

# A Difficult Rebirth: Tibetan Reincarnations in the Spotlight of Chinese Religious Policy

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Official documents related to religious policy in the People's Republic of China clearly state that the control of the process of the search, identification, recognition, enthronement and education of reincarnations is a crucial task of the Beijing government in its Tibet policy,<sup>1</sup> which reflects the central role of reincarnations within the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. An especially pending issue for the future, the 15th reincarnation of the current Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatsho (*bstan 'dzin rgya mtsho*, b1935), has become a fervently debated question inside the Tibetan communities both inside and outside of Tibet after the promulgation of new administrative measures regulating the process of selection of Tibetan Buddhist reincarnations by Chinese authorities in July 2007. The

1 See e.g. *Dangdai Zhongguo minzu zongjiao wenti yanjiu* 當代中國民族宗教問題研究 [Research on Minority and Religious Issues in Contemporary China], ed. by Gong Xuezheng 龔學增 (Beijing: Zhonggong zhongyang dangxiao chubanshe, 1998) 351–352; *Zhongguo de zongjiao wenti he zongjiao zhengce* 中國的宗教問題和宗教政策 [Religious Issues and Religious Policy in China], ed. by Wang Zuo'an 王作安 (Beijing: Zongjiao wenhua chubanshe, 2002), 261–262; Cao Ziqiang 曹自強 and Li Decheng 李德成, *Xizang zongjiao gongzuo gaisuo* 西藏宗教工作概說 [Summary of Religious Work in Tibet] (Beijing: Zhongguo Zangxue chubanshe, 2008), 237–238.

strain between the striving of the secular (post-) Marxist state to implement a tighter control on religious life in Tibet and the effort of the Tibetan Buddhist community to revive the traditional religious and social role of Buddhist monasteries and dignitaries illustrates the fundamentally different understanding of the role of Buddhist reincarnations in contemporary Tibet. These discrepant perceptions have affected the whole process of the Tibetan Buddhist revival which was launched over 30 years ago. This article provides an analysis of the traditional religious and political status of Tibetan Buddhist reincarnations and discusses their situation within the context of the Chinese religious policy.

### *The Religious Context of Tibetan Reincarnations*

The institution of reincarnation (Tib. *trulku*, *sprul sku*) is rooted in the Buddhist (and also Hindu) concept of the cycle of birth, death and rebirth (Sansk. *samsāra*), which applies to all sentient beings until they attain *nirvāṇa*. According to the religious beliefs of Buddhists, this cycle has no beginning and it is endless, while every sentient being passes from one existence to the other according to its moral behaviour. Later, with the development of Mahāyāna Buddhism, the concept of the ‘three bodies’ (Sansk. *trikāya*) of Buddha Śākyamuni was formulated. According to this concept, the Buddhahood was described in terms of ‘bodies’ which represent various aspects of the Buddhahood: (a) the true body of the Buddha (Sansk. *dharmakāya*)—the eternal and cosmic body of Buddha which embodies the supreme truth and transcends the forms of physical and spiritual bodies; (b) the ‘body of enjoyment’ (Sansk. *sambhogakāya*)—this corresponds to the forms of Buddhas and *bōdhisattvas* in celestial realms and it can be perceived only by those who have reached a specific level of attainment; and (c) ‘transformation body’ (Sansk. *nirmāṇakāya*, Tib. *trulku*, Chin. *huofo* 活佛)—the material body in which Buddhas and *bōdhisattvas* appear to ordinary human beings and in which they can help a sentient being on their path towards the attainment of *nirvāṇa*.<sup>2</sup>

The *trikāya* concept spread from India to Tibet from the 7th century as part of the Mahāyāna Buddhist teachings. In the late 10th and early 11th centuries, during the so-called ‘later dissemination’ (Tib. *phyi dar*) of Buddhism in Tibet, a ‘Tibetanization’ of Buddhism started which was accompanied by the institu-

2 For details see Geoffrey Samuel, *Civilized Shamans. Buddhism in Tibetan Societies* (Washington; London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993), 281–283; Damien Keown, *Lexikon des Buddhismus* (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 2003), 270.

tionalization of Buddhism in Tibetan society and the establishment of Tibetan Buddhist schools. As part of this process of domestication of Indian religious ideas and philosophical concepts in Tibet, the institution of Buddhist reincarnations, *trulkus*, had emerged as a distinctive feature of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. In contradiction to the rebirth of other sentient beings within the *samsāra* cycle of existence, the Tibetan concept of *trulku* is vested in the belief that spiritually highly accomplished beings (who have overcome the cycle of existence and could attain *nirvāṇa*) can reincarnate according to their will and appear in material bodies. These mundane appearances of enlightened masters, who are usually venerated by believers as emanations of Buddhas and *bōdhisattvas*, should bring the believers religious benefit. Their compassion and the realization of the Buddhahood offers believers the possibility to develop various virtues and qualities associated with these accomplished spiritual beings.<sup>3</sup>

Later Tibetan sources traditionally mention the religious head of the Karma-Kagyü (*karma bka' brgyud*) Tibetan Buddhist school as the establisher of the first reincarnations' lineage in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. After the death of the Düsüm Khyenpa (*dus gsum mkhyen pa*, 1100–1193), the founder of this school, his disciples recognized the reincarnation of their master in Karma Pakshi (*karma pakshi*, 1206–1283), who became the 2nd Karmapa (*karma pa*), head of the Karma-Kagyü; this reincarnation lineage has continued up to now with the 17th Karmapa. However, recently published research findings prove that already before the 13th century several Tibetan Buddhist masters had been designated as *trulku* (reincarnations).<sup>4</sup> During the following centuries, the institution of recognized reincarnations had partially replaced the older succession system of leadership within Tibetan Buddhist schools established by the Sakya (*sa skya*), according to which the head of the school was always selected within the Khön (*khon*) family (the post was inherited from the uncle by the nephew). The

3 See Egbert Asshauer, »Das tibetische Tulkusystem: Entwicklung und Bedeutung«, *Tibet und Buddhismus* 3 (2010), 29–33; Leonard van der Kuijp, »Die Dalai Lamas von Tibet und die Ursprünge der Lama-Wiedergeburten«, in *Die Dalai Lamas*, ed. by Martin Brauen (Stuttgart: Arnoldsche, 2005), 14–31.

4 Van der Kuijp, »Die Dalai Lamas von Tibet«, 29; Daniel Berounský, »Entering Dead Bodies and the Miraculous Power of the Tibetan Kings: The Landmark of Karma Pakshi's Reincarnation in Tibet. Part I«, *Mongolo-Tibetica '10, Linguistics, Ethnolinguistics, Religion and Culture* 3,2 (2010), 7–33. The author provides a detailed historical and religious background on the emergence of the first reincarnations in Tibet. See also Turrell V. Wylie, »Reincarnation: A Political Innovation in Tibetan Buddhism«, in *Proceedings of the Csoma de Kőrös Memorial Symposium*, ed. by Louis Ligeti (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1987), 579–586.

number of reincarnation lineages substantially rose especially with the ascent of the Gelug (*dge lugs*) Tibetan Buddhist school to religious and political power in Tibet. In traditional pre-1951 Tibet, the *trulkus* enjoyed supreme religious authority, and from the 17th century the institution of reincarnation considerably left its mark on the whole political and economic system.

The two most well-known and important reincarnation lineages in Tibet, namely the Dalai Lamas (*tā lā'i bla ma*), who are venerated by the Tibetans as the emanation of *bōdhisattva* Avalokiteśvara, the guardian deity of Tibetans, and the Panchen Lamas (*paṅ chen bla ma*), who are worshipped as the emanation of Buddha Amitābha, belong to the Gelug Buddhist school. The rise of the religious and political power of the Gelug in the 17th century resulted in the foundation of numerous new monasteries,<sup>5</sup> and subsequently hundreds of reincarnation lineages were established in monasteries on a local level.<sup>6</sup> Contrary to the nationwide influence of the Dalai Lama or Panchen Lama (gradually spreading also to Mongolia from the late 16th century), the other numerous reincarnation lineages enjoyed only a limited impact and their authority was closely linked to their residential monastery. From the 17th century, a complicated system of reincarnation lineages developed and it has not been possible to clearly determine a hierarchy of these dignitaries, although the highest status and authority of the Dalai Lamas and Panchen Lamas has been acknowledged and accepted.

