

Religious Policy and State Control in Tibet

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Executive Summary

“We must enhance the knowledge of the monks and nuns about patriotism and law. Tibetan Buddhism must self-reform ... they must adapt themselves to suit the development and stabilisation of Tibet ... Religious tenets and practices which do not comply with a socialist society should be changed.”

(A Golden Bridge Leading to a New Era, TAR Party document, 1996, p. 39)

Since 1950, the government of the Peoples’ Republic of China has sought to control the dominant Buddhist religion and its leadership in Tibet as a means to ensure the integration and security of Tibetan regions within China. The age of the present Dalai Lama and the question of a possible future re-incarnation brings these issues to the fore. It is likely that the Chinese government and Tibetan government-in-exile will declare separate candidates for the Dalai Lama’s re-incarnation. Such a dispute may precipitate large-scale violent unrest across the Tibetan cultural area with potentially grave human rights implications for those involved.

Tibetan Buddhism not only asserts the doctrine of re-incarnation, but recognises a central place for ‘incarnate lamas’ – Buddhist teachers who inherit property and status from one re-incarnation to the next - both in its religious leadership and in its traditional systems of state government. The most important of these have traditionally been the Dalai, Panchen and Karmapa Lamas, although there still exist hundreds of such ‘lineages’ of recognised reincarnations.

While PRC policy regarding Tibetan religious leadership followed communist atheist doctrine during the Cultural Revolution period, modern policies have revived the imperial precedent of using the institution of incarnate lamas as a means for pragmatic political control in Tibet and Mongolia. This control is manifest through post-1990 Patriotic Education campaigns in Tibetan areas and, more recently, the 2007 'Management Measures for the Reincarnation of Living Buddhas in Tibetan Buddhism', which state that all incarnates must be recognised by the Chinese Communist Party’s state apparatus.

Chinese state control of religious leadership was demonstrated in 1995 following the Fourteenth Dalai Lama’s recognition of the young Tibetan boy Gendun Choekyi Nyima as the reincarnation of the recently deceased Panchen Lama. PRC authorities placed the boy, his family and many of those involved in detention and announced their own candidate, Gyalsen Norbu. Neither Gendun Choekyi Nyima nor his family have been seen since.

Today, the primary importance of these issues lies in the age of the present Dalai Lama, and the recognition of a future re-incarnation. While the present Dalai Lama has said that he will not be reborn in an “Tibet under Chinese control”ⁱ, contestation between Beijing and Dharamsala over a future re-incarnation is highly likely. Such a dispute could have repercussions far beyond the religious sphere, sparking large-scale violent unrest across the Tibetan cultural area. Under such a situation, unrest would most likely dissolve into several different factions, and chronic low-level insurgency in Tibet. This problem is exacerbated by a traditionalist focus on the Dalai Lama by the PRC, the international community and Tibetans themselves, to the effective exclusion of other Tibetan political figures, whether religiously or democratically chosen.

Historical Background

Incarcate Lamas in Tibetan History

The institution of the incarnate lama – or *tülku* – is a Buddhist tradition unique to Tibet. Regarded as the reincarnation of previous religious leaders and sometimes the earthly emanation of Buddhist deitiesⁱⁱ, incarnate lamas are religious teachers who inherit the landed property and religious authority of their previous incarnations. The first known example of this institution was in the twelfth century, when the reincarnation of Buddhist teacher Düsüm Khyenpa (1110-1193) was recognised as the ‘Second’ Karmapa Lama of the influential Kagyü school of Tibetan Buddhism. The idea of ‘incarnate lamas’ actually took several hundred years to gain wide acceptance in Tibetan religious culture, developing complex doctrines as well as elaborate tests to identify ‘true’ reincarnationsⁱⁱⁱ. While the precise identity of incarnates was a religious matter, the ownership of the land and titles associated with such lineages often came under the control of Tibetan ruling families.

