

## The *Dalai Lama* as a Political Figure: Nationally and Internationally Over Time

Selvi Bunce

[selvi.bunce@yahoo.com](mailto:selvi.bunce@yahoo.com)

---

---

The fourteenth *Dalai Lama* is best known for his fashionable glasses, his Nobel Peace Prize, his unique position in exile, his strong belief in democracy, his advocacy of Buddhism as the religion of kindness, and his twitter page. However, it has not always been like this. The office of the *Dalai Lama* has changed tremendously from its birth in the mid fifteenth century to the present day (Shastri 2003), but some characteristics of the office do remain the same. This paper will study how the office of the *Dalai Lama* and its political relationship to its own people and other nations has changed over time. It will begin by studying the office of the *Dalai Lama* in Tibet, then its growth to greater Asia, and finally, the international sphere.

For centuries, the *Dalai Lama* has been seen as the political and spiritual leader of Tibet - even when he has not resided in Tibet. However, this is beginning to change as the Fourteenth *Dalai Lama* begins to push for a Democratic Tibet where he remains the spiritual, but not political head. In order to understand this shift, the nature of the office of the *Dalai Lama* in Tibet must first be understood.

The *Dalai Lama* is seen as a key, multifaceted symbol of both state and religion. For example, there are five central elements that form the institution of the *Dalai Lama*. These include succession through incarnation, an identification as the patron deity and ruler of Tibet, a representation of the beginning of the Tibetan race and protector of Tibetan culture, hegemony over Tibet through a priest/patron relationship, and synthesis of *Mahayana* and *Vajrayana* elements to represent the *Bodhisattvas* of both Tibet and China. (Klieger 1991) While there have been numerous changes in the institution of the *Dalai Lama*, it has successfully maintained the aforementioned elements over time.

While seventh century Tibetan emperor Songtsen Gampo (604 A.D. – 650 A.D.) is proclaimed to have been an incarnation of *bodhisattva* Chenrezi, (Klieger 1991) the first record of a leader with the title of *Dalai Lama* participating in Tibetan ceremony and life dates to 1430 CE. (Shastri 2003) There is record of the First *Dalai Lama* being in contact with foreign kings in central Asia, sending fundraising teams to other kingdoms, receiving contributions from the

people of a neighboring kingdom to build a monastery, and writing, by royal request, a commentary on the root text of the *Vinaya*. (Shastri 2003)

The Third *Dalai Lama* maintained the relationships the First had built with nearby rulers, but also developed teacher-disciple relations with learned scholars in the region. This made possible a sharing of knowledge that was previously unseen without monetary trade at the time and set the pattern of personal discipleship with the *Lama* for generations to come. For example, one scholar shared with the Third *Lama* the *Kālacakra* system of astrological calculations in 1558. (Shastri 2003)

It was also during the reign of the Third that the title *Dalai Lama* was conferred on Bsod nams rgya mtsho (1543–1588) by the Altan Khan of the southeast Mongolian Tümed Mongols as part of a longer sequence of titles. The event recalled the relationship between the *Sa skya* hierarch (1235–1280) and Qubilai Khan (r. 1260–1294), the founder of the Yuan dynasty that had enabled the *Sa skya* school of Buddhism to dominate Central Tibet politically. Conceived as relationships between patron and priest, and therefore framed from the perspective of religion, these relations were reciprocal in that the “priest” offered instructions and tantric initiations to the ruler, while the ruler in turn extended his patronage to the master and his community, which included political and military protection. (Kellner 2016)

However, it is the Fifth *Dalai Lama* (1617-1682) that is often remembered in history as the *Lama* that gave the office its political power. (Kellner 2016) Rahul states that “the supremacy of the *Dalai Lama* over Lamaism in Central Asia and the secular power of the institution of the *Dalai Lama* in Tibet were wholly the work of *Dalai Lama V*”. (1969)

It was under the Fifth that Tibet became an ecclesiastical or “*bodhisattvacratic*” state. As the Fifth became known not only as the latest link in a chain of reborn religious hierarchs, but also as an embodiment of the *bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara*, Tibet came to be seen as a society under the tutelage of a supreme *bodhisattva*. (Kellner 2016) This officially made Tibet a religious state, politically ruled by a religious leader of sacred lineage.

