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**THE "CONQUEST OF QINGHAI"  
STELE OF 1725 AND THE  
AFTERMATH OF LOBSANG  
DANJIN'S REBELLION  
IN 1723-1724**

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## **THE "CONQUEST OF QINGHAI" STELE OF 1725 AND THE AFTERMATH OF LOBSANG DANJIN'S REBELLION IN 1723-1724<sup>2</sup>**

This paper represents an account of the text of the "Conquest of Qinghai" stele erected in 1725 in the context of the suppression of the rebellion against the Qing Empire initiated by Gushi Khan's (1581-1655) grandson Lobsang Danjin in 1723–1724. This event became pivotal in the history of the eastern Inner Asia having influenced the situation not only in Qinghai itself, but also in Jungaria and Tibet. Why was the reduction of the rebellion of such a great importance and why did it lead to massive massacres of the lamas and destruction of the Buddhist monasteries? What was the official position of the Qing court on these events?

This research offers a revision of the motives lying behind turbulent events in Qinghai of 1723–1724, based on the Yongzheng Emperor's words carved in stone, shows his official attitude to the circumstances of the Rebellion; besides, it reveals significant aspects of his policy toward the peoples of eastern Inner Asia and outlines some aftermath of the Rebellion.

JEL Classification: Z19.

Keywords: History of China, Qinghai, Koko Nor, Tibet, Qing Empire, Yongzheng, stele, rebellion of Lobsang Danjin.

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## **Introduction**

Qinghai (青海) province of the People's Republic of China, formerly known as Koko Nor, occupies a large territory in north-west China inhabited by a number of ethnic groups, including Han, Tibetans, Mongols and others. For a long period of time it was under the rule of Khoshut Mongols before being conquered by the Qing (清) in 1724.

The Koko Nor rebellion of 1723, that was initiated by Gushi Khan's grandson, the Prince of Koko Nor Lobsang Danjin against the Qing Empire and resulted in the annexation of Koko Nor by the Empire, is one of the most vital events to have impacted the distribution of power in the region in the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Its aftermath determined the future not only of Koko Nor itself, but also of Tibet and Jungaria, and mostly outlined the modern political map of China.

### **The history of study of the Koko Nor rebellion**

Being an event of a great importance, the Koko Nor rebellion has long been attracting the scholars, starting with the contemporary learned lamas and staying topical problem up to now. The first attempt to describe these events in the context of history of Koko Nor was made in 18<sup>th</sup> century by learned lama Sum-pa mkhan-po Ye-shes dpal-'byor. His work was later translated into English by Ho Chin Yang (Sum-pa mkhan-po, 1969). Although very brief, it is a work of a great importance, as it represents a view of a witness of the events.

Staying a topical subject up to now the Koko Nor rebellion has repeatedly been analyzed by modern researchers both in articles and more extensive works. An account on the Rebellion appeared in Luciano Petech's "China and Tibet in the Early XVIIIth Century: History of the Establishment of Chinese Protectorate in Tibet" (Petech, 1979). Although the Rebellion has been described there rather detailed, it has attracted more scholars after new Chinese documents have been published in PRC. "The Memorials of Nian Gengyao" in 3 volumes (年羹尧奏折, Nian Gengyao zouzhe, 1971) contains reproductions of the collected memorials of Nian Gengyao (d. 1726), the supreme commander of the Qing military forces responsible for the suppression of the Rebellion. The edition contains Chinese and Manchu memorials, letters in Manchu and bilingual edicts. Manchu memorials were translated into Chinese and published in 1995 (年羹尧满汉奏折译编, Nian Gengyao man-han zouzhe yibian, 1995).

These materials have been analyzed in a number of articles by Kato Naoto, who extended the knowledge about the eve of the Rebellion and the reasons of the quarrel between Mongolian princes that resulted in Rebellion's failure (Kato Naoto, 1993; Kato Naoto, 2004; Kato Naoto, 2013). An extensive research on the confidential memorials of Nian Gengyao has been undertaken by a

German scholar Shu-hui Wu in 1995, who presented a survey on the Qing Empire's conquest of Qinghai (Shu-hui Wu, 1994).