After the death of a *trulku*, the complicated process of the search for his reincarnation starts, and this usually follows the same pattern: a search commission headed by a high Buddhist dignitary from the residential monastery of the deceased *trulku* is appointed, the oracle is consulted, unusual dreams and

5 Since the 18th century, the Gelug has been the most popular Buddhist school in Tibet. A characteristic feature of the Gelug is its stress on mass monasticism. In traditional pre-1951 Tibet, about 13 percent of the population were monks (the number of nuns was quite limited)—Melvyn C. Goldstein, *A History of Modern Tibet, 1913–1951. The Demise of the Lamaist State* (Berkeley, CA; Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), 21. On Tibetan history in the 17th–18th centuries, see Sam van Schaik, *Tibet. A History* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2011), 114–145, Tsepon W. D. Shakabpa, *Tibet. A Political History* (New York: Potala Publication, 1984), 100–139.

6 The number of female reincarnation lineages in Tibet was very small. The sole female reincarnation with considerable standing is Dorje Phagmo (*rdo rje phag mo*), who resides in the Samding (*bsam lding*) monastery south of Lhasa and currently lives her 12th reincarnation. For more on Dorje Phagmo, see Hildegard Diemberger, *When a Woman Becomes a Religious Dynasty. The Samding Dorje Phagmo of Tibet* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

phenomena are observed, and the testament of the deceased *trulku* is scrutinized with the aim of checking whether he has indicated his place of rebirth. The potential candidates, usually children between three and six years of age, should then identify objects (e.g. ritual utensils) which they have used in their previous life. At the same time, some typical bodily signs of the children associated with Buddhas or *bōdbisattvas* (e.g. longer earlobes) are inspected.<sup>7</sup> Traditionally, the reincarnation of the Panchen Lama was confirmed and recognized by the Dalai Lama and *vice versa*, as this highest Tibetan Buddhist reincarnation had established a close teacher-disciple relationship.

### *The Political Role of Buddhist Reincarnations in Pre-1951 Tibet*

The growing authority of *trulkus* and Tibetan Buddhist dignitaries in general from the 15th century had initiated a gradual transformation of the political system. When the Tibetan Empire was founded in the mid-7th century, political, economic and military authority was vested in the hands of secular aristocratic elites. The institutionalization of Tibetan Buddhism, which started in the late 10th to early 11th centuries, resulted in the growing status of Buddhist dignitaries, which led to a gradual shifting of the balance of power. After the demise of the Tibetan Empire in the mid-9th century, the central Tibetan government lost its authority, and on the Tibetan Plateau a series of local and often short-lived kingdoms were established, often due to the alliances between local aristocratic families and influential Buddhist hierarchs.

In the 13th and 14th centuries, during the period of the Mongol overlordship in Central Tibet, a distinct religio-political system developed. The political subordination of Central Tibet to the Mongol rulers of the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368) gave birth to a special relationship, described in Tibetan sources as a Yöñchö (*yon chos*, ‘Lama-Patron’) relationship, i.e. the link between the so-called Patron (Tib. *yöndag*, *yon bdag*—this term denotes the Mongol worldly ruler, i.e. the Khan) and the so-called Lama (Tib. *chöne*, *chos gnas*, i.e. the highest representative of the Sakya school, who played a dominant role in the politics in Central Tibet).<sup>8</sup> According to the Tibetan interpretation, these two dignitaries were on

7 The autobiography of the 14th Dalai Lama is a rich source of information on the process of selection of a new *trulku* for the Western reader: Dalai Lama, *Mein Leben und mein Volk. Die Tragödie Tibets* (München: Knauer, 1962), 16–22. In the movie *Kundun* (1997, directed by Martin Scorsese), this process is vividly illustrated.

8 For the historical context see Shakabpa, *Tibet*, 61–72.

an equal footing with different realms of competence: the Patron was responsible for the political and military matters of the empire, while the Lama was in charge of spiritual and religious affairs. This idealized concept of the distribution of power illustrates that in this period politics and religion were perceived as two distinct spheres which were reflected also in the Tibetan term *chösi lugnyi* (*chos srid lugs gnyis*, ‘religion and politics—two systems’).

The political developments in Tibet during the following centuries caused a stronger intermingling of politics and religion in Central Tibet. In this process political and economic power was gradually shifting towards the Buddhist dignitaries, especially the reincarnations, while at the same time the privileged status of the traditional secular aristocratic elites was weakened. These developments reached their peak in 1642 with the seizure of political power in Central Tibet (Tib. *dbus gtsang*) by the 5th Dalai Lama Ngawang Lozang Gyatsho (*ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho*, 1617–1682).<sup>9</sup> The traditional political system of Central Tibet in the years from 1642 to 1950 is usually described in Tibetan as ‘having two [powers]: religious and political’ (Tib. *chos srid gnyis ldan*),<sup>10</sup> which reflected the fact that supreme political and religious power was in the hands of the successive reincarnations of the Dalai Lama.<sup>11</sup> The ecclesiastical elite of Tibetan society played an important role in the government and therefore the Tibetan polity has been often characterized as theocratic.

The influence of the Buddhist clergy in Tibet is also obvious from the structure of government agencies, where the so-called monk officials from the biggest Gelug monasteries occupied crucial posts. The highest governmental offices were often filled with Buddhist reincarnations, with the Dalai Lama at

9 For details see van Schaik, *Tibet*, 120–124.

10 In Chinese sources, this system is characterized as the ‘union of politics and religion’ (*zhengjiao beiyi* 政教合一), which is in direct contradiction with the ‘principle of the separation of politics and religion’ (*zhengjiao fenli de yuanze* 政教分離的原則) that stands at the core of religious policy in the People’s Republic of China. See e.g. Jiang Ping 江平 & al., *Xizang de zongjiao he Zhongguo gongchandang de zongjiao zhengce* 西藏的宗教和中國共產黨的宗教政策 [Tibetan Religion and the Religious Policy of the Chinese Communist Party] (Beijing: Zhongguo Zangxue chubanshe, 1996), 96.

11 On the issue of interweaving of religion and politics in Tibet, see Phuntsog Wangyal, »The Influence of Religion on Tibetan Politics«, *The Tibet Journal* 1,1 (1975), 78–86; Klaus Sagaster, »Die Institution der Dalai Lamas und das Verhältnis zwischen Religion und Politik in Tibet«, in *Heil und Macht. Approches du sacré*, ed. by Franz Josef Thiel and Albert Doutreloux (St. Augustin: Anthropos-Institut, 1975), 120–138.

the pinnacle of political and religious power.<sup>12</sup> The parallel structure of lay officials staffed by members of aristocratic families represented a counterbalance to the ecclesiastic government agencies in Lhasa only to a certain degree. Due to this predominant position, the Buddhist clergy successfully asserted its political and economical priorities in traditional Tibet and in fact they perceived the role of the state as the protector of their interests and the Buddhist faith. The predominant role of Buddhist reincarnations in traditional Tibet was enabled also due to their material wealth: the *trulku* possessed the bulk of the property of his residential monastery. These possessions comprised arable land, grassland (including the farmers and nomads, who were subordinated to the monastery, or *trulku*, and had to pay taxes and provide them with various services), livestock and financial donations from the lay believers. This property was inherited within the reincarnation lineage. The economic influence of monasteries and especially of the *trulku* residing in them can be illustrated by the fact that they accounted for 37% of arable land and grasslands in Central Tibet, while the rest was owned by the central Lhasa government and aristocratic families.<sup>13</sup>

