

Research Article

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Nenghai: A Perspective from Han-Tibetan Cultural Interaction

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Abstract: Nenghai 能海, a distinguished patriotic monk in the history of modern Chinese Buddhism, made remarkable contributions to the revitalization of Han Buddhism and the promotion of Han-Tibetan cultural exchanges. He journeyed to Xizang twice, studying under Khang Gsar Rinpoche 康萨仁波切 (1890–1941) and mastering both the exoteric and esoteric teachings of Buddhism. Upon his return to the Han regions of China, he founded “the Great Prajñāpāramitā Sect 大般若宗”, guiding disciples through Tibetan Lamrim and managing monasteries according to Han traditions, thereby adeptly propagating the integrated teachings of exoteric and esoteric Buddhism. During times of national turmoil and ethnic crises, he strove to revive the declining influence of Buddhism, fearlessly persevering against adversities. His efforts significantly contributed to preserving the integrity of Buddhist doctrines in China and fostering the diversity and prosperity of various Buddhist sects.

Keywords: Nenghai; Han-Tibetan cultural interaction; development of Tibetan Buddhism in the Chinese context

1 Introduction

Since the late 19th century, coinciding with the march of modernization and the tumult of various secular ideologies, Chinese religion – particularly Buddhism – has undergone unprecedented transformations. Over the past century, not only has the relationship between Buddhism and state politics profoundly shifted, but the economic structures, organizational frameworks, and methods of dissemination related to Buddhism have also seen significant reformulations. Additionally, interpretations of canonical texts have been extensively revised (De 2018). Predominantly facilitated

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through Buddhism, the interactions involved religious figures seeking teachings, translating scriptures, and propagating the faith, thereby laying a foundational groundwork for later Han and Tibetan Buddhist cultural exchanges.

Since modern times, the weakening of Han Buddhism has spurred efforts towards its rejuvenation. Initially, religious figures such as Dayong 大勇 (1893–1929) traveled to Japan to study Shingon Buddhism, subsequently turning their focus towards Tibetan Buddhism. With the concerted efforts of prominent monks from both Han and Tibetan traditions, such as the 9th Panchen Lama, Dorjé Chöpa 多杰觉拔 (1874–?), Bai Puren 白普仁 (1870–1927), and Taixu 太虚 (1890–1947), and their devout followers, a significant reciprocal cultural exchange between Han and Tibetan regions was initiated. This sustained interaction in the Buddhist community was not only driven by the cultural needs during the transition from decline to revival of the Chinese Buddhism but was also closely linked to the adaptation of the Buddhist community to objective circumstances, and governmental policies on religious culture. During the Republic of China era, the central government's formulation of temple management regulations, preferential treatment for Mongolian and Tibetan monks visiting other regions, implementation of frontier religious and educational plans, and subsidies for Han and Tibetan monks' travel studies are among the policies and regulations that have been introduced and continuously revised, creating a platform for cultural exchanges through the fissures of history (Wang 2009). Despite these challenges, it remained exceedingly difficult for Han monks to seek teachings in Xizang. During this period, many withdrew, yet Nenghai remained unwaveringly dedicated and persevered. Disguised as a merchant, he secretly entered Xizang, not only successfully acquiring esoteric teachings but also bringing them back to Han regions and establishing the Great Prajñāpāramitā Sect. In the context of that complex societal era, this was undeniably an innovative feat. This article intends to explore Nenghai's endeavors in promoting Han-Tibetan cultural exchanges by examining his journey to learn esoteric teachings, the establishment of the Great Prajñāpāramitā Sect, and his practices in propagating the faith.

2 Nenghai and the Circumstances Leading to His Esoteric Practice

Nenghai 能海 (1887–1967),¹ born Gong Xueguang 龚学光, styled Jixi 缉熙, hailed from Mianzhu 绵竹, Sichuan. In his early years, he apprenticed in a commercial firm

¹ While many historical records document his birth year as 1886, according to Shen Quji's 沈去疾 *Chronology of Master Nenghai* 能海上师年谱, he was actually born in 1887.

