RECONCILIATION AND LEGITIMIZATION: THE FIFTH KARMAPA
DESHIN SHEGPA’S TRIP TO MING CHINA
(1406-1408)
by
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Abstract

Departing from the vexed debate on the nature of the Sino-Tibetan relationship, this thesis examines the Fifth Karmapa Deshin Shegpa’s historic visit to the Chinese court in the early Ming era. By reading across Chinese and Tibetan language sources, in this thesis I reconstruct the entire trip of the Karmapa, a case of another dimension through which Tibetan Buddhism is perceived and the importance of the Tibetan hierarchs for the Ming to conduct its policy toward Tibetan Buddhism and the relation with the people of Inner Asia are illustrated. I argue that unlike those trips made by other Tibetan hierarchs, the trip of the Fifth Karmapa and his performance of Buddhist rituals were designed as a mean through which the Yongle emperor legitimized his controversial rise to power. From existing Tibetan and Chinese primary sources it becomes apparent that the Fifth Karmapa’s visit not only served to confirm and solidify the political power of the Yongle emperor through religious means but also brought tremendous financial benefits for the Karmapa and fostered the influence of his sect in Tibet and beyond.
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Introduction

This thesis examines the Fifth Karmapa Deshin Shegpa’s (bde bzhin gshegs pa 1384-1425) historic visit to China as a way to understand the relationship between the Ming emperor and the Tibetan lama, an important dimension of the Sino-Tibetan relations in the early Ming era. The Fifth Karmapa’s travel to the Ming court is noted by all historians dealing with the relationship between Tibet and China. Yet their portrayals of this seminal event have tended to be general or incomplete, shedding little light on the role played by Karmapa's mission in shaping the Sino-Tibetan relationship. This neglect is partially due to a lack of knowledge of the political and religious conditions in Tibet at the time, and the political and religious influence that the Karmapa exercised within Tibet and in the Sino-Tibetan borderland.

The focus of this thesis is the entirety of the Fifth Karmapa’s travel to Ming China. Key research questions to ask are: What prompted the Yongle emperor to invite the Fifth Karmapa and what advantage did it represent for the Ming? Why did the Karmapa make the arduous journey and what was its significance for Buddhism in China generally and for the Karma Kagyupa sect in specific? How would the visit help us better understand the relationship between China and Tibet? Scholarly works tend to repeat and reinforce each other’s understandings of the visit. A careful re-reading of key original sources in Tibetan and Chinese, however, reveals details from which alternative interpretations can be drawn.

This thesis is based on an examination of primary sources -historical texts and contemporary commentaries in both Tibetan and Chinese. For details around the Karmapa’s trip, the main sources are the biographies of the Fifth Karmapa and a series of biographies of high-ranking Tibetan monks who visited the Ming court before and after the Karmapa’s visit. I used these biographies as my primary sources because they contain a great deal of information about
receiving and refusing invitation letters sent by the Chinese emperors, the aim and consequences of such invitations as well as relevant activities in China in general, and at the court in particular. The biographies include detailed accounts of the routes taken during the journeys, the names of envoys who came to receive the Karmapa, the intricacies of the encounter with the Tibetan lamas, and the scale of tributes offered and gifts received. They also provide descriptions of trade in the borderlands, as well as other secular and religious activities both in the border areas and in the capital of Ming China. These biographies were usually written by the disciples shortly after the death of their teachers, published in block-print and then preserved at their monasteries.

Three biographies in particular are key sources. The first and most important one is found in the fifteenth century work *Feast of the Scholar* (Tib: mkhas pa’i dga’ ston; Chi: xian zhe xi yan 贤者喜宴), written by Pawo Tsuglag Trengwo (1503-1566). The second was composed by Situ Panchen Chokyi Jungne (1700-1774). The third and most recent one was written by Danma Jamyang Tshultrim and it was published in 1997.

Most of the references quoted in the thesis are from *Feast of the Scholar*. This work deserves some introduction in terms of its reliability as a source. Pawo Tsuglag Trengwa is the most well-known historian and religious master of the fifteenth century; *Feast of the Scholar* is one of a series of works he wrote on Tibetan history, literature and other aspects of Tibetan culture. Unlike other historical books produced at the time and later, *Feast of the Scholar* is based on many early sources. This allows readers to access the original sources, many of which would in time be used by later biographers of the Fifth Karmapa. Many of the sources Pawo used in his book were proven to be authentic by later discovery of Dunhuang documents. He had consulted the edicts and letters received from Ming emperors and the letters exchanged between the Fifth Karmapa and Tibetan hierarchs, including Dragpa Gyaltschan (1384-1425), the head of
the Phagmodrupa family and Tsongkha Losang Dragpa (1357-1419), the founder of the Gelupa sect. Ancient inscriptions from these sources were quoted for the first time in his book. Powa spent three decades writing the book, which indicate how serious a scholar he was and how much effort he had invested in this lengthy historical work.

Other Tibetan language sources used were the early chronologies of Tibet composed by leading scholars of the time, such as Goelo Shunnu Pal (1392-1481) and Tshalpa Kunga Dorje (1309-1364). Works consulted include the Blue Annual (Tib: deb ther sngon po) by Goelo, the Red Annual (Tib: deb ther dmar po) by Tshalpa, Catalogue of the Tshuphu Monastery, travel records of the Karmapa lamas, and autobiographies or biographies of other high-ranking monks such as Lama Tsongkhapa and his disciple Jamchen Choeje Shakya Yeshi (1379-1449).

It is equally important for my thesis to use sources from Chinese archives. I examined accounts of Tibet and its religious activities as recorded in the Ming shi lu, the Veritable Record of the Ming, the gazetteer of the city of Nanjing and the edicts of the emperor, the names and titles of the lamas issued by the emperor, the inscriptions of seals and scroll-paintings, and the invitation letters from the emperors. Furthermore, I have utilized all the relevant works of western scholars - mainly English language secondary sources.

All but one of the biographies of the Fifth Karmapa were written by his followers or students who belonged to the same sect. As result, there might be a tendency to overstate the religious and political influence of one’s own master and sect. To be sure, these biographies provide valuable insight into the events that took place during the Karmapa’s trip, but they might attempt to alter the historical records in their authors’ interests. Furthermore, worldly events are interpreted through a religious lens so that it can be hard to confirm some of the accounts and stories recorded in the biographies without a comparative research into important secular
documents produced in the same period. At the same time, while Chinese sources provide some valuable information regarding the visit of the Karmapa, there are gaps around the interaction with the Yongle emperor, possibly due to ignorance or reservations on the part of Chinese chroniclers. The close relation between the Ming emperors and the Tibetan Buddhist hierarchs might have been unintelligible and even unpalatable, to Confucian courtiers, for whom the Tibetan version of Buddhism was viewed as a distortion of the true teachings.

In using Chinese and Tibetan language sources it is often difficult to match the names of envoys and officials appearing in Tibetan sources with those appearing in Chinese sources, because of mis-pronunciations in Tibetan documents or lapses in Chinese ones. I tried to identify the names of some of the important envoys appearing in both the Tibetan and Chinese sources.

All the trips to the court of imperial China made by Tibetan Lamas, including the trip of the Fifth Karmapa, were interpreted by historians either as a demonstration of political authority of the Ming emperor over Tibet or paying tributes to the court of the dynasty. By contrast, Tibetan historians considered the trips to be primarily religious in nature and described the contact between the Tibetan hierarchy and the Chinese emperors as a relationship of priest-patron. While the Chinese sources elevate the emperor, Tibetan sources tend to place primacy on the lama’s spiritual authority over the emperor.

It is in examining the political atmosphere and conditions in Tibet in the early fifteenth century, as well as the consequences of the trips made by the Tibetan monks to China, that a difference of purpose becomes apparent. The purpose of the visits by Tibetan monks to the Chinese court varied; many of them were aimed at obtaining patronage and view travel to China as evangelizing missions and propagating the faith. The Fifth Karmapa’s travel in 1406 to the Ming court was not a tributary mission. The significance of the trip is that it brought peace and
stability to the Sino-Tibetan border reconciliation among the peoples in Inner Asia and legitimization for the Ming emperorship. Therefore, I argue, the Fifth Karmapa’s journey to the Ming court had strategic ramifications for both the Tibetan lama and the Chinese emperor.

With the exception of the names of persons such as Karmapa Deshin Shegpa and Pawo Tsuglag Trengwa, I have transliterated Tibetan terms and phrases using the phonetic transcription devised by Turrell and for Chinese names and terms I have used the *pin yin* system. Since the names of some of the envoys sent to Tibet only appear in Tibetan sources I thus provided their names and titles with Tibetan phonetic transcription. In a number of instances when I am citing other scholarly sources, which use Wylie or other systems of transliteration, the original spelling has been preserved.

While there are a number of books dedicated to the subject of Sino-Tibetan relations during the Yuan and Qing dynasties, the Ming relation with Tibet has received lesser scholarly attention in the West as well as in China and Tibet. William Woodville Rockhill is one of the earlier Western scholars who touched on the subject of Sino-Tibetan relations in the Ming period. In his well-known article “The Dalai Lamas of Lhasa and Their Relation with the Manchu Emperor of China,” Rockhill describes the relationship between Tibet and Ming China as follows:

After Drogon Chogyal Phagpa, many other high lamas of Tibet received from the sovereigns of the Yuan and Ming dynasties long pompous titles, seals of office and rich presents. They in turn sent presents to the court of China, bringing at the same time products from their country to sell to the Chinese. Here the relations stopped, however; in the histories of these dynasties there is not a single reference to political relations having been established at any time by the temporal rulers of Tibet.\(^2\)

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Rockhill suggests that the Ming policy that evolved with Tibet was to grant titles and offer lavish gifts to any leading lamas who would accept an invitation to China, regardless of their school affiliation. He maintains that, beyond such formalities, there was no formal political relationship between Tibet and Ming China. His statement appears simplistic and is inconsistent with sources of the period produced both in Tibetan and Chinese.

Giuseppe Tucci (1894-1984), in his monumental work *Tibetan Painted Scroll*, brings more nuances to the subject. His description of Ming policies toward Tibet is worth quoting here:

The Ming did not renounce their pretension over Tibet, on the contrary they continued to claim the same right as the Mongol. But acts of paramount and actual interference with Tibet’s internal affairs had become more and more feeble, occasional and ineffective under the last Mongol Emperor, and now they were not resumed with the same show of undisputed authority. …. The links which had bound Tibet to the Mongol in the time of Kublai Khan and his successors were very much weakened.  

Tucci indicates that Ming emperors did not openly renounce control over Tibet after their military forces chased the Mongols back to their steppe homeland beyond the Great Wall. At the same time, the Ming did not extend their rule inside Tibet. Tucci’s use of both Tibetan and Chinese sources gave him a more astute understanding of Sino-Tibetan relations, and one more consistent with historical reality.

In his paper entitled “Lama Tribute in the Ming Dynasty,” Turrell Wylie sheds new light on the subject:

The motivation behind the Ming policy was to encourage nationalistic fragmentation among Tibetan lamas, and to discourage the restoration of the Priest-Patron Relationship between any one of them and Mongols.

Wylie argues that the chief aim of the Ming was to seek fragmentation of Tibet by rewarding and maintaining equal distance from all lamas and discouraging any special relationship with a particular religious school in Tibet. He goes on to argue that the secondary aim was to prevent the Tibetans from forming any further alliance with the Mongols. Wylie’s work attracted attention and stimulated debate among scholars in the field.

Wylie’s proposition that the Ming encouraged a fragmentation of Tibet was expanded upon and further developed by the Japanese scholar Sato Hisashi. In the 1960s, Sato published a series of very important articles that introduced new perspectives on the Sino-Tibetan relationship and had tremendous impact on the later research of scholars. According to Sato, the crucial period for the establishment of Ming China’s policy toward Tibet was the reign of the Yongle emperor. The emperor first thought to take advantage of the influence of the Fifth Karmapa as a vehicle for indirect Chinese rule. Sato believes that the emperor’s well known invitation to this hierarch and the attention that the emperor accorded him during that visit, were due not to religious devotion, but rather to his shrewd political sense. Sato believes that the emperor hoped to establish a relationship with the Fifth Karmapa similar to that which had existed between the Tibetan monk Drogon Chogyal Phagpa and the Mongol emperor Kublai Khan during the early Yuan period.

A great scholarly contribution made by Sato Hisashi is his reconstruction of a complete

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6 See for example: “The Tibetan Monks in the Ming Court;” “The Rise and Fall of the Phagmodrupa Dynasty;” “The Ming Court and the Eight Tibetan Hierarchs;” “Invocation to Tibetan Monk from Emperor Wuzong;” “On the Situation in the Early Ming and Historical Records on Tibet Derived from the Ming shi lu.” Sato’s works were written in Japanese later translated into Chinese and published in the Journals of Tibetan Studies in Lhasa and China’s Tibetology in Beijing, from 1980s to 1990s.
7 In the year 1260, Drogon Chogyal Phagpa was given the temporal authority over the 13 myriarchies of Central Tibet first and finally with the support of Kublai Khan, he established himself and his sect as the preeminent political power in Tibet.
lineage of the Drigung Kagyupa sect and its close tie with Ming emperors.\textsuperscript{8} Sato examined the \textit{Ming shi lu} and rare Tibetan sources for reference to the eight hierarchs of Tibet. His research presents a more complete picture of these hierarchs and their relation with the Ming emperor.\textsuperscript{9} With the publication of Sato’s writings, the questions about the nature of early Ming relations with Tibet seemed to have been settled. Sato had given form and substance to the idea toward which scholarly opinion now began leaning – namely, that the Ming court was pursuing a concrete political end in its acceptance of Tibetan tribute and in its grants of titles and gifts to Tibetan hierarchs. Sato thought that the Yongle emperor tried to undermine the authority of Phagmodrupa by conferring honours on Tibetan hierarchs, as part of a goal to prevent any unifying element from gaining effective power in Tibet. The idea that Ming emperors practiced a policy of ‘divide and rule’ toward Tibet has gone unchallenged up to the publication of the work of Elliot Sperling.\textsuperscript{10}

In recent years, scholars have shown new interest in the Ming-Tibet relationship and particularly the influence and popularity of Tibetan Buddhism in China. Historians both in the West and China started to focus on the roles played by individuals in different stages of the Sino-Tibetan relation. To date the most extensive works on the subject are the doctoral dissertation\textsuperscript{11} and subsequent research essays written by Elliot Sperling. Utilizing both Tibetan and Chinese sources, Sperling examines the political relation between Tibet and China in the Ming dynasty. He rejects the dominant proposition that early Ming emperors adopted a policy of divide and rule. Sperling argues that the Sino-Tibetan relation in the early Ming period was driven by the genuine

interest of Emperor Yongle in Tibetan Buddhism and his concern for stability, security of postal stations and trade in the border areas, rather than a desire to interfere with the internal affairs of Tibet.

Sperling’s work suggests that the proposition of a ‘divide and rule’ policy is virtually a later creation of Chinese historians; he points out that the Tibetan religious establishment was already fragmented before the founding of the Ming Dynasty. He argues that one could not say that Ming influence in Tibet was so great that it helped to maintain that disunity. He further states that while Ming emperors requested that Tibetan lamas visit China, there was no obligation involved. Tibetan lamas exercised their freedom to reject or accept these invitations. ¹²

In his essay “The Tibetan Hierarch and Ming Chengzu,” Elliot Sperling argues that the conferment of titles and tributary relationships alone cannot prove the fact that Tibet was under the direct control of Ming China. He finally concludes that the main reason why Ming emperors offered honorific titles to the Tibetan monks was to restrain Mongolian warlords beyond the Great Wall and to pacify the so-called barbaric people in the frontier regions. In his article “The 5th Karma-pa and some aspects of the relationship between Tibet and the Early Ming,” Sperling investigates some of the religious activities of the Fifth Karmapa Deshin Shegpa at the Ming court. He points out that, in any event, Tibetan and Chinese sources provide no basis for doubting the sincerity of Ming Chengzu’s devotion to the Karmapa. In this short essay, Sperling touches upon the question of why the Yongle emperor invited the Fifth Karmapa and what political role the Karmapa played in the context of Sino-Tibetan relations. Sperling answers the first question vaguely by saying that the Yongle emperor had only recently fought a war to usurp his predecessor when he dispatched his invitation to the Fifth Karmapa. Sperling answers the

¹² Ibid., 89-100.
second question without prevarication by saying that the Fifth Karmapa had no secular power inside Tibet and even refused the opportunity when offered it.\(^{13}\)

It also is worth mentioning Hoong Tiek Toh’s doctoral dissertation on Tibetan Buddhism in Ming China. Toh proposed that during the Ming, Tibet replaced India as the source for wisdom and that India and Tibet became synonymous in Ming perception.\(^{14}\) After the Yongle emperor took power of the Ming, Tibetan Buddhism became more popular at the imperial court under the patronage of the royal court and the elites, a majority of whom were eunuchs. The popularity and influence of Tibetan Buddhism in China reached its peak at this time. Toh argues that Tibet was now perceived as the holy land and that the Tibetan lamas were treated as the true embodiment of the Buddha by Chinese and Mongol devotees.

From the early 1980s, foreign academic works including those on Sino-Tibetan relations began to appear in China. Japanese scholars, notably the works of Sato Hisashi, in particular had considerable influence on Chinese scholars. As Sato’s works had been translated and published in China since the early 1980s, his hypothesis about a ‘divide and rule’ policy inspired many Chinese scholars to think along the same lines. Indeed, even today among historians of China this perspective remains the dominant paradigm for interpreting Sino-Tibetan relations in that era.

Shen Weirong is the only scholar in China to have communicated directly with Western scholars. He has published a number of articles on the portrayal of Tibetan Buddhism by the Han literati during the Yuan and Ming periods, and on the changes and continuity of Tibetan policies in the transition from the Yuan to the Ming period. In his paper “Accommodating Barbarians from Afar: Political and Cultural Interactions Between Ming and Tibet,” Shen argues that the


goal of early Ming policy toward Tibet was to manage the frontier relations through cultural exchange rather than military involvement. Shen places emphasis on the Chinese emperors’ attempts to manipulate Tibetan affairs by patronizing the representatives who sent tributes to the Ming court. Shen comments that it is apparent from historical records that Tibetan Buddhism had a powerful cultural impact on individual Ming emperors and wider elements of Han Chinese society. He points out that in the face of this influence, some members of the Chinese literati were hostile to what they regarded as a polluting foreign faith and that they sustained a discourse which painted Tibetan Buddhism in starkly negative terms.

Shen was the first to point out that the foundation of the Ming state actually owed much to its predecessor, the Mongol, despite Ming proclamations that a central tenet of its policy in the early period of ascendancy was the ‘expelling of hu barbarians and restoration of China.’ It is hard to imagine that the Ming court would have aspired to managing frontier areas as remote and broad as Tibet if the Yuan dynasty had not first laid the foundation.

Responding to Sperling’s argument that there was no Ming policy of ‘divide and rule’ (Chi: huai rou yuan yi 懷柔遠夷) in Tibet, Shen states that:

“[I]ater, people habitually viewed the Ming court’s granting of titles to Tibetan monks on such a large scale as a policy of divide and rule. In reality, this situation was only a logical outcome of the court policy of ‘accommodating barbarians from afar.’”