The authority of the Buddhist dignitaries, particularly *trulkus*, was even stronger in peripheral regions of Tibet, such as Kham (*kham*) in the eastern part of Tibetan Plateau or in the Amdo (*amdo*) in the northeast, i.e. outside of the political power of the Lhasa government. The local reincarnations exercised direct political power over the local Tibetan (and sometimes even Muslim Hui 回) population. The example of the Labrang Tashikhyil (*bla brang bkra shis 'kbyil*) monastery in Amdo (now part of Gansu Province) illustrates this situation.<sup>14</sup> The successive highest reincarnations of Labrang, namely Jamyang Zhepa (*jam dbyangs bzbad pa*), was the *de facto* ruler in the north-eastern part of the Tibetan Plateau and his authority was contested neither by the Lhasa authorities nor by

12 On traditional Tibetan government, see Goldstein, *A History of Modern Tibet*, 6–19; Franz Michael, *Rule by Incarnation: Tibetan Buddhism and Its Role in Society and State* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1982), 51–60. The claim for the religious and political power of the Dalai Lama is illustrated also in his title as the ‘religious and political ruler of Tibet’ (Tib. *bod ljongs chos srid gnyis kyi ngag dbang*).

13 Goldstein, *A History of Modern Tibet*, 3.

14 Labrang was one of the six big Gelug monasteries in Tibet with approx. 4,000 monks residing there before 1949. On Labrang, see Paul Kocot Nietupski, *Labrang Monastery: A Tibetan Buddhist Community on the Inner Asian Borderlands, 1709–1958* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2011); for developments in Labrang after 1949 see Martin Slobodnik, »Destruction and Revival: The Fate of the Tibetan Buddhist Monastery Labrang in Socialist China«, *Religion, State & Society* 32,1 (2004), 7–19.

the imperial government in Beijing, which had a very limited capacity to implement effective politics in the region. The local population was directly subjugated to Jamyang Zhepa and his administration was staffed mainly by monks. His authority included political, religious, economic, military and judicial power. Therefore, the example of Labrang was a more persuasive example of an theocracy than the often quoted case in Central Tibet.<sup>15</sup>

The Manchu-Chinese Qing dynasty (1644–1911) had successfully striven to establish a Central Asian empire, which would also bring under its authority Mongolia and Tibet. With the aim of strengthening the standing of Qing emperors among Tibetans and Mongols, the Qing dynasty attempted to instrumentalize Tibetan Buddhism for its political purposes. Several Qing emperors (e.g. Qianlong 乾隆, 1736–1796) enacted their role of generous patrons of the Tibetan Buddhist institutions (especially the Gelug monasteries) and pious believers.<sup>16</sup> During the 18th century, the political influence of the Qing dynasty in Central Tibet had gradually strengthened due to the inner political conflict within the Tibetan ruling class and repeated intrusions from outside forces (Mongolian and Nepalese), and by 1793 Central Tibet became a vassal state of the Qing.<sup>17</sup> The Qing court was well aware of the religious and political influence of such Buddhist reincarnations as the Dalai Lama or Panchen Lama among Central Asian Buddhists; therefore, in order to control the process of the selection of the highest Buddhist reincarnations and to prevent potential manipulations, the imperial court promulgated the 29-Point Imperial Regulations

15 The political role of reincarnations which was established in Tibet later also emerged in other Central Asian regions where Tibetan Buddhism was spread, e.g. in Outer Mongolia as embodied by the reincarnation lineage of the Jebtsundamba Khutukhtu, who, however, effectively ruled Outer Mongolia only for a short period at the beginning of the 20th century. See Ram Rahul, »The Role of Lamas in Central Asian Politics«, *Central Asiatic Journal* 12 (1968/69), 209–227.

16 See Sabine Dabringhaus, »Chinese Emperors and Tibetan Monks: Religion as an Instrument of Rule«, in *China and Her Neighbours. Borders, Visions of the Other, Foreign Policy 10th to 19th Century*, ed. by Sabine Dabringhaus, Roderich Ptak and Richard Teschke (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1997), 119–134; David M. Farquhar, »Emperor as Bodhisattva in the Governance of the Ch'ing Dynasty«, *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 38,1 (1978), 5–34; Wang Xiangyun, »The Qing Court's Tibet Connection: Lcang skya Rol pa'i rdo rje and the Qianlong Emperor«, *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 60,1 (2000), 125–163. The presence of high-ranking Tibetan lamas at the imperial court and the exposure to Tibetan culture had also influenced art production at the Qing court.

17 For the historical background, see e.g. van Schaik, *Tibet*, 129–160.

(*Qinding Zang nei shan hou zhangcheng ershijiu tiao* 欽定藏內善後章程二十九條).<sup>18</sup> This included measures for the selection of new reincarnations, known as the ‘drawing lots from a golden urn’ (Chin. *jinpíng ché qián* 金瓶掣籤, Tib. *gser bum skrug pa*). This practice was established by the Qing dynasty emperor Qianlong in 1793 at the peak of the Manchu-Chinese influence in Central Tibet. According to this procedure, the names of the candidates<sup>19</sup> for the reincarnation were to be selected by lot from the golden urn in the Jokhang (*jo khang*) Temple in Lhasa in the presence of the highest Qing representatives in Central Tibet, the *ambans*. Even though this procedure was later not regularly used due to the weakening of the Qing dynasty’s grasp on Central Tibet during the 19th century,<sup>20</sup> even for the current Beijing regime it represents the cornerstone of its Tibet policy and a demonstration of Chinese sovereignty in Tibet and the milestone of its claim for the historical legitimacy of the control of the whole process of the search, identification and enthronement of high Tibetan Buddhist reincarnations such as the Dalai Lama and Panchen Lama.<sup>21</sup> It was especially after the decay of the Qing dynasty in 1911, when Central Tibet entered into a period of *de facto*—although not *de iure*—independence (1912–1950) and with the emergence of a strong political ruler, namely the 13th Dalai Lama Thubten Gyatso (*thub bstan rgya mtsbo*, 1876–1933), that the theocratic polity could fully unfold and the ‘Lamaist state’ could go through the last stage of the *Ancien Régime*.

### *Trukus in Socialist China (1949–1979)*

The incorporation of Tibet into the newly founded People’s Republic of China in the years 1949–51 gradually brought dramatic changes into traditional Tibetan society.<sup>22</sup> These changes had a direct impact also on the status of high Buddhist

18 Su Faxiang 蘇發祥, *Qingdai zhi Zang zhengce yanjiu* 清代治藏政策研究 [A Study on the Policy of Qing Dynasty Rule in Tibet] (Beijing: Minzu chubanshe, 2001), 166–174.

19 They were selected on the basis of the traditional procedure mentioned above.

20 Even Chinese authors acknowledge that this procedure was not used in the process of identification of the 9th and 13th Dalai Lama. See e.g. Su Faxiang, *Qingdai zhi Zang*, 168–169. The current 14th Dalai Lama was also selected without recourse to the ‘drawing lots from a golden urn’ ceremony (see Goldstein, *A History of Modern Tibet*, 314–330).

21 Cai Zhichun 蔡志純 and Huang Hao 黃顯, *Hufo zhuanshi* 活佛轉世 [Reincarnation of a Living Buddha] (Beijing: Huawen chubanshe, 2000), 63.

