

UDC 24

THE CURRENT SITUATION AND DEVELOPMENT TRENDS OF TIBETAN BUDDHISM IN INNER MONGOLIA

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Annotation

Since the 16th century, the dge-lugs-pa (Gelug sect) of Tibetan Buddhism has been spread widely in Mongolian regions, gradually permeating the ideological and social lives of the Mongolian people. This has imbued Mongolian people's politics, economy, culture and art with profound Tibetan Buddhist characteristics. Meanwhile, due to specific reasons such as the different history of inheritance, the different language and culture of the believers, and the different degrees of social development in the regions where Mongolian are located, after hundreds of years of localization, Tibetan Buddhism in Mongolian regions also has strong Mongolian characteristics, which significantly differentiate it from Tibetan Buddhism in Tibetan areas. Therefore, if we want to understand the inheritance and development of Tibetan Buddhism, we should also pay attention to the current situation and development trends of Tibetan Buddhism in Inner Mongolia. Although the belief in Tibetan Buddhism in Inner Mongolia has evidently weakened compared to its prosperous dissemination over the past few centuries, it still occupies a main position among religious beliefs in the region. As the primary religious faith of Mongolians in Inner Mongolia, Tibetan Buddhism continues to play a role in preserving and inheriting traditional culture, while offering unique functions and contemporary values in constructing Mongolian identity and imparting ethical and moral education. Currently, in the process of development of Tibetan Buddhism in Inner Mongolia, there are many problems, such as the low level of ability among monastic talents, the lack of unity and harmony within monk team, the inadequate standardized management of monks, and the inaccurate dissemination and promotion of Buddhist teachings. This paper analyzes the manifestations and causes of these issues, and puts forward countermeasures and suggestions to solve these problems, so as to provide intellectual support for the healthy development of Tibetan Buddhism in Inner Mongolia.

Key words

The current situation, development trends, Tibetan Buddhism, Inner Mongolia, China.



I. Existing Problems in the Development of Tibetan Buddhism in Inner Mongolia

Since the Reform and Opening-up, Tibetan Buddhism in Inner Mongolia has entered a stage of recovery and rapid development, characterized by an increase number of monasteries, a growing contingent of sangha and nuns, and frequent religious activities.

At present, there are 308 officially registered Buddhist monasteries in Inner Mongolia, including 181 Tibetan Buddhist temples and 127 Han Buddhist temples. There are 2,265 Buddhist clergy in the Autonomous Region, including 2,072 Tibetan Buddhists and 193 Han Buddhists. From this set of figures, we can know that the ranks of Tibetan Buddhist temples and monk teams in Inner Mongolia have been greatly strengthened.

However, in the process of development of Tibetan Buddhism in Inner Mongolia, there are also the following problems.

(i) the low level of ability among monastic talents

One serious issue is the educational attainment of Tibetan Buddhist monks in Inner Mongolia is generally low. On the whole, the vast majority of monks only get junior high school education, with a minority holding a high school diploma, and very few having a university degree or above. Due to the limited historical and cultural knowledge imparted in junior high school, these monks who only get junior high school education are simply not competent to explain and disseminate Buddhist teachings to believers. Many young monks in temples do not have a grasp of the basic knowledge of Buddhism, let alone systematic study or profound understanding of Buddhist thought. Owing to limited temple funds, monks have few opportunities to receive formal education in Buddhist colleges.

Moreover, most senior living Buddhas or eminent monks in temples who are knowledgeable and have profound Buddhist attainments are either elderly or have passed away, making it difficult for the older generation to pass on and help the younger generation to study systematic Buddhist thought. A more serious issue is the proficiency in Tibetan language among Tibetan Buddhist monks in Inner Mongolia is generally low, with many even many having no knowledge of Tibetan.

Since Tibetan Buddhism regards the Buddhist sutra (Ganjuur) as the order of the Buddha, which must not be arbitrarily altered or fabricated in the process of transmission to ensure the accuracy of Buddhist teachings, the language of inheritance and dissemination of Tibetan Buddhism is Tibetan. The name "Tibetan Buddhism" is also derived from "Buddhism of the Tibetan language family". For hundreds of years since Tibetan Buddhism spread in Mongolian regions, monks in Tibetan Buddhist temples have maintained the tradition of chanting sutras in Tibetan. However, most current monks in the Tibetan Buddhist temples in Inner Mongolia do not understand Tibetan, making it difficult for them to accurately and profoundly understand Tibetan Buddhist thought, let alone accurately explain the teachings of Tibetan Buddhism to Tibetan Buddhist believers. This situation is extremely unfavorable to the development of Tibetan Buddhism.

