Integration Through Devotion: Qing Buddhist Policy toward Tibet and Mongolia (1661–1796)

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Abstract. This study examines Qing dynasty policy toward Tibetan Buddhism in Tibet and Mongolia, in particular how the empire pursued frontier integration through the Gelugpa sect of Tibetan Buddhism. We ask why Qing rulers implemented more intrusive administrative controls in Tibet but relied on symbolic patronage in Mongolia despite a common goal of full incorporation. Utilizing existing scholarship and historical records, we comparatively analyze how the Qing maintained a unified ideological framework under the Gelugpa while tailoring tactics to local structures. In Tibet's preexisting theocracy, the empire inserted resident commissioners (ambans), regulated reincarnations, and reformed governance, whereas in Mongolia's dispersed khanates the state reinforced existing lamas and nobles with titles and stipends. These findings reveal the Qing Empire's flexible yet asymmetrical religious governance. The study aims to significantly increase academic understanding in Qing frontier integration through in-depth cross-regional comparison and sheds light on broader critical questions of state–religion relations in early modern China.

Keywords: Qing dynasty, Gelugpa sect, Tibetan Buddhism, regional integration, comparative historical analysis

1. Introduction

This study examines Qing dynasty religious policy toward Tibet and Mongolia during the Kangxi–Qianlong era (1661–1796), a period when Buddhist diplomacy was central to frontier integration.

Qing emperors increasingly deployed Tibetan Buddhism – especially the Gelugpa or "Yellow Hat" sect – as a tool of imperial rule. In both regions the court aimed for full political incorporation via religious patronage, but with markedly different implementation. Existing studies have extensively noted the patron–priest model by which the Qing co-opted Tibetan Buddhist elites through institutions like the Golden Urn, monastic stipends, and amban residency. However, a key puzzle remains: Why did Qing religious policy take a more intrusive, administrative turn in Tibet but rely mainly on symbolic patronage in Mongolia? In other words, given a common goal of stabilizing the frontiers through Gelugpa Buddhism, what structural and regional factors led to divergent policies?

To address this gap, we compare Qing–Gelugpa relations in Tibet and Mongolia using a common framework. We argue that Qing rulers combined a consistent ideological program-exalting the Gelugpa while marginalizing its rivals-with region-specific strategies. In Tibet, the state introduced ambans, regents, and succession regulations; in Mongolia, it relied more on patronage, titles, and indirect influence. By examining these cases comparatively, this study reveals that Qing frontier rule was flexible yet asymmetrical. This approach deepens the understanding of Qing statecraft and offers insights into broader issues of religion–state interaction in imperial settings.

2. Literature review

There is abundant existing literature on the topic of Qing religious policy in Tibet and Mongolia, which could be roughly divided into three categories.

Imperial Integration and Religious Policy: A first stream of scholarship emphasizes the Qing state's strategic use of Tibetan Buddhism to reinforce imperial unity. These works describe emperors, especially Qianlong, as Buddhist "bodhisattva-kings" who patronized the Gelugpa sect to legitimize rule and stabilize borders. Qing monarchs are said to have "exalted the Yellow, suppressed the Red", simultaneously promoting the Gelugpa while suppressing rival lineages like the Red Hat (Nyingma) sect. For example, Li wrote that the Qing brought monasteries under bureaucratic oversight through land registration and loyalty oaths, integrating religious institutions into the imperial system [1]. In sum, this category portrays Qing religious policy as a calculated form of patronage that wove Buddhist elites into the state apparatus.

Buddhist Commonwealth and Fragmentation: Other scholars adopt a broader Inner Asian perspective, exploring the idea of a shared "Tibetan Buddhist world." Zou argues that Qing emperors framed Gelugpa Buddhism as a symbolic language of empire, echoing Yuan-era nomadic–Tibetan ties [2]. Historical precedents like Altan Khan's 16th-century alliance with the Gelugpa (as noted by Wangyal) suggest a long-standing cultural nexus [3]. These studies imply a tripartite synthesis of Manchu, Mongol, and Tibetan elites around Gelugpa authority. At the same time, recent work cautions against viewing this world as monolithic. Zhong and Pirie find evidence of Mongol–Tibetan tensions and local contestation: Zhong highlights folklore of conflict, while Pirie documents negotiated or resistant relations in Amdo and Kham [4,5]. In sum, comparative research recognizes common religious frameworks but underscores that cultural and political differences could fragment the Buddhist commonwealth.

