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# The Revival of the Tulku Institution in Modern China: Narratives and Practices

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# The Revival of the Tulku Institution in Modern China: Narratives and Practices

Nicole Willock

(Old Dominion University)

Given the choice, I would transmigrate to Tuṣita Heaven and not reincarnate. If I must be reborn, then find a child, who cannot only recite flawlessly from memory the *Great Exposition on the Stages of the Path* (*Lam rim chen mo*) and the *Great Exposition on the Stages of Mantra* (*Sngags rim chen mo*), but who also does not stop uttering this even when being chased by a wild dog; only such a child would be my reincarnation.<sup>1</sup>

**W**hat child could perform such an impossible feat? Arik Geshé Chenmo Jampa Öser's (*A rig dge bshes chen mo* Byams pa 'od zer, 1728-1803)<sup>2</sup> trenchant last testament chided his disciples for imploring him to reincarnate, yet he did not deride the tulku institution itself. In his autobiography, the Sixth Tséten Zhabdrung, Jikmé Rikpai Lodrö (*Tshe tan zhabs drung 'Jigs med rigs pa'i blo gros*, 1910-1985) retold Arik Geshé's story with a similar didactic purpose, in order to analytically expound "the Tibetan-Mongol system of reincarnation."<sup>3</sup> Yet when Arik Geshé's incisive words were re-employed for a twentieth century audience, the socio-political cornerstones of the tulku institution had undergone dramatic restructuring.

Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China (P.R.C) in 1949, Tibetan cultural-religious practices, including the tulku

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in Tséten Zhabdrung 2007, 59.

<sup>2</sup> Arik Geshé recognized and taught Shingza Paṇḍita Losang Dargyé Gyatso (*Shing bza' pan di ta Blo bzang dar rgyas rgya mtsho*, 1752-1824); Cf. Tsering Namgyal, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Tséten Zhabdrung 2007, 54 used the term "*bod sog gi sku skye'i lam lugs*" for the "Tibeto-Mongol system of reincarnation." In this article, with few exceptions, I translate the relevant Tibetan terms as follows: "*sprul sku*" as "emanation body" (Sanskrit: *nirmāṇākāya*); "*yang srid*" as "reincarnation"; and "*sku skye*" as "rebirth" or "to be reborn." In some cases, such as here, "*sku skye*" is translated as "to reincarnate."

institution, have withstood epic changes. In the 1980s, after twenty years (ca. 1956-1976) of decimating attacks on all aspects of Tibetan culture, Geluk Buddhist leaders cautiously participated in reviving the system of recognizing reincarnate lamas in a nation-state that ideologically reviled religiosity but tolerated expressions of ethnic-cultural identity. This paper considers how Geluk Buddhists within the P.R.C. provided models and suggestions to ensure the survival of the tulku institution despite political vicissitudes. The first section of this paper analyzes Buddhist narratives from the past that show a path for the future of tulkus; a future in which the import of education and ethical behavior are paramount. The second section examines the surprisingly divergent practices involved in reviving two related reincarnation lineages in the wake of the Cultural Revolution. A comparison of recognition processes based on the factors of age and types of education serve as indicators of how local actors adapt traditional practices in response to both internal pressures of Geluk authority and to the external pressures of the state.

### 1. *Tséten Zhabdrung's autobiography and the Tséten incarnation lineages*

Tséten Zhabdrung Jikmé Rikpai Lodrö, one of the few Geluk Buddhist monastic scholars to have survived twenty years of relentless attacks on Tibetan religious culture, took measures to revive the tulku institution in the 1980s. His vision of what it meant to be a tulku and the importance of reincarnation for Tibetan culture can be found in his autobiography, which was circulating widely by the 1990s, a decade after the author's death in 1985 at age 75. The Buddhist polymath had started writing his own life story in 1962<sup>4</sup> when a group of his disciples led by Shardong Rinpoché Losang

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<sup>4</sup> Tséten Zhabdrung (2007, 265) stated,

“In my fifty-third year in the Water Tiger Year (1962) on the auspicious day of the winter solstice, Shardong Choktul Losang Shedrup Gyatso (Shardong mchog sprul Blo bzang bshad sgrub rgya mtsho), Mani Tulku Jikmé Lekshe Drayang (Ma ñi'i sprul sku 'jigs med legs bshad sgra dbyangs), Rikhu Tulku Gendun Ngawang Tendar (Ri khud sprul sku Dge 'dun ngag dbang bstan dar), accompanied by my students—Dzongnang Tsering Dorjé (Rdzong nang Tshe ring rdo rje) and Tuwa Lama Tseten (Mthu ba bla ma Tshe brtan)—presented me with a long silk khatag and various high quality articles, and then urged me to write my own biography (*rnam thar*) using clear words and an intelligible style mixing both poetry and prose. They insisted that this would be diligent advice for the benefit of present and later disciples and devotees. Under these auspicious circumstances, I immediately agreed to their urgent requests.”