Key here is the word “later” indicating that the notion of a divide and rule policy was a hypothesis that was eventually handed down as historical fact. On the other hand, it is not quite clear what Shen means by ‘logical outcome’. Surely the phrase ‘accommodating the barbarian from afar’ can be considered to be standard policy toward frontier regions; it is a phrase often used as early as the Tang period. Shen characterizes the early Ming relation with Tibet in three

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ways. Firstly, there is the premise that ‘accommodating the barbarian from afar’ was a means of emphasizing the distinction between Han Chinese and barbarians. The Ming rulers often viewed the sending of tribute and the maintenance of peace on the border as the cornerstones of their interaction with the various people of Tibet. Secondly, the Ming wanted to guard against threats to their political and cultural system. In other words, these were conservative, defensive policies. Thirdly, since Tibetans were considered barbarian beyond the reach of Chinese culture-conquest, the so-called accommodation may have been an attempt to sinicize them, in part to offset the affront of having been ruled earlier by foreign elements.16

Shen’s assumption that Tibetans were seen by the Chinese as a barbarian people throughout the Ming period is also questionable. It is not borne out by documents of the time. The assumption may be a direct result of his taking the Chinese term Xifan (Chi: xi fan 西番) as Tibet proper and Xiyi (Chi: xi yi 西夷), the western barbarian, as Tibetan. In historical records from the early Ming, Tibet is known as Wusizang (Chi: wu ci zang 乌思藏)or sometimes it is referred to as Western Heaven (Chi: xi tian 西天). The term xi fan usually refers to the region situated on the Sino-Tibetan border and xi yi usually refers to the peoples inhabiting the forests of the northwest. There is no proof of Tibet being called Xifan as a whole either in Tibetan or Chinese historical records. On the contrary, the first Ming emperor commented that using Tibetan monks and their moral model was a means of pacifying the people in the frontier areas. Furthermore, as will be detailed in this thesis, the visit of the Karmapa elicited a tremendous outpouring of respect for his person and for Tibetan Buddhism – hardly consistent with the idea that Tibet and its culture were regarded as barbarian at the time. Indeed, the number of Tibetan monks active in China, presenting tributes and establishing monastic institutions in the Capital,

16Ibid.,30.
was much larger under the Ming than during the previous dynasty.\textsuperscript{17}

There are a few scholars, including Elliot Sperling and Shen Weirong, who are bringing new perspectives to the subject but their works are somewhat controversial. A solid and objective scholarship within and analytical frameworks remains to be developed.

It is worth mentioning that in recent years there have been a number of secondary sources published in Chinese – for example, the works of Chen Chingying, Shen Weirong and others exploring the Sino-Tibetan relationship in the areas of cultural exchange, border trade and religion. Chinese scholars have started to pay attention to Tibetan sources and some of them are able to read Tibetan materials. This is a very positive trend. Detailed accounts of the Tibetan monks and Ming policies toward Tibetan Buddhism as recorded by Chinese historians together can enhance understandings of Sino-Tibetan relations during the Ming period.

I argue that it is possible to draw conclusions on the relationship between Tibet and Ming China from this practice of invitations to high-ranking Tibetan Lamas, from the earliest days of the dynasty. Through this practice the Ming emperor was not only making a political gesture as a country newly recovered from foreign rule, but also expressing a willingness to promote Buddhism as a means of linking the peoples of Inner Asia. The message the Chinese emperors wanted to send to the peoples of the frontier lands was that the emperor now had the mandate of Heaven. It is the very ancient Chinese belief that the virtue of the ruler is made manifest through heavenly signs and portents which was widely understood by the peoples in Inner Asia to be the idealized worldly order of Buddhism. In other words, like the rulers of Inner Asia, the Ming emperor used Buddhist establishments to affirm imperial authority, protect state interests and conduct foreign relationships.

According to the *Ming shi lu*, in the early period of the Ming, two dozen envoys were sent to Tibet and other regions in the west to invite high-ranking monks. More than fifteen Tibetan high-ranking lamas received honourable titles from various Ming emperors, including the Eight Religious Kings (Chi: *ba da fa wang* 八大法王) as bestowed by the Yongle emperor.

According to the information which is recorded in the Chinese inscriptions of the scroll-paintings, there were several thousand monks, both Tibetan and Chinese, in the capital in the early Ming period.\\(^{18}\)

In examining the relationship between Tibet and China in the early Ming period, the Fifth Karmapa’s trip to Ming China was arguably the most revealing event. The Fifth Karmapa was the head of the Kagyupa sect (Chi: *ga ju pai* 噶举派; Tib: *bka’ brgyud pa*) of Tibetan Buddhism. He was the first and foremost Tibetan hierarch to receive the highest title from the Ming emperor and his trip can be taken as the official re-establishment of Sino-Tibetan relations at the time.

For centuries, Tibetan Buddhism and its clerics were in the forefront of Tibetan political history and were key figures in the Sino-Tibetan relationship. This unique relationship between the hierarchs of Tibetan Buddhism and the rulers of China was first established during the Yuan period and it lasted to the end of the Qing dynasty in the early twentieth century. The subject I am going to discuss in this paper is the re-establishment of the Sino-Tibetan relationship, which was initiated by the historic visit made by the Fifth Karmapa Deshin Shegpa to Ming China in 1406, after the collapse of the Yuan dynasty. I focus on the period late-1300 to early-1400, a time when Tibet was undergoing social, political, and economic transformation. Tibet’s relations with China were friendly in comparison with both the preceding and the succeeding dynasties of

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China. In fact, in various historical books, fifteenth-century Tibet is described as a golden age in which an old woman carrying a bag of gold could travel throughout the country.19

This period is also characterized by the development and expansion of Tibetan Buddhism within and beyond ethnically Tibetan areas. Like the Mongol rulers of the Yuan, the founding father of the Ming dynasty and his son showed tremendous interest in Tibetan Buddhism and its clergies. Thus the two early emperors of the Ming became the first ethnically Han Chinese emperors to make close contact with Tibetan lamas. Tibetan Buddhism became the single most defining dimension of Sino-Tibetan relations in the Ming period, particularly in the early years of the dynasty. Among the many Tibetan Buddhist hierarchs to visit China at the time, the Fifth Karmapa was the most important figure.

Tibetan sources are all in agreement that the Fifth Karmapa restored the Priest-Patron Relation (Tib: mchod yon sbyin bdag; Chi: shì zhu guān xì 供施关系) with the Ming, that previously existed between the Sakya family and the Yuan court. The historic trip of the Fifth Karmapa had tremendous impact not only in terms of an increased influence of Tibetan Buddhism at the Ming court generally, but also in terms of the legitimization of the Yongle emperor’s rule in China.

Despite the importance of the relationship between the lamas of the Karmapa sect and the Ming emperors, this subject has never received adequate attention from scholars of Tibetan studies or from Sinologists. Neither Tibetan nor Ming era sources have been explored and not a single monograph fully examining the subject has been published. The scholarly literature on Sino-Tibetan relations tends to focus on the role of Tibetan Buddhism in general and on its utility in subduing the Mongols and keeping the borderlands stable. Tibetan lamas are seen as passive

19 The Fifth Dalai Lama Ngagwang Losang Gyatsho, Dpyid kyi rgyal mo ‘i glu dbyang (The Historical Accounts of Tibet) (Beijing: Nationality Publishing House, 1986), 78.
instruments of rule rather than as active players virtually shaping the political landscape of Inner Asia and its relation with China. Since the Yuan dynasty, Tibetan Buddhism started to have an influence on the relationship between China and Inner Asia. During all the dynastic transactions afterward Tibetan Buddhism played a part in bringing the elites including the princes and eunuchs to the imperial family; it also provided channels through which the court could communicate with the peoples of Inner Asia in general and the rulers in particular.

Unlike the preceding Yuan dynasty and the succeeding Qing dynasty, the Ming dynasty was created by a group of rebelling peasants of native origin. The Ming boasted of finally having established a Chinese dominated dynasty, recovering a Chinese world order. The Ming considered the Mongol Yuan rule to be a foreign conquest; a phrase used at the time was “upsetting hat and shoes,” meaning that barbaric, alien Mongols had broken down the native Chinese political system. The policy of the Ming toward Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism was also very different from that pursued under the Yuan and Qing dynasties, partly because of a lack of familiarity with the culture of Tibet. The only vestige of Yuan tradition that Ming retained was the liberal granting of Buddhist titles indicating mentorship, such as Imperial Preceptor (Tib: go’i shri; Chi: guo shi 国师).

It is generally assumed that Ming China did not have a great interest in Tibetan politics and that the close political relationship that had existed between Tibet and China during the Yuan period had come to an end. However, this assumption has to be revisited. I argue that for strategic reasons, early emperors of the Ming dynasty actively engaged with Tibet and accommodated Tibetan Buddhism as a cornerstone of their Tibetan policy. As with the Yuan, relations with Tibet were conducted through Ming patronage of Tibetan lamas, a relationship

largely characterized by the conferring of titles and the offering of gifts to high lamas of Tibet. The Tibetan lamas in return conferred spiritual guidance.

The first contact between Tibetans and the Ming was initiated by the founding emperor of the Ming, who dispatched envoys to Tibet in 1373. The chief motivation for the emperor, as for his successor, was to obtain cooperation from the local rulers and religious clerics of Tibet, to pacify the local chieftains in the Sino-Tibetan borderland and to contain the Mongols in the west. The edict sent to Tibet in 1373 states:

I, the sovereign of the Empire, courteously treat people from all corners of the empire who love righteousness and pledge allegiance to the court and assign them official post. I have learned with great pleasure that you, Chos-kun skyabs who live in the Western Region, inspired by my power and reputation, are loyal to the court and capable of safeguarding the territory in your charge. The Nga Ri Military and Civil Wanhu Office have just been established. I, therefore, appoint you head of the office with the title of General Huaiyuan, believing that you are most qualified for the post. I expect you to be even more conscientious in your work than in the past, to comply with discipline and to care for your men so that security and peace in your region can be guaranteed.21

This edict is one of the earliest orders issued by the Ming court to Tibet and it is in fact an appointment of the head of the Nga Ri (Tib: mnga’ ris) Military and Civil Wanhu (Tib: khris skor) Office. Information on the name of the Tibetan official Chos Kunkyab and the military and civil office cannot be found in Tibetan sources; the effectiveness of the order and its relationship with the Phamodrupa regime is unknown in Tibetan history. It is probable that many orders of the early Ming sent to Tibet were never acted upon.

To what extent the Ming emperor exerted authority over Tibet and the nature of the Sino-Tibetan relations has been a major topic in early scholarship. Indeed, how these were framed and interpreted became a vexed debate. For Tibetans, the relation was understood within a Buddhist

21 This edict (244 cm long and 35 cm high) is originally preserved in the Achieves of the Tibet Autonomous Region and it is reproduced in the collection of archives of Tibet entitled Testimony of History (Beijing: China International Press, 2000), 75.
priest-patron framework, while for the Chinese it was understood within the framework of the tributary system of the day. The Fifth Karmapa made his trip to the Ming court, at a critical moment during which the legitimacy of the Yongle emperor’s emperorship was in question on several fronts, with threats from both within and without the empire. The needs of the Ming court provide only one side of the story. The other side concerns the missionary agenda of the Karmapa sect and the territorial extension of Tibetan Buddhism. The issues to be examined in this thesis suggest that a new multi-factorial framework is needed for understanding Sino-Tibetan relations in the Ming era.

This thesis consists of four main parts. In the first part, I provide a brief survey of Tibetan Buddhism in the early fifteenth century both in Tibet and China to help the readers understand developing trends at the time. The second part investigates the invitation letter of the Yongle emperor and Karmapa’s journey to the Ming court. Here I examine all the most available Tibetan and Chinese sources and reconstruct the whole trip of the Karmapa. The third part discusses the ritual performance of the Karmapa at the Ming capital and his receipt of the honourable title ‘The Great Dharma King’ (Tib: rin po che chos kyi rgyal po; Chi: da bao fa wang 大宝法王) which is used to the present day. The fourth part analyses the impacts and significance of the trip from several angles including the legitimization of the Yongle emperor’s right to the Ming throne, the Sino-Tibetan relationship and the Ming’s use of Tibetan Buddhism to pacify the peoples of Inner Asia.

23 Although the Sino-Tibetan relation emerged in the Yuan period and continued into the Ming, the degree of contact and its significance varied over time. Both Tibetan and Chinese language sources indicate that the contact was strong and closer in the initial stages of consolidating the Ming state but then deteriorated, becoming more ceremonial with the weakening of the late Ming and the re-emergence of the Mongols in the north.
Chapter One
Tibetan Buddhism in the Fifteenth Century

The fifteenth century was a pivotal time in the history of Tibet and its religious orientation. During this period the unique form of Buddhism that came to be known as Tibetan Buddhism was taking shape and its institutional features were being established. Different schools consolidated their territories and new schools began to emerge during the period. As noted earlier, between the end of the fourteenth century and the beginning of the fifteenth century, these schools had their own leaders and institutionalized teachings. Importantly they also had spiritual and temporal powers within an overall framework of religious belief. This created religion oriented powers as characterized by the existence of several family-centred local powers such as Sakya, Phagmodrupa, Derge and Ngagrong.

In 1347, preceding the collapse of the Mongols, Tai Situ Changchub Gyaltsen (1302-1364) toppled the Sakya rule (1260-1347) in Tibet, and founded the Phagmodrupa Dynasty (1347-1434) in Central Tibet, with Nedong in Yarlong valley as the capital. He led the country to greater independence and created a new system of administration. Traditional Tibetan historians claim that the rule of the ancient Tibetan empire (618-843) was revived in Central Tibet, and that the structures of a dual system of religion merged with politics began to take form in Tibet. Changchub Gyaltshan overthrew the Sakya regime supported by the Mongols and, not unlike the Ming, he sought to remove all the signs of Mongol influence – for example, in dress, administrative organization, and naming of official titles and customs. He deliberately sought to restore the glories of the old Tibetan chos rgyal, the King who ruled the country according to the

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24 Shakabpa Wangchug Dedan, Tibet, A Political History (Yale University Press, 1984), 334-335.
Buddhist morals. Thus this transitional period was a rebirth of socio-cultural life in Central Tibet and it constituted a mechanism whereby Tibetan society attempted to recapture the dynamism of the old Tibetan empire.

Changchub Gyaltsen was born in the rlangs family, which is one of the famous Buddhist lineage holders of the Kagyupa sect, the most powerful Buddhist sect in Tibet at the time. Changchub Gyaltshan was the secular leader of the Phagmodrupa regime and remained in power from 1346 to 1416. Changchub Gyaltsen’s family was also the patron of both the Kagyupa sect and other sects, all of which flourished during his reign. After the death of Changchub Gyaltsen, his son Dragpa Gyaltsen (1374 -1432) became the ruler of the Phagmodrupa Dynasty. Although Dragpa Gyaltsen had no personal contact with the Ming emperor, he received the title of the “Prince of Spreading Magical Transformation” (Chi: Chan hua wang 開化王) from the Yongle emperor.

During the reign of Dragpa Gyaltsen, the economy grew and society was stable. Buddhism continued to flourish and brought with it widespread cultural and commercial development in Central Tibet. In particular, this new socio-economic growth generated a large number of learned men, such as Bodong Choglas Namgyal, Thangdong Gyalpo, Buton Rinchen Drub, Kasdrub Geleg Palsangpo, Redawa Shunnu Lodro, Gos Lotsawa, Tagtshang Lotsawa, and Je Tsongkhapa. It was an era in which there was an outburst of creativity and a deep quest for knowledge. In about the year 1400 the first method of printing was introduced in Tibet, producing a vast body of literature. This printing revolution was accompanied by reforms in

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26 Phagmodrupa, one of the distinguished Buddhist sects in Tibet, was founded by Dorje Gyalpo (1110-117) in the twelfth century and was based in Yarlong Valley. In the early fifteenth century it made close contact with the Sakya ruling family; the member from the phagmodrupa family became the governor of Lhokha and started extending his political and religious influences in the region. After Changchub Gyaltsen overthrew the power of the Sakya family, the Phagmodrupa sect become the most powerful religious sect. Like other sects in Tibet, they also periodically dispatched formal tributes to the emperors of the Ming Dynasty.
religious discipline within monastic institutions, pushing the evolution of Buddhism to higher levels.

Tsongkhapa Losang Dragpa the founder of the Gelugpa sect and the Fifth Karmapa Deshin Shegpa of the Karma Kagyupa sect were the two most influential religious hierarchs at the time. As the fame and charisma of the heads of these religious sects increased, it became necessary for the lay nobles to forge alliances with the lamas. Since that time no ruler of Tibet could survive without the support of lamas. This new relationship between local rulers and lamas became a key feature of the political system that was to evolve further over the subsequent centuries. (See Figure 1)

The royal family of Phagmodrupa were patrons and close allies of the branch of the Kagyupa sect known as the Drigungpa. As throne holder of the Drigungpa sect and one of its most prestigious lamas, Chenga Chokyi Gyalpo (1335–1407) became a dominant force in all of Central Tibet. The influence of this sect can be seen in Chenga Chokyi Gyalpo’s compilation of the Tibetan Buddhist canons known as Kangyur (Tib: bka’ ‘gyur; Chi: gan zhu er 甘珠尔) and Tengyur (Tib: bstan ‘gyur; Chi: dan zhu er 丹珠尔), which provided the foundation for all later editions of the Tibetan Buddhist Canon. The Kangyur and Tengyur were copied on indigo paper in gold and silver script for the first time by this sect.

As had done with other Buddhist sects in Tibet in the fifteenth century, the Yongle emperor recognized Drigungpa’s increasing influence and granted the head of the sect the honorific title of the Prince of Spreading the Doctrine (Chi: chan jiao wang 禪教王).27 Two outstanding personalities on the throne of the Drigungpa sect left their mark - Gyalwang Kunga Rinchen (1475–1527) and his successor Gyalwang Rinchen Phuntshog (1509–1557). They and

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their disciples extended the influence of the Drigungpa across a wider territory and built retreat centres as far away as Mt. Kailash and Lapchi in western Tibet, and Tsari Mountain in the southeast of Tibet.

The reincarnation system is a distinguishing characteristic of Tibetan Buddhism. The first recognized reincarnation among Buddhist monks in Tibet was Karma Pakshi (1204–1283), who happened to be the Second Karmapa of the Karma Kagyupa sect. This system of designating a spiritual leader through his spiritual connection with the past solved a longstanding problem of ensuring consistency of leadership. This system was later gradually adopted by other sects of Tibetan Buddhism. Many monks were selected as reincarnated lamas by all the four main sects of Tibetan Buddhism as well. The Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama became the most famous after the Gelugpa sect seized religious and political power in Tibet in the seventeenth century.

The Karma Kagyupa sect (also known as the Black Hat sect) was established in Central Tibet but had several monasteries in the Kongpo, Kham and Amdo regions of eastern Tibet. Its root monastery, Tshurphu Monastery, was located within the territory of Duilung Dechen (Tib: stod lung bde chen rzung) county, west of Lhasa. A decree issued by the Ming court as early as the eighth year of the reign of the Hongwu emperor assured the Karma Kagyupa continuity in Tibet.28 By the beginning of the fifteenth century, Karma Kagyupa was widely spread in Tibet and beyond. All the head lamas of the Karma Kagyupa lineage before the Fifth Karmapa visited Ming China. When the Fifth Karmapa came to the throne of the Karmapa sect, he received support not only from the royal family of the Phagmodrupa who shared affiliation with the Karmapa lineage, but also from the chief of Lhasa valley. Like many other religious master at the time, the Fifth Karmapa studied under many masters belonging to different religious sects. The

Fifth Karmapa frequently met Dragpa Gyaltsen and gave him private teachings and political advice; in turn Dragpa Gyaltsen offered the Potala Palace to the Fifth Karmapa as his residence in Lhasa. Dragpa Gyaltsen also encouraged the Karmapa to promote peace within Tibet and along the Sino-Tibetan border, and he facilitated Karmapa’s missionary activities, including the trip to China.

The influence of the Fifth Karmapa and the Karma Kagyupa sect as a whole became even stronger after Karmapa’s visit to China and his being awarded the title of Great Precious Religious King by Yongle emperor. At the same time, even though they won the favour of Ming emperors, most of the heads of this sect were dedicated primarily to the promotion of religious teachings and showed little interest in politics and secular power. As a result, the sect never acquired predominant political power in Tibet to the extent that other sects did. Nonetheless, the teachings and the charisma of its lineage holders brought it great influence and prestige under the patronage of the local rulers of successive regimes – from the Phagmodrupa (1363-1435), to the Rinpongpa (1435-1564) and the Tsangpa King (1565-1642).