Yet there are more materials left to be analyzed in the context of the history of Qinghai and Tibet. The memorials described above were later reprinted together with other memorials presented to the Yongzheng Emperor with his own instructions in reply held in the First Historical Archive of China in Beijing. This collection has been published in Nanjing in 1989-1991. It consists of 40 volumes, holding more than 33000 memorials from the National Palace Museum in Taipei and the First Historical Archive (雍正朝汉文朱批奏折汇编, Yongzheng chao Hanwen zhupi zouzhe huibian, 1991). Manchu-language memorials were also collected and translated into Chinese (雍正朝满文朱批奏折全译, Yongzheng chao Manwen zhupi zouzhe quanyi, 1998).

“The Veritable Records of the Qing Dynasty” (清实录, Qing shi lu, 1982) and "Biographies and record of imperially ordained princes and dukes of Mongolia and Turkestan during Ch'ing dynasty" (欽定外藩蒙古回部王公表傳, "Biographies...") also contain valuable material that hasn't been introduced to the scientific world yet. The text of the "Conquest of Qinghai" stele is to be found in two latter sources that are well known among the sinologists and tibetologists, but are too extensive to have been analyzed fully.

In this research we present a translation of the Yongzheng Emperor's text of the "Conquest of Qinghai" stele in the context of the history of the region, adding some other notes on the Koko Nor rebellion's aftermath, based on the sources described above.

### **The "Conquest of Qinghai" stele**

The cause of the uprising was the decision of the Qing Emperor Kangxi (康熙, ruled 1654 – 1722) to grant the Tibetans the right to choose the head of government after the expulsion of the Jungars from Tibet in 1720 by the joint forces of Manchus, Mongolians and Chinese troops. His successor Emperor Yongzheng (雍正, ruled 1723 – 1735) seemed not only to approve this decision, he also ordered the withdrawal of Imperial troops from Lhasa at the very beginning of his reign. These circumstances convinced Lobsang Danjin of the necessity to try to win the status of the secular ruler of Tibet back by force. The Rebellion suffered a crushing defeat, as the leadership of Koko Nor had failed to win the Jungars over to their side and, what is more, it had not been able to gain understanding among themselves.

After a rapid suppression of the rebellion in 1725, the court advised Yongzheng to erect a stele to capture the great event of the conquest of Qinghai and to praise the glorious feat of the Qing army. The officials cited an example of Emperor Kangxi, who had erected a similar stele with texts

in the Chinese and Manchu languages after the victory over Galdan Khan (Di Fubao, 2006, p.76; "Biographies..." juan 81, p. 31b).<sup>3</sup> Yu Huichun reports that this became a tradition held up by the Qing rulers to legitimize and confirm their power in China, as steles had been erected in Confucian temples, and victories, in accordance with an ancient custom, were dedicated to Confucius.<sup>4</sup> Up to this day, two steles "On the conquest of Qinghai" (Yu zhi ping ding qing hai gao cheng tai xue bo, 御制平定青海告成太学碑) with identical texts have survived. One is located in the Temple of Confucius in Beijing and is set next to the stele "On the conquest of distant desert lands" (Yu zhi ping ding shuo mo gao cheng tai xue bo, 御制平定朔漠告成太学碑, 1705), "On the conquest of Jinchuan" (Yu zhi ping ding jin chuan gao cheng tai xue bo, 御制平定金川告成太学碑, 1749) and "On the conquest of Jungaria" (Yu zhi ping ding zhun ge er gao cheng tai xue bo, 御制平定准噶尔告成太学碑, 1755). The other stands in the temple of Confucius in the city of Yuncheng (运城), Jiangxia District (绛县, Shanxi Province). The text of these steles which is also to be found in "Biographies..." and "The Veritable Records of the Qing Dynasty", states that, following the tradition, the example of Emperor Kangxi and the advice of the court, Emperor Yongzheng wrote the text and ordered to set the stele, and then he commanded to commit ritual sacrifice in front of the image of Confucius. In this text the Emperor expressed his vision of events that occurred in 1723-1724, stressing the most important facts which influenced the Qing policy toward Koko Nor:

‘Concerning Lobsang Danjin, his ancestor Gushi Khan, in the early days of our state, bowing to the ground, expressed humility. And at that time directed [to him] officials after having a discussion, approved [the decision] to give him the land for nomads. These lands, where the Fans and the Qiangs (番羌, the Tibetans – *M.S.*) lived together, were very close to Ganzhou and Liangzhou. The strategy of my gracious father Shengzu (聖祖, Kangxi – *M.S.*) was deep and far-reaching, so I am constantly thinking about it. He himself, leading a great army, pacified the

<sup>3</sup> About the defeat of Galdan see also Romanovsky Wolfgang, 1998.

<sup>4</sup> According to Yu Hui-chun, there are seven steles of this kind in the Confucian temple in the Guozijian (國子監, Imperial Academy): *Yuzhi pingding shuo mo gaocheng taixue bei* 御製平定朔漠告成太學碑 (1704, in Manchu and Chinese), *Yuzhi pingding Qinghai gaocheng taixue bei* 御製平定青海告成太學碑 (1725, in Chinese), *Yuzhi pingding Jinchuan gaocheng taixue bei* 御製平定金川告成太學碑 (1749, in Manchu and Chinese), *Yuzhi pingding Zhungear gaocheng taixue bei* 御製平定準葛爾告成太學碑 (1755, in Manchu and Chinese), *Yuzhi pingding Huibu gaocheng bei* 御製平定回部告成碑 (1759, in Manchu and Chinese), *Yuzhi pingding liang Jinchuan gaocheng bei* 御製平定兩金川告成碑 (1776, in Manchu and Chinese), and *Yuzhi pingding Huijiang jiaoqin niyi gaocheng taixue bei* 御製平定回疆剿擒逆裔告成太學碑 (1829, in Chinese). See Yu Hui-chun, 2007, p.113-114.

northern desert. [He] nurtured a strong spirit, and Dashi Bathur of Koko Nor tribe (Gushi Khan's son – *M.S.*) and the others got frightened of [his] greatness and obeyed [him]. Gracious Emperor Shengzu showed benevolence and conferred [Dashi Bathur] a title of Qing-wang, and eight of his elder and younger brothers were awarded the hereditary title and salary. Although they explicitly demonstrated that they were under control, bad thoughts and character cannot be fixed by law and virtue. Over 30 years they harboured ill-feelings. When I ascended the great throne, I continued to administer the great charity by granting them honours. At the time I still had hope to pacify the wild hearts of the subjects. However, Lobsang Danjin raised a revolt, stupidly and recklessly, and took the lead of it along with Choilag Nomchi (Chui la ke nuo mu qi, 吹拉克诺木齐), Rabten Wenbu (A er bu tan wen bu, 阿尔布坦温布), Jampa Jab (Zang ba zha bu, 藏巴札布) and others. Speaking of a good deed of creating a great state, he did not show that he was preparing [for the uprising]. But he dared to lead a rebellion, to engage the Fans and the Qiangs in it, to attack the border towns, to demonstrate anti-government slogans, committing acts unspeakable to Heaven. Then I appointed the gong, a great defender, governor-general of Sichuan Nian Gengyao to become the Great general, pacifying the distant lands (Fu yuan da jiang jun, 撫遠大將軍), publicly accused [Lobsang Danjin] and sent a punitive expedition. In the 10<sup>th</sup> month of the first year of Yongzheng the soul of honour (Nian Gengyao – *M.S.*) started a military campaign. Throughout the whole winter and spring, he invincibly defeated the crowds sided with the uprising tribes. Armed with a pick and a battle-axe, at the right time he won victories. He achieved victory over a hundred thousands of people, and also defeated more than twenty beile, beise, gong and taiji (贝勒, 贝子, 公, 台吉). I had mercy to his (Lobsang Danjin's – *M.S.*) stupidity and lack of consciousness, [and decided that] if [Lobsang Danjin], having no wish of repetition of woe, repenting his crimes, personally appeared, I would grant him with my complete forgiveness. But [he] persisted in his errors. Bringing fear, he resisted, not obeying. Then I plotted [his] destruction, under great secrecy, I explained in detail the strategy to the great commander Nian Gengyao telling him the army movement plan. [The General] examined the weapons, troops and commanders. The Sichuan Commander-In-Chief Yue Zhongqi was appointed to be a powerful general (Fen wei jiang jun, 奋威将军). At the beginning of the middle month of spring, sacrificing to the main banner prior to the campaign, they moved to attack. [...] For my sake [the soldiers] served with enthusiasm, risking their lives. Having suppressed the rebels, pacified the Fans and the Qiangs, [they] made the smoke and fire beacons to extinguish forever<sup>5</sup>. People of internal and external lands enjoy the peace and prosperity. In deed and not in name, following the intentions of my ancestor (Kangxi – *M.S.*), [I] have achieved this great success.' ("Biographies...", juan 81, pp.29a – 31b).