Shédруп Gyatso (Shar gdong rin po che Blo bzang bshad sgrub rgya mtsho, 1922-2002)<sup>5</sup> implored their teacher to take up this task. Missing among this cohort was the Thirteenth Tséten Khenpo Jikmé Rikpai Nyingbo (Tshe tan mkhan po 'Jigs med rigs pa'i snying po, 1910-1958), who had shared the throne of Six Garwaka Monasteries with the Sixth Tséten Zhabdrung Jikmé Rikpai Lodrö for nearly 40 years. The events surrounding the tragic death of the Thirteenth Tséten Khenpo Jikmé Rikpai Nyingbo remain unclear with some reports that he was shot by troops when they stormed Tséten Monastery; others stated that he died in the lorry ride on the way to Nantan Prison in Xining. The Sixth Tséten Zhabdrung had been residing in Beijing at that time, so he had been spared, at least temporarily, the horrible fate of most of his fellow monks in 1958. Soon after the official denouncement of the Pañchen Lama Chökyi Gyeltsen (Chos kyi rgyal mtshan, 1938-1987) in 1964,<sup>6</sup> Tséten Zhabdrung was also imprisoned, serving almost twelve years in Xining's Nantan Prison. He received release on medical parole in 1976. After recovering, the monk began the task of re-writing his autobiography, *Ambrosia for the Ear: Truthful Discourse by Jikmé Rikpai Lodrö, himself a Disciple of the Powerful, Matchless Shākya*. Chronologically this text ends in the autumn of 1978, when the author accepted a professorship at Northwest Nationalities University (Ch. Xibei minzu daxue; Tib. Nub byang slob grwa chen mo) in the capital of Gansu Province, Lanzhou. The remaining years of his life story were penned by two different disciples in two addenda, both included in the 2007 copy of the Sixth Tséten Zhabdrung Jikmé Rikpai Lodrö's thirteen-volume *Collected Works* (*gsung 'bum*). According to one addendum, Tséten Zhabdrung Jikmé Rikpai Lodrö met with other Geluk leaders in Beijing in 1983 where they discussed crucial changes to the process of recognizing reincarnate lamas within China.

Nearly a decade after the death of the Sixth Tséten Zhabdrung (1985), some of these recommendations would be applied in the revival of the two incarnation lineages at the group of temples and monasteries collectively referred to as the Six Garwaka (Sgar ba kha drug) Monasteries. They are located in the low-lying mountains of

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<sup>5</sup> Shardong Rinpoche was a major figure in the continuation of the revival of Tibetan culture and Buddhism in Amdo up until his death in 2002. He rebuilt Jakhyung (Bya 'khyung) Monastery and played an important role in the building of Tséten Zhabdrung's reliquary stupa at Dentik Monastery. He was also a professor at Qinghai Nationalities University teaching Tibetan history, language and culture there.

<sup>6</sup> Tibet Information Network 1997.

present-day eastern Hualong County (in Jinyuan Township) and western Minhe County of Qinghai Province. The main mother monastery is Tséten Monastery (Tib. Tshe tan; Ch. Xing'er 杏儿 Caidan 才旦), after which the two incarnation lineages are named. Tuwa Monastery (Tib. Mthu ba; Ch. Tuwa 土哇), traditionally a retreat center, also became a small printing house under the leadership of Tséten Zhabdrung Jigmé Rikpai Lodrö in the 1930s. Dentik Monastery (Tib. Dan tig; Ch. Dandou 丹斗) is historically the most important of the six monasteries as many believe that Lachen Gongpa Rabsal (bla chen dgongs pa rab gsal, 953?-1035?) took his monastic vows here in the late tenth century. The three other hermitages are: Chenpuk (Tib. Gcan phug; Ch. Zhaomuchuan 赵木川), Katung (Tib. Ka thung; Ch. Gadong 尕洞), and Gongkya (Tib. Kong skya; Ch. Gongshenjia 工什加). The dual spiritual leadership of Tséten Zhabdrung and Tséten Khenpo (Tshe tan mkhan po) followed historical precedent dating back to the early eighteenth century.<sup>7</sup> The shared governance over the Six Garwaka Monasteries was violently disrupted when the Thirteenth Tséten Khenpo was murdered in 1958 and the Six Garwaka Monasteries were partially demolished by Communist zealots, and subsequently closed until the early 1980s. The Sixth Tséten Zhabdrung was the sole surviving tulku of these monasteries once they were reopened. It was only after his death that both the Fourteenth Tséten Khenpo and Seventh Tséten Zhabdrung were installed within a few months from one another to continue the historical tradition as “dual throne-holders.”