Tsongkhapa, the founder of the Gelugpa sect, was born in Tsongkha region in Amdo, eastern Tibet. He left for Central Tibet at an early age and studied Buddhism under many masters of different Buddhist sects in Tibet. In 1409, under the patronage of Jangchub Gyaltsan and the local chieftain of Lhasa valley, Tsongkhapa founded the first Gelugpa monastery, Gadan, in the upper part of Lhasa River, fifty kilometres away from the capital. Shortly after building his own monastery, Tsongkhapa established the religious festival known as the Great Prayer Ceremony (Tib: smon lam chen mo; Chi: qi dao da fa hui) in Lhasa. In this way he and his

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29 Potala Palace was erected by Songtsen Gampo, the 34th King of Tibet in the seventh century. The Palace became the chief residence of the successive Dalai Lamas after the Fifth Dalai Lama came to power in the seventeenth century.

30 Pawo Tsuglag Trengwa, Mkhas pa’i dga’ston, pp. 500-501.
chief disciples restored Lhasa as a holy city and made it the stronghold of the new sect that came
to be known as the Gelugpa. From the seventeenth century onward, the Gelugpa became the
largest and most prestigious religious sect in Tibet.

Tsongkhapa’s fame reached Ming China and the Yongle emperor sent envoys to invite
him to his court in 1403. Tsongkhapa declined the invitation but sent his close disciple Jamchen
Choje Shakya Yeshi (1352-1435) to the Ming court instead. The Ming emperor lavishly
rewarded Jamchen Choje and bestowed upon him the title of State Preceptor (Tib: gu’i shi; Chi:
guo shi 国师). According to the Yellow Book on the Origin of Buddhism in Tibet (Tib: Vaiduya-
ser-po; Chi: huang liu li jiao liu 黄琉璃教流), Jamchen Choje brought sixteen white
sandalwood images of the Buddha’s venerable disciples from China and installed them as the
principle icons in the temple of Sera Monastery in Lhasa, the third largest monastery of the
Gelugpa sect in Tibet. This information shows that Jamyang Choje’s building of his own
monastery in 1415 benefited greatly from his trip to China.

In the year 1419, Jamyang Choeje Tashi Paldan, another personal disciple of Tsongkhapa,
founded the monastery of Drepung in Lhasa. The patron for this monastic institute was again the
head of the Woekha County (Tib: ‘od kha dzong), Namkha Sangpo. In 1418, Gedan Legshed
Sangpo, a disciple of Tsongkhapa, built the monastery of Palkhor Chode at Gyaltse in Tsang
region with the financial support of the local ruler of Gyantse, Rabtan Kunsang Phagpa, who had
served as Chamberlain to the second ruler of the Phagmodrupa court, Dragpa Gyaltsen. During
this period, the Gelugpa sect received a great deal of attention from both secular rulers and
monastic scholars. In the meantime, the chief lamas of the Gelugpa sect in Central Tibet obtained
patronage from both the royal family of the Phagmodrupa and local rulers in Lhasa valley and
Tsang. Therefore, within a decade or so, the number of Gelugpa monasteries multiplied in Central Tibet.

As the Gelugpa and the Kagyupa sects gained in influence, the two older sects, the Nyingmapa and the Sakyapa became marginalized after the collapse of the Mongol dynasty. Thus, the early fifteenth century was a period of dynamic shift in the landscape of religious institutions. In earlier times, there was less sectarian divide; teachings moved fluidly between sects, and patrons offered support with little favouritism. The advent of the Gelugpa sect was accompanied by Tsongkhapa’s reformist attitude and stress on monasteries as centres of Buddhist practice. This orientation generated a rapid development of Gelugpa monasteries throughout the country with the support of the noble families. The creation of huge monastic institutions and the increase in the population of monks required ever larger numbers of devotees and donations – for which it became necessary to expand influence into remote areas of Tibet as well as the western Himalayan region, Mongolia and China.31 These pressures attending the rise of the Gelugpa sect generated religious and political conflicts among the sects of Buddhism and their supporters in Tibet. The eventual outcome in the seventeenth century was the establishment of a government under the Fifth Dalai Lama, the head of the Gelugpa School.

The tradition of Tibetan lamas traveling to China and acting as spiritual advisors or teachers to the rulers there can be traced back to the eleventh century Tangut Kingdom, long before the establishment of the Yuan dynasty.32 Monks from Tibet enjoyed high respect and some of them even were granted the title of State Preceptor. The period coincided with the expansion of Tibetan Buddhism into the hinterland and the consolidation of the competing

schools. The period is also known as the end of the second wave of the translation of Sanskrit texts into Tibetan. New religious geographies were created by designating pilgrimage sites, and building networks of patronage. In this process establishing the authority of a lama and his spiritual pre-eminence became strategically important. The search for patronage even beyond Tibet into China continued until the early sixteenth century, when the Jiaqing emperor banned Tibetan Buddhism. By the time of the Fifth Karmapa’s visit to Ming China, a various Buddhist sects with their own monastic institutions were well established in Tibet, and the change that occurred in Tibet in the early fifteenth century had their counterpart in China

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Founder</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Monastery</th>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Current Head</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Ningmapa</td>
<td>Padmasambhava</td>
<td>762</td>
<td>Samye</td>
<td>Lhokha</td>
<td>Padnor Rinpoche</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kagyupa</td>
<td>Dagpo Lhaje</td>
<td>1121</td>
<td>Dala Gampo</td>
<td>Lhokha</td>
<td>The 17th Karmapa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sakyapa</td>
<td>Konchog Gyalpo</td>
<td>1073</td>
<td>Sakya</td>
<td>Shegatse</td>
<td>Sakya Trizin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gelugpa</td>
<td>Tsongkhapa</td>
<td>1409</td>
<td>Ganden</td>
<td>Lhasa</td>
<td>The 14th Dalai Lama</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. The four main Tibetan Buddhist schools and their founders and root monasteries.

It was probably in Hongwu’s (1368–1398) reign that the Ming imperial court began to worship Tibetan Buddhism. The Emperor Hongwu had been a monk for eight years before joining the rebellion against Mongol rule.\footnote{33 Frederick Mote, \textit{Imperial China 900–1800} (Harvard University Press, 2003), 543–545} This singular experience led him to adopt a policy of accommodating and granting titles to Tibetan monks once he became emperor of the Ming. He knew very well the role of eminent Tibetan monks among the peoples in Inner Asia. Although he did not succeed as Yongle did, Zhu Yuanzhang tried his best to draw the high-ranking monks
over to his side by inviting them to visit the imperial court.

Emperor Hongwu ordered Zhi Guang (智光), who was fluent in both Tibetan and Chinese, to stay in the Zhongshan Monastery and translate Buddhist scriptures from Tibetan into Chinese. In order to facilitate the project of compiling Buddhist scripture, Hongwu emperor sent a mission to Central Tibet to collect sacred scriptures and invite religious teachers, but the envoys returned without much result. A second mission was led by the envoy Xu Yunde (徐云德) and, on his arrival in Tibet, he issued invitations to some of the leading lamas from different schools, to visit the imperial court in Nanjing. According to the Ming shi lu, Zhi Guang was sent to Nepal in search of Buddhist scriptures, although the area in question was actually part of Tibet, In the meantime, many Tibetan monks were spending time in China, building up learning centres and monasteries not only in the capital city of the Ming but also in Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces. According to an entry in Ming shi lu dated to 1385, the eighteenth year of the Hongwu reign:

Jiming Monastery was built in memory of monk Bao Gong of the Liang Dynasty, with monk De Xuan as its first abbot. When De Xuan died the successor was Dao Ben. In the early years of Hongwu’s reign, Tibetan monk Sanggye Gyaltsen, who had been appointed as a Right Buddhist Rectifier, came to Mount Jiming and a house was built for him to the west of the Jiming Monastery.  

After the Yongle emperor assumed power of the Ming, Tibetan Buddhism became more popular at the imperial court under the patronage of the royal court and the elites whose majority were eunuchs. Hoong Tiek Toh states in his dissertation that, during the Ming, the influence of Tibetan Buddhism in China reached its peak and Tibet replaced India as the source of Buddhist

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34 ZhangTingyu, et al., eds, Ming shi, xi yu san, vol. 331 (Zhonghua shu ju, 1974), 8575.
teachings in China. During the early Ming years, if not the entire period of the Ming, Tibet was perceived as the holy land and Tibetan lamas were treated as true embodiments of the Buddha by believers from China and amongst the Mongols. That Tibet and its religion were held in highest regard throughout the Buddhist world of Eurasia can be seen from the fact that envoys were sent to Tibet to collect sacred scriptures; Yongle’s letter of invitation itself refers to the Fifth Karmapa as a manifestation of Shakyamuni.

The Yongle emperor saw Tibetan Buddhism as critical for maintaining peace in the Sino-Tibetan border, but he also had a great interest in the charisma of the lamas and their esoteric tantric rituals, which he felt could empower him in worldly affairs. Having a strong association with the imperial family and court elites by bestowing consecration, Tibetan Buddhism gained strong favour and patronage in the Ming court.

A unique feature of the Chinese political landscape was that eunuchs prevailed in the court of the Ming Dynasty; many outstanding eunuchs held senior positions in the court and played a significant role in fostering the relations between Tibetan monks and their masters, the emperors. In the reign of the Yongle emperor, some eunuchs were actively involved in inviting lamas from Tibet. Despite the hardships and lengthy time required for travel to Tibet, there were a number of eunuchs who even visited Tibet two or three times as envoys of the emperor. They were involved in delivering messages from the court and collecting Tibetan texts. It is evident that Tibetan Buddhism gained in stature during the Ming years, due in great part to the strong support of the eunuchs of the Ming court.

Most of the attendants in charge of the religious rituals at the palace were eunuchs who believed in Tibetan Buddhism and they paid great respect to the Tibetan monks. Prior to the

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36 Pawo Tsuglag Trengwa, Mkhas pa’i dga’ston, p. 510. See also the letter of invitation at page 39 in this paper.
establishment of the Ming, Tibetan monks developed a set of specific religious rituals which were complex, mysterious and attractive to the officials and common people in China. Tibetan Buddhism continued to flourish and even became more popular in China after the Yongle emperor’s patronage and Zheng He’s conversion to Tibetan Buddhism.

How Xian (侯显) (Tib: phu zhan or hu skyen) was probably one of the first eunuchs sent to Tibet by the emperor of the Ming court. He was born in Fanyang (潘阳) in the Central Plain and had been trained as a secular official in the early part of his life. He became a monk at the Longxiang Monastery for seven years until the end of the Yuan dynasty. In 1410, the Yongle emperor dispatched him again to Tibet to collect Tibetan manuscripts and the Ming court produced the first block print of the Kangyur and Tengyur Tibetan Buddhist cannons. A complete set of Kangyur texts was printed under the patronage of the Yongle emperor, who even composed the preface for the collection and distributed copies to the Tibetan high-ranking lamas and monasteries of all the sects in Tibet as a gift from the royal family. One version of these texts is even today preserved in the temple of the Potala Palace in Lhasa.\(^{37}\)

Having opportunities to be close to Tibetan monks, eunuchs naturally treated the Tibetan monks as religious tutors and took Buddhist vows before them. Zheng He (郑和), another important eunuch of the court was a favourite of the Yongle emperor and a pious believer of Buddhism. Given his intimate connection with the Yongle emperor, he may also have received teachings from the Fifth Karmapa and may have received from him his Tibetan name, Sonam Tashi (Tib: bsod nams bkra shis; Chi: suo nan zha xi 索南扎西).\(^{38}\) Zheng He began to support Tibetan Buddhist lamas after his safe return from various seafaring trips. He gave alms for the

\(^{38}\) Chen Nan, “Influence of the Tibetan Buddhism on the Hinterland in the Ming Dynasty.” *China’s Tibetology*, no. 11 (2008): 5.
printing of the *Tripitaka Sutra* (Chi: *Da zang jing* 大藏经), so the sutra could be chanted widely in order to accumulate merit for himself. Zheng He had ten sets of the *Tripitaka Sutra* printed at his expense. It had become popular for the *Tripitaka* to be printed and chanted for the emperor at auspicious times and copies of the sutra were donated to various temples and monasteries near the capital and beyond. The great success of Zheng He’s naval expeditions and his support of Buddhism resulted in many people in China following his footsteps to become believers in Tibetan Buddhism.\(^{39}\) According to some sources there were over ten thousand Chinese and Tibetan monks in the capital alone.\(^{40}\)

It is clear that the Yongle emperor worshipped Tibetan Buddhism before becoming the emperor of the Ming and he officially designated it as one of the great religions of the state, alongside Daoism and Confucianism. As he mentioned in his letter to the Fifth Karmapa (1384-1415), the Yongle emperor attached more importance to Tibetan monks than any other emperors before him. Even when the regime changed, the monasteries built under the patronage of the Yuan continued to flourish. Tibetan style temples in the capital as well as in many places such as Hangzhou in Zhejiang and Wutai Shan Mountain in China became centres for Tibetan Buddhist teaching and sacred sites for the performance of rituals for the sake of the state and individuals alike.

In 1410, the Ming court moved its capital from Nanking to Beijing during the Yongle emperor’s reign (1403-1425). Within a short time, there were a dozen Tibetan Buddhist monasteries in Nanking and Beijing. Because of the Ming accommodation of the Tibetan monks, like the previous dynasty of Yuan, Tibetan monks continued to arrive and stayed in China in ever


greater numbers. In the first half of the Ming a large number of Tibetan monks (Chi: fan seng 番僧) in China were housed in monasteries, including the Grand Tolerant Monastery (Chi: Da neng ren si 大能仁司寺) and the Grand Compassionate Monastery (Chi: Da ci en si 大慈恩寺). A huge number of monks from all over the country gathered while Karmapa was in the capital of the Ming in Nanjing. According to the inscriptions on the hands-scroll paintings commissioned by the Yongle emperor to record Karmapa’s ritual performance, more than twenty thousand attended a vegetarian banquet at the Linggusi Monastery hosted by the Yongle emperor in honour of the Karmapa.\footnote{Patricia Berger, “Miracles in Nanjing: An Imperial Record of the Fifth Karmapa’s Visit to the Chinese Capital,” in \textit{Cultural Intersection in Later Chinese Buddhism}, ed. Marsha Weidner (University of Hawai’i Press, 2001), 165.}

To be sure, Tibetan monks won the Emperor Yongle’s favour with their esoteric rituals. Tibetan monks enjoyed free meals and clothes. The eunuchs, upon meeting the monks, would kneel down before them while the monks were sitting to receive the salutations.\footnote{Pawo Tsuglag Trengwa, \textit{Mkhas pa’i dga’ ston}, p.} A strong continuity of interest in Tibetan Buddhism among successive Ming emperors gave Tibetan Buddhism and its clerics such a privileged position that all the main religious sects in Tibet received titles such as Dharma Prince (Chi: fa wang 法王), Son of Buddha (Chi: fo zi 佛子) and Great Master of the State (Chi: da guo shi 大国师). It seems the fact that only the high-ranking monks who had their own monastic institutions in Tibet and received the title of prince or king could have seals, while other monks in the capital had only honourable titles and lavish gifts.

Not confined to the imperial court, Tibetan Buddhism made its way beyond the sphere of elites to the ordinary people of the realm. Many Chinese became devotees or even monks. Beginning with the Zhengtong emperor (1449), a special test was announced for those who
wished to be ordained as Tibetan monks.\textsuperscript{43} In the Chenghua period (1447-1487), the number of ordination certificates for Tibetan monks amounted to 3,400.\textsuperscript{44} Before the Jiaqing reign, Tibetan Buddhism became so popular in Ming China that there were even numbers of fake monks, who were ultimately captured and made to do military service on the frontier as punishment. All the Dharma Kings who engaged in both teaching and trading had the benefit of thousands of ordination certificates and could choose their disciples at will.\textsuperscript{45}

The influence of Tibetan Buddhism on Chinese Buddhism can be seen in the monastic establishment and from the eminence of Chinese monks who were sent by the emperor to Tibet in the early Ming. A number of Tibetan Buddhist monasteries built in Nanjing and Beijing during the Yuan were kept and extended by the Ming.\textsuperscript{46} Among them, the most famous one was Dalong Shangji Gongsii Monastery, which was built by the Yuan dynasty and whose name was changed by the Ming to Grand Tianjisi Monastery. Hui Tian who was also sent to Tibet as an envoy of the Ming emperor had been the abbot of this monastery. The monastery was then so crowded that there was no place even for the monks coming from afar.\textsuperscript{47}

Through the many personal visits of Tibetan lamas, Tibetan Buddhism gained a strong spiritual hold over the Ming realm in the early fifteenth century. How it was perceived and what significance it had for the Ming can be seen through the historic trip of the Fifth Karmapa.

\textsuperscript{43} Ming Ying zong shi lu 177, 10b, 3425.
\textsuperscript{44} Chen Nan, “Influence of Tibetan Buddhism on the Hinterland in the Ming Dynasty,” p. 34.
\textsuperscript{46} Chen Nan, “Influence of Tibetan Buddhism on the Hinterland in the Ming Dynasty,” p. 2.
\textsuperscript{47} “Biography of Hui Tian, a Monk of Da Tianjie Si Monastery at Jinling in Ming Dynasty,” in Xing Xu Gao Sheng Zhuan (A New Sequel to the Biographies of Eminent Monks) vol. 34.
Chapter Two
The Letter of Invitation and Journey to Ming China
Inviting Buddhist monks to perform religious rituals for the deceased was a practice of the Ming court. From the very beginning of his reign, the Hongwu emperor sent Tsungle on a mission to the western regions, including Tibet and probably India, to invite religious masters and collect tantric Buddhist scriptures. The first two Tibetan leaders invited by the Ming emperor to perform rituals and receive honourable titles were the Fourth Karmapa Rolpai Dorje (1330-1389) and the King of the Phagmodrupa dynasty Jangchub Gyaltshan (1332-1389). The Lama and the King did not take up the invitations, however. There appeared to be no particular reason for declining the invitations, other than a lack of interest on the part of the Tibetans in what was taking place in China with the establishment of the Ming rule.

Tsungle and Taoyen (1335-1418) were the two key figures who played significant roles in propagating Buddhism, including its Tibetan variant. They had been in the service of the Yuan emperor Togh Temur (1304-1332) and had witnessed the custom of accommodating Tibetan Buddhism and inviting high-ranking monks to the court of the Yuan. It is entirely possible that the two influential monk advisors of the Hongwu emperor met the Fourth Karmapa and monks from the Sakya sect who had visited and served the Yuan court. It is probable that Tsungle was the envoy who brought the letter of invitation to the Fourth Karmapa and the King of the Phagmodrupa dynasty.

In inviting the Tibetan hierarchs, the Hongwu emperor was following a tradition established by the previous emperors of the Yuan of having lamas perform rituals for the deceased and for the welfare of the living. With the failure of the invitation to elicit the desired

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48 It is recorded in his biography that he declined the invitation because of the uncertain political situation in China at the time, the rivalries of the Ming, and his previous visit to the Yuan court. However, the Fourth Karmapa Rolpe Dorje sent a lama as his emissary instead.
response, in 1368, the Hongwu emperor invited the leading Chan masters of South China to Changshan Temple to hold Buddhist services. The main purpose for this ritual was as usual to pray for the general deliverance of the people who perished in the wars preceding his victory.

