

**John Powers.** *The Buddha Party: How the People's Republic of China Works to Define and Control Tibetan Buddhism.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. 393 pp. \$34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-935815-1.

**Reviewed by** David Templeman

**Published on** H-Buddhism (June, 2017)

**Commissioned by** Gregory A. Scott (University of Edinburgh)

At the outset it should be said that this book is a complete and thorough examination of its topic, written in a clear and unambiguous manner and backed up by exacting citations. More importantly it offers a concise overview of the way in which the People's Republic of China (PRC) is attempting to redefine Tibetan Buddhism and history for its own purposes. It follows on from the author's previous book on Chinese propaganda and its attempt to counter Tibetan aspirations (*History as Propaganda: Tibetan Exiles versus the People's Republic of China*, 2004).

This controversial book follows two broad themes. The first is an updated revalorization of his work on propaganda and its mechanisms, and the second is an examination of how the most recent strategies of the PRC have been employed to reevaluate and redefine what lies at the heart of what makes Tibetans who they are--their religious beliefs. Powers explores how certain radical changes are being made to how the Tibetan people inside Tibet conceive, practice, and gain from Buddhism and how, as the pace and scope of Chinese pressure expands, Tibetan Buddhism risks being utterly redefined in the PRC.

The first two of the book's three chapters challenge the manner in which Chinese historians of Tibet continue to manipulate and change well-

documented primary source materials while, at the same time, despite serious criticisms from the international scholarly community, refusing to revise or reconsider their largely untenable views. As noted by two Chinese Tibetologists working in the PRC, "many Chinese publications in this field are politically oriented with little substance, lack originality, or repeat other's research" (p. 9). Powers then goes on to note that in 2000 the Tibetological academic community in the PRC was instructed to treat the discipline of Tibetology "as an effective army" whose enemy is "an organized international anti-China force" (p. 10). In an effort to counter these scholarly untruths from foreign scholars which, it is claimed, "hurt China's feelings" (p. 55), the State Council's Information Office noted that "succinct and well-written works are as effective as missiles in the battlefield" (pp. 10-11). It is in the light of this combative and truth-eschewing attitude of the PRC towards any real knowledge of Tibet and Tibetan sensitivities that the rest of the book is directed.

As further background the author examines the various recent anti-Chinese uprisings. What becomes evident is the sense of frustration the PRC feels at what it regards as the West's consistently anti-PRC attitude. Blaming the so-called Dalai Clique for fomenting the various protests,

the PRC has shown a stunning inability to examine its own role in them and instead blames the (then 75-year-old) Dalai Lama himself, claiming that he personally trains terrorists whom he then sends to do their work in China (p. 38). In their various uprisings the Tibetans have, as Powers notes, not been reacting to purely economic marginalization but rather to religious and cultural deprivations (p. 41). For the Tibetans there is a palpable sense that they are not in fact a part of the Great Motherland as claimed by the PRC but still occupy the marginal zone within the PRC. As centralized pressure mounts this only serves to reinforce their sense of “Tibetan-ness” and as the author notes, “this is a new phenomenon that is a direct consequence of PRC policies” (p. 44). In a brief section on the vexed issue of self-immolation, which has now caused over 150 deaths at the time of writing this review, Powers adduces much that is largely unknown about the dynamics of the issue. This reached the height of absurdity in the words of the chairman of the Standing Committee of the People’s Congress for the Tibet Autonomous Region, who claimed that no self-immolations had occurred in that region and that in the opinion of the PRC the Dalai Lama wished to turn Tibetan Buddhism “into (a) religion of suicide and self-immolation in the service of his own political purposes” (p. 83).

Having set the dynamics of the scene economically and thoroughly, it is in chapters 3 and 4 that Powers comes to grips with the vexed issue of how the PRC is attempting to change the religious practices of the Tibetans. It is in these chapters that the story becomes even more like something from the Theater of the Absurd, especially in the PRC efforts to control what is known as the Tülku system of the rebirth of certain Lamas. In this process the athiestic Communist Party has arrogated to itself the role of determining the appropriate selection of a Buddhist rebirth. Without state approval, no rebirth may be sanctioned and justification for this is sought in the so-called Golden Urn method of divining a true rebirth.

This system was introduced into Tibet by the emperor Qianlong in the eighteenth century and was very rarely used by Tibetans due to its utter lack of credibility. The latest permutation of this system is the state use of a large, rotating barrel containing candidates names which are drawn rather in the manner of a game show on television, by a state representative, a Communist Party official, and a token Lama. Indeed, in their efforts to bring the rebirth system under their aegis, the website [chinaculture.org](http://chinaculture.org) discusses rebirth in completely Chinese cultural terms, employing concepts entirely alien to Tibetans, such as the “imperishable soul.” It utterly negates rebirth as a genuine feature of Tibetan Buddhism, positing instead that the abbots of the monastery make their own selection from the candidates, thereby incorrectly placing the Tibetan system well within a Chinese cultural and political system of belief.

The final chapters, 4 and 5, discuss how the study of Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism in the PRC has taken on certain “Chinese characteristics” which serve to bring Tibetans within that country into the broader field of Chinese culture itself. This is amplified in chapter 5, in which Powers examines the manner in which both the PRC and the Tibetan exile community defend their own views of history from their radically different perspectives.

Powers locates the vast range of ongoing manipulations in available Chinese government literature and reports of conferences involving high-ranking officials, and his research and sources are impeccable and broadly sourced. Much of his primary source material is seen for the first time outside of hard-to-access archival and obscure locations. Most important of these is an instructor’s manual written in Tibetan intended for use by cadres in their training of monks and nuns, a classified document and perhaps the first one to be translated. This manual is used by the author in a pointed manner to demonstrate the actual process of indoctrination. The book is enhanced

by three appendices, a glossary of Tibetan terminology, an English/Chinese/Tibetan glossary of terms used in the book, and a glossary of Buddhist terms and names. There are copious and detailed notes and a very complete bibliography, all of which enhance the value and relevance of this up-to-date and challenging book.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-buddhism>

**Citation:** David Templeman. Review of Powers, John. *The Buddha Party: How the People's Republic of China Works to Define and Control Tibetan Buddhism*. H-Buddhism, H-Net Reviews. June, 2017.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=49956>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.