before resolving to serve his country through military service. In 1905, he was admitted to an accelerated course at the Military Academy, where he was classmates with Liu Xiang 刘湘 (1890–1938) and Liu Wenhui 刘文辉 (1895–1976). Following his graduation in 1907, he was assigned to Yunnan's Jiangwutang 讲武堂 as a battalion commander, where his students included Zhu De 朱德 (1886–1976) and Yang Sen 杨森 (1884–1977). Subsequently, he encountered Buddhist teachings and developed an interest in them. In 1924, at the age of 39, he was ordained as a monk under the venerable Master Foyuan 佛源 at Baoguang Temple 宝光寺 in Xindu 新都, Sichuan, and later received the Dharma from Foyuan, aligning himself with the forty-fourth generation of the Linji school of Chan Buddhism. After embracing Buddhism, Nenghai dedicated himself to rigorous and extensive learning. He delved deeply into the exoteric teachings of various schools within Han Buddhism, yet felt something was still lacking. His quest for deeper understanding led him to explore the catalogue of Buddhist Canon at Yonghegong Lamasery in Beijing, where he discovered a wealth of esoteric scriptures, igniting his passion to pursue Vajrayana studies (Zong 2014). After his ordination, Nenghai embarked on two pilgrimages to Xizang in 1926 and 1940 to seek teachings, spending a total of seven years there. He received over four hundred major and minor empowerments from Khang Gsar Rinpoche, becoming the twenty-eighth direct lineage holder of Tsongkhapa. Upon his return to the Han regions, he extensively propagated the teachings of Buddhism. In 1953, Nenghai participated in the inaugural congress of the Buddhist Association of China and was elected as the National Vice President, residing at Guangji Temple 广济寺 in Beijing. Chairman Zhu De invited him for a heartfelt discussion, treating him with great respect as a teacher and offering him robes as a gesture of comfort. Throughout his life, Nenghai harbored a compassionate and grand aspiration to surmount numerous obstacles and welcome the Dharma from the east, thereby pioneering the study of Esoteric Buddhism in Han regions of China. In addition to translating Buddhist scriptures, he led monastic communities in establishing various temples and monasteries, including Jinci Temple 近慈寺, Jixiang Temple 吉祥寺, Yunwu Temple 云悟寺, Cisheng Hermitage 慈圣庵, as well as Vajrayana centers in Chongqing and Shanghai. He personally led the congregation in cultivating discipline and meditation, expounding the scriptures, and extensively promoting the Dharma, thus making a significant contribution to the revival of modern Chinese Buddhism. Nenghai's lifelong dedication to promoting the integration of Han regions and Tibetan cultures was driven by several reasons, which the author believes can be attributed to the following three motives.

2.1 The Need for the Buddhist Revival

The influx of modern Western civilization has clashed dramatically with the ancient Chinese civilization. In this turbulent wave, Buddhism too faced profound

impacts. After undergoing the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom Movement and the trend of utilizing temple properties for education, Chinese Buddhism further declined. Nenghai once described the situation at the time as follows:

“In recent times, when discussing the Tiantai Sect, only the elderly monk Dixian 谛闲 (1858–1932) from Ningbo revitalized its faltering legacy at Guanzong Temple 观宗寺. The Xianshou Sect were nearly extinct ... As for the Chan Sect, as all the people rushed towards the path of doctrinal system, it became as scattered as the melodies of Guangling. Firstly, there was a lack of qualified mentors, and secondly, the disciples possessed inadequate capabilities. In an era devoid of deep faith and adherence to the path, where people stopped after a mere taste, how could any achievement be realized? ... Regarding the Pure Land Sect, it indeed has a special connection with China. For lay practitioners, often preoccupied with numerous worldly affairs, it particularly offers a timely opportunity for spiritual practice. However, contemporary practitioners of the Pure Land teachings, who solely adhere to the ‘Smaller Amitayus Sutra 小品弥陀经,’ and deem it sufficient, are regrettably taking a rather narrow view ... Merely relying on the resounding name for rebirth, even if one attains the flowering of enlightenment and sees the Buddha, countless eons are still required to fulfill the vows and return. How can the beings in the evil realms wait that long? Furthermore, recent Buddhist scholars primarily favor the Consciousness-Only doctrine, focusing solely on developing wisdom and engaging in contemplative practice year after year, neglecting the quest for inner peace ... Clinging merely to scripture and yet unable to advance on the path of applied practice, how can one speak of achieving the state of non-learning? As for the Esoteric Sect, although it arrived early in the Han regions of China, its teachings were not widely disseminated. Today, although numerous esoteric scriptures exist within the great Buddhist canon, the rituals and the two stages of progression are still notably lacking. In Yonghegong Lamasery in Beijing, although Mongolian lamas have established a place for practicing the Dharma according to the traditional rites, they remain completely isolated from the monastic community of the inland, creating a distinct atmosphere with minimal influence.²

