Royal Geographical Society with IBG
Advancing geography and geographical learning
AREA

Area (2013) 45.2, 162–169 doi: 10.1111/j.1475-4762.2012.01120.x

The geopolitics of Buddhist reincarnation: contested futures of Tibetan leadership

Fiona McConnell
Trinity College, University of Cambridge, Cambridge CB2 1TQ
Email: frm24@cam.ac.uk

Revised manuscript received 5 May 2012

In attending to a religion and a region often overlooked in critical geopolitics, this paper examines the intersections between issues of legitimacy, agency and authority, and the case of Tibetan Buddhism. Buddhist values and political policies are deeply intertwined in the Tibetan case, to the extent that the political philosophy of Tibet – both prior to 1959 and in exile – is chos srid gnyis ldan*, or 'religion and politics combined'. Central to this conflation has been the figure of the Dalai Lama who, since 1642, has been the spiritual and political leader of Tibet. However, in March 2011, the current and 14th Dalai Lama declared his retirement from political life and devolution of political power to the directly elected exile Prime Minister (Kalon Tripa). Six months later, His Holiness issued a statement on the future of his own successor, declaring that he has the 'sole legitimate authority' over the reincarnation of the next Dalai Lama. Within days the Chinese Government responded by declaring that 'the title of Dalai Lama is conferred by the central government and is illegal otherwise'. In historically contextualising and critically analysing these recent events, this paper challenges conventional transpositional mappings of secular modernity and religious traditionalism onto the Chinese and Tibetan leadership respectively. It concludes by making the case for a more sustained critical geopolitical engagement with Buddhist communities, leaders and politics.*

Key words: *Buddhism, geopolitics, Tibet, China, legitimacy, Dalai Lama*

Introduction

Critical analysis of the intersections of religion and geopolitics has, in recent years, proved to be a fertile ground for exploring the development of foreign policy, issues of (in)security and the decline of secular democracy in what is arguably a post-secular international system (Agnew 2006; Dijkink 2006; Dittmer and Sturm 2010). Yet this field has, to date, been dominated by the study of two faiths: Anglophone Christianity and, post-9/11, Islam (Kong 2010). In contrast, this paper turns attention to a religion and a region often overlooked in critical geopolitics: Buddhism and Tibet. It uses this case to explore the geopolitics of succession in Tibetan political and religious leadership and, more generally, to analyse intersections between Buddhism, legitimacy and political agency.

Buddhist values and political policies are deeply intertwined in the Tibetan case, to the extent that Tibetan political philosophy is termed *chos srid gnyis ldan*, or 'religion and politics combined' (Shakabpa 1967). Central to this has been the figure of the Dalai Lama who, since 1642, has been the spiritual and political leader of Tibet. However, changes are afoot. Whilst declaring 'turning points' in a nation's history is rarely to be encouraged, 2011 does seem to be a particularly eventful year in Tibetan politics. Following protests across the Tibetan plateau in spring 2008 and the stalling of Sino-Tibetan dialogue in 2010, two announcements in 2011 have fundamentally altered the nature of relations both between Tibetan Buddhism and politics, and between the Chinese and exiled Tibetan authorities. These are the Dalai Lama's decision to retire from political life and transfer his authority to the exile Tibetan Prime Minister (Kalon Tripa), and His Holiness's statement on his reincarnation and the rebuttal to this from the Chinese Government. At first glance the initial decision appears to be about politics, and the latter seems to be theological but, as this paper will explore, they both demonstrate the complex meshing of religion and politics in this highly contested region, and reveal important contentions around agency, secularism and legitimacy.

ISSN 0004-0894

The case of Tibet has long remained marginal in studies of geopolitics, appearing if at all as a 'footnote to the Cold War . . . or as a pawn in Sino-Western . . . or Sino-Indian relations' (Anand 2008, xv). Alongside the conventional focus on strategic interests of major Western powers, such neglect can arguably be attributed to a Western wariness of engaging with Buddhist beliefs and practices, in particular those around reincarnation (Keown 1996). Indeed, Buddhism has long posed a puzzle for scholars of religion for, if religion is notoriously difficult to define (Turner 1991), then the debate over whether Buddhism can or even should be classified as a religion confuses matters further. What geographical literature that there is on Buddhism includes work focused on spatio-symbolic aspects of Buddhist landscapes (Tanaka 1984), the mobilisation of Buddhist traditions by Sinhalese elites in Sri Lanka (Stokke 1998) and the politics of Buddhist peace activism in Burma (Grundy-Warr 2011). However, the previous special issue on religion and geopolitics (*Geopolitics* 2006) included no papers on Buddhism, and this faith is mentioned only in passing if at all in papers reviewing this field (Kong 2001 2010; Dittmer 2007).