22 For an analysis of the first stage of the PRC religious policy in Tibet, see Martin Slobodnik, »Mao versus Buddha: Religious Policy towards Tibetan *samgha* in the People’s Republic of

dignitaries and reincarnations. Except for the vague guarantees stipulated by the so-called 17-Point Agreement signed on May 23, 1951, by representatives of the Dalai Lama and representatives of the Chinese central government, according to which »the central authorities also will not alter the established status, functions and powers of the Dalai Lama«,<sup>23</sup> and similar guarantees which were provided for the Panchen Lama (Point 5), and the general commitment to carry out the policy of freedom of religious belief (Point 7), there did not exist any other administrative measures or regulations related to the status, authority, or selection process of *trulkus* in China in the 1950s. The Communist government was well aware of the strong embedding of religion in Tibetan society and acknowledged the fact that the number of the supporters of the central government in Tibet was scarce; therefore, they strove to preserve the privileges of the secular and Buddhist elites in Tibet and win them over for the project of building a new socialist society. As a result of this strategy, the religious policy in Tibet was implemented in a less repressive way when taking into consideration the harsh measures implemented in other parts of China after 1950, where monks, nuns, and clergymen in general were politically persecuted as well as laicized under coercion, while the property of the monasteries was requisitioned and the monks had to participate in physical labour activities and thus contribute to the construction of the new socialist economy. Some monasteries were converted into factories, warehouses, schools or housing. The social and economic reforms of the central government dramatically changed the character of religious communities and decimated the clergy.<sup>24</sup> The special situation of Buddhist communities in Tibet, which was the result of the special provisions guaranteed by the 17-Point Agreement and the »gradualist strategy«<sup>25</sup> implemented in Tibet can be illustrated also by the fact that the number of their co-religionists in

China in the Years 1950–1965», *Acta Universitatis Carolinae Philologica. Orientalia Pragensia* 16 (2009), 115–130.

23 Tsering Shakya, *The Dragon in the Land of Snows. A History of Modern Tibet since 1947* (London: Pimlico, 1999), 450. For the Chinese original, see e.g., *Jiefang Xizang shi* 解放西藏史 [A History of Liberated Tibet], ed. by Yin Fatang 陰法唐 (Beijing: Zhonggong dangshi chubanshe, 2008), 162.

24 For details see Holmes Welch, *Buddhism under Mao* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), 42–45, 61, 81.

25 For the gradual approach of Chinese authorities in Tibet in the 1950s, see Melvyn C. Goldstein, *A History of Modern Tibet. Volume 2: The Calm before the Storm, 1951–1955* (Berkeley; Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2007), e.g. 37–40.

Inner Mongolia was already severely reduced in the early 1950s due to the restrictive measures adopted by the Chinese authorities.<sup>26</sup>

The turning point of the religious policy in Tibetan areas came in 1958 in the peripheral regions of Tibet (Amdo and Kham) when the Chinese authorities launched land reform and at the same time, similarly as in other Chinese provinces (with the exception of Central Tibet), a campaign for the establishment of 'people's communes' (Chin. *renmin gongshe* 人民公社). These economic reforms deprived Buddhist monasteries, the biggest landowners in the north-eastern and eastern parts of the Tibetan Plateau, of the financial basis of their existence and caused in the summer of 1958 a large-scale armed anti-Chinese uprising which was quashed by the Chinese army within several months. This marked the beginning of the first phase of the destruction of Tibetan Buddhist institutions because they were pinpointed by the Chinese authorities as the centres of anti-Chinese resistance.<sup>27</sup> In December 1958 the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee approved a report prepared by the State Ethnic Affairs Commission which analyzed the religious policy towards Tibetan Buddhism and Islam.<sup>28</sup> This document launched the 'democratic reform of the religious system' (Chin. *zongjiao zhidu minzhu gaige* 宗教制度民主改革), which was in fact a large-scale anti-religious campaign. This repressive campaign was implemented in the first phase in the peripheral regions of the Tibetan Plateau, but after the anti-Chinese uprising in Lhasa in March 1959 also in Central Tibet.

- 26 In the first half of the 1950s, the number of monks in Mongolian Buddhist monasteries was reduced by 80 percent from 80,000 to 17,000 and they had to participate in physical labour. See Delege 德勒革 [Deleg], *Nei Menggu lamajiao shi* 內蒙古喇嘛教史 [History of Lamaism in Inner Mongolia] (Hohhot: Nei Menggu renmin chubanshe, 1998), 738–742. As an example of the more tolerant religious policy implemented in Tibetan areas, one can mention the selection process and the subsequent enthronement ceremony in February 1952 of the current 6th Jamyang Zhepa Lozang Jigme Thubten Chökyi Nyima (*blo bzang 'jigs med thub bstan chos kyi nyi ma*, 1948–), the highest reincarnation of the Labrang monastery, which proceeded in the traditional way with the Chinese authorities not intervening in this process. See Zhazha 扎扎, *Jiamuyang butuketu shixi* 嘉木樣呼圖克圖世系 [The Genealogies of the Jamyang Zhepas] (Lanzhou: Gansu minzu chubanshe, 1998), 430–438.
- 27 Mao Zedong 毛澤東, *Mao Zedong Xizang gongzuo wenxuan* 毛澤東西藏工作文選 [Selected Documents of Mao Zedong on the Work in Tibet] (Beijing: Zhongguo zangxue chubanshe, 2001), 203.
- 28 Chen Jinlong 陳金龍, »Lun 1958–1960 nian Zhongguo zongjiao zhidu de minzhu gaige 論 1958–1960 年中國宗教制度的民主改革« [On the Chinese Democratic Reform of Religious System in the Years 1958–1960], *Shijie zongjiao yanjiu* 世界宗教研究 3 (2002), 26.

The Chinese authorities relinquished their restrained religious policy and the accommodating approach to Tibetan secular elites and opted for a massive persecution of traditional upper-strata representatives. The ‘democratic reform of the religious system’ marked the launch of the elimination of the institutionalized forms of religion in Tibet.<sup>29</sup> The measures adopted by Chinese authorities primarily targeted the high-ranking lamas and *trulkus*, who according to the Marxist logic of the class struggle were branded as an exploitative class. Hundreds of reincarnations were first deprived of their religious status and economic basis, later to be imprisoned and politically persecuted. Some of them—including the 14th Dalai Lama—were able to escape to India.<sup>30</sup>

There was a short interlude with a more restrained ethnic and religious policy in the years 1961–1962, which enabled a brief phase of a limited institutional revival of Tibetan Buddhism; this was followed by the most tragic period in modern Tibetan and Chinese history: the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). One of the bluntly declared aims of this campaign was to eradicate all forms of religion and to assimilate the ethnic minorities. After the smashing of the institutional web of Tibetan Buddhism in the late 1950s, now also individual

29 For a Chinese perspective of these developments (which the contemporary authors in principle still endorse, although they acknowledge that the authorities were persecuting the monks and nuns regardless of whether they had participated in the anti-Chinese activities or not) see e.g. Gong Xuezheng 龔學增, *Shehuizhuyi yu zongjiao* 社會主義與宗教 [Socialism and Religion] (Beijing: Zongjiao wenhua chubanshe, 2003), 175–178; Chen Jinlong, »Lun 1958–1960 nian Zhongguo zongjiao zhidu de minzhu gaige«, 23–31; Jiang Ping, *Xizang de zongjiao*, 105; Yin Fatang, ed., *Jiefang Xizang shi*, 437–443. A detailed account of the dramatic impact of these measures on the social, religious and economic situation of the Tibetans can be found in a report prepared by the 10th Panchen Lama Chökyi Gyaltsen (*chos kyi rgyal mtshan*, 1938–1989). According to this first-hand data, more than 90 percent of the monks and nuns were forced to leave their resident monasteries. See 10th Panchen Lama, *A Poisoned Arrow. The Secret Report of the 10th Panchen Lama* (London: Tibet Information Network, 1997), 40–60. As a result of this critical report, the 10th Panchen Lama encountered political persecution in 1964 and he was released from house arrest only in October 1977.

