

The tawdry politics of Tibetan Buddhism

The flight of the Karmapa Lama from Tibet

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22 March 2000

For two months, ever since his arrival in India on January 5, the 14-year-old Tibetan monk Ugyen Trinley Dorje has been in and out of the international media. His brief public appearances and even briefer utterances have been the occasion for rather fawning reports which for the most part are marked by an uncritical acceptance of statements and comments emanating from the self-styled Tibetan government-in-exile headed by the Dalai Lama. Trinley Dorje's flight from Tibet has been turned into a "Boys Own" adventure story and the arcane religious rites surrounding his selection as the 17th Karmapa Lama have been the subject of close interest and reportage.

Among a few of the writers, one detects a willingness to lend a certain credence to the myth of reincarnation and the claim that the 14-year-old boy has inherited the mental and spiritual capacities of the 16th Karmapa Lama who died in a Chicago hospital in 1981. In a gushing article in early February, a correspondent for the *Boston Globe* wrote that the young monk "already displayed the same star quality, combining flashes of brilliance with humility and composure with impish humour, an infectious mix that has helped his mentor [the Dalai Lama] win international sympathy for the Tibetan cause". After praising his attributes, she concluded that "such breadth of character seems incredible for a 14-year-old boy" and quoted a Canadian student as saying "something illuminated from him".

Needless to say such royal treatment is extended to few other 14-year-olds around the world, particularly from backward and impoverished countries. Nor is much time spent discussing, for instance, the cultural practices of Papua New Guinean tribes or the demise of the beliefs of the Peruvian Indians. International media interest in the intricacies of Tibetan Buddhism and the doings of its high lamas are bound up with broader issues both on the Indian subcontinent and elsewhere.

According to press reports, Trinley Dorje fled the Tsurphu monastery near the Tibetan capital of Lhasa on December 28 after announcing a few days before that he was entering a religious retreat. He jumped out of his window into a waiting car and with two experienced drivers, his sister and several other passengers sped off to the border with Nepal. Details of the journey into Nepal then onto New Delhi vary widely—many include a romantic ride on horseback, some the more prosaic use of public transport and others the possibility that he and his party simply caught commercial airline flights from the Nepalese city of Pokhara.

How the car managed to evade Chinese security within Tibet, how he and his group were able to cross two international borders without passports or papers; and where he obtained a car and the necessary money in the first place—all of this is left somewhat hazy. All reports appear to agree on one thing: on the night of January 4 he hired a cab in New Delhi and drove hundreds of kilometres to Dharmasala in the foothills of the Himalayas in northwest India—the Dalai Lama's headquarters.

Why he left is even murkier than the route he took. By all accounts, the 14-year-old led a rather pampered existence in Tibet complete with toys, chauffeured limousines and trips through China. Trinley Dorje was

particularly valuable to the Chinese bureaucracy, as he was the only high lama recognised by both the Dalai Lama and Beijing. As the 17th Karmapa Lama, he heads the powerful Karma Kagyu sect and ranks third in the hierarchy of Tibetan Buddhism after the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama.

For the most part the boy has been cosseted away since his arrival in Dharmasala. His brief public comments referring to the lack of freedom in Tibet have been tailored to the political requirements of the Dalai Lama and his government-in exile. Trinley Dorje fled Tibet, it is said, because he felt "like he was living in a gilded cage". The official story appears to be that he is a headstrong lad who just decided to jump in his car and arrive unannounced in India taking the Dalai Lama, Beijing and New Delhi completely by surprise.

Unlikely as it is, even if Trinley Dorje did depart unprompted and unassisted from his "gilded cage", then he has leapt from the frying pan into the fire. If he felt he was being used by Chinese authorities in Tibet then in Dharmasala he will quickly find himself—if he is not already—a pawn in the political intrigues within the Tibetan exile community and in the broader strategic equation of regional power politics.

