

*The Dalai Lama and the Emperor of China: A Political History of the Tibetan Institution of Reincarnation*, by Peter Schwieger. Columbia University Press, 2015. 352pp. Hb. £50.00. ISBN-13: 978-0231168526. E-book. £50.00. ISBN: 978-0231538602.

Reviewed by Lucia Galli, University of Oxford, lubigalli@gmail.com.

The comprehensive and substantial use of archival sources that is at the core of Peter Schwieger's new book is the most valuable contribution of what can be considered one of the most in-depth analyses of pre-modern Tibet available to date. In his volume, the author mainly deals with the developments experienced by the Tibetan system of recognized reincarnations (Tib. *sprul sku*) between the 17th and 19th centuries, a period historically pregnant, as demonstrated by the legal and social documents of which Schwieger avails himself. As clarified in the Preface, in fact, most of the material employed by the author is drawn from Tibetan-language archival sources procured either by Dieter Schuh, Schwieger's advisor, or through the joint collaboration between the author's own institution (Bonn University) and the Archives of the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) in Lhasa.

In the Introduction, Schwieger provides an overview of the basic sources used in his study, describing the pattern followed by Tibetan documents of legal importance. Compared to the ubiquitous historiographic studies, mainly based on biographical and hagiographical narratives (*rnam thar*) of the lives of holy persons, diplomatic and social documents offer a different, and possibly more realistic, perspective on Sino-Tibetan relations and, more broadly, on Tibetan history. As convincingly shown by Schwieger, the perception of political actions and political functions as skillful means that have no purpose but the welfare of living beings and the spreading of the Buddhist teachings gradually came to shape Tibet's historical memory. Unlike historiographical sources, archival records were a direct part of the historical events and circumstances and were originally kept in the monastic, private, and governmental archives of pre-modern Tibet.

The chapters are structured chronologically. In Chapter One the author discusses the historical developments of the reincarnation system, starting from the first emergence of recognised rebirths in the 12th century. At that time, certain holy persons who had either been regarded by others or who were self-proclaimed as the reincarnation of previous masters began to appear within the bKa' gdams tradition, but it was the Karma bKa' brgyud school that was credited with the creation of the *sprul sku* system in the 13th century. The success of a metaphysical lineage devoid of patrimonial connections, as well as the promise of maintaining the connection with the monastic institution and its disciples, contributed to the spreading of the system to other traditions throughout the 15th and 16th centuries. The chapter follows the rise of the dGe lugs school, focusing on some of its most important lines of *sprul skus*, such as the Panchen Lama, the rTag tshag rJe drung, and the Dalai Lama, and concludes with Gushri Qan's conquest of Tibet on behalf of the Fifth Dalai Lama, Ngag dbang blo bzang rgyal mtsho (1617–1682).

Keywords: Tibetan Buddhism, China, rebirth, *sprul sku*

Chapter 2 explores the role of the Fifth Dalai Lama as both a religious and political leader. Ngag dbang blo bzang rgyal mtsho epitomised the 'union of religion and politics', so fervently advocated by the Tibetan clerical elite since the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Under the 'Great Fifth' though, the distinction between the secular and religious spheres, at the base of the well-known priest-patron relationship that modelled the earlier Tibetan-Mongol affairs, became more and more blurred. The study of the archival sources leaves no doubt that the Fifth Dalai Lama regarded himself as the full ruler of Tibet, a position offered to him by Gushri Qan. It was clear that, in the eyes of the Ngag dbang blo bzang rgyal mtsho, the Qoshots were the ideal patrons: the armed wing through whom the dGe lugs orthodoxy could be implemented among Tibetans and Mongols. The involvement of the Qing dynasty (1644–1912), and their posing as main patrons of the dGe lugs pas and the Dalai Lama, was due to their general strategy of absorbing others' power into their own, rather than a willing choice of the dGe lugs head.

Chapter 3 opens with the death of the Fifth Dalai Lama in 1682 and describes the attempt to create a Buddhist government through the stipulation of diplomatic exchanges and alliances. Schwieger presents the reader with a series of lesser known incarnation lines which played an important role in shaping the Qing control over Tibetan affairs. The chapter draws to a conclusion on the first years of the Sixth Dalai Lama's reign (ca. 1703), analyzing in detail some of the incidents that determined the *sde srid* Sang gyas rgya mtsho's losing the trust of the Emperor, such as the communications between the first and the Fourth dBen sa *sprul sku* Galdan Qan, the Fifth Panchen Lama's refusal of the imperial invitations, and the Kangxi Emperor's reaction to the concealed death of the Great Fifth.

Chapter 4 outlines the progressive moves to take control of the whole Tibetan plateau by the Qing emperors. Decisive in the process was the active depoliticisation of the Dalai Lama, initiated by the Yongzheng Emperor — with his direct intervention in the recognition of the 'second' Sixth Dalai Lama — and pursued by his successor, the Qianlong Emperor.

Chapter 5 describes the emergence of a new political role for the Dalai Lama. It became evident to the Qing court that the latter should have been reinstalled as lord of Tibet, as long as his power was reined and supervised by imperial emissaries, the *ambans*. Through a learned display of translated archival documents, Schwieger shows the skillful manipulation of the *sprul sku* by the Qing throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

In Chapter 6, the author examines some of the most controversial means through which the Emperors asserted control over the appointment of Tibetan reincarnates up to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century; among the means employed was the use of the Golden Urn for the recognition of *sprul sku*, including the Dalai and Panchen Lama.

Chapter 7 offers a brief overview of the decades following the fall of the Qing dynasty, drawing connections between the imperial strategies of control and those put into action by the Republicans first and the Communists later.

Schwieger's ambitious enterprise is not immune to a predicament commonly faced in the editorial market by specialist books when it comes to the intended

readership. Despite the commendable attempt of the author to refrain from technical language and jargon, the historical details, as well as the lengthy translations, hamper the possible appreciation of the volume by non-specialized readers. At the same time, those who have the background knowledge necessary to recognize the well-researched efforts of the author would have enjoyed the presence of the full text of the original sources in an appendix.

Nevertheless, *The Dalai Lama and the Emperor of China* is a wonderful contribution to the studies on Sino-Tibetan relations between the 16th and 19th centuries, and has the major quality of drawing attention to the multi-vocal political, social, and cultural environment of the time, taking into consideration textual sources produced by different agents – whether they be Tibetans, Manchus, Mongols, or Chinese.