In the latter part of the year, the Hongwu emperor summoned more than ten great monks from south China to the Changshan temple to perform Buddhist services. In 1382, Empress Ma died and, as a part of the mourning ceremony, the Hongwu emperor decided to have Buddhist monks assist the princes in reciting Buddhist texts for her benefit. All these rituals were organized under the supervision of the two monk advisors, and they illustrate the importance of such state religious ceremonies. There were Tibetan monks in the capital at the time and they may have participated in such rituals, even if the invitation to influential monks from Tibet was to no avail. It is highly probable that the Hongwu emperor meant for the Tibetan hierarchs to lead the above-mentioned Buddhist ceremonies. Prior to the Karmapa’s visit, the Ming court tried to invite another leading Tibetan lama, Tsongkhapa Losang Dragpa, the founder of the Gelugpa sect of Tibetan Buddhism. In 1403, while consolidating his rule in China and pacifying the force of the Mongols, the Yongle emperor issued his first invitation letter to Tsongkhapa. We can find this florid description in the Biography of Tsongkhapa written shortly after his death:

After hearing the fame and unique characteristics of the master Tsongkhapa, the Ming emperor Yongle sent envoys Wang Driwo and Tayen to Tibet to invite master [Tsongkhapa] with lavish presents, but all the previous invitation letters were declined by him because of poor health, which did not allow him to undertake such a long journey and public meetings. The Chinese envoys remained in Tibet and after a while they heard that he was teaching publicly again. Then the team of envoys, which consisted of several hundred men, travelled throughout the day and night without stopping. [They went from] Phanpo, an agricultural place located a hundred kilometres away from Lhasa, the capital of Tibet, and arrived at Sera Choeding, a small hermitage of Tsongkhapa above the Sera Monastery. They requested the attendants of Tsongkhapa to have an audience with the master in order to persuade him to accept the invitation from their emperor. 

50 Chahar Geshes Losang Tshultrim, Rje Tsong kha pa’i rnam thar (China’s Tibet Publishing House, 2006), 216-18.
Although the Chinese envoys remained in Lhasa and made repeated attempts to meet Tsongkhapa, they were not successful. It was only after the involvement of Miwang Dragpa Gyaltshan, the secular ruler of Tibet, that Tsongkhapa finally agreed to give an audience to the envoys and received the invitation letter and gifts from the Chinese emperor. However, even then, the Lama refused to go to China citing again his ill health but also claiming that such a trip would not bring any benefit to the people of China. As recorded in his biography: “Tsongkhapa continued to refuse to visit China and the envoys left Lhasa with tears in their eyes.” It is further recorded that, before the departure of the Chinese envoys, Tsongkhapa composed two letters to the Hongwu emperor. The monk official Taoyen, who was better known by his secular name Yao Guangxiao, the Interior Minister of the Ming court, sent the letter on through the envoys, together with a fine statue of the Buddha Shakyamuni and local products offered as gifts. After remaining in Tibet for more than three months, Chinese envoys finally left for China with nothing but these two letters from Tsongkhapa. (See the Tibetan letters in Appendices I-II)

There is no way to prove the accuracy of the details concerning the activities of the Chinese envoys in Tibet, but from the above record it is clear that the envoys were desperate and determined to fulfill the wishes of their emperor. What is interesting about the Ming’s attempt to establish contact with Tsongkhapa is that, initially, the Ming showed no preference for any particular Buddhists sect. Indeed, the later invitation to Karmapa gives no indication of Ming support to the Karma Kagyupa sect as such.

Tsongkhapa was the first high lama to receive an invitation from the Yongle emperor, probably because he was one of the most influential lamas in the Tibetan Buddhist world and had

51 Ibid., 221.
52 Ibid., 220.
established a close relation with the secular ruler of Tibet. Another important factor is that his
fame had already spread beyond central Tibet and his disciples had started to build their
influence in the eastern border region with Ming China. Thus, the Ming emperor may have
wanted to establish contact with Tsongkhapa for political motives rather than just spiritual ones.

There is no copy of the actual invitation letter to Tsongkhapa included in his biography or
other Tibetan sources. Thus the form and exact content of the letter remain a mystery for
historians. The fact that an invitation did exist can be deduced, however, from other descriptions
in his biography – for example, the detailed account of Tsongkhapa’s meeting with the envoys
from China and the two copies of the complete letters of response to the Yongle emperor and his
Interior Minister Tao-yen. Tsongkhapa’s explanation of the reasons why he was unable to make
the trip to China and his begging for a deep apology from the emperor can be taken as
confirmation. Another proof that such an invitation did exist is his dispatch of Jamchen Choje
as his representative. Jamchen Choje visited China twice and became one of the great teachers of
the Yongle emperor; his visits to Ming China brought great benefits when he founded his own
monastery Sera, the second largest monastery in Tibet.

It has been a puzzling issue for Tibetan historians that, even though the Gelugpa
exchanged gifts with and sent missions to the Ming court up until the 1430s, there are no
confirming entries to that effect in the Chinese historical records Ming shi lu or other Chinese
sources of the Ming period. Nor is there any record of the rejections of the Ming’s invitations
letters first by Tsongkhapa and later by the Seventh and the Eighth Karpama, An exception to
this general silence around invitations and their rejection can be found in the work of Chinese
historian Li Tiesheng. He wrote:

53 Ibid., 222-213.
54 Pawo Tsuglag Trengwa, Mkhas pa’i dga’ ston, pp. 635-636.
In China not only the emperor could do no wrong, but also his prestige and dignity had to be upheld at any cost. Had the fact been made known to the public that Ch'eng-tsu's repeated invitations extended to Tsongkhapa were declined, the Emperor's prestige and dignity would have been considered as lowered to a contemptible degree, especially at a time when his policy to show high favours toward lamas was by no means popular and had already caused resentment among the people. This explains why no mention of Tsongkhapa and the Yellow Sect was made in the *Ming shi lu and Ming Shih*.\(^{55}\)

Li’s explanation is valid and illustrates something of the longstanding Sino-centric worldview by which China considered itself to be superior to neighbouring territories. It is clear that the matter of accepting invitation letters from Chinese emperors, or not accepting them, depended on several factors determined by various interests at the level of the state, the religious sect concerned or even the individual. For example, in the case of Tsongkhapa, the fact that a new religious sect was emerging under his leadership may have been a pragmatic consideration. Tsongkhapa was more concerned at the time with consolidating his newly established power within Tibet than with disseminating his teachings beyond the homeland.

In the early period of the fifteenth century, another religious figure in Tibet was the Fifth Karmapa whose reputation was as high as that of Tsongkhapa. Tsongkhapa had received teachings from the Fourth Karmapa and thus had a close relation with the Fifth one after the former passed away. Shortly after Tsongkhapa declined to visit China, the Ming court switched tactics by inviting the Fifth Karmapa Deshin Shegpa. That invitation is clearly recorded in the *Ming shi lu*: In the first year of the reign of the Yongle emperor, young eunuch Hou Xian and monk Zhiguang were sent to deliver the invitation (永乐元年命司礼少监侯显、僧智光背书币

The record continues noting that the envoy left China on the 10th of March in 1403 and this date accords with the date of the invitation letter in Tibetan sources.\(^{57}\)

After more than seven months of travelling the envoys arrived in Tibet and finally met the Fifth Karmapa. The letter of invitation from the Yongle emperor was delivered to the Karmapa with lavish gifts of silk, tea and money.\(^{58}\) However, the Fifth Karmapa, like Tsongkhapa, turned down the invitation at the time but promised to visit China later.\(^{59}\)

A second batch of envoys arrived in Tibet three years later in 1406. They made their journey to Central Tibet, first visiting Drigung Monastery, another powerful branch of the Kagyupa sect, and then went to visit Neubon, the chieftain of the Lhasa valley and a patron of the Karmapa sect. Finally, the envoys arrived at Tshurphu Monastery, the residence of the Karmapa, and delivered the following invitation letter, written in Tibetan:\(^{60}\)

> You, the supreme teacher, the one who knows all wisdom and benefiting all the beings in the west. To me, you are just like Buddha manifest on earth and it is impossible for me to promote benefits for all sentient beings without having obtained the excellent blessing from you. When I was in the north, after hearing of your good name, I thought to meet you. Now I possess the highest position and all the territories of the Central Kingdom are in peace. I have been thinking for a long time that you should come and clarify the darkness, and you should promote benefits to all the peoples equally. In the past, Shakyamuni worked for all sentient beings. To obtain the excellent realization of the teaching of the Lord, there is no differentiation between you and the lord himself. Therefore, to preach the doctrine of the Lord Buddha and for the sake of bringing benefits and happiness to the Central Plain, you should come to the Central Plain. Since I have been thinking of inviting you for a long time and now I have the opportunity to invite you and I am begging you to come to the court. All the previous kings ruled the Middle Kingdom by peaceful means and worshiped the Buddha dharma sincerely. A long time has passed since my father, the King Tai Emperor Huhang and the faithful consort Huhang bu passed away, but no way of repaying their kindness has been found. You, supreme teacher, in the true

\(^{56}\) Gu Zucheng et al., eds, 明实录藏族史料, 第二集 (Collection of Tibetan Historical Documents from Ming Shi lu, vol. 2) (Tibet People’s Publishing House, 1982), 120.

\(^{57}\) Pawo Tsuglag Trengwa, Mchas pa’i dga’ston, p. 510.

\(^{58}\) Ibid., 509.

\(^{59}\) Ibid., 510.

\(^{60}\) It is believed that the envoy delivered the invitation letter to the Karmapa in 1406. However, the date of the invitation letter appears to be 1403, when Hou Xian and two other envoys visited Tibet for the first time.
sense of having obtained the excellent blessing by means of skill and deeds, are the essence of the Buddha. In order for you to arrive here promptly to perform the ritual to liberate the souls of the deceased, I sent Likyam Shaokyam, Hukyen and so on to invite you with this letter. I hope you will accept my invitation and come as soon as possible. Together with the letter are the following gifts to you: three big silver ingots in a total of 150 taels, ten bolts of silk and ten bolts of satin, piece of sandalwood, ten jin (kilogram) of white incense, one jin of suhe incense and 150 jin of white tea. This letter is written in the second month of the first year of Yongle reign.61 (See the Tibetan text in Appendix III)

Unlike the invitation letter to Tsongkhapa, a copy of this invitation letter can be found in the various biographies of the Fifth Karmapa. The quotation above is taken from the Biography of the Fifth Karmapa written in the mid fifteenth century by Pawo Tsuglag Trengwa. Since then the letter has been re-quoted in other, later versions. The letter is considered to be the complete version and no doubts have been raised as to its authenticity.

The invitation letter is written in a florid style that is normal for addressing high lamas in Tibet. It is not unusual as the Chinese imperial courts had long experience dealing with the Tibetan lamas and at the court there must have been courtiers who were well versed in etiquette. However, when we read the letter carefully and compare its form and content with other letters or edicts from the Chinese court addressed to Tibetan hierarchs, it appears to be an incomplete version. Likely it is a segment of the original invitation letter, quoted from the point where Pawo describes the spiritual relationship between the Fifth Karmapa and the Yongle emperor and not intending to introduce the invitation itself. Pawo states that he has examined many documents from Chinese emperors, including the original letter of invitation in the archival rooms of the Tshuphu Monastery. He did not make any comment on the style or format of the invitation letter.

A number of points suggest incompleteness of the letter. For example, the letter in the quotation begins rather abruptly with “You, the supreme teacher” – that is, without mentioning

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61 Pawo Tsuglag Trengwa, Mkhas pa ’i dga’ ston, p. 509.
any proper name either of the recipient or the sender. The letter also lacks any honorific or formality normally included in a royal invitation, such as words of greeting, titles, and so forth. Comparison can be made, for example, with the extant invitation letter received by the Eighth Karmapa Mikyo Dorje from Wutsung emperor of the Ming dynasty.\textsuperscript{62} That letter consists of a silk-wrapped scroll some five feet broad by two feet high. The Tibetan script is on the right, the Chinese on the left and the date is indicated in both languages, together with the imperial seal, located to the left of the Chinese text. One would expect the format of the two invitation letters to be the same.\textsuperscript{63}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure2.png}
\caption{The edict issued to Lha btsan skyab by the Yongle emperor (400 cm long 32 cm high) is preserved in the Archives of the Tibet Autonomous Region.}
\end{figure}

It is possible that Pawo omitted some parts of the letter since his purpose for quoting the letter was to illustrate the degree of respect being shown to the Karmapa by the Yongle emperor,

\textsuperscript{62} Pawo Tsuglag Trengwa, \textit{Mkhas pa'i dga' ston}, pp. 634-636.
\textsuperscript{63} The original letter is stored at the Archive of the Tibetan Autonomous Region. A copy of the letter is printed in a picture album entitled \textit{Testimony of History} (Chinese International Press, 2000), 81.
as well as to demonstrate the degree of devotion that the Ming emperor expressed for the teachings of the Kargyupa sect.

Judging from the date of the letter and the three names of the envoys recorded in the letter, this would have to be the first letter of invitation, the one which was turned down by the Fifth Karmapa in 1403. As indicated at the end of the letter, the three main envoys sent to Tibet this time were Likyam (Tib: li skyam), Shaokym (Tib: sh’u skyam) and Hukyam (Tib: hu’u rkyen). There were others who were sent as escorts of the envoy team, but their names are not recorded. The number and high profile of the envoys demonstrate how serious and sincere the Yongle emperor was at the time in his intention to bring Tibetan monks to the court of the Ming. The date on which the envoys were sent is also recorded in an entry in Ming shi lu.

The Yongle emperor sent a second batch of envoys to Tibet in 1406. The team was headed by Hou Xian who had travelled to Tibet three years earlier as a member of the first mission. In the historical records of the Ming, including Ming shi lu and Ming shi, only the name of the envoy Hou Xian, is noted, even though two other senior envoys accompanied him and records of the earlier invitation mission list all the envoys. Since there is a three year time gap between the first and the second trips to Tibet. Hugh Richardson and many others historians mistakenly concluded that Hou Xian had remained in Tibet for more than three years, until the Karmapa’s trip to China finally materialized in 1406.

The original idea of inviting the Fifth Karmapa has generally been attributed to the Yongle emperor. However, information recorded in the biography of the Fifth Karmapa suggests

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64 Pawo Tsuglag Trengwa, Mkhas pa’i dga’ ston, p. 510

“The Junior Director of Ceremonials was dispatched to Central Tibet, bearing document and present, to summon the lama Karma. When the emperor was at his princely court he had commonly heard that his practice of religion was especially excellent, and now he dispatched someone to summon him.”

that it was actually the Hongwu emperor who had the idea. As recorded in Tibetan sources:

“Before inviting the Fifth Karmapa, the Hongwu emperor first invited the Indian master Birwaba (Tib: bir ba pa; Chi: shi fu lai 释复来?), who passed away unexpectedly.”

Regardless of whose idea it originally was to invite the Fifth Karmapa, each emperor had his own agenda hiding behind the one made explicit in the invitation letter, that is, to promote Buddhist teachings in China. A more personal reason also is mentioned in the Yongle emperor’s letter: to conduct rituals for the deceased imperial family. Regarding the latter, the Yongle emperor detailed in the letter that a considerable time had passed since his parents, the Hongwu emperor and his faithful mother had died, but no way of repaying their kindness had yet been found. The only way to repay their kindness was to invite Karmapa to perform the tantric rituals to liberate their souls.

To be sure, it was a well-established tradition in China to provide the religious service, known as Universal Salvation Ritual (Tib: sgrol pa’i cho ga; Chi: pu du da zhai 普度大祭), for someone who had just passed away. Yet, it might have appeared to be strange to be performing such a funeral ceremony again for someone who had already died nearly a decade ago. However, the Yongle emperor, as the ruler of the country, had power to order the Buddhist clerics to do his bidding. It has to be considered that what the Yongle emperor was actually trying to do was to dispel the controversy of his place in the lineage of the royal family and to demonstrate his legitimacy on the throne of the Ming dynasty. This he would accomplish by performing a filial duty that would refresh the peoples’ memory of his natural connection with his parents, thereby counteracting rumours to the contrary.

In his invitation letter, the Yongle emperor explicitly asked Karmapa to dispel the ‘darkness’ in China, a metaphoric term that provides yet another pivotal clue to deciphering the

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67 Pawo Tsuglag Trengwa, Mkhhas pa’i dga’ston, p. 514.
68 Ibid., 510.
motivations behind the invitation. In other words, the Karmapa would help the emperor solve the worldly conflict and spiritual chaos afflicting China. For Tibetans the phrase ‘dispelling darkness’ is often understood as countering the corruption of Buddhist practices in China at the time.\(^{69}\) This request for spiritual advice was consistent with prevalent debates about the nature and purity of Buddhism as practiced in China. For example, a folk belief deriving from Maitreyana Buddhism and Manichaeism called the White Lotus was discouraged by the Yongle emperor. The leader of the White Lotus had been supported by Jianwen (Chi: \textit{jian wen} 建文) emperor (1399-1402), whose reign was cut short by his uncle the Yongle emperor. The Yongle reign was therefore vigilant about keeping this folk religion’s flames in check. As pointed out in a 1970 article on the subject by John Dardess:

Leaders of the sect incited their followers with religious or magical propaganda – prophecies of dooms, claims of personal divinity, assurances of magical protection, and so forth. In some case, the leader went so far as to adopt dynastic names and reign titles, thus advertising an overt political challenge to the Ming dynasty.\(^{70}\)

Both the content of the invitation letter, and other Tibetan and Chinese historical records, clearly show that from the very beginning, the Hongwu emperor and his successor the Yongle emperor were impressed and fascinated by the magical powers exhibited by the Tibetan monks and by the charismatic effect they had on people in the north of Ming China. Given known facts about on-going religious and social disorder in the country, the Yongle emperor’s interest in Buddhism now becomes more strategic. The Yongle emperor desperately needed the populace to witness the miracles performed by the Fifth Karmapa to counter any rumours that he was a

\(^{69}\) According to the records from the \textit{Ming shi lu}, it was widely held that auspicious portents were frequent occurrences during the Yongle reign, and the courtiers sought to flatter the emperor with exaggerated interpretations.

usurper of the throne and to reassert his legitimacy. At the same time, Tibetan sources note the Yongle emperor’s respect for the Fifth Karmapa and his active participation in the rituals at the court, suggesting thereby his faith in Tibetan Buddhism was sincere and that he was not only a follower of the faith but also a disciple of the Fifth Karmapa.  

Chinese sources also confirm the Yongle emperor’s deep involvement in Tibetan Buddhism and the fact that Karmapa’s fame had reached the Ming court before his visit to China. In *Ming shi* we find this statement: “When Chengzu was the Prince of Yen, he learned of his [Karmapa’s] name…” and later in the same text: “The emperor heard that the monk from Central Tibet, the lama Karma, was skilled in Buddhism and excellent in illusory transformation, and he wanted to meet him once.”

The Fifth Karmapa’s decision to go to China was more complicated. He determined to go to China after he was encouraged to take the arduous journey by many seculars and religious leaders, including Miwang Dragpa Namgyal, the temporal ruler of Tibet, who might have been fearful of a Ming invasion. Karmapa’s meeting with the Chinese emperor took place at a critical moment in the relationship between China and Inner Asia, a time when Ming foreign relations with neighbouring regions remained uncertain and fears of Chinese military intrusion into Tibet prevailed in the whole region.

As noted earlier, soon after Ming came to power, a number of invitations to visit China had been issued to high Lamas, but to no avail. Constant rejection by Tibetan high-ranking Lamas including the Fifth Karmapa might have further annoyed the emperor of the Ming. As noted in his biography, before he passed away the Fourth Karmapa instructed his attendants that his body should be buried on the top of the mountain and proclaimed that this would protect

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Tibet from any potential foreign invasions, particularly from China.\textsuperscript{73} Moreover, all Tibetan sources from the same period reveal that in the eyes of Tibetans at the time the Fifth Karmapa went to China in order to prevent a Chinese invasion of Tibet.\textsuperscript{74}

If the fear of invasion from China was the partial reason for the Karmapa’s trip, then it is helpful to go back to the invitation letter and rethink what the allegedly missing part of the invitation letter is. Can we assume that unknown parts of the letter might be about military intervention or similar threats if the Tibetans continued to decline invitations extended by the Chinese emperor? Many questions about the invitation letter and the real reason behind the Karmapa’s decision to visit the Ming court remain uncertain and need to be clarified.