To understand why it is necessary to start by delving, briefly at least, into the bitter factional rivalries of Tibetan lamadom and its rather bizarre politics of reincarnation. Trinley Dorje is not the sole claimant to be the reincarnation of the Karmapa Lama—there are at least two other youngsters, each backed by rival lamas and their respective organisations who also insist that they are the new physical embodiment of the spirit of the dead monk.

At stake in the dispute are not spiritual matters or fine doctrinal points but an earthly lust for power and considerable sums of money. While most of the 130,000 Tibetans in India, Nepal and Bhutan eke out a precarious existence on small plots of land or in handicraft production and small businesses, the religious hierarchy has been able to amass significant fortunes through business investments and donations, particularly by exploiting interest in the West in Tibetan Buddhism.

The Karma Kagyu sect, headed by the Karmapa Lama, has a lavish monastery in Rumtek in Sikkim in northern India, which houses the symbol of his leadership—a black crown said to have been woven from the hair of 100,000 dakinis, or fairies, and to possess miraculous properties. The sect also has a centre in the United States, where the 16th Karmapa Lama chose to spend much of his time, and a large business empire. Estimates of the worth of the Karmapa Charitable Trust start at around \$US1 billion and escalate from there.

Following the death of the previous Karmapa Lama in 1981, four regents were charged with the task of finding his reincarnation. The senior regent, Kunzig Shamar Rinpoche, also known as the Sharmapa, subsequently fell out with the others and with the Dalai Lama. The selection of Trinley Dorje was based on clues purportedly left behind by the 16th Karmapa Lama, which were miraculously discovered in 1992 inside a talisman worn by another regent Tai Situ Rinpoche.

Shamar challenged the selection and the feud came to blows on more than one occasion. According to an article in the *New York Times*, “On August 2, 1993, a second brawl broke out, far worse than the first. Versions of what occurred are as different as inner peace and outer space. What is certain is that the split within the monastery’s walls had become irreparable. Dozens of monks slept in the woods that night—or in a hospital or in jail.” Monks loyal to the Dalai Lama continue to control the valuable monastery.

Shamar did not let the issue rest. In March 1994, he enthroned another reincarnation—Thinley Thaye Dorje—as the alternative 17th Karmapa Lama in a ceremony in New Delhi. The matter has been the subject of a lengthy and rather sordid six-year-long wrangle through the Indian courts. An article in the *Indian Express* entitled “Brief history of the lama wars” refers to no less than six legal cases in various courts throughout India, all but one of which have been dismissed. Shamar currently resides at a monastery donated to the 16th Karmapa by the President of India in 1979 but he himself owns a couple of well-appointed houses in India as well as land in Nepal.

But there is also a third claimant to be the reincarnation of the Karmapa Lama, Dawa Zangpo Sherpa. An article on March 5 in the *Hindustan Times* reported his comments warning that any attempt by the new boy from Tibet to enter the Rumtek monastery would create “a major law-and-order problem”. His group, which unsuccessfully tried to storm the Rumtek monastery in 1998 and 1999, claims that 60 percent of Kagyu sect followers in Sikkim do not recognise the Tai Situ nominee.

These intrigues are not solely bound up with money. The factional disputes in Tibetan Buddhism intersect with regional politics. In the case of Shamar he has not only sought to have the courts decide on the thorny legal issue of which boy is the real reincarnation but accused Tai Situ and other lamas of being Chinese agents engaged in anti-Indian activities. The Indian government took the charges seriously enough to ban Tai Situ from entering India from 1994 to 1998 and still bar him from entering Sikkim or the Rumtek monastery.

Whether the accusations against Tai Situ are true or not, the flight of his protégé to Dharmasala has the potential to set off tensions between India and China who have yet to settle the border disputes that led to army skirmishes in the 1960s. Beijing has always been sensitive to the political activities of the Tibetan government-in-exile on Indian soil and anxious that it be afforded no official recognition. For its part, India has utilised Tibet as a means of putting pressure on China, which has been allied with India’s bitter rival Pakistan.