In 1511, the young monk Gendun Gyatso was recognised as the reincarnation of Gendundrup, one of the disciples of Tsongkapa, the founder of the rising Geluk school of Tibetan Buddhism. When this monk’s own reincarnation made an alliance with Altan Khan, leader of the Mongolian tribes to the north-east of Tibet, he was given the title of *Talai* (or Dalai – ‘great ocean’) Lama, and his predecessors became retrospectively known as the First and Second Dalai Lamas. The alliance between the Dalai Lamas and the Mongols allowed the Geluk School to rise to prominence amidst Tibet’s turbulent political landscape. War with the neighbouring Tibetan kingdoms of Tsang and Beri eventually brought the Fifth Dalai Lama to the throne in 1642, and his personal religious estate, the Ganden Podrang, became the basis of the new government at Lhasa. The rise of the ‘Great Fifth’ to rulership over Tibet had in no small part been due to the authority and peacemaking powers of his ageing Buddhist tutor, Lobsang Chökyi Gyaltzen (1567-1662), owner of the influential Tashilhunpo monastery in Xigatse, whom the new Tibetan Government recognised as the First Panchen (or *Pandita Chenmo* – ‘great scholar’) Lama. While there have often been tensions between these two powerful religious estates, the role of the Dalai and Panchen Lamas in recognising one another’s re-incarnations during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries led to them being regarded as ‘father and son’, their roles intimately linked even in Tibetan Buddhist cosmology. By the seventeenth century, identification of the Dalai Lama and other high incarnates involved consultation of state oracles, the visions and dreams of their disciples and regents, the interpretation of omens and lotteries and tests regarding candidates’ memories of their previous lives.

The Dalai, Panchen and Karmapa Lamas are certainly the best known incarnate lamas in Tibet, but they are by no means alone. By the start of the twentieth century, there were over two thousand *tülku* lineages in Tibetan Buddhism: their religious authority dominated the religious imagination of Tibetan (and, in large part, Mongolian and Western Chinese) life, just as their combined religious and agricultural estates dominated the landscape of Tibet itself.

Imperial Control from Beijing

The importance of the institution of the incarnate lama – and particularly incarnates such as the Dalai and Panchen Lamas – was not lost on the courts of imperial China. While Tibet itself was only of marginal interest, the Third Dalai Lama’s ‘second conversion’ to Buddhism of the fractious Mongol factions to China’s north meant that the religious influence of Tibetan incarnates became a crucial factor in the overall security of Beijing’s imperial possessions. Successive Chinese emperors presented themselves as powerful patrons and protectors of the Geluk school of Tibetan Buddhism, a diplomatic relationship understood by the Tibetan government in terms of the long-standing *chöyon* (patron-priest) relationship^{iv}. In this capacity, imperial forces intervened several times in Tibet to maintain politically favourable conditions there: in 1717, following the ransacking of Lhasa by the Dzungar Mongols the Kanxi emperor placed the Seventh Dalai Lama on the throne, instigating Tibet’s two centuries as an imperial protectorate. In 1792, amidst Tibet’s trade war with Nepal, the Qianlong emperor sent new ‘regulations’ for the recognition of all senior incarnate lamas, including the use of the infamous ‘golden urn’ ceremony. The 29-point regulations stated:

“Dalai Lama and Panchen Lama are the heads of the Gelugpa sect of Tibetan Buddhism. Traditionally their reincarnations are decided by divination in front of the Four Protectors, and that has found to be inaccurate due to human errors. To promote Gelugpa Buddhism, the Emperor grants the Golden Urn to Tibet. Since the Dalai Lama is the mentor for the Panchen Lama, and vice versa, therefore each side should find the reincarnation of the other party by divination with the Golden Urn”. (乾隆《钦定藏内善后章程二十九条》，1792).

The urns were used as a system of lottery to be carried out before a shrine to the Buddha, following offerings and prayers. The name-stick that jumped out following the shaking of the urn would contain the name of the divinely chosen candidate.

Two golden urns were issued: one enshrined in Jokhang Temple in Lhasa for choosing Dalai and Panchen Lama reincarnations; the other is in Yonghe Palace in Beijing for choosing senior Mongolian reincarnations. These new regulations were to be overseen by the imperial *ambans* (representatives) stationed in Lhasa. The historical evidence suggests that such regulations were deployed on an episodic basis, and accepted by the Tibetan government at Lhasa within the context of three conditions: firstly, that the Chinese Emperor was acting as a Buddhist with strong Geluk affiliations; secondly, that he was acting as the religious and military protector of Tibet, following the ransacking of Lhasa by invading Mongols in 1717; and finally, that imperial involvement via the *ambans* was primarily passive in nature – that Tibetans themselves got to choose the candidate or candidates, which were ratified (often years later) by the imperial authorities in China. Moreover, these urns were regarded as just one of a number of possible divinatory methods for establishing succession along with oracular declaration, astrology and dreams.

