

MAO AND BUDDHA – RELIGIOUS POLICY TOWARDS TIBETAN BUDDHISM IN CHINA

SUMMARY

The publication deals with the issue of religious policy presenting a detailed analysis of how the relationship between religion and politics in China evolved. It focuses on the situation of Tibetan Buddhist community in China, as the political measures adopted in relation to this distinctive religious tradition has posed a particular challenge to the Chinese secular state due to the fact that the religion has traditionally been closely interrelated with politics in Tibet. The publication offers a broad and in-depth analysis of the state authorities approaches in historical context, highlighting the post-1949 developments.

The introducing chapter discusses the relationship between the state and religion in Asia against the backdrop of the European idea of secularization and separation between church and state as promoted by the Enlightenment. It also deals with the birth of religious nationalism and fundamentalism in Asia in response to the spread of the Western idea of secular nationalism combined with liberal democracy. The author mentions the various patterns of state – church relationship as defined by K. Medhurst and their relevance to the situation in China. This chapter also discusses the state of research of religious policy in China and the research methods adopted. The research dwells on two closely interrelated issues: first, a detailed analysis of the various laws, regulations and official policy documents promulgated by the state and Party authorities which address the issue of religious policy towards Tibetan Buddhism. The normative aspect of the religious policy has been studied and analyzed using primary sources written in Chinese and Tibetan languages representing the official positions (laws, regulations, policy statements etc.). The research on the normative level of the religious policy functioning was supplemented by a focus on the practical implementation of these regulations and laws which enabled the author to analyze both the religious policy's theory and praxis in China. In years 2000-2006 the author repeatedly conducted field research mainly in the area around the Labrang Tashikhyil (*bla brang bkra shis 'khyil*) monastery in the Gansu Province 甘肃省 (Xiahe township 夏河县). As the Labrang monastery is currently the largest Tibetan Buddhist monastery in China, its experience with the implementation of the religious policy

of Chinese authorities at the local level is of a representative character. This part of research work included empirical field research using qualitative methods (participant observation, interviewing).

As the research was primarily focused on the problem of continuity/discontinuity of the Chinese policy towards Tibetan Buddhism during the Qing 清 Dynasty, the Republican period (1912-1949) and the post-1949 situation, the second and third chapters provide a necessary historical background on this issue. The author first discusses the role of religion in the traditional Tibetan polity, in Tibetan characterized as “having two (powers): religious and political” (Tib. *chos srid gnyis ldan*) which reflected the fact, that between 1642 and 1951 the supreme political and religious powers rested with the successive reincarnations of the Dalai Lama. In the traditional Tibet, monasteries and high incarnations (Tib. *sprul sku*) hold considerable chunks of land and the population subordinated to a monastery had to pay taxes that represented the main source of income. On the other hand, the Imperial Chinese state was characterized by the official support for the orthodox Confucianism, embodied by the ritual role of the Son of Heaven, i.e. the Chinese Emperor. Other religious traditions, namely Buddhism and Daoism, were traditionally perceived as potential sources of social unrest and the Imperial bureaucracy strived to control and supervise the activities of clergy and laity. Because of ideological, political and economic reasons especially the Chinese Buddhists repeatedly encountered state-sponsored religious persecutions. The Manchu-Chinese Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) was involved in both Tibetan political and religious affairs. The Qing Imperial government issued a number of decrees and regulations with the aim to regulate the status and powers of religious institutions and dignitaries. After 1949 some of these measures and regulations adopted by the Imperial bureaucracy have also been repeatedly referred to by the government of the People’s Republic as an important element of its Tibet policy (namely the system of identification of the successive reincarnations of the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama, so-called “drawing lots from a gold urn”). The role of Tibetan Buddhism in the Qing policy towards Inner Asia was not limited to Tibet proper as the Qing emperors also used Tibetan religion as a tool of their policy towards Mongolia. Moreover, some Qing emperors – especially Qianlong 乾隆 (r. 1736–1796) – had shown deep personal interest in Tibetan Buddhist teachings and the presence of high-ranking Tibetan lamas as well as the exposure to Tibetan culture had also its bearing on the art at the Qing court.

