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Will he or Won't he? Recent Sino-Tibetan Exchanges over the Dalai Lama's Reincarnation

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Discussions about a post-Dalai Lama situation and its implications for the Sino-Tibetan problem have been raging a very long time. A connected and ubiquitous discussion that is anchored within this larger debate pertains to the question of the Dalai Lama's reincarnation or *zhuanshi* (转世). Discussions range from whether the Dalai Lama would be reborn in Tibet or outside to who has the ultimate authority to choose the next Dalai Lama (Dalai Lama n.d; Ramzy 2008; *The Weekly Voice* 2011).

The latest debate on the reincarnation issue was sparked by a *BBC* report of its interview of the Dalai Lama published on 17 December 2014, which was suggestively titled 'Dalai Lama concedes he may be the last' (*BBC* 2014). This story needs to be read with care owing to a similar media flare-up on the same issue following another

media report earlier on 9 September 2014, of an interview of the Dalai Lama by *Die Welt* or *Welt am Sonntag*, a German daily (Eigendorf 2014a). This report flaunted another sensational title, '*Der Dalai Lama will keinen Nachfolger mehr haben*' (The Dalai Lama will have no successor). Understandably, many of the reports and articles do not seem to have gone through the lengthy German transcript of the interview (available at Eigendorf 2014b) which might have provided a more nuanced understanding about the Dalai Lama's thoughts on the issue.

Within 24 hours of the appearance of the *Welt am Sonntag* report, an official from the Gaden Phodrang,¹ the institution entrusted

¹ Gaden Phodrang is short for the Gaden Phodrang government that was established by the Fifth Dalai Lama Ngawang Lobsang Gyatso (1617-82) in 1642, thus, replacing the Gaden Phodrang Labrang established in the 15th century. While the Gaden

by the Dalai Lama as the sole legitimate body to choose his successor (Dalai Lama 2011) dismissed the report as ‘incomplete’ (VoA 2014). Surprisingly – or perhaps, not so surprisingly – this statement went virtually unnoticed.

Partial or incomplete accounts of the Dalai Lama’s interviews have impacted the fragile relations.

The ‘incomplete’ reports have had a very noticeable impact on the already fragile Sino-Tibetan relations. This paper first deals with the reactions by Chinese officials and media followed by an attempt to decode the message underlying the Dalai Lama’s supposed statements to a news-hungry media. Instead of relying on mere summaries or *zhaiyao* (摘要) of interviews, this analysis will take up the full interviews available in video or transcribed format. Before concluding, some of the concerns on the two sides will be briefly analysed.

Fault-lines in Sino-Tibetan Relations Revealed

A review of the statements by Chinese officials and scholars to the two interviews gives a sense of how the Chinese side perceives the recent media hype on the reincarnation issue. For one, Zhu Weiqun, Chairman of the Ethnic and Religious

Phodrang Labrang was merely a religious institution headed by the Dalai Lama, the Gaden Phodrang government, vested both the spiritual and political power of Tibet in the successive Dalai Lamas. After the devolution exercise in Dharamsala in 2011 which transferred the Dalai Lama’s political authority to an elected leadership of the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA), the institution of Gaden Phodrang, once again assumed its former religious potency. The latter has been referred to as the Gaden Phodrang Trust since 2011 (Dalai Lama 2011).

Affairs Committee of the CPPCC (*Reuters* 2014) and Qin Yongzhang, a researcher with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (*China Tibet Online* 2014a, 2014b), both see the Dalai Lama’s moves as being an international gimmick. Second, both of them along with Hua Chunying, a foreign ministry spokesperson (*China Daily* 2014) assert the authority of the Chinese central government’s role in the selection of the next Dalai Lama. Third, while all of them are on the same page as regards their deep suspicion of the Dalai Lama’s motives, Qin’s assessment of the Dalai Lama’s objective – about ensuring that the next Dalai Lama is not born in China – is more or less accurate. In an important statement on the reincarnation issue dated 24 September 2011, the Dalai Lama stated, ‘Bear in mind that, apart from the reincarnation recognized through such legitimate methods, no recognition or acceptance should be given to a candidate chosen for political ends by anyone, including those in the People’s Republic of China ((Dalai Lama 2011).