<sup>5</sup> Such beacons served as signs of military alarm in China.

There is also a poetic presentation of the same events on the stele, which follows the text translated above.

### **The interpretation of the events of 1723-1724 by Emperor Yongzheng**

Let us specify some interesting points related to the interpretation of the events by Emperor Yongzheng:

1. As can be seen from the translation of the abstract above, the Emperor gave great importance to the participation in the uprising of the Tibetans, who Lobsang Danjin "dared to engage into rebellion": their "pacifying" is on the list of merits next to the "defeating the rebels". The anger of the Emperor is to be explained as a result of suddenness of the support of the Rebellion by the Buddhists. Having sustained the lamas since the foundation of the Empire, the Qing court expected them to highly support their policy towards the Mongols. Actually, the possible approval and support of the Qing court's policy towards the Mongols is sometimes regarded as being their main goal in sustaining Tibet and Dalai Lama (Успенский, 2011, p.152-198). The Empire regarded Tibet as a rather poor region difficult of access, that couldn't bring any material benefits by itself. But staying the place of the residence of Dalai-lama, it became one of the key point in Qing Empire policy in the region.

2. It should also be noted, that, despite the popular idea of Yongzheng's foreign strategy being new (Petech, 1972, p.91-112), he remarks time and again that in his policy he was guided by his father's wise ideas of conquering foreign lands. The fact that Emperor Yongzheng was following Kangxi political behavior is also mentioned repeatedly both in official documents and his personal correspondence with his subjects (Yongzheng chao Manwen zhupi zouzhe quanyi, 1998, Vol. I, p.300, Yongzheng chao Hanwen zhupi zouzhe huibian, 1991, Vol.11, p.13-14).

3. It is likewise important to emphasize that in the Mongolian version of «Biographies ...» the stele's abstract about the merits of General Nian Gengyao is missing. This is probably due to the fact that, despite his numerous merits, the General fell into disgrace, and after being ordered to commit suicide in 1726, panegyrics in his behalf were cut from the official documentation. There are different points of view upon the reasons why Yongzheng ordered Nian Gengyao to commit suicide. One of them is that the General, being presumptuous, stopped keeping up with the ritual and behaved unacceptably in relation to the Emperor. Another point of view is that the Emperor was afraid of Nian Gengyao's influence to overcome his own, that Nian Gengyao took bribes and appointed his people to take the high positions, without advising the Emperor, forming a group of people to help him to ascend to the throne. There is also an opinion that Nian Gengyao participated in a plot, due to which Yongzheng seized the power after the Emperor Kangxi's death, and he

called his heir to be a 14-year-old son Yunti (允禵, 1688–1755). When he established the power hierarchy, he got rid of the unnecessary witness (Shu Hui-wu, 1995, p.317-329).