## 2. *Looking to past narratives for the future of tulku*

When Arik Geshé maintained his preference for rebirth in Tuṣita Heaven, he was not alone. Many autobiographies and memoirs, especially those from eastern Tibet (both Khams and Amdo) gave voice to what Matthew Kapstein identified as a “fundamental tension between the socially-constructed role of the tulku and the self-identity of the person concerned.” Some of these authors expressed doubt over their recognition including: Amdo Tertön Rigzin Düjom Dorjé (A mdo gter ston Rig 'dzin bdud 'joms rdo rje, ca. 1857-1921), Jamgön Kongtrül Lodrö Thayé ('Jam mgon kong sprul blo gros mtha' yas, 1813-1899), and Gungthang Tenpé Drönmé (*Gung thang bstan*

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Tséten Zhabdrung 2007, vol. 3.

pa'i sgron me, 1762-1823).<sup>8</sup> Other authors, such as Dza Paltrül Rinpoché (Dza Dpal sprul rin po che, 1808-1887) contemptuously attacked the tulku institution. Reportedly he not only had counseled his disciples against looking for his reincarnation, but maintained that they would go to the Avīci Hell realm if they searched for his rebirth, because of the evils entailed with the tulku system.<sup>9</sup> So when Tséten Zhabdrung Jikmé Rikpai Lodrö wrote about the good, the bad, and the ugly of the Tibetan and Mongolian system of reincarnation in his autobiography, this act was not particularly novel. Many scholars before him had analyzed and critiqued this institution in the past. Nonetheless, Tséten Zhabdrung's writing on this topic are valuable due to: 1) the fact that this act of writing was undertaken in a volatile political climate; 2) the depth of his analysis of the tulku system through Tibetan historical narratives; 3) the didactic argument in this treatise; and 4) the application of his recommendations on changing aspects of tulku recognition that were enacted after his death.

When Tséten Zhabdrung took up his pen to complete his autobiography, *Ambrosia for the Ear: Truthful Discourse*, the social fabric that had supported all of the great savants mentioned above had been dismantled. No political or social incentives lured him into discussing historical narratives of the tulku system, much less to uphold this Tibetan institution. So why address this topic in his autobiography? This choice of subject matter was one of many vital lessons on Tibetan history and culture that needed to be taught to a generation of Tibetan youth that had received little or no education in their own language and culture due to a hostile political climate.<sup>10</sup> Tséten Zhabdrung's analysis of the tulku system was written under unprecedented circumstances. He revisited past narratives to re-build a foundation that would ensure a future for this important Tibetan cultural institution in modern China. Despite writing in socialist China, his message did not carry state propaganda. Rather his vision was informed by Buddhist teachings and Tibetan history.

Through a careful selection of historical narratives, the Buddhist polymath showed how the "unwholesome roots"<sup>11</sup> of avarice and ignorance in the tulku institution were to be remedied through an

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<sup>8</sup> Kapstein 2002, 109.

<sup>9</sup> Kapstein 2002, 102.

<sup>10</sup> While many accounts detail the horrors of the Cultural Revolution, Pema Bhum's autobiography (2001) told of how Tséten Zhabdrung's and other monastic scholars' language books were labelled as "poisonous weeds," and how some young students clandestinely copied their writings in order to learn Tibetan.

<sup>11</sup> The three unwholesome roots or three poisons refer to the three roots of suffering, the defilements of ignorance, attachment, and aversion.

education based on Buddhist ethics. Tséten Zhabdrung Jikmé Rikpai Lodrö exposed the “bad and ugly” side of the tulku system by relaying popular stories and disclosing the motivations of greedy parents found in historical texts. A humorous anecdote mocked the greed of an incarnate lama from western Bāyan (Ch. Hualong) County. When a tulku had gone to visit his patron, the donor held his son in his arms and jested to the lama, “Alak tsang<sup>12</sup> is my son an incarnate lama? He keeps asking me for this and that!”<sup>13</sup> This clever anecdote comically articulated the most blatant tension in the tulku system. On one hand, a tulku is supposed to renounce worldly attachments; while on the other hand, a tulku inherits enormous wealth, generating a system that creates the causes and conditions for attachment and avarice.<sup>14</sup> As Tséten Zhabdrung explained:

When an old monk passes away, then a search is made for a so-called “tulku” (*sprul sku*) or “zhabdrung” (*zhabs drung*). When an “old ngak-pa” (*sngags rgan*) dies, then a search is conducted for a so-called “ku-lo” (*sku lo*) or “kuba” (*sku 'ba'*). After this, people use them in whatever way they can as a base for business to amass material things by merely chanting and without studying anything meaningful; in every way possible they deceive ignorant people. For someone who cherishes the Teachings, this is certainly horrifying.<sup>15</sup>

