

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

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the Spiritual Realm

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In 1954, China's paramount leader Mao Zedong met Tenzin Gyatso, the then 19-year-old who was the 14th Dalai Lama, the spiritual and temporal leader of Tibet. "Religion," Mao acerbically observed to the young Dalai Lama, "is poison." Five years later, Chinese forces would roll into Tibet and take over the country, driving the Dalai Lama and many other Tibetans into exile. The communists, who espoused atheism and derided religions, sought to yoke Tibet to China by squashing its local culture and historical institutions; destroying Tibetan Buddhist monasteries, nunneries, and cultural artifacts; and suppressing the practice of the Tibetan Buddhist faith.

In more recent times, however, Beijing has taken an inordinate interest in the ins and outs of Tibetan Buddhism. *The Global Times*, a Chinese state mouthpiece, has published in the last two years a series of articles asserting the Chinese state's control not just over territory but over souls. The articles claim that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has the final

say over the traditions that guide the Tibetan belief in reincarnation—particularly over the reincarnation of the next Dalai Lama.

As the Dalai Lama gets older, China has become increasingly invested in the question of his succession. When a high lama—an important priest—dies, his post is typically filled by someone identified as his reincarnation. This tradition is deeply entrenched in the spiritual and cultural fabric of Tibetan Buddhism. Communist China, which under Mao was so vigorously and uncompromisingly atheist in its orientation, now seeks to control the process that will identify the reincarnation of the Dalai Lama. This audacious move points to China's drive to consolidate its hold over Tibet, a strategy that not only seeks to fatally undermine the institution of the Dalai Lama but also encroaches on the Tibetan people, their rich culture, and their civilization.

In addition to a significant recent uptick in Chinese propaganda on this topic, Beijing has convened a committee composed of government-selected Tibetan monks and key Communist Party officials to preside over the process that will select the next Dalai Lama. Authorities have set up museum exhibitions about the reincarnation of Dalai Lamas in both Beijing and Lhasa, the capital city of Tibet, highlighting the Chinese government's claims to legitimacy in supervising the selection. Such an orchestration will blatantly violate Tibetan tradition and is a move of monumental concern to the Tibetan people.

The norms of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition of reincarnation and the Dalai Lama's stance on his own reincarnation must steer the process of determining any future succession. In accordance with that tradition, instructions the Dalai Lama leaves before his death should be the basis of any search to identify his successor. Beijing, however, wants to usurp both spiritual and temporal authority in Tibet. The Chinese government's transgressions are legion, including legislative interference, historical revisionism, and the outright denial of the Dalai Lama's fundamental right to guide the choice of his successor. Along with the government's broader efforts to suppress Tibetan culture, China's actions constitute a grave violation of the basic human rights of the Tibetan people.

THE OLD ORIGINS OF NEW BEGINNINGS

The 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet is an esteemed spiritual leader who continues to amass a large following worldwide. His teachings, which emphasize peace and compassion, resonate across cultures and religions and have elevated him to remarkable heights over the past few decades. In recognition of his contributions toward global peace and nonviolence, he has received an array of international recognitions, including the Nobel Peace Prize and the U.S. Congressional Gold Medal.

The respect the Dalai Lama receives around the world stands in stark contrast to the opprobrium heaped on him by the Chinese government. Chinese officials have persistently vilified him, calling him a “splittist” and “a wolf in monk’s clothing,” while deriding his followers as “the Dalai Clique.” Beijing sees the Dalai Lama as a threat, even though he has lived in exile in India since 1959. That threat is, of course, significantly overblown. The Dalai Lama has not advocated Tibetan independence since the 1970s but, rather, demands genuine autonomy for Tibet within the framework of the Chinese constitution. Since 2011, he has devolved all of his political and administrative responsibilities to a democratically elected Tibetan leadership. Yet the Chinese government continues to accuse him of inciting political unrest against the state.