A text dating to 1698, sixteen years after the death of the Fifth *Dalai Lama*, notes that the *Dalai Lama*’s government served Tibet just as a *bodhisattva* serves all humanity. This political shift was facilitated by the close relationship between hierarchs and their Mongol patrons. In 1642, Güüshi Khan of the Khoshud Mongols offered the thirteen myriarchies of Tibet as a gift to Blo bzang rgya mtsho. The Mongol ruler was in turn awarded the title “Upholder of Doctrine, King of the Dharma”, solidifying the patron-priest relationship. This act marked the end of a long period of civil war between the forces of Central Tibet and Western Tibet, exemplifying just how much political power the institution of the *Dalai Lama* had come to hold. (Kellner 2016)

This act was not only symbolic because it increased the legitimacy of both party's political power – it also increased their spiritual legitimacy. For example, this patron-priest relationship can ultimately be traced back to the Indian emperor Ashoka's patronage of the *sangha*, an arrangement that had been prophesized by the Buddha himself. (Klieger 1991)

Furthermore, the activities of the Fifth *Dalai Lama* and his regents after 1642 include key ingredients of what a modern political analyst would refer to as “nation-building”. For example, the office of the Fifth established a new form of government—the *Dga' ldan pho brang* government. This new government system united religious and secular branches, created new administrative structures, and began large-scale public projects to reinforce the identification of the *Dalai Lama* with *Avalokiteśvara*. The most visible of these was the construction of the Potala Palace in Lhasa, that remained the residence of the office of the *Dalai Lama* until the Fourteenth fled in 1959. (Kellner 2016) It is clear that even in the relatively early generations of the *Dalai Lama* much political change was happening, while key aspects of the spiritual side of the institution remained untouched and consistent.

The increasingly political role the Fifth *Dalai Lama* laid foundation continued through both the Sixth and Seventh *Dalai Lamas*. For example, in the biography of the Sixth, it is noted that the son of a neighboring king often visited Lhasa. Furthermore, the “ten thousand offering” was collectively submitted to the sixth by the neighboring four districts. In addition, the Seventh *Dalai Lama* often acted as a mediator and settled disputes between the Kings of Upper and Lower Ladakh (territory within modern Indian state of Kashmir). (Shastri 2003)

The role of the *Dalai Lama* remained fairly stable during the time of Eighth, Ninth, and Twelfth *Lamas*. Though contact with neighboring kingdoms did slightly decrease, it was not cut off and the *Lamas* continued to receive royal visitors at Lhasa. It was during the time of the Thirteenth *Dalai Lama* that the relationship between the *Lama* and the people of West Tibet was reinforced. Tributes from Bhutan and Ladakh were also reintroduced at this time. (Shastri 2003)

Which brings us to the present – the Fourteenth *Dalai Lama*. The institution has seen much change under the Fourteenth due to his status in exile and his increased international prominence. Most notably, the Fourteenth *Lama* officially stepped down from politics in 2011 in an effort to make Tibet a democratic society. (Tsujimura 2015)

However, while the Dalai Lama has announced his renunciation of the supreme authority vested in him to approve the members of the assembly and supervise its function, the majority of the Tibetan people still see him as their total leader and reject his renunciation. In response, the *Dalai Lama* has brought the conversation back to Buddhism and states that democracy is

common to Buddhism preached by Buddha, and never contradicts Buddhism. In fact, the *Lama* focuses on compassion as one of the main points of his argument. Certainly, compassion (*snying rje*) is one of the most important concepts of Buddhism. Yet the *Dalai Lama* considers that compassion is common to all religions, and that everyone can be compassionate because no one wants to suffer. From this perspective, compassion is also a “secular” concept that implies mutual tolerance and respect for all faiths, as well as for those of no faith. By using the notion of “compassion” as a bridge between “religion” and “secularism,” the *Dalai Lama* has resolved the issue of democratic reform of the Tibetan political system. (Tsujimura 2015)

This view is regarded by scholars of Tibetan Buddhism as “Buddhist Modernism”. The Fourteenth *Dalai Lama* often cites examples from the United States and other Buddhist communities, to reinforce that he is part of an international conversation about Buddhism, Tibet, religion, and politics. Buddhist Modernism provides an effective way for Buddhist leaders to portray their religion as a world religion. Through the advocacy of this form of Buddhism, the *Dalai Lama* has engaged in a dialogue that easily incorporates Christians, Jews, and other world religious communities. (Singer 2003)

