

10 Contested (Geo)Politics of Reincarnation and the Future China-Tibet Relations

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Conventional international relations, based on secularized modernist ideas of sovereignty, statehood, and nationalism, creates winners and losers since not all people have secured their claims to these ideas. As European ideas and ideals of political community became universalized in the Tibetan-Himalayan world, China, both through actual physical occupation as well as its speedy sovereignty claims, has been a beneficiary while the Tibetan people lost out as their traditional lamaist state¹ was erased under the aegis of communist modernity.

A specific feature of Tibetan polity and culture has been the *trulku* system,² where certain lineages and beings are considered to be reincarnations, and some of them *bodhisattvas*, those sacred deities who have attained the highest level of enlightenment but delay entering into paradise because they want to be on earth to help fellow beings.³ While the notion of *karmic* cycle of birth, death, and rebirth is common to Hindu as well as Buddhist societies, reincarnation is different. Unlike ordinary sentient beings who are not aware of their previous births nor can escape the karmic cycle, the Tibetan Buddhist world in the last millennium developed the belief that a very select few can escape the cycle if they want to since they are enlightened; but they choose to come back on this earth for their missions are incomplete. There are hundreds of reincarnate lamas, often, but not always, males,⁴ in the wider Tibetan world, of which the Dalai Lama, the Panchen Lama and Karmapa are the most prominent. The Dalai Lama is the reincarnation of *Avalokitesvara*, the *bodhisattva* of compassion.

Unlike most traditional polities organized around tribes, kingdoms, or empires, Tibet was a lamaist state where it was the reincarnate lamas and their close ones who governed the state. The Dalai Lamas have been the head of that state for a few centuries. The present Dalai Lama, who often speaks of himself as a 'simple monk', is more than a religious leader; he is not a pope, he is not a prophet, he is the sacrality himself. The present Fourteenth Dalai Lama has

gone beyond being head of the Tibetan traditional state and since 1959 of the Tibetan movement-in-exile; he is a global figure. In fact, he insists that his priorities are universal compassion, inter-faith dialogue and religious harmony, and the Tibetan issue, in the declining order of importance. In his own words, “As far as this third commitment, it will cease to exist once a mutually beneficial solution is reached between the Tibetans and Chinese. However, my first two commitments I will carry on till my last breath.”⁵

The Dalai Lama’s role in surviving, sustaining, and flourishing the Tibetan national movement in exile is unparalleled. While the People’s Republic of China often demonizes him as a separatist, splittist, and enemy of China, they do recognize him as the legitimate Dalai Lama; this recognition of him is only as a ‘high lama’ and not the paramount leader of the Tibetan people. While Tibetans insist the reincarnation system is indigenous and based on a belief system that is not shared by the Chinese Communist Party and hence the latter has no *locus standi*, Beijing claims *trulkus* to be under its sovereignty. In the past, negotiations between Dharamshala, the seat of the Dalai Lama and of the de facto Tibetan Government-in-exile, and Beijing have taken place with latter insisting it has always been about the personal status of the Dalai Lama and his possible return from exile to the homeland. The absence of any negotiations for more than a decade and the relentless hardline stance by Communist party officials leave very little room for sincere dialogue and possible return of the Dalai Lama. In fact, Beijing insists on referring to him as “politician in exile” who is a “splittist.”⁶

As the Dalai Lama advances in age, Beijing has insisted that ultimate sovereignty over the institution lies with it, rather than with the Dalai Lama himself. Tibetans and their supporters are aware of how Beijing has sought to control the reincarnation system and specifically intervene when it comes to ‘high lamas’. The Dalai Lama’s chosen candidate for the Panchen Lama remains one of the world’s longest political prisoner, removed from public eye by the Chinese government, while Beijing imposed its own candidate and provides immense resources to bolster his legitimacy.