### **Qinghai conquest's aftermath**

The suppression of the uprising was accompanied by numerous brutal massacres of Tibetan lamas and by destruction of the Buddhist monasteries in 1723-1724. As a result, in Tibet, where the image of the Manchu ruler had just started to be formed, it became too difficult to maintain his image as a "patron of Buddhism". However, Yongzheng succeeded in not becoming associated with monastery looting and massacres of Tibetans in the territory of Koko Nor: the cause of those was the support by the Tibetans of the rebellious Mongolian Prince Lobsang Danjin and the bloodlust and cruelty of Chinese generals. In Tibetan historiography the name of Nian-gong (Tib. Nyen-gung) denoted an incarnation of the evil spirit. So when Nian Gengyao, a loyal and talented general fulfilling the Emperor's will, was ordered to commit suicide, it was perceived in Tibet as a retribution for his cruelty. Yongzheng also ordered monastery reconstruction, which was mostly completed by 1729.

Another attempt to improve the image of the emperor was made in 1726 by signing a decree that aimed at the support of the Gelug school of Tibetan Buddhism by the restriction of Nyingma ("The Old school") activities in Tibet. This decree is to be found in the biography of the secular ruler of Tibet in 1728-1747 Po-lha-nas (Hor khang, 1998, p.92; English translation of the text in: Petech, 1979, p.106). By rebuilding the destroyed monasteries and by executing the Chinese military commander Nian Gengyao Emperor Yongzheng maintained his image of a defender of the Yellow Faith. But although the most damage of 1723-1724 was associated with the executed general, it still might be not enough to improve Tibetans opinion about the emperor. So this pro-Gelug decree may have been designed to be a part of the new image of the Yongzheng emperor.

The information scattered in the biographies of top Beijing lamas makes it possible to suppose that this initiative rather originated from Beijing than from Tibet proper. At that time two groups of Tibetan Buddhists existed in Beijing: one demonstrated equal respect for Nyingma and Gelug Schools (headed by bKa'-'gyur-ba Lobzang Tsultem & the seventeenth prince Yunli), the other were Gelug "purists" (Thu'u-bkwan, Sum-pa mkan-po & Cangkyia Qutuqtu). Their intrigues could have influenced the emperor's opinion (Uspensky, 1997, p.27-30; Su Faxiang, 2009).

The decree of 1726 may be regarded as the first attempt of emperor's interference into Tibetan religious life. But despite of a great benefit to the Gelug which it might provide, this imperial decree caused little enthusiasm in Tibet and seems not to be implemented. The reasons for



it can be found in the popularity of Nyingma school, as well as in the tradition of good relations between Gelug and Nyingma.

### **Conclusion**

The Manchus' conquest of Koko Nor and its integration into the Qing Empire put an end to the claims of the Hoshot Mongols Gushi Khan's heirs to the title of "King of Tibet" and to participation in its governance. The support of Lobsang Danjin uprising by Tibetan lamas gave Emperor Yongzheng the opportunity to establish rigid measures for lamas and restrictions of the monasteries' activities. At the same time he managed to acquire the glory of "The Yellow Faith" patron by executing General Nian Gengyao, the leader of a punitive expedition, and by reconstructing the destroyed monasteries.

The conquest of Qinghai (with the majority of population being Tibetans) entered the history of China as one of the greatest acts of Emperor Yongzheng, immortalized on two steles in Confucian temples. The text on the steles written by the Emperor himself not only shows his official attitude to the events of great importance, but also points out the significant features of his policy. The most important is that his views were based entirely on his father Kangxi's intentions and strategy, despite the popular opinion of his managing the Empire being based on suspending the active foreign policy of his ancestor. Another curious point is revealed by the later translation of this text into Mongolian which followed the execution of General Nian Gengyao: the compiling of official documents was determined solely by the current goals of the Emperor, insomuch that parts of the texts in the highly approved documents carved in stone 'went missing'.

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