(ii) the lack of unity and harmony within monk team

Tibetan Buddhism in Inner Mongolia is influenced by the differences between different sects, ethnic groups and regions, and various controversies have emerged within the monk teams concerning precepts, lifestyles, and chanting languages. For example, regarding vegetarianism, while Tibetan Buddhism does not prohibit meat-eating, many Buddhists in Inner Mongolia adhere to both Tibetan and Han Buddhism, and Han Buddhism clearly stipulates that monk can only eat vegetarian food.

Therefore, in order to maintain a positive image among Buddhists, many Tibetan Buddhist temples have thus stipulated that monk should not eat meat, and that they should adopt vegetarianism to cultivate compassion and equanimity. However, due to differing dietary habits formed before ordination in pastoral and agricultural areas, monks often hold varying views on this regulation, and sometimes leading to controversy within monk teams. In terms of clothing, Tibetan Buddhist monks have a wide variety of clothing, and the way of wearing and sewing varies from sect to sect and from the status of the monk. Following democratic reforms and socialist transformations from the 1940s to the 1950s, many privileges of Tibetan Buddhism in Inner Mongolia were abolished, weakening the strict requirements for monks to wear differently based on their status.

Tibetan Buddhism in Inner Mongolia belongs to the Gelug sect, and most of the existing temples also belong to the Gelug sect of Tibetan Buddhism (Erhimbayar, 2006). Gelug monks are strictly forbidden to marry. But, the marriage of Tibetan Buddhist monks in Inner Mongolia is very common after the democratic reform and socialist transformation. These phenomena make monks who strictly adhere to Buddhist precepts and remain celibate question the faith of married monks, which leads to internal contradictions and disunity.

(iii) the inadequate standardized management of monks

There are many problems in many Tibetan Buddhist monasteries in Inner Mongolia in the process of managing, including management committees existing in name only, monastery affairs decided by the abbot alone or by a few individuals, lacking of proper democratic management procedures. All temple affairs such as personnel, finance, and religious activities are decided by one person, and even the “patriarchal temple”(where leadership is passed within familial lines) is prevalent, with phenomena like “fathers building temples and sons taking charge”. This is extremely detrimental to the development of Tibetan Buddhism. In contrast, there are also many temples where the management committee, the abbot of the monks, the legal person, and the lay practitioner each represent certain forces and interests. They fight with each other for the rights of the temple’s personnel and finances, lacking the spirit of democratic consultation, which seriously damages the image of the temple. The relationship between Buddhist associations and Buddhist temples is also problematic. In some places, Buddhist associations control over all affairs of local Buddhist temples, resulting in the loss of the independence for the temples and the fact that temples become agencies affiliated with Buddhist associations. This gives the Buddhist associations too much power to harm the interests of individual temples. In some area, tense relationships and mutual resistance between Buddhist associations and temples hinder the conduct of religious and cultural activities. These are not good for the development of Tibetan Buddhism.

(iv) the inaccurate dissemination and promotion of Buddhist teachings

During the propagation of Tibetan Buddhism in Inner Mongolia, due to the low level of education and Buddhist literacy of many monks, Buddhist sutra are often taken out of context and cannot meet the faith needs of believers. Some monks even create and compile “Buddhist scriptures” under the pretext of spirit possession, distorting or tampering with Buddhist teachings, which leads believers to doubt and deny Buddhist teachings. Worse still, some Tibetan Buddhist monks often preach the erroneous notion that “ alms-giving means donating” and “the guru is the Buddha”. In some temples in the rural pastoral areas of Inner Mongolia, there are still feudal superstitious activities. Sick believers come to the temple to ask for items such as incense ashes as medicine for treatment.

In many remote areas, Tibetan Buddhism has absorbed the content of folk beliefs and engaged in animal worship, even including descending fox fairies and yellow immortals. Many Tibetan Buddhist monks have absorbed “buge” from the indigenous Mongolian religion of shamanism, claiming that they have the ability to summon spirits and invite the Buddha to possess them. Tibetan Buddhist monks often hold pujas in the process of spreading Buddhist teachings, and they clearly mark the price of the prayer tablet for blessing when they pray for believers. This kind of behavior has caused the vast number of believers to lack a true understanding of Tibetan Buddhism, and has seriously damaged the status and image of Tibetan Buddhism in the minds of believers.

II. Main Causes of the Existing Problems in Tibetan Buddhism in Inner Mongolia

Today, Tibetan Buddhism is one of the two main Buddhist traditions in China, along with Chinese Buddhism itself (Charleux, 2021). A series of problems in the development of Tibetan Buddhism in Inner Mongolia stem from both historical legacies and era development. The causes for these problems are multifaceted. By summarizing and analyzing these problems to find out the main causes behind their emergence, we will propose targeted countermeasures and suggestions for solving them. Through theoretical analysis, the main reasons for the aforementioned problems in Tibetan Buddhism in Inner Mongolia are as follows.