Gelugpa–Qing Interactions: A related body of literature examines the patron–priest alliance itself. Li and Zhao show that the Qing granted the Gelugpa sect decisive control over reincarnation processes in exchange for loyalty; they also provided stipends, titles, and imperial honors to lamas [1,6]. These policies effectively elevated Gelugpa hierarchies across Inner Asia while binding them to the court (e.g. the Golden Urn for Tibetan lamas). However, recent historiography stresses Gelugpa agency. Zhong (drawing on Tibetan sources) and Pirie emphasize that local lamas and nobles actively negotiated with the Qing, sometimes resisting imperial demands [4,5]. Such work shows the relationship was reciprocal: Gelugpa elites leveraged Qing patronage to strengthen their position rather than serving merely as imperial instruments.

3. Methodology

For the purpose of this study, a comparative historical analysis will be adopted, drawing on both Qing-era archival records and secondary studies. This approach enables us to trace how a single policy framework played out differently across regions over time. By treating Tibet and Mongolia as comparable case studies, this study can hold broader imperial objectives constant while exploring the influence of local conditions. Our data are primarily published documents and scholarly works in Chinese and English. However, that these sources are all written in Chinese and heavily Qingcentric: no Tibetan- or Mongolian-language archives were directly accessible in related databases, so local perspectives are underrepresented. Evidence for each region are systematically compiled along key dimensions: governance goals, policy instruments, and outcomes. In practice, Qing stability and legitimacy goals are identified from imperial proclamations; catalogued instruments such as the Golden Urn, Amban appointments, lama titles, and monastic stipends; and assessed effects on local governance. Constant comparison across regions allowed the author to challenge assumptions (for example, questioning whether differences were intentional or contextual). Despite source limitations, this methodology allows us to trace parallels and divergences in a structured way. It acknowledges that while the Qing state pursued common overarching aims, it adapted its means to fit local contexts.

4. Historical background

The Qing dynasty (1644–1912) presided over a vast multi-ethnic empire that incorporated the Mongolian steppes and the Tibetan Plateau, regions with deep-rooted Buddhist traditions. Mongolia was relatively decentralized and had no single religious authority. From the late Ming era onward, Tibetan Buddhism — particularly the Gelugpa or "Yellow Hat" sect (黄教) , had become a defining element of Mongol religious and political life. In the 16th century, as Wangyal describes, Altan Khan's embrace of Gelugpa Buddhism established a lasting Mongol–Tibetan tie: Mongol elites saw the Dalai Lamas as spiritual patrons and the Qing later inherited this dynamic [3]. Tibet, by contrast, was a unified Buddhist theocracy centered on the Dalai and Panchen Lamas. These pre-existing structures shaped Qing strategy.

Early Qing rulers were keenly aware of this legacy. The founding Manchu emperors actively positioned themselves as patrons of Buddhism, earning honorific titles that evoked Buddha-world sovereignty [4,6]. The Kangxi Emperor (r. 1662–1722) maintained diplomatic ties with the Fifth Dalai Lama and rewarded prominent Gelugpa leaders, thereby reinforcing the idea that the Qing throne was a protector of the Dharma among Mongols and Tibetans [1,4]. This policy of "conforming to local customs" (从俗从宜) allowed for a degree of religious autonomy, but it was always under the watchful eye of imperial authority [3,7]. According to Zhong, even as the Qing court professed respect for traditional faiths, it simultaneously sought to channel them toward state ends, foreshadowing later codified strategies [4].

The next generation of emperors further institutionalized this religious patronage. The Yongzheng (1722–1735) and Qianlong (1735–1796) emperors, having secured the core of Qing control in China proper, turned their attention to frontier regions. In 1717, a turbulent interlude occurred when the Dzungar Mongols, who were of the Khoshut lineage, invaded Tibet and expelled the ruling Gelugpa regent. The Qing responded with military force, defeating the Dzungars by 1720 and installing Qing-appointed resident commissioners (Ambans) in Lhasa [4,7]. This intervention not only restored the Gelugpa hierarchy — now bound by treaties to the Qing — but also created a template for dual administration in Tibet. In the decades that followed, the Qianlong Emperor waged a series of campaigns (such as the pacification of Dzungaria in 1755–1759) to bring the Mongol homelands firmly under Qing rule. Each conquest was followed by measures to entwine Mongolian and Tibetan Buddhist institutions with imperial governance.