This is a discourse Nenghai delivered in the early days of January 1942 at Jinci Temple 近慈寺, expounding on a section from the “Lectures on the Song of Provisions for the Path 定道资粮颂讲录.” In 1941, Nenghai ventured into Xizang to invite Khang Gsar Rinpoche to propagate the Dharma in Han regions. Unfortunately, Khang Gsar was unable to leave Xizang due to illness. However, before Nenghai departed, Khang Gsar entrusted him with his lifetime’s Dharma robes and ritual

2 Nenghai’s teachings, recorded by Longlian 隆蓮 in “Lectures on the Song of Provisions for the Path 定道资粮颂讲录,” found in Shen Quji’s 沈去疾 *Chronology of Master Nenghai*, Hong Kong: Tianma Books Ltd., 2004, p. 197.

instruments, permitting him to spread the Dharma in China. This not only signified Khang Gsar's complete endorsement of Nenghai's learned traditions but also represented his charge to Nenghai to disseminate the Dharma in Han regions. After returning from Xizang, Nenghai widely turned the wheel of Dharma: In 1942, he led the translation of "The Guru Sadhana of the Great Kalachakra 大时轮上师相应法" at Jinci Temple and conducted the Grand Empowerment Ceremony of Yamantaka; in 1943, he delivered Dharma talk at Longxing Temple 龙兴寺 and established the Committee for the Restoration of the Longxing Pagoda; in 1946, he preached at the Peace Dharma Assembly at Zhaojue Temple 昭觉寺... Until his passing, Nenghai ceaselessly taught and propagated the Dharma. In fact, his various undertakings in Dharma propagation and translation had commenced upon his return from his first study in Xizang in 1932. For instance, in 1933, he delivered Dharma talk at Changan Temple 长安寺 in Chongqing and Daci Temple 大慈寺 in Chengdu; in 1934, he preached and translated Buddhist scriptures at Guangji Straw Hut 广济茅蓬 on Mount Wutai; and during the 1936 Bingzi Disaster Relief Dharma Assembly in Shanghai, he lectured at Jueyuan 觉园, among other activities. Although the poignant critique of the state of various Buddhist sects in China was expressed in 1942, this concern was not new at that time. The various efforts made by Nenghai after his return from Xizang reveal that his journey to study the esoteric teachings in Xizang was driven by a mission to revive Chinese Buddhism.

2.2 The Need for the Nation-State

During the Republic of China era, the societal and political landscape of China was tumultuous, and the lives of its citizens were in decline. Both the Beiyang Government and the subsequent Nanjing Government struggled to address the ethnic frontier issues concerning Mongolia and Xizang. On one hand, the stationed Sichuan army in Xizang took advantage of the chaos to incite a mutiny, while on the other hand, Britain seized the opportunity to nurture pro-British forces. Amidst internal strife and external threats, the relationship between the central government and the local Tibetan administration faced severe challenges. At this juncture, the cultural exchange between Han and Tibetan communities became an essential link in maintaining their relationship. During this period, several esteemed Tibetan monks propagated the esoteric teachings across the Han regions, encouraged and supported by the central government's policies and financial aid. In 1924, prominent Tibetan Buddhist figures such as the 9th Panchen Lama and other high-ranking lamas like Ba Puren, Dorjé Chöpa Geshe, and Norlha Hotogtu 诺那呼图克图 (1864–1936), with the support of the central government, provincial and municipal governments, political dignitaries such as Dai Jitao 戴季陶 (1891–1949) and Liu Wenhui, and societal elites