Furthermore, the Dalai Lama's role as a world spiritual leader is enhanced by the fact that he has projected a form of Buddhism with which Western audiences identify. In its press release announcing the award of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989 to the Fourteenth *Dalai Lama*, the Nobel Committee, without mentioning Buddhism explicitly, referred to the *Dalai Lama* as the religious and political leader of Tibet. It said that he "has developed his philosophy of peace from a great reverence for all things living and upon the concept of universal responsibility embracing all mankind as well as nature." Although the Nobel Committee elsewhere connects this to Buddhism, it also reflects the universal qualities of the Fourteenth *Dalai Lama's* Buddhist philosophy. (Singer 2003)

Now that the institution of the Dalai Lama in Tibet is understood, it is possible to study how the institution has shifted from a local spiritual and political powerhouse to an international symbol of peace, Tibetan culture, and Buddhism as a whole. It is clear that the institution of the *Dalai Lama* has always maintained regional ties, as exemplified by its consistent presence as a peacekeeper in central Asia and maintaining its ties with western Tibet. However, over the last decade, the position of the *Dalai Lama* has become increasingly globalized.

Rahul states that even in 1951 the “high lamas of Tibet were always a strong force in the politics of Central Asia” and that all Mongols looked with reverence on Lhasa, the seat of the *Dalai Lama*. The institution also experienced high influential power in the border states of Nepal, Sikkim, and Bhutan. It was because of this that the office of the *Lama* soon became one of China’s chief concerns. (1969) Tibet composes one quarter of China’s land mass – so the

Chinese government views the *Dalai Lama* as a danger to the republic, a separatist trying to steal their land. (Baculinao and Cumming 2018) Once China's attention was re-drawn, the international influence of the *Dalai Lama* only grew. Therefore, while Chinese troops did enter Tibet in 1912, the struggle for power between the Chinese government and the office of the *Lama* came to a peak in 1951 when the Fourteenth *Lama* fled Tibet for India. (Rahul 1969)

While China's aim in increasing military presence in Tibet was to solidify their position, demonstrate their power to the surrounding border states and India, and remove the threat of the *Dalai Lama* as a political figure, it accomplished just the opposite. Since the Fourteenth fled Tibet, the office of the *Dalai Lama* has exponentially grown in political influence, despite being removed from official political power. It was the Fourteenth's push for peace in the face of Chinese aggression that gained him international recognition.

But this dichotomy is exactly why the Fourteenth *Dalai Lama* has reached unprecedented levels of global influence (beyond globalization, technology, and social media). For example, Kolas states that "an important strategy in the struggle for support [was] the move towards democracy. The *Dalai Lama* initiated the democratization process soon after his arrival in India, with the first elections for the Assembly of Tibetan People's Deputies". (1996)

The present Tibetan leader has repeatedly stated that the role of the *Dalai Lama* is determined by the will of his people. Therefore, changes in the roles associated with such a symbol as the office of the *Dalai Lama* would not necessarily preclude the symbol's apparent continuity and value as a national focus. (Klieger 1991) One reason for the shift towards democratization increasing Tibetan international influence is that one of the key components of Western government and their approval of modern political systems is the separation of church and state. (Kolas 1996) So, it is exactly this democratization process, the stepping out of political power, that has given the *Lama* increased global influence. The visibility of the *Dalai Lama* as a peaceful and democratic figure counteracts the notion that Tibet, as a mythical land, surely cannot exist in the modern age. (Klieger 1991)

The democratization of the Tibetan government in exile has allowed the office of the *Lama* to garner support by more effectively presenting its case for independence and Buddhist ethics to the West. (Kolas 1996) Although the first introductions of the ideological establishment and institution of the *Dalai Lama* to the West can be attributed the late Tibetan historian and statesman, Tsepon Shakabpa (1907-1989), through the formation of the strong central Tibetan government in 1967 (Klieger 1991), influence grew exponentially only in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

This is exemplified by the Fourteenth *Lama's* visiting influence in many nations as a foreign “spiritual leader”. His status as a spiritual leader allows for meetings with world leaders without the burden of political threat and power plays. For example, in 1979, when the *Dalai Lama* visited the Soviet Union and toured America for the first time, he was welcomed as a 'religious leader'. In this capacity he has met with a number of Christian religious leaders, including Pope John Paul II. During the *Dalai Lama's* first visit to America he was invited to speak at many churches as well as Buddhist centers, and was honored with the Doctor's degree by two Christian universities. (Kolas 1996) This is interesting because China's diplomatic strategy has always been to emphasize the religious role of the Dalai Lama, and persuade other governments to do the same. It is now clear that this has only positively affected the premises for much of the Fourteenth *Dalai Lama's* diplomacy. (Kolas 1996)

Furthermore, since the mid-1980s the *Dalai Lama* has been gaining recognition not only as a religious leader, but as the exiled political leader of Tibet. In June 1987 the United States House of Representatives passed an amendment denouncing Chinese human rights violations in Tibet. In addition, the *Dalai Lama* was invited to address the Human Rights Caucus of the United States Congress, where in September 1987 he presented his Five-Point Peace Plan. In 1988 the *Lama* was invited to speak at the European Parliament, where he restated and expanded on his Five-Point Peace Plan in what has been called the “Strasbourg Proposal”. Under these proposals, China would remain responsible for Tibet's foreign policy, while Tibet would be governed by its own constitution or basic law. (He and Sautman 2005)

One year later, in 1989, the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to the *Dalai Lama* as religious and political leader of the Tibetan people. (Kolas 1996) Therefore, it was exactly the stepping down from official Tibetan political power that enabled the Fourteenth *Lama* to build international influence and come to be recognized as an international religious and political figure.

But it was not just a rhetoric of compassion and a peace plan that won the *Lama* his Nobel Peace Prize. He has been exceedingly effective in advancing his arguments about human rights and the rights of Tibetans. The Nobel Prize also recognized the Fourteenth as a global advocate for human rights and reinforced his status as world leader beyond his Tibetan nationality. (Singer 2003)

But just because the *Dalai Lama* is an international figure does not mean he ceases to be a Tibetan figure. He is still a leader of Tibetans, and as such he embodies and defines Tibet, Tibetans, and Tibetan culture for a wide audience. In addition, as the most prominent Buddhist figure, he has come to represent Buddhism in its many forms. (Singer 2003)

However, Tibetans are not as confident in the democracy as the Fourteenth is and many still view the *Dalai Lama* as their political leader as well – and his increased international influence has only solidified their faith in his ability and right to be the political head of Tibet. For example, photos of the *Dalai Lama* in company with Western political leaders have been on display in many temple altars, along with various “Free Tibet” items. Pocket-sized *Dalai Lama* photos are extremely popular, despite the fact that they have been periodically banned and are targets for confiscation. The *Dalai Lama* is gaining ground in Tibet as a political leader and a symbol. One young Lhasa monk stated that “the Chinese have Mao, we have the Dalai Lama”. (Kolas 1996)

Recently, this quote might be changed to “the Chinese have Mao, and the Dalai Lama”. As the Fourteenth *Lama* reaches his eighty-third year, more questions of his succession are brought up every day. Odds are slim that the tradition of finding a young Tibetan as the reincarnation of the passed *Lama* will be upheld. The Fourteenth has provided the untraditional options of naming the Fifteenth during his lifetime, that his soul will transfer to someone outside of Tibet, and most recently, that the line of *Dalai Lamas* may even end with him if it is the will of the Tibetan people. (Beech 2015) But China disagrees with all of the above. In 2015, the head of the influential ethnic-and-religious-affairs committee, Zhu Weiqun, stated that it is the responsibility of the Chinese government to determine the Fifteenth *Dalai Lama*. (Beech 2015) The Fourteenth *Dalai Lama* himself has stated that his biggest concern is that China will attempt to name his successor, while China says it must approve the next. (Baculinao and Cumming 2018) This is highly controversial among Tibetans, both in Tibet and in exile. They realize that if China names the successor, Tibetan Buddhism and culture in its most pure forms will most likely cease to exist.

China realizes that the pushback is strong and has been attempting to buy the support of the people of Tibet. For example, as government restrictions on Tibetan faith and culture have intensified over the past four years, more than 130 Tibetans have immolated themselves to protest Chinese rule in Tibet. In many cases, they have used their final words to express devotion to the *Dalai Lama*. In addition, the Tibetan exile community has disparaged the ruling Communist Party’s insistence on dictating the Dalai Lama’s afterlife. (Beech 2015)

Yet, while China skirts claims of human rights violations and the repression of Tibetans, it continues to boast the economic growth of Tibet. In fact, the economic growth of Tibet has surpassed China, and reached eleven percent in 2014. (Beech 2015) China is even making this bribery a personal one. In the summer of 2018, a rare Chinese government-organized visit to Tibet occurred and the plan was made to invest in infrastructure projects up to \$97 billion. This investment does not only cover traditional government works like highways, bridges, and airports, but also includes plans to protect Tibetan Buddhism’s holy sites. The officially atheist

country of China has already spent over \$450 million renovating Tibetan monasteries and other religious sites since the 1980's and has budgeted an additional \$290 million for the next five years. (Baculinao and Cumming 2018) China is showing exactly how much the power of the *Dalai Lama* is worth to them.

