

The Tibetan Tradition of Reincarnation and CCP's Assertion to Reign Sovereignty over "Living Buddhas"

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Introduction

The tradition of reincarnation is rooted on a Buddhist belief system wherein all sentient beings are bound through a cycle of birth and death. The cycle is broken when through rigorous training and practice one could attain enlightenment. The Sankrit term for Tulku is Nirmanakaya. It has been variedly translated into English as the manifested body, incarnation, reincarnation and rebirth. In Chinese it has been translated as huafo meaning "living Buddha" and in Mongolian as qubilyan. Tulkus are considered principal standard-bearers of Tibetan Buddhist traditions and provide social and spiritual guidance for both ordained and laity. (Thondup, 2011)

In Tibetan Buddhism there are broadly three types of tulkus. Foremost are the emanation of the Buddhas. The second are the manifestations of highly accomplished adepts and the third are the rebirths of virtuous teachers and spiritual masters. The Buddha manifestations or Tulkus in Sanskrit is referred to as Nirmanakaya, they appear as ordinary beings and serve in infinite forms through their enlightened attainments. The second type of tulku who are manifestations of highly accomplished adepts appear in forms through their highly realized wisdom. The third type are the rebirths of virtuous and meritorious teachers who are in the process of fulfilling their own spiritual goals and at the same time serving others through the beneficial effects of their own virtuous deeds.

In Tibet, most of the tulkus belong to the third category who are the rebirths of virtuous teachers and lamas (Thondup, 2011). In Tibet, as Tibetans practice Mahayana (Great Vehicle), they believe that buddhas and bodhisattvas continue to manifest in different forms to help other beings for liberation from samsara (Gamble, 2018). As with the manifestations of the enlightened power of the buddhas, Tibetans have adopted the term and concept of tulku for the rebirth of Tibetan lamas who are considered virtuous and due to their spiritual attainment. This revolves around the concept of Karma where deceased lamas who have accumulated virtuous karma will obtain rebirths that could help them continue with their tasks of helping others. This stems from a belief that the lamas who have led a virtuous life, accumulated merits becomes a source of happiness and provide guidance to enlightenment among Tibetan Buddhists. Tibetan Buddhists also believe in the power of highly accomplished adepts to find the reborn manifestations of deceased lamas, because they trust in the power of highly realized wisdom-mind. Tibetan Buddhists enjoy full trust in the tulku tradition because it is based on mahayana fundamentals, and they have witnessed and appreciated an abundance of benefit from the good merit of tulkus. To explain it in clear terms, tulkus are the earthly manifestation of buddhahood (Kuijp, 2013).

Tibetan Assimilation of Buddhism

Imperial Tibet (c.629-869), a period in Tibetan history whose periodization is based on traditional Tibetan historiography, during this period Tibet witnessed the adoption of Tibetan script and first assimilation of Buddhism from India (Dung-dkar-blo-bzang-'phrin-las, 1981/83). One of the most significant contributions during the reign of Songsten Gampo(c.605-650)remained his endeavor to invent Tibetan script where he sent sixteen people, including Thonmi Sambhota and Taglo Dhetrong, to India to study various Indian literature and scripts. When he returned to Tibet ... he devised the first Tibetan script and established the tradition of written Tibetan. It became the root of all knowledge. The common written script of the Tibetan language enabled the Tibetan people to store the whole body of knowledge from Buddhist India. The script also enabled the Tibetans to store and

leave for posterity non-Buddhist knowledge and sciences emanating from other cultural realms (Samten, 2005).

During the reign of Trisong Detsen (756-797 or 804), a grand debate was held to decide on the importation of Buddhism to Tibet. The debate on philosophical principles was held between “Simultaneists” led by Moheyan (A Chinese Buddhist teacher and a practitioner) and the “Gradualists” led by Kamalashila (an Indian student of Shantarakshita). The debate for the adoption of Chinese and Indian Buddhist tradition, the outcome of the debate would serve to gain imperial endorsement of to take firm root in Tibet (Desal, 2017). This debate is recounted later to have continued for two years, which is later described as the “Council of Samye.” The emperor declared Kamalashila, the Indian master victorious. Tibetans would continue to consult Indian masters and momentous translation projects under various patronages served as the basis for Tibetan Buddhism.