By the mid-18th century, the Qing had refined a coherent policy: elevating the Gelugpa sect as the state-approved orthodoxy, while co-opting the loyalties of Mongol nobles and Tibetan clergy through titles, stipends, and elaborate rituals. For example, Qianlong established a formal investiture ceremony for new Dalai Lamas and Panchen Lamas using the so-called Golden Urn system, designed to give the emperor final decision-making power in reincarnation disputes [8]. He also proclaimed several Gelugpa monasteries as national shrines and commissioned translations of Buddhist scriptures into Manchu and Mongolian. At the same time, other Tibetan Buddhist schools (often called “Red Hat” sects) were either marginalized or suppressed if they were seen as politically unreliable [1,4].

These developments were mirrored in Mongolia itself. Over the 17th and 18th centuries, Mongolian elites had steadily adopted Gelugpa Buddhism as central to their identity, with figures like the Jebtsundamba Khutughtu in Outer Mongolia becoming symbols of national Buddhism [3]. The Qing emperors recognized this and thus cultivated ties with Mongolian lamas through gifts and honors. By granting Mongol leaders and high-ranking monks prestigious titles (such as “Universal Teacher” or “Living Buddha” honors), the Qing integrated Mongol theocratic structures into the imperial hierarchy [3,8]. Over time, the Mongol nobility came to see the Beijing court as the ultimate arbitrator of religious legitimacy, which in turn underpinned their political allegiance to the dynasty.

In sum, the historical backdrop of Qing religious governance was one of gradual synthesis. Centuries-old connections between Mongol and Tibetan Buddhism did not vanish under the Manchus; rather, they were transformed by Qing statecraft. The Qing emperors learned from and adapted to local traditions: they preserved the outward forms of Tibetan Buddhist ritual and theology while repurposing them as instruments of imperial rule. Historians emphasize that the Qing could not have consolidated their northwestern frontier without engaging deeply with Buddhism — both for its spiritual authority and for the cohesion it offered to subject peoples. In this way, the stage was set-by the late 18th century, the Qing had created a system in which religious figures and institutions were key components of frontier governance, with implications for both unity and control across the empire.

4.1. Governance goals

Qing policy toward Tibetan and Mongolian Buddhist communities was underpinned by several interlocking governance goals. First and foremost was political stability and integration of the empire’s frontiers. Frontier regions like Tibet, Outer Mongolia, and Xinjiang were ethnically and culturally distinct from the Han heartland; their loyalty was never guaranteed. By co-opting Buddhism, which was deeply revered in these regions, Qing rulers sought to ensure that local rulers and populations remained loyal to Beijing. The Qing Dynasty perceived the Gelugpa faith as a social adhesive that could “fuse together the multi-ethnic empire” [8]. Thus, Manchu emperors aimed to maintain stability by aligning the religious hierarchy with the imperial center — a goal seen as crucial especially after disturbances like the Dzungar revolts [4,7].

A second goal was legitimization of Qing rule in the eyes of subject peoples. In traditional Chinese ideology, a ruler’s virtue and mandate were often measured by their moral and religious conduct. By portraying themselves as enlightened Buddhist rulers — patrons of temples, builders of monasteries, and supporters of high lamas — Qing emperors generated religious legitimacy. Kangxi’s and Qianlong’s inscriptions, for example, likened the emperor’s role to that of a Bodhisattva on earth, a portrayal that Chinese historians argue was designed to solidify the moral authority of the Manchu state [7]. In practical terms, legitimizing rule meant frequent bestowals of imperial seals, robes, and ceremonial gifts to the Dalai and Panchen Lamas, which communicated that these lamas derived their status from the Qing throne. Scholars emphasize that through these gestures, the Qing transformed what had been a spiritual allegiance between Tibetan Buddhists and Mongol princes into a direct relationship between Buddhism and the Manchu emperor himself [1].

A related goal was control over alternative power centers or ideologies. The Qing court was acutely aware that certain sects or influential lamas could foment dissent. Thus, promoting Buddhism had to be balanced by regulating it. By designating Gelugpa as the orthodox state-favored sect, the Qing aimed to marginalize other Tibetan and Mongolian Buddhist lineages that might threaten imperial cohesion. Historians like Zhong point out that this goal served a dual purpose: it placated the majority Gelugpa population in Mongolia and Tibet while discouraging heterodox movements (including esoteric or folk-religious sects) that could channel into anti-Qing resistance [4].