30 In order to illustrate the scale of the persecution, I can give the example of the Labrang monastery: out of the 23 high-ranking reincarnations residing in this monastery in 1958, 15 were incarcerated (7 of them died soon after their imprisonment), 6 were sent to labour camps, 1 escaped to India and the fate of 1 is unclear. See Zhazha 扎扎, *Labuleng si bufo sbixi* 拉卜楞活佛世系 [The Genealogies of the Reincarnations from Labrang] (Lanzhou: Gansu minzu chubanshe, 2000).

religious manifestations were persecuted and forbidden as feudal relics.<sup>31</sup> Religious life in Tibet was on the brink of destruction.

*Religious Revival in Tibet: Reincarnations Caught between the Political Demands of the Chinese Authorities and the Religious Expectations of Tibetan Believers*

The issue of the role and selection of reincarnations in the PRC re-emerged during the religious revival that swept through Tibet starting from the late 1970s. The fact that the majority of reincarnation lineages were interrupted during the period of religious persecution in the late 1950s and 1960s and that there were loudly voiced demands from the lay and monastic communities in Tibet resulted in the renewal of the selection process in Tibetan areas in 1990 with the tacit agreement of the Chinese authorities. Buddhist reincarnations played a crucial role in the process of religious and cultural revival in Tibetan areas.<sup>32</sup> Of particular note is the 10th Panchen Lama, who was released from his house arrest in 1977, was subsequently politically rehabilitated and installed in the position of Vice-Chairman of the Standing Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (Chin. *Zhongguo renmin zhengzhi xieshang huiyi* 中國人民政治協商會議) in March 1978 and became Vice-Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (Chin. *Quanguo renmin daibiao dabui* 全國人民代表大會) in August 1979; he put to use his newly acquired political status primarily to raise financial resources for the reconstruction of Tibetan monasteries and the establishment of schools in Tibetan areas as well as for securing the return of looted Buddhist artefacts from

31 Tsering Shakya, *The Dragon in the Land of Snows*, 320–322.

32 For a case study of the religious revival, see Melvyn C. Goldstein, »The Revival of Monastic Life in Drepung Monastery«, in *Buddhism in Contemporary Tibet: Religious Revival and Cultural Identity*, ed. by Melvyn C. Goldstein and Matthew T. Kapstein (Berkeley, CA; Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 15–52. For more detailed accounts on the religious policy towards Tibetan Buddhism in the 1980s and 1990s, see José Ignacio Cabezón, »State Control of Tibetan Buddhist Monasticism in the People's Republic of China«, in *Chinese Religiosities. Afflictions of Modernity and State Formation*, ed. by Mayfair Mei-hui Yang (Berkeley, CA; London: University of California Press, 2008), 261–291; Martin Slobodník, »“Strengthen Party and Government Leadership and Consolidate Management of Religion”: Religious Policy towards Tibetan Buddhism in 1990s«, in *Religion und Politik in der Volksrepublik China*, ed. by Wiebke Koenig and Karl-Fritz Daiber (Würzburg: Ergon Verlag, 2008), 339–358.

Chinese depositories to Tibetan monasteries in order to strengthen the religious and ethnic identity of Tibetans.<sup>33</sup>

From the perspective of the PRC government, the reincarnations represented crucial ‘middlemen’ between the Chinese state and the Tibetan people. A considerable number of them have therefore been installed in various official bodies such as the People’s Congress, the People’s Political Consultative Conference, and Chinese Buddhist Associations (Chin. *Zhongguo fojiao xiehui* 中國佛教協會) at central, provincial and prefectural levels.<sup>34</sup> Their positions within these bodies showcase the state’s supposed preferential treatment of ethnic and religious minorities in general and respect towards traditional Tibetan hierarchies in particular; however, politically they invariably provide them with little more than a rubber-stamping function. At the same time, the state authorities strive to exploit the charisma of reincarnations in order to legitimize central government policies in Tibetan areas and pursue their political aims. The Chinese authorities recognize the pivotal role of Buddhist reincarnations at all levels of Tibetan society and it is this recognition that seems to compel the state to control them and even the process of their selection.<sup>35</sup>

Already in July 1994, at the 3rd session of the Tibet Work Forum (Chin. *Xizang gongzuo zuotanhui* 西藏工作座談會), the Chinese government authorities declared their control of the selection, identification, enthronement and education of Buddhist reincarnation as one of the crucial tasks of its religious

33 At the local level, the reincarnations released from prison have played a similar role. For the case of the activities of the 6th Jamyang Zhepa and the 6th Gungthang (*gung thang*) in the revival of religious life in Labrang monastery, see Slobodnik, »Destruction and Revival«, 10–11.

34 The Chinese authorities attempted to utilize the Tibetan reincarnations for political purposes already at an early stage. In September 1954, the 14th Dalai Lama and the 10th Panchen Lama participated at the inaugural session of the National People’s Congress in Beijing and were both elected members of its Standing Committee; moreover, the 14th Dalai Lama was appointed Vice-Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress. See Tsering Shakya, *The Dragon in the Land of Snows*, 122–123.

35 The political role of Buddhist reincarnations continued even after the escape of the 14th Dalai Lama to India to the Central Tibetan Administration in exile. Despite the democratization process initiated by the Dalai Lama in the 1960s, the first elected prime minister, Samdhong Rinpoche (in office 2001–11), was a reincarnation, as is the current representative of the Dalai Lama in Washington, Lodi Gyari.

policy in Tibet.<sup>36</sup> Internal Chinese propaganda publications from the 1990s proved that the decisive role in the selection of new reincarnation was played by local Buddhist dignitaries and that the final choice was often made by the 14th Dalai Lama, who in these materials is sharply criticized and perceived as a threat to the sovereignty and integrity of the PRC.<sup>37</sup> These materials strongly plead for a reduction in the number of reincarnations who can receive official approval to reincarnate and give the authority to decide which *trulku* can reincarnate to the hands of Chinese authorities in charge of religious affairs.<sup>38</sup> Until the approval of the 'Management Measures for the Reincarnation of Living Buddhas in Tibetan Buddhism' in July 2007 (see below) there were no publicly promulgated and formally established regulations on the process of selection, identification and enthronement of reincarnations; instead, internal directives drafted by governmental (Religious Affairs Bureaux, Chin. *Zongjiao shiwuju* 宗教事務局) and party (United Front Departments, Chin. *Tongzhanbu* 統戰部) bodies dealt in great detail with these issues. Even though these documents were never officially disclosed and cannot be considered either as administrative measures or regulations, they established a practice followed by Chinese authorities since the early 1990s. According to these materials, the whole process was to be conducted under the guidance of the Chinese Communist Party, while the crucial administrative tasks were to be carried out by the local branches of the Religious Affairs Bureau.<sup>39</sup>

The endeavour of the Chinese authorities to subordinate the process of the choice of a new reincarnation to a dull set of bureaucratic regulations which deal

36 *Xizang zhibi jianming duben* 西藏知識簡明讀本 [Knowledge on Tibet—A Concise Reader], ed. by Li Dezhu 李德洙 (Beijing: Huawen chubanshe, 2003), 85–86; Wang Zuo'an, *Zhongguo de zongjiao*, 261–262.

37 Anon., *Zangchuan fojiao aiguozhuyi jiaoyu xuexi xuanchuan cailiao* 藏傳佛教愛國主義教育學習宣傳材料 [Propaganda Materials for Education and Study in Patriotism in Tibetan Buddhism] (Lanzhou: Zhonggong Gansu shengwei tongzhanbu—Gansu sheng zongjiao shiwuju, 1998), 194–195.

38 Anon., *Zangchuan fojiao aiguozhuyi jiaoyu*, 195. The authorities allege there is a heavy financial burden for the enthronement ceremony and the maintenance of a reincarnation and his entourage in his residential monastery as reasons for the restriction of the number of *tulkus*—see also Åshild Kolås and Monika P. Thowsen, *On the Margins of Tibet: Cultural Survival on the Sino-Tibetan Frontier* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005), 76.

