FROM KUBLAI’S CONQUEST TO THE PRESENT: 
THE IMPACT OF TIBETAN AND CENTRAL ASIAN VAJRAYĀNA IN CHINA
52. TIBETAN BUDDHISM IN MONGOL-YUAN CHINA  
(1206–1368)

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During the Mongol-Yuan period (1271–1368) Tibetan tantric Buddhism was widespread among the Mongols, and also among the Chinese. In China, Tibetan Buddhist monks, or as they were so called in Chinese sources, “barbarian monks from the West” (xifan seng 西番僧) enjoyed great popularity and were enthusiastically admired and supported by their Mongol patrons. Tibetan lamas of the Sa skya pa school became imperial preceptors of the great Mongol Khans. In all provinces they were granted unprecedented status and privileges, such as being enshrined in the temple and offered sacrifices. In Chinese history, such honors were enjoyed only by Confucius (551–479 B.C.E.) and his disciples.

The protective deity Mahākāla was adopted as the country’s tutelary deity by the Mongols, along with various healing and protective cults.¹ The notorious scandal related to the practice of “the secret teaching of supreme bliss” (tantric sexual practice) introduced by Tibetan lamas at the Mongol court provided plenty of ammunition for generations of Chinese literati to demonize Tibetan lamas for engaging in sexualized tantric rituals. The yogic practice of Tibetan tantric Buddhism was said to be one of the causes of the rapid destruction of the Mongol-Yuan dynasty.²

Nevertheless, very little is known about what forms of Tibetan tantric Buddhist teachings and rituals spread among and were practiced by the Mongols. Other than mentioning some indecipherable terms of Tibetan origin in Chinese phonetic transcription, contemporary Chinese sources scattered in various types of literary works offer no details in this regard. In recent years, the discovery of a large number of Tibetan tantric Buddhist texts in Chinese translation among the Khara Khoto texts, which are preserved in St. Petersburg, Russia, and which only recently have become widely available, have prompted

¹ See Wang 1994a.