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Autobiography of Arjia Rinpoche as a Source on the Tibetan History

Abstract

The article analyzes the life and activities of Arjia Rinpoche, director of the Tibetan-Mongolian Cultural Center in Bloomington, in the context of the contemporary history of China and its ethnic minorities. Arjia Rinpoche is the former abbot of an influential Buddhist monastery Kumbum in Eastern Tibet and the incarnation of Tsongkhapa's father, its founder. In addition to his high religious position, he held important posts in the system of Chinese state power. However these regalia notwithstanding, in 1998 Arjia-Rinpoche fled the country with great risk to his life and became a powerless refugee. In 2010 Arjia-Rinpoche's autobiography was

published in the United States in English. In 2013 its extended and revised edition (571 p.) was published in Chinese. The author of this article has translated the book in the Russian and it awaits publication in the “Buryad-Mongol Nome” publishing house. The article analyzes Arjia Rinpoche’s autobiography as an important source on ethnography and history of the Tibetans and Mongols of the PRC and their relationship with the Chinese state. The life and activities of Arjia Rinpoche are studied in the context of contemporary history of the PRC. Arjia Rinpoche himself has divided his life into eight-year cycles. Each loosely corresponds to a certain stage in the history of the PRC. There are six cycles since Arjia Rinpoche’s birth in 1950 to his escape from the PRC in 1998. At the age of two he was recognized as reincarnation of Arjia Rinpoche, abbot of the Kumbum monastery. At the age of eight, religious reform in the monastery cardinally changed his life and he went through vicissitudes of political campaigns and the Cultural Revolution in the two successive cycles. With the beginning of the socio-political and economic reforms initiated after the death of Mao Zedong in 1978, he became the head of Kumbum and grew involved in politics. In 1995, in the last period of his life in the PRC, there was a big conflict between the PRC government and the Dalai Lama over recognition of the 11th incarnation of the Panchen Lama. In order to legitimize their chosen candidate, the authorities suggested that Arjia-Rinpoche become his religious teacher. In reaction to that, the lama made his secret escape from the country. The author concludes that Arjia Rinpoche is one of the most important religious and political figures in Tibet, and his autobiography is one of the most valuable and reliable sources on ethnography and history of Tibet and China in general.

### Keywords

Arjia Rinpoche, Kumbum, China, Tibet, Sino-Tibetan relations

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