(i) Influence of Historical Legacies

It seems that the low level of ability among Tibetan Buddhist monastic talents in Inner Mongolia is caused by the construction lag of Buddhist colleges, a resource fault and gap of monks in temple, and the uneven economic and social development of the source areas of monastic talents. However, the deep-seated background of these causes is that in the period of democratic reform and socialist transformation of Tibetan Buddhism in Inner Mongolia, many living Buddhas and great lamas who were proficient in Tibetan language and Buddhist thought returned to secular life to participate in social production and labor, and many school-age monks also left the temples and enrolled in public schools. During the Cultural Revolution, due to the ultra-leftist ideology in religious work, numerous learned monks were persecuted and unable to engage in Buddhist activities or the study of Buddhist scriptures normally. As a result, a large number of monastic talents in Tibetan Buddhist temples suffered a resource fault and gap. After the rectification of wrongs, although some living Buddhas and eminent monks returned to temples, most of them were then old or even have passed away. The absence of guidance and mentorship from the older generation has hindered the continuous improvement of Buddhist scholarship among the younger generation of monks.

(ii) Uneven Economic and Social Development in Inner Mongolia

The root cause of the poor quality of monks and talented resource is that the economic, social, and cultural development in various parts of Inner Mongolia is uneven. In some remote rural and pastoral areas, the economic development is lagging behind, and the level of culture and education is generally low. Under such circumstances, monks from impoverished families find it difficult to receive a quality education. Some individuals do not choose to but have no choice to become monks, not out of a pure love for Buddhism and a desire to devote themselves to Buddhism but rather to address the problems in livelihood or the difficulty in education. Observing that Tibetan Buddhist monks only recite sutras and worship Buddha in temples everyday without participating in labor but

consequently are supported by numbers of believers, these impious individuals believe that as long as they became monks, they could solve their livelihood problems and even make a fortune. Monks with such ideas often engage in commercialized and superstitious Buddhist activities in temples so as to wantonly amass wealth, ignoring the image of Tibetan Buddhism, which harms both the interests and religious feelings of the vast believers.

(iii) New challenges brought about by era development

The main reason for the internal disunity and inharmony within the Tibetan Buddhist monastic community in Inner Mongolia is that the younger-generation monks yearn for the various lifestyles brought about by modernization, but are reluctant to strictly abide by Buddhist precepts. In aspects such as diet, clothing, and even marriage and childbearing, they behave similarly to people who are not monks. Some of monks regard Buddhist temples as workplaces and consider themselves as employees of the Buddhist profession. They wear monastic robes only during religious activities or when reciting sutras to believers, while they usually wear fashionable casual clothes like normal people. They consider dining in restaurant, drinking alcohol, eating meat, dating girls, playing with mobile phones and electronic devices as the normal way of monastic life. Some monks take advantage of the religious needs of believers to engage in commercial activities. Some believers themselves are businessmen who pin the success or failure of business on the Buddhist faith, believing that the blessing from various Buddhist Buddhas and Bodhisattvas enabled them to succeed in business and earn a lot of money. Therefore, to thank those Buddha's disciples, businessmen donate money to the temples and the monks, which has fueled the commercialization trend of Tibetan Buddhism in Inner Mongolia. With centuries-old histories, many Tibetan Buddhist temples in Inner Mongolia have currently become national or autonomous region-level cultural heritage protection units and popular tourist attractions. In order to develop tourism, local governments have turned these Buddhist temples into tourist spots and sold tickets openly for profit. This practice has imbued Tibetan Buddhist temples in Inner Mongolia a strong sense of commercialization.

III. Proposals for Promoting the Development of Tibetan Buddhism in Inner Mongolia

In order to inherit and protect the traditional culture of Tibetan Buddhism, party and government cadres, Buddhist figures, and scholars engaged in Buddhist studies in Inner Mongolia have made joint efforts and significant contributions to the healthy development of Tibetan Buddhism in the region.

Party committees and government departments at all levels in Inner Mongolia attach great importance to the development of Tibetan Buddhism. They allocate special funds annually to repair Tibetan Buddhist temples, train monks, support Tibetan Buddhist monks in Inner Mongolia to chant sutras in Mongolian. Within the policy framework of systematically advancing the Sinicization of religions, they support Tibetan Buddhism in interpreting Buddhist doctrines and teachings with values that meet the requirements of the development of the times, so that Buddhism can better inherit and develop the fine traditional Chinese culture.

Great efforts have been made to strengthen the Inner Mongolia Buddhist College, including supporting the construction of the new campus facilities, providing living allowances for students, standardizing the enrollment work, cultivating teaching staff,

and carrying out cooperation and exchange. So far, the Inner Mongolia Buddhist College has cultivated and delivered more than 300 outstanding monastic talents to the Buddhist community in Inner Mongolia.

