



**Nikolay Tsyrempilov. 2013. *Buddhism and the Empire: The Buriat Community in Russia (18th–Early 20th century)*. (*Buddizm i imperiia. Buriatskaia obshchina v Rossii [XVIII–nachala XX v.]*). Ulan-Ude: Institut mongolovedeniia, buddologii i tibetologii SO RAN (in Russian). — 338 pages.**

Nikolay Tsyrempilov's monograph deals with an important, complex, and interesting topic that weaves together politics and religion, state interests and the spiritual needs of members of one of Russia's minor confessions (Buddhism). This must be appreciated as a highly successful choice of topic, since, as Tsyrempilov rightly remarks in his introduction, "an understanding of the laws by which relationships between imperial power and religious communities align can clarify many of the questions asked both by historians researching the nature of empires and by religious scholars exploring the formation of religious institutions" (p. 3). The almost three-hundred-year relationship between the Russian state and Buddhist communities stands in need of conceptualization and "summation," absent which, to quote Tsyrempilov again, the state will find it "extremely challenging to frame

an effective and optimal line of engagement with the contemporary Buddhist world, both within the country and beyond its borders." Herein lies the unquestionable relevance of this study, especially in light of events in post-Soviet Russia, when the authorities have openly sought to confer on Orthodoxy the status of a dominant, "state" religion and also have imposed politically motivated restrictions on contacts between Buriat and Kalmyk Buddhists and their spiritual head, the fourteenth Dalai Lama, as was the case in the 1990s and early twenty-first century. Tsyrempilov's work is set in a broad chronological framework, beginning in the early eighteenth century with the first state initiatives to regulate the spiritual affairs of Buriat Buddhists, and ending in early twentieth century, when the imperial decree "On Strengthening the Foundation of Religious Tolerance" (which opened up a

new era in the relations between the Buddhist community and the Russian state) was published.

Tsyrempilov's monograph is an original and innovative study that offers an integrated and comprehensive analysis of the interaction between the organized Buddhist community in Buryatia and the power structures of the Russian state in "macroregional and intercivilizational terms" (as Tsyrempilov puts it). This is the first work on the history of the Buriat Buddhist sangha's integration into the Russian Empire since Kseniia Maksimovna Gerasimova published her *Lamaism and Tsarism's National-Colonial Policy in Transbaikal in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries*<sup>1</sup> in 1957. The scholarly novelty of Tsyrempilov's work is therefore indisputable, not least because he has here incorporated into his research, and thereby introduced into academic circulation, a number of previously unknown sources in Tibetan, Mongolian, and Russian. Aside from an enormous array of primary sources, he has also read virtually all the core literature on this topic, both domestic and foreign (the latter mostly in English). Another important indicator of the originality of this scholar's research

is his comprehensive comparative description of tsarist Russia's religious policy toward the Buddhist sangha relative to its policy toward other confessional groups.

In the first chapter, Tsyrempilov examines the specifically Russian model for relations between a religious (in this case, Buddhist) community and the state, from the point at which Buddhism began to spread in Transbaikal in the early eighteenth century. He refers to "the socio-confessional structure" of imperial Russia thus: "The Empire's categories were religious rather than ethnic or otherwise. Confession underlay the social order. Every one of the Empire's subjects had to adhere to one confession or another" (p. 132). The Russian Orthodox Church's dominant role in society unavoidably placed other confessions in a subordinate position, where they had to adapt, to seek out ways of surviving the state's campaign (launched in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries) to eradicate "paganism." This allows Tsyrempilov to conclude that until 1905, religious minorities in the Russian Empire were targets of discrimination. Thus, "the Buddhist lamas were faced with constructing a community in circumstances that were both familiar and at the same time highly unusual. While altogether prepared for, and even in need of, strict supervision on

1. Gerasimova, K. M. 1957. *Lamaizm i natsional'no-kolonial'naiia politika tsarizma v Zabaikal'e v XIX i nachale XX veka*. Ulan-Ude.

the part of the state, they were obliged to exist in a situation of constant and acknowledged *marginalization* and to carry *the stigma of being the cultural other, the cultural alien*" (p. 38). This is, in my view, a very important conclusion that fosters an understanding of the Buriat Buddhist community's unique kind of self-identification.

