

## Some Notes on Khubilai Khan, vPhags-pa and Kar-ma Pak-shi in the Years 1251-1255

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In the year of 1251, Mongke, Khubilai's older brother, became the Great Khan of Mongolia. After that, Mongke Khan enforced a system of enfeoffment step by step in Tibetan area. But this could not calm down the conflicts between different religious schools and local forces in Tibet. On the contrary, it intensified their original rivalry. Under this situation, the Mongolian royal family must enforce the cooperation with the religious leaders from Tibet, build a united and complete political system and organizational order, and strengthen the economical, cultural and religious relationship between Inner China and Tibet. Only in this way could they obtain local stability and propelled the course of unification. After the death of Mongke Khan in 1259, this historical duty fell on the shoulders of Khubilai and vPhags-pa-Lama. The author wants to investigate the complex process of their meeting and unification in this article, and hopes it can bring enlightenment on this topic. Criticism and suggestions are always welcome.

### 1. When did vPhags-pa acquaint himself with Khubilai Khan?

There are many records about the meeting of vPhags-pa with Khubilai Khan. The contents are quite similar, but there are some contradictions and need more textual research about the year and the personages. Let's check what was recorded firstly in a Chinese historical document, the *Fozu Lidai Tongzai* (佛祖历代通载 *Buddha's Records in all Successive Dynasties*, hereinafter referred to as *Buddha's Record*).

Originally, when Khubilai Khan stayed in his own mansion in the capital, he heard that there was a famous learned monk, who lived in the west. Khubilai Khan wanted to meet him, so he sent a messenger to

Xiliang 西凉, and asked Godan to send this monk to his place. But Godan told the messenger: “The master has passed away. But his nephew, named vPhags-pa, only 16 years old, is very good at Buddhism. So please allow me to send him to you.” But vPhags-pa requested to go back to Xiliang when he had spent only ten days in the capital since his arrival at Khubilai Khan’s place. Khubilai Khan asked him: “Compared to your uncle, how much do you know about the knowledge of Buddhism?” He answered: “My uncle’s Buddhist knowledge is like an ocean, and mine is so little that it is only like a drop of water in the mouth.” Khubilai Khan was very pleased by his unobtrusive answer and said: “You have a noble and unsullied disposition, despite of your young age. Please stay with me and teach me the Buddhism doctrine.” And vPhags-pa was accepted as a teacher of Khubilai Khan thereafter.<sup>1</sup>

There are several points we should pay attention to in this record. Firstly, this event happened in the year after the death of Saskya Pandita, and Godan still existed then; secondly, vPhags-pa was “only 16 years old”; thirdly, “vPhags-pa requested to go back to Xiliang 西凉 when he had spent only ten days in the capital since his arrival”. We all know that both Saskya Pandita and Godan died in 1251. In historical document, the date of Saskya Pandita’s death was November 14, but there was so far no research about Godan’s death date. Could it be said that Godan died after Saskya Pandita? It was said that vPhags-pa was “16 years old” at that year, but records in Tibetan about the birth year of vPhags-pa was different from Chinese sources.<sup>2</sup> So some scholar keenly pointed out that, it should happened in

<sup>1</sup>See the different versions of “Biography of Danpa” 胆巴传 in vol. 49 of *Taisho Tripitaka* 大正藏 (or *Taisho Shinshu Daiyokyo* 大正新修大藏经, vol.22 of Nian Chang’s *Fozu Lidai Tongzai* 佛祖历代通载 (*Buddha’s Records in all Successive Dynasties*, 致 11 of *Pinjia Tripitaka* 频伽藏致十一, etc. The characters “绰理哲瓦 Zhuoli Zhewa” in “Biography of Danpa” is the transliteration of the Tibetan “Chos-rje-ba”, the title of Saskya Pandita, which means the king of Dharma. “廓丹大王” equals to “阔端大王”(the Magnate Godan). The birth year of vPhags-pa was usually recorded as 1239 in Chinese sources, but the record here was a little bit special—it was not copied from the inscription written by Wang Pan 王磐 according to the emperor’s order. There are two reasons: first, those copied from Wang Pan were quoted from his “Dishi Xingzhuang” 帝师行状 (biography of the imperial preceptor), but the quotation here was from *Biography of Danba* in vol. 22 of Nian Chang, which was a mixture of different works and full of inconsistencies. We can find the same cases in other ancient Chinese source (even including the official annals such as *Yuanshi* 元史); second, since this quotation records the answering from Godan to a messenger, he couldn’t be ignorant about the age of vPhags-pa.