like Duan Qirui 段祺瑞 (1865–1936), conducted extensive Dharma assemblies such as the “Protection of the Nation by the Benevolent King 仁王护国法会” in various cities including Beijing, Chongqing, Chengdu, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, where they also bestowed empowerments upon the faithful followers. Coupled with the promotional coverage by social media and Buddhist magazines like “Sound of the Sea Tide 海潮音” and “Majestic Sound 威音,” a fervor for Tibetan Esoteric Buddhism surged throughout the Han regions of China (Chen 1987). Simultaneously, the Buddhist community in Han regions established institutions such as the Buddhist Tibetan Studies Institute 佛教藏文学院 and the Group for Studying Buddhism in Xizang 留藏学法团, endeavoring to foster integration between Han and Tibetan Buddhism. It was under this wave that Nenghai ventured into Xizang in search of the Dharma. In his youth, upon witnessing the nation’s chronic poverty and weakness, Nenghai resolved to serve his country through military service. In 1905, he enrolled in the Army Academy, where he studied alongside figures such as Liu Xiang and Qiao Yifu 乔毅夫 (1885–1967). Upon graduation, his career progressed smoothly, eventually ascending to the rank of regimental commander and commander for clearing bandits in northern Sichuan. During a time of warlord conflicts and widespread suffering, Nenghai saw the perilous state of national affairs and recognized his own helplessness. Later, he contemplated turning to horticulture to enrich and rejuvenate the nation through industry, but this too did not come to fruition. In 1914, at the Sanyi Temple 三义庙 in Chengdu, upon hearing the Dharma talk of the venerable monk Foyuan, he was deeply convinced and thus converted to Buddhism, thereafter renouncing worldly life to pursue the true essence of human existence. Despite his monastic life, he retained a profound sense of patriotism. His journey to Xizang to study its esoteric teachings served dual purposes: on one hand, it allowed him to learn the comprehensive doctrinal system and ritual practices of Tibetan Buddhism, providing robust support for the transformation and revitalization of Chinese Buddhism; on the other hand, the integration of Han and Tibetan cultures through his efforts played a significant role in maintaining the national unity and integrity of the state. From both religious and national perspectives, seeking the Dharma in Xizang seemed to be a superior choice.

2.3 Choices Aligned with Public Sentiment Amidst a Unique Historical Context

During the turbulent era of the Republic of China, with external threats looming and internal strife among warlords, the populace urgently needed spiritual support and solace. Tibetan Buddhism, especially its tantric practices, contains extensive rituals focused on disaster alleviation, enhancement of welfare, subjugation of demons, and

the cultivation of love – rituals that significantly contributed to fulfilling the people's psychological needs during the tumultuous war years, such as reducing disasters and ensuring peace. For instance, in the early years of the Republic, Lama Bai Puren of the Yonghegong Lamasery in Beijing, at the request of the Duan Qirui government, led 108 lamas in a 21-day practice of the Golden Light Sutra in 1925 to alleviate national crises. In 1932, the Ninth Panchen Lama was invited by Qu Yingguang 屈映光 (1881–1973) and others to conduct a Kalachakra ceremony in the Hall of Supreme Harmony in the Forbidden City, praying for the nation's peace and the people's safety (Chen 2000). The miraculous effects of the rituals conducted by esteemed lamas of Tibetan Buddhism starkly contrasted with the superficial activities of the local Buddhist and Taoist monks, who were merely performing repentance ceremonies to earn money. Additionally, the unfamiliar Tibetan tantric rituals captivated the curiosity and sense of mystery among the Chinese Han populace, thereby laying a foundational public support for the widespread dissemination of Tibetan Buddhism in the Han regions of China. The decline of Chinese Han Buddhism and the flourishing of Tibetan Buddhism in the Han regions provided a stark contrast, with the public's choices significantly directing the course of Buddhism's development. For Nenghai, who was fervently intent on reviving Chinese Han Buddhism and saving the nation from dire straits, traveling to Xizang to study tantric practices seemed an unparalleled choice.

3 The Integrative Practice System of Han-Tibetan Exoteric and Esoteric Buddhism

The Great Prajñāpāramitā Sect 大般若宗 was founded by Nenghai in his determined effort to revive Chinese Han Buddhism, after journeying to Xizang and studying thoroughly under the accomplished Gelug master, Khang Gsar Rinpoche, known as the “Moon Wheel of Xizang 西藏月轮.” According to existing records, the concept of the “Great Prajñāpāramitā Sect” was first mentioned on July 25, 1958. At that time, Nenghai, while lecturing at Bishan Temple 碧山寺 on Mount Wutai on the “Prajñāpāramitā Teachings: Abhisamayālamkāra-śāstra with Clear Exposition 般若波罗蜜多教授现证庄严论显明义疏,” referred to his own tradition as the “Great Prajñāpāramitā Sect” (Neng 1997). Nenghai frequently referenced this during his lectures in various locations. The memoirs by Zhimin 智敏 (1927–2017), titled *The Authentic Record of Venerable Nenghai's Reflections and Deeds in His Advanced Years* 海公上师耆年思行实录, also note: “When people inquire about our sect, I say our sect is called the Great Prajñāpāramitā Sect. We study Prajñāpāramitā and take it as our doctrine.” This statement exemplifies that over the years, all teachings invariably