Fourth, Qin’s understanding about the Dalai Lama’s objective, namely, to ‘bring difficulties to the central government’, however, discounts the fact that it might actually be an attempt by the Dalai Lama to gain China’s attention and to get Beijing to the negotiating table. Creation of difficulty, in that sense, could be interpreted as being a strategy by the Dalai Lama, rather than an end in itself. Fifth, both the MOFA and Qin tend to argue in favour of history and tradition unlike Zhu who sees it as Beijing’s prerogative to decide whether the Dalai Lama institution should continue. However, the MOFA’s call for adherence to history is somewhat inconsistent in that it also demands adherence to ‘set religious procedures’, which in all probability, is a reference to China’s more recent 2007 State Administration for Religious Affairs

regulation delineating procedures for selection of reincarnated monks (discussed in more detail below). In this context, reference to historical sanctity of reincarnation procedures appears to be more of a high-sounding rhetorical device to counter the Dalai Lama.

Decoding the Dalai Lama's Statements

The Dalai Lama's responses in the *Welt am Sonntag* interview, though somewhat roundabout, seem to be an attempt to tell the interviewer that he, the Dalai Lama, as a person, is not important. Hence, when the question was asked in a more straightforward way, he chooses to respond in a rather non-committal, rhetorical way: 'I sometimes say in jest' that the Dalai Lama institution had been around for nearly five centuries and hence, '[n]ow, this tradition can stop with the 14th Dalai Lama, who is quite popular'.

On a more sombre note, towards the end of the interview, he twice hints at a desire to be 'reborn'. The first time, he quotes the lines of his favourite prayer from Shantideva – 'I will stay as long as the suffering remains of sentient beings in the world'. The second time, he narrates the story of the first Dalai Lama who when asked by his disciples if he was ready to move on to a 'heavenly plane' responded by saying that he would like to be 'reborn in a difficult place in which he can be of use.' With a similar motivation, he, that is, the current Dalai Lama, confesses that 'I pray also'.

The *BBC* interview too proceeds on similar lines as the *Welt am Sonntag* interview. To the direct question, '[s]o there won't be a 15th Dalai Lama?', he categorically replies, '[t]hat very much depends on the circumstances.' At the same time, he

reiterates the primacy of the Tibetan people in the whole debate (*BBC* 2014). In a *Nikkei* interview on 25 November 2014, he mentioned that he had been asserting this '[a]s early as 1969' (*Nikkei Asian Review* 2014). Interestingly, here he added 'Buddhists and Mongolians' to the list of people who could decide the fate of the institution of the Dalai Lama, thereby expanding the scope of the debate.²

[Historical representation is not
the only issue at stake.]

The above discussion conveys a sense of the Dalai Lama's wish to be reborn if given an option considering that it also involves a 'karmic' mandate (also see Dalai Lama n.d.). Which is probably why he leaves room for speculation and manoeuvre by resorting to 'jest', citing religious sermons, making open-ended remarks that it depends on 'circumstances' and, transferring the onus on to external parties, such as the 'Tibetan people' and other Buddhists.

Respective Concerns

The reincarnation issue is undoubtedly embedded within the larger contest over the question of Tibet's historical status³ and who in the past controlled and would continue to control the appointment of the Dalai Lama, the highest office of Tibetan Buddhism since the 17th century. Both sides of the Sino-Tibetan divide appear to perceive that much is at stake not just in terms of historical representation, but also in

² In this context, in 2011, he had vaguely referred to 'other concerned people who follow Tibetan Buddhism' (Dalai Lama 2011).

³ The question of Tibet's status and its relations with imperial China is too complicated to be fitted into modern conceptions of sovereignty or autonomy and cannot be addressed in this brief analysis.

terms of future outcomes. It is no wonder, therefore, that there is such clamour on all sides.

A 2008 statement by a Tibetan official in Dharamsala, Thubten Samphel that '[t]he institution of the Dalai Lama, it's one of Tibet's great strengths ... At the same time, it's one of our weaknesses, because all of us are dependent on him' (quoted in Ramzy 2008) captures the essence of Tibetan dilemma. Beijing, on the other hand, may be particularly concerned, given an earlier 'convoluted attempt' by the fifth Dalai Lama in the 17th century to 'prevent China from choosing his successor' (Barnett 2011a). This explains to a great extent the Manchu Qing empire's decision in the late 18th century to introduce a new system termed as the 'golden urn system' whereby names of prospective candidates would be placed in an urn, from which lots would be drawn to pick the real incarnation. Julia Famularo from Yale University in a comprehensive analysis of the issue mentions that '[e]ven modern PRC historians admit that the use of the urn process was inconsistent to the point of being nearly discretionary' (2012: 6).