Tsyrempilov identifies two principles that guided "the Russian administrators" in laying the foundations of policy with respect to the Transbaikal ("Buriat-Mongol") Buddhists. The first was the striving to isolate the community from its coreligionists in the neighboring empire (the Qing), in order to "ensure security in the frontier zone and block unregulated channels of communication." The second was the officials' desire to establish "control over the system of admission to monastic orders by introducing a staffing roster and centralizing the community" (pp. 89–90). This was, however, hampered by the lack of a legal framework that would have made it possible to "incorporate" the Buddhist community into the system of governance.

The second chapter explores the earliest drafts of relevant religious legislation (drawn up in the first half of the nineteenth century), which took the form of statutes designed to manage "the

Buddhist lamas." Note is taken of the fact that those drafts emerged from both the liberal and the conservative standpoints. The liberal position was that of the officials of the Asian departments of both the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Ministry of Finance, and its conservative counterpart was that of the Chief Directorate of Eastern Siberia and the Siberian Committee. At the same time, though, the authorities were rejecting the lamas' own initiatives, despite their being well considered and "focused on constructive interaction." This invites the conclusion that "the power structure (in the first half of the nineteenth century) was not prepared for interaction with the community," preferring "to hand down decisions from above" (p. 149).

The third chapter covers the way in which the system for managing the Empire's Buddhist subjects took its final form in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Among the issues it examines are the adoption of the "Statute on the Lamaist Clergy, 1853" [Polozhenie o lamaiskom dukhovenstve 1853 g.], the "religious migrations," and the publishing activities of the *dat-sans* [Buriat; a Lamaist temple-cum-residence]. Tsyrempilov concludes that there was "a high degree of consolidation" of the Buddhist sangha in the Baikal area and intensification of

its “centripetal tendencies” in the late nineteenth century. In addition, he notes a characteristic feature of the Buriat community’s relations with the imperial administration, which is that the Buriat Buddhists “looked on the Empire not as a hostile force but as an arena of opportunity and a sphere of symbiotic interaction” (p. 199). This is a conclusion that one can thoroughly endorse.

In the fourth and final chapter, Tsyrempilov explores the mutual perceptions of the Buddhist community and Russian society, noting that the latter half of the nineteenth century was a time of “rapprochement between the two worlds on an intellectual and cultural level.”

Tsyrempilov’s ultimate inferences, which are summarized in his conclusion (pp. 232–39), strike me as well-considered, convincing, and valid, which is a testament to the thoroughness and superior quality of his research. The author has carried out extensive research in the archives and used a sizable array of Russian and Mongolian/Tibetan sources that have allowed him to convincingly demonstrate just how vexed the relations between the Russian imperial state and the Buriat Buddhist community were and how they evolved within the confines of “the Russian model,” and to draw some logically grounded and incontrovertible conclusions.

The one thing that could have been added to Tsyrempilov’s description of the Buddhist sangha’s perception of the Russian Empire is the mythologization by Buddhists of their relationship with the supreme tsarist authority as personified by the ruling Romanov dynasty, and specifically the creation of the myth of protection extended to Buddhism by the Russian tsars (Elizaveta Petrovna, Catherine the Great, and Nicholas II), who were seen as an embodiment of the White Tārā. In Mongolia, Tibet, and Russia itself, as is well known, the learned Buriat lama Agvan Dorzhiev assiduously circulated that myth in the early twentieth century, calling Russia the *Chang Shambhala* (or Northern *Shambhala*), his aim being a political rapprochement between Russia and Tibet. Furthermore, he urged Nicholas II to declare himself the secular patron and protector of Tibet, as a purely religious state, in accordance with the Tibetan conception of the priest-patron, or *choyon*. Part of the myth that is circulated by Buddhists to this day involves the Empress Elizaveta Petrovna signing an edict in 1741 that “approved” Buddhism in Russia, although there is no such document to be found in the Russian archives. This provided the contemporary Buddhist sangha with its rationale for an extensive celebration of “the two-hundred-and-

fiftieth anniversary of Buddhism in Russia” in 1991.