Such neglect can be attributed to a number of factors. Stereotyped as benign and passive, Buddhism is often perceived as geopolitically unthreatening and thus insignificant. This religion has had little geopolitical impact on the West, and Tibetan Buddhism in particular has (mistakenly) been seen as immune to geopolitical shifts that have shaped other religions, such as the Cold War (however see McGranahan 2010), the 'war on terror' and debates around the 'clash of civilisations' (Huntington 1996). Through exploring questions of legitimate leadership in the specific case of Tibetan Buddhism, this paper argues that a focus on Buddhism more generally has the potential to open up productive new lines of inquiry in religious geopolitics. These include opening up questions around political and religious succession and leadership, exposing contestations over sources of political legitimacy (Fox and Sandler 2004), and blurring conceptual boundaries of the secular and the religious, the traditional and the modern.

Based on textual analysis of statements made by the Tibetan and Chinese leaderships and ethnographic research conducted in the exile Tibetan Government headquarters in Dharamsala, north India from 2006 to 2011, this paper is formed of three takes on the intersection of Tibetan Buddhism and geopolitics. The following section sets out the context of this case, tracing the historical influence of Buddhism on Sino-Tibetan relations, the intertwining of Buddhism and politics in pre-1959 Tibet and in exile, and the promotion of compassion and nonviolence as political strategies. Turning to the Dalai Lama's efforts to separate 'church and state' in the exile polity, the second section examines the (geo)political repercussions of His Holiness's decision to transfer his political authority to the exile elected leadership, and the questions this raises regarding relations between Buddhism and secular democracy. Focusing on the struggle over the legacy of the Dalai Lama institution, the third section attends to His Holiness's 2011 statement on reincarnation, an issue which is at the core of Sino-Tibetan contestations regarding legitimate authority over Tibetan Buddhism and the Tibetan nation. In asking what it means for the officially atheist Chinese state to claim legitimacy over decisions of religious leadership, the paper disrupts conventional mappings of secular modernity and religious traditionalism onto Chinese and Tibetan leadership respectively. Finally, the paper concludes by tracing the wider geopolitical implications of these events and makes the case for a more sustained critical geopolitical engagement with Buddhist communities, leaders and politics.

The intertwining of Tibetan politics and Buddhism

Far from the '*emerging* political language of the time' (Agnew 2006, 183, emphasis added), the influence of religion on Sino-Tibetan relations can be traced back to early history and continues to be cited in on-going controversies over the legal and political status of Tibet. Chinese authorities maintain that Tibet has been and remains an 'inseparable part of China' (Wei 1989, 27), while the exile Tibetan leadership assert that Tibet was an independent state between 1913 and 1950 and is thus currently under Chinese occupation (DIIR 1996). Central to the latter's claim is the importance of religion in defining Tibet's relationship with China. Tibetan historians and politicians frequently cite the traditional Buddhist priest–patron relationship (*mchod yon*) between Tibetan spiritual leaders and a succession of Chinese emperors, with the implication that such relationships were religious in nature and thus did not constitute Tibet's subjugation to, or unification with, China (Shakabpa 1967).

Buddhism was first brought to Tibet in the seventh century by Songtsen Gampo, the Tibetan king who consolidated the Tibetan Empire and, under the following Tibetan kings, became established as the state religion (Schwartz 1999).[1] Between the seventeenth century and 1959, the Dalai Lamas – a lineage of religious leaders of the Gelug school of Tibetan Buddhism – were both the religious and political leaders of Tibet and headed the Lhasa-based Tibetan Government. As such, this intertwining of political and spiritual legitimacy formed a central part of Tibetan politics, with the government being constituted of a diarchy of equivalent ecclesiastical and secular offices at every level of administration (Kolås 1996).