39 *Zangchuan fojiao aiguozhuyi jiaoyu*, 195–199.

in great detail with the territorial, social,<sup>40</sup> and organizational aspects of the search, identification and enthronement, illustrates the deep contrast between the administrative perception of religion by the state bodies in charge and the spiritual understanding of religion by Tibetans. The authorities also repeatedly stress the importance of the education of young *trulkus* who were not meant to be influenced by the Tibetan government in exile and who should become loyal to the Chinese regime.<sup>41</sup>

In July 1992 the first high-ranking reincarnation was enthroned since the Cultural Revolution, namely the 17th Karmapa Orgyen Thrinle Dorje (*karma pa o rgyan 'phrin las rdo rje*, b1985). With his selection, the Chinese authorities were able to accommodate the religious demands of the believers and at the same time the 14th Dalai Lama endorsed this choice. The Chinese government had repeatedly portrayed the 17th Karmapa as a patriotic religious leader who was to play a key role in the legitimization of Chinese religious policy in Tibet, and according to official media, he was to become a 'model *trulku*' who was simultaneously respected by the Buddhist community and a loyal supporter of the Chinese regime. His critical remarks concerning the 14th Dalai Lama were often quoted in Chinese media. The fate of the 17th Karmapa, who in late December 1999 escaped from his residential monastery Tshurphu (*mtshur phu*) in Central Tibet to India, where he declared his loyalty to the Dalai Lama and

40 Internal instruction explicitly warns that new reincarnations should not be searched for amongst children of party cadres on county and higher administrative levels or children of public officials on village/town and higher administrative levels. See *Zangchuan fojiao aiguozybui jiaoyu*, 195.

41 See *Zangchuan fojiao aiguozybui jiaoyu*, 197. For these purposes, provincial Buddhist Institutes (Chin. *Foxueyuan* 佛學院) and the highest state-sponsored educational institution for Tibetan Buddhist monks (mainly high reincarnations), namely the Beijing Tibetan Language Institute of Higher Buddhist Studies (Chin. *Beijing zangyuxi gaoji foxueyuan* 北京藏語系高級佛學院), founded in 1987 by the late 10th Panchen Lama, are supposed to provide the Tibetan reincarnations and monks with high-level education not only in the field of Buddhist studies; the state authorities simultaneously strive to educate influential Tibetan religious authorities in loyalty to the Chinese state and the party.

condemned the Chinese policy in Tibet,<sup>42</sup> vividly illustrates the failure of the Chinese authorities to foster loyal reincarnations.<sup>43</sup>

The conflict between the Chinese government and the Tibetan Buddhist community regarding the selection process of *trulkus* escalated in 1995: at the centre of this controversy was the issue of the selection of the late 10th Panchen Lama, who passed away in January 1989 in his residential Tashilhünpo (*bkra sbis lhun po*) monastery in Shigatse (*gzhis ka rtse*). This conflict involved the crucial issue of the responsible authority in the process of selection, identification, and enthronement of high-ranking Tibetan reincarnations and has highlighted the hard-line policy of the Chinese government towards the Dalai Lama in the aftermath of the 3rd Tibet Work Forum. This dispute evolved in May 1995 after the Dalai Lama publicly announced the recognition of Gendün Chökyi Nyima (*dge 'dun chos kyi nyi ma*, b1989) as the 11th Panchen Lama. The Chinese government rejected his selection as illegal and declared the 1793 method of 'drawing lots from a golden urn' as the sole legitimate selection procedure. The publicizing of the 11th Panchen Lama's name by the Dalai Lama was perceived by the Chinese authorities as a serious interference in state sovereignty in an issue which represents the cornerstone of Chinese religious policy. The Chinese authorities were well aware of the fact that the selection of the 11th Panchen Lama played a central role in asserting their claim for political power in Tibet, and with regard to the selection of the future 15th Dalai Lama that it would establish a precedent. Subsequently, in November 1995 the Chinese government staged a ceremony of 'drawing lots from a golden urn' in the Lhasa Jokhang Temple, in which Gyaltshen Norbu (*rgyal mtsban nor bu*, b1990) was selected and

42 For details see Anon., *News Review. Reports from Tibet*, 2000 (London: Tibet Information Network, 2001), 30–35; Anon., *When the Sky Fell to Earth. The New Crackdown on Buddhism in Tibet* (Washington; Amsterdam; Berlin: International Campaign for Tibet, 2004), 41–42; Thierry Dodin, »Karmapagate?«, *Himäl*, March 2011 <[www.himalmag.com/component/content/article/4282-karmapagate.html](http://www.himalmag.com/component/content/article/4282-karmapagate.html)> (Sep 5, 2011).

43 Another example is the influential 8th Arjia Rinpoche (b1950), the highest reincarnation and former abbot of the important Gelug monastery Kumbum (*sku 'bum*) in the Qinghai 青海 Province, who in 1998 escaped to the United States, where he sharply criticized the Chinese Tibet policy. See »Arjia rinpoche, former official in Tibet, talks about China's attempt to assert control over Tibetan Buddhism«, <[www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/arjia-rinpoche-former-official-tibet-talks-about-chinas-attempt-assert-control-over-tibet](http://www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/arjia-rinpoche-former-official-tibet-talks-about-chinas-attempt-assert-control-over-tibet)> (Aug 10, 2011).

enthroned in Tashilhünpo monastery in December 1995.<sup>44</sup> The Panchen Lama dispute has escalated the Beijing government conflict with the Dalai Lama as well as with the Tibetan Buddhist lay and monastic community. Since 1995, the Panchen Lama approved by the Dalai Lama has been under house arrest in an unknown location; despite this, he is considered by the majority of Tibetans as the legitimate and true choice. The candidate selected by the Chinese authorities resides in seclusion in Beijing and his rare visits to Tibetan areas are made under tight security measures.<sup>45</sup>

This trial of strength between the 14th Dalai Lama and the Chinese government brought stronger infringements by Chinese authorities on religious life in Tibet. From 1996 to 2000 the Chinese authorities launched a patriotic education campaign (Chin. *aiguo aijiao* 爱国爱教, literally 'love the motherland, love religion') in Tibetan monasteries. The monks and nuns were obliged to openly repudiate separatism, support the unity of China, uphold the leading role of the CCP and voice their loyalty towards the regime. One of the central issues in this ideological campaign was the requirement to openly denounce the 14th Dalai Lama and support the Chinese choice of the Panchen Lama reincarnation.<sup>46</sup> However, even after the Panchen Lama dispute and the subsequent political campaign, the local authorities enabled the selection of a new reincarnation according to traditional procedure and in accordance with the demands of local religious dignitaries and monastic communities so long as the monks from the *trulkus*' residential monastery refrained from political activities (e.g. demonstrations calling for the return of the Dalai Lama or demands for Tibetan independence) and the 14th Dalai Lama did not intervene in this process; this can be illustrated by the enthronement of the 7th Gungthang Lozang Geleg Tenpe Khenchen (*blo bzang dge legs bstan pa'i mkhan chen*, b2002) in Labrang in Autumn 2006.<sup>47</sup>

44 For details, see Tsering Shakya, *The Dragon in the Land of Snows*, 440–447. For the Chinese official perspective of this dispute see Cao Ziqiang and Li Decheng, *Xizang zongjiao gongzuo gaishuo*, 215–236.

45 On the strong disapproval of Tibetan believers voiced against the Chinese candidate, see *The Communist Party as Living Buddha. The Crisis Facing Tibetan Religion under Chinese Control* (Washington; Amsterdam; Berlin: International Campaign for Tibet, 2007), 53–55.

46 For a detailed description of this campaign with a selection of propaganda materials used during the regularly held sessions, see Anon., *A Sea of Bitterness. Patriotic Education in Qinghai Monasteries* (London: Tibet Information Network, 1999). In the case of monks and nuns refusing to accept these ideological requirements, they were forced to leave the monastery.