According to Tibetan Buddhist historiography, the last imperial king of Tibet, Lang Darma (Darma the Ox) after ascending to the throne of “Greater Tibet” indulged in a lifestyle of drinking, hunting and partying. The ministers who steered him to power set about cutting spending on Buddhist projects. This led to Lhalung Palgyi Dorje, the ninth abbot of Samye to assassinate the king by breaking his monastic vows in 842 (Schaik, 2012). This marks the beginning of the disintegration of Tibetan empire. Most of the Buddhist historical writings suggest that the King Songtsen Gampo is an incarnation of Tibet’s patron saint Avalokiteivara and he ‘tamed’ the country by introducing Buddhism and establishing the monarchy with Lhasa at its center. He, along with two other imperial kings are credited as the religious kings of Tibet and marked the ‘earlier spread’ (snga-dar) of Buddhism, which ends in the mid ninth century with the persecution of the “wicked” king Lang Darma (Stein, 1972).

Traditional historical accounts record that following the assassination of the anti-Buddhist monarch Lang Darma in 842, and the ensuing power vacuum persisted for a full four hundred years. Eventually Tibet witnessed germination of cultural life as Tibetan seekers and adventurers in great earnestness began to look outside Tibet for authoritative sources of Buddhist teachings. Tibetan seekers went to India in Nepal in the eleventh century in search of teachers, text and masters of esoteric practice. This development is epitomized in the Western Tibet by the life and time of the great translator Rinchen Zangpo (958-1055). He was patronized by the monarchs of the Kingdom of Guge and went on to establish monasteries in Tibet and in what is now the Indian Himalayas in Ladakh and Spiti. This development received further impetus with the visit of an Indian scholar and adept Atisha (982-1045) who was invited to teach in 1042. The works and life of these two Buddhist scholars marked the beginning of what is recorded in traditional Tibetan historical writings as the “later spread of the teaching”(bstan-pa phyi-dar), or the age of the “new translations” (Kapstein, 2000).

Birth of *tulku* System in Tibetan Buddhism

It is difficult to assert and establish the origin of tulku system in Tibet. However, traditional Tibetan sources suggest that tulku system began with Karma Phakshi (1206-1283). He was the second hierarch of the Karma branch of the Kagyu School. Karma Phakshi is later recognized as the reincarnation of the Dusum Khenpa (1110-1193) and that of Avalokitesvara (Kuijp, 2013). By the lifetime of the third Karmapa, Rangjung Dorje (1284-1339) in the thirteenth century Tibet, the belief in reincarnation was well established in Tibet (Gamble, 2018). The current Karmapa is the seventeenth reincarnation of Karmapas of the Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism. In a comprehensive study on tulkus in Tibet, the total named and dated incarnations from 1100–1950 is estimated to be about 445. According to this study, Amdo dominates with 188 recognised incarnations, followed by “Central Tibet” with 104 and in Kham, the study points that there are 104 incarnations and 11 is listed as others during that period (Tuttle, 2017, p. 30). Since the ascendancy

of Gelugpa tradition of Tibetan Buddhism in sixteenth and seventeenth century, the incarnations of the Dalai Lamas and the Panchen Lamas became significant. The rise of the Gelugpa is evidenced from the number of new incarnation lineages that emerged in Tibet affiliated to the Gelugpas. From 1460s to the 1630s there were at least 85 new incarnation lineages recognized, 43 of which were in Central Tibet, and more than a third (32) were within the dGa' ldan pa/ dGe lugs pa (Tuttle, 2017).

Among the incarnation lineages recognized in the period, two incarnations became particularly significant and revered in Tibet. The Dalai Lamas and the Panchen Lamas are regarded by Tibetans as the 'sun and moon' owing to special spiritual bond they share and their interchangeable role as teacher and disciple. The Tashilhunpo monastery that was founded by the first Dalai Lama, Gendun Drupa (1391-1474) in 1447 and also was its first abbot. During the fifth Dalai Lama, Lobsang Gyatso (1617-1682), the abbot of the Tashilhunpo monastery, Lobsang Choekyi Gyaltsen (1570-1662) was bestowed the title Panchen Lama and ownership of the Tashilhunpo Monastery. This became the seat of the incarnations of the Panchen Lamas (DIIR, 2019).