In exile, both religion and the figure of the Dalai Lama continue to be central unifying elements for Tibetan

Area Vol. 45 No. 2, pp. 162–169, 2013
ISSN 0004-0894

nationalism and play key roles in a number of aspects of exile politics. This includes Buddhist values being enshrined at the core of the 1963 'Draft Constitution for Future Tibet', Buddhist prioritisation of cooperation over competition underpinning exile democracy (Ardley 2003; McConnell 2009), and the central role of the Dalai Lama in uniting and leading the community. As a school teacher in Sonamling settlement in Ladakh put it, 'we Tibetans have utmost faith in the Dalai Lama . . . what he says we do, where he goes we go'. Indeed, this meshing of Buddhist beliefs with both the distribution of authority and Tibetan nationalism offers an important grounding to assertions that the religious and the national often map onto each other (Ivakhiv 2006).

Traditional religious values also inform exile Tibetan 'foreign policy' in terms of the 'Middle Way Approach', which, launched by the Dalai Lama in 1988, remains the exile government's official position on the future of Tibet. Premised on the Buddhist principle of seeking a path of moderation and conciliation rather than confrontation, the transposition of the 'Middle Way' into politics represents a compact in which China would accede to genuine Tibetan autonomy within Tibet without compromising China's territorial integrity (DIIR 2005).[2] Related to this, the intertwining of Buddhism and politics is also manifested in the exile leaderships' adoption of nonviolence as a political policy and strategy (McConnell forthcoming). Buddhist societies are not necessarily nonviolent, nor is Buddhism itself a nonviolent religion (Jerryson and Juergensmeyer 2010). Nevertheless, based on Buddhist principles of compassion and *ahimsa* – 'to do no harm' – strict adherence to nonviolence is promoted by the Dalai Lama and exile government (Garfield 2002). A distinct set of geopolitical imaginaries are at work here. These include the framing of Tibet as a 'Zone of Peace' in Asia (Dalai Lama 1989), and the Dalai Lama's discourse of 'World Peace', both of which define His Holiness as an important moral voice in the international community and form key components of Tibetan soft power (Magnusson 2002). Facilitating this scalar jump from Tibet as a *regional* zone of peace to the promotion of *world* peace is the Buddhist concept of interconnectedness (*rten 'byung*).

The desire to promote compassion in geopolitics and the notion of Tibet as a buffer between India and China can be perceived as somewhat idealistic. However, as Mills (2009) argues, such readings fail to recognise the distinct geographical imaginations being invoked and the historical significance of these ideas within pre-1959 Tibetan systems of theocratic statecraft. Given the vast size of the Tibetan plateau, the governing authority of the Tibetan Government was limited, and was compensated for by a ritualised system of religious authority (Samuel 1993). The invoking of 'World Peace' therefore reflects this context of less-bounded understandings of sovereignty than are prevalent in Western political theory. As such, just as 'religious visions in Christianity and Islam such as holy land, holy war or millennialism . . . have a clear geopolitical character' (Dijkink 2006, 193), so too do Buddhist visions of world peace (Mills 2009).

However, though providing a powerful uniting force for the Tibetan nation and earning Tibetans *moral* legitimacy in international politics (albeit often without material support), this interweaving of religion and politics has been neither unproblematic nor uncontested. Not only has the reliance on Buddhist reincarnation to determine leadership succession been a source of political vulnerability, but there are critiques voiced by some young exiles that the influence of Buddhism on politics has led to Tibetans being reluctant to engage with political decision-making and assume leadership positions. Reflecting on the 'blind following of His Holiness' and assumptions that there is a degree of passiveness and apathy related to faith in karma (Grundy-Warr 2011), a Tibetan graduate in Delhi described to me how, 'for Tibetans, whatever the Dalai Lama says, they will believe and go along with, for them his word . . . is Tibetan law . . . this is a mental and political block in our community'.

Separating 'church and state'

In light of such critiques, and arguably to also reflect Western ideals of secular democracy back to a Western-dominated international audience, the Dalai Lama has spearheaded a process of dismantling the traditional theocratic system. The governmental ecclesiastical offices were abolished in the early years of exile, the monasteries lost their traditional roles as local administrators and, most importantly, the Dalai Lama has pushed through a series of democratic reforms (McConnell 2009). This democratisation of the Tibetan Government-in-Exile (TGiE) has recently been advanced by a decision by the Dalai Lama that both separates 'church and state' at the highest level of government and marks a significant transition in Tibetan politics. On 14 March 2011, the Dalai Lama announced that he was retiring from political life and would transfer his political authority to elected leaders. In standing down as both head of state and head of government – though retaining his role as spiritual leader – the Dalai Lama thus voluntarily relinquished an almost 400-year-old tradition of power. As explored here, this decision raises issues that speak directly to the relationship between secular 'modernity' and religious 'tradition', and questions of where legitimacy lies and how it is constituted (Fox and Sandler 2004; Kent 2006).