Karmapa’s departure for China was a major event in Tibet and it received a great deal of attention from both political and religious leaders in Tibet. A grand ceremony was organized for the departure by the heads of the Drigung Monastery, the Phagmodrupa family and the Lhasa Chieftain Neupon. The Karmapa took the northern route, accompanied by the Chinese envoys. Since his trip to China was in fact combined with pilgrimage, trade, missionary activity and meetings with both local rulers and religious masters, the scale of the enterprise was considerable and the number of people in the entourage was huge.

Tibetan sources provide a general picture of the route Karmapa took for the journey and all the places he visited on the way to China. All the places visited and dignitaries met had significant meaning for the relations between the Karmapa and the local rulers and also between Inner Asia and Ming China. The urgency for the Karmapa’s trip is vividly expressed in the invitation letter by the Yongle emperor. It also is demonstrated by the pace of the trip as recorded in Karmapa’s travel notes. The daily pace and distance of the Karmapa’s trip was measured by

\textsuperscript{73} Pawo Tsuglag Trengwa, \textit{Mkhas pa’i dga’ston}, pp. 500-506.  
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 490-500; 501-506.
the unit of relay stations (Tib: ‘jam tshugs; Chi: yi zhan 驿站) that they passed through along the way.\textsuperscript{75}

The Karmapa first arrived in Lhading (Tib: lha steng) and then the monastery of Karma in Riwoche of Khams. Karma Monastery was built by the First Karmapa Dusum Khyenpa (1010-1200) and the second most important monastery of the Karma Kagyupa sect in Tibet at the time. Here Karmapa met some Chinese officials who were sent by the emperor to facilitate his trip with gifts. According to the biography, the reason that Chinese officials came to Lhading was to urge Karmapa to speed up his travelling pace.\textsuperscript{76} Besides emphasizing the high profile and importance of the Chinese officials (Tib: rgya’i mi chen), Tibetan records provide no further information about their names or officials titles.\textsuperscript{77}

It is recorded that when the party reached Keding (Tib: rke stong) and Karkyang (Tib: ker rgyang), Karmapa met a Chinese Buddhist Master who held the title of State Preceptor (Tib: kon ting go’i shri; Chi: guand ding guo-shi 灌顶国师) as well as other important secular officials including Chou Taoba (Tib: ch’u thob pa) from China.\textsuperscript{78} Again, aside from the title, it is hard to identify the ‘Great Master’ who held the title of State Preceptor and the other Chinese court officials and military personnel. Tibetan sources do not provide much detail but we can deduce that an active and considerable military force was stationed in the Sino-Tibetan frontier, for they facilitated Karmapa’s trip by providing escorts and the necessities for his trip, in compliance with the emperor’s orders. In Kergyang, Karmapa was also welcomed by hundreds of thousands of monks and ordinary people in the region and neighbouring areas. After having a grand audience with the people in the town of Sharkha (Tib: shar kha), Karmapa and his

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 509-510.  
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 511.  
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., 515.  
\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 514.
entourage once again crossed the River Longthang (Tib: ‘bri chu’i klong thang) and travelled further toward the northeast.

Karmapa arrived in Markhang (Tib: smar khaps) region of eastern Tibet. Markhang is an area which was then under the control of the Gongyo King (Tib: gon gyo; Chi:), a powerful local ruler, who received the title of Prince of Protecting the Doctrine (Chi: hu jiao wang 护教王), after Karmapa's trip to China. In Markhang, Karmapa was welcomed by thousands of monks and local people. After offering religious teachings and blessings to all the people in the region, Karmapa and his party crossed the River Longthang again and entered Ganze (Tib: dkar mdzes; Chi: gan zi 甘孜) region, the eastern door of Tibet. Karmapa was welcomed by the head of the Ling Tshang (Tib: gling tshang; Chi: ling cang 灵仓) family. This family was well known in Tibetan history. As early as the Yuan dynasty, members of the Ling family were appointed as Domad Ponchen (Tib: mdo smad dpon chen), heads of Amdo, the eastern region of Tibet. In the fifth year of the Yongle reign, the head of the Ling Tshang family was conferred the title of the Prince of Assisting Virtue (Chi: zan shan wang 赞善王)

A decade prior to Karmapa’s trip to China, the heads of the two families visited the Fifth Karmapa and built a close relation with the Karmapa sect. References to these two powerful families in the Sino-Tibetan border region first appear in the Ming shi lu in an entry for September 4, 1402, which records that Yongle dispatched the monk Zhiguang to both places, carrying gifts and edicts to the two leaders. Thus, the fact that the two local rulers’ having received honourable titles is said to be the outcome of the Karmapa’s trip to Ming China. In his dissertation Sperling also remarked that: “In view of the nature of Ch'eng-tsu's interest in Ling

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79 For Chinese accounts of the family's relation with the Ming court, see Ming-shi, 8583-8584.
80 Gu Zucheng et al., eds, Collection of Tibetan Historical Documents from Ming Shi lu, vol. 2, p. 115.
81 Pawo Tsuglag Trengwa, Mkhas pa'i dga' ston, p. 509.
Tshanga and Gongyo clerics, it must be assumed that the Karmapa had recommended them to the emperor as personages of authority.  

Karmapa received lavish donations from the heads of the two above mentioned powerful families on his way. Both the Ling Tshang and Gongyo families held the titles of the Prince of Assisting Virtue and the Prince of Protecting the Doctrine respectively for many generations and paid their tribute to the Ming court continuously till the very end of the Ming dynasty.

The party travelled continuously from Ling Tshang to the ferry of Ragya Druso (Tib: rgya gru so), which is a considerable trip of ten-relay-stations. After the departure from Ragya Druso, the party reached the valley of Krombu (Tib: krom bu rong). The distance they had travelled between the Ragya Druso and Krombu was sixteen relay stations. The party arrived in Kromburong (Tib: krom bu rong) valley, where Karmapa received five hundred horses as a donation from the local people. Whether these were places inhabited by Tibetans or Mongols is hard to determine but the region itself lies within Tibetan territory, as can be deduced from the kinds of gifts offered.

After travelling one relay station further from Krombu, Dai Shingchen (Tib: ta’i zhing chen po), presumably the Governor of the Province, came to receive the Fifth Karmapa. Dai Shingchin accompanied the party for two relay stations until it reached a place called Gachur (Tib: ga chu). Curiously, while this important Chinese official is mentioned in the Karmapa’s travel account, no mention can be found in Chinese sources.

On the third day of the twelfth month of the year 1406, Karmapa and his party departed from Gachu; after travelling for three relay stations they arrived in Shinggun (Tib: shing kun). The monastery of Shinggun was built by Drongon Chogyal Phagpa during the Yuan and visited

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82 Elliot Sperling, “Did the Early Ming Emperors Attempt to Implement a ‘Divide and Rule’ Policy in Tibet? ” pp.165-166.
by the Fourth Karmapa Rolpai Dorji. After passing through another two relay stations they arrived in Chumakhar Fortress (Tib: chu ma mkhar). After travelling through another nineteen relay stations, Karmapa was received by the Prince of Zamshing (Tib: zam shing rgyal bu), who probably was the son of the Yongle emperor. Karmapa travelled toward the east and passed through twenty relay stations and finally arrived in Panyang (Tib: pan yang) in Shaanxi, where he was received by the Prince of Panyang (Tib: pan yang rgyal bu), another son of the Yongle emperor. Since all the place and people names were recorded with Tibetan pronunciation, it is extremely difficult to confirm or reconcile with the Chinese historical records. After the party entered the realm of the Ming, travelling through the Central Plain of China, there were countless numbers of people every day who came to see the Karmapa. They flocked to him paying tribute and seeking blessings. After travelling for more than fourteen relay stations, the party arrived in Hongmang (Tib: hung mang) where Karmapa was welcomed by a huge gathering of monks from the region. The monks held a grand offering ceremony for the Karmapa before he set off on the next leg of his trip. Then, after passing through three more relay stations, the party arrived in Chugun, where two more Princes (Tib: rgyal bu gnyis) of the emperor came to greet the Karmapa.83

The party travelled through another three relay stations, finally reaching the outskirts of Nanjing, the capital of the Ming, where more than a thousand boats waited along the nearby river. From there, the Fifth Karmapa and his attendants travelled in a massive boat with hundreds of compartments. According to the Biography of the Fifth Karmapa, on the 21st day of the first month of the fire-pig year (1407), the party arrived in Nanjing to a warm welcome ceremony. A parade of ten thousand monks, soldiers and thirty extravagantly decorated elephants were

83 Pawo Tsuglag Trengwa, Mkhas pa ’i dga’ ston, p. 520.
waiting for the arrival of the Karmapa. At the gate of the city of Nanking, Emperor Yongle received the Karmapa, who presented him with a golden wheel of the Dharma and received in exchange an auspicious white conch-shell. In an exceptional gesture, the Yongle emperor stood up and served tea for the Karmapa and his entourage.

All the care and protection Karmapa received on his way to China and especially the scale and degree of the welcoming ceremony at the capital show the significance of the Karmapa’s trip to the state of Ming. Tibetan sources indicate that the early emperor of the Ming dynasty was not as ferocious as he was depicted to be by Chinese historians. It may be that the emperor of the Ming showed more restraint or respect toward the exotic Tibetan hierarchs than what he was accustomed to showing the monks of Chinese Buddhism at home.

The importance of the trip is also highlighted in Tibetan sources with references to the supernatural powers possessed by Karmapa. It is said in the biography of the Karmapa that, when he arrived in Nanjing, the day was clear, yet rainbows appeared in the sky, an auspicious symbol witnessed by all the people in the city.

Whether rainbows appeared or not is not the issue here. Rather, it is the undeniable fact that, at the invitation of the Ming emperor, the Karmapa reached his destination after a year-long trip. The moment of meeting the emperor of the Ming was the starting point for constructing an image of the Ming emperor as mandated by heaven. It equally was the official re-establishment of the Sino-Tibetan relations as one of priest-patron, with the conferring of honourable titles on the Tibetan monks by the Ming emperor and, in turn, the offering of Tibetan Buddhist teachings by the monks to the emperor.

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84 Ibid., 515-521.
85 Ibid., 516.
Chapter Three
Ritual Performance and the Honourable Titles

Written sources on how Tibetan high-ranking lamas were received by the Ming emperors and the exchange of presents between the two are abundant. However, the scale and the spectacular scene of the welcoming ceremony held for the Fifth Karmapa by the Yongle emperor is unprecedented in any record. No parallel can be found, for example, in the record of ceremonial rituals organized by the Ming court for tributary missions from around the world. The invitations, the lavish celebrations, the building of a residence inside the Linggusi Monastery, the awarding of honourable titles and the proffering of precious gifts were unique to the Tibetan high-ranking monks. 86

In Tibetan documents produced both before and during the Ming periods, Ming China was described as a Buddhist state and its emperors as the sage kings. 87 Therefore, the presence of the Fifth Karmapa at the Ming court is depicted as a spiritual mission rather than one pursuing worldly interests. Although the accounts of Karmapa’s visit to the Ming court are dealt with only briefly in Chinese sources, they are treated in great detail in Tibetan sources. Chinese sources, however, do provide confirmation and they supplement information for some of the major events that took place during Karmapa’s visit in the capital of the Ming. In this section I will focus on the way in which the ritual activities, interactions between Karmapa and the Yongle emperor and the receiving of gifts and honourable titles from the court have been portrayed in Tibetan and Chinese sources.

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86 Pawo Tsuglag Trengwa, Mkhas pa’i dga’ ston, p. 505-509.
After travelling for nearly a year, on the 21st day of the first month of the fire-pig year (1407), the Fifth Karmapa and his party arrived in Nanjing. Nanjing was the political centre of the Ming and it remained as the capital of the Ming Dynasty until 1412 when the Yongle emperor relocated the capital to Beijing. It is believed that Nanjing was the largest city in the world from 1358 to 1425, with a population of 48,000.\(^88\) Karmapa and his attendants must have been impressed by the size, bustling commerce and prosperity of the grand city of Nanjing.

According to the Biography of the Karmapa, on the 22nd of the first month of 1407, at the age of 24, Karmapa arrived in Nanjing. Emperor Yongle came out from his palace to receive the Karmapa. At the meeting, the Yongle emperor stood up and served tea both to the Karmapa and to his attendants.\(^89\) The event of the Karmapa’s arrival in the capital is also recorded in Chinese sources of the *Ming shi lu*: “Master Halima arrived in Nanjing and was welcomed in the Fengtian Palace” (上师哈立麻至京, 入见上御奉天殿)\(^90\)

At the first meeting with the Yongle emperor in Nanjing, the Karmapa offered a statue of the Buddha to the emperor and in return Karmapa was given the Golden Wheel of Dharma (Tib: chos kyi ‘khor lo; Chi: fa lun 法轮), which represents the teachings of Buddha. The two exchanged white scarves to greet each other.\(^91\) This historical meeting is also recorded in Chinese sources. The *Ming shi lu* states: “Master Halima dispatched envoys to present statues of the Buddha and so on.” (上师哈立麻遣人献佛像等)\(^92\) The exchanging of gifts between the two may have been dictated by tradition as established during Yuan, when emperor Kublai Khan and


\(^{89}\) Pawo Tsuglag Trengwa, *Mkhas pa’i dga’ ston*, p. 510.

\(^{90}\) Gu Zucheng et al., eds, *Collection of Tibetan Historical Documents from Ming Shi lu*, p.130.

\(^{91}\) Pawo Tsuglag Trengwa, *Mkhas pa’i dga’ ston*, p. 510.

\(^{92}\) Gu Zucheng et al., eds, *Collection of Tibetan Historical Documents from Ming shi lu*, p. 125.
the Tibetan lama Phagpa met. The offering of the Dharma Wheel by the Ming emperor to the Tibetan lama is a political gesture on the part of the Yongle emperor confirming the spiritual supremacy of the Karmapa. Religious hierarchs had no temporal power in Tibet at this time. Official relations between Tibetan secular rulers and the emperors of the Ming dynasty were inconsistent. Therefore, often it was through the leverage of religious hierarchs that emperors sought to exert influence in Tibet. This meeting and the exchanges marked the establishment of such a liaison between the Ming court and Tibetan Buddhist hierarchs. To express his appreciation for the presence of the Karmapa at the court, the Yongle emperor issued a letter of gratitude to the Karmapa, as seen below:

Greeting from the Emperor of the Great Ming. Great Master Halima, you came here from long distance by overcoming many barriers and difficulties. My wish is fulfilled now. You offered horses as gifts. Your mind is immeasurable. I accepted your horse and I am delighted. This letter is sent as the repayment for your kindness and the expression of my heart. May all the wishes of mine be fulfilled with your blesses.

大明皇帝致意 法尊大乘尚师哈立麻 朕劳 尚师远来已慰所望 尚师又以马进厚意深至朕领受之不胜欣喜 用致书酬答以申朕意 尚师其亮之.  

93 Pawo Tsuglag Trengwa, Mkhas pa’i dga’ ston, p. 500.  
94 The original letter is stored at the Archive of the Tibetan Autonomous Region. A copy of the letter is printed in a picture album entitled Testimony of History (Chinese International Press, 2000), 81.
Karmapa and his attendants were lodged at Linggusi Monastery (Tib: ling gu si’i sde; Chi: ling gu si 灵谷寺), the most influential Buddhist Temple in Nanjing where a new residence was built for the Karmapa. This temple was designated as the state temple and many Buddhist masters from south China were invited there to perform Buddhist services before the arrival of the Karmapa. Important state ceremonial rituals were performed inside the Linggusi Monastery by Chinese monks during the reigns of both the Hongwu emperor and the Yongle emperor. Building a residence for the Tibetan delegate inside this highly respected state temple indicates the esteem in which the Tibetan hierarch was held by the Ming court and shows that Tibetan Buddhism was given a deference equal to that shown to Chinese Buddhism.

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Karmapa’s journey from Tshurphu Monastery to Nanjing city was long and arduous enough that robes and shoes might have worn out by the end of the trip. Indeed, it is recorded in the Biography of the Fifth Karmapa that on the morning of the second day after his arrival, Karmapa and his attendants each received a pair of shoes and robe, and each of the secular officials accompanying the Karmapa were given hats.\textsuperscript{96}

Seating for the Karmapa at the meeting with the Ming emperor was judiciously arranged to convey equality and mutuality of respect. The author of the Biography of the Fifth Karmapa was familiar with Chinese diplomatic protocol and ceremony. He states that according to Chinese custom, the Yongle emperor’s seat would be arranged in the inner centre of the hall. He notes that in China the left side is considered more important than the right. Significantly, the seat for the Karmapa was arranged on the left side, followed by the seats of the Three Principle Lamas (Tib: bla ma rnam gsum) from Tibet and the rest of the monks.\textsuperscript{97} The Three Principle Lamas were the State Preceptor Drongbu (Tib:’bron gyi bdeug), Master Karshiba Rinchen Pal (Tib: slob dpon dkar bshi bar rin chen dpal) and State Preceptor Lodro Rinchen (Tib: mkhan chen mgon blon pa). All the Biographies of the Fifth Karmapa observe that the meeting lasted for a long time; the Yongle emperor left for his Palace after greeting the entire audience, and the Tibetan monks and Chinese officials remained in the reception hall to continue the celebrations and dialogue.\textsuperscript{98} Since the biographies of the high lamas of Tibet tend to ignore secular matters, we have no way of knowing what happened after the emperor left the meeting or what words were exchanged between the Tibetan monks and Chinese officials.

The influence of Tibetan Buddhism in the Ming capital was vivid before the trip of the Karmapa. Tibetan sources show that there were fifty thousand monks holding flowers in their

\textsuperscript{96} Pawo Tsuglag Trenga, Mkhas pa’i dga’ ston, p. 500.
\textsuperscript{97} Ibid., 511.
\textsuperscript{98} Ibid., 510.
hands as they lined the two sides of the road leading toward the Palace, awaiting the arrival of Karmapa. The huge population of monks at the Ming court in the early period of the fifteenth century is also recorded in Chinese sources.99

The welcoming ceremony of the Karmapa as described in his biography was spectacular and unprecedented. On the morning of the 23rd, a huge parade was held at the palace with monks carrying offerings of sculptures in gold and turquoise, religious banners, umbrellas, prayer flags and spears. All the nine princes of the Yongle emperor attended this welcoming ceremony. There were a hundred thousand higher and lower officials from the civil service office, led by the three thousand provincial governors – all-standing along the way to welcome the Karmapa. There were more than one hundred thousand armed soldiers holding golden axes and spears, standing on the roadside along the way to the Palace. There were people holding four thousand banners made of gold, with moon and sun shapes, also waiting for the arrival of the Karmapa on the roadsides.100 This magnificent description of the welcoming ceremony held for the Karmapa at the Ming court suggests that Tibetan Buddhism and its clerics obtained full recognition as absolute spiritual authorities – not only from the royal family but also from all the officials of the court.

The Yongle emperor was delighted by the prompt arrival of the Karmapa. The emperor was so eager to meet the Karmapa that he even ignored court protocol according to which he must assume a commanding posture, as opposed to descending from the throne to meet his subjects or foreign delegates. It seems as though all these rules were suspended during the presence of the Karmapa at the Ming court. According to Tibetan sources, when Karmapa was

100 Pawo Tsuglag Trengwa, Mkhas pa’i dga’ ston, p. 511.
approaching the Palace, the Yongle emperor came out from the Palace to receive him.\(^{101}\) In order to emphasize the meeting with the Karmapa, similar ceremonies were held both outside and inside the Palace. Both were magnificent. The only difference between the two ceremonies was that for the one inside, the famed Palace Guard of the Ming - better known as Imperial Bodyguard (Chi: \textit{jin yi wei} 锦衣卫) – was assembled, as noted in Chinese sources. Tibetan sources also describe two hundred soldiers in attendance equipped with golden armours and shields.\(^{102}\)

It can be expected that Tibetan sources would paint a lavish picture of the reception given to the Karmapa. Understandably, for Tibetan readers, it would be important to underscore the honours bestowed on a Tibetan high lama by the Ming emperor. For the Tibetan Buddhist world it would be tactical to highlight the prominence of this hierarch from the Kargyupa sect in specific. At the same time, these descriptions convey the message to the people of Tibet that Ming China was very powerful militarily and materially prosperous.

