

Abstract

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Tibetan Buddhist Leadership: Historical Legacies, Current Developments

This chapter considers the dynamics — alternately longstanding and contemporary — that underlie Tibetan Buddhist leadership. The strong devotion accorded Tibetan Buddhist lamas, and the Dalai Lama in particular, was complemented in pre-1950s Tibet with strong rivalries and power politics among lay and monastic elites, including concerning regents while the Dalai Lamas were young. Deeply scholastic, few Dalai Lamas engaged strongly in secular politics. With Chinese invasion and occupation, however, the Tibetan noble and clerical elite was severely undercut, and the influence of the XIVth Dalai Lama was both displaced and centralized for the Tibetan diaspora. This devotionism retains a flipside of uncertainty and potential intrigue in the inner circle of the Dalai Lama's advisers, including with respect to the influencing of social outcomes and implementation. With the recent divestiture of political leadership by the XIVth Dalai Lama, this tendency continues. In particular, I examine a failed recent "Nalanda initiative" designed to inaugurate a large-scale organization to represent the interests of Tibetan/Mahāyāna Buddhists across the Altai-Himalayan region, including northern India, Nepal, Bhutan, Mongolia, and Russian Buddhist Republics of Buryatia and Kalmykia. This planned organization emphasized cultural politics based on human cultural and religious rights rather than political autonomy or self-determination. Suspicions of impropriety compromised the organization's development, however, when the Dalai himself withdrew his support. Ironically, the current political weakness of Tibetan Buddhism in organizational terms is complemented by its great motivational strength and influence of its values — as reflected in the immense ethical influence and status accorded the current Dalai Lama.