PRC and Religion in China

The founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the development of religious policy after 1949 could be seen as an attempt by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to exercise control over all spheres of social and political life. The Constitution of the PRC grants all its citizens who are above 18 years of age and who are not a member of PRC freedom of religious belief and by corollary freedom not to believe. The purpose of policy on religion in China was to eviscerate the religious communities and its institutions and essentially turning them into an instrument of the CCP's United Front Work Department. The space and influence of religions who had no potential symbolic and institutional autonomy from the "feudal" and "semi-colonial structures" of the "old society" were curtailed (Palmer, 2009). Confucianism which had been disorganized since the collapse of imperial China and the imperial examination system was completely banned as the very essence of "feudalism" (Duara, 2003). The specific state organizations that govern and control religion in China are the Religious Affairs Bureau (RAB) or it came to be known as the State Association for Religious Affairs (SARA) in 1998 (Conkling, 2014). Under the supervision of State Council's Religious Affairs Bureau (RAB) only Buddhism, Christianity and Islam were accorded legitimacy as "religion" due to their recognition as world religion, self-contained scriptural and symbolic systems and their identifiable religious institutions. Their religious leaders were dealt by the United Front Department of the CCP.

China's Management of Tibetan Buddhism

The signing of the 17-Point Agreement marked on 23 May, 1951 marked the beginning of the implementation of CCP's policies on Tibet. This was followed by the formation of the Preparatory Committee for the Autonomous Region of Tibet (PCART) in 1954, which laid the foundation for the formation of the Tibet Autonomous Region in 1965. This controversial treaty is seen by Beijing as an agreement between the Central Government and the representatives of the Tibetan "Local Government." However it had been repudiated by the exile Tibetan government as the "agreement" being made to sign this agreement under duress (DIIR, 2001). This agreement guaranteed that the traditional Tibetan political system wouldn't be altered and the religious freedom of the Tibetan people would be respected as promised in the Common Program of the Chinese People Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC). This also came with an assurance that the income and the economy of Tibetan monasteries wouldn't be altered (DIIR, 2001). In an attempt to attract religious elites, the Party organized number of visits for them to visit Beijing by the newly-formed Party-state. This is exemplified by the visit of 30-member-delegate of Tibetan tulkus from various regions in Tibet in 1952. The group included Hsieh-wala, the "Living Buddha" of the Chamdo Lama monastery;

Kang-ku, the Living Buddha of Chaya County, Kungpu, acting commander of the ninth regiment of the Tibetan local army, lamas of various sects in Chamdo and representatives of the Tibetan population. The Living Buddha of Lungwu monastery, Hsia Jihsang in Tungjen County, Qinghai and six other Tibetans also arrived in Beijing on 24 March 1952 to “pay respects” to Chairman Mao (Yeshe, 2015).

This early policy of uneasy accommodation witnessed a rupture with the implementation of “Democratic Reform.” This policy in Tibet was implemented during the China’s Great Leap Forward to achieve ambitious economic growth. At the same time, some privileges accorded to religious elites and monasteries were curbed. During this period, Tibetans were subjected to a state-led violence and atrocities in many parts of Tibet. In some regions of Tibet, unprecedented mass-starvation occurred and in certain other parts of Tibet it resulted in a highly skewed gender ratio due to depleting male population (Sperling, 2012). This led to the 10th Panchen Lama, Lobsang Trinley Lhündrub Chökyi Gyaltsen, to draft and submit a critical petition calling out on failed policies in Tibet to Chairman Mao through Zhou Enlai (Gyaltsen, 1997).

From 1966-76, when Tibet was also swept by the Cultural Revolution as with the rest of China, China’s policies on Tibetan Buddhism took a radical shift as religious elites who were earlier courted by the party-state came under severe attack. This is exemplified by no other than the persecution and the fall of the tenth Panchen Lama. He was a towering figure in the party-state administering Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism and at the same time he took it upon himself to question China’s failed policies in Tibet (Desal, 2019). Following the death of Mao in 1976, with the ascendancy of Deng Xiaoping many of the religious and political leaders who were purged during the Cultural Revolution were rehabilitated (Desal, 2019).