<sup>2</sup> Even of the Chinese historical works, their sources are different. This was stemmed from *Biography of Danba*, a record especially of Godan’s words; but the other source were all from “Dishi Xingzhuang” written by Wang Pan. So they are different. In other words, the record here is maybe the most adjacent age (maybe the unique one).

1250 based on Tibetan records which said vPhags-pa Lama was born in 1235, but it should have happened in 1254 based on Chinese sources which said vPhags-pa Lama was born in 1239.<sup>3</sup> This is the ordinary counting method which counts the birth year in. If we count only their real ages, which means that the birth year is not counted in, this event should have happened in the year of 1251 (according to the Tibetan, 1251-1235=16), or 1255 (according to the Chinese, 1255-1239=16). If we count in the first way, it was 1250 or 1254 that Khubilai Khan called in vPhags-pa. But both were impossible: in 1250 Khubilai Khan still had no power in his grip, and could not order Godan and the latter would not obey his order; in 1254 he was on his expedition to Dali 大理 (i.e. Nanzhao 南诏 in the ancient time, now in Yunnan 云南 province) and it was inconvenient for their meeting. So this event must have happened after Khubilai Khan had mastered all military affairs of western Mongol (in 1251). If counting in the second way, there are two possibilities. If Godan was still alive, the time must be in 1251; but if the name of “Godan Magnate” is a mistake, the time must be in 1255. But the documents in both languages clearly and definitely recorded that in the year of 1253 vPhags-pa met Khuublai Khan in the Khan’s mansion.<sup>4</sup> So their meeting can’t be later than 1253, and their first meeting ought to be in 1251.

Again let’s check the third point: “vPhags-pa requested to go back to Xiliang when he had spent only ten days in the capital since his arrival”. Why did he hurry back after his arriving? There must be some reasons.

It is recorded in this way in the Tibetan book, *rgya bod yig tshang* 汉藏史集:

When Saskya Pandita and his nephews arrived at the fantastic monastery in Liangzhou, Mongolian Se-chen-rgyal-po (i.e. Khubilai) issued an edict saying that “The celebrated Sa-skyapa abbot, who has arrived Liangzhou, should be my religious teacher”. Because of Saskya

<sup>3</sup> Chen Qingying (1992), pp.47;

<sup>4</sup> According to “Dishi Xingzhuang” by Wang Pan, in vol.32 of Pinjia Tripitaka, the record is that “In the year of Gui-chou (1253) when the Guru was 15 years old, the Emperor Shizu invited him to his mansion, the Guru knew it was an royal edict so he hurried to the palace.” (癸丑师年十五, 世祖皇帝龙德渊潜, 师知真令有归, 驰驿径诣王府). In “Shi Lao Zhuan” 释老传 in vol. 202 of *Yuanshi* 元史 (Yuan Annals), the record is “in the year of Guichou (1253), [the Master] was 15 and he met Emperor Shizu at his mansion.” (岁癸丑, 年有十五, 谒世祖于潜邸). And in Ngag-dbang Kun-dgav Bsod-nams’ *Saskya gdung-rabs* 萨迦世系史 (The Lineage History of Sakya-Pa Sect [appeared in 1629], mi-rigs dbe-skrun-khang [Minzu Chubanshe], Beijing, 1986), it records (p.151) that “In the year of ox (1253), being invited by Se-chen-rgyal-po, vPhags-pa went to his palace...” (de-nas glang-lo-la se-chen gan-gyis gdan-drangs-pa nas pho-brang du byon-te...). Here vPhags-pa was already 18 years old since he was certainly born in 1235. Quite different from other sources.