As the medium through which political authority and national identity are enacted and secured into the future, the Dalai Lama is frequently referred to as the key source of Tibetan legitimacy. As one TGiE Secretary put it, 'the true

ISSN 0004-0894

legitimacy we [TGiE] have – where our sovereignty is located – is in the moral authority enjoyed by the Dalai Lama'. Indeed, more generally, the role of the Dalai Lama in embodying Tibetan culture, providing continuity to the history of Tibet, and epitomising the formula of 'religion and politics combined' cannot be overemphasised (Kolås 1996). Given the lack of centralised governance in pre-1959 Tibet, the personal qualities of the Dalai Lama assumed heightened importance, and this continues today, with His Holiness functioning 'as the central locus of power and identity within the Tibetan diaspora' (Houston and Wright 2003, 218) and the literal 'holder of the faith' for the increasingly global community of Tibetan Buddhist practitioners.[3] Given such a role, not only has the diaspora been reluctant to support His Holiness's resignation from politics, but his decision raises important constitutional issues for the TGiE (Tibet Justice Center 2011). Central to this are on-going discussions over its framing as a 'transfer' or 'devolution' of the political aspect of the Dalai Lama's authority, and the implications this has both for ensuring that the legitimacy of Tibetan political authority is maintained, and for acknowledging the key spiritual power that the Dalai Lama continues to hold.

The Dalai Lama's statement also raises the issue of secularism. In empowering the nascent Tibetan democracy, the Dalai Lama's retirement means that the new Kalon Tripa is expected to take on much of the political authority previously borne by His Holiness. Recently elected Lobsang Sangay, a Harvard law scholar who was born and educated in India, will therefore play a significantly more prominent role in the Tibetan movement than his predecessors. With such a background, Sangay represents an important shift in exile leadership and brings with him a new style of Tibetan politics: one that is young, Western-educated and, crucially, secular. However, this deliberate strategy to separate religious and political leadership is not as straightforward as it might seem, with this case appearing to turn on its head assumptions that secularism is both diminishing in light of a rise of religious geopolitics and is marginal to understanding contemporary religion (Wilford 2010). Not only is the term 'secular' a somewhat confusing one in the (exile) Tibetan context – it is defined not as the absence of religion but as the state not discriminating among different religions (Dalai Lama 1991) – but the spiritual has been far from abandoned in this recent shift of power. For example, Article 1 of the amended 'Charter for Tibetans-in-Exile' states that His Holiness remains the symbolic spokesperson and provider of guidance for the Tibetan people, and can continue to meet world leaders to promote the Tibetan cause. Further confirmation that the Dalai Lama remains inextricably linked with issues of (geo)politics is found in on-going debates over the question of his reincarnation. For, although the transfer of political authority to the exile-based Kalon Tripa positions Tibetan temporal authority outside of China and beyond its authorities' control, it is the future of the institution of the Dalai Lama that arguably has far broader political as well as religious consequences.

The geopolitics of reincarnation

Since the fourteenth century, all lineages of Tibetan Buddhism have used reincarnation as the method of succession for high lamas. This has conventionally involved signs left by the predecessor, consultations with oracles and verification tests in order to identify a child as the recently deceased lama's reincarnation. Given the centrality of reincarnation to Tibetan leadership and thus the legitimacy of the Tibetan polity, it has long been a political as well as religious practice (Goldstein 1989). Questions around what will happen when the current Dalai Lama passes away, whether and where a reincarnation will be found, and who holds the legitimate authority for recognising him/her are therefore not just at the core of the future of Tibetan Buddhism, but have far wider geopolitical repercussions.

Before turning to the Dalai Lama's recent statement, it is important to note that the discovery of the current, 14th, Dalai Lama in 1937 was not without political interference. Not only did the local Chinese warlord of Qinghai (Tibetan: Amdo province) where the two-year-old child was found stall his travel to Lhasa, but the Tibetan Government asserted its independence by declaring *its* candidate to be the 14th Dalai Lama before he reached the capital, thereby thwarting Chinese Government claims that they had to be present to approve the selection (Goldstein 1989, 322). With China securing authority over Tibet in 1959, it has 'attempted to take over the role of legitimate patron of religion', thereby seeking to 'intervene directly in religious matters in order to shape Tibetan Buddhism to suit its political requirements' (Schwartz 1999, 237, 245). To date, the most overt intervention of the atheist Chinese state into Tibetan Buddhist practices has been the dispute over the reincarnation of the 10th Panchen Lama. The second most important incarnation in the Gelug school of Tibetan Buddhism, the Panchen Lama and the Dalai Lama have traditionally played a role in recognising each other's reincarnation. As Tsering Shakya notes, the death of the 10th Panchen Lama in 1989 'left China without a credible figurehead in Tibet at a time when . . . the Chinese were facing a serious . . . challenge to their rule by Tibetan nationalists' and, as a pre-emptive block to the Dalai Lama's involvement in the identification of a successor, 'Premier Li Peng announced that outsiders would not be allowed to "meddle in the selection procedure"' (1999, 441). However, with photographs of candidates smuggled out of Tibet to