return to the doctrine of Prajñāpāramitā (Zhi 1997). Although the sect is named the Great Prajñāpāramitā Sect, the Buddhist teachings imparted by Nenghai were not confined merely to Prajñāpāramitā, but rather encompassed an integration of all doctrines from both the Sutric and Tantric traditions of Han and Tibetan Buddhism. He believed that “the exoteric teachings are the foundation of the esoteric practices, and the esoteric teachings are the skillful means of the exoteric. The two complement each other, enhancing each other’s values. If esoteric practices deviate from the foundation of exoteric teachings, they are no different from heterodox paths. Therefore, a practitioner must have a solid foundation in exoteric teachings before they can properly engage in esoteric practice” (Zong 2014). Nenghai’s philosophical approach to learning and practice was deeply rooted in the teachings of Tibetan Buddhism, advocating for a methodical progression in spiritual cultivation. Prioritizing personal development, he also integrated the Han Buddhist emphasis on doctrinal understanding, advocating a harmonious union between exoteric and esoteric teachings. Furthermore, he placed a strong emphasis on discipline, and greatly valued the establishment of monastic rules and organizational structures.

Nenghai observed that the state of Han Buddhism in China somewhat resembled that of Tibetan Buddhism in Xizang in earlier years, resolved to promote monastic discipline and revitalize the monastic hierarchy by setting a personal example of strict adherence to the Vinaya (Zong 2014). During his pursuit of the Dharma in Xizang, he steadfastly adhered to the vegetarian tradition of Han Buddhism, believing that “the monastic code is more crucial than Buddhist customs 僧制重于佛制故” (Zong 2014). During his time in Xizang, Nenghai studied Tibetan esoteric Buddhism but maintained and later advocated for the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya 四分律 of Han Buddhism rather than the Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya prevalent in Xizang. This choice not only demonstrated his far-sighted wisdom but also reflected his initial intention when he ventured into Xizang to seek the Dharma. Nenghai was acutely aware that his mission was to eventually revive Han Buddhism. Adhering to a different set of monastic rules could have created significant obstacles in reintegrating with the Han Buddhist monastic community, thus his cautious adherence to the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya he originally received was a prudent decision. Upon his return, Nenghai showed great respect for monastic regulations. When invited by other temples to give teachings, he did not set up separate esoteric altars and all offerings received, except those for the monks, were given to the hosting temple, never taken back to his own temple, Jinci Temple 近慈寺. Nenghai often said, “The rules of a temple are established by the ancestral masters and, over time, become the spiritual heritage of the temple. Breaking these rules damages the temple and disrupts its ability to guide future students. According to Pāṭimokkha, adhering to the monastic precepts serves two purposes: it is a grave offense to break these vows, and it avoids criticism, thus not harming the benefits of others” (Ren 1997). Though Han

and Tibetan Buddhism both belong to the Mahayana tradition, their methods of propagating the Dharma, as well as their monastic disciplines and rules, differ significantly. Integration requires a balanced, gradual approach to avoid conflicts. Nenghai exemplified humility and modesty, never considering himself superior despite promoting esoteric Buddhism. He consistently respected the rules of other temples, refraining from constructing separate esoteric altars and donating all offerings received during teachings back to the hosting temple. This practice was particularly commendable given the financial constraints faced by many temples at the time. Nenghai's respect for the interests of other temples not only preserved harmony but also opened further opportunities for spreading the Dharma, thus successfully promoting the revitalization of Han Buddhism through Tibetan esoteric practices. His foresight and wisdom in this regard were truly remarkable.

In order to systemically promote and integrate the exoteric and esoteric teachings of the Great Prajñāpāramitā Sect, Nenghai embarked on explorations concerning organizational structures during his propagation efforts in the Han regions of China. This primarily manifested in the establishment of permanent venues that blended exoteric and esoteric teachings, and in the internal exploration within temples to develop corresponding organizational management systems and educational frameworks. Before 1936, Nenghai propagated esoteric teachings within Han temples; however, due to doctrinal differences, conflicts among disciples were inevitable. Thus, Nenghai decided to establish a dedicated Dharma centre. In 1938, under the coordination of Elder Master Faguang 法光 of Wenshu Monastery, the lower courtyard of the monastery – Jinci Temple in the southern suburbs of Chengdu – was granted to Nenghai to establish his Dharma centre. After seven years of renovations, Jinci Temple successively constructed the Tsongkhapa Hall, a scripture tower, a Homa altar, a novice hall, and a translation institute, becoming a major Dharma centre for the Great Prajñāpāramitā Sect in the Han regions. Later, Master Nenghai also restored Yunwu Temple 云悟寺 in Mianzhu, Cisheng Hermitage 慈圣庵 on Mount Emei, and Jixiang Vinaya Institute 吉祥律院 on Mount Wutai, and established Vajra centres in Chongqing and Shanghai. Blending the monastic regulatory systems of Han Buddhism with the educational systems of Tibetan Buddhism, Nenghai established a unique Han and Tibetan Buddhist educational system within these temples. This included the establishment of five specialized halls: the Novice Hall 沙弥堂, the Affairs Study Hall 学事堂, the Precepts Study Hall 学戒堂, the Additional Practices Hall 加行堂, and the Vajra Institute 金刚院, as well as a Translation Institute 译经院, thereby pioneering an educational model for the Great Prajñāpāramitā Sect.