Clearly Beijing would be concerned if the boy it has recognised as the Karmapa Lama were to be afforded some form of official status by the Indian government and used as a vehicle for agitating for Tibetan independence. But the Indian press, which takes a rather more hardnosed attitude than its Western counterparts to Tibetan matters and the politics of reincarnation, considered the possibility that all was not as it appeared. Beijing, it speculated, was playing its own game.

An article in the *Hindustan Times* in January entitled “Chinese piece in Karmapa jigsaw remains a puzzle” hypothesised that Beijing might be trying to insert the young monk as a more pliable figure in the Tibetan exile leadership. Preliminary police investigations in India, it noted, did not show that “the boy lama and his entourage slipped through the heavy Chinese security cover. On the contrary, the investigations suggest that they had a fairly smooth passage out of their Chinese-occupied homeland, indicating that Beijing may at least have acquiesced in the departure...”

“If the boy-lama was sent to secure the spiritually vital Black Crown and be installed at Kagyu’s Rumtek headquarters, his presence in India could aid Chinese designs both on Sikkim and the Tibetan exile community. He who controls Rumtek also controls the school’s \$1.2 billion worldwide wealth and commands influence over many Buddhists living in the strategically sensitive Indian Himalayan arc from Arunchal

Pradesh to Ladakh. What undergirds India’s concerns is the fact that China on its maps still shows Arunchal Pradesh as its territory, Sikkim as independent, and Jammu and Kashmir (other than the parts it occupies) as disputed.”

Here the story begins to read like something out of Rudyard Kipling’s *Kim* and the boy agent who was involved in the Great Game played by the British colonial rulers on India’s northern borders during the 19th century. The *Hindustan Times* points to the possibility that Tai Situ and the Dalai Lama are involved in a complex web of intrigue with elements of the Chinese bureaucracy. “The Dalai Lama’s controversial endorsement of China’s Karmapa was driven by purely political reasons,” it noted, concluding: “India has yet to figure out the Dalai Lama’s game”.

For his part, Shamar is also involved in intricate machinations with connections in India, China and Taiwan. According to the *Indian Express* article, referred to above, “He enjoys very cordial relations with Kathog Shingchong Tulku, an office-bearer of the Chinese Communist Party who was allegedly deported from Dehradun [in India] 20 years ago for indulging in anti-Indian activities. Tulku now resides in Chengdu, located in the Szechwan province of China, and is a key anti-Dalai Lama player.”

Little more has been written on the political machinations behind the boy’s flight as both India and China have sought to downplay the issue. India is allowing Trinley Dorje to remain as a refugee but has refused to grant him the status of political asylum. Beijing has indicated that it is satisfied with New Delhi’s response. But all of this underlines the basic fact that Tibetan factional politics has always been bound up with regional politics and the geo-political interests of the major powers. The question of Tibet is connected to the longstanding border dispute between India and China, the bitter conflict between Pakistan and India particularly over Kashmir, and wider strategic issues connected to the scramble for oil and minerals in Central Asia.

For centuries the high Tibetan plateau has constituted a key strategic position within the region—long under Chinese patronage, and then after the Chinese revolution of 1911, used by the British in India as a buffer against China and Russia. Soon after Mao’s peasant armies took power in Beijing in 1949, the Chinese army seized Tibet and in 1951 it was formally incorporated into China.

But the Chinese Stalinists were unable to create a stable social base for their rule. Beijing invariably approached religious and cultural questions in Tibet with the heavy hand of the state bureaucrat imbued with Chinese chauvinism. Incapable of eliminating social inequality, poverty and cultural backwardness, Chinese policy has in varying degrees combined brutal repression with pandering to Tibetan Buddhism in an effort to create its own officially sanctioned hierarchy of lamas through which to manipulate local politics.

China’s brutish behaviour in Tibet created oppositional tendencies. Throughout the Cold War, the US was able to exploit as a means of putting pressure on Beijing. While not diplomatically recognising the Dalai Lama’s government-in-exile, US administrations have in the past provided diplomatic, financial and even military assistance to the Tibetan priesthood. After China’s takeover of Tibet in 1950, the CIA financed and trained Tibetans to engage in espionage and guerrilla activities against the Chinese authorities.

