decided to use this opportunity to establish some new administrative units in Tibet and appoint some lower official from Central Tibet to Chinese official posts. The most important among them was the establishment of the branch of the Regional Military Commission (Chin. *xing du zhihui shi si* 行都指揮使司 – Hucker 1985: 537) and the Emperor appointed Nange Jianzang 喃葛監藏, the *rdzong dpon* of Sne’u-rdzong, to the post of Assistant Commissioner (Chin. *du zhihui qianshi* 都指揮僉事 – Hucker 1985: 154, 537).

<sup>50</sup> According to Tibetan sources (Ngag-dbang Blo-bzang Rgya-mtsho 1988: 147) he was one of the high-ranking officials of Grags-pa Rgyal-mtshan.

<sup>51</sup> Located near Lhasa – Wylie 1962: 170.

<sup>52</sup> According to Satō (1981: 28) he was an official in ‘Phyong-rgyas (in the Yar-lung valley).

<sup>53</sup> Today’s Gzhis-ka-rtse.

<sup>54</sup> Probably Zhajiezhugu 札節竹古 (Tib. Lcags-rtse-gri-gu – Shen Weirong 2002: 43), south of Rtse-thang.

<sup>55</sup> The seat monastery of the Tshal-pa Bka’-brgyud school located near the Nepalese border.

<sup>56</sup> On him see Satō 1981: 29.

<sup>57</sup> A high official, on him see Satō 1981: 29.

<sup>58</sup> Probably the younger brother of Dga’-bde Bzang-po – Satō 1981: 29.

<sup>59</sup> Located in Central Tibet near the road from Pha-ri to Rgyal-rtse (Das 1995: 752).

<sup>60</sup> The exact date of his dispatch is not recorded in the available sources.

The reason why precisely this Tibetan official was appointed to this post is not clear.

On the 25th January 1414 the eunuch Yang Sanbao was again dispatched to Tibet with another request (similar as in April 1407) to rebuild the relay stations (MShL: 155; MSh: 331, 6b; MHY: 1530) to Grags-pa Rgyal-mtshan and local dignitaries in 'Bri-gung, Gon-gyo and in Gling-tshang. This repeated request shows that the authority of the Ming court in Tibetan areas was only superficial. However, this second request was more successful and Chinese sources claim that "since that time all the roads have been open and the envoys had travelled there and back ten thousands of *li* 里 without the danger of being robbed" (MSh: 331, 6a). It was of great importance to safeguard the routes between China and Tibet for the further development of Sino-Tibetan relations in the realm of diplomatic and trade contacts.<sup>61</sup> The activity of Tibetan dignitaries involved in this project was rewarded by gifts from the Emperor dispatched with an envoy on the 26th June 1415 (MShL: 158).

All the following contacts between the Emperor Chengzu and Grags-pa Rgyal-mtshan consisted of tribute missions and dispatches of envoys. The envoys bringing tribute from Grags-pa Rgyal-mtshan are always included in a larger group of Tibetan envoys and the Chinese envoys are not dispatched especially to Grags-pa Rgyal-mtshan but also to other Tibetan dignitaries. The next two tribute missions from Tibet are recorded on the 5th June 1416 (MShL: 161) and on the 29th January 1418. On the 30th October 1419 one of the most experienced specialist in Tibetan affairs, the eunuch Yang Sanbao was sent to Tibet with gifts for the high-ranking Buddhist and secular authorities in Tibet – including Grags-pa Rgyal-mtshan – which shows the Emperor's recognition of "the loyalty with which they [i.e. Tibetan dignitaries] dispatch envoy with tribute" (MShL: 167). Another group of Tibetan envoys arrived on the 15th March 1423 and their members<sup>62</sup> received gifts from the Emperor (MShL: 170). Subsequently, on the 28th March 1423 the eunuch Dai Xing 戴興 was dispatched with them to Tibet with gifts for Grags-pa Rgyal-mtshan and other Tibetan dignitaries whose envoys were included in the tributary mission (MShL: 171; MSh: 331, 6b). This mission represents the last contact between the Ming Chengzu who died in 1424 and Grags-pa Rgyal-mtshan.