The Great Prajñāpāramitā Sect's system places equal emphasis on cultivating both monastic discipline and educating talented monks, tailoring educational and practice arrangements to suit the characteristics of novices, middle-aged bhikkhus,

and elder bhikkhus. Young people focus on learning, while older monks focus on spiritual practice. Typically, monasteries do not admit novices, but Nenghai stipulated that children over the age of seven could enter the Novice Hall to cultivate “Manjushri Children 文殊童子” (Zong 2014). The Novice Hall is managed by a head monk and five deputies, with the ordination master involved in overseeing the novices’ well-being. In addition to studying novice precepts and Buddhist doctrines, novices also learn classical literature and arithmetic. Upon reaching the age of twenty and taking full monastic vows, novices enter the Precepts Study Hall as formal trainees. Over a five-year period, they study texts such as the Bhikkhu Precepts Primer, the Ten Gates of Vinaya, and the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya, with regular assessments on recitation, understanding, and adherence to the precepts. Those who fail assessments or breach rules are sent back to the Affairs Study Hall. This hall generally serves as an orientation place for visiting bhikkhus to familiarize themselves with the monastery’s rules, typically requiring a year of study before qualifying for the Precepts Study Hall. After passing exams in the Precepts Study Hall, monks move on to the Additional Practices Hall to study texts such as the Stages of Generation 生起次第 and the Secret Gatha 秘密伽陀, chant major rituals, and the Five Great Vajras, focusing on cultivating monks capable of teaching the Three Fold Path 三学 of Buddhism. Upon completion, monks may enter the highest level, the Vajra Institute, whose members serve as exemplars for the entire monastic community. Initially, they practice the Thirteen Yamantka 十三尊大威德, listen to the Stages of Completion 圆满次第, and independently study texts like Abhisamayālamkāra-śāstra 现证庄严论 and Madhyamaka Prajnaparamita 中观颂, engaging in ritual practices four times and meditation six times daily. Additionally, there is a dedicated Translation Institute aimed at nurturing translators proficient in both Han and Tibetan languages, serving both to train personnel and translate scriptures. The Dharma centre primarily focuses on study and cultivation, generally “eschewing mass recitation of penitential rites, abstaining from conducting Buddhist services, refraining from maintaining donation ledgers, and not using donation cylinders” (Zong 2014), relying on spontaneous offerings from devotees and the monastic community’s engagement in agricultural for sustenance.

Nenghai’s Great Prajñāpāramitā Sect encompasses the Three Fold Path of precepts, concentration, and wisdom in its curriculum, with particular emphasis on the study of precepts. It extensively borrows from Tibetan traditions in its educational sequence while employing the traditional monastic head monk system for sangha management, adhering strictly to the rules, resolving issues through collective sanghakarma decisions, and conducting rituals such as recitation of precepts, rains-retreat, and ordination according to Han customs. The Great Prajñāpāramitā Sect integrates the strengths of both exoteric and esoteric teachings, ensuring that neither practice is neglected for the sake of doctrine, nor doctrine forsaken for

practice. Its advanced management and educational model, coupled with its progressive philosophical concepts, remain highly inspirational even today.