But the *Dalai Lama's* increased international influence has only strengthened the belief that the Fourteenth *Dalai Lama's* passing will sharply set back the Tibetan cause for independence. One pro-independence member of the Tibetan parliament-in-exile has stated that "[a]s long as he is alive, he will be the foremost motivating factor. After his passing away, for the next fifty years Tibetans will not be able to bring any sort of momentum for their struggle and the Tibetan issue will be lost". (He and Sautman 2005)

However, the Fourteenth *Dalai Lama* remains just as important in Tibet as he is internationally – if not more so. The *Dalai Lama* now represents a homeland and way of life that are no longer present, and comparable symbols do not exist in significant measure in any other form. Therefore, the perceived absoluteness of the *Dalai Lama* provides “a level of exclusive emotional security” to a people whose loss of homeland has been undoubtedly traumatic and without clear temporal limits. (Klieger 1991)

The institution of the *Dalai Lama* is one like no other. Its history, power, consistency, and fluidity cease to amaze no one. This is still a time of much change for the office as the Fourteenth continues to live on in exile, and it is difficult to tell what will happen to the institution once he passes. But if one thing is for certain it is that while he may wish to go quietly, Tibet and the world will share grief and mourning fit for a king.

---

### Works Cited

- Baculinao, Eric, and Jason Cumming. “China Spends Big on Tibet to Avert a Crisis When the Dalai Lama Dies.” *NBC News*, 30 Aug. 2018, [www.nbcnews.com/news/world/china-spends-big-tibet-avert-crisis-when-dalai-lama-dies-n904676](http://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/china-spends-big-tibet-avert-crisis-when-dalai-lama-dies-n904676).
- Beech, Hannah. “China Says It Will Decide Who the Dalai Lama Shall Be Reincarnated As.” *Time*, 13 Mar. 2015, [time.com/3743742/dalai-lama-china-reincarnation-tibet-buddhism/](http://time.com/3743742/dalai-lama-china-reincarnation-tibet-buddhism/).
- He, Baogang, and Barry Sautman. “The Politics of the Dalai Lama's New Initiative for Autonomy.” *Pacific Affairs*, vol. 78, no. 4, 2005, pp. 601–629., doi:10.5509/2005784601.
- Kellner, Birgit. “Genealogy into the Future: Glimpses from Sangs Rgyas Rgya Mtsho's (1653–1705) Exposition of the Extended Dalai Lama Lineage.” *Meanings of Community across Medieval Eurasia: Comparative Approaches*, Brill, 2016, pp. 203–231.



- Klieger, Christiaan P. "The Institution of the Dalai Lama as a Symbolic Matrix." *The Tibet Journal*, vol. 16, no. 1, 1 Apr. 1991, pp. 96–107.
- Kolås, Åshild. "Tibetan Nationalism: The Politics of Religion." *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 33, no. 1, 1 Feb. 1996, pp. 51–66.
- Rahul, R. "The Role of Lamas in Central Asian Politics." *Central Asiatic Journal*, vol. 12, no. 3, 1 Jan. 1969, pp. 209–227.
- Shastri, Lobsang. "Relations between Dalai Lamas and Rulers of MNga' Ris Skor Gsum: From Late 14th-Mid 19th Century." *The Tibet Journal*, vol. 28, no. 3, 1 Oct. 2003, pp. 3–16.
- Singer, Wendy. "The Dalai Lama's Many Tibetan Landscapes." *The Kenyon Review*, vol. 25, no. 3/4, Culture and Place, 1 July 2003, pp. 233–256.
- Tsujimura, Masahide. "The Politics of 'Compassion' of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama: Between 'Religion' and 'Secularism.'" *The Tibet Journal*, vol. 40, no. 1, 1 Mar. 2015, pp. 41–55.