His admonishment of those who took advantage of this sacred institution for their own financial gain echoed the voice of a much earlier Amdo scholar. Sumpa Paṅḍita Yeshé Peljor (Sum pa pan di ta Ye shes dpal 'jor, 1704-1788) found fault in greedy parents:

...a few parents falsely proclaim their son, who had been born before the death of a lama, as his incarnation. Other people will replace an incarnate lama who dies young with a youth of the same age. They are doing this only as a means to attract wealth and property.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> In Amdo dialect, this is an honorific term addressing a high teacher, a synonym for “Rinpoche.”

<sup>13</sup> Tséten Zhabdrung 2007, 59-60.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Kapstein 2002, 109.

<sup>15</sup> Tséten Zhabdrung 2007, 58.

<sup>16</sup> Cited in Tséten Zhabdrung 2007, 58.

For Tséten Zhabdrung, Tibetan Buddhist scholars of the past addressed the pernicious avarice of the tulku system.

At the root of all this avariciousness—cheating lamas, amassing material wealth, covetous parents, making false claims—lies ignorance. As a Buddhist teacher Tséten Zhabdrung stressed ignorance as the foundation of other afflictions, especially attachment. He again drew upon historical narratives to prove his point, such as citing the following verse attributed to the Fifth Dalai Lama Ngawang Lobsang Gyatso (Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho, 1617-1682):

An ignorant child adorned in silk brocade  
Sits haughtily upon a beautiful throne,  
Poised among a group of officials, I suspect that, like a fog,  
He destroys the Lotus Garden of the Buddhist teachings.

He misconstrues helping and benefiting sentient beings as  
Persuasion, brawn, wealth, deceit, and cunning  
And abandons the practice of the Ten Good Deeds;  
That type of Buddha is certainly a mistake.<sup>17</sup>

The verse sharply focuses in on the child's ignorance as the main cause of a whole host of other negative behaviors. The following verse, also credited to the Fifth Dalai Lama, has a strong resonance of a social commentary while reiterating ignorance as the root problem:

In these times, the educated and knowledgeable are called  
'ordinary,'  
While the uneducated and ignorant are considered 'holy.'  
This country confuses gold and black ink;  
It may be called "the Center,"<sup>18</sup> but is similar to an uncivilized  
city.<sup>19</sup>

As alluded to in these above verses, ignorance carries with it a host of connotations including: obliviousness "like a fog", "misconstruing" the goal of helping sentient beings, and feigning holiness. Ignorance mainly, however, seems to be a genuine lack of knowledge and education. Tséten Zhabdrung's citation of Cangkyia Rolpai Dorjé's

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<sup>17</sup> Cited in Tséten Zhabdrung 2007, 58.

<sup>18</sup> The Tibetan term for "Center" is "*yul dbus*," which could be a reference to India proper, but seems more likely to be Lhasa here.

<sup>19</sup> Cited in Tséten Zhabdrung 2007, 58-59.

(Lcang skya Rol pa'i rdo rje, 1717-1786) verse serves to illustrate this point:

During childhood, lacking time to study and contemplate,  
A child becomes a piece of merchandise parading silk  
brocade,  
Improperly enjoying funerary repast,  
While receiving prostrations, veneration from monks.<sup>20</sup>

These narratives read to together in Tséten Zhabdrung's autobiography reinforce a clear didactic point concerning the negative aspects of the tulku institution. At the root of all these harmful behaviors lies the ignorance of a child, a youth who happens to be recognized as an incarnate lama by members of his society. Without a proper education, people venerate the boy solely for his status.

Although Tséten Zhabdrung pointed out the negative aspects of the tulku institution as found in historical texts, similar to Arik Geshé, he did not reject it outright. Despite the volatile political atmosphere at the time of writing, he highlighted two interrelated aspects of this tradition to be held in high esteem: 1) the cultural value of this Tibetan-Mongol institution; and 2) the esoteric mastery involved in transferring one's consciousness at death.