The current Dalai Lama was enthroned in the Potala Palace on February 22, 1940, during a ceremony attended by Wu Zhongxin, minister of the Commission for Mongolian and Tibetan Affairs of the nationalist government of the Republic of China (1911-49). The nationalist government accepted that he be confirmed as the reincarnation of the 13th Dalai Lama without the occasional practice of drawing lot from the golden urn and that he instead directly succeeds as the 14th Dalai Lama. This well documented search for the current Dalai Lama clearly shows that many and varied methods used to confirm the reincarnation of the Tibetan ruler.

The Modern Era

The collapse of Chinese imperial rule in 1912 instigated a period of political independence for Tibet, and civil war for the China. When Chairman Mao's communist forces finally prevailed in 1947, the incorporation of Tibet into the newly formed Peoples' Republic of China was one of its first stated goals as a government. Like their imperial predecessors, Mao's newly formed government were fully aware of the political standing of incarnate lamas in the question of ruling Tibetan populations. Following the invasion of Tibet in 1949-50, the Seventeen Point Agreement negotiated between Beijing and the Lhasa peace delegation guaranteed the "established status, functions and powers" of the Dalai and Panchen Lamas^v. In the years immediately following the invasion, the Dalai and Panchen Lamas were made members of the Standing Committee of the PRC's National People's Congress and respectively Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Preparatory Committee of the Autonomous Region of Tibet (PCART), charged with overseeing Tibet's constitutional incorporation into the People's Republic of China. While these roles were in

large part sinecures, and the PCART wholly secondary to the might of the PLA's military jurisdiction in Tibet, it spoke to the understanding that the early communists had of Buddhism's constitutional and popular importance in ruling Tibet.

Much of this situation changed with the Tibetan Uprising of 1956-9, and the flight of the Dalai Lama and much of his remaining government into exile in March 1959. The military suppression of the Uprising was followed by a vilification of the Dalai Lama, and Beijing sought to bring forward the initially more politically-compliant Panchen Lama as a replacement^{vi}. However, when the young Panchen Lama wrote a 70,000 character petition criticising Chinese policies in Tibet in 1962, he too was vilified through extensive revolutionary 'struggle sessions', imprisoned until 1977, and did not re-appear in public life until 1982. The early 1980s constituted limited re-birth of Tibetan religious culture after the depredations of the Cultural Revolution years, and the politically-adept Panchen Lama was a critical figure in this renaissance; his premature and unexpected death in 1989 has been the object of considerable speculation, conjectures which have however been overshadowed by the politically disastrous events surrounding the recognition of his re-incarnation (see **Focus**, below).



1: The Qianlong Emperor, 1739 or 1758, by Giuseppe Castiglione. The Palace Museum, Beijing.



2: The Golden Urn

PRC Religious Policy in Tibet Today

The important but intractable position that incarnate lamas hold in the Beijing's relationship with Tibetan populations has caused the Chinese Communist Party to direct considerable constitutional and political will to the problem. This is in three regards: extensive deliberations on, and redefinitions of, the meaning of religion within the Chinese Constitution; tightening of political control and police regulations pertaining to both religion as a whole, and the treatment, designation and activities of incarnate lamas in particular; and extensive campaigns associated with the control of public loyalty to incarnate lamas.

The role of the Dalai Lama as the principal focus of loyalty amongst Tibetan protesters in the large-scale protests of the late 1980s (and more recently in 2008) has proven problematic in terms of the PRC's explicit constitutional guarantees of religious freedom for its citizens, enshrined in Article 36 of the 1982 Constitution. Responding to this, the PRC's Third Forum for Work on Tibet argued that the essence of religion was patriotism, and therefore that, because of their 'splittist activities', figures such as the Dalai Lama could not be counted as genuinely religious, and therefore that demonstrations of loyalty to them could not be protected under the banner of religious freedom. Thus, on the 10 March 1995, the Chinese language version of *Tibet Daily* argued:

"The purpose of Buddhism is to deliver all living beings in a peaceful manner. Now that Dalai and his clique have violated the religious doctrine and have even spread rumours to fool and incite people against the other, in what way can he be regarded as a spiritual leader? ... As for the Dalai, he has always incorporated 'Tibetan independence' into the doctrines which he preaches in his sermons, ... wildly using godly strength to poison and bewitch the masses ... such flagrant deceptiveness and demagoguery constitute a blasphemy to Buddhism"^{vii}

It is within the context of this constitutional logic that, for example, ownership of or showing photographs of the Dalai Lama has been banned within the PRC since 1993. This position dramatically intensified with the 1995 controversy over the recognition of the new Panchen Lama (see below).