The Dalai Lama turned a venerable 88 this July. At some point in the years ahead, the question of succession will arise. China wants to determine who the next Dalai Lama will be, and Chinese officials have taken a huge interest in the sacred Tibetan tradition of reincarnation, known as *tulku*. It dictates that a young lama of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition inherits the religious, economic, and political responsibilities of the predecessor following that person’s death. The process that leads to the identification of the reincarnated lama is guided by the instructions left by the previous incarnation and is carried out by highly trained Buddhist scholars, often chosen by the previous lama. In the case of the Dalai Lamas, this process is often supervised by the regent appointed by the Dalai Lama or by the government in Tibet. In the last eight centuries, many reincarnated lamas have been found throughout the Tibetan plateau but also elsewhere in the far-flung world of Tibetan Buddhism: in the Himalayan regions of Bhutan, India, and Nepal, and even in areas such as

Mongolia and parts of Russia where there are many Tibetan Buddhist practitioners, particularly in the Russian republics of Buryatia, Kalmykia, and Tuva.

LAMAS AND BUREAUCRATS

In 2007, the Chinese government asserted its jurisdiction over spiritual matters and proclaimed that the *tulku* system could operate only with state approval. Traditional precedents were not enough to govern the selection of reincarnated lamas; it now was subject to Chinese laws. Authorities promulgated a national-level decree through the State Administration and Religious Affairs department. This legislation formalized an earlier set of reincarnation rules announced by the Chinese-controlled Tibet Autonomous Region in 1995.

China may officially be an atheist state, but through such legislation it continues to interject itself into the religious lives of its citizens. Its track record of meddling in the selection of Tibetan reincarnated lamas has proved largely unsuccessful, often leading to widespread anxiety and confusion among Tibetans. A distressing example is the case of the 11th Panchen Lama, the second-most well-known lama in Tibetan Buddhism, who was endorsed by the Dalai Lama in 1995 at the age of five as the reincarnation of the tenth Panchen Lama. That same year, the Chinese government forcibly disappeared him from his hometown in Tibet. Authorities then elevated their own choice of a boy as the 11th Panchen Lama. The disappeared boy remains missing after 29 years, as do his parents and the main members of the search committee that identified him.

The atheist Chinese government has asserted its jurisdiction over spiritual matters.

China's interference in the reincarnation system has also fostered bad practices. Under Chinese law, all reincarnated lamas must register with the government, leading to the transformation of a sacred religious practice into a bureaucratic process open to sordid abuse. Jampel Gyatso, a prominent Tibetan scholar and senior member of the CCP, alleged in 2016 that bribery and corruption were

rampant among Chinese officials involved in the process of recognizing reincarnated lamas. From 2007 to 2017, under the guise of religion and tradition, the number of registered lamas quadrupled from around 300 to over 1,300, an increase that has much more to do with corrupt political interests than spiritual needs. This political interference has cast a shadow of uncertainty and suspicion over a time-honored Tibetan tradition.

Along with its bureaucratization of a Tibetan cultural and spiritual practice, China relies heavily on historical distortion to assert its legitimacy in wading into Tibetan religious matters. A *Global Times* article in 2021 falsely claimed that all previous Dalai Lamas were born in China. Even under the presumption that Tibet has always been part of China, not all Dalai Lamas were born in what is recognized as Tibet. The fourth Dalai Lama, Yonten Gyatso, was an ethnic Mongolian born in Mongolia, while the sixth Dalai Lama, Tsangyang Gyatso, was an ethnic Monpa from present-day Arunachal Pradesh in India. Furthermore, the Chinese government incorrectly asserts that Qing Emperor Shunzhi granted the title of “the Dalai Lama” in 1653 to Tibetan spiritual leaders. In truth, the title “Dalai” is a Mongolian word meaning “Ocean” and was bestowed in 1578 by Mongol leader Altan Khan. “The Dalai Lama” translates to “Ocean of Wisdom” and bears no connection to the Chinese language or Chinese dynastic history.