Intricate details covering what happened between the Tibetan hierarch and Ming emperor are hard to come by in either Tibetan or Chinese sources. For this thesis, the most authentic and reliable source has been the Biography of the Fifth Karmapa written by Pawo Tsuglug Trengwa not very long after his death. It is now worthwhile to look more closely at some of the detail available, and to add tentative comments and discussion.

Where and how a particular meeting transpired between the Karmapa and the Yongle emperor was described in the Biography of the Fifth Karmapa in the following words:

\textit{To enter the meeting hall, one has to pass through five doors facing toward the south. The ceiling of the hall is made of gold. There are thirty-two Tibetan style pillars inside the hall and a door toward each of the four directions. The arrangement of the seats for the second meeting between the emperor and the Karmapa is the same as the previous one.}

\(^{101}\) Ibid., 510.  
\(^{102}\) Ibid., 511.
The Fifth Karmapa and his attendants sit on the left side and are guarded by fifty soldiers with golden armour and shields. The emperor is escorted by forty soldiers who are [similarly] equipped with golden armour and shields.\textsuperscript{103}

The Karmapa is the only Tibetan lama in Chinese records having had lunch with the Ming emperor. Dances and songs were performed to entertain the delegates after lunch, in much the same way as guests from afar would be entertained. Curiously, it does not seem to have been considered improper to entertain Buddhist monks with such secular activities. When these were concluded, the emperor and Karmapa left the premises through the central door of the hall. The emperor walked out the front door of the Palace to take leave of the Karmapa as the latter departed for Linggusi Monastery.\textsuperscript{104} Three Principle Lamas of Tibet and the rest of the monks departed through the left door of the hall.

It was definitely a great honour for any foreign guest to share in a banquet sponsored by the court of the Ming. The \textit{Ming shi lu} states that: “The court hosted a banquet for the envoys sent by the Karmapa” (賜上師哈立麻使臣宴)\textsuperscript{105} The food served at the banquet was beyond the expectation of the Tibetan monks, as it attempted to respect dietary differences between the two cultures. The inscription on the painting scroll recording the event shows that the food served was vegetarian, on the assumption that the Tibetans did not consume meat,\textsuperscript{106} This gesture again points to the esteem in which Tibetan Buddhism and particularly the Fifth Karmapa were held at the Ming court.

The Yongle emperor maintained close contact with the Karmapa, visiting him frequently and remaining involved with the whole process of rituals performed at the Linggusi Monastery. On the 24\textsuperscript{th}, for example, the Yongle emperor came to Linggusi Monastery to meet the Karmapa.

\textsuperscript{103} Ibid. 512.
\textsuperscript{104} Ibid. 514.
\textsuperscript{105} Gu Zucheng et al., eds, \textit{Collection of Tibetan Historical Documents from Ming shi lu}, vol.2, p. 127.
The Three Principle Lamas welcomed the emperor in front of the central door and the Karmapa received the emperor inside the hall.\textsuperscript{107} This meeting again was marked with lavish gifts presented to the Karmapa including three white horses with saddles, eighteen horses without saddle, seven tael of gold, thirty tael of silver, a hundred rolls of satin, thirty containers of tea and fifteen golden ritual daggers, two golden vases, five silver vases, five golden and silver plates.\textsuperscript{108}

The offering of lavish presents is also recorded in Chinese sources. According to the \textit{Ming shi lu}:

The court entertained Master Halima at the Huagai Palace and offered him a hundred tael of gold, thousand tael of silver, ten thousand in paper money, forty five \textit{caibi of biaol}, ritual instruments, \textit{yinru} (mattress), saddles, \textit{xiangguo}, rice and tea. All the attendants received white gold, \textit{caibi} and other offerings.

宴尚师哈立麻于华盖殿，赐金百两，银千两，钞二万贯，彩币四十五表里及法器，茵褥，鞍马，香果，米，茶等物，并赐其徒众白金，彩币等物有差.\textsuperscript{109}

Instead of paying tribute to the Ming court as neighbouring territories typically did, (for example, today’s Vietnam and Korea) the Tibetan mission was the one to receive great honours. This reversal suggests that the relation between the Karmapa and the Ming emperor was not like the relationship between a master and subject or that between a dominant entity and a subordinate one. Tibetan sources even note that the Yongle emperor came out of his Palace several times to receive the Karmapa and bowed before him during an empowerment.\textsuperscript{110} It would be rare, if not impossible, for Chinese sources to record that the emperor of the Ming came out of his Palace to greet and bestow gifts upon guests from alien lands normally thought of as barbaric. The Fifth Karmapa was the only one, among all the dignitaries from afar, to have received such treatment from the court, which can only be explained by the prevalence of Buddhism in the

\textsuperscript{107} Pawo Tsuglag Trengwa, \textit{Mkhas pa’i dga’ ston}, p. 511.
\textsuperscript{108} Ibid., 512.
\textsuperscript{109} Gu Zucheng et al., eds, \textit{Collection of Tibetan Historical Documents from Ming shi lu}, vol.2, p.130.
\textsuperscript{110} Pawo Tsuglag Trengwa, \textit{Mkhas pa’i dga’ ston}, pp. 510-512.
early period of the Ming, the charisma of the Tibetan Buddhist hierarchs and their prestige among the peoples of Eurasia.

The notion of presenting gifts and receiving gifts is defined in different ways by Chinese and Tibetan sources, according to their respective understandings of the nature of the relationship. Regarding the offering of lavish gifts by the Ming emperor, Henry Tsai writes that: “in his effort to draw neighbouring states to the Ming orbit so that he could bask in glory, the Yongle emperor was quite willing to pay a small price.” 111

The interactions between the Karmapa’s delegation and the Ming court were dense and replete throughout with gifts from the emperor. On the 25th, for example, the Karmapa, the Three Principle Lamas and the rest of the attendants gathered again in the Palace, at the invitation of the emperor. During the encounter, each of the Three Principle Lamas received three and half tael of silver, ritual instruments made of gold, silk banners and a plate. Among the attendant monks, the first level received one big tael of silver, six external silks and six internal silks. The middle level received three tael of silver, six rolls of satin. The lower level received a half tael of silver, and four rolls of silk. All the monks of the delegation received a white rosary, a robe and two pairs of bells and ritual daggers. 112 Silver was considered valuable and the amount of silver offered to the Karmapa and his attendants was huge. Later on the same day, the emperor revisited the Karmapa and presented him with a statue of the Thousand-Arms-Thousand-Eyes Buddha (Tibet: phyag stong spyan stong; Chi: qian shou qian yan fo 千手千眼佛) and various ritual implements made of silver and crystal. Yongle’s overwhelming generosity with precious gifts was preparatory to the grand ritual that the Karmapa would be performing.

111 Shin-Shan Henry Tsai, Perpetual Happiness: The Ming Emperor Yongle (University of Washington Press, 2001), 188.
112 Pawo Tsuglag Trengwa, Mkhas pa’i dga’ ston, p. 512.
The month following Karmapa’s arrival coincided with the beginning of the Chinese New Year. The New Year’s celebration ceremony again became the occasion for a meeting between the emperor and the Karmapa. As detailed in Tibetan sources, at dawn of the first day of the New Year 1408, the Karmapa and his attendants were invited to the imperial Palace. Although rules governing entry into the Palace were very strict, the Karmapa and his attendants entered the Palace from the eastern door and then waited for the emperor at the pavilion. The Yongle emperor came out and greeted the Karmapa there. Later, the Tibetan delegation was witness to the prostration of five hundred thousand officials in front of the Palace in greeting to the emperor. The fact that the Tibetan hierarch was accompanying the emperor in front of the parade of court officials shows the elevated status that he enjoyed on that very public occasion.

The early Ming dynasty was so powerful that all the neighbouring countries came to pay tribute. The kinds of tribute paid by the foreign states can be seen from Tibetan records covering the period of the Karmapa’s visit. Among tributes brought to the emperor were exotic tigers, rhinoceroses, snow leopards and hundreds of elephants. The entire guard of honour was in attendance. There was an exhibition of one hundred thousand soldiers wearing armour and holding spears. A series of traditional Chinese dances and songs was led by two hundred main dancers. These examples show the pomp and splendour involved.

Tibetan sources suggest that New Year’s entertainments were organized at least partly for the pleasure of the Karmapa. Pawo describes that the Karmapa passed through the crowds, enjoying the artistic performances before arriving inside the Palace to meet the emperor. The attendants of the Karmapa were permitted a single prostration before the emperor while others

113 Ibid., 512.
114 Ibid., 512.
had to perform this gesture of respect several times - again as a sign of exceptional privilege.\textsuperscript{115} At the moment of Karmapa’s departure from the Palace, the Yongle emperor accompanied him to the outside of the Palace and all the princes of the royal family off the Karmapa to his residence at the Linggusi Monastery.

The pinnacle of activities occurring during this time was of course the performance of the Universal Salvation Ritual which allegedly was the main purpose for inviting the Karmapa to the Ming court. According to the Biography of the Fifth Karmapa, from the first day of the second month of the year 1408, the Karmapa started to perform the ritual of the Universal Salvation.

This ritual begins with the construction of a sand \textit{Mandala} (Tib: dkyil ‘khor; Chi: \textit{tan cheng} 坛城), the chanting of secret scriptures of sutra and the evocation of all the tutelary deities.\textsuperscript{116} In order to convey a sense of how this particular ritual unfolded, it is worth quoting the inscription that appears in several languages on the scroll painting produced by the royal house of the Ming:

\begin{quote}
The Emperor of the Great Ming welcomed the Tathagata (the Karmapa), the Great and Precious Dharma King, Great Goodness, Self-Abiding Buddha, Helima, inviting him to take command of all the monks in the empire and to proceed to Linggusi Monastery to conduct the mass of universal salvation, in honour of the late imperial father, the Emperor Taizu, and the late imperial mother, the Empress Xiaoci, and for the universal salvation of all the spirits of the dead under Heaven. From the fifth day of the second month of the fifth year of the Yongle emperor (1407), when preparation began, there were propitious five-coloured clouds, which floated up quickly and coalesced to form a wish-granting gem. Then a relic was seen glowing at the top of the pagoda, like a newly risen bright moon or flowing, glistening water. And two golden rays were also seen.\textsuperscript{117}
\end{quote}

It is interesting to learn from Tibetan sources that during the ritual process, the Karmapa respected and followed the Chinese custom of burning paper cards with the names of the deceased parents of Yongle emperor. Then, according to Tibetan Buddhist tradition, a \textit{Mandala}

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{115} Ibid., 512.
\textsuperscript{116} Danma Jamyang Tshultrim, \textit{The Biography of the Fifth Karmapa}, p. 129; Pawo Tsuglag Trengwa, \textit{Mkhas pa’i dga’ ston}, p. 513.
\textsuperscript{117} Patricia Berger, “Miracles in Nanjing: An Imperial Record of the Fifth Karmapa’s Visit to the Chinese Capital,” p. 162.
\end{footnotesize}
was constructed out of coloured sand, the pattern to be dismantled at the end of the ritual.
Accompanied by thousands of monks, beautifully decorated elephants carried the bagloads of used sand to the ocean, where the grains of sand were dispersed on the water. Connecting the scroll painting with earlier Chinese portrayals of portentous events, Patricia Berger highlights its mixture of Buddhist and indigenous Chinese sign as multivalent, speaking simultaneously to the spiritual power of the Fifth Karmapa, the efficacy of his rituals and the sacredness of Linggusi Monastery.

It is recorded in the Tibetan sources that the Yongle emperor participated in the main ritual performed at the Linggusi Monastery and he offered generous donations to all the lamas and monks who assisted the rituals. This is also confirmed in the Ming shi lu:

Master Halima led the rest of the monks and performed the ritual of the Universal Salvation for the Emperor Taizu and the Empress Gao Huanghou. After finishing the ritual, Master Halima is given two hundred tael of gold, two thousand paper money, two hundreds of caibi biaoli and nine horses. All the State Preceptors including Master Hashi Looga are given two hundred tael of silver and two hundred ding of paper money respectively. The rest of the attendants are also given different presents.

The image below shows (Figure 4) Karmapa on a high throne, with the emperor seated at a lower level, as any disciple would be, during the performance of sacred rituals at the Linggusi Monastery temple. During the ritual performance itself, miracles are said to have occurred.

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Figure 4. Artist unknown, the Portrait of the Fifth Karmapa Deshin Shegpa. Hanging Scroll. The origin is formally kept at the Tambaran Gallery, New York City.

Details on the ritual and the occurrence of miracles are recorded in the Karmapa’s biography, as well as in the scroll-paintings depicting the forty-nine days of ritual performance. This portrait of the Karmapa that also records the Karmapa’s visit to Nanjing, offers an instructive comparison to the Tshurphu Monastery scroll. It depicts the Karmapa as a large figure enthroned in a grove before Linggusi Monastery where the temple building and pagoda emit rays of multi-coloured light. The Karmapa holds the vajra and bell, symbols of the Adi-Buddha Vajrasattva and of the union of wisdom and compassion. Whereas a much smaller Yongle emperor sits to the right wearing his golden-yellow dragon robes and encircled by an aureole. The Karmapa’s acolyte is offering a consecration jar to the emperor, pouring pure water imbued with the essences of medicine, grain, and gem over an image reflected in a mirror of the emperor’s head. As it is recorded in the biography of the Karmapa, the sky was filled with wondrous visions such as rays of light, rains of followers, congregations of arhite (Chi: luo han

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119 Pawo Tsuglag Trengwa, Mkhas pa’i dga’ ston, p. 513.
In her paper “Miracle in Nanking: An Imperial Record of the Fifth Karmapa’s visit to the Chinese Capital,” Berger interprets the ritual event and attendant miracle as part of the Yongle emperor’s drive to re-establish the link between China and Tibet forged by the Mongols during the preceding Yuan dynasty and to sanctify his irregular assumption of the throne.

It was the Yongle emperor who sent the court painters to paint the ritual performance of the Karmapa. They painted the process of the ritual in forty-nine separate scenes with inscriptions in Chinese, Arabic, Uighur, Tibetan and Mongolian. According to the biography of the Karmapa, the auspicious signs depicted in the scrolls were witnessed by the emperor and his officials as well. The miracles emanated from the Linggusi Monastery pagoda, the monastic hall where the Karmapa rested, the burial mound of the imperial couple and the roof of the imperial Palace. One can imagine the heightened atmosphere in which these rituals took place and the special meaning they had for the emperor of the Ming, from both a spiritual and a strategic perspective. The whole idea of constructing such a scroll painting and the inclusion of the miraculous manifestations show that the Yongle emperor was intent on portraying a virtuous and positive image of himself as a ruler graced with the signs of Heaven's favour. For this, Berger pointed out that the purpose of miracles was to establish the primacy of the Karmapa and simultaneously to proclaim that the emperor and his parents were doubly legitimate as virtuous monarchs recognized by a Confucian Heaven and Chakravartin rulers whose rule foretold a new Buddhist epoch.

120 Ibid., 514.
121 Patricia Berger, “Miracle in Nanking: An Imperial Record of the Fifth Karmapa’s visit to the Chinese Capital,” pp. 145-152
122 Ibid., 152.
123 Ibid., 159.
After completing his mission in Nanking, the Fifth Karmapa travelled to Mongolia and then to Yunnan and Minyag (Tib: mi nyag; Chi: *xi xia* 西夏), bestowing initiations and converting many thousands of people to Tibetan Buddhism.

As the most sacred place of Buddhism in China, Mount Wutaishan (Tib: ro bo rtse lnga; Chi: *wu tai shan* 五台山) played an important role in the development of Tibetan Buddhism in Ming China. Karmapa went to Mount Wutai to perform rituals for the Ming deceased parents of the Yongle emperor and created an affiliation of the Buddhist site with the Karmapa sect. The author of the *Feast of the Scholar*, indicates that in the archive of the Fifth Karmapa, he saw the document of appointment of the abbot of the Mount Wutai Buddhist monastery in the archive of the Karmapa while he had been looking for the materials for his writings of the biography of the Fifth Karmapa.\(^{124}\) The mountain serves as a spiritual link between the Central Plain and Inner Asia. Therefore, the Karmapa’s visit to Mount Wutai also had meaningful overtones for Ming diplomacy.

The Karmapa made one more visit to the famous Mount Wutai on his way to Tibet. He spent a great deal of time on his way to Tibet giving teachings to his disciples in different regions of the west. He also sought to pacify the peoples of the Sino-Tibetan frontier, bringing stability to the area, in compliance with the wishes of the Ming emperor. I will discuss the Karmapa’s activities in the borderlands in the following section where I focus more on the political implications of the trip.

Aside from the various rituals performed at the Linggusi Monastery and the court, there also were cultural exchanges that took place. For example, on occasions when the emperor joined chanting ceremonies headed by the Karmapa, Tibetan ritual texts were translated into

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Chinese for his benefit. According to the records from the *Feast of the Scholar*, before starting
the teachings, the fundamental texts on the Six Yogas of Nāropa (Tib: na ro chos drug; Chi: na
ruo liu jing 那若六经) were translated into Chinese and offered to the emperor when he attended
the teaching session.\(^\text{125}\) In order to receive the Buddhist teachings from the monks of the
northwest and to facilitate the project of building a close relationship with the regions in the west,
the Ming court had founded the College of Translators (Chi: *si yi guan* 司译馆) and the College
of Interpreter (Chi: *hui tong guan* 会同馆). These institutions trained translators and interpreters
in the wide variety of languages spoken by envoys to the court. The messages, edicts and
invitation letters carried by the envoys to and from Tibet also were translated and went through
this office, including those addressed to the Fifth Karmapa. Indeed, according to an entry in the
*Ming shi lu*: “The high officials from Wusizang [Tibet]) were hosted with a banquet at the
College of Interpreter.” (赐西番乌思藏头目阿奴等宴于会同馆)\(^\text{126}\)

According to Karmapa’s biography, the Yongle emperor was a pious believer in Tibetan
Buddhism. Shortly after the welcoming ceremony, the Karmapa bestowed upon him the
initiations of *Red Avalokiteshwara* (Tib: spyan ras gzigs; Chi: *guan yin fo* 观音佛) and *Hevajra*
(Tib: dgyes pa rdo rje; Chi: *jin gang fo* 金刚佛).\(^\text{127}\) The rituals were accompanied by a series of
miracles which impressed the Yongle emperor so much that he referred to the Karmapa as the
Buddha Tathagata (Tib: bde bzhin gshegs pa; Chi: *ru lai fo* 如来佛). As recorded in Tibetan
sources, the Yongle emperor saw a black crown manifest above the head of the Karmapa; after

\(^{125}\) Pawo Tsuglag Trengwa, *Mkhas pa’i dga’ ston*, p. 513.

\(^{126}\) Gu Zucheng et al., eds, *Collection of Tibetan Historical Documents from Ming shi lu*, vol. 2, p.121.

this experience he commissioned the making of a replica and presented it to the Karmapa. This reportedly is the source of the Black Crown, which to this day symbolizes the Karma Kagyupa lineage. Whoever possesses the black crown possesses absolute authority over the sect. There is no mention, however, of the black hat or crown in the Ming shi lu or any other sources from Ming China. Whether the accounts of the black crown are true or not, the fact remains that it became the symbol of authority and the source of legitimization for the Karmapa lineage.