ISSN 0004-0894

Dharamsala, in May 1995 the Dalai Lama announced the recognition of six-year-old Gedun Chokyi Nyima from Nagchu, north-west Tibet, as the 11th Panchen Lama. Interpreting this announcement as a direct challenge to their authority, the Chinese Government denounced the Dalai Lama's decision as 'illegal and a political plot by the Dalai clique to split the Motherland' and rejected his choice (Shakya 1999, 440). Gedun Chokyi Nyima was detained by Chinese security forces soon after his recognition and has not been seen since.

In November 1995, the Chinese authorities appointed their own 11th Panchen Lama, Gyaltsen Norbu. The son of Communist Party members, Gyaltsen Norbu was selected through a draw from a 'golden urn', a ceremony established in the eighteenth century by the Qing Emperor and that had been used to select the 11th and 12th Dalai Lamas.[4] In Chinese eyes, this 'artefact of Manchu imperial power' (Schwartz 1999, 246) therefore demonstrated that 'final authority in Tibet had always rested in Beijing' (Shakya 1999, 444) and was a symbolic claim of sovereignty over Tibet, albeit at the expense of their candidate lacking legitimacy in the eyes of Tibetans. Indeed, while this Chinese-appointed 11th Panchen Lama has been appointed Vice-President of the Buddhist Association of China and is being promoted as a future leader, he is largely rejected by Tibetans (Sehgal 2011).

The gulf created between the Chinese and exile Tibetan authorities over the former's appointment of their own Panchen Lama was further reinforced by Beijing's issuing of 'State Order No. 5: Management Measures for the Reincarnation of Living Buddhas in Tibetan Buddhism' in 2007. The order declares that only the Chinese Government can recognise the reincarnation of a lama, including the Dalai Lama, and that all such individuals must be reborn within China. Further solidifying the seemingly counter-intuitive link between Buddhist reincarnation and the integrity of the modern, atheist Chinese state, Article 2 of the order states that 'Reincarnating living Buddhas should respect and protect the principles of the unification of the state . . . [and] shall not be interfered with or be under the dominion of any foreign organization or individual' (State Administration of Religious Affairs 2007, n.p.). Order No. 5 was formally repudiated by exiled Tibetan Buddhist leaders shortly after it was issued, and the Dalai Lama's statement in September 2011 is a further rebuttal. This 4000 word declaration was issued in Tibetan and English following a meeting of leaders of the four main schools of Tibetan Buddhism in Dharamsala and sets out key practical steps regarding the future of Tibetan Buddhism that have far-reaching religious and geopolitical repercussions.

One of the most striking aspects of the Dalai Lama's statement is its expression of agency and authority, an assertiveness that is notably absent in articulations of the 'Middle Way Approach'. The declaration clearly spells out that only the Dalai Lama and, in his absence, the 'Gaden Phodrang Trust' – the 'Dalai Lama's Institution' constituted after His Holiness's transfer of authority to TGiE – will have 'sole legitimate authority' for managing the Dalai Lama's lineage and the succession process. Further, His Holiness both explicitly excludes the People's Republic of China from intervening in the succession of the 14th Dalai Lama and uses his authority to delineate the future course of Tibetan Buddhism and, in turn, the Tibetan nation. In offering an important response to Dittmer's query, how do 'religious elites . . . generate geographical imaginations and political action?' (2007, 737), the Dalai Lama's statement thus sets out the reincarnation process as rooted in Buddhist traditions, but it also demonstrates the agency of the Tibetan (spiritual) leader to employ these religious rituals in response to contemporary conditions (Barnett 2011).