A fourth goal was economic and administrative supervision of frontier societies. Monasteries and temples in Tibet and Mongolia held vast estates and resources. Integrating these into state oversight helped the Qing extend its bureaucratic and fiscal reach. Qing decrees often included clauses about the registration of monastic lands and the collection of taxes or labor from monastery tenants [1]. This was not purely for revenue; it also meant that monasteries could no longer act as fully autonomous entities. In effect, ecclesiastical boundaries overlapped with imperial jurisdiction [8]. By bringing monasteries into the administrative fold — for instance, by requiring lamas to swear loyalty to the emperor — the Qing reduced the chance that religious leaders could mobilize resources against the state.

A final governance goal was multicultural accommodation framed in state terms. Qing rulers styled themselves as benevolent sovereigns of all peoples, but "benevolence" in policy often meant respectful inclusion of frontier customs — so long as these did not undermine Qing primacy. Scholars summarize this as the Qing aim to be "universal ruler" and "patron of all faiths." In practice, this meant that officials were instructed to study and understand local religions and laws. The incorporation of Tibetan lamas into the imperial bureaucracy (for example, through the Lifanyuan) served this goal of inclusion. Such bureaucratic channels allowed the Qing to appear tolerant and supportive of Buddhism while still controlling its leadership. Wang points out that, for many Mongols and Tibetans, the Qing promise of respect for their Lamas and customs legitimized the Manchu regime in a manner that pure military occupation never could [8].

In sum, Qing governance goals regarding Tibetan and Mongolian religion were multifaceted and often overlapping. The monarchy sought to stabilize its borders, legitimize its rule, and harness the moral authority of Buddhism — all while ensuring that local religious institutions did not become independent centers of power. Scholars consistently highlight that understanding these goals requires a nuanced reading: while on the surface the Qing appear to have been great patrons of Buddhism, their patronage was always strategic. It was a calculated attempt to weave frontier societies into the imperial system. In doing so, the Qing drew on centuries of existing patronage patterns but repurposed them for the objectives of state-building and control.

4.2. Strategy

Having identified the goals of Qing religious governance, we can now examine the concrete strategies and actions the Qing state employed to achieve them. These strategies ranged from ceremonial patronage and legal reform to military intervention and administrative restructuring. First among these was the ceremonial and ritual patronage of key Buddhist figures. The Qing emperors personally participated in rituals and donated to temples to signal their role as enlightened sovereigns. For instance, the Qianlong Emperor commissioned gilded statues, bestowed imperial robes, and performed elaborate investiture rites for the Dalai and Panchen Lamas [1]. Such ceremonies were not mere pageantry: they were formalized expressions of the patron–priest bond. By giving imperial insignia (such as seals and banners) to newly recognized Lamas, the Qing bound those leaders symbolically to the throne. Historians note that these public displays reassured Buddhist populations that their religion had imperial sanction, while also reminding those Lamas that their authority derived from the emperor [7,8].

Another key strategy was legal codification. The Qing included regulations pertaining to monastic life and religious affairs within the broader imperial legal code. For example, the Qing Code contained articles that protected the property and persons of Buddhist clergy, prohibiting abuses such as conscripting monks into corvée labor without permission [4]. At the same time, the code forbade unauthorized religious activities and dissent. Officials were instructed to suppress any sects deemed heretical or subversive, following the emperor's orders [1]. By merging local religious law into the imperial legal framework, the Qing both granted Buddhism a measure of official status and asserted ultimate legal authority over it. This approach underscored the larger strategy of bureaucratic integration: incorporating religious institutions into the machinery of state control.

Closely related was the strategy of administrative supervision through institutions like the Lifan Yuan (理藩院), often translated as the Office of Foreign Affairs or Court of Colonial Affairs. This central agency was responsible for overseeing Mongolian and Tibetan affairs, and it monitored the implementation of religious policy in those regions. Through this channel, the emperor issued specific instructions to local governors and Ambans regarding Buddhist affairs. For instance, the Lifan Yuan circulated edicts demanding loyalty oaths from senior lamas and detailing the correct procedures for recognizing reincarnations. In many cases, this entailed direct contact: Qianlong and his successors sometimes summoned or received Tibetan and Mongol Lamas at the imperial court, thereby incorporating them into the Qing ceremonial hierarchy [7]. The existence of such oversight bodies meant that religious affairs were not left to chance but were actively managed as part of state governance.