Pandita's old age, his nephew vPhags-pa, accompanied with Mong-gor-dang, went to the inner China instead, and met Se-chen-rgyal-poKhubilai at Lu-bavi-shan 六盘山 in inner China. Khubilai was so pleased that he sent 100 army horses to them as present, and kept the Sa-skyapa Lama (vPhags-pa) by his side, aligned him and himself a religious affiliation as the Priest and Patron. He (vPhags-pa) held the post of Lama and performed the ritual of releasing souls from purgatory for his uncle, the hierarch of Sa-skyapa, and lived in inner China and Mongolia for many years<sup>5</sup>.

There are two points that should be noticed in the above record: first, when the order of Se-chen-rgyal-po Khubilai arrived, Saskya Pandita was still alive but too old and sick to travel then. Therefore vPhags-pa met Khubilai in 1251; second, after that meeting, vPhags-pa returned to Liangzhou 凉州 and performed a releasing ceremony for his uncle. And this situation is a little different from the *Buddha's Records* which says "the teacher[Saskya Pandita] has been dead". This is another question which will be investigated later.

As to the matter, there is also a record in *Deb-ther Dmar-po*<sup>6</sup> saying that Khubilai sent 100 army horses to Liangzhou and let vPhags-pa stay by his side, etc. But there was no exact time and did not mention whether Saskya Pandita was alive or not at that time:

The protector of all living creatures, vPhags-pa bLo-gros rGyal-mtshan was born in the year of wood-sheep. He accompanied his uncle to Liangzhou when he was only 10 years old. After that, when Khubilai (Kov Pe La) garrisoned in Lu-pavi-shan, the magnate of Liangzhou, (Mo-go-du) and the esteemed teacher (vPhags-pa) went to meet him there. Khubilai was very pleased, and sent the magnate of Liangzhou

<sup>5</sup> See Stag-tshang Rdzong-pa Dpal-vbyor Bzang-po, *Rgya-bod Yig-tshang chen-mo* 汉藏史集(Sino-Tibetan History)[appeared in 1434], si-khron mi-rigs dpe-skrun-khang (Sichuan Minzu Chubanshe), Chengdu, 1985, pp. 325-326: "der byang-ngos sprul-pa sder/ khu-dpon phebs-pavi skabs-su/ hor se-chen rgyal-povi lung-gis byang-ngos nas/ sa-skya bla-ma bya-ba/ khyad-vphags slebs-yod vdug-pa/ nged-kyi bla-mchod la dgos-gsungs-pa byung-nas/ cho-rje pa-sku na bgres-pas ma-byon/ bla-ma vphags-pas/ byang-ngos-pavi/ rgyal-bu mong-gor-dang/ lhan-cig tu/ rgya-nag la byon/ rgyal-po se-chen go-se-la/ lu-bavi-shan na bzhugs-pa dang mjal-bas/ shin-tu mnyes-nas/ hor-gyi rta-pa brgya-skor gcig/ byang-ngos la phyin-nas/ sa-skyapa blangs/ yon-mchod du vbrel/ bla-mavi brtags-ba mjad-rin dang/ byang-mgos su/ chos-rje bde-bar gshegs-pavi dgongs-pa rdzogs thabs-sogs la/ rgya-hor-gyi yul-du lo-mang-bar bzhugs/" Here "go-se-la"(Khubilai) may be a mistake which replace "pe" with "se", since they seem similar.

<sup>6</sup> i.e. Vtshal-pa Kun-dgav Rdo-rje, *Deb-ther Dmar-po* 红史(Red Annals)[appeared in 1346-1363], mi-rigs dpe-skrun-khang (Minzu Chubanshe), Beijing, 1981.