The modifications to the system of succession in themselves also have important implications for questions of political agency and legitimate authority. The statement indicates that, for the first time in six centuries, the Dalai Lama's successor will likely be an 'emanation' (*sprul ba*), rather than a reincarnation (*sprul sku*), with the former being when a manifestation takes place without the source passing away. The strategic advantage of this change to succession means that the next Dalai Lama will probably be identified before the current Dalai Lama passes away, will likely be an adult rather than a child, and will be identified outside of Tibet (ICT 2007). In thereby shifting the temporal and spatial parameters of his succession, the problematic interim period between Dalai Lamas when Tibet has historically suffered political instability is avoided, and legitimate authority for overseeing the process is placed firmly in Tibetan hands.

China was quick to respond to the Dalai Lama's statement, with the Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hong Lei claiming that '[O]ut of ulterior political motives, the 14th Dailai Lama [*sic*] wilfully distorts and denies history. . . . The title of the Dalai Lama is illegal if not conferred by the Central Government' (26 September 2011, np). As with the Panchen Lama, China is therefore likely to appoint its own successor, which raises the prospect of two Tibetan spiritual leaders, one recognised by Beijing, the other by Dharamsala. On a strategic level this is clearly an attempt by the Chinese Government to reinforce its authority in Tibet, control the future Tibetan leadership and split Tibetan loyalties, but the irony of an officially atheist state claiming to have exclusive rights to recognise Buddhist reincarnations is not lost on the exile Tibetan leadership. Lobsang Sangay has described the situation as absurd, claiming that the Chinese Government has 'no experience, and certainly no right, to interfere in matter of the heart and of the spirit' (2011, np), while the Dalai Lama

ISSN 0004-0894

states that '[S]uch brazen meddling contradicts their own political ideology and reveals their double standards' (2011, np). However, the irony goes further. With 'modernising', atheist China insisting on the traditional reincarnation system, the Dalai Lama's flexible adaptation of the system to suit contemporary circumstances might well have the final say. The exile leader is arguably playing an astute geopolitical game, one that fundamentally challenges conventional geographies of secularism and religiosity, modernity and tradition.

Conclusion

In responding to Kong's plea that 'in conditions of modernity, "new" geographies of religion must take on board more actively . . . different religions in different historical and place-specific contexts' (2001, 228), this paper has focused on particular aspects of Tibetan Buddhist geopolitics. It has demonstrated the importance of providing historical, cultural and political context for examining the influence of Buddhism on a range of political issues, from Sino-Tibetan relations, to exile Tibetan democracy and the future of Tibetan leadership. As noted at the start of this paper, 2011 was an eventful year in Tibetan politics and Buddhism, with the Dalai Lama's retirement from political life and his statement on reincarnation both delineating the religious and the secular within the exile polity, and asserting Tibetan agency in setting the terms for Tibet's future leadership. Three key themes pertinent to religious geopolitics can be drawn out from this study.

First is the intersection between religion and political legitimacy (Fox and Sandler 2004), the latter being a notably under-theorised concept in critical geopolitics. Framed by both the Chinese and exile Tibetan authorities as a key source of legitimacy, Buddhism – and the issue of reincarnation in particular – has become a highly contested issue. As such, this case raises important questions regarding how 'legitimacy is acquired and how social roles, power relations, and actions are ascribed meaning and value' (Kent 2006, 346). Buddhist geopolitics thus foregrounds the importance of examining the politicisation of religion (Grundy-Warr 2011) and the role religion plays in shaping relations between power, legitimacy and (embodied) sovereignty. Secondly, this case foregrounds how questions of legitimacy intersect with the relationship between secularism and religion. The Dalai Lama's attempts to separate 'church and state' and Chinese intervention in the process of Buddhist reincarnation both challenges the binary of modern, secular China and traditional, religious Tibet, and highlights complex and politically charged intersections between the secular and the religious more generally (Wilford 2010). Thirdly, this case foregrounds the often neglected issue of leadership and the agency of spiritual elites in the context of religious geopolitics (Dittmer 2007). For example, the Dalai Lama's ability to shape the future of Tibetan Buddhism and Tibetan politics pushes Ivakhiv's assertion that '"religion" is neither permanent nor especially stable' (2006, 170) to consider issues of power dynamics and agency. Further, the role of reincarnation in Buddhist geopolitics foregrounds important issues around authenticating political and spiritual leadership and the contestations over designating authority to recognise future leaders.

