

Religious Succession in Asia

March 5-6, 2026

Aarhus Institute for Advanced Studies
Building 1630, room 301
Høegh-Guldbergs Gade 6B, 8000 Aarhus C

A conference sponsored by Danmarks Fri Forskningsfond (Independent Research Fund Denmark), and hosted by the Department of Anthropology at Aarhus University and the Aarhus Institute for Advanced Studies as part of the Leadership and Reincarnation of the Dalai Lamas (LEAD) Research Network

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On July 2nd, 2025, the Office of the Dalai Lama broadcast a prerecorded video in which the Dalai Lama officially announced his succession plans to the world. For three years the Leadership and Reincarnation of the Dalai Lamas Research Network (LEAD) has organized conferences building up to that event. In 2023, we met in Aarhus, Denmark to discuss the Dalai Lama's legacy of innovation. In 2024, we met in Boulder, Colorado to discuss the Dalai Lama's charisma. In the spring of 2025, we met in Paris to discuss examples of succession from across the Tibetan world. And at various side meetings, we have discussed related topics, especially geopolitics and the phenomenon of reincarnation. Underlying those meetings, some presentations referred to our core dyadic concepts: leadership and devotion, liminality and impermanence, and futures and innovation.

At the final conference of the LEAD network, we will discuss the Dalai Lama's succession plans and compare them to other examples of religious succession in Asia. How does religious succession impact various communities: religious professionals, lay supporters, members of government, civil society? How have governments responded to succession plans? How do succession plans evolve over time? What are the epistemological or ontological assumptions underpinning a particular religious succession? How is succession treated as a media event?

We also welcome historical papers that compare a succession plan and its outcome, papers that consider the impact of gender or ethnicity, and papers that examine the legal basis of succession plans, or compare two examples of religious succession, etc.

Schedule

Wednesday 4 March

18:00 **optional** meet in lobby of Wakeup Hotel to walk to dinner

18:15-20:15? dinner @ Aarhus Street Food, Ny Banegårdsgade 46, 8000 Aarhus C

Thursday 5 March

9:00 guests meet in lobby of Wakeup Hotel

9:30-10:00

Coffee and cake @ AIAS

10:00

Cameron Warner

Welcome address

10:30

Ian MacCormack

Authority and Succession in the Early Ganden Phodrang

11:00

Nitasha Kaul

Consensus and Contention concerning histories of succession in Bhutan

11:30

Martijn van Beek

Tulku Trouble: The Remarkable Life of the 8th Thikse Rinpoche and Its Representation

12:00

Tomas Larsson

Reflection and Response

12:30-13:30

Lunch on site

13:30

Marianne Fibiger

The Succession of Sai Baba: Can or will a third be found?

14:00

Uwe Skoda, Matthias Olesen, and Thomas Fibiger

Nass as a concept of succession: Leadership, contestation and schism among Bohra (Ismaili Shia Muslims) in South Asia and beyond

14:30-15:00

Coffee and cake

15:30

Jørn Borup

Religious succession: Zen in Japan

16:00

Tomas Larsson

Buddhism and the troubled politics of succession in Thailand

16:30

Tabita Rosendal

Reflection and Response

17:00

Walk to dinner or bus to hotel

18:00

Dinner @ Keyser Social Aarhus, Frue Kirkeplads 4, 8000 Aarhus C
[+45 69 15 68 50](tel:+4569156850)

Friday 6 March

8:00

Guests meet in lobby of Wakeup Hotel

8:30 -9:00

Coffee and cake @ AIAS

9:00

Fabienne Jagou

Maintaining Lineage and Leadership: Case Studies of Tibetan Buddhist Monasteries in Taiwan

9:30

John Osburg

Bureaucratizing Religious Charisma: State Management, Moral Authority, and Tibetan Buddhism in Urban China

9:30

Sonam Frasi

The Dalai Lama Reincarnation: Challenges for a Premature Revelation

10:00

10:30-11:00

Coffee

11:00

Carole McGranahan

Grief and Rebellion: Interregnum Politics Between the 13th and 14th Dalai Lamas

11:30

Carsten Vala

Reflection and Response

12:00-13:00

Lunch on site

13:00

Tabita Rosendal

China's Buddhist strategic narratives in Sri Lanka — benefits and Buddhism?