While Tséten Zhabdrung's research was not concerned with the origins of the tulku system,<sup>21</sup> he demonstrated the historical process of its development into a tradition and acknowledged the esoteric mastery involved in consciously directed rebirth. Sections of Sumpa Paṇḍita's writings were used to exemplify the tulku institution as a custom in Tibet and Mongolia:

Even though there was without doubt a rosary of births of great lamas, constant as waves on the ocean, for example: the luminaries of the past—the Buddha Śākyamuni; the Six Ornaments: Nāgārjuna, Āryadeva, Asaṅga, Dignāga, Vasubhandu and Dharmakīrti; the Two Supreme Ones: Śākyaprabha and Gunaprabha; the Eighty Mahāsiddha; paṇḍit and siddha of Nepal and Kashmir; Marpa; Milarepa; Butön; and Tsongkhapa, there was no discourse on reincarnation in their respective birth places either due to the idea of going to a Pure Land or that being born as incarnate lama was not a

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<sup>20</sup> Cited in Tséten Zhabdrung 2007, 58-59.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Wylie 1978; van der Kuijp 2005.

common custom at that time and place. Nevertheless, in Tibet, taking form as a “zhabdrung” (*zhabs drung*), “tulku” (*sprul sku*) or “rebirth” (*sku skye*) had not yet been adopted, but many people intentionally directed their consciousness to be born on earth in order to benefit the Dharma. Later, the tradition gradually spread in Ü, Tsang, Do-kham, and Mongolia.<sup>22</sup>

First and foremost this passage focuses on the historical presence of many great Buddhist luminaries prior to the establishment of the tulku tradition. Secondly it recognizes that the development of the tulku institution as occurring over time to eventually become an established custom in Tibet and Mongolia. Sumpa Pandita, similar to other authors cited above, reminded his readers of the inherent conflict of interests in the recognition process. Nonetheless, he also emphasized the authenticity of some tulku:

Besides them, it is extremely rare for people to be recognized as an incarnate lama; especially for any people who are very devout but not very famous, wealthy or powerful in this world; and also rare for those people, who do not grasp at the self or at this-worldly wealth, or who don't have wealthy monk disciples, or those people with meager means e.g., Milarepa. Moreover, from my impression, a few lamas with good and bad qualities are nevertheless subjected to insistent requests by monks and students regarding the prophecy to search for their next incarnation; in some cases this is real, but in others this is uncertain.<sup>23</sup>

Despite the human failings of this institution, Sumpa Paṇḍita's writings articulated a belief in the possibility of transferring one's consciousness at death. This seems to have been shared by Tséten Zhabdrung as he provided further examples of this.

For evidence of this ability, Tséten Zhabdrung turned to biographical writings. He retold the story of the Second Dalai Lama Gendün Gyatso (Dge 'dun rgya mtsho, 1475-1542) as a child that proved his remarkable abilities to remember his past life connections with the great Buddhist scholar and practitioner Jé Tsongkhapa Losang Drakpa (Rje Tsong kha pa Blo bzang grags pa, 1357-1419). When the future Second Dalai Lama was still a toddler sitting on his father's lap, upon hearing the sound of thunder in the sky, he said to

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<sup>22</sup> Cited in Tséten Zhabdrung 2007, 56-57.

<sup>23</sup> Cited in Tséten Zhabdrung 2007, 56-57.

his father, "That must be similar to the sound of Master Losang Drakpa giving Dharma teachings." The father asked, "How is it similar to Master Losang Drakpa giving Dharma teachings?" He then responded with a passage from the *Ornament for the Mahāyāna Sūtras*:

Rely on a Mahāyāna teacher who is disciplined, calm,  
thoroughly pacified;  
Who has superior knowledge, diligence, and a wealth of oral  
transmissions,  
Who has realized emptiness, has skill in instructing students,  
Has great compassion, and has abandoned all regrets.<sup>24</sup>

The Second Dalai Lama Gendün Gyatso had recalled this from Dharma teachings given by Tsongkhapa to the First Dalai Lama Gendün Drup (Dge 'dun grub, 1391-1474). Accepting the validity of this narrative, Tséten Zhabdrung reasoned that an "authentic" incarnate lama must exhibit certain behaviors, such as those demonstrated by the Second Dalai Lama. Tséten Zhabdrung's belief in the ability of certain great masters to transfer their consciousness is attested to in the biographies of Sumpa Pañḍita Yeshé Peljor and Jamyang Shépa Jikmé Gyatso ('Jam dbyangs bzhad pa 'Jigs med rgya mtsho, 1762-1836).<sup>25</sup> An authentic rebirth possessed *yonten* (*yon tan*), "qualities" or "virtues" such as those listed above, but also in the sense of demonstrating a profound understanding of Buddhist concepts such as karma.