Whilst to describe Buddhism as the new 'frontier' of religious geopolitics (Sopher 1967) is perhaps overstating the case, nevertheless this paper suggests that a sustained engagement in the intersection of geopolitics and the diversity of Buddhism(s) in and beyond Asia has the potential to open up productive new lines of theoretical and empirical inquiry. Broad avenues for further research might include issues around politically and socially 'engaged Buddhism' (Queen and King 1996), the geopolitical imaginations that underpin Buddhist world-views, Buddhism as a tool of soft power and intersections between Buddhist thought and geographies of peace. More generally, by shifting our attention away from the West and from the dominance of Christianity and Islam in religious geopolitics, the lens of Buddhist geopolitics has the potential to bring into focus important 'bigger questions' (Kong 2010, 763) pertaining to geopolitics today, including those of institutional continuity, political agency and legitimate authority.

Acknowledgements

This article is partly based on research funded by an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) PhD studentship, and additional fieldwork funding from Trinity College, Cambridge. The author would like to thank: Bhuchung D Sonam for his invaluable advice and careful reading of an earlier draft; Tristan Sturm and Jason Dittmer for their comments and encouragement; two anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful and constructive criticisms; and the many Tibetans in India who generously shared their time and thoughts.

Notes

1 Whilst Tibet was and is an overwhelmingly Buddhist society, there is a small Tibetan Muslim population, now predominantly in exile.
2 Not all Tibetans support the 'Middle Way approach', with many calling instead for '*rangzen*' or full Tibetan independence.
3 The 'Tenzin' (*Bstan-'dzin*) part of the 14th Dalai Lama's name (Tenzin Gyatso) translates as the 'holder of the faith'.
4 However, the Dalai Lama asserts that 'the Twelfth Dalai Lama had already been recognised before the procedure was employed. Therefore, there has only been one occasion when a Dalai Lama was recognised by using this method' (2011, np).

ISSN 0004-0894

References

Agnew J 2006 Religion and geopolitics *Geopolitics* 11 183–91

Anand D 2008 *Geopolitical exotica: Tibet in Western imagination* University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis MN

Ardley J 2003 Learning the art of democracy? Continuity and change in the Tibetan Government-in-Exile *Contemporary South Asia* 12 349–63

Barnett R 2011 Between the lines: interpreting the Dalai Lama's statement on his successor *The China Beat* 14 October (http://www.thechinabeat.org/?p=3873) Accessed 20 December 2011

Dalai Lama 1989 Acceptance speech, on the occasion of the award of the Nobel Peace Prize, Oslo, 10 December 1989 (http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1989/lama-acceptance.html) Accessed 20 December 2011

Dalai Lama 1991 Speech at Assembly of Tibetan People's Deputies, Dharamsala, 29 May 1991 in **Shiromany A A** ed 1998 *The political philosophy of H H the XIV Dalai Lama: selected speeches and writings* TPPRC, New Delhi 268–75

Dalai Lama 2011 Statement of His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama on the issue of his reincarnation 24 September 2011 (http://dalailama.com/messages/tibet/reincarnation-statement) Accessed 20 December 2011

DIIR 1996 *Tibet: proving truth from facts* DIIR, Dharamsala

DIIR 2005 *The Middle-Way approach: a framework for resolving the issue of Tibet* DIIR, Dharamsala

Dijkink G 2006 When geopolitics and religion fuse: a historical perspective *Geopolitics* 11 192–208

Dittmer J 2007 Intervention: religious geopolitics *Political Geography* 26 737–9

Dittmer J and Sturm T eds 2010 *Mapping the end times: American evangelical geopolitics and apocalyptic visions* Ashgate, Farnham

Fox J and Sandler S 2004 *Bringing religion into international relations* Palgrave Macmillan, New York

Garfield J L 2002 *Empty words: Buddhist philosophy and cross-cultural interpretation* Oxford University Press, Oxford

Geopolitics 2006 Special issue: Religion and geopolitics *Geopolitics* 11(2)

Goldstein M C 1989 *A history of modern Tibet, 1913–1951. Volume 1: the demise of the Lamaist state* University of California Press, Berkeley CA

Grundy-Warr C 2011 Commentary: Pacific geographies and the politics of Buddhist peace activism *Political Geography* 30 190–2

Houston S and Wright R 2003 Making and remaking Tibetan diasporic identities *Social and Cultural Geography* 4 217–31

Huntington S 1996 *The clash of civilizations and the remaking of world order* Simon & Schuster, New York

ICT 2007 *New state regulations on recognition of Tibetan reincarnates* ICT, Washington DC