The management of all Buddhist institutions in Tibet were altered in order to maintain the primacy of the CCP in all spheres of religious and social life. In February 2012, reports started to emerge on the establishment of Democratic Management Committees in “every” Tibetan monasteries. The report cited Luobu Dunzhu, a director with the office of religious affairs under the Tibetan United Front Work Department saying that the committee is tasked to “carry out duties including tourist reception, cultural relic protection and assisting locals with religious affairs.” This measure seemed to be an immediate response to the mass uprising across Tibetan region in 2008 (UN, EU and Human Rights Desk, 2010). The report cites Lhasa’s Party chief, Qi Zhala urging “monastery committee workers to raise vigilance and create a “harmonious and stable” social environment for the 18th National Congress” and “recognize the “important role it has played in maintaining stability” (Le, 2012). The Buddhist Association of China (BAC) in late 2012 passed a regulation that gave party and government officials wherewithal to appoint religious instructors in Tibetan Buddhist institutions (TCHRD, 2014). The official media of the PRC in March 2013, had reported that these measures had proven effective and quoted TAR religious bureau and United Front Work Department officials saying that this new policy was effective to “instill love and patriotism towards the Motherland in the minds of monks and nuns and destroy the forces of separatism” (TCHRD, 2014).

This management of monastic affairs by party officials is supplemented by other coercive measures that include patriotic education. It is difficult to ascertain and fully comprehend the extent to which these measures are imposed. Larung Gar monastery which is now administered under Sêrtar County of Garzê Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, in Sichuan had been until then one of the largest “center of Buddhist monasticism in Tibet, if not the world.” This had undergone an “eight-month program of expulsions and demolitions, which ended in April 2017 after reducing the number of residents to around 5,000.” China has mobilized over 200 Communist Party cadres and lay officials to take over all management, finances, security, admissions, and even the choice of textbooks at the center, following demolitions and expulsions of a sprawling monastic institution (Human Rights Watch,

2018). According to a brochure obtained by the rights group, it emphasized “increased security and heightened control of the monks and nuns, calling for rigid limits on the numbers allowed to stay there, and for ongoing surveillance of the monastery population through the establishment of a “grid management” system throughout the settlement” (Humarn Rights Watch, 2018). As early as 2012, Chinese state media had reported that since November 2011, the Chinese government had established monastery management committees in 1,787 monasteries in what is now the Tibet Autonomous Region alone (TCHRD, 2014).

Managing *tulkus* in PRC

In the early stage of China’s engagement with Tibetan polity, which could be described as uneasy accommodation, PRC sought to court many of the Tulkus in Tibet. It was only with the death of Mao in 1976 and the rehabilitation of purged leaders during the Cultural Revolution that limited right to freedom of religion was provided to Chinese citizens and also extended to the Tibetan regions. This led to germination of Tibetan cultural life and religious institutions in Tibet. This also led to the lifting of ban on the recognition of new tulkus that was effectively not allowed in Tibet since late 1950s (Kolas & Thowsen, 2005, p. 73).

The Information Office of the State Council, or China’s Cabinet, on Sept 6 issued a White Paper on Tibet which claims that China recognizes “has 358 Living Buddhas, more than 60 of whom have been confirmed through historical conventions and traditional religious rituals” (State Council, 2015). The state control over the recognition of Tibetan tulkus in Tibet is further strengthened by the establishment of a database that could be accessed online. A report in Chinese state-media in January 2016 claims that the online system contains profiles of 870 “living Buddhas.” The data had swollen and it was reported later in April 2016 that the registration system contains 1,311 “living Buddhas” (Global Times, 2016) However, public access to this database had proven difficult for researchers and observers outside Tibet and PRC.

On 13 July, 2007, one of the most significant and sweeping measure was introduced by the State Administration of Religious Affairs (SARA) that was slated for implementation from 1 September, 2007 called the “management measures for the reincarnation of living Buddhas in Tibetan Buddhism” or is commonly described as the Order no 5 (International Campaign for Tibet, 2007). Article 2 of the measure dictates that the “reincarnating living Buddhas should respect and protect the principles of the unification of the state, protecting the unity of the minorities, protecting religious concord and social harmony” and the “reincarnating living Buddhas shall not be interfered with or be under the dominion of any foreign organization or individual” (International Campaign for Tibet, 2007). This measure gives state and its local authorities sweeping power in the recognition of Tibetan tulkus as outlined in the article 5 of this measure:

Reincarnating living Buddhas should carry out application and approval procedures. The application and approval procedure is: the management organization at the monastery applying for the living Buddha reincarnation where the monk is registered, or the local Buddhist Association, should submit applications for reincarnations to the local religious affairs departments at the level of people’s government above county-level; once the people’s government above county-level has made suggestions, the people’s government religious affairs department reports upwards, and examination and approval shall be made by the provincial or autonomous regional people’s government religious affairs department. Living Buddha reincarnations who have a relatively large impact shall be reported to the provincial or autonomous regional people’s government for approval; those with a great impact shall be reported to the State Administration for Religious Affairs for approval; those with a particularly great impact shall be reported to the State Council for approval.