Military and security measures also formed a part of the Qing strategy. When religious factions collided with imperial interests, the Qing did not hesitate to use force. The earlier example of the 1717 Dzungar invasion and Qing re-conquest of Tibet illustrates this point. Similarly, in Mongolia, any nobles who flouted Qing religious policy risked military penalties or loss of status. After defeating the Dzungars in 1759, the Qing even settled loyal Mongols in the former Dzungar territories as garrisons, ensuring that the Gelugpa sect remained dominant there [7]. Scholars argue that such actions combined the use of martial power with an appeal to religious justice; the Qing portrayed the removal of "infidel" Dzungar rulers as a liberation for Tibetan Buddhists [7]. This narrative allowed the empire to justify expansion under the guise of righteous intervention.

Alongside forceful measures, the Qing employed divide-and-rule tactics. By supporting the Gelugpa sect, the Qing implicitly cultivated divisions between Gelugpa and other Buddhist lineages. Within Gelug itself, the Qing sponsored multiple Panchen and other high lamas, and at times even encouraged competition between the Dalai Lama and other incarnations lineages, so that no single figure could dominate religious authority unchecked [1]. In Mongolia, the Qing backed one branch of the aristocracy against another if the balance of power threatened central authority. The Qing would, for example, differentiate between Khalkha and Oirat Mongols, granting slightly different privileges to each in order to prevent a unified Mongolian challenge. This strategy of managed pluralism meant the Qing government carefully calibrated their patronage: enough to maintain loyalty, but with checks to prevent any subordinate group from gaining too strong an independent religious identity.

Economic and social co-option strategies were also critical. The Qing often co-opted the monastic economy into the imperial system by integrating monasteries into state-regulated taxation and land systems. Monasteries that wished to enjoy tax exemptions or land grants had to register their holdings with the authorities and sometimes take on state-appointed abbots [4]. The court even established special funds to support certain monasteries, tying their fortune to that of the empire. In parallel, the Qing sponsored cultural exchange programs: they invited Tibetan scholars to the capital and sent Manchu and Mongol officials to study Buddhism in major Tibetan temples. These exchanges served to both disseminate Qing-sanctioned interpretations of Buddhism and to instill Confucian loyalty among Buddhist elites [8].

Finally, a concrete strategy for controlling succession in religion was the reincarnation selection process. After the Sino-Nepalese War (1788–1792) ended with a Qing victory, the 1793 29-Article Ordinance for the More Effective Governing of Tibet stipulated that new Dalai and Panchen Lamas would be chosen by lot from among golden urns bearing their names — a method instituted by the Qianlong Emperor in 1792. This Golden Urn system, though partly a fiction since Qing officials often manipulated outcomes, effectively gave the Qing emperor veto power over high lama appointments. Historians point out that this was arguably the most direct form of imperial control over Tibetan religion, ensuring that every head lama was at least nominally a product of Qing authority.

Taken together, these strategies formed a comprehensive statecraft of religious governance. The Qing empire did not passively adopt Tibetan Buddhism; it actively shaped its institutions to serve imperial needs. Scholars describe this fusion of policy as a careful balancing act: the Qing had to remain patron enough to gain Buddhist support, but powerful enough to enforce its rules. The evidence shows an empire deeply engaged with religion as an arm of governance — an approach that was innovative for Chinese dynasties and crucial for the longevity of Qing rule. The Qing's actions in monasteries, courts, and battlefields illustrate a consistent strategy: to weave Buddhism into the fabric of state in such a way that the frontiers would remain loyal, the lamas would remain compliant, and the empire as a whole would prosper under the aegis of a shared religious-political order [1].

4.3. Effect

4.3.1. Political stability

The Qing dynasty's religious policies aimed to stabilize Tibet and Mongolia as loyal frontiers, but the results diverged sharply. In Mongolia, state support for the Gelug (Yellow Hat) sect largely secured the allegiance of Mongol nobles and commoners. Although the Qing-endorsed Huangjiao (Gelug) policy had some negative impact on Mongolian society, it nonetheless maintained the nation's stability [9]. By promoting Gelug among Mongols (through temple patronage, exemptions, and high titles for lamas), the Qing bound Mongolian banner leaders more closely to the imperial center. This religious tie helped avert large-scale rebellions; no major Mongol uprising threatened the empire after Kangxi's conquest of the Khalkha in 1696 and the defeat of the Oirats under Qianlong. In effect, Qing patronage of Gelug became a social glue in Mongolia, as Wang notes, helping to "maintain…unity and stability" on the northern border. Political order in Mongolia therefore remained comparatively secure throughout the Kangxi–Qianlong period.