4 The Practice of Propagating Dharma that Promotes the Integration of Han and Tibetan Buddhism

Since returning from Xizang in 1932 until the eve of his passing in 1967, Nenghai devoted himself to constructing temples and ordaining monks throughout the Han regions of China, leaving his mark in cities such as Chengdu, Mianzhu, Chongqing, Shanghai, Wuhan, Mount Wutai, Mount Emei, and Beijing. The integration of Han and Tibetan cultures promoted by Nenghai extended beyond merely the religious sphere; it was grounded in a profound understanding of both historical and contemporary realities. He consistently prioritized the national interest, directing all his efforts to promote ethnic unity, border stability, and national unification. In times of national crises, he exemplified the demeanor befitting a religious leader. His contributions can be summarized in three main aspects:

4.1 Fostering Han-Tibetan Interaction and Promoting Peaceful Liberation

During the Republic of China period, the country was embroiled in internecine conflicts among warlords and continuous internal and external wars. The central government had little time to attend to Xizang, and the involvement of Western powers, notably the British, further complicated and destabilized the Sichuan-Tibet situation. At this juncture, the exchange of Buddhist culture between Han and Tibetan communities became a crucial link between Xizang and the central government. Many high-ranking Tibetan Buddhist monks were invited to other regions to preach, while numerous Han monks, represented by Nenghai, journeyed to Xizang in search of Buddhist teachings. Through various forms and channels, they propagated Buddhist culture, establishing a bridge for Han-Tibetan relations. After returning from studying Buddhism in Xizang, Nenghai leveraged his influence among the faithful to promote esoteric Buddhism. His efforts in preaching, propagating teachings, promoting education, and other activities played an irreplaceable political role. Nenghai played a significant role in both the Pengxian Peace Uprising 彭县和平起义 of 1949 and the peaceful liberation of Xizang in 1950. The decision by Liu Wenhui, Deng Xihou 邓锡侯 (1889–1964), and Pan Wenhua 潘文华 (1885–1950) to

set the uprising's location at Longxing Temple in Pengxian was partly due to its strategic geographical position and greatly influenced by Nenghai. According to *Historical Records of Pengxian, Sichuan* 四川彭县文史资料, on December 8, 1949, Liu and Deng arrived at Longxing Temple and met with Nenghai in the abbot's quarters. On December 10, Pan Wenhua joined them, and during a meeting of seventy to eighty senior officials where the uprising was announced, Nenghai was present.³ Before Pan Wenhua's arrival, Qiao Yifu, who co-signed the uprising communiqué with Liu Wenhui and Deng Xihou, was a classmate of Nenghai at the Military Academy in 1905. Prior to ordination, Nenghai had served as a high-ranking military officer. Although he no longer held military positions after becoming a monk, he maintained contact with many of his former classmates to some extent. His and Qiao Yifu's arrival at Longxing Temple in preparation for this patriotic uprising was clearly not coincidental. In 1950, when representatives of the People's Liberation Army sought advice on entering Xizang, Nenghai provided detailed information and dispatched his disciple Lunguo 隆果, who was proficient in Tibetan, to serve as a military translator, thereby contributing to the subsequent peaceful liberation of Xizang.

4.2 Catalyzing the Reform and Renaissance of the Chinese Buddhism

During the late Qing Dynasty and the early Republic of China, Chinese society underwent profound transformations, leading to the disintegration of political, social, and spiritual orders to varying degrees, and Buddhism was not immune to these upheavals. With the awakening and concerted efforts of the monastic community, Buddhism began to show signs of revival during the Republic era. This revival encompassed two aspects: the restoration of traditional Buddhism and the modern innovation of Buddhist practices, both guided by the principles of adapting to circumstances and conforming to doctrinal truths (Xue 2019). In his book *the Buddhist Revival of China*, Holmes Welch criticized Master Taixu, stating that it is laughable that Taixu misunderstood the situation. Welch thought Taixu believed that Westerners would be interested in a Buddhism characterized by science, knowledge, and social welfare, but he did not realize that the West was already well-provided in these aspects, and in the long run, would be more interested in the unique cultivation methods of China that he was abandoning (Welch 2006). Nenghai adeptly balanced traditional restoration with modern innovation in advancing the revival of

3 Refer to Selection of Pengxian Historical Materials 彭县文史资料选辑, Vol. 5, Sichuan Provincial Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, Pengxian Literary and Historical Materials Research Committee, 1987.

Chinese Buddhism. Upon his return from Xizang, he scrutinized Chinese Buddhism through the lens of Tibetan Buddhism, reflecting on its shortcomings. He translated Tibetan Buddhist scriptures into Chinese and propagated the teachings. On one hand, he upheld the regulations of traditional Chinese monastic life and adhered to Chinese Buddhist precepts. On the other hand, he incorporated the sequential practices and rituals of Tibetan Buddhism, establishing appropriate curricula for disciples of varying levels, constructing a system of practice that was both traditional and innovative. This represented the second significant reform and innovation in Chinese Buddhism since Xuanzang 玄奘 (602–664)’s journey to India for Buddhist scriptures, marking a pioneering and historical attempt at revitalizing Chinese Buddhism and playing an active role in its resurgence.