Details of the CIA’s operations in Tibet have recently begun to leak out as former operatives have begun to publicly reminisce about their Cold War exploits. An article in the US-based *Newsweek* magazine last August pointed out that the CIA’s activities began as far back as 1956. While the Dalai Lama, keen to preserve his image as a man of peace, claims not to have been directly involved, his elder brother Gyalo Thondup was at the centre of the operations. According to the magazine’s report: “Gyalo Thondup now says he didn’t inform his exalted sibling about all of his intelligence connections at the time: ‘This was a very dirty business’.”

The *Newsweek* article explained: “Beginning in 1958, American

operatives trained about 300 Tibetans at Camp Hale in Colorado. The trainees were schooled in spy photography and sabotage, Morse Code and minelaying. Between 1957 and 1960, the CIA dropped more than 400 tonnes of cargo to the resistance. Yet nine out of 10 guerrillas who fought in Tibet were killed by the Chinese or committed suicide to evade capture, according to an article by aerospace historian William Leary in the Smithsonian's *Air & Space Magazine*."

These activities culminated in an abortive uprising in Tibet in 1959, which was ruthlessly suppressed by Chinese security forces. The Dalai Lama, his close associates and thousands of other Tibetans fled to Nepal and India and established a government-in-exile, which received US and CIA support throughout the 1960s. "By the mid-60s," *Newsweek* explained, "the Tibet operation was costing Washington \$1.7 million a year, according to intelligence documents. That included \$500,000 subsidy to support 2,100 guerrillas based in Nepal and \$180,000 worth of 'subsidy to the Dalai Lama'."

Following Washington's rapprochement with Beijing in 1972, overt support for the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan guerrillas dried up. The *Newsweek* article quoted the rather bitter remarks of the Dalai Lama: "They [the CIA] gave the impression that once I arrived in India, great support would come from the United States. It's a sad, sad story... The US help was very, very limited." By 1974, the Dalai Lama was forced to publicly call for an end to armed resistance in Tibet.

While the US and other Western powers have been wary about alienating Beijing by associating too closely with the Dalai Lama's government-in-exile, neither have they dropped completely what could still be a useful political tool. It was no doubt for past services rendered that the Dalai Lama was given the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989. He continues to receive "unofficial" audiences with political leaders and to bathe in the invariably reverential adulation of the international media.

Tibet along with Taiwan has always been a political hobbyhorse of the extreme right in the US, particularly in the Republican Party. The anti-China lobby wields considerable influence within both the Democrat and Republican parties and as the presidential campaign heats up it is not beyond the bounds of possibility that Tibet along with US-China relations as a whole will surface as an issue.

Certainly the "Free Tibet" movement, which has become something of a cause celebre among middle class social circles and numbers in its ranks figures such as actor Richard Gere, has a degree of political clout in the US and elsewhere. No doubt many people are repelled, quite legitimately, by the acts of repression carried out by the Beijing bureaucracy in Tibet and the insensitivity of the Chinese bureaucracy to the language and cultural traditions of ordinary Tibetans.

Some are also drawn by a fascination for the Dalai Lama's religious teachings—a phenomenon which has far more to do with a profound crisis of perspective among broad layers of the population in the West than any inherent profundity of Tibetan Buddhism. Not a few people find themselves alienated from the political establishment and at the same time can see no way out of the immense social and political problems of the day. In a society thoroughly saturated with individualism, some try to find an individual solution to their anxieties and personal crises. Tibetan Buddhism not only offers an exotic lifestyle but one, which is centred on the spiritual salvation of the individual through his or her own efforts. Moreover, Buddhism justifies indifference and inaction as a response to suffering, poverty and social inequality with the reactionary doctrine that the world is the way it is and the woes of individuals are brought on themselves by their sins in present and past reincarnations.