For Tséten Zhabdrung it was certainly possible to direct one's consciousness at death, but that had to be coupled with intellectual education as well as ethical development of a tulku. This point was particularly salient for the reestablishment of the tulku institution in the 1980s. Both knowledge and ethical comportment were imperative for all tulku. Tséten Zhabdrung warned that a lack of knowledge of Buddhist concepts e.g., karma and the *trikāya*—the three bodies of the Buddha—could have a negative impact on the levels of realization a Buddhist practitioner had achieved.<sup>26</sup> No longer citing historical texts, Tséten Zhabdrung openly criticized tulkus who claimed this status but lacked Buddhist knowledge:

Bodies of the Buddha are the three: Truth, Enjoyment, and  
Emanation;

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<sup>24</sup> Cited in Tséten Zhabdrung 2007, 54; Cf. Tsongkhapa 2007, 71.

<sup>25</sup> Tséten Zhabdrung 2007, 56-60.

<sup>26</sup> Tséten Zhabdrung 2007, 56.

Only a Buddha manifests an emanation body.  
 I admit that those lamas, who can't even count the three  
 Buddha bodies,  
 Are really deluded to claim themselves as authentic emanation  
 bodies!

How could a lama who didn't even understand the concept of "emanation body" claim to be one? For Tséten Zhabdrung knowledge and education were far more important than the status associated with being recognized as a tulku. Tséten Zhabdrung even took this logic one step further. He argued that religious figures should be venerated only if they are learned and ethical:

Revering a Buddhist teacher befits ordinary people  
 When the lama possesses knowledge, follows vows chastely,  
 With pure intentions and few desires, then  
 Needless are methods--gazing into butter lamps and rolling  
 tsampa balls.<sup>27</sup>

The butter lamps and tsampa balls symbolize the divination methods used in the tulku recognition process. These are unimportant as long as a lama demonstrated the virtues of Buddhist knowledge and ethical comportment. Tséten Zhabdrung's textual analysis of the tulku institution in Tibetan histories and poetic commentary admonished tulku in the present who transgressed Buddhist ethics; he also promoted education as the remedy to the ills of avarice and ignorance. Tséten Zhabdrung, similar to the Buddhist polymaths he had cited, wrote within the conventions of the established religious elite. Yet Tséten Zhabdrung lived in a tumultuous time, when the traditional Tibetan hierarchy had been violently dismantled. His writings on the topic of the "Mongolian and Tibetan system of reincarnation" served a didactic function to place value on receiving an education in Tibetan history, language, and culture for the purpose of reviving Tibetan Buddhism in post-Cultural Revolution China. Many of his suggestions on tulku recognition were applied in the revival of the two Tséten incarnation lineages after his death.

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<sup>27</sup> Tséten Zhabdrung 2007, 60.

3. *From narratives to practices:  
The revival of the Tséten incarnation lineages*

The two current tulku of the Six Garwaka Monasteries, the Seventh Tséten Zhabdrung and Fourteenth Tséten Khenpo, were both enthroned in 1993. Their recognition and subsequent education occurred within the space of state-controlled religion within China as regulated by the dual party/government structure. The state-level channels which govern the space of religion include both the State Administration for Religious Affairs and the United Front Work Department (Ch. Tongyi zhanxian bu). The United Front Work Department provides the ideological guidance of the Party, while the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA) governs and implements the state's religious policies. These government organizations claimed "rule on the management of reincarnations of Tibetan living Buddhas" in 2007, effectively placing control over the future recognition of tulku in the hands of the state.<sup>28</sup> In the case of the two Tséten incarnation lineages, in 1993, the political space governing the recognition of incarnation lineages was ambiguous, leaving room for local agents to enact the tulku recognition processes in dissimilar ways, despite the geographical proximity and historical precedents binding these two lineages together. The recognition of the Seventh Tséten Zhabdrung took place temporally shortly after the enthronement of the Fourteenth Tséten Khenpo in 1993. This order of enthronement followed historical precedent because the position of Tséten Zhabdrung was subordinate to that of Tséten Khenpo, who had been the first of the two incarnation lineages, founded in the seventeenth century with the rise of Geluk power in Amdo.<sup>29</sup> The group of Six Garwaka Monasteries ceased functioning in 1958 and reopened around 1981.<sup>30</sup>

The reopening of the Six Garwaka Monasteries in the early 1980s was due to policy shifts permitting Tibetans to "exercise [ethnic] nationality autonomy."<sup>31</sup> In 1982, the Party issued *Document 19, the Basic Viewpoint and Policy on the Religious Question during Our Country's Socialist Period* that allowed for the promotion of religious activities within certain parameters. These policy shifts promoted

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<sup>28</sup> Xinhua News Agency, 2007.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Nietupski 2011.

<sup>30</sup> According to the local county gazetteer, the *Hualong xianzhi* (1994, 134-136), all the villages of Hualong County were turned into communes on September 1, 1958. According to personal communication (September 2008), the reopening of the monasteries was a gradual process beginning in 1981.