The Emperor Ming Chengzu showed a deep interest in Tibetan Buddhism and this aspect should also be taken into account. He first acquired some knowledge of Tibetan Buddhism already before his accession to the throne, when he, as Prince of Yan (*Yanwang* 燕王) stationed in the area of former Yuan capital Dadu was informed about the visits of Tibetan lamas of the Sa-skyapa and Karma-pa schools to the Imperial court (MSh: 331, 2a). During his reign he had

<sup>61</sup> In Chinese sources one may find numerous instances when Chinese and Tibetan envoys were robbed by local Tibetans (e. g. Sperling 1983b: 168; Greatrex 1997a: 331; Greatrex 1997b: 108, 121-122).

<sup>62</sup> In the first place, the envoy from Grags-pa Rgyal-mtshan Duanyue Zhuba 端岳竹巴 is mentioned. We can also find his name in the tribute mission which arrived on the 2nd February 1439 – MShL: 381.

several times dispatched envoys to Tibet with the aim of bringing Buddhist texts and statues.<sup>63</sup> Ming Chengzu wrote several forewords to Buddhist texts and the authorship of two Buddhist works is ascribed to him (Goodrich – Chaoying Fang 1976: 363). The visits of Tibetan lamas to his court included their dispensation of both religious instruction and Tantric initiations to the Emperor. Ming Chengzu sponsored the printing of the first part of Tibetan Buddhist canon (Bka'-gyur), which was distributed in Tibet as an imperial gift.<sup>64</sup> During his reign several Tibetan Buddhist temples and monasteries were built in Nanjing<sup>65</sup> and Beijing (Deng Ruiling 1989: 71) and the stay of Tibetan monks in these temples was financially supported by the Emperor (Huang Yusheng 1995: 105). The close relationship of Ming Chenzu towards Tibetan Buddhism undoubtedly shaped his Tibet policy.

Ming Chenzu had during his reign retained contacts only with one *sde srid* (the 5th) Grags-pa Rgyal-mtshan. These contacts were limited to tribute missions (in 1406, 1409, 1413, 1416, 1418, 1423) who were often followed by dispatches of Chinese envoys with gifts (1409, 1413, 1415, 1419, 1423). Though the contacts were more frequent than in the preceding period they were still focused on ceremonial aspects. Grags-pa Rgyal mtshan had helped the Ming court in the restoration of relay station between the years 1407 and 1414. However, his assistance was not a matter of course but required a longer Chinese diplomatic activity and lavish gifts. The Tibet policy of Ming Chengzu is characterized by his granting of titles – starting with the title “anointed national preceptor, prince who initiates transformation” bestowed on Grags-pa Rgyal-mtshan in March 1406 – to Tibetan secular and Buddhist dignitaries. Central Tibet did not play a crucial role in Chengzu’s foreign policy and the pattern of relations with the Phag-mo-grus reflected this situation.

According to the available sources during the short reign of his successor Ming Renzong 明仁宗 (1378-1425, r. 1424-1425) the contacts with Central Tibet ceased and it was only during the reign of Ming Xuanzong 明宣宗 (1399-1435, r. 1426-1435) that they were revived. On the 29th April 1427, he dispatched the Palace Eunuch (Chin. *taijian* 太監 – Hucker 1985: 476) Hou Xian 侯顯<sup>66</sup> to Central Tibet and Nepal with presents for local dignitaries. Grags-pa Rgyal mtshan had in return send the envoy Nanha Jiancuo 喃哈監剌 to China. The arrival of this mission is not mentioned in Chinese sources, but they record

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<sup>63</sup> These statues of Tibetan Buddhist deities influenced Chinese Buddhist art and later these statues with Tibetan art features were sent back to Tibet as gifts from the Emperor to Tibetan dignitaries (Karmay 1975: 72-103).

<sup>64</sup> E. g. in March 1413 (MShL: 155), in June 1416 (MShL: 160).

<sup>65</sup> During the visit of the 5th Karma-pa De-bzhin Gshegs-pa (1384-1415) he had ordered the erection of a Tibetan Buddhist temple even within the complex of the Imperial palace – Sperling 1983b: 80.

<sup>66</sup> Hou Xian had played an important role in the relations with Tibet (especially with the 5th Karma-pa), Nepal and northern India. Hou Xian had twice accompanied the famous eunuch Zheng He 鄭和 (1371-1433) on his trips to South Asia – see Goodrich – Chaoying Fang 1976: 522-523.

(MShL: 231) an incident which had occurred on their way back to Tibet. Nanha Jiancuo became involved in a conflict with the son of the Aide (Chin. *cheng* 丞 – Hucker 1985: 125) of the relay station in Xining who was killed in a fight. The Emperor Xuanzong had granted the Tibetan envoy a pardon and Nanha Jiancuo was sent back to Tibet with the order to Grags-pa Rgyal-mtshan to rectify this offence. The fact that a Tibetan envoy who had killed a Chinese subject of the Emperor was granted a pardon shows, that Xuanzong had decided to give priority to foreign policy goals before bringing him to justice.

From summer 1430 a new feature appeared in the mutual relations. The Chinese sources record the arrival of Tibetan envoys who were dispatched either by Grags-pa Rgyal-mtshan or some officials under his authority and they had requested a residence permit in the Ming capital Beijing and an official rank in the central Chinese administration. On the 18th July 1430 the Emperor granted a residence permit to a certain Sanzhasi 三札思 (MShL: 277) and appointed him Judge<sup>67</sup> (Chin. *zhenfu* 鎮撫 – Hucker 1985: 121). In 1430 honorary titles were again granted to Ban lama 伴喇嘛 (MShL: 279), a member of a tributary mission dispatched by Grags-pa Rgyal-mtshan, who was appointed Assistant Commissioner (Chin. *du zhihui qianshi* 都指揮僉事 – Hucker 1985: 154, 537), and to the envoy Sunzhu 孫竹 (MShL: 279) who was appointed Judge and was permitted to stay in the capital. Though these three Tibetan envoys were granted honorary ranks their main task was to represent Grags-pa Rgyal-mtshan at the Imperial court (Huang Yusheng 1995: 104).<sup>68</sup> The last record on relations between the 5th *sde srid* Grags-pa Rgyal-mtshan and the Ming emperors is recorded on the 26th December 1431 when a tribute mission under the guidance of lama Zangbubo 藏卜伯 and the monk Xingji Lingzhan 星吉領占 arrived (MShL: 294). The Emperor Xuanzong had taken over the framework of relations with Tibet established by Ming Chengzu and during his reign three subjects of Grags-pa Rgyal-mtshan were appointed to honorary ranks in the Chinese capital which reflects the interest to establish a direct communication. The death of Grags-pa Rgyal-mtshan and the subsequent defeat of the Phag-mo-gru ruling house in 1434 ended one stage of Sino-Tibetan relations.

From the above-mentioned facts it is obvious that in the years 1368-143 the Phag-mo-gru did not represent an important ally or a dangerous enemy of the Ming Dynasty in its Inner Asian policy. The amount of information on these relations available in Chinese and Tibetan sources reflects the fact that at any time it did not represent a priority either for the Chinese or the Tibetan side. In relations with China Tibet was only one of numerous peripheral regions (Schuh 1976: 218). During the reign of the founder of the Ming Dynasty the Emperor Taizu, Chinese foreign policy was focused on the military and political conflict with the Mongols, which had a crucial character for the newly established dy-

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<sup>67</sup> Serruys (1967: 613) translates this term as “constable” and states that this honorary military rank was often given to members of tributary missions (Serruys 1967: 145-147).

<sup>68</sup> The increasing number of Tibetans, mainly Buddhist monks, who resided in the capital was later criticized by Chinese officials – Greatrex 1997b: 137-138.

nasty. Later too the Ming court did not possess any effective policy tools which could secure its political, economic and military interest in Central Tibet. At the same time we may assert that the Ming Dynasty did not have any strategic interest in Central Tibet. Thus the formal and ceremonial character of their mutual relations as performed in the framework of the tributary system satisfied the needs of both sides. The Ming strategy towards Tibet can be characterized as a kind of *laissez-faire* policy (Kolmaš 1967: 28) and one can agree with Tucci's statement that "Chinese sovereignty [in Tibet] was then limited to *de iure* recognition of privileges and authority already existing *de facto*" (Tucci 1949: 24). The Sino-Tibetan relations during the Ming period, of which the early contacts with the Phag-mo-gru form only one chapter, do not represent only a "transition period" between the preceding Mongolian Yuan Dynasty and the following Manchu Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) as they are sometimes treated but they deserve our separate attention.

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