

Tibet



Peter Schwieger, *The Dalai Lama and the Emperor of China: A Political History of the Tibetan Institution of Reincarnation*

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DURING THE THIRTEENTH CENTURY, the Karma Kargyu sect of Tibetan Buddhism augmented the fundamental understanding of Mahayana Buddhism that the fully enlightened being would forgo release from the cycle of rebirth in order to work for the enlightenment of all sentient beings, introducing the understanding that the earthly reincarnations of such enlightened individuals—or Boddhisattvas—could be specifically identified. In due course this belief became universal within

Tibetan Buddhism and the processes by which reincarnations were identified became standardized. Within what became the leading sect, the Gelukpa, the reincarnation system was fully developed during the seventeenth century and the incarnations (Trülkus), considered to possess the powers of the Boddhisattva from which they emanated, were elevated to the leading positions within Tibetan society. The most prominent Trülkus were of course the Dalai and Panchen Lamas, but for a variety of reasons the numbers of those so identified increasingly proliferated. While no standard list exists it is estimated here that there was a 40 percent increase in incarnation lineages during the eighteenth century and their ranks have continued to expand even in the modern period.

As *The Dalai Lama and the Emperor of China*, their leading role in Tibetan society involved Trülkus not only in socio-religious roles, but in “economic, legal, and political functions” (i) and their eminence “created and justified distinct patterns of social and political interaction, not only within Tibet itself but also in relation to its mighty neighbors” (vii). It is with the interface of religion and politics, the reincarnation system’s effects on those relationships between Tibet, China, and the Mongols, that this work is concerned. Its central questions involve the development of the political role of the leading Tibetan incarnations, their function, and the efforts of the emperors of China to influence that role, particularly during the struggles between the three great Central Asian powers over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Drawing to a large extent on the author’s expertise in the translation and interpretation of Sino-Tibetan diplomatic correspondence, much of which has only become available to scholarship in recent decades, the result is not only to highlight the fundamental significance of the institution of reincarnation to the Tibetan Buddhist sociopolitical system, but also to provide the most authoritative account we have of this period of Tibetan and indeed Inner Asian history. While the pioneering studies of Luciano Petech remain important, *The Dalai Lama and the Emperor of China* is essential reading for all concerned with this era and with the history of Sino-Tibetan relations. At all times sensitive to the many nuances of the subject and the multiple interpretations possible, this work is also of great significance in that it serves as the most sophisticated analysis we have of the process and stages by which the Qing dynasty took power in Tibet. In its erudite scholarship and measured judgments it is an unmatched study of a crucial period of history, and will unquestionably be the standard work on the subject for many years to come.

Within the Tibetan system, as Schweiger observes, “[t]he goal of the ‘union of religion and politics’ was the total subordination of the secular sphere to the religious sphere” (60); the role of the political was ultimately to further religious aims. That implicitly required, however, patronage and protection of Tibet’s religious institutions by powerful secular forces, which led to the “patron-priest” relationship between the Qing Emperor and the Dalai Lama. The Tibetans, and more specifically the Gelukpa, originally sought to extend the authority of the Dalai Lama to encompass their Mongolian co-religionists, notably through the endowment of the Dsungar Mongol leaders with religious titles ultimately intended to ensure their patronage of the Dalai Lamas.

The complex interplay of Tibetan, Mongol, and Chinese forces is skilfully analyzed in the core of this work, which takes the Qing Emperor's recognition of the sixth Dalai Lama in 1710 as an early marker of China's supremacy over Tibet (119). That authority became clearly manifest when the Chinese intervened there to expel the Dsungar forces and install the seventh Dalai Lama in Lhasa in 1720. Subsequently the Qing appointed the Tibetan regent after the seventh's death in 1757 and with the emperor himself acknowledged by the Tibetans as a *Bodhisattva*, Tibetan religion was fully "subordinated to imperial politics" (158).

In their relations with the Tibetan elites the Chinese emperors sought through the award of titles and authority to use the incarnation processes in Tibet as a tool with which to control their neighbors, albeit that Schweiger concludes that their interest in Tibetan Buddhism was "a genuine effort to actually master and control ... Buddhist technology" (165). Indeed that the emperor was not a purely secular force was indicated by his frequent critiques of the Dalai Lama in the religious sphere.

A notable inclusion here is Schweiger's original translation of the Tibetan language version of the 1751 document detailing the reorganization of the Tibetan government under the emperor's authority. While restoring political power to the Dalai Lama, it placed the Chinese representatives in Lhasa (the Ambans) on an equal footing with the Tibetan reincarnation, and established the emperor as the ultimate authority in Tibet.

In an analysis of the 1793 edict attributed to the Qianlong emperor, the author also provides an illuminating discussion concerning the so-called "Golden Urn." This was presented to the Tibetans by the emperor with the intention that the names of leading candidates for high incarnation positions should be placed in it and, in the fashion of a lottery, the "winner" drawn out by a suitable authority in the presence of the Ambans. Modern exile Tibetan historians, notably Tsepon Shakabpa, have situated this device as a benchmark for nineteenth-century Tibetan resistance to Chinese authority, with the occasional rejection of its usage (as in the selection of the thirteenth Dalai Lama), presented as a nationalist statement. In this account, however, the Urn is rather less of a Chinese Trojan horse and more a necessary insurance against corruption and nepotism, and it is the submissive forms and modes of communication to the emperor from the Tibetan authorities that are of greater significance in understanding nineteenth century power balances.

The author's concern is with the establishment of the reincarnation system, and his treatment of the post-eighteenth century period is brief. This reader would have favored more detailed analysis of the incarnation processes under the powerful thirteenth Dalai Lama, whose period of rule (1899–1933) straddled the end of the Qing dynasty and a period of effective Tibetan independence, albeit that the end of the Qing dynasty "brought an end to this mutually accepted, common ideological ground" (216). Subsequent Republican and Communist Chinese governments' claims to Tibet have, however, inexorably drawn them into involvement in the Tibetan incarnation system, and today the Beijing-recognized incarnates are expected and required to uphold Communist authority and policies in the TAR. In contrast to the period of their patron-priest relationship with the Qing emperor,

however, Tibetans accept such policies under duress.

While focusing, as the title indicates, exclusively on the higher incarnations, this work should provide a basis for future studies developing the conclusions established here, most obviously in regard to economic imperatives and how the process operated at local and regional levels, but also concerning the role of those “ambiguous” figures, the Regents, and the monastic managers who acted on behalf of the Trülkus. The “second level of incarnations from which the Regents were drawn” were instituted by the emperor, allowing the author to conclude that “[I]t can therefore be said that the dominance of the Qing court over Tibet was based entirely on the Tibetan Institution of reincarnation” (220), albeit that they helped create an image of the Dalai Lama which was too powerful for even modern China to control.

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