As part of this wider constitutional logic, new regulations have been introduced in Tibet for the regulation of the recognition and activities of incarnate lamas. Often called the MMR ('Management Measures for the Reincarnation of Living Buddhas in Tibetan Buddhism' - Chin: *Zangchuan fojiao huofu zhuanshi guanli banfa*), these were approved by the PRC's State Administration of Religious Affairs on 13 July 2007. This fourteen point document asserted state control over searches, testing, recognition, enthronement, education and religious training of any incarnate lama (Chin. *huofu* - literally "living Buddha"). The Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) in Dharamsala, seat of the exiled Dalai Lama, has described the new document as "ludicrous and unwarranted" and "an attempt to further repress and undermine the religious culture of Tibet", arguing that placing authority over the recognition of re-incarnation under that of an atheist government is a contradiction in terms.

Tibetan attitudes regarding the Dalai Lama and the general religious importance of incarnates remain strong amongst the public, particularly within the Buddhist monasteries, and state authorities have engaged in a number of high profile campaigns to bring such sentiments under government control. The most marked of these have been the 'Patriotic Education' campaigns of the 1990s, in which work teams visited monasteries and temples across Tibet to enforce education on the Beijing government's view on Tibetan history, the institutions of Tibetan Buddhism and, not least, the standing and role of the present and previous Dalai Lamas.

Excerpt: Patriotic Education Book I

The following is a translated excerpt of *A Brief Summary Explanation of the Announcement on the History of Tibet*, the first of four books issued to monks, nuns and religious officials in Tibet by the work teams of the Patriotic Education Campaign, June 1996:

Contents

1. Tibet and China co-existed in friendship from ancient times.
2. How Tibet became part of China.
3. How the central government of China during the Yuan period took care of Tibet.
4. The central government of China under the Yuan period not only had the power of appointment and dismissal, rewards and punishment with respect to the leaders of the at various levels in the local government of Tibet, but also exercised the authority to conduct census and instituting "aja' mo" (tax on post runners carrying government messages).
5. How the Ming Dynasty exercised effective control of the Tibetan areas.
6. How the Ming Dynasty gave edicts to the big lamas of the various sects of Tibet.
7. The relationship between the Qing Emperor and the Dalai Lama is like a master and his servant.
- ...
10. Proclaiming the 29-point ordinance to establish new Tibetan customs and introducing the new custom of "shaking the Golden Urn".
11. The central government of the Qing Dynasty held the authority to grant recognition to the successive reincarnations of the Dalai Lama and the prerogative to preside over the enthronement ceremonies."

(Source: *Political Campaigns: Documents and Statements from Tibet, 1996-7*. London: Tibet Information Network, 1998, p. 7-8..)

Focus: the Panchen Lama Dispute

The death of the Tenth Panchen Lama in 1989 was both unexpected and, ultimately, profoundly compromised the fledgling rapprochement between Beijing and the Central Tibetan Administration of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama in Dharamsala that had emerged in the early 1990s. While some degree of agreement had occurred between the two administrations over the choice of the Karmapa Lama in 1992, disagreements over the choice and timing of the recognition of the Eleventh Panchen Lama caused a catastrophic rift that remains to this day, primarily because of the impact of these decisions on the question of any future re-incarnation of the present Dalai Lama (see below).

While there are some suggestions that authorities in Tibet and Dharamsala engaged in both overt and clandestine co-operation over the initial stages of the search for a reincarnation^{viii}, this evaporated in May 1995 when the Dalai Lama named Gedhun Choeki Nyima as the rightful reincarnation of the 10th Panchen Lama. Often referred to as the 'youngest political prisoner in the world', Gedhun Choeki Nyima and his family were taken into 'protective custody' by PRC officials three days after the Dalai Lama's announcement, and has not been seen by independent observers since^{ix}.