Failing to follow this measure, the article 11 reprimands that the “persons and units who are responsible for being in contravention of these measures and who without authority carry out living Buddha reincarnation affairs, shall be dealt administrative sanction by the people’s government religious affairs departments in accordance with stipulations in the “Regulations on Religious Affairs”; when a crime has been constituted, criminal responsibility shall be pursued” (International Campaign for Tibet, 2007).

Sinicisation of Tibetan Buddhism

The 19 Party Congress could be seen as an inflection point in the CCP’s history where the National People Congress reappointed Xi Jinping with no limit on the number of terms he can serve. This came in the wake of a terse announcement by Xinhua News Agency on February 25, 2018 saying that “The Communist Party of China Central Committee proposed to remove the expression that the President and Vice-President of the People’s Republic of China ‘shall serve no more than two consecutive terms’ from the country’s Constitution” (Xinhua, 2018). In his Work Report at the 19th Party Congress, Xi Jinping delivered a speech that lasted for over three hours; he further stressed the role of the United Front work to “ensure the success of the Party.” The United Front Work Department functions by liaising with the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC). A member from the Politburo Standing Committee heads this organization. The Charter of the CPPCC enunciates its place in governing China where it states: “The Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference is an organization of the united front of the Chinese people, an important institution of multi-party cooperation and political consultation under the leadership of the Communist Party of China” (Desal, 2017). On the sidelines of the CCP’s 19th National Party Congress on October 20, Zhang Yijiong, the executive deputy head of the UFD, elaborated on the CCP’s policy on religious affairs since the 18th Party Congress in 2012. Zhang stressed on CCP’s goal of “sinicizing religions” in China and the role of religious community in realizing “socialist core values.” In the public address he further went on to say and it is quoted below in verbatim, he said (Gao, 2017):

Tibetan Buddhism, born in our ancient China, is a religion with Chinese characteristics. It is true that Tibetan Buddhism in formation had received influence from other neighboring Buddhist countries, but it adapted to the local reality and formed its own unique doctrine and rituals, which is a model of sinicization itself... That we are actively guiding Tibetan Buddhism in the direction of sinicization is in the hope that Tibetan Buddhism will further absorb the nutrition of the Chinese excellent culture.

Conclusion

The tenth Panchen Lama was one of the towering figures in Tibet and he was later purged for critiquing the party’s policies in Tibet. After his death in 1989, the search for his reincarnation was pursued in Tibet with the list of probable candidates. When the Dalai Lama made his choice and declared on 15 May 1995 that Gendun Choekyi Nyima had been recognized as the 11th Panchen Lama. This declaration was sharply rebuked by the Chinese government and declared it “illegal and invalid.” On 17 May, 1995, the authorities abducted the child and his family. Chadrel Rinpoche who led the search party for the reincarnation and his assistant Jampa Chung were then arrested and handed six-year and four-year sentences respectively for “selling state secrets” and “colluding with separatist forces abroad”. Six months after his abduction, China announced that it had selected a Tibetan boy named Gyaltsen Norbu and he is currently being promoted by the government. However, little is known about the fate and current state of the candidate that was declared by the Dalai Lama as the reincarnation of the tenth Panchen Lama. China has in the last few decades have strengthened control over religious institutions with party cadres effectively controlling these institutions. With the introduction of new measures, all reincarnating lamas must now seek approval of the state. The Dalai Lama in a public statement remarked on the irony of Chinese attempts to seek to recognize his

reincarnation, he said that it “is particularly inappropriate for Chinese communists, who explicitly reject even the idea of past and future lives, let alone the concept of incarnate Tulkus, to meddle in the system of reincarnation and especially the reincarnations of the Dalai Lamas and Panchen Lamas.” He further said in no uncertain terms that “apart from the reincarnation recognized through such legitimate methods, no recognition or acceptance should be given to a candidate chosen for political ends by anyone, including those in the People’s Republic of China.”

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