

Institute of Chinese Studies

WEDNESDAY SEMINAR

*Contested (Geo)Politics of
Reincarnation: Tibet and
China*

REPORT

Speaker :

Dibyesh Anand

20 December 2023

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The speaker highlighted the sensitivity of the subject of reincarnation for Tibetans, given its sacrality. Anand contested the notion of a modern nation-state ruled by an atheist party claiming final authority over non-secular subjects. The PRC has proclaimed itself as the protector of the tradition by following the *Golden Urn* system.
- The speaker noted that the issue of reincarnation has always invited political intervention. Anand argued that there is no continuity in the PRC's interactions with the tradition from the Qing era. Earlier interactions sought political stability in Tibet, not the domestication of belief.
- The primary objectives of PRC with regard to Tibetan Buddhism are domestication and eradication. Anand stated that, even if not atheist, the PRC would eliminate Tibetan Buddhism due to the intolerance for shared or ambiguous sovereignty in the client-patron relationship.
- Anand concluded by stating that the Chinese state aims to diminish the credibility of Tibetan Buddhism by manipulating the appointment of Panchen Lama, thereby influencing the selection of the next Dalai Lama.

REPORT

CONTESTED (GEO)POLITICS OF REINCARNATION: TIBET AND CHINA

Speaker: Dr. Dibyesh Anand, Interim Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Global Engagement and Employability), University of Westminster, London.

Chair: Dr. Tshering Chonzom Bhutia, Advisor and In-Charge, National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration (NIEPA); and, Associate Editor, *India Quarterly*.

Date: 20 December 2023

Venue: Zoom Webinar

Dr. Tshering Chonzom Bhutia, began the seminar by reflecting on the process of reincarnation of the Dalai Lama across the timelines of the Qing Dynasty, the Republican era, and contemporary period of the People’s Republic of China. She observed that the Chinese consider it necessary to exert their influence over the Dalai Lama as a marker of Chinese authority. For the PRC, the internationalisation of the Tibet issue, with the active involvement of India and Mongolia, serves to exacerbate the issue.

Dr. Dibyesh Anand fleshed out the geopolitical underpinnings of reincarnation, and anchored the discussion at the intersection of Tibet, China, and India. He presented historical parallels and policy objectives to argue that there was no continuity in how the Chinese state presently deals with Tibetan Buddhism.

Dr. Anand noted that reincarnation is a sensitive topic for Tibetans, given its nature of sacrality. He highlighted the political contestation as a confluence of tradition and modernity. In his view, it involves a “modern nation-state ruled by an atheist party claiming final authority over non-secular subjects.” Dr. Anand illustrated this through the party-state presenting itself as the protector of tradition—following the *Golden Urn* system of reincarnation—as opposed to the 14th Dalai Lama’s views on reincarnation, which can be seen as being more modern.

Nonetheless, political considerations have always accompanied the process of reincarnation in Tibetan Buddhism. The word ‘Dalai’ is Mongolian and holds the memory of legitimising patron-client relationships between Tibetan Buddhist monks and Mongolian rulers. Similarly,

Qing rulers intervened to strengthen the Gelug sect and establish the sect's absolute authority in Tibet. This was not to domesticate the belief system but rather to maintain political stability in the region. The speaker argued that such intentions no longer prevail. Rather, the PRC intends to domesticate and even potentially eradicate Tibetan Buddhism. Dr. Anand went on to assert that even if the PRC had not been atheist, it would have still proceeded with the elimination of Tibetan Buddhism, primarily because a modern state cannot tolerate the shared or ambiguous sovereignty that the original client-patron relationship mandated.

Furthermore, it was posited that reincarnation has far-reaching geopolitical implications in the region. Dr. Anand noted that it was in fact Bhutan and not China that passed the first relevant legislation on reincarnation. However, Bhutan had intended to avoid complications of sovereignty by presenting solutions in a situation where a Bhutanese might be found as the reincarnation of a foreign Lama—providing parallels with the operations of the Qing and Republican eras. He also highlighted that India has officially taken on an agnostic role, pointing out that India has merely an approach towards the Tibet issue, but no consistent policy.

The speaker explained that China's Order No. 5 assigns the Buddhist Association of China (BAC) as the bridge between the Tibetan monasteries and the United Front Work Department (UFWD). However, the speaker pointed out that there exist divergences in operation, where the BAC is biased towards the workings of the UFWD. Similarly, despite China claiming to protect the traditions of Tibetan Buddhism, its operation is aimed at diminishing its credibility. Dr. Anand provided the example of the party-state intervening in the recognition of the Panchen Lama, who is traditionally required to identify the next reincarnation of the Dalai Lama.

Following the speaker's talk, Dr. Bhutia added some remarks on the policies of the Communist Party of China towards Tibetan Buddhism. She remarked that the continued "instrumentalisation of reincarnation" by the Chinese had caused the politically aware younger generations of Tibetans to lose faith in the process.

This report was prepared by Tamiliniyaa Rangarajan, Research Intern, Institute of Chinese Studies.

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