A tradition of showing the Black Crown in public when the Karmapa is giving audience has been preserved to this day, from the time of Karmapa’s visit to Ming China. It was customary at the time to publically exhibit all the gifts that had been received in the centre of the city of Lhasa, before storing them at the Potala Palace, which was then the residence of the Fifth Karmapa. This indicates that recognition and favours from the Ming emperor also served a purpose for Tibetan Buddhist hierarchs at the time.

The gifts from the Yongle emperor continued even after the Karmapa left Ming China. For example, porcelains and paintings were specially designed for the lifestyle, local habits and climatic conditions of Tibet. To prevent the porcelain from being broken easily in transit or through mishandling, the cups and vases destined to be gifts for the Tibetan hierarch were fashioned in a sturdier way than usual. Banners received from the Ming emperor were hung at the doors of the temples and inside the halls of the Palace. These details indicate that it was viewed as an honour to be receiving a diverse range of precious gifts from the mighty Ming emperor, as compensation for the spiritual guidance of lamas. Clearly, this exchange played a role in making the Tibetan hierarchs, including the Karmapa, more powerful and influential at the time. The stature thus achieved by the Karmapa lineage is reflected in the honourable titles

129 Pawo Tsuglag Trengwa, Mkhas pa’i dga’ ston, pp. 515-516.
conferred by the emperor Yongle after the grand ritual performed at the Linggusi Monastery. As recorded in the *Ming shi lu* titles such as:

Buddha of Great Compassion in the West, Leader of the Buddhist Faith and *Tathagata*, the Great Treasure Prince of Dharma, [were conferred] on Master Halima, [with] seal, certificate, silver and gold.

封尚师哈立麻为万行具足十方最胜圆觉妙智慧善应佑国演教如来
大宝法王天下自在佛，领天下释教；赐印，诰及金银. 130

![Seal of the Tathagath, Great Treasure Princes of Dharma](https://www.chad.net)

Figure 5. Seal of the *Tathagath*, Great Treasure Princes of Dharma (white jade seal with a dragon knob, 8.3 cm high, each side 12.8 cm) is preserved in Norbu Lingkha, Lhasa.

There was precedence for the bestowing of honourable titles on Tibetan lamas before the Ming. Phagpa, the head of the Sakya sect received similar titles from the Yuan emperor Kublai Khan. As observed in the Biography of the Karmapa, the Yongle emperor’s intention in conferring titles was to designate the Karmapa as the supreme spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism, just as the Yuan emperor had done with the Tibetan Lama Phagpa before him. 131

130 Gu Zucheng et al., eds, *Collection of Tibetan Historical Documents from Ming shi lu*, vol.2, p. 132.
It is interesting to note that in the Ming records and other Chinese sources, the Fifth Karmapa is often referred to as Halima, Halimapa, and Galima and so forth (哈立麻, 哈立麻巴, 哈立玛, 葛立玛 and 葛哩麻.) These names are hardly ever seen in Tibetan sources and their use has never been investigated. They are simply taken by Chinese historians to be the translation of the Tibetan word Karmapa (Chi: ga ma ba 噶玛巴) and, as a result, their significance in relation to peoples of Islamic background inhabiting Central Asia, including court officials and military generals has never been brought out.

Etymologically, the term Halima is derived from the Arabic word Ulamāʾ and its literary meaning is priest or great scholar. Why would the Karmapa be given a name with Arabic origin? The answer may be found in the influence of the Karmapa lineage among the peoples of Central Asia, the various religious traditions supported by the Ming court and the fact that the borders in the southwest and northwest of the country were guarded by Muslim generals at the time.

The lineage of the Karmapa was well known in Central Asia where Buddhists and Muslims mixed. It is very possible that titles and names were used interchangeably between peoples of different faiths. Tibetan sources note that most of the previous Karmapas had visited Central Asia and that there were many followers of Tibetan Buddhism in the area. One possibility therefore is that the Karmapa was called Ulamāʾ by the people of Inner Asia and those Mongols who had been converted to Islam.

Ming historical records and Tibetan sources both demonstrate the importance of the Karmapa for the people of Inner Asia in general, but also of senior clerics, eunuchs and military officials of Muslim origin at the Ming court. Viewed from that perspective, it is also possible that the court accepted such a designation in deference to the importance of these Muslim elites.

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132 Ibid., 455-530.
From the very beginning of the dynasty, the Ming were in close contact with Islam. The Hongwu emperor ordered the building of several mosques in southern China. He had over 10 Muslim generals in his military. Among them was Lan Yu, who in 1388 led a strong imperial Ming army beyond the Great Wall to win a decisive victory over the Mongols in Mongolia. Another general Mu Ying survived the massacre of the Hongwu emperor and guarded Yunnan, a province near Vietnam, until the end of the reign of the Yongle emperor. Coincidentally, Yunnan is an important pilgrimage site for Tibetan Buddhists. The Fifth Karmapa visited the region and, given that he was known to be the spiritual mentor of the Ming emperor, the officials of Yunnan province might have met with him on that occasion.

Among many indications that the Karmapa was considered to be an important spiritual leader by the peoples of Inner Asia was the multilingual text that accompanied the scroll paintings commissioned by the Ming court. The hand-scroll painting, as a matter of fact, functioned as the medium through which the messages of the imperial court could be disseminated to the periphery.

Also of interest in this connection is the fact that the Yongle emperor’s mother, Empress Ma, though a pious Buddhist, could trace her family’s genealogy to Islamic ancestors from tenth century China. Moreover, her husband Zhu Yuanzhang was originally a member of a rebel group that had a Muslim leader named Guo Zhixin. The Emperor built mosques in Nanjing, Yunnan, Guangdong and Fujian. The Hongwu emperor also rebuilt Jinjue Mosque in Nanjing and a large number of Muslims moved to Nanjing during his rule. Similarly, the Yongle emperor called for the construction and repair of Islamic mosques during his reign. Two mosques were

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133 Tan Ta Sen and Dasheng Chen, Cheng Ho and Islam in Southeast Asia (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2009), 170; Shih-shan Henry Tsai, The Eunuchs in the Ming Dynasty (Suny Press, 1996), 14.
134 Tan Ta Sen and Dasheng Chen, Cheng Ho and Islam in Southeast Asia (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2009), 170.
built by him, one in Nanjing and the other in Xi’an and they still stand today. The early era of Ming saw Nanjing become an important center of Islamic study.

Another example of interest is Zheng He, who was a eunuch of Muslim origin who served the Yongle emperor. He later converted to Buddhism and was known as Sanbao (Chi: san bao 三宝), meaning ‘Three Jewels’ in Tibetan. He was born in 1371 to a Muslim family in Yunnan province, which was missionary territory for the Karmapa sect. When he was seven years old, Zheng He was captured by the Ming Muslim troops and made a eunuch. He was sent to the court of the Yongle emperor, then the Prince of Yan, and after the Prince of Yan became the emperor of the Ming, Zheng He remained as his trusted advisor. (Chi: tai jian 太監) and Chief Envoy (Chi: zheng shi 正使). It is very possible that Zheng He met the Karmapa at the Ming court, as well as during his visit to Tibet in 1413. The Ming she lu makes a brief mention that: “The eunuch official Sanbao and other envoys visited Wusizang (Chi: wu si zang 乌思藏) and returned.” (中官杨三宝等使乌思藏等处还) Zheng He also went by the Tibetan name Sonam Tashi (Chi: suo nan zha xi 索南扎西), reflecting his connection with Tibetan Buddhism. He is known to have commissioned ten sets of the Tripitaka Sutra printed at his own expense - one copy of which was printed at the Linggusi Monastery in the fifth reign of the Yongle emperor. A record confirming these points can be found in the Preface to the Rules of Liberation in Upasaka, Vol. 7, which was printed in the early period of the Ming Dynasty. It states:

Zheng He was a eunuch of the Ming imperial court. He believed in Buddhism. His religious name was Sonam Tashi, which means auspicious fortune. Fortunately, he lived in the prosperous period of the Ming Dynasty and came to the Emperor’s favours. He gave alms for the printing of Tripitaka Sutra so the sutra would be chanted widely.

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137 Deng Zhicheng, Gu Dong Suo Ji (Account on the Antique), (China Bookstore, 1991), 593.
Considering the popularity of Tibetan Buddhism at the Ming court and the Karmapa’s wide range of personal contacts with different peoples, both at the court and on the frontiers, it is reasonable to assume that the name Halima (Great Scholar) was used for the Fifth Karmapa to express the respect of the Muslim scholars and officials of the court.

In addition to the ritual performances and teaching of Tibetan Buddhism in China, the Karmapa and his attendants witnessed the richness of Chinese culture and particularly the technology of printing and textiles. During his stay in China, the Karmapa was appointed by the Yongle emperor as the chief editor of the Nanking version of the Kangyur in the Tibetan language.\footnote{Pawo Tsuglag Trengwa, \textit{Mkhas pa’i dga’ston}, p. 514.} Tibetan texts on Buddhist Canon were block printed in China for the first time and distributed for the major Tibetan monasteries as a gift from the Ming emperor. A Tibetan language school sponsored by the court was also established in the Ming capital and became the centre where members of the royal family and the eunuchs could study the Tibetan language and listen to Buddhist teachings.\footnote{Ibid., 520.}

Following in the footsteps of the two previous Karmapas, the Fifth Karmapa subsequently made a pilgrimage to the famous mountain Wutai Shan in Central China and from there he returned to Tibet via Yunnan province. In the \textit{Ming shi lu}, it is recorded that: “The Great Precious King of Dharma returned to Tibet. He is given white gold, caibi, statues of the Buddha and escorted by eunuch official.” (如来大宝法王哈立麻辞归。赐白金，彩币，佛像等物，仍谴中官护送)\footnote{Gu Zucheng et al., eds, \textit{Collection of Tibetan Historical Documents from Ming shi lu}, vol. 2, p. 137.}

In 1412, the Fifth Karmapa arrived at his home monastery Tshurphu, laden with the enormous number of gifts received in Ming China. After his return, he received lavish gifts three
more times from the Yongle emperor, as well as more than seven missions to Tibet by the Ming court between 1408 and 1412. The Fifth Karmapa also sent missions to the Ming court almost every year up to his death. Reportedly, he had promised the Yongle emperor that he would visit China again but this never happened as he died of smallpox in 1415, at the age of thirty-one.

The benefits resulting from the Karmapa’s trip – both for his own monastery and for the Karmapa sect – were considerable. Right after his return, for example, the Karmapa started to reconstruct and enlarge his monastery, which had been damaged by an earthquake. It is also recorded in his biography that Karmapa visited many monasteries in Tibet and donated large amounts of money and materials to almost all the monasteries in Central Tibet. Just how much was achieved with this visit is reflected in a letter from Tsongkhapa to the Karmapa after the visit. In the letter Tsongkhapa wrote:

You taught the people both in the land of snow and China in order for them to obtain wisdom and realization. Your reputation now prevails in the realm of Central Plain and I am pleased by hearing that you returned home soundly eventually.\(^{141}\)

Just as Ming imperial policy toward Tibetan Buddhism affected the rise of the Karmapa sect, so too it affected the eventual decline. The visit to the Ming court had greatly enriched Karmapa’s economic resources. The Karma Kagyupa had become an influential sect and remained strong in Central Tibet up until the ascendancy of the Gelugpa sect in the seventeenth century. The deaths of the Karmapa and the Yongle emperor, the collapse of the personal relationship between the Karmapa sect and the Ming court, and the emergence of a defensive policy in the late Ming period all combined to hasten a loss of privilege, first in Tibet and later in China.

\(^{141}\) Chahar Geshes Losang Tshultrim, *The Biography of Tsongkhapa*, p. 271.
Gelugpa, the newly emergent school of Tibetan Buddhism surpassed the Kagyupa sect to become the strongest religious force in Tibet, first with the support of the local secular heads, and later the Mongol tribal heads. The Gelugpa eventually seized both political and religious power and ruled Tibet until the middle of the twentieth century.
Chapter Four
The Impacts and Significance of the Trip

Ritual performance was the main task of the Karmapa, and rituals were considered important in the definition and operation of traditional Chinese polities. Many theorists since Durkheim have viewed rituals and rites as a form of social control. I think the ritual performed by the Karmapa was instrumental, intended as it was to serve political interests that went beyond the immediate or more overtly expressed purpose.

In his invitation letter, the Yongle emperor stated that his parents practiced Buddhism and that he wanted the Fifth Karmapa to come to China as soon as possible to bring the benefits of Tibetan Buddhist teachings to the people of China. However, there is a contradiction between what the Yongle emperor mentions in his letter and what was actually happening at the time in his realm.

Yongle would spend most of his early years suppressing rumours, stopping bandits, and healing the wounds of the land scarred by rebellion. It was not long before the Fifth Karmapa’s arrival to the court that the Yongle emperor sought to consolidate his power through brutal means. To deal with anyone suspected of plotting against him or associating with conspirators, the Yongle emperor skinned alive, slowly sliced, boiled or fried his political enemies to death, claiming it was Heaven’s will. His legitimacy was being contested because he had usurped the power of the emperorship from his nephew Jianwen (1377-1402). Because of his ruthless policy toward his opponents and the massacre that took place in Nanking, people perceived the Yongle emperor as the ‘prince of devils’ and not a legitimate and filial son of the deceased the Hongwu emperor.
Chinese and Tibetan sources reveal the Yongle emperor’s and his father’s attitudes towards religion and Tibetan Buddhism as being positive and indeed useful. The *Ming shi* states:

When the Hongwu emperor took power from Emperor Shundi (1320-370) of the Yuan Dynasty, he said that the country was under his control and should be ruled in accordance with the teachings of Confucius ……there are no lay people who do not believe in supernatural powers and there are no people who are not fearful of heaven, therefore, why do we not use this for the sake of controlling the state by the kingship.\(^{142}\)

Emperor Hongwu further declares:

The teaching of the three religions has prevailed since the era of Han to the present time, and all the people of China are aware of this fact. Among the three religions, Confucianism can help the Emperor create legal system to be trusted for everlasting time, whereas Buddhism helps the ruler of the kingdom with its secret ways and it contains endless benefits and brings auspicious deeds for the country. I often hear that it is difficult for two religious teachings to be co-existing and no saint has two hearts. These religions are different in form, but they promote good and are based on the same principle. Although these three religions contain the elements which make people foolish, all three religions are indispensable for the Kingdom.\(^{143}\)

Complementing that picture, the importance of high-ranking Tibetan lamas in China is noted in the *Ming shi* as follows:

In the beginning of the Ming dynasty, Emperor Zhu Yuanzhang examined the war between Tibet (Chi: *tu fan* 吐蕃) and the Tang Dynasty determining how to protect the kingdom from any invasion. He found that the only way of settling disputes and clearing problems was to invite Tibetan monks, as only the monks had the power to change primitive customs and prevent trouble.”\(^{144}\)

A similar picture of understandings between the Ming emperor and high-ranking Tibetan monks can be found in Tibetan historical documents. As noted previously, it is unfortunate that relevant, confirming information that might have been contained in the letter of invitation has been lost or censored from the Ming records. The Confucian scholars compiling those records

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might have had reasons not to highlight the influence of Tibetan Buddhism on the politics of the Ming.\textsuperscript{145} It also is possible that the interpretation in \textit{Ming shi} of the early Ming policy toward Tibet may have been influenced by the developing state of affairs in the Qing-Tibetan relation during the early eighteenth century.

To be sure, some of the intentions behind the Yongle emperor’s invitation to the Karmapa must have been consistent with rumours prevailing at the time. According to the \textit{Ming shi lu}, it was widely held that auspicious portents were frequent occurrences during the Yongle reign, and that the courtiers sought to flatter the emperor with exaggerated interpretations. Tim Brook writes:

\begin{quote}
As Yongle had come to the throne by usurping it from his nephew who mysteriously died in palace fire, people had good reason to suspect that Heaven was chastising the man. Not anyone dared say that, for it would be high treason to suggest that the emperor should not be the emperor. ”\textsuperscript{146}
\end{quote}

Not content with flattery, the emperor encouraged a search by spiritual leaders within China for mysterious signs. In order to make himself the legitimate successor to his father, the Yongle emperor asserted that his nephew, Jianwen, forfeited the mandate of the heaven by misruling the realm. Consequently, the Yongle emperor ordered the court to hold regular rituals that manifested his political authority and reaffirmed his role as the son of the Heaven. All efforts were directed to seeking heavenly help from within the Chinese cults. When these appeared to fail, the Yongle emperor turned his eye to Tibetan Buddhism.\textsuperscript{147} Thus, in his letter to the Fifth Karmapa, Emperor Yongle said that when he was in the north leading the Ming soldiers

\begin{footnotes}
\item[146] Timothy Brook, \textit{The Trouble Empire: China in the Yuan and Ming Dynasty} (Harvard University Press, 2010), 9.
\item[147] The capital of the Ming dynasty was originally located in Nanjing in the south. However, Yongle emperor moved it to Beijing in 1410, just after the departure of the Karmapa from China. This was probably a strategic move, presumably to get rid of the movement of the White Lotus Cult which still had strong influence in the South and also in small measure to repress the rebellion and resistance in the newly conquered territories in the North.
\end{footnotes}
he heard about the good repute of the Fifth Karmapa and thought to meet him, as he needed Karmapa’s help to restore peace and stability in the country.

The Yongle emperor was extremely sensitive to being branded a usurper and disloyal son of the previous emperor. Huang Zicheng, an official who was loyal to Jianwen, reportedly said to the Yongle emperor: “If Your Highness deserved my service, you’d have to apply the cardinal principle of ruling the world. Since Your Highness has violated such cardinal principle, I am afraid the future generation will learn from you.” Since the first Ming emperor respected Buddhism, Emperor Yongle took great pains not only to bolster an appearance of legitimacy to his rule but also to stress his own filial ties to Taizu and Empress Ma. At the same time, various stories originating during and after Emperor Yongle’s reign continued to cast doubt on his purported parentage – that is, up until the time of the Karmapa’s visit to China. According to one version of Chinese history, the Yongle emperor was a son of the last Mongol emperor of the Yuan dynasty; other versions advance the more likely idea that he was the son of Taizu and a consort of lesser rank than Empress Ma.

The internal political situation of the Ming court was in such turmoil that it is entirely conceivable that the Yongle emperor would have had ulterior motives in inviting a Buddhist Lama revered by both Mongol and China. He had usurped the position of emperor and needed confirmation of a heavenly mandate to rule. Therefore, although he stated in his letter that China needed the Karmapa for his Buddhist teachings, the visit also could be a way of confirming his own right to succession, while serving as an instrument for politically stabilizing the realm. The various religious rituals to be performed – including the Universal Salvation Ritual - were

148 Qian Shisheng, Huang Ming biaozhong ji (Loyalty Roll of the Imperial Ming) (Seventeenth century edition), s.v “Huang Zicheng,” 17a.
149 Mao Peiqi, Yongle Dadi-Zhudi (Beijing: University of Renmin Press, 1998), 123.
designed to prove that the Yongle emperor was the legitimate son of the Hongwu emperor and to obtain the favour of Heaven.

The Yongle emperor also tried to obtain supernatural confirmation to justify the violence he had committed. Despite the many moral homilies he gave, he was constantly worried about conspiracies against him. At this critical time, the Fifth Karmapa appeared to be the perfect individual to help the Yongle emperor get rid of conspiracies and restore moral standards to the court.