<sup>31</sup> Wang Yao 1994, 287.

moderate acceptance of expressions of Tibetan ethnic and cultural identity in public discourse. In this context, the Sixth Tséten Zhabdrung and other surviving Tibetan Buddhist hierarchs were called upon to restore Tibetan traditions and educate the youth, especially those born from 1958 onward, many of whom as a result of harsh socio-political policies, had received little or no education in their language, history, or culture. As part of this process of reviving Tibetan cultural practices, the Sixth Tséten Zhabdrung met with the Tenth Pañchen Lama and other Geluk hierarchs (including Alak Sertri and Jamyang Shépa) in Beijing in 1983. At a gathering of the Buddhist Association of China, they discussed the situation of recognizing incarnate lamas after the Cultural Revolution.<sup>32</sup> The Buddhist Association of China serves as a bridge between Buddhists and the state, and as such, it is one of the key channels for coordinating the “coexistence of the state and religion.”<sup>33</sup> The Buddhist hierarchs deliberated on the necessary attributes of incarnate lama. One of the new measures included raising the age of recognition. In this meeting, Tséten Zhabdrung is reported to have suggested that, “based on the current situation, past biographies and teachings from the Buddhist canon, commentaries and Valid Cognition texts... in earlier times, a child of three or four was sought out and then placed upon the throne with a ceremonial kathag.”<sup>34</sup> Now the times had changed, and, “it would be beneficial if a child from age 12-13 to the age of 15 showing signs of intelligence and good moral standing was chosen.” The recommendation was that it would be best if a divination would be conducted only after three factors: age, intelligence, and moral character, had been established. According to this report, then, it was still proper to use the method of divination in recognizing an incarnate lama, but the youth should be of the correct age, intelligence, and moral disposition. This proposal was reportedly supported by the Tenth Pañchen Lama.<sup>35</sup> Efforts to verify these events in other external sources, such as the publication by the Buddhist Association of China (*The Voice of Dharma*, Ch. *Fayin*) have not yet been successful. Yet, the veracity of this discussion is not the focus here.

More importantly is the fact that this event was reported in Tséten Zhabdrung’s *Collected Works*, written by his disciples. The

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<sup>32</sup> Tséten Zhabdrung 2007, 1: 356.

<sup>33</sup> Ashiwa 2009, 59.

<sup>34</sup> Tséten Zhabdrung 2007, 1: 357.

<sup>35</sup> This report was written by Jikmé Tekchok (‘Jigs med theg mchog) at the behest of Shardong Rinpoché and is found in the addendum to Tséten Zhabdrung’s autobiography (2007, 1: 402).

inclusion of this account can be understood in two ways. On one hand, it can be read as a general concern of Tibetan Buddhist communities in China on important factors in the recognition of tulku. The recommendation that a child should be recognized only in their teenage years may have been a concession for the reinstatement of the tulku institution that was in accord with government law as stated in *Document 19*:

It will absolutely be forbidden to force anyone, particularly people under eighteen years of age, to become a member of a church, to become a Buddhist monks or nun, or to go to temples or monasteries to study Buddhist scriptures.<sup>36</sup>

The proposal to raise the age of recognition could be a careful negotiation between the external pressures of the state policy on Buddhism and the wishes of the Buddhist community to revive the tradition. On the other hand, this account can be also read as a reference to the revival of the Tséten incarnation lineages. Tséten Khenpo's reincarnation had not been recognized in 1983. The monk biographer, Jikmé Tekchok, was likely concerned with the future of his own monastic communities. All involved understood that the continued rebuilding of monastic communities was dependent on leadership, so perhaps the age restriction was a concession in order to restore the Tséten Khenpo incarnation lineage. The analysis penned by the Sixth Tséten Zhabdrung above lacked any clear commentary promoting an age restriction on the recognition of tulku even though the themes of education and ethics were evident. Despite these recommendations at the 1983 Beijing meeting, the Sixth Tséten Zhabdrung never witnessed the recognition or education of the next Tséten Khenpo incarnation. It took a decade after this meeting in 1983 for the recognition of the two Tséten throne-holders.

The recognition of the Fourteenth Tséten Khenpo Nominhan Ngawang Losang Tenpé Gyeltsen (Ngag dbang blo bzang bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan, b. 1965)<sup>37</sup> followed the suggestions of the 1983 Beijing meeting, including the age restriction. The Fourteenth Tséten Khenpo was recognized when he was much older—at age twenty-six. He was only recognized after proving his intellectual and moral aptitude to

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<sup>36</sup> Cited in MacInnis 1989, 15.

