

Why the Dalai Lama Won't Reincarnate

Fewer and fewer governments are willing to risk Beijing's anger by being seen to be on amicable terms with the Dalai Lama



The chairman of China's ethnic and religious affairs committee, Zhu Weiqun, recently condemned the 14th Dalai Lama's repeated statements that he may not want to reincarnate after death. Zhu said the sentiment represented a betrayal of Tibetan Buddhism, adding harshly, "One minute he will reincarnate as a foreigner ... the next as a woman. If you gave him a jar of honey, he'd happily tell you that in his next life he'll be a bee."

It is understandable that a Chinese government representative should make a venomous statement against the Dalai Lama, given the latter's status as the focal point of Free Tibet movement. What may seem strange is the way that reincarnation, an esoteric concept that can't be proved scientifically, has become a political matter in the Chinese-Tibetan context.

The reincarnation of Tibetan lamas became politicized when in 2007 China's State of Religious Affairs Bureau issued its Decree No.5, ruling that reincarnations of all tulkus or living Buddhas, were only valid once approved by the state. Perhaps Chinese bureaucrats believed the decree would ensure that something like the controversial succession of the Panchen Lama in 1989 could not recur.

The tradition has been that when the Dalai Lama dies, the duty falls on the Panchen Lama to find his new reincarnation, and in turn a new Panchen Lama also has to be recognized by the Dalai Lama. Given the strategic importance of the two lamas in Tibetan history, it is no wonder, following the death of the 10th Panchen Lama, Beijing moved quickly to recognize Gyancaïn Norbu as his successor. In protest, the Dalai Lama declared a 6-year-old boy called Gedhun Choekyi Nyima to be the true reincarnation the following year.

In a typically efficient Chinese manner, the 6-year-old boy promptly disappeared from public view and is still thought to be under house arrest.

Religious affairs have admittedly always had state patronage in China. During the imperial period, all Taoist deities had to be officially recognized by the emperor. For example, an imperial decree of the Song Dynasty in 1281 conferred upon the sea goddess Mazu, popular within the Chinese Diaspora, the official title of Tianfei (Heavenly Princess). Under the Qing Dynasty, four centuries later, Emperor Qianlong elevated the goddess to the rank of Tianhou (Empress of Heaven).

In the Tibetan context, Beijing has also sought to justify the 2007 decree through legal precedent, arguing that in the past reincarnations of the Dalai and Panchen lamas had had to be approved by Qing emperors.

The decree will also mean that following the current Dalai Lama's death, only a Beijing-backed candidate will stand a chance of being recognized. Any other contender will simply be dismissed as a pretender. This is perhaps why, back in 2007, the Dalai Lama publicly suggested that he might not want to reincarnate. Later on, he reportedly told author Matteo Pistono that he would "be reborn outside of China's control." In 2014, however, the Dalai Lama, in an interview with the German Newspaper Welt am Sonntag, implied that he had decided against reincarnating after all.

Zhu Weiqun also claimed that the Dalai Lama's international standing was declining. This is, in some ways, true. As China's power and influence increase globally, fewer and fewer governments are willing to risk Beijing's anger by being seen to be on amicable terms with the Dalai Lama.

The Tibetan community in exile is less united than it was when the Dalai Lama fled from Tibet to India more than 50 years ago. The Gelug school of Tibetan Buddhism, to which the Dalai Lama belongs, is now fragmented by the ban on the worship of Dorje Shugden, a protector deity propitiated by many of its followers. The Dalai Lama denies there is an official ban but he admits to having discouraged Buddhists from the Shugden practice. He has also asked those who consider themselves devotees of Shugden not to attend his public teachings.

It seems, despite his latest desire against being reborn, if the current Dalai Lama dies, the Chinese government will proceed to appoint his successor. Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama, may not prevail against Beijing in the matter of his succession but he still has time to ensure a great legacy. The thorn in the flesh for him remains the opposition by the Shugden devotees to his religious ban. It seems only logical, instead of imitating Beijing in politicizing religion, the Dalai Lama should resolve the Shugden controversy in a peaceful manner.

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