Tibet's experience was more turbulent. Early Qing rule in Tibet was marked by conflict and resistance. Kangxi and his successors faced instability caused by rival Tibetan factions and external invaders. For example, after the Mongol khan Lha-bzang was overthrown, the Dzungar Mongols invaded Tibet in 1717 and killed the Qing-backed regent, demonstrating Tibetan volatility. Only a decisive Qing military expedition in 1720 during Kangxi's reign expelled the Dzungars and restored the 7th Dalai Lama, but effective Qing control was still indirect, mediated through local lamas and regents. In the early 18th century Qing policy in Tibet often reacted to crises rather than prevented them. It was not until mid-Qianlong (c. 1751) that the Qing reorganized Tibetan governance – splitting civil and religious power and replacing hereditary regents with the Kashag council – that political stability was consolidated. In short, whereas Mongolian stability was largely preserved through Qing religious patronage, Tibet saw prolonged instability and resistance in the early Qing, necessitating multiple military interventions before the state finally imposed more effective control under Qianlong. This pattern of early disorder followed by later stabilization reflects the unique political geography of Tibet and the challenge of integrating its theocratic polity.

4.3.2. Military and security outcomes

Religious policy was intertwined with military security, with the Qing deploying force when necessary to enforce order. In Mongolia, once the Qing had defeated the Dzungar Oirats (1755–57) and secured the northern border by the 1689 Treaty of Nerchinsk, frontiers became relatively quiet. The Qing relied on Mongolian banners to guard the steppes, and no large-scale foreign incursion reached central Mongolia after the 1690s. As Wang notes, the Gelugpa policy weakened Mongolian military force by making Mongols "inactive" in war, but this very effect was conducive to peace and stability of the society [9]. In other words, the reduction in Mongol bellicosity – a byproduct of pacification through religion – meant fewer rebellions. The frontier was so secure that Mongolian and Qing forces could even be sent on distant campaigns. For example, Mongol banners supported Qing armies in the Nepal campaign of 1791–92. Thus, for Mongolia the combination of religious conciliation and military deterrence produced a strong security outcome, albeit at the cost of diminished Mongol martial vigor.

Tibet's security outcomes were mixed. Here the Qing repeatedly used military campaigns to deal with instability. Kangxi's armies first entered Tibet in 1720 and again under Yongzheng to quell local uprisings. Qianlong later intervened in 1758 and 1792 to suppress feuding Tibetan and neighboring rulers, including the Gurkhas in Nepal. These interventions succeeded in driving out rivals - the Dzungars and Gurkhas - and reasserting Qing prestige. In that sense, Qing strategy in Tibet was militarily effective: foreign threats were neutralized, and a modicum of order was imposed. However, the need for repeated campaigns also shows the limits of Qing influence. Until the mid-18th century, Tibet could not be secured by soft policy alone. By contrast, the religious strategy in Mongolia helped render large-scale Qing military intervention unnecessary after 1700. In sum, Qing military outcomes were better in Mongolia, where religious pacification prevented warfare, than in Tibet, where force was the main tool of control.

4.3.3. Fiscal and administrative integration

The Qing's integration of the two regions also differed. In Mongolia, religious policy went hand-in-hand with administrative incorporation. Mongolian leaders were enrolled in the Eight Banner system or managed through the Lifanyuan, and they paid tribute to the emperor. The Qing granted Mongol nobility stipends of silver and trade privileges, often conducted through monastic networks, and these policies nurtured a Mongolian economy tied to the Qing state. Scholars noted that under Qing rule, the Mongolian economy (including monastery economy), religious culture and education obtained a degree of development [9]. In practice this meant investment in Mongol pastures and temples, and the export of Mongolian horses and furs to China for sale or military use, which brought material prosperity to some Mongols. Thus, the economic aspect of integration – however uneven – appears to have been reasonably effective: the frontier economy expanded under Qing auspices, and Mongol elites profited from the status quo. However, it should also be noted that although religion became a cornerstone of local culture and cultivated a literate class, it also constrained secular education, resisted modern schooling, and contributed to social stagnation and population decline due to monastic celibacy and anti-modern attitudes [10].