The Tibetan Buddhist community in Inner Mongolia have strengthened monastery management and the construction of monastic teams, actively improved the ways and means of disseminating Buddhist teachings to believers, and gradually established a positive image for Tibetan Buddhism in Inner Mongolia. For example, in recent years, the Buddhist Association of Inner Mongolia has formulated various rules and regulations such as the *Financial Management Regulations of the Buddhist Association of Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region*, the *Management Rules of Resident Personnel of the Buddhist Association of Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region*, and the *Fixed Asset Management System of the Buddhist Association of Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region*. In addition, the Buddhist Association of Inner Mongolia and the Buddhist associations of various leagues and cities have led Buddhist monks and lay practitioners in their jurisdictions to study the *Regulations on Religious Affairs*, the *Measures for the Management of Religious Groups*, the *Measures for the Management of Religious Professionals*, the *Code of Conduct for Buddhist Professionals*, the *Measures for the Administration of Religious Institutions* and other policies and regulations. These efforts have further standardized the management of temples and monastic teams, enhanced the scientific level of the management of Tibetan Buddhism in Inner Mongolia, and maintained the pure and solemn image of Buddhism.

Scholars studying Tibetan Buddhism in Inner Mongolia have based their research on the history and reality of Inner Mongolia to explore classic literatures and the history of the introduction, development and evolution of Tibetan Buddhism in Mongolian regions. They published numerous outstanding works, making significant contributions to helping believers in Inner Mongolia gain a deeper understanding of Buddhist philosophical thoughts and the historical traditions of accepting and spreading Tibetan Buddhism in Mongolia. Some scholars have also taken on teaching responsibilities in Buddhist studies courses at the Inner Mongolia Buddhist Institute, and have even delivered lectures in training programs for Tibetan Buddhist monks, making efforts to improve the Buddhist literacy and cultural level of Tibetan Buddhist monastic talents in Inner Mongolia. Of great interest is the study of the local specifics of the Chinese and Mongolian calendars, and the influence of Buddhism on the development of the calendar system (Omakaeva, 2017).

In order to promote the healthy development of Tibetan Buddhism in Inner Mongolia and further leverage the role in inheriting and protecting national culture, as well as promoting ethical morality and values, the following suggestions are put forward in view of the current situation and existing problems.

I. Strengthening the construction of the ranks of Tibetan Buddhist Professionals

The core task of promoting the development of Tibetan Buddhism in Inner Mongolia is to strengthen the construction of the ranks of Tibetan Buddhist professionals, so as to enhance the education of Tibetan Buddhist monastic talents, and cultivate professional talents for the Buddhist community.

II. Strengthening Tibetan Language Learning among Tibetan Buddhist monks in Inner Mongolia

Since the propagation language of Tibetan Buddhism is Tibetan, and the vast majority of Buddhist scriptures introduced to Mongolian regions are in Tibetan, it is crucial to vigorously promote Tibetan language learning among monastics in Inner Mongolia.

This will enable monks to deeply and accurately understand Buddhist philosophical thoughts and accurately explain Buddhist doctrines to believers by reading original texts and grasping principles and essences.

III. Promoting and Popularizing Chanting Sutras in Mongolian within Tibetan Buddhism in Inner Mongolia

Some temples of Tibetan Buddhism in Inner Mongolia have the tradition of chanting sutras in Mongolian, but its popularization remains low. In Inner Mongolia, Mongolian language is an important embodiment of the localization of Tibetan Buddhism, and its development and promotion are of great significance to the inheritance and protection of Mongolian traditional culture. In view of the current reality that the Tibetan followers of Tibetan Buddhism in Inner Mongolia have limited or no knowledge of Tibetan language, popularizing Mongolian chanting sutras will enable the vast Mongolian believers to better accept and understand Buddhist thought.

IV. Strengthening international exchanges of Tibetan Buddhism in Inner Mongolia

One of China's religious policies is to adhere to the principle of independence and self-management, which does not call for closed-door doctrine or the severance of peaceful exchanges and contacts between Tibetan Buddhism and foreign religions. Instead, it aims to ensure the healthy development of Tibetan Buddhism's exchanges with foreign countries. China's religious policies support Tibetan Buddhism in carrying out friendly dialogues with different sects, religions and civilizations on the basis of independence, equality, friendship, mutual respect and common development. So as to tell the story of China's religion well and show the image of China's religion in the international community. Therefore, Tibetan Buddhism in Inner Mongolia should strengthen international exchanges, enhance ties with Tibetan Buddhism in Mongolia and Russia, and jointly carry out Buddhist research and monk exchanges.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, the current development of Tibetan Buddhism in Inner Mongolia has made remarkable progress, but many problems still exist. Some of these issues will be solved quickly, and some will require long-term efforts from all sides to improve. The proper resolution of these problems will promote the healthy development of Tibetan Buddhism in Inner Mongolia.

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