Tibet

Max Oidtmann, *Forging the Golden Urn: The Qing Empire and the Politics of Reincarnation in Tibet*

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This remarkable book is about the origins and practice of what is often called "the Golden Urn Lottery," in which high-status Tibetan Buddhist monastics, regarded as incarnations of their predecessors, have been chosen through a lottery system. This system, initiated by the Manchu emperor of China at the end of the eighteenth century, was perhaps thought to be obsolete in modern times but was in fact revived in 1995 when it was employed by the Chinese Communist authorities to identify and install the eleventh Panchen Lama, second only to the Dalai Lama in the hierarchy of the dominant Geluk school of Tibetan Buddhism.

Using hitherto unexploited sources, including records of developments in Tibet written in Manchu by the imperial representatives in Lhasa (the *ambans*) during the latter part of the nineteenth century, historian Max Oidtmann traces in detail the origin of this lottery practice. He shows how it was an adaptation of an older system of appointing high officials by the Imperial Court, a system designed to avoid corruption, and how the Emperor Qianlong introduced it to restore "faith in the authenticity of reincarnation" (74) in the face of what he perceived as "the moral decay of the Geluk establishment itself" (75).

Oidtmann uses a range of sources, including sources in Manchu, biographies, and histories in Tibetan. On the basis of these sources, he provides a complex and nuanced picture of several key issues related to the Golden Urn lottery, one of which is the fact that in Tibet, reincarnated lamas had up to then been identified largely on the basis of oracles entering trance when "descended upon" by a deity, and while in that state they would give indications as to where and how the new incarnation would be found. The emperor's policy was, therefore, to organize public tests and trials in Lhasa "to

discredit the claims of the oracles" (106). This may be viewed as part of a wider campaign, styled "shamanic imperialism" by Oidtmann, since the beginning of the Manchu (Qing) dynasty in the seventeenth century to limit, control, and often eradicate the resorting to oracles and shamans throughout the empire (110), and, in the case of Tibet, to "shatter trust in indigenous traditions of divination" (21).

However, the practice of consulting oracles was vigorously defended by the Tibetans and, in the long run, the introduction of the lottery system was only successful once it had been transformed into—and was perceived by Tibetans as—a valid Tibetan Buddhist divination technology. This brings us to a second important issue discussed and carefully documented by Oidtmann: contrary to the claims of certain modern historians, in particular historians in the Tibetan diaspora, to the effect that the Manchu authorities "were little more than 'political observers' and that the Tibetan people vigorously resisted their interference in the process of identifying lamas" (17), the work of "repacking" the Golden Urn lottery so that it became acceptable to Tibetans was in fact undertaken primarily by Tibetan elites (193).

The Golden Urn lottery took time to assume a more or less fixed form and was applied flexibly and sometimes not at all. Nevertheless, it prevailed because "the fundamental interests of the Qing court and the Geluk church overlapped: both wanted the identification process to produce lamas who were widely credible" (199–200). However, with the fall of the Manchu dynasty the institutional basis for the ritual also disappeared until, as mentioned, it was revived by the Chinese government in 1995 and—paradoxically, one might think, in a state that is founded upon an atheist ideology—was formulated as a national law in China in 2007.

The paradox, however, is only apparent. Oidtmann points out that there is less of a break of continuity between the Manchu court and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) than might be supposed: "In an uncanny way, the CCP's understanding of the Golden Urn is remarkably similar to that of the Qianlong emperor" (222). Both regimes give priority to control of religious institutions, which, by definition, are based on a different ideology than that of the state. As Oidtmann argues, "Qianlong and his advisors ultimately found themselves arguing for the termination of temporal rule by monastic authorities" (55). This is a policy that has been carried to its fulfilment by the CCP. At the same time, the present reviewer, for one, had never thought about the fact before reading it in Oidtmann's work that, "much as in the Qing period, the Geluk church remained at the turn of the twenty-first century arguably the largest—in terms of both geographical scope and informal membership—extrabureaucratic nongovernmental organization in the PRC" (15). Keeping this in mind, it is not difficult to understand why the Chinese government chooses well-tested methods of control, such as the Golden Urn ritual, to keep this religious organization under control, while at the same time allowing it carefully proportioned freedom.

Behind this balancing act, one may discern the Chinese state's concern with the situation that will arise the day—whether soon or at a more distant time—when the present Dalai Lama passes away. Perhaps the authorities sincerely believe that if the right tools are in place, his reincarnation can be discovered and approved by the state. Oidtmann only hints at this eventuality (2). However, it invites the further question: why would the Chinese state, in the twenty-first century, be concerned at all with the appointment of the future Dalai Lama? The answer must surely be that the fervent belief of a great majority of Tibetans in the reality of reincarnation, and above all, that of

the Dalai Lama, is a reality that is likely to remain a strong and potentially destabilizing factor throughout the foreseeable future.

Forging the Golden Urn is a very carefully researched and thought-provoking work. Oidtmann's scholarship and versatile use of many different sources—in Manchu, Tibetan, and Chinese—is all the more remarkable for the many hitherto unknown sources he is able to draw upon. It is a work that is by no means of interest to scholars of Tibetan history only, but it is of great interest and importance for the study of premodern East and Central Asia in general and also highly commendable for the indirect light it sheds on present-day Chinese-Tibetan relations. And not least—its fluent style makes it a pleasure to read.

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