The impression is that Tsyrempilov believes in the existence of that edict. “I do not *as yet* have the full text of that document to hand,” he writes (p. 62). However, a little later in the same section he holds that it was actually issued by the local (provincial) authorities: “Although I have yet to find that document, there can be no doubt that it did indeed exist [. . .] Its status was that of an edict — not *a personally signed imperial edict but an administrative edict published by a local authority on behalf of the supreme monarch, which was normal in eighteenth-century administrative practice*. The same data compel me to admit that, although I cannot call it an official sanctioning of the Buddhist religion within the Russian Empire, *the edict to all intents and purposes legitimized the Buddhist clergy, recognizing its members as Russian subjects*” (p. 61). That conclusion cannot be contested, although it seems to me that the idea of an edict personally signed by the empress (who, incidentally, did not ascend to the Russian throne until very late in 1741) should have been more definitively and unambiguously labeled as myth.

It also seems to me that Tsyrempilov could have given rather more detailed coverage to

the role of Agvan Dorzhiev and his political and religious activity in Russia in the early twentieth century, although that would, without question, have led him beyond his established chronological framework. So, for instance, Dorzhiev conceived the Buddhist temple that he built in St. Petersburg in 1909–15 not only as a “modest datsan” designed to meet the spiritual needs of local Buddhists, but also as the residence of the Dalai Lama’s unofficial representative in Russia (Dorzhiev himself, that is). He was evidently aspiring to manifest on Russian soil the Tibetan concept of the *choyon*, facilitator of the relationship between secular and spiritual leaders (in this case, the Russian tsar and the Dalai Lama). But this would in effect make the Buddhist sangha and its head (the Bandido Khambo Lama) distinctly and quite heavily dependent on Lhasa. Naturally, such a hierarchy of spiritual power did not appeal to St. Petersburg, which doomed Dorzhiev’s plan to failure.

Tsyrempilov does allude to this complicated topic in passing, quoting Al’fred Iosifovich Termen, who wrote in 1912 that Dorzhiev “by his constant presence in Petersburg and his brief annual visits to outlying areas carrying the message of Buddhism *is gradually transferring Buddhism’s*

*center of gravity to Petersburg, which is giving Buddhism a new coloration in the eyes of the populace.*” Termen also cited rumors circulating among Buriats to the effect that “the tsar has ordered a magnificent *datsan* to be built for Dorzhiev alongside his own palace,” that “lamas live in the palace of the tsar himself,” and that “the tsar sympathizes greatly with Lamaism and would have all Buriats be Lamaist” (pp. 205–6). In other words, Dorzhiev actively created a myth of the Russian tsars’ patronage of Buddhism, which he needed in order

to carry through his extensive political project of “Russo-Tibetan rapprochement.”

In sum, it should be noted that this study’s principal value is that in it Tsyrempilov has been able to gather and summarize a large amount of empirical material, which he uses as a basis on which to reveal the logic behind the historical processes he examines, in both the Russian and the pan-Asian contexts.

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**Alexey Rakhmanin et al., eds. 2016. *The Study of Religion: Textbook and Practicum for Academic Bachelor Students. (Religiovedenie: uchebnik i praktikum dlia akademicheskogo bakalavriata)*. Moscow: Iurait (in Russian). — 307 pages.**

The educational and methodological discourse of contemporary religious studies is highly diversified; there are dozens of textbooks, instructional aids, academic dictionaries and anthologies. The sheer variety of texts and approaches often makes it difficult for both instructors and students to navigate through the literature. Furthermore, the authors of textbooks often pursue originality for its own sake, which leads them to avoid presenting concepts that are generally accepted in the religious studies community in favor

of offering the theories and hypotheses of individual schools or branches of the discipline. Since these positions are not firmly established, they cannot help being read as controversial. In short, the “time-tested” is often sacrificed to the “up-to-date.” Obviously, students require balanced materials that will enable them to develop a conception of both the basic framework of academic religious studies and the current state of the field. It seems to me that the main strength of this peer-reviewed textbook is the fact