(Mo-go-du) 100 Mongolian army horses, and let Sa-skyapa Lama (vPhags-pa) stay with him for his initiation ceremony (abhiseca) and setted up a relationship of Patron and Priest.<sup>7</sup>

The record about the same matter in *Mdo Smad Chos Vbyung*<sup>8</sup> is unclear and vague. It says that at the invitation of Godan in the year of Wood-dragon (1244), Saskya Pandita went to the north with vPhags-pa and his younger brother. He met Godan in the year of Fire-sheep (1247). After that, a woman paid a visit to them with a zigzag tool. Inspired by this, Saskya Pandita created the Mongolian characters. Later on Khubilai Khan invited the protector for all living creatures (i.e. vPhags-pa) to his place. This Sa-skyapa Lama converted his religious belief by the Lama's Abinna, etc.<sup>9</sup> Judging by this record, it seems as if vPhags-pa had met Khubilai Khan when Saskya Pandita was still alive.<sup>10</sup> But there was no exact evidence about the exact time, and it was hard to confirm the time of his visiting.

We'd better here to have a comprehensively analysis on this event based on the historical data at hand.

Mongke was elected as the Great Khan of Mongolia, in June, 1251, and his formal enthronement was in July. After Mongke's accession, he ordered his brother Khubilai, who had the same mother with him, to lead all military affairs in the south of the Great Desert (Monan 漠南).<sup>11</sup> Thus "Se-chen-rgyal-po (i.e. Khubilai)

<sup>7</sup> See *Deb-ther Dmar-po*, pp.47-48: "gcen-po vgro-mgon vphags-pa blo-gros rgyal-mtshan shing-mo-lug la vkhrungs/ dgung lo-bcu-pa la khu-bovi phyags-phyi la byang-ngos sub yon/ phyis rgyal-po kov-pe-la lu-pavi shan-na bzhugs-dus la/ byang bgos-pavi rgyal-po mo-go-du dang/ bla-ma-pa lhan-du byon-pa mjal-bas mnyes-nas rgyal-bu byang-ngos-pa la/ kor-gyi rta-pa brgya-skor-gcig byin nas/ sa-skyapa blangs/ dbang-bskur/ de-nas yon-mchod du sbrel-te/" Khubilai here was transliterated in Tibetan as "kov pe la" which was different from the one "go se[pe] la" in *Rgya-bod yig-tshang*. In addition, the transliteration of "Mong-gor-dang" in which there was nasal consonant (i.e. ng) at its end.

<sup>8</sup> i.e. Brag-dgon-pa Dkon-mchog Bstan-pa Rab-rgya, *Mdo Smad Chos Vbyung* 安多政教史 (The Political and Religious History of A-mdo), [appeared in 1865], Kan-suvu mi-rigs dbe-skrunkhang (Gansu Minzu Chubanshe), Lanzhou, 1982.

<sup>9</sup> See *Mdo Smad Chos Vbyung*, pp.20, 166-167.

<sup>10</sup> Wang Furen 王辅仁, Chen Qingying 陈庆英: "Basiba Zhuanlue" 八思巴传略 (A Brief Biography of vPhags-pa), in *Zhongguo Minzushi Yanjiu* 中国民族史研究 (chief-edited by the Institute of Ethnology, China Academy of Social Sciences), Zhongguo Shehuikexue Chubanshe, Beijing, 1987, p.64, note 2. It is clearly recorded on page 166 in *Stod-smad Chos-vbyung* that Khubilai Khan sent out an "invitation", and claimed that "Saskya Pandita must come and serve as my attending Lama!" (.....) Godan didn't allow that, so Khubilai Khan blagged for vPhags-pa instead. But later it says that vPhags-pa did not meet Khubilai until he had received his Gelung-pa initiation. Thus it is doubtful that vPhags-pa met Khubilai Khan when Saskya Pandita was still alive.

<sup>11</sup> See *The Biography of Emperor Xianzong* 宪宗本纪 in vol. 3 of *The Yuan Annals* 《元史》: "in summer June in the first year of [Xianzong's reign] Xinhai 辛亥 (1251), [Mongke Khan]...was