4.3 Fostering Mutual Trust and Progress Between Han and Tibetan Buddhism

During the Republic of China era, relations between the Han and Tibetan communities reached unprecedented levels of tension, causing a near standstill in the millennia-long cultural exchanges. Representing the Han monks who ventured into Xizang in search of Buddhist teachings, Nenghai played a pivotal role in propagating esoteric Buddhism in the Han regions of China, introducing Tibetan rituals, establishing practice centers, and organizing dharma assemblies. By breaking free from narrow-minded perspectives and gaining an accurate understanding of the distinctive features and essence of Tibetan Buddhism, he developed a deep and clear comprehension of the historical roots and differences in Han and Tibetan Buddhist exchanges. This fostered mutual understanding and learning between Han and Tibetan Buddhism and their communities, reducing opposition, enhancing relationships, and establishing shared values of mutual recognition and respect. Consequently, it expanded the scope of Han-Tibetan exchanges, promoting mutual prosperity and progress for both ethnic groups. Nenghai’s contributions have been historically significant in the revival and development of Buddhism in both regions and in the exchange and integration of Han and Tibetan peoples. The work of Nenghai offers significant guidance for contemporary Han and Tibetan Buddhist cultural promotion. From a Buddhist perspective, he sustained the cultural exchange between the Han and Tibetan peoples, inaugurating a new phase and starting point in the history of Han and Tibetan Buddhist cultural interaction. This exchange not only maintained the relationship between the Han and Tibetan communities but also advanced the development of Han and Tibetan Buddhism. The social influence of religion is evident not merely in the exchanges between the Han and Tibetan Buddhist circles or in the mutual supplementing and referencing within Buddhism

but also in the continuation of historical interactions and contemporary developments. Objectively, these activities deepened the dissemination and interaction between the two cultures, aiding in the elimination of historical barriers between the Han and Tibetan peoples and fostering joint development under a unified national ideology. The cultural exchanges based on Buddhist culture between the Han and Tibetan ethnic groups have provided a laudable model and inspiration for the cultural exchanges among various domestic ethnicities. To this day, the exchange of Buddhist beliefs and culture remains a vital bridge and link that sustains the relationship between the Han and Tibetan communities.

5 Conclusions

Reflecting on the life of Nenghai, it can be broadly divided into two phases – his sojourn in Xizang for study and his efforts in propagating the Dharma. The revitalization of Chinese Buddhism and the propagation of the Dharma for the benefit of sentient beings were the ultimate aims and aspirations of Nenghai's journey to Xizang. He made two trips to Xizang, dedicating seven years to studying Buddhist teachings. Upon his return, he established a Vajrayana Dharma center in the Han region and founded the Great Prajñāpāramitā Sect. Nenghai guided practice according to the Lamrim of Tibetan Buddhism while managing monasteries according to Chinese regulations. He advocated strict adherence to precepts and emphasized the cultivation of talents. Throughout his life, he traveled extensively, planting the banner of the Dharma far and wide, earning him the recognition as a paragon of multicultural promotion between Han and Tibetan Buddhist cultures (Wang 2009). The eminent monk Seng You 僧佑 (445–518) of the Liang Dynasty once said, “The Dao is propagated by individuals, and teachings are elucidated through culture 道以人弘, 教以文明” (Seng 1995). As early as the Northern and Southern Dynasties, Chinese Buddhism established the dual mission of cultivating monastic talents and elucidating doctrinal teachings, a principle cherished and upheld by monastics across various schools throughout successive dynasties. Nenghai's two journeys to Xizang for study, his extensive preaching tours, his tireless writing, and his emphasis on disciple training exemplified his conscious continuation of this important cultural tradition of Chinese Buddhism. Amidst national turmoil and ethnic crises, Nenghai and his disciples strove to revive Buddhism, overcoming numerous challenges and diligently advancing, thereby making significant contributions to preserving the doctrinal completeness and sectarian diversity of Buddhism. From a cultural perspective, Nenghai's numerous achievements in the history of Han and Tibetan Buddhist exchanges have become a valuable legacy of Chinese culture. Through the inheritance and development by his disciples, these

achievements continue to enrich and influence the social life and cultural psyche of Chinese populace. Nenghai's life epitomizes the essence of Han-Tibetan interaction, opening new horizons for the cultural interaction between Han and Tibetan Buddhism.

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