The result of this rather bizarre mixture of religion and politics is the demand of the Free Tibet movement for an independent Tibet and the return of the Dalai Lama and his entourage of monks to their palatial monasteries in Lhasa. Prior to 1950 Tibet was, after all, a theocracy rooted in the backward semi-feudal practices of the past. The Dalai Lama and the

top lamas were not only religious leaders but also political despots with absolute powers that could be wielded in brutal ways. The social conditions of pre-1950 Tibet are as much a matter of fierce debate as its history and politics. Suffice it to say that hard-line Free Tibet supporters are compelled to acknowledge that life was harsh for the majority of Tibetans under the rule of the Dalai Lama.

For instance, Mary Craig in her book *Tears of Blood—A Cry for Tibet*, with a foreword by the Dalai Lama, provides the following grim picture: "In this strange theocracy administered from Lhasa, all land belonged to the state. Much of this had been granted in the form of hereditary manorial estates to aristocratic families or important monasteries. The government retained a few holdings for its own use, but most of the remaining arable land was leased in strips to small-holding peasants.

"It was a mediaeval feudal society and whether he worked on government property, the monastic estates or on the lands held by the two hundred or so great aristocratic families, the Tibetan peasant was undeniably owned by his master. He had to render a certain amount of compulsory labour in exchange for his own bit of land; and give up the greater portion of his crops to his landlord, keeping the barest minimum necessity for himself and his family. The landlord not only had the right to exact whatever rents he wished, but could also impose cruel punishments for failure to conform. Capital punishment and limb amputation were quite common in some regions."

Having painted this picture, Craig in the next breath tells us: "Life for the ordinary Tibetan was harsh, but it was not the unmitigated hell claimed by Chinese propaganda... Generally speaking, the Tibetans were not aware of being downtrodden or exploited, and their enormous zest for life was undimmed by desire for a freedom they had never known... Despite the yawning divide in terms of money and material possessions, there was so little resentment of the rich by the poor that in all Tibet's history there had seldom been a popular uprising."

They had food, shelter and clothes—what more could they want? At any rate, they didn't rebel so they must have been content. All of this reeks of the same appalling indifference and contempt towards the plight of the oppressed as was exhibited by the high lamas themselves and could no doubt be found—with the appropriate changes—among the justifications trotted out by the apologists of, for example, the British Raj in India or Czarist Russia.

The Tibetan theocracy has, of course, had to change its tune a little over the last 50 years ago, if for no other reason than that the Dalai Lama's US patrons were fighting the Cold War under the banner of democracy. But in examining the "Guidelines for Future Tibet's polity" to be found on the official website of the Tibetan government-in-exile it is remarkable just how limited is the nature of the "democratisation" proposals.

The plan for a "democratic" Tibet abounds with contradictions, not least of which is the fact that it is written in the first person by the Dalai Lama in the manner of an absolute monarch. He eulogises the period prior to 1950 as one in which, under Tibet's Kings and Dalai Lamas, "peace and happiness prevailed". Yet for reasons unexplained he finds it necessary "to reform the unsavoury aspects of our social system". He has made up his mind "not to play any role in the future government of Tibet" but nevertheless will appoint the interim president to form any transitional government.

The Dalai Lama is involved in a delicate balancing act between many forces, including within the Tibetan exile community. While a handful of lamas preside over significant fortunes, the vast majority of Tibetans in India, Nepal and Bhutan live in poverty. According to the Tibetan government-in-exile's own figures, the unemployment rate among exiles is 18.5 percent and many live in settlements which lack basic sanitation, clean water, adequate housing or proper health and education facilities. It was only in 1990 that the "democratisation" of the exile regime constituted itself as the Assembly of Tibetan People's Deputies on a "one

man one vote” basis. But even then, the Dalai Lama retains the right to appoint his nominees and the major Tibetan Buddhist sects all have their representatives.

Stripped of its media hype the world of Dharmasala into which the 14-year-old monk from Tibet has entered hardly presents an edifying spectacle. What emerges is a rather seedy picture of a Tibetan lamadom steeped in backward superstitions, embroiled in sordid intrigues over money and power, and a willing instrument of great power politics in the region.



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