47 See Martin Slobodník, »Inthronisierung des 7. Gungthang«, *China heute* 4–5/2006, 131–132.

*Reincarnations in the Post-2000 Religious Policy*

Since the early 1990s there have appeared a number of laws, regulations and measures with the aim of regulating various aspects of the religious life of the five state sanctioned religions in China on the provincial and central level. These documents were an expression of one of the basic principles of religious policy formulated by the then President and General Secretary of the CCP Central Committee Jiang Zemin 江澤民 (b1926) in November 1993, who stressed the need to 'strengthen the management of religious affairs according to law' (Chin. *yifa jiaqiang dui zongjiao shiwu de guanli* 依法加強對宗教事務的管理).<sup>48</sup> The endeavour to establish an administrative framework which would regulate religious life and at the same time legitimize the intervention of Chinese authorities into religious life led to the approval of the Religious Affairs Regulations (Chin. *Zongjiao shiwu tiaoli* 宗教事務條例) by the State Council on July 7, 2004, which took effect on March 1st, 2005.<sup>49</sup> The aim of the Religious Affairs Regulations is to establish a broad administrative framework for the five state sanctioned religious traditions in China on a number of issues (e.g. religious property, sites of religious activities and religious personnel). It is not the aim of these regulations to deal in detail with issues relevant for particular traditions. Article 27 of the Religious Affairs Regulations states that »the succession of living Buddhas in Tibetan Buddhism shall be conducted under the guidance of Buddhist bodies and in accordance with the religious rites and rituals and historical conventions, and be reported for approval to the religious affairs department of the people's government at or above the level of a city divided into districts, or to the people's government at or above the level of a city divided into districts«. This is the only part of the regulations which directly mentions Tibetan Buddhism, and it is symptomatic that it focuses on the issue of Buddhist reincarnations.

48 *Xin shiqi zongjiao gongzuo wenxian xuanbian* 新時期宗教工作文獻選編 [Selection of Documents on Religious Work during the New Period] (Beijing: Zongjiao wenhua chubanshe, 2004), 249–255.

49 For the Chinese text and English translation, refer to Kim-kwong Chan and Eric B. Carlson, *Religious Freedom in China: Policy, Administration, and Regulation. A Research Handbook* (Santa Barbara, CA; Hong Kong: Institute for the Study of American Religion; Hong Kong Institute for Culture, Commerce and Religion, 2004), 71–87.

Subsequently, the State Agency for Religious Affairs and the particular religious associations promulgated measures which dealt with issues relevant for individual religious traditions. The Management Measures for the Reincarnation of Living Buddhas in Tibetan Buddhism (Chin. *Zangchuan fojiao huofu zhuanshi guanli banfa* 藏傳佛教活佛轉世管理辦法, hitherto abbreviated as MMR)<sup>50</sup>, which were promulgated by the State Administration of Religious Affairs (SARA) on July 13, 2007, and which took effect from September 1, 2007, represent the first document formulated by Chinese authorities on a central level, which in detail defines the administrative procedure for the selection, identification, enthronement and education of Tibetan Buddhist reincarnations.<sup>51</sup> The brief text of the MMR provides an administrative framework in 14 articles which is meant to regulate the process of determining whether a search for a new reincarnation may start, the recognition of a reincarnation and the obtainment of a government approval for the recognition.<sup>52</sup> The MMR also deals with the enthronement, education and religious training of a reincarnation. The aim of the MMR is to strengthen the authority of governmental bodies (the central SARA and its branches at lower administrative levels) and the state-sponsored religious association (Chinese Buddhist Association) which ought to tighten the state control of the whole process of selection of new reincarnations and thus interfere with traditional Tibetan procedures. The intervention of the Dalai Lama in these issues is to be prohibited; the MMR stress the principle of non-interference of any foreign organization or individual in this procedure (Article 2). According to the MMR, the government authorities categorize the reincarnations according to their status in Tibetan society (local, provincial or Tibet-wide) and specify which government bodies have the authority to approve the particular reincarnation. In the case of the high-ranking *trulkus* (e.g. the

50 For the Chinese text of MMR see <[www.sara.gov.cn/GB//zcfg/89522ff7-409d-11dc-bafe-93180af1bb1a.html](http://www.sara.gov.cn/GB//zcfg/89522ff7-409d-11dc-bafe-93180af1bb1a.html)> (July 20, 2011). For an English translation, see »New Measures on Reincarnation Reveal Party's Objectives of Political Control«, <[www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/new-measures-reincarnation-reveal-partys-objectives-political-control](http://www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/new-measures-reincarnation-reveal-partys-objectives-political-control)> (July 20, 2011).

51 For an analysis of the MMR, see Thomas Heberer, »Peking erlässt die "Verwaltungsmethode zur Reinkarnation des Lebenden Buddhas im tibetischen Buddhismus". Analyse vor dem allgemeinen Hintergrund der Tibet-Frage«, *Zeitschrift für Chinesisches Recht* 15,1 (2008), 1–9.

52 This process should be concluded by the Chinese Buddhist Association which will then issue a 'Living Buddha Certificate' (Chin. *huofu zhengshu* 活佛證書) to the officially recognized candidate (Article 10 of the MMR).

Dalai Lama and Panchen Lama), it is the reserve of the highest executive body, the State Council, to make the final decision (Article 5).

An example of the remarkable continuity of Chinese religious policy and approach to Tibet is the reference to the ‘drawing lots from a golden urn’ procedure. According to the interpretation of authorities, this late 18th century measure represents not only evidence of Chinese sovereignty in Tibet; the MMR also stipulates this procedure as the sole legitimate way to select high-ranking reincarnations even in socialist China.<sup>53</sup> The continuity of the Chinese Tibet policy can be further illustrated by the ‘Measures for the Reincarnations of Lamas’ (Chin. *Lama zhuanshi banfa* 喇嘛轉世辦法) approved on February 10, 1936, by the Commission for Mongolian and Tibetan Affairs (Chin. *Meng Zang weiyuanhui* 蒙藏委員會),<sup>54</sup> an act designed to assert China’s sovereignty over Tibet by the Guomindang 國民黨 government even though it had little effect.<sup>55</sup> Like the recent MMR, this 1936 document described in detail the search, identification and recognition procedures for reincarnations while referring to the ‘drawing lots from a golden urn’ as the sole legitimate procedure for selecting important lineages of both Tibetan and Mongolian reincarnations. It also categorized reincarnations into various groups according to their status in society and claimed that the whole process should be supervised by the

53 »Living Buddhas that have historically been recognized by drawing lots from the golden urn shall have their reincarnating soul children recognized by drawing lots from the golden urn«, Article 8 of the MMR.

54 See *Minguo yilai Meng Zang zhongyao zhengce huibian* 民國以來蒙藏重要政策彙編 [Collection of Important Policy Documents on Mongolia and Tibet since the Republic of China], ed. by Xu Zhengguang 徐正光 (Taipei: Meng Zang weiyuanhui, 2001), 62–64. For an English translation, see *Regulations of the Republic of China Concerning Rule over Tibet (1912–1949)* (Beijing: China Intercontinental Press, 1999), 66–68.