The period following the foundation of the Republic of China in 1912 was characterized by a negative approach towards religion culminating in the antireligious and anti-Christian campaigns in the 1920s. Especially after the May Fourth Movement of 1919 that promoted program for the modernization of Chinese

society under the slogans of democracy and science, the two notions representing in the eyes of Chinese intellectuals progressive aspects of Western civilization, the traditional Chinese religions became the target of harsh criticism and refusal. In the eyes of young intelligentsia they stood for a relict from the past, an obstacle to modernization, an antithesis of rational and scientific way of thinking. This negative approach towards the religion was adopted also by Guomindang 國民黨. In 1928 and 1929 representatives of the left wing of Guomindang launched a vigorous campaign against religion and “superstition”. The aim of the religious policy of the Guomindang government was to strengthen the state’s administrative control of religious groups, while the authorities attempted to distinguish between various local deities from the pantheon of folk religion labeled as ”superstitions” which should be eliminated and those religious traditions (Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Christianity) which should be preserved and protected. This administrative control of religion entailed the approval of a number of regulations and rules, some of which were specifically tailored to Tibetan Buddhism (e. g. rules for the identification and enthronement of Tibetan incarnations). Political instability and the weak authority of central government prevented the full implementation of these regulations and due to the *de facto* independent status of Central Tibet in the years 1912–1950 Tibetan Buddhist monasteries were not subordinated to the jurisdiction of the Guomindang government.

The post-1949 situation is analyzed in great detail. The author discusses the approach of the state authorities to Tibetan Buddhism in comparative perspective with the status of Chinese Buddhists in order to illustrate the similarities and differences in the state authorities approach towards various religious groups. First it discusses the shaping of religious policy by the Chinese Communist Party in the 1930s and 1940s. By quoting the most important official documents (e.g. Common Program approved in 1949, Chinese Constitution adopted in 1954, 17-Point Agreement signed in 1951) it illustrates the legal and political guarantees relevant to Tibetan Buddhism as stipulated by socialist authorities. The institutional foundations of the religious policy (Religious Affairs Bureau and Chinese Buddhist Association) are also dealt with. The so-called Democratic Reform of the Religious System (Chin. *zongjiao zhidu minzhu gaige* 宗教制度民主改革) launched as of 1958 in the peripheral Tibetan areas (Amdo, Kham) and in spring 1959 in Central Tibet has dramatically affected the religious life of Tibetans and the economical basis of the monasteries. The drastic reduction of monastic community and the partial closure of the monasteries (as documented for instance in the secret report submitted by the 10th Panchen Lama in May 1962) represented a first blow by the state authorities to Tibetan Buddhism. The short relaxation of religious policy in Tibet (and, generally, in China) after the

corrections in the years 1961-62 turned to be just a short interlude before the ill-famed Cultural Revolution that broke out in 1966 resulting in the complete destruction of religious life and religious institutions in Tibet.

The final part of the monograph deals with the development of religious policy towards Tibetan Buddhism since the late 1970s, i.e. during the period of opening and economic reforms. The religious policy towards Tibetan Buddhism in the post-Mao period could be divided into two periods: the 1980s and the 1990s. The publication firstly discusses the legal guarantees stipulated by the Constitution of the PRC adopted in 1982 and then goes on describing the qualitative and quantitative characteristics of the massive religious revival started in Tibetan areas after 1979. The revival of Buddhism in Tibet led to the anti-Chinese riots in Lhasa in 1987-1989 after which monasteries and monks were identified as sources of political dissent by the Chinese authorities. The new policy towards religions in general, which attempted to subordinate religious life to the “rule by law” and Party leadership, came to the forefront in 1991 and brought about the tightening of religious life also in Tibet. The Chinese religious policy in Tibetan areas has been focused on the political campaigning (under the slogan “love the motherland and love the religion”), strengthening the administrative grip on the monasteries through the newly established Monastery Management Committees, downsizing the monastic communities, supervising the process of identification and enthronement of new incarnations (the issues surrounding the recognition of a new Buddhist reincarnation in Tibet were highlighted in 1995 when the choice of the 11th Panchen Lama stirred up a controversy between the Dalai Lama and the Chinese government). The author discusses the impact of these measures on Tibetan Buddhist monastic communities and illustrates some controversies between the state authorities and religious circles. As of late 1980s the economic arguments have played a significant role in the official discourse on the limits of religious freedom in Tibet. According to the authorities Tibetan Buddhist monasteries should provide services and establish subsistence production units, which would finance their religious activities and sustain monastic communities. Economic activities hamper the internal life of Buddhist institutions – scarce resources limit the scope of religious life, while the impact of tourism presents a challenge to some monasteries.