Tibet was administered more as a tributary dependency. The Qing did not impose direct taxes on Tibet or restructure its economy but rather left fiscal matters largely in native hands. Tibetan monasteries were sponsored and issued paper money, and the Dalai Lama received Chinese gifts and an imperial seal of authority, but daily revenue was collected by Tibet's own Kashag or by appointed Dalai regents, not by Chinese officials. In 1751 Qianlong forbade charging "porter fees" on commoners (a tax on peasants), and overall, the region's integration remained loose. In effect, Tibet's economy continued under Tibetan control: nomads, farmers, and lamas paid tithes and rents to monastic authorities more than to Peking. The Qing treasury gained little revenue from Tibet beyond ceremonial gifts and the costs of its missions. Administratively, Tibetans were ruled by a mix of imperial ambans (resident commissioners) and the Dalai Lama's government. The Qing shrewdly balanced control through ambans with co-optation while honoring the Dalai Lama's status but stopped short of full bureaucratic integration. Therefore, fiscal and administrative integration was more thorough in Mongolia through tribute and banner governance than in Tibet, which remained semi-autonomous under the existing Gelug hierarchy.

4.3.4. Cultural and long-term impacts

In the long run, Qing religious policy left lasting cultural imprints, again with regional contrasts. The most notable impact was the spread of Gelug Buddhism as a shared identity. In Mongolia, Gelug became nearly universal: virtually all major Mongol nobles converted or officially patronized it. Young Mongol aristocrats were sent to Lhasa to study, and many Mongolian monasteries were built in Chinese and Tibetan styles with Qing support. This created a pan-Mongolian clergy linked to the Dalai and Panchen Lamas. Over generations, Gelug fused Manchu–Mongol–Tibetan religious worlds into a common framework. Even the Qing court adopted Buddhist symbols (for example, Qianlong's fondness for Tibetan Buddhist iconography), reflecting the extent of this cultural integration.

Tibet likewise became more closely aligned with the Qing in cultural terms, though the effect was complex. The Qing emperors continued the Ming practice of conferring titles on Tibetan lamas; Qianlong's lavish gifts to Lhasa and his own writings on lamas show an imperial embrace of Tibetan Buddhism. Culturally, the period saw a flourishing of Tibetan literature, art, and printing, much of it sponsored by Beijing and by the Gelug establishment. Architecturally, Lhasa's Potala Palace was expanded under Qianlong, symbolizing Qing support for Tibetan cultural glory. However, scholars note that Tibet remained distinctive – Qing influence was exercised through religion, not by imposing Han culture. In fact, the policy of privileging Gelug meant that Tibet's religious-civil system persisted largely intact with the Gelug patriarchy continuing, so there was little assimilation of Han administrative practices. However, some scholars also argue that although Qing rule ensured a degree of stability and continuity, monastic regulations such as prohibitions on marriage and labor led to population decline, economic stagnation, and excessive land and wealth concentration in monasteries in the long run [11]. In Mongolia, the long-term impact was more profound: Qing policies deeply transformed Mongol society, integrating it into the multi-ethnic Qing empire, while in Tibet the impact was lighter – preserving Tibetan elites' traditional authority while placing them under imperial patronage.

Overall, the effectiveness of Qing strategies was mixed but regionally varied. In Mongolia, the combination of religious patronage and administrative incorporation largely achieved the Qing aims of stability, loyalty, and economic development. Early Tibetan policy, by contrast, encountered significant instability and resistance: the frontier remained volatile until Qianlong's mid-18th-century reforms. Even then, Tibet's integration remained shallow. The sources suggest that Qing methods worked better on the steppe, where Buddhism was already entrenched and tribal structures could be co-opted, than in Tibet, where politics were more complex and autonomous. These outcomes indicate that the Qing's religious policy was effective in consolidating control on the Mongolian border, but only gradually effective in Tibet – a disparity traceable to the frontier geography and the reactive nature of early Qing interventions.

5. Discussion

5.1. Policy initiative and reactive adaptation

In Tibet the Qing were proactive. Military conquest was followed by institutional reforms: Ambans and Tibetan regents were appointed to displace native ruling houses, and monastic succession with the Golden Urn was regulated to ensure imperial influence. The Qing also reformed fiscal systems by placing monasteries under state tax registers and stationed troops. In Mongolia, by contrast, the Qing mostly acted through intermediaries. Since Mongol loyalty was secured earlier (Khalkha submission by 1691), Qing emperors did not establish permanent administrators there. Instead, they reinforced local hierarchies: bestowing honors and stipends on Mongol princes and Gelugpa nobles to affirm Qing overlordship. This difference reflects the relative initiative of Qing policy: Tibet's theater required active state-building, whereas Mongolia's frontier was largely managed by accommodating existing powers.