While it is tempting to reject this politicization of religious beliefs as stemming from the atheism of the party state of China, the story is more complex. The *trulku* system has never been free from politics, including high politics;⁷ even the name “Dalai” (“Ocean of Wisdom”) was given by a Mongol prince. The high lamas like the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama are the senior most *trulkus*, the reincarnate lamas. The Qing Empire run by the Manchus did claim

some role in the recognition of the three highest lamas of the Gelug sect, the dominant ones in Tibet and Mongolia. Contestation over reincarnation and the existence of more than one candidates supported by different factions of the *labrang* (monastic household) is not new. However, what is new is the fact that unlike the Manchus who sought to claim and play a role in order to prevent internecine conflicts and support and promote Tibetan Buddhism, specifically the primacy of the Gelug sect, the Communist Party of China interferes to sow discord, domesticate Tibetan Buddhism and dilute legitimacy.

Thus, the reincarnation of the future Fifteenth Dalai Lama will take place under intense media scrutiny and immense public interest, in addition to causing anxieties amongst not only Tibetans and the Chinese government, but various states including India, Mongolia, and even Russia that has two Buddhist republics within its territories. This topic is more than about contested reincarnation of one religious figure living in exile. The uncertainty relating to it will have significance beyond the Tibetans in Tibet because of the veneration for the Dalai Lama amongst Tibetan Buddhist populations outside Tibet.

For Tibetans, it will be a matter of life and death of their national movement. The Fifteenth Dalai Lama will be the reincarnation of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama; the manifestation will continue but through the body of a new person. Following centuries of tradition, it is the present Dalai Lama who will decide where he wants to reincarnate and it is those close to him in his personal office, *Gaden Phodrang*,⁸ who would have the traditional legitimacy to search for his reincarnation. The Dalai Lama has repeatedly made it clear that he will not reincarnate in Chinese controlled territories until the political conflict between China and Tibet is resolved; he has even referred to the possibility of not reincarnating at all. He asserts his agency.

Beijing's insistence⁹ that the present Dalai Lama is going against tradition and Tibetan belief system by saying he will not reincarnate raises questions of absurdity. A modernist communist state claims to be a defender of the reincarnation system while the reincarnate lama himself says his future will be determined by him and the Tibetan people alone.¹⁰ There is absolutely no precedence for anyone to force an enlightened *bodhisatva* to reincarnate against their own wishes.

Beijing's denial of agency to the Dalai Lama to reincarnate or not points toward its actual desire—it is not to preserve Tibetan tradition; it is to control and colonise it. Beijing will hope

that its meddling, including setting up contenders, will either make Tibetans give up resistance or become disillusioned by the entire system. In both cases, Beijing, with the hubris of a colonizer, hopes to be the winner.

What about neighboring countries with Tibetan presence or influence of Tibetan Buddhism? If we focus only on India, it has avoided direct interference and so far adopted an agnostic approach toward the *trulku* system. Other than the fiasco over the Karmapa, it has sought to keep out of decision making on who is the legitimate reincarnation and who is not. With the Dalai Lama, who misses no opportunity in expressing his gratitude to India for hosting him and Tibetan refugees, and thus acts as a most invaluable soft power for India without being its citizen, India has, in military language, a 'strategic asset'. His role in providing India with a good image, in keeping Himalayan Buddhist people soft toward India and reducing tensions is not easily calculable. With an impasse over reincarnation, India can expect severe instability in its already sensitive borderland areas at best, and conspicuously greater tension with China.

For the sake of speculation, imagine this. What if the next Dalai Lama's reincarnation gets identified in Tawang region, the birthplace of the Sixth Dalai Lama, in Arunachal Pradesh? It is a region where Tibetan Buddhism is predominant and so it makes sense from a conventional, religious and cultural perspective. It is outside China's jurisdiction and therefore meets the Dalai Lama's vision. How will China that claims Tawang and whose map shows it to be part of the PRC, react? Will it accept the mismatch between its cartographical claim and ground reality and insist that the process is not acceptable because the reincarnation has taken place outside its jurisdiction? Whether Indian governments wants it or not, it cannot wash its hand off the issue.