During the 1990s the Party and government authorities have successfully carried out the administrative, legal and organizational measures which have strengthened the state apparatus grip over the Tibetan Buddhist monasteries but failed to solve major problems of religious work in Tibet such as the role and influence of the Dalai Lama or the size of monastic communities. Political campaigns and the lip-service monks and nuns have paid to Party and State did not undermine their traditional loyalty to the

Dalai Lama. The divergent Chinese and Tibetan perceptions of the role of religion, religious institutions and religious figures in society have led and will inevitably lead to further confrontations and conflicts which will impede the overall Chinese policy on Tibet of which the religious policy constitutes only a small, though very important part. As was the case in the then Communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe, religions in China are considered “necessary evils” that could not be eradicated by force but rather have to be tolerated and should adapt to socialism. According to some Chinese authors the government’s re-think in religious policy is only a matter of time and opportunity as religion is a relatively easy area in which to make adjustments. The example of Tibetan Buddhism – as in the case of Islam and Uighurs – shows that religious policy is a complex issue involving sensitive question of ethnic identity, territorial integrity, adequate and sustainable economic policy; any predictions should be therefore formulated with great caution and relevant to particular religion. The research uncovered a certain degree of voluntarism in the implementation of religious policy in post-Mao period as some of the restrictions (size of the monastic community etc.) are not adhered to. In conclusion the continuity of the relations between state and religion in China, one of the main issues raised by the monograph, is discussed including the possible scenarios on how the role of religious groups in Chinese society with special reference to Tibetan Buddhist community might evolve. It also deals with the issue of the religious freedom in China’s foreign relations (especially with the U.S.).

The detailed analysis of the development of religious policy towards Tibetan Buddhism in China since 1949 made it possible to suggest a more precise chronology reflecting both the shifts in its theoretical framework and practical implementations: a) 1950-1958: relatively tolerant religious policy, respecting the specific status of Tibet in the PRC; b) 1958-1959: “democratic reform of the religious system”, vast destruction of the institutionalized forms of religion in Tibet; c) 1960-1963: partial liberalization of religious policy; d) 1964-1976: gradual uprooting of Tibetan Buddhism in both its institutional and individual form; e) 1977-1989: revitalization of Buddhism in Tibet, return to relatively tolerant policy, limited interference by the state authorities; f) after 1990: intensifying state interference with the internal life of Buddhist monasteries (e. g. by way of political campaigns), more restrictive implementation of religious policy.

The author concludes that the revival of religious life in Tibetan areas has reached a certain limit. The future will show whether it will be possible within the revitalization process to reconcile two entirely different sets of interests: on the one hand the desire by the Chinese authorities to administratively control the internal life of the Buddhist monasteries; on the other hand the endeavor by the Tibetan monks

and laypeople to proceed further with the revival of the monastic communities aimed at reestablishing them in their traditional role, which encompassed not only religious authority but also political and economic power. The two trends are contradictory: for Tibetans the alternative of a limited revival is unacceptable in the same measure as the Chinese baulk at the vision of the gradual resurrection of the traditional role of Tibetan monasteries, represented by the high incarnations, which would lead to the creation of parallel administrative structures independent of the Chinese state.

The publication is supplemented by translations of important post-1979 official documents and regulations on religious policy with specific pertinence to Tibetan Buddhism, namely “Measures for the Management of Buddhist Monasteries in the Gansu Province” (1991); “An Investigation Report on the Situation in the Management of the Labrang Monastery” (1995); selected parts on patriotic education and the identification of incarnations from *Propaganda Materials for Education and Study to Patriotism in Tibetan Buddhism* (1998); and “Regulations on Religious Affairs” (2005).