THE MISSING DECREE

History, or at least a particular understanding of it, underlies the Chinese intervention in the question of reincarnation. The Chinese government bases its right to appoint and recognize reincarnated lamas, particularly the Dalai Lamas, on a decree on governing Tibet that supposedly dates to the Qing dynasty during the late eighteenth century.

And yet scholars have been unable to track down either an original version or a copy of this decree. It is conspicuously absent in numerous Qing-era archives, and no Chinese or Tibetan-language version has been found. Chinese authorities point to a document in Tibetan that they claim contains the notes compiled by an official of the *amban*, the Qing ambassador, in Tibet. The absence of an actual decree, if it existed at all,

that supposedly set out laws on how to govern the whole of Tibet is not just curious: it is suspicious. This absence is even more startling given the reputation of the Chinese imperial archivists, especially those of the Qing dynasty, for meticulous and substantial record keeping. Nevertheless, the modern Chinese government claims its right to appoint the next Dalai Lama on the basis of an ordinance that is not extant.



Surveillance cameras near a Buddhist temple, Lhasa, Tibet Autonomous Region, China, June 2021

Martin Pollard / Reuters

It is also ironic that the CCP seeks to invoke the Qing past as justification for its control over Tibetan life. A century ago, communists and republican nationalists alike denounced the Qing—whose rulers hailed from Manchuria—as “foreign,” “divisive,” and “oppressive.” The CCP was founded to “topple the three mountains” of “imperialism” (Western interference in China), “feudalism” (Qing rule), and “bureaucrat-capitalism” (the nationalist rule of China). Not a single law or ordinance from the Qing era remains valid in public law in China today.

Yet, somehow, Beijing thinks it can cite an eighteenth-century Qing ordinance when it comes to the question of the reincarnation of Tibetan lamas.

That cynicism is all the more galling when one considers why and, crucially, when Beijing began to take an interest in the reincarnation of lamas. Between 1959 and 1990, Chinese authorities simply didn't allow Tibetans to choose new lamas in most Tibetan Buddhist reincarnation lineages. It was only in 1990, after the Dalai Lama was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989, that the Chinese government sought to revive religious institutions, such as the *tulku* tradition, within Tibet in a bid to counterbalance the growing popularity of the Dalai Lama. The introduction in 1995 of rules about reincarnations was calculated to allow the government to intervene in the selection of the 11th Panchen Lama. And China's more recent attempts to invoke the inheritance of Qing-era institutions and insist on historical continuity—when it does not obtain in any other area of Chinese law—seem designed for one reason: to control the appointment of the next Dalai Lama.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR THE NEXT LIFE

In Tibetan tradition, discussions about the next life of a spiritual teacher are discouraged while the individual is still alive. It is considered insensitive and disrespectful, almost as if the community is eagerly anticipating the lama's death. The Chinese government has displayed a keen and intrusive interest in the future incarnation of the 14th Dalai Lama, while the Dalai Lama himself approaches these speculations lightly. For example, when asked in 2019 about his next life, the Dalai Lama humorously responded: "What is the hurry for my reincarnation? I may be 84, but my health is good."

To be sure, the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan community are not oblivious to the profound impact his death and his reincarnation will have on the future of Tibet and the broader Buddhist world. The absurdity of an atheist communist state, which continuously vilifies the Dalai Lama and bans the display of his portrait, attempting to dictate his reincarnation is not lost on observers. Between 2009 and 2022, 157 people committed

self-immolations in Tibet calling for the return of the Dalai Lama and freedom for Tibetans. The incongruity is further heightened by the fact that the CCP, after invading Tibet in the 1950s, was responsible for destroying nearly all of Tibet's approximately 6,000 Tibetan monasteries and nunneries and disrobing almost all its monks and nuns. Several thousand tons of ancient Tibetan cultural artifacts, upward of three-quarters of the total kept in Tibetan sites, were destroyed, looted, or recycled for their components. That this same party is now claiming it has the right to choose Buddhist leaders, including the next Dalai Lama, is at best disingenuous.

In 2011, the Dalai Lama issued his most explicit statement regarding his reincarnation, unequivocally rejecting China's interference. He stated that he will leave clear, written instructions that will be implemented by the Gaden Phodrang Trust (the Dalai Lama's private office), in consultation with high-ranking lamas of the Tibetan Buddhist lineages and others who follow Tibetan Buddhism. He further clarified that only the individual set to be reincarnated has authority over determining where and how his rebirth will happen and how that reincarnation can be recognized. He stated explicitly that if he dies in exile, then his reincarnation will be born outside of China. This was a clear denouncement of the Chinese government's attempts to interfere in the reincarnation system, a sentiment that was reinforced at a 2019 conference of the spiritual leaders of Tibetan Buddhism and Bon (the Tibetan religious tradition that predated Buddhism), all living in exile. In the statement from 2011, the Dalai Lama specified that he would clarify his instructions for succession around the time he reaches the age of 90 (in 2025).

The Chinese government, however, will likely reject any decision regarding succession taken by the Tibetan Buddhists and the Dalai Lama's office. It falls on the governments of countries that support the free expression of religion as a fundamental human right to lend their support and insist that the selection process for the next Dalai Lama take place without Chinese political interference.

COMPLICITY IN SILENCE

For centuries, Tibetans have maintained a mystical and sophisticated tradition for managing the succession of the Dalai Lama. This established procedure has ensured largely smooth and uncomplicated transitions of power, with only a few exceptions. It is unacceptable for China to attempt to usurp the Dalai Lama's fundamental right to determine how his successor will be selected, a tradition adhered to for five centuries.

China holds no moral or legal authority to intervene in the succession, and that it is doing so is an alarming situation that calls for a global response to protect religious freedom and ensure stability. The United States has already made a significant move in this direction by enacting the Tibetan Policy and Support Act in 2020, which states that "protecting the internationally recognized right to the freedom of religion and belief, including ensuring that the identification and installation of Tibetan Buddhist religious leaders, including a future 15th Dalai Lama, is a matter determined solely within the Tibetan Buddhist faith community, based on instructions of the 14th Dalai Lama, without interference by the Government of the People's Republic of China." Any Chinese officials interfering in this process will face sanctions.

Although the U.S. stance is helpful, this policy will not succeed without concrete support from other key countries and blocs. These include Europe and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), countries such as India and Mongolia with large communities that adhere to Tibetan Buddhism, and countries such as Canada, Japan, and South Korea that have a special relationship with the Dalai Lama.

The European Parliament should agree to similar legislation to that passed in the United States clearly stating the EU (where Buddhism is the third- or fourth-largest religion in many European countries) recognizes the sole right of the Dalai Lama to decide on his reincarnation. India, too, holds special responsibilities to take a public stand.

The Dalai Lama has been living there as a guest for more than six decades and calls himself a son of India because Buddhism originated in the country over 2,000 years ago. Mongolia, with a majority

China will likely reject the Dalai Lama's instructions regarding his own succession.

Buddhist population, most of whom are followers of the Dalai Lama, should also clearly state that it is up to the Dalai Lama to decide on his reincarnation.

Japan, a frequent host of the Dalai Lama and home to many of his followers, should make similar statements. The Dalai Lama is an honorary citizen of Canada, and thus that government has the responsibility to protect his religious freedom. It is also important for Buddhist countries such as South Korea and several members of ASEAN to protect the tradition and customs of Buddhism. If the Chinese government selects the 15th Dalai Lama without protest, it sets the precedent for the CCP to assert its candidates as the heads of sanghas, or monasteries, in other Buddhist countries as well.

As the saying goes, “Silence is complicity.” This is true in the reincarnation of the Dalai Lama. Failure to defend justice and religious freedom will not only embolden an expansionist regime but also risk instability in Asia and Buddhist countries, with ramifications for both the global south and global north. Instead, governments around the world should take a stand on this matter of principle. Tibetan Buddhists have the right choose their own spiritual leader, and upholding that right is essential to protecting the human rights of all people.