Ivakhiv A 2006 Toward a geography of 'religion': mapping the distribution of an unstable signifier *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 96 169–75

Jerryson M and Juergensmeyer M eds 2010 *Buddhist warfare* Oxford University Press, Oxford

Kent A 2006 Reconfiguring security: Buddhism and moral legitimacy in Cambodia *Security Dialogue* 37 343–60

Keown D 1996 *Buddhism: a very short introduction* Oxford University Press, Oxford

Kolås A 1996 Tibetan nationalism: the politics of religion *Journal of Peace Research* 33 51–66

Kong L 2001 Mapping 'new' geographies of religion: politics and poetics in modernity *Progress in Human Geography* 25 211–33

Kong L 2010 Global shifts, theoretical shifts: changing geographies of religion *Progress in Human Geography* 34 755–76

Lei H 2011 Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hong Lei's regular press conference on September 26, 2011 (http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xwfw/s2510/t863132.htm) Accessed 20 December 2011

Magnusson J 2002 A myth of Tibet: reverse orientalism and soft power in **Klieger P C** ed *Tibet, self, and the Tibetan diaspora: voices of difference* Brill, Leiden 195–212

McConnell F 2009 Democracy-in-exile: the 'uniqueness' and limitations of exile Tibetan democracy *Sociological Bulletin* 58 115–44

McConnell F forthcoming Contextualising and contesting peace: geographies of Tibetan satyagraha in **Megoran N McConnell F and Williams P** eds *Geographies of peace* I B Tauris, London

McGranahan C 2010 *Arrested histories: Tibet, the CIA and memories of a forgotten war* Duke University Press, Durham NC

Mills M 2009 This circle of kings: modern Tibetan visions of world peace in **Wynn Kirby P** ed *Boundless worlds: an anthropological approach to movement* Berghan Books, Oxford 95–114

Queen C S and King S eds 1996 *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist liberation movements in Asia* SUNY Press, New York

Samuel G 1993 *Civilized shamans: Buddhism in Tibetan societies* Smithsonian Institute Press, Washington DC

Sangay L 2011 Testimony of Kalon Tripa Lobsang Sangay before the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, United States Congress, November 3, 2011 (http://tlhrc.house.gov/docs/transcripts/2011_11_03_Human_Rights_in_Tibet/Lobsang_Sangay_Testimony.pdf) Accessed 20 December 2011

Schwartz R 1999 Renewal and resistance: Tibetan Buddhism in the modern era in **Harris I** ed *Buddhism and politics in twentieth-century Asia* Pinter, London 229–53

Sehgal S 2011 China plays Dalai Lama succession card *Asia Times Online* 30 August 2011 (http://www.atimes.com/atimes/China/MH30Ad01.html) Accessed 20 December 2011

Shakabpa T W D 1967 *Tibet: a political history* Yale University Press, New Haven CT

Shakya T 1999 *The dragon in the land of snows: a history of modern Tibet since 1947* Columbia University Press, New York

Shiromany A A ed 1998 *The political philosophy of HH the XIV Dalai Lama: selected speeches and writings* TPPRC, New Delhi

Sopher D 1967 *Geography of religions* Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs NJ

State Administration of Religious Affairs 2007 State order no. 5: management measures for the reincarnation of living Buddhas in Tibetan Buddhism (http://www.sara.gov.cn/GB//zcfg/89522ff7-409d-11dc-bafe-93180af1bb1a.html Translation available at: http://www.savetibet.de/fileadmin/user_upload/content/berichte/Briefing_Papier_Reinkarnationsgesetz.pdf) Accessed 20 December 2011

ISSN 0004-0894

Stokke K 1998 Sinhalese and Tamil nationalism as post-colonial political projects from 'above', 1948–1983 *Political Geography* 17 83–113

Tanaka H 1984 Landscape expression of the evolution of Buddhism in Japan *The Canadian Geographer* 28 240–57

Tibet Justice Center 2011 Legal issues implicated by the Dalai Lama's devolution of power (http://www.tibetjustice.org/dalailamadevolution/DevolutionMemo.pdf) Accessed 20 December 2011

Turner B S 1991 *Religion and social theory* Sage, London

Wei J ed 1989 *100 Questions about Tibet* Beijing Review Publications, Beijing

Wilford J 2010 Sacred archipelagos: geographies of secularization *Progress in Human Geography* 34 328–48

Area Vol. 45 No. 2, pp. 162–169, 2013
ISSN 0004-0894