(2) Gelugpa agency

Local lamas and aristocrats shaped these policies. In Mongolia, powerful Buddhist figures such as the Jebtsundamba Khutughtu negotiated their status, extracting privileges from Beijing in return for recognition. Pirie emphasizes that Mongol nobles and lamas were not passive: they leveraged Qing patronage to consolidate authority and sometimes resisted imperial encroachment in areas like Amdo [5]. In Tibet, Gelugpa elites similarly engaged with the Qing: while Dalai Lamas benefited from Chinese support and elevated the Gelugpa position through Qing patronage, they also worked to limit Qing oversight when possible [7]. For example, Tibetan leaders negotiated regency rules to reduce Amban power. Thus, in both regions, Gelugpa actors exercised agency—participating in the patronage relationship on terms that served their interests. The result was that Qing religious policy often operated through compromise: lamas accepted titles and funds but retained substantial autonomy.

(3) Regional structural differences

The underlying social and political structures of Tibet and Mongolia explain why the above patterns emerged. Tibet's centralized theocracy with a singular Dalai Lama hierarchy and large monasteries meant that the Qing faced one dominant network to manage. Direct oversight via Ambans and central decrees was feasible but costly, given Tibet's distance and unique traditions. Mongolia's situation was almost the opposite: its society was divided among multiple khans and lineages, each with its own Gelugpa patrons. Geography also mattered – Mongolia's steppes were more accessible to nomadic mobility, making permanent administration less effective. Consequently, the Qing tailored their tools: they built bureaucratic channels (Lifan Yuan) to handle Tibet's unified structure, while in Mongolia they worked through the banner system and Mongol patron-lama networks. In summary, the Qing combined consistent goals of stability, legitimacy, assimilation with adaptive means. The divergent outcomes – intrusive oversight in Tibet, indirect patronage in Mongolia – thus reflect how frontier structure and local agency shaped policy.

Together, these themes answer our research question. They show that the same ideological program produced different modes of rule because the Qing adapted to context. The Gelugpa-centered strategy offered legitimacy in both regions, but Tibetan political centralization invited bureaucratic intervention, whereas Mongolian fragmentation allowed a lighter touch. This confirms that Qing religious policy was coherent in intent but differentiated in practice.

5.2. Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, our sources are biased toward the Qing perspective. We rely mainly on Chinese-language scholarship and official documents, so indigenous Tibetan and Mongolian voices are largely absent. This limits our insight into local perceptions and reactions. For instance, although Qing official caliber and conventional historiography defined the Dzungar rebellion as merely a violent "灭法" (religious persecution), scholars like Wang & Yang challenges this established view and reinterprets it as an act of "护法" (protection of the Gelugpa sect) instead. They argue that the Dzungars deliberately suppressed rival sects like the Nyingma while promoting Gelugpa monastic reforms aligned with their political goals, hinting that there may be more complex sectarian dynamics behind the event, and the Qing narrative might just serve as legitimization for later intervention in Tibet [12].

Second, the comparative-historical method illuminates general patterns but may oversimplify local variation. Our cross-case analysis cannot capture every intra-regional difference, and causal links (e.g. from a decree to a specific outcome) remain somewhat conjectural given complex frontier dynamics. Future research should incorporate Tibetan- and Mongolian-language materials, such as monastic chronicles or administrative records, and undertake fieldwork to include local narratives. Such work would help test and refine our conclusions, providing a more granular view of Qing religious governance.

6. Conclusion

This comparative study offers two main contributions. Methodologically, it demonstrates the value of cross-regional analysis for Qing frontier studies. By examining Tibet and Mongolia side by side, we reveal patterns that single-case studies miss, showing how similar policies operated differently. Theoretically, our findings highlight the flexibility and limits of imperial religious governance. The Qing Empire pursued a unified Gelugpa-based ideology to integrate its frontiers but had to adapt that ideology to local conditions. In practice, the dynasty combined ideology with pragmatism: it projected itself as a Buddhist sovereign to legitimize rule yet calibrated its involvement to each region's structure. This underscores that Qing statecraft was not monolithically top-down; it was mediated by geography, social organization, and the actions of local actors.

These insights have broader relevance for understanding state–religion relations and imperial rule. They suggest that empires can wield religion as a cohesive force, but that outcomes depend on pre-existing local systems. In the Qing case, religion served both as an adhesive and as a constraint. Recognizing this duality enriches our view of imperial governance: integration is achieved not only by ideology, but by the intricate interplay between central aims and frontier realities. Beyond the Qing case, these findings contribute to broader debates on empire-building and the role of religion in state formation.

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