<sup>37</sup> The Fourteenth Abbot of Tseten Monastery is Vice Director of the Buddhist Association of Eastern Qinghai (Ch. Haidong; Tib. Mtsho shar), the Vice Chairman of Minhe County to the National Committee (Ch. zhangxie; Tib. srid gros) of the CPPCC (Chinese People's Political Consultative Committee) and the Chairman of Minhe County's Buddhist Association.

uphold monastic discipline. He was born in 1965, almost eight years after the murder of his predecessor. His biography compiled by the monks at Dentik stressed that he showed aptitude at public primary and middle school. "When he went to school, whoever came in his presence, remarked that he was not like the other children who liked to play all the time. Many people thought he was an incarnate lama."<sup>38</sup> After graduating from Xunhua Minority Middle School, he worked at the Nationalities Performing Arts Center, and traveled to Central Tibet. Then in 1986, he decided to become a monk while residing at Dentik Monastery. In 1991, after studying and working at nearby Kumbum Monastery for more than five years, he was recognized as the incarnation of the former Tséten Khenpo Jikmé Rikpé Nyingpo. On the twelfth day of the ninth month of 1993, he was enthroned at Tséten Monastery, then enthronement at the other five monasteries followed. After his recognition, he studied at China's Tibetan Language Division of the Higher Buddhist Studies Institute (Zhongguo Zangyuxi gaoji foxueyuan 中国藏语系高级佛学院) located in Beijing. Since 1987, this institute has been charged with educating all officially recognized incarnations, so that, "Upon graduation, they return to where they came, working hard for unification of the motherland, ethnic unity, social stability, and local economic construction."<sup>39</sup> Since Tséten Khenpo returned to Dentik, he has continuously initiated important social projects for the larger monastic community. He had a water-well tapped so that the monks would have running water and had electricity lines laid to the monastery. His recognition met all of the three criteria: correct age, intelligence, and moral disposition, outlined at the 1983 Beijing meeting. This was not the case for his counterpart.

The Seventh Tséten Zhabdrung Losang Jampel Norbu (Blo bzang 'jam dpal nor bu, 1988) is the son of the Sixth Tséten Zhabdrung Jikmé Rikpai Lodrö's younger brother. Unlike Tséten Khenpo, he took his novice monk vows when only five years old as part of his enthronement ceremony. As a youth, he did not receive an education at state-run schools, but rather was educated at Jakhyung (Bya khyung) Monastery. His root lama was the Sixth Tséten Zhabdrung's disciple Shardong Rinpoché, who also ordained him with his *getsül* (dge tshul) vows. Up until Shardong Rinpoché's death in 2002, he studied at Jakhyung Monastery. The community ensured that he received a traditional monastic education, unlike many of his generation. Similar to Tséten Khenpo, he continues to be an active

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<sup>38</sup> Willock 2008, 3.

<sup>39</sup> China Internet Information Center, 2006; Cf. Tuttle 2005.

leader in his monasteries even though he has returned his vows. He also assists in the distribution of the Tséten Zhabdrung Award Fellowship.<sup>40</sup> This scholarship fund was founded by the Sixth Tséten Zhabdrung in his lifetime to help students in financial need obtain an education at the Northwest Nationalities University. It was expanded to meet the needs of students at the Xunhua Tibetan Language Middle School in 2007.

Local members of the monastic communities charged with the responsibility of recognizing and educating the two incarnate lamas have created the space to reinstate the two Tséten throne-holders nearly thirty-five years after the death of Tséten Khenpo, and almost a decade after the death of the previous Tséten Zhabdrung. While the two Tséten tulkus remain active in their shared communities, this brief comparison shows some of the inconsistencies in the project of tulku recognition today.

#### *4. Concluding remarks*

The historical narratives outlined in the first part of this paper showed that the Sixth Tséten Zhabdrung drew upon Tibetan historical texts in order to uphold certain Buddhist ideals that could be used as model for the future of the tulku institution in China despite a tenuous political climate. Tséten Zhabdrung's analysis and commentary on the tulku system served a didactic purpose—to emphasize what he viewed as two of the most important qualities in a Buddhist teacher: to be knowledgeable, especially in Buddhist doctrine, and ethical. When the political tide shifted to allow for local agents to search for the two Tséten throne-holders, those charged with this position drew upon their deceased teacher's advice, which they had received verbally during his lifetime and remembered through the written words of their lama's autobiography. Certainly the two Tséten throne-holders embodied the characteristics of knowledge and ethics following Tséten Zhabdrung's recommendations. Although these leaders continue the historical tradition as "dual throne-holders," the discrepancies in the age of recognition of both tulku and the different types of education that the two tulku received indicates that the application and interpretation of what was meant by education and ethics were dissimilar. These cases indicate how local actors adapt traditional practices in varying ways

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<sup>40</sup> Qinghai News, 2007.

in order to balance the needs of the local communities and state pressures.

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