Political exigency has commanded adroitness and innovation from both sides.

The issue gained traction in the 21st century, owing to another attempt by the Chinese government to reassert its role. On 18 July 2007, China's State Administration for Religious Affairs issued a new regulation or *guiding* (规定) (Order No. 5), to be effective from 1 September 2007, which in essence was intended to exclude 'any foreign organization or individual' from the reincarnation selection process (Congressional Executive Commission on China 2007; for translation, see International

Campaign for Tibet 2007). It outlined a number of eligibility conditions, application procedures and the government and religious institutions to be approached for approval, depending on the level of 'impact' of the reincarnated monk.

The regulation gave rise to major debates and discussions among the Tibetan diaspora and the leadership in Dharamsala. Suggestions to foil possible Chinese plans to choose the next Dalai Lama ranged from asking the Dalai Lama to assume the role of a constitutional head of state with nominal powers rather than retiring fully (Norbu 2007), to asking him to appoint a 'young man of fifteen or twenty years of age' as the 15th Dalai Lama within the current one's lifetime (Sangay 2008). Following major protests on the Tibetan plateau in 2008 and coinciding with a lack of movement in the Sino-Tibetan talks, the Dalai Lama opted for full retirement in 2011.

The Dalai Lama's decision to retire from political service was combined with the issuing of a lengthy policy statement on the reincarnation issue (see Dalai Lama 2011; for analyses, see Barnett 2011b and Famularo 2012). In it, he clarified, '[w]hen I am about ninety I will consult the high Lamas of the Tibetan Buddhist traditions, the Tibetan public, and other concerned people who follow Tibetan Buddhism, and re-evaluate whether the institution of the Dalai Lama should continue or not' (Dalai Lama 2011). Further, if the institution was to continue, then he entrusted the Gaden Phodrang Trust, in its current religious form, with the responsibility of selecting the next Dalai Lama.

Developments in Dharamsala did not go unnoticed in China. A *Xinhua* article saw it as an attempt to 'pass on his (the Dalai Lama's) "Tibet independence" attempt'

(*Xinhua* 2011). The Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Hong Lei's responses (Sehgal 2011) were more carefully crafted. Even while he reiterated the usual objections, a cognizance of the weakness of Chinese claims based on the golden urn system perhaps restrained him from straying too far into history. He stated that the 14th Dalai Lama was 'approved by the then republican government'. Given the long and winding narrative about Republican China's involvement in the matter, suffice it to mention that its policy document titled 'Methods for the Reincarnation of Lamas' promulgated on 10 February 1936 'had little impact' in the 14th Dalai Lama's selection (Famularo 2012:7-8).

Conclusion

It is clear that the two contending documents – of 2007 and 2011 – are basically attempts by the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Dalai Lama, respectively, to reassert their respective roles and exclude the other. In this context, we may revert to the Chinese grudge against the Dalai Lama for 'seeking to distort and negate history' and harming the 'normal order of Tibetan Buddhism' (*China Daily* 2014). Such a grudge is problematic and inconsistent, in the sense that, while the question about immutability of religious and historical customs is a matter of philosophical debate, political exigency has commanded adroitness and innovation from both sides.

Understandably, in the current age, the question has assumed a dynamic of its own and cannot be contained by merely invoking historical or religious salience or, for that matter, by asserting the superiority of one over the other in the selection process. The question of what would happen in a post-Dalai Lama period when there might be two

or more Dalai Lamas remains a pertinent one.

The Dalai Lama does not necessarily discount a Chinese role.

A close reading of the 2011 statement shows that the Dalai Lama does not necessarily discount a Chinese role in the reincarnation system; of course, he hints at it in a very indirect manner. While maintaining that the 'Tibetans (historically) had no faith in the Chinese 'golden urn' system of reincarnation because it lacked any spiritual quality', in the very next sentence, he suggests that 'if it were to be used honestly, it seems that we could consider it as similar to the manner of divination employing the dough-ball method (*zen tak*)' (or ཟེན་ཏུ་རྩུ་གཞེས). This may be interpreted as an attempt by him to leave scope for Chinese involvement in the selection process, with the precondition that they do it 'honestly'. This crucial point, with immense face-saving and deal-brokering potential in Sino-Tibetan relations, has unfortunately been overlooked. ■

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