On 29 November 1995, TAR authorities held a secret divination ceremony using the Golden Urn, to decide upon its own candidate for the Panchen Lama. Bomi Rinpoche, an incarnate who had the previous day been made Acting Throne Holder of Ganden Monastery, was chosen to carry out the ceremony^x, attended by state officials and the abbots of prominent Gelukpa monasteries. The ceremony, in which sticks carrying the names of candidates were drawn from the Golden Urn, was carried out in Lhasa's main Jokhang Temple in secret before dawn. The Golden Urn lottery named Gyancen Norbu (Qoigyijabu) as the 11th Panchen Lama.

Arjia Rinpoche, previous Abbot of Kumbum monastery and Deputy Chairman of the Chinese Buddhist Association, has described in his autobiography the atmosphere of coercion and threat surrounding these events, and the relatively overt 'fixing' of the Golden Urn divination^{xi}. Chosen as future tutor to the young Gyalcen Norbu, Arjia Rinpoche fled into exile in 2000. At a subsequent commission on religious freedom in China, he stated:

"Had I remained in Tibet I would have been forced to denounce the Dalai Lama and my religion and to serve the Chinese Government. This meant also participating in government practices that went against my religion and personal beliefs. As Abbot of the Kumbum Monastery, I would have been forced to help the government have its choice of the Panchen Lama accepted by the Tibetan people. This would violate my deepest beliefs. It was at this point that I knew I had to leave my country."^{xii}

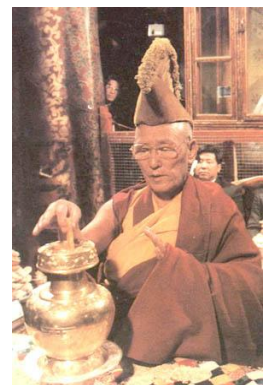
Focus: The Succession of the Dalai Lama

Alongside the history of the Panchen Lama dispute, the imposition of the MMR regulations raises obvious questions regarding the succession of the present Fourteenth Dalai Lama. While the present Dalai Lama is overtly in good health, questions of his age and that of the future leadership of the Tibetan exiled movement are now raised on a regular basis. His Holiness has unequivocally stated on several occasions that he would not choose to be reborn within an 'unfree Tibet', but rather in exile^{xiii}. The present Dalai Lama denies the Chinese Communist Party's right to choose or recognise his successor, primarily because of the CCP's status as an atheist state. Nonetheless, given the investment that the Beijing government have placed in the issue over the last few decades, it is almost inconceivable that they will not wish to instal a Fifteenth Dalai Lama of their own upon the death of the Fourteenth.

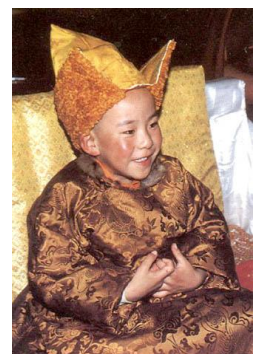
The consequences of such an action could be both grave and enduring – both for the exiled Tibetan movement and for internal security within the PRC. Regardless of claims by the PRC, there is no evidence that the Dalai Lama either instigates or co-ordinates 'splittist' or violent activities within Tibet such as the protests of 2008; indeed, the Dalai Lama's public advocacy of non-violence has clearly restrained the development of violent Tibetan nationalism both



3: Gedhun Choeki Nyima, the Dalai Lama's choice



4: Bomi Rinpoche and the Golden Urn ceremony, Lhasa 1995



5: Gyalsen Norbu, the 'Chinese choice', at his enthronement ceremony.

within Tibet and exile. Nevertheless, he is clearly both a symbol of unification for Tibetans and for the persistent and growing discontent that is widely felt towards PRC government policies in the region. In the almost inevitable case of a contestation over the succession, widespread violence may well break out amongst Tibetans protesting the installation of a Party-backed candidate. Given the depth of religious sentiment and loyalty that surrounds the present Dalai Lama, such protests may well include all regions and classes of the Tibetan population, as was indicated by the 2008 protests. While it is doubtful that such protests could seriously challenge Beijing's sovereignty in Tibet, they may well involve a large number of casualties, and certainly a larger number of arrests and detentions. The human rights implications of such events are grave.