It had long been a tradition in Eurasia to seize political power and maintain it by capitalizing on eminent and charismatic figures. Religious figures helped secular leaders to either contain or expand boundaries and control large segments of population with different cultural and religious backgrounds. It is a historical fact that the Yongle emperor needed to gain some degree of legitimacy with the assistance of someone within the court or others beyond the sphere of the Ming court who were believed to have supernatural powers. The Yongle emperor sought the legitimization first from his own officials who were essential for transmission of power. Without their support he could not have imposed his leadership on the large group who were Buddhist devotees. Most famous among them were the eunuchs. Historical records both in Tibetan and Chinese tell us that eunuchs paid great respect to the Tibetan hierarchs. Having opportunities to be close to monks, eunuchs naturally also treated the Fifth Karmapa as their religious tutor and took Buddhist vows with him. The rituals of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism

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150 Pi-ching Hsu, “Tang Sair and Yongle: Contest Images of Rebel Woman and a Monarch in Ming-Qing Narrative,” Ming Studies 56 (Number 2007): 1-6.
were equally mysterious and attractive to the eunuchs. According to *Ming shi lu*, “The Yongle emperor constantly sought supernatural confirmation of his legitimacy.”

At the time of his visit to China, the Fifth Karmapa was revered and held in highest repute in the territories of the Central Kingdom and especially in the North, the homeland of the Mongols. From the invitation letter and other sources, we can see that Chinese ruling figures, including the emperors of early Ming China, were well aware of both the positive and negative impacts Buddhism could have on politics and the lives of ordinary people. I have argued, however, that neither Chinese nor overseas scholars have given adequate attention to the role played by the Fifth Karmapa in early Ming state-building and the Yongle emperor’s legitimization.

Tibetan Buddhist literature portrays the Yongle emperor as a pious Buddhist King, a grand patron of Tibetan Buddhism; like other emperors of the Yuan and Qing, he is considered to be the embodiment of the Buddha Manjushri. Since a need for spreading the dharma was explicitly mentioned in the invitation letter, the visit of the Karmapa has been perceived as a religious mission to reconstruct the Priest-Patron Relation (Tib: mchod yon sbyin bdg; Chi: *gong shi guan xi* 供施关系) of earlier times.

To better understand the nature of the invitation and the trip itself, it is helpful to review the historical reality of the Sino-Tibetan relation in the early fifteenth century. Dawa Norbu states that the Ming Dynasty, preoccupied with the Mongol threat to the north, could not spare additional armed forces to enforce or back up its claim of sovereignty over Tibet. Instead it relied on “Confucian instruments of tribute relations,” – acts of diplomacy whereby unlimited numbers of titles and gifts were given to Tibetan lamas. In this respect, Dawa argues that Tibet

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was not treated differently than any of the other surrounding states that paid tribute to Ming China. Elliot Sperling introduces a different nuance:

The delicate relationship between the Ming and Tibet was the last time a united China had to deal with an independent Tibet. There was a potential for armed conflict at their borders, and the ultimate goal of Ming foreign policy with Tibet was not subjugation but avoidance of any kind of Tibetan threat.¹⁵⁴

Christian Klieger also argues that the Ming court's patronage of high Tibetan lamas was designed to help stabilize border regions and protect trade routes.¹⁵⁵ Shih Shan Henry Tsai wrote that “Tibet maintained a cordial relationship with China and exercised full control over its own affairs during the Ming.”¹⁵⁶ These scholars all agree that the Ming did not exercise political power over Tibet. They focus mainly on the political status of Tibet, frontiers and tributary missions, rather than on the role that Tibetan Buddhism played in making the Chinese emperor more mandated and powerful in his own right.

The proposition in this thesis is that the significance of the rituals performed by the Karmapa can be seen in the context of the political concerns of the Yongle emperor. The fact is that the arrival of the Fifth Karmapa in Ming China coincided with a project of reconstructing the state religion of the Ming, of legitimizing the succession of the Yongle emperor who usurped the throne of his nephew Jianwen, and of confronting threats coming from the Mongols in the northwest. The information contained in the invitation letter, the activities of the Fifth Karmapa at the Ming court and the grandiosity of his reception there all indicate that the visit was intended to serve more than a single purpose. The details described in this thesis substantiate my view that, far from wanting to subjugate Tibet, the Yongle emperor wanted to exploit the Tibetan

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 187.
hierarch’s charisma and stature to establish himself as a filial son and legitimate holder of the Ming throne. In return, the Fifth Karmapa enjoyed heightened personal prestige and status for his Kagyupa sect.

A Confucian perspective on the moral principle guiding the relationship between ruler and ruled would take the Yongle emperor’s action of overthrowing his nephew as treason. As pointed out already, Emperor Yongle carried out brutal policies and killed many officials and ordinary people. He needed to expiate his sins through public rituals showing respect for his ancestors, reaffirming his filial tie and praying for the liberation of the deceased parents. The gestures, positioning and dress during funeral ceremonies and religious rituals were meant to demonstrate the relation between the deceased and those hosting the ceremonies. That is, the expense and grand scale of the memorial services were taken as a measure of how much the person loved and cared about the deceased. They were a public demonstration of the legitimate relationship between parents and children.

In close examination of the events, the theme of legitimization can be seen as running through the whole process of the rituals performed by the Karmapa. Whether the Yongle emperor was a legitimate son of the latest emperor had been an open question since the time of his rebellion. To stress his own filial ties to Taizu and Empress Ma, the Yongle emperor chose the Universal Salvation Ritual as a means through which to remove any doubt about his right to the throne. The claim of auspicious symbols manifesting during the rituals at Linggusi Monastery was meant to demonstrate that the Yongle emperor had the blessings of his deceased parents, as well as the favour of heaven. Tibetan sources record these miraculous happenings in the following words:

On the thirteenth day of the month, two Lamps of Perfect Intellect appeared; one came to rest on the tomb and one on the Palace. Also a circular light of five colours moved around
the chapel where the Mandala was and shone above the upper room where Deshin Shegpa was staying. At the same time there was a shower of flowers which circled round the emperor’s apartment as they fell. At midday there was a snowfall of good omens. That night a brilliance like a jewel appeared above the building where the emperor was residing.\footnote{Pawo Tsuglag Trengwa, \textit{Mkhas pa’i dga’ ston}, p. 520.}

This ritual was, in fact, designed to support the idea of the will of heaven, thereby obtaining supernatural confirmation of the Yongle emperor’s right to the throne. The Yongle emperor ordered the court painters to record all the ritual activities of the Karmapa in hand-scroll paintings.\footnote{A copy of the hand scroll panting was kept at the Tshuphu Monastery until 1959 and is now stored at the Norbu Lingkha Museum in Lhasa. According to the Biography of the Fifth Karmapa, a similar copy was kept at the Ming court but Chinese sources make no mention of the existence of such a copy in the Ming archives.} The paintings extol the profound charisma of the Fifth Karmapa, and reveal the Yongle emperor’s parents as Bodhisattvas (Tib: byang chub sems pa; Chi: \textit{da ci bei fo} 大慈悲佛) and \textit{Chakravartin} (Tib: ‘khor los bsgyur ba’i rgyal po; Chi: \textit{zhuan lun wang} 转轮王) - while also hinting at the same status for the Yongle emperor himself. This is a masterful example of religious-political propaganda, where the supernatural powers of the Tibetan Buddhist masters are presented in a visual idiom that is basically Chinese and designed to serve practical ends such as obtaining the mandate of heaven.

Another significance of the trip was the pacification of the Mongols in the north. Although Mongols lost their power in China, their relation with Tibet and particularly with Tibetan hierarchs continued, which was seen as a threat by the Ming.

Before the end of the Yuan dynasty, the Fourth Karmapa was already the supreme religious power in Tibet and had been invited to the Yuan court. The reputation of the monks of the Karmapa sect was already rising, both in the capital of the Yuan and among the peoples of Inner Asia. Many people, including the tribal headmen of the region, had already been converted to Buddhism. A Persian traveller of the early fifteenth century noted: “In Amir town in Sinkiang
[they] had built a magnificent mosque, facing which they had constructed a Buddhist temple of a very high size”\textsuperscript{159}

The fact is that there were a large number of Mongols and Muslims serving in the Ming army. They had joined wars launched by the Ming emperor in order to seize new territories and to counteract invasions from the north. These Mongolian soldiers were followers of Tibetan Buddhism and the Ming military base built by the Yongle emperor, then the Prince of Yen, was also a stronghold of Buddhism.\textsuperscript{160} Therefore, the Fifth Karmapa’s travel through the northwest regions on his way to Ming China, his presence in the Ming capital and his intimacy with the Ming emperor all signalled to the Mongol and Uighur chieftains that they should not harass the Chinese border, traders or messengers. The effect was to encourage those in Ming service to remain loyal. It is entirely conceivable that the Yongle emperor was well aware of the reconciliatory role that Tibetan Buddhism and its hierarchs could play.

At the same time, although the Mongol forces were chased out from the Central Plain some decades prior, they had not surrendered completely.\textsuperscript{161} There were revolts and threats of invasion, which continued to challenge the political power of the Ming Dynasty. In the reign of the Yongle emperor, wars had been launched five times in order to seize new territories and to counteract the invasions from the north. Campaigns started by the Yongle emperor against the Mongols were in progress even during the Fifth Karmapa’s visit. For example, four of the nine frontiers in the northwest occupied strategic positions and had large military contingents -Yansui (Chi: yan sui 延绥), Ningxia Chi: (ning xia 宁夏), Gansu( Chi: gan su 甘肃) and Guyuan (Chi: gu yuan 固原). Lintao (Chi: lin tao 临洮) was one of the important places of Buddhism and it is

\textsuperscript{159} K. M. Maitra, \textit{A Persian Embassy to China} (New York, 1970), 14.
\textsuperscript{160} Elliot Sperling, “Did the Early Ming Emperors Attempt to Implement a ‘Divide and Rule’ Policy in Tibet? ” pp. 74-75.
recorded that when the Fourth Karmapa was visiting the area in 1360 there were thousands of monks led by the abbot of the Shingkun Monastery Paldan Chog.\textsuperscript{162} As region of cross-cultural tradition and religious belief, Guyuan and the surrounding areas were known to be rife with religious conflicts all through the Ming dynasty. For example, there was an uprising in Shensi in 1409 led by a man who called himself Chinkang Nu (Chi: jin gang nu 金刚奴), Slave of the Diamond (Sutra). He was a Buddhist who took the title of King of the Four Heavens (Chi: si tian wang 四天王) and used his faith to challenge Ming authority.\textsuperscript{163} Thus, the dual project of defending and integrating these western territories must have been a paramount concern for the Yongle emperor at the time of the Kharmapa’s visit.

Although reconciliation and pacification in the frontier regions was an important dimension of the Karmapa’s travel to the Ming court, it is not clear how aware he was of the Yongle emperor’s ulterior motives in that regard. As noted in his biography, Karmapa gave religious teachings in the region but also requested release and amnesty for a thousand imprisoned monks and nuns.\textsuperscript{164} The emperor subsequently issued two orders – one that would free the prisoners across the country and another that would permit the practice of all religious traditions in the realm of China.\textsuperscript{165} As noted already, there were many violent uprisings during the Ming Dynasty; they often were the result of economic hardship, rather than a desire for social change or power struggle.\textsuperscript{166} However, one rebel group known as the White Lotus Group, openly questioned the legitimacy of the succession of the Yongle emperor, and launched a

\textsuperscript{162} Tai Si-tu pa, op. cit.ff 179r-179v.
\textsuperscript{164} Pawo Tsuglag Trengwa, \textit{Mkhas pa’i dga’ ston}, p. 513.
\textsuperscript{165} Ibid., 513.
\textsuperscript{166} David Robinson, \textit{Empire Twilight: Northeast Asia under the Mongol} (Harvard University Press, 2011), 35.
number of violent rebellions. Monks and nuns were active in these rebellions, sometimes participating in factional struggles at the court, sometimes assisting the emperor to run the empire. Monks and their monastic institutions could be a tangible social and political force and thus were restrained by most of the emperors of the Ming. Karmapa’s appeal for the release of monks and nuns from prisons demonstrates that he had influence with the Yongle emperor. His benevolent character in turn helped to reconcile relations among those devoted to Buddhism in China and Inner Asia – whether wittingly or unwittingly, again lending his spiritual power to the complex project of legitimating the Yongle emperor’s rule.

The relationship between Tibet and China and the early Ming was one that contained numerous aspects and intricacies. From existing Tibetan and Chinese primary sources it becomes apparent that the Fifth Karmapa’s visit was not just a simple religious affair, but rather a multi-faceted, multi-purpose mission, with mutual benefits accruing to emperor and lama, realm and Tibetan Buddhist sect.

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Conclusion

The relationship between Tibet and early Ming China was one that contained numerous aspects and intricacies. From existing Tibetan and Chinese primary sources it becomes apparent that the Fifth Karmapa’s visit was not just a simple religious affair, but rather a multi-faceted, multi-purpose mission, with mutual benefits accruing to emperor and lama, the Ming dynasty and Tibetan Buddhism.

Tibetan sources have tended to characterize the reciprocity within a priest-patron framework that evolved under the Yuan dynasty and had no overtones of hierarchy or subordination. Chinese sources have tended to use a tributary system framework whereby delegations from the country’s perimeter or beyond pay tribute to the court of the ruling dynasty. In this thesis I essentially have argued that neither framework captures the complexity of what was happening in the social, political and religious realm of Ming China and Tibet in this period. Consequently neither framework accommodates the multiplicity of intentions behind the invitation extended to the Fifth Karmapa or reasons behind his acceptance. Neither allows for a more nuanced reading of the reciprocity of benefit involved.

By reading across Chinese, Tibetan and English language sources it becomes possible to propose a new matrix for understanding events – one on which other scholars might expand further, according to their own focus. It is one that identifies goals, means and outcomes for which the visit of the Fifth Karmapa was instrumental.

In the first place, for the Yongle emperor the goal of establishing his legitimacy as emperor had both internal and external dimensions. Internally, there was a domestic moral and political crisis. The Yongle emperor needed to: 1) demonstrate that he was the natural son (and therefore heir) of emperor Taizu and Empress Ma; 2) re-new the Confucian practice of ancestral
worship through which he could demonstrate filial devotion and his commitment to indigenous custom; 3) project a moral image of himself to expiate his sins of brutality against opponents but yet keep them in check; 4) re-call to his subjects the Confucian principle of a ruler having the mandate of heaven; and 5) bring harmony to the court which consisted of officials with different religious beliefs and cultural traditions.

To achieve these internal goals, the Yongle emperor requested that the Fifth Karmapa perform the Universal Salvation Ritual on a scale that would leave no doubt about his devotion to his parents. Similarly, the magnificent scale of reception and showy celebrations accorded to the Tibetan hierarch and his entourage would display the sincerity of his spiritual (and hence moral) orientations; his public devotion would help dim the memory of atrocities committed. The recording of the rituals in minute detail in hand scroll paintings and the reports of auspicious signs would establish that he had the mandate of heaven and the approval of his royal parents. None of this is to say that there was not a genuine spiritual aspiration and reverence for the Fifth Karmapa on the part of Yongle emperor. Rather, it puts the spotlight on what was an ingenious harnessing of the popular appeal of indigenous beliefs and the supernatural aura of Tibetan Buddhism. With his use of the honorific Muslim title Halima for the Fifth Karmapa, the Yongle emperor even managed to embrace the Islamic elements in his court. The Fifth Karmapa’s visit was part of the Yongle emperor’s project to construct a state religion based on elements derived from the different religious traditions in China. In short, as previous dynasties had done before him, he claimed his power through the means of religious legitimacy.

The external dimension of the Yongle emperor’s need for legitimacy concerned the unstable borderlands to the north where the possibility of war breaking out was always present. Although the Mongol forces had been chased out toward the grasslands during the reign of the
Hongwu emperor, they had not surrendered to the Ming entirely. There were revolts and threats of invasion continually challenging the political power of the Ming Dynasty. Furthermore, there were considerable numbers of Mongols in the Ming army whose loyalty needed to be secured in the campaigns to seize new territories and to contain any invasions from the north. These soldiers were followers of Tibetan Buddhism and the Ming’s military bases in regions such as Yenjin, Liaodong and Gansu were strongholds of Tibetan Buddhism. On his way back to Tibet from China, the “Karmapa was invited by all the secular rulers and monastic heads of the border region.” It is recorded in Tibetan sources that the achievements of the Fifth Karmapa were so great that “countless people of China, Mongol, Uighur, Tangut and both the upper and lower region of Amdo remained in tranquillity and stability.” Thus, the visit of the Fifth Karmapa served to: 1) legitimate the Yongle emperor, a fellow devotee of Tibetan Buddhism and of the revered Karmapa, as one with the people; and 2) achieve reconciliation of conflicts through the personal charisma and skill of the Tibetan hierarch at key points along his itinerary through the borderlands.

In the second place, though these may have been more diffuse, there were certain Tibetan and sectarian interests involved. After the decline of Mongol power, Tibetans made fundamental changes to their institutional system and the whole country was ruled by the Phagmodrupa Dynasty, an indigenous power. The Ming dynasty was very powerful, yet its emperor did not send a single soldier to Tibet and did not establish any agency in Tibet such as the Yuan dynasty had done. There was no close contact between the ruler of Tibet and that of the Ming; Buddhist

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168 Elliot Sperling, “Did the Early Ming Emperors Attempt to Implement a ‘Divide and Rule’ Policy in Tibet?” pp. 74-75; Modern historians of Ming and Tibetan history in China treated this letter of invitation as the original and complete version of the invitation letter from Yongle emperor; this has led to confusion over the date of the actual invitation. Hugh Richardson in his paper The Karmapa dated the event as occurring in 1407. Elliot Sperling might neglected the other two main envoys who actually delivered the letter to the Karmapa and only mentioned that Hou Xian is the envoy who delivered the letter and he treated the invitation letter as intact.

169 Pawo Tsuglag Trengwa, *Mkhas pa’i dga’ ston*, p. 516

170 Ibid., 515.
hierarchs, though influential, had no temporal control in Tibet. Nevertheless, large numbers of Tibetan Buddhist hierarchs were continuously travelling to China and there is reason to believe that they had some influence in keeping the Ming from expanding into Tibet, politically or militarily. Given the strong personal bond established between the Ming emperor the Yongle emperor and the Fifth Karmapa, the latter’s visit can be seen as contributing to the delicate balance of bilateral relations. Furthermore, the size of the Fifth Karmapa’s entourage, his many activities and the extensive travel itinerary supported the expansion of Tibetan Buddhist influence into remote areas of Tibet, the western Himalayan region, Mongolia and China. Importantly, his visit generated new sources of donations from which all sects benefitted. At a time when the different sects were institutionalizing their teachings under different charismatic leaders, the competition for followers and donations was growing in intensity. In this shifting landscape of religious power in Tibet, the Fifth Karmapa’s trip also served to legitimate the prominence of the Karma Kagyu sect.

In this thesis I have reconstructed the entire trip of the Fifth Karmapa by reading across Chinese and Tibetan language sources. In doing so I have been able to illustrate new dimensions in Tibetan relations with China, highlighting how Tibetan Buddhism was perceived and how important Tibetan hierarchs were for the Ming in their conduct of domestic and foreign affairs. I essentially have argued that unlike trips made by other Tibetan hierarchs, the trip of the Fifth Karmapa and his performance of Buddhist rituals at the Ming capital were a means through which the Yongle emperor legitimized his controversial authority to the throne. From existing Tibetan and Chinese primary sources it becomes apparent that the Fifth Karmapa’s visit not only served to confirm and solidify the political power of the Yongle emperor but also brought tremendous benefits for the Karmapa, bolstering the influence of his sect in Tibet and beyond.
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Appendix I

The Letter of Tsongkhapa to the Yongle emperor

༄།།་ཨོམ་བདེ་ལེགས་-་འ/ར་ཅིག།3བས་པོ་ཆེའི་བསོད་ནམས་7ི་མ8་ལ་བ9ེན་ནས་ས་ཆེན་པོ་:་མཚ<འི་8ག་བར་=ོང་བའི་མིའི་དབང་པོ་ཆེན་པོ

Appendix II

The Letter of Tsongkhapa to the Minister Yao Guangxia
Appendix III

The Letter of the Yongle emperor to the Fifth Karmapa