The coming years will be most tense and unprecedented in China-Tibet relation and the politics over reincarnation will have impact beyond these two countries, one the occupier, one occupied. It will also bring further instability in China-India relations. One scenario, that Beijing will hope for, is a period of tensions and uprising that it would crush and wait for the Tibetans to give up resistance and accept its choice of the Dalai Lama. The Dalai Lama recognized in exile would, over the time, lose traction as the international community loses interest, China's might makes most countries go silent, and the exiled Tibetans accept the fait accompli. The second scenario is one where the competing choice of the Dalai Lama lead to a permanent fracture between exiled Tibetans and Beijing, where there is no room for any

negotiation. The Dalai Lama in exile becomes a magnet for dissent while China uses blatant repression. The third scenario is one where the exiles find the reincarnation, Beijing does not go for its own candidate and then dangles the carrot of “recognition” in return for the Fifteenth Dalai Lama led exile community to give up their struggle and return to their homeland. The fourth scenario, favored by many Tibetans, is that China has increasing tensions and instability, its collapses and Tibet becomes free. All the signs are that it is first or second scenario that is more likely.

What will India,¹¹ host to the largest Tibetan exile community do in these different scenarios? Will it offer hospitality to the new Dalai Lama or will it indulge in some grand bargain with China where in return for giving up on Tibetans it gets a resolution of the boundary dispute, or will it simply continue with its present, rather disjointed and ambiguous, approach. All these are speculations and the only thing that is certain is that the geopolitics of reincarnation will enter a more turbulent phase than ever in its history.

Reincarnation challenges conventional ideas and practices of international relations and yet a modernist nation-state like China is insisting on its sovereign right to control the traditional belief system. Most Tibetans may reject this but they face an uphill struggle as China has what we can call “sovereignty privilege”. In international relations, the views of sovereign states count more than that of occupied people, even if the matter under consideration is peripheral for the state and integral to the belief systems of the occupied people.

Notes

¹ Melvyn C. Goldstein, *A History of Modern Tibet, 1913-1951—The Demise of the Lamaist State* (London: University of California Press, 1991).

² Dalailama.com, “Reincarnation,” September 24, 2021, <https://www.dalailama.com/the-dalai-lama/biography-and-daily-life/reincarnation>.

³ Jonathan Silk, “Bodhisattva,” n.d., <https://www.britannica.com/topic/bodhisattva>. See also: *History Today*, “Bodhisattva,” 2018, 68, 8, <https://www.historytoday.com/archive/foundations/what-bodhisattva>.

⁴ Samding Dorje Phagmo hails from a rare female *trulku* lineage and is the senior most. See: <https://www.socanth.cam.ac.uk/directory/research-clusters/other-research-projects/tibetan-woman-lama-reincarnations>.

⁵ Dalailama.com, “Questions and Answers,” n.d., <https://www.dalailama.com/the-dalai-lama/biography-and-daily-life/questions-answers>.

⁶ Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in Poland, “Statement by Foreign Affairs Committee of NPC on Tibetan Problem (October 27, 2001),” June 9, 2004, http://pl.china-embassy.gov.cn/pol/zt/zgxz/200406/t20040609_2370767.htm.

⁷ Deepak Thapa, “The Lama and the Khan,” *Himal*, April 1, 1996, <https://www.himalmag.com/the-lama-and-the-khan/>.

⁸ See: Tshering Chonzhom, “The Dalai Lama’s Reincarnation Debate: Unravelling Hype, Identifying Interests,” *China Report* 51, no. 3 (2015): 258-269, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0009445515587399>.

⁹ See, for instance: Tibet.Cn, “Three Sins of the Dalai Lama ‘Reincarnation Statement’,” December 3, 2015, http://m.tibet.cn/eng/opinion/editorial/201512/t20151203_5763739.html.

¹⁰ Dibyesh Anand, “The Next Dalai Lama: China has a Choice,” *The Guardian*, December 15, 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2010/dec/15/china-dalai-lama-exile-tibetans>.

¹¹ See: Dibyesh Anand, “The Great Wall of Tibet,” Gateway House, May 17, 2013, <https://www.gatewayhouse.in/great-wall-of-tibet/>.