In the absence of a sitting Dalai Lama, it is unlikely that any religious leaders of the existing ranks (either within Tibet or in exile) that could contain or give form to popular Tibetan sentiment on the matter. The present Dalai Lama's religious and political influence – which extends far beyond the confines of the Geluk School of Tibetan Buddhism, and beyond the confines of his pre-1950 status of head of the Tibetan government – is very much a function of his personal authority, and has expanded considerably during his time in exile. In this sense, just as there would be no clear leadership to anti-Chinese protest, there would equally be no obvious means of controlling it or predicting its course. International focus on the Dalai Lama at the expense of other Tibetan leaders both inside and outside Tibet, only exacerbates this problem.

At the same time, the progressive incorporation of the ranks of senior *tulku* as representatives of Beijing Party interests may be less effective in the long run than the CCP anticipates. There is no guarantee that the present importance of incarnates such as the Dalai and Panchen Lamas will continue on into the future. The rise of popular lay leaders may be equally important, as it has been at key moments in Tibet's past. Similarly, evidence already suggests that alternative and charismatic forms of religious authority are emerging within the TAR and its surrounding Tibetan areas. These are increasingly circumventing state control, providing an alternative focus for religious and political affiliation.

References

ⁱ "Dalai's reincarnation will not be found under Chinese control". *Indian Express* July 6, 1999.

ⁱⁱ Incarnates are referred to in Chinese official literature as 'living Buddhas', although this term often mistakenly gives the impression that incarnates have the status of Buddhas.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Mills, M. 2003. *Identity, Ritual and State in Tibetan Buddhism*. London: Routledge, Ch. 11.

^{iv} See *The Scottish Parliament's Cross Party Group on Tibet Briefing Paper 2*.

^v Items 4-6 of *The Agreement Of The Central People's Government And The Local Government Of Tibet On Measures For The Peaceful Liberation Of Tibet* (1951).

^{vi} In 1923, a lengthy dispute between the Dalai Lama's government in Lhasa and the Panchen Lama's estates at Zhigatse had led to the Panchen Lama fleeing into exile in China. Seeking leverage against the Lhasa government, the Panchen Lama's officials sought alliance with the nationalist government of China until the Panchen Lama's death on the Tibetan border in 1937 (Goldstein 1989: 266). When the Panchen Lama's re-incarnation was found by his old entourage, it was not recognised by the Tibetan Government until 1951 (Goldstein 1989: 762).

^{vii} Translated from "Clearly Understand The True Nature Of The Dalai Clique, Oppose Splittism And Safeguard Stability". Chinese language *Tibet Daily*, 10 March 1995. See TIN/Lawasia 1996: 33.

^{viii} See TIN/Human Rights Watch Asia, 1998. *Cutting off the Serpent's Head: Tightening Control in Tibet 1994-5*, p. 52.

^{ix} In July 2007, the TAR spokesman Nyima Cering stated that: "The boy chosen by the Dalai Lama as the reincarnation of the Panchen Lama, which is illegal and invalid, is living a normal life in Tibet. He is studying at a senior high school; his brothers and sisters are either studying or working. The boy is patriotic. He does not want his life to be disturbed. We respect his wish." ("Official urges Dalai Lama to abandon secessionist". *China Daily (Xinhua)*, 2007-07-29, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2007-07/29/content_5445348.htm).

^x "Obituary of Bomi Rinpoche". In Tibet Information Network 2003, *Tibet 2002 – A Yearbook*, pp. 58-9.

^{xi} Arjia Rinpoche 2010. *Surviving the Dragon*. Rodale Press, Inc., pp.206-7.

^{xii} Statement to a hearing on religious freedom in China organized by the Commission on International Religious Freedom in Los Angeles on 16 March 2000.

^{xiii} At the same time, the Dalai Lama has publicly speculated on whether the choice of his successor should be determined according to the established system of searches, by a conclave of senior figures (as in the case of papal succession), by popular democratic vote, or indeed by choosing his own successor himself. There is considerable ambiguity in such statements: it is often difficult to see whether he is discussing the next Dalai Lama, or the political regent who will oversee his affairs in the lengthy inter-regnum (that is, his immediate political successor).