55 According to Lin Hsiao-ting, the aim of promulgating the Measures for the Reincarnations of Lamas in February 1936 was also to prevent Japanese infiltration in Mongolia and Tibetan borderlands by means of Buddhist monasteries. See Lin Hsiao-ting, *Modern China's Ethnic Frontiers. A Journey to the West* (London; New York: Routledge, 2011), 70. For a summary of the ‘Measures for the Reincarnations of Lamas’ and other administrative measures related to Tibetan Buddhism approved by the Republic of China, see Sun Zhenping 孫鎮平 and Wang Liyan 王立艷, *Minguo shiqi Xizang fazhi yanjiu* 民國時期西藏法制研究 [Legal Regulations Related to Tibet during Republican China] (Beijing: Zhishi chanquan chubanshe, 2006), 171–195.

government of the Republic of China, which held the authority on all issues related to new reincarnations in Tibetan and Mongolian areas.<sup>56</sup>

Despite the sharp criticism of Tibetans both inside and outside of Tibet as well as their Western supporters, the brief text of the MMR does not represent any substantial change in the administration of the process of selection, identification or enthronement of reincarnations in Tibet. The high degree of interference of government bodies into this primarily religious matter has been an established practice since the very beginning of the revival of Buddhism in the early 1990s, when after a more than 30-year-long break new reincarnations were enthroned. Thus the document promulgated by the State Agency for Religious Affairs essentially ratifies the status quo.<sup>57</sup>

The promulgation of the MMR testifies that after the controversy surrounding the choice of the 11th Panchen Lama in 1995 the Beijing government is trying to assert stronger control over the selection of the future 15th Dalai Lama by formulating clear administrative rules which put the final decision in the hands of the State Council. In reaction to the MMR, the 14th Dalai Lama has repeatedly mentioned various possibilities which should prevent the Chinese authorities from manipulating the process of the selection of his next reincarnation, such as staging a referendum on the method of selection or creating a commission of high-ranking exiled representatives of Tibet who would choose the next candidate by vote.<sup>58</sup> In addition, the Dalai Lama proposed that

56 In reality, the only enthronement of a high reincarnation ever supervised by the Republican Chinese government, shortly before its fall, was that of the 10th Panchen Lama. This took place in Kumbum monastery in Qinghai Province in August 1949, but the process took place without the 'drawing lots from a golden urn' procedure. Following a dispute with the Tibetan government, the preceding 9th Panchen Lama had fled to China in 1923 where he died in 1937. This provided the Chinese government (despite loud protests from Lhasa authorities) with an otherwise un hoped for opportunity to control the selection of the next reincarnation.—See Lin Hsiao-ting, *Tibet and Nationalist China's Frontier: Intrigues and Ethnopolitics, 1928-49* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2006), 200-201.

57 Recently, Chinese media celebrated the selection and enthronement of the 6th Detsul Rinpoche in the Jokhang Temple in July 2010. This process was conducted according to the provisions stipulated by the MMR, including the 'drawing lots from a golden urn' procedure. See Lozang Tsering, »A Record of the Enthronement of the Soul Boy of Detsul Reincarnation«, *China's Tibet* 21,6 (2010), 44-49.

58 See e.g. Randeep Ramesh, »Dalai Lama Challenges China—With a Referendum on Reincarnation«, *The Guardian* (Nov 28, 2007) <[www.guardian.co.uk/world/2007/nov/28/china.religion](http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2007/nov/28/china.religion)> (July 23, 2011); »Dalai Lama says Chinese More Concerned about Successor than Him«,

his reincarnation should be searched for outside Tibet and he even mentioned the possibility that the reincarnation lineage of the Dalai Lamas would cease with the 14th reincarnation.<sup>59</sup> His resignation as the political leader of the Tibetans in March 2011 can be interpreted as a manoeuvre which should prepare the Tibetan community for an uneasy transitional period between the passing away of the 14th Dalai and the enthronement of the 15th reincarnation.

Regardless of the outcome of the considerations of the Tibetans in exile, it will not hinder the Chinese authorities to carry out a selection procedure according to the provisions stipulated by the MMR.<sup>60</sup> The Chinese authorities consider it a crucial issue which documents the supreme political power of Beijing in Tibet and they will be not ready to compromise on this issue.<sup>61</sup>

*Daily News & Analysis* (Nov, 19, 2010) <[www.dnaindia.com/india/report\\_dalai-lama-says-chinese-more-concerned-about-successor-than-him\\_1468934](http://www.dnaindia.com/india/report_dalai-lama-says-chinese-more-concerned-about-successor-than-him_1468934)> (July 23rd, 2011).

59 Influential Tibetan Buddhist dignitaries and political leaders, such as the former (2001–2011) prime minister Samdhong Rinpoche, even earlier pleaded for the abolition of the institution of *trulkus* as such in Tibetan society as anachronistic and condemned the repeated manipulations during the selection of reincarnations in traditional Tibet, see Samdhong Rinpoche, »Das Tulku-system gehört ins Museum«, *Tibet und Buddhismus* 3 (2010), 34–36.

60 For instance in March 2011 Padma Choling (*padma 'phrin las*, b1952, Chin. Baima Chilin 白瑪赤林), the current Chairman (in office since January 2010) of the government of the Tibetan Autonomous Region, openly stated during the yearly session of the National People's Congress that the Dalai Lama has to reincarnate; he does not have a right to choose his successor any way he wants and he must follow the historical and religious tradition of reincarnation (i.e. to accept the 'drawing lots from a golden urn' procedure). See Sui-Lee Wee and Ben Blanchard, »China says Dalai Lama has to Reincarnate« <[www.reuters.com/article/2011/03/07/us-china-npc-tibet-idUSTRE72624L20110307](http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/03/07/us-china-npc-tibet-idUSTRE72624L20110307)> (Aug 1st, 2011).

61 An interesting historical precedent of the strained relationship between the Marxist atheistic state authorities and Buddhist reincarnations is represented by the case of the 8th Jebtsundamba Khutukhtu (1870–1924). In May 1924 after his death, the Central Committee of the Mongolian People's Party proclaimed that he had been reborn in the Buddhist paradise of Shambhala and forbade the search of his next reincarnation. See Luboš Bělka, »Institution of Mongolian (Khalkha) Jibzundamba Khutugtu: Religion and Politics on the Treshold of the 21st Century«, in *Piatije torchinovskiye chtenia. Filosofiya, religiya i kultura stran Vostoka*, ed. by Sergey V. Pachomov & al. (Sankt Peterburg University Press, 2009), 309–316. The high political potential of Buddhist reincarnation in modern Central and East Asian politics can be further illustrated by the fact that the Japanese government was considering in the late 1930s, during the period of their expansion into East Asia and to a certain degree also into Central Asia, to install a new

According to their (mis)interpretation, the appointment of a loyal Chinese-fostered 15th Dalai Lama would remove the only obstacle for the acceptance of Chinese rule among Tibetans. As the example of the 11th Panchen Lama vividly illustrates, the Chinese government will select a 15th Dalai Lama through the 'drawing lots from a golden urn' procedure referring to the MMR and subsequently launch a large-scale political campaign in Tibet with the goal of procuring the approval of Tibetans for their candidate, which will be a hopeless task, as can be proved by the refusal of the Chinese choice for the 11th Panchen Lama. These developments will further heighten tensions between Tibetans and Chinese authorities and further destabilize the situation in areas inhabited by Tibetans in the PRC. Under such circumstances, a latent conflict between the majority of Tibetans and the Chinese state is inevitable and it can burst at anytime into an individual manifestation of dissent or even open mass protests, as was the case in the spring of 2008.<sup>62</sup> With regard to the international setting, Tibetan issues will shrink back from the viewpoint of the Western political elite as well as the international media in the post-14th Dalai Lama phase, which may offer the Chinese authorities the opportunity for an even more heavy-handed approach in Tibet.

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9th Jebtsundamba Khutukhtu, who would be loyal to Japan and who would legitimize its policy in areas inhabited by Mongols.—See Lin Hsiao-ting, *Modern China's Ethnic Frontiers*, 70.

- 62 For an analysis of the protests and their background, see Warren W. Smith, Jr., *Tibet's Last Stand? The Tibetan Uprising of 2008 and China's Response* (Lanham; New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010). The issue of state infringements in religious life, including the selection of the future Dalai Lama and other reincarnations, was one of the reasons which caused the week-long protests across the whole Tibetan Plateau.