

Between Buddha and Tsar: Kalmyk Buddhist Sangha in Late Russian Empire

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Abstract : This study explores how the Kalmyk Buddhist sangha responded to the Russian empire's administrative integration and how the Buddhist clerical institutions were shaped in the process of interaction with representatives of the predominantly Orthodox state. The eighteenth-nineteenth century Russian imperial regime adhered to a religion-centred framework to govern its diverse subjects. Within this framework, any form of religious authority was considered a useful tool in the imperial quest for legibility. As such, rather than imposing religious homogeneity, the Russian administration engineered a framework of religious toleration and integrated the non-Orthodox clerical institutions in the empire's administration. In its attempt to govern the large body of Kalmyk Buddhist sangha, the Russian government had to incorporate the sangha into the imperial institutional establishment. To this end, the Russian government founded the Lamaist Spiritual Governing Board in 1834, which became a part of the civil administration, where the Kalmyk Buddhist affairs were managed under the supervision of the Russian secular authorities. In 1847 the Lamaist Spiritual Board was abolished and Buddhist religious authority was transferred to the Lama of the Kalmyk people. From 1847 until the end of the empire in 1917 the Lama was the manager and intermediary figure between the Russian authorities and the Kalmyks where religious affairs were concerned. Substantial evidence collected in archives in Elista, Astrakhan, Stavropol and St.Petersburg show that despite being on the government's payroll, first the Lamaist Spiritual Governing Board and later on the Lama did not always serve the interests of the state, and did not always comply with the Russian authorities' orders. Although being incorporated into the state administrative system the Lama often found ways to manoeuvre the web of the Russian imperial bureaucracy in order to achieve his own goals. The Lama often used 'every-day forms of resistance' such as feigned misinterpretation, evasion, false compliance, feigned ignorance, and sabotage in order to resist without directly confronting or challenging the state orders.

Keywords : Buddhist Sangha, intermediary, Kalmyks, Lama, legibility, resistance, reform, Russian empire

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