

Institute of Chinese Studies

WEDNESDAY SEMINAR

*Binding the Deities - Tibetan
Buddhism, Reincarnation
and the Chinese Communist
Party*

REPORT

Speaker :

Jigme Yeshe Lama

14 June 2023

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The seminar explored the interaction between the Chinese State and Tibetan Buddhism on the issues of the reincarnation of *rinpoches*. Traditionally, this relationship has been viewed through the lens of conflict. However, Lama provided a fresh perspective by highlighting the central processes of cooperation and “co-option” in the Chinese State’s administration of Tibet.
- Tibetan Buddhist hierarchs traditionally exercised control through ritual sovereignty, of which the reincarnation of the *rinpoches* was a key component. Lama contends that the Chinese nation-state deploys the logic of historical legitimacy and modern governance to counter this.
- China’s historical legitimacy rests on the support of some Tibetan elites to the PLA during its early encounters in the 1930s and the subsequent “co-option” of these elites in the ranks of the UFDW and NPC. This “co-option” is innate to the Buddhist tradition, where local deities were co-opted to the lower rungs of the Buddhist hierarchy and were treated as guardians. This led to the concept of “shared sovereignty”.
- China rejects this concept of “shared sovereignty” based on the notions of modern state sovereignty. Therefore, the religious elites co-opted into organisations such as the UFDW and NPC exercise lesser autonomy. Additional institutions are created to train *rinpoches* and deploy them to effectuate a tighter grip of the Party over Tibetan affairs.
- In conclusion, China’s policies on the issue of reincarnation are shaped by the logic of nation-state sovereignty. Its criticism of the Dalai Lama goes against the traditional practices of ritual sovereignty within the region, resulting in limited opportunities for negotiation. Additionally, the continued reverence for the Dalai Lama within the Himalayan belt may potentially affect future relations between China and India.

REPORT

Speaker: Dr. Jigme Yeshe Lama, Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Calcutta; and, PhD, Centre for East Asian Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

Chair: Dr. Swargajyoti Gohain, Associate Professor, Ashoka University; PhD, Emory University, U.S.A.; and, M.Phil, University of Delhi.

Date: 14 June 2023

Venue: Zoom Webinar

Tibetan Buddhism, with its rich spiritual traditions and beliefs, has long been intertwined with the intricate issue of reincarnation, particularly concerning the recognition and succession of *tulkus* or *rinpoches*. However, the relationship between Tibetan Buddhism and the Communist Party of China (CPC) has been marked by complex dynamics, with the issue of reincarnation serving as a focal point for state control, political suppression, and cultural assimilation. To enhance comprehension of the tradition, and contentious issues surrounding the reincarnation of *tulkus* and *rinpoches*. On 14 June 2023, a captivating seminar titled, *Binding the Deities: Tibetan Buddhism, Reincarnation, and the Chinese Communist Party* was organised by the Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi, and featured Dr. Jigme Yeshe Lama as the speaker.

The discussion aimed to explore the intricate relationship between Tibetan Buddhism, the practice of reincarnation, and the Communist Party of China (CPC), shedding light on the challenges and conflicts faced by these entities.

Dr. Lama commenced the session by highlighting the central role of reincarnation within Tibetan Buddhism, and its historical significance. The concept of reincarnation is deeply intertwined with the recognition and succession of *tulkus* or *rinpoches*, highly revered spiritual leaders in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. However, the CPC's involvement in this process has resulted in a complex and contentious dynamic.

The session delved into the issue of state control and interference, elucidating how the CPC seeks to assert authority over Tibetan religious institutions. Dr. Lama emphasized that the Chinese government's intervention in the recognition and appointment of *tulkus* aims to diminish the influence of Tibetan Buddhism and consolidate state control over religious affairs. Measures such as the Management Measures for the Reincarnation of Living Buddhas in Tibetan Buddhism have been implemented by the CPC, requiring state approval for the recognition of *tulkus*, resulting in significant tension between the Chinese authorities and the Tibetan Buddhist community.

Furthermore, Dr. Lama addressed the broader context of political and cultural suppression in Tibet, asserting that the CPC's interference in the reincarnation process reflects a larger strategy to suppress Tibetan culture, erode religious identity, and exert control over Tibet. By manipulating the selection and recognition of *tulkus*, the Chinese government seeks to align the future leadership of Tibetan Buddhism with its own political interests, diluting the spiritual essence of the tradition.

Throughout the seminar, Dr. Lama highlighted the resilience demonstrated by Tibetan Buddhism in the face of state interference. The Tibetan Buddhist community, including the Dalai Lama, has openly criticized the Chinese government's attempts to manipulate the reincarnation process. They stress the importance of maintaining the authenticity and integrity of their religious practices, considering the recognition of *tulkus* as a sacred matter that should be free from political interference. This resistance underscores the enduring significance of religious identity and autonomy within Tibetan society.

Dr. Jigme Yeshe Lama concluded by stating that, the policies of the Communist Party of China (CPC) regarding Tibetan Buddhist reincarnates are influenced by the concept of nation-state sovereignty. While these policies allow for some room for negotiation due to the ritual sovereignty inherent in Tibetan Buddhist reincarnates, this space is gradually diminishing. Nevertheless, the modern Chinese state continues to engage with Tibetan Buddhist reincarnates. Moreover, Tibetan Buddhism and regional sovereignty exhibit a transnational character, as a significant portion of the Himalayas consists of devoted followers of Tibetan Buddhism. As a result, the CPC's future strategy concerning reincarnation, and its response will carry significant geopolitical implications.

The chair, Dr. Swargajyoti Gohain, commended Dr. Lama's analysis. She emphasised the importance of understanding the complex relationship in today's geopolitical context. Further, she stressed upon the need to preserve religious autonomy and cultural diversity, considering the transnational nature of Tibetan Buddhism in the Himalayan region. She expressed optimism that this seminar shall foster further research, dialogue, and awareness on this critical topic.

During the seminar, questions were raised about the international response to the CPC's interference in the reincarnation process, and efforts by other governments, human rights organisations, and religious leaders to protect religious freedom and cultural preservation in Tibet. Dr. Lama acknowledged the current global concern, highlighting ongoing initiatives to address human rights issues in Tibet. He emphasized the significance of advocacy for religious freedom, despite diplomatic tensions arising from differing perspectives. Dr. Lama further stressed upon sustained international engagement and collaboration to protect autonomy and rights in Tibet, encouraging participants to raise awareness and support initiatives safeguarding Tibet's religious and cultural heritage.

This report is prepared by Khan Farah, Research Intern at the Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi.

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