13:30

Carsten Vala

Lessons from the CCP's Approaches to Protestant TSPM Leadership Management for the Dalai Lama's Succession

14:00-14:30

Coffee and cake

14:30

Allen Carlson

After the Statement: China's Reaction to the Dalai Lama's 2025 Affirmation of the Continuation of His Lineage (ZOOM)

15:00

Lobsang Sangay

Geopolitics of Reincarnation, International Law, and the Institution of the Dalai Lama

15:30

Nitasha Kaul

Reflection and Response

16:00

Carole, Fabienne, Martijn, and Lobsang, chaired by Cameron

Final reflections on LEAD and next steps

16:45

Predinner drinks @ Cerulean Gallery, Mejlgade 34, 8000 Aarhus C

...or rest time at the hotel

18:30

Dinner @ Restaurant Syv Ni 13, Kalkværksvej 5, 19.tv, 8000 Aarhus C

Abstracts

Cameron Warner
Department of Anthropology, Aarhus University

Welcome Address

I'll present a brief overview of the Dalai Lama's plans for his upcoming succession beginning with his earlier statements and leading up to his statement in July 2025. Alongside these developments, I will present the origins of the LEAD network, the results of its previous conferences, publication ideas, and the potentials I see for further research.

Ian MacCormack
Department of Religion, Florida State University

Authority and Succession in the Early Ganden Phodrang

This paper proceeds from the assumption that models of political succession are closely connected to concepts of authority; thus, the historical study of the former can benefit by attention to the discourses and practices constituting the latter. In particular, the period of the early Ganden Phodrang, during which the “Great Fifth” Dalai Lama solidified his rule over central Tibet and endeavored to transfer power to a successor, may be especially fruitful in this regard, not least because of the historical and intellectual data found within the prolific output of the Dalai Lama and the Desi Sangyé Gyatso. In my remarks, I will try to advance several basic points for thinking about authority and succession in the early Ganden Phodrang, especially during the leadup to and aftermath of the fifth Dalai Lama’s death: first, that the idea of his theo-political authority evolved dynamically over this period; second, that its study should be approached not in isolation but as part of a larger network of persons, texts, and ideas; third, that the notion of exclusive rule by Dalai Lamas was not solely a Tibetan construction but also depended on other parties with a stake in this Tibetan polity; and fourth, that taken together, these points may suggest that in this early period at least, political succession remained open to multiple potential trajectories.

Nitasha Kaul
Politics, International Relations, and Critical Interdisciplinary Studies, University of Westminster

Consensus and Contention concerning histories of succession in Bhutan

The presentation will trace the political histories of the role played by patterns of consensus and contention in how succession has functioned in Bhutan since its founding by Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel in the seventeenth century, and past 1907 when the modern Bhutanese state came into existence at a turning point for the traditional dual form of government.

Martijn van Beek
Department of Anthropology, Aarhus University

Tulku Trouble: The Remarkable Life of the 8th Thikse Rinpoche and Its Representation

The recognition of (mostly male) children as the reincarnations (*yangsi* or *tulku*) of specific Tibetan Buddhist teachers and practitioners has been a source of fascination for Western travellers, scholars and missionaries. It is also a matter of intense interest and debate among Himalayan Buddhist populations. The presence and qualities, including family ties, of a tulku can have a significant impact on the fortune and prestige of the monastic institutions with which they are associated. Succession relying on the identification, education and assumption of responsibilities of a tulku is fraught with spiritual, political and economic risks. Who gets to determine which child is the unmistakable reincarnation of his predecessor? And what happens if the child does not live up to expectations, or chooses not to follow the destiny the institution has in store for them?

To explore the latter challenge, we will present the case of Lhasa-born Chamba Chosphe (1895-1942?) who was identified as the 8th reincarnation of Jangsem Sherab Zangpo and enthroned as the 28th abbot of Thikse monastery in Ladakh in 1914. Refusing and actively resisting the status and roles assigned to him, he engaged in a wide range of activities unbecoming of his status before facing final expulsion from the monastery in 1920. After many further remarkable exploits, he ended up as a police officer in Lhasa before landing in jail in connection with the killing of two Sera monks. He died a few years after his release from prison. His reincarnation, the current 9th Thikse Khanpo Rinpoche, Ngawang Chamba Stanzin, was identified in Ladakh in 1945.

Drawing on a wide range of sources, in Ladakhi/Tibetan, Hindi and several European languages, contemporary as well as recent, we will examine how different authors use the dramatic stories about Chamba Chosphe's life and fate to serve different agendas. Disparities between versions of his life and the purposes to which they are put shed light on the contested representations of the tulku system and Tibetan Buddhism more generally, as well as the inherent risks of this system of succession.

Marianne Fibiger
Department of the Study of Religion, Aarhus University

The Succession of Sai Baba: Can or will a third be found?

The first Sai Baba, Shirdi Sai Baba, who died in 1918, did not designate a formal spiritual successor. The subsequent “succession” was therefore essentially institutional, managed by the Shirdi Sansthan Temple Trust, which became the de facto successor in administering his extensive educational, medical, and charitable institutions after his death. Although he never named a personal successor and claimed that his “powers” could not be transmitted to any other living person, multiple—often competing—devotional lineages and *sampradāyas*, all claiming fidelity to his memory, nevertheless emerged. These groups also competed in identifying a new incarnation of Sai Baba in an avatāric sense.

One of these lineages identified a boy born in 1926, later known as Sathya Sai Baba (1926–2011). Sathya Sai Baba himself proclaimed that he was the second in a trilogy of incarnations: Shirdi Sai (the first), Sathya Sai (the second), and a future “Prema Sai,” who was to be born in Karnataka.

This paper outlines the various selection criteria employed by different *sampradāyas* in their search for the third Sai Baba—some of whom have already identified a candidate. It also

discusses how and why the second Sai Baba has been disclaimed by many *sampradāyas* as well as by a significant number of lay devotees today.

Uwe Skoda

Section for India and South Asian Studies, Aarhus University

Matthias Olesen

Section for Arabic and Islamic Studies, Aarhus University

Thomas Fibiger

Section for Arabic and Islamic Studies, Aarhus University

***Nass* as a concept of succession: Leadership, contestation and schism among Bohra (Ismaili Shia Muslims) in South Asia and beyond**

Tonight, I confer *nass* upon my most beloved and radiant son, the delight of the eye, Bhai Mufaddal Saifuddin. May Allah, the Exalted, aid him in his deeds...” With these words, as quoted in a volume on the current religious head of the Dawoodi community, Mufaddal Saifuddin’s father and predecessor, Syedna Mohammed Burhanuddin announced his succession plan in the presence of three witnesses in 2009 at the age of 94. Later, the act was publicly reiterated and photographically documented in 2011.

The volume presents a narrative of a seamless transition of the highest authority, but shortly after Syedna Burhanuddin’s death in 2014, his younger brother (uncle and earlier also father-in-law of Syedna Mufaddal Saifuddin) contested the abovementioned appointment of a successor by claiming that he himself had already been selected as next head of the community long before 2009. The dispute turned into a court case which was settled in favour of Syedna Mufaddal Saifuddin in 2024, but a split in the community had already occurred and the schism continues.

The paper will firstly introduce the Bohra community, a mercantile community with a headquarter in India, but also a strong presence around the Indian Ocean, and specifically the position of its leader formally referred to as Dai al-Mutlaq (lit. absolute or unrestricted missionary) considered as vicegerent of the Imam. Secondly, it will present the concept of *nass* as articulated among the Bohras and in the recent court case as well as other historical incidents (specifically the one in 1840) that led to schisms within the community during precarious moments of transition.

Jørn Borup

Department of the Study of Religion, Aarhus University

Religious succession: Zen in Japan

Chan and Zen Buddhist traditions have been based on ritual, literary and institutional models of succession serving to legitimate and keep alive the dharma and sangha. Ideals of patriarchal lineages from Śākyamuni Buddha to Mahākāśyapa, Bodhidharma and Huineng through modern and contemporary times have been idealised as unbroken succession of enlightened masters through “mind-to-mind” transmission and ritualised monastic recognition. This paper will trace the ideals of Chan/Zen successions before discussing contemporary institutional configurations and challenges of religious (temple and monastic) succession in Buddhist Japan.

Tomas Larsson

Department of Politics and International Studies, University of Cambridge

Buddhism and the troubled politics of succession in Thailand

This paper uses the “dual succession” of sangha supreme patriarch and of monarch in Thailand in the 2010s as a case study that helps illuminate the challenges of establishing stable rules of succession in a Buddhist religio-political context. In the early 2010s, Thailand’s king and supreme patriarch were both approaching the end of their respective lives. Incapacitated by poor health in their final years, Supreme Patriarch Wachirayannasangwon was the first to pass, in October 2013. The supreme patriarch was followed three years later by King Bhumibol. The years from 2004 to 2016 were characterized by considerable political strife and convulsions—manifested in a cycle of urban street protests, military coups (in 2006 and 2014), constitution drafting assemblies, and elections. The dual succession was an important background factor that fuelled these collective anxieties and institutional turbulence. A modicum of religio-political stability was regained only after King Vajiralongkorn had succeeded to the throne, in December 2016, and appointed a new Supreme Patriarch, Ariyavongsagatanana, in February 2017. This paper situates these developments in historical and theoretical perspective in order to shed light on the dynamics of religio-political succession in the world’s most populous Buddhist majority society, Thailand.

Allen Carlson

Department of Government, Cornell University

After the Statement: China’s Reaction to the Dalai Lama’s 2025 Affirmation of the Continuation of His Lineage

It is well known China has long insisted it has final authority over the selection process of reincarnate lamas within Tibetan Buddhism, particularly the Dalai Lama’s own line, and does so largely through highlighting the role of the Golden Urn as the final arbitrator of making decisions. This paper delves into the most recent turn within this Chinese narrative of control. More specifically, it describes China’s reaction to the July 2025 statement by the Dalai Lama on the continuation of his lineage. It does so through surveying Chinese language sources including official statements, media reports, academic writings, and social media posts. Such materials reveal that the Dalai Lama’s statement has been met by China with an icy near silence. Rather than even hinting at compromise, the Chinese discourse on the future of the Dalai Lama lineage remains resolute and unyielding. This flies in the face of talk in some circles of a partial thawing of the Chinese position. It does not bode well for an amicable, cooperative, framework emerging between Beijing and Dharamshala over how to eventually handle the task of selecting the next Dalai Lama.

Sonam Frasi

The Institute of Tibetan Affairs, London

The Dalai Lama Reincarnation: Challenges for a Premature Revelation

His Holiness the Dalai Lama is a manifestation of Avalokiteshvara (Chenrezig), who having taken that solemn vow of altruism has a primordial role in leading and guiding the Tibetan people to salvation. Tibetans are forced to undergo a complete Han Chinese nationalist assimilation programme with the imposition of alien culture, social and ideological values. To cement their atheist and anti-Tibetan Buddhism ideology, large scale social transformations

have been forced in monasteries, nunneries and other traditional education institutions through the introduction of so-called patriotic re-education, where monks and nuns are forced to denounce His Holiness the Dalai Lama and forced to declare their allegiance to the Communist Party and Chinese Communist leaders. To counter the egregious behaviour and their baseless so-called order No.5 decree for “measures on the Management of the Reincarnation of living Buddhas in Tibetan Buddhism”, His Holiness issued a public statement entitled “The Dalai Lama: Rebirth, Recognition and Tradition” on 24th September 2014, rebutting the Chinese claim that the Chinese Central Government has sole authority to recognise the reincarnation of the Dalai Lama.

The fundamental question is can we ascertain which could be “a free country” where the next Dalai Lama can/may be born? What are the challenges and how can these be overcome? There is precedence that the reincarnation of the future Dalai Lama can be born outside of Tibet, but religious and social environments between then and now are vastly different. One of the challenges for recognition and succession of a future Dalai Lama may be can which countries can withstand the unbearable pressures from China to allow the process of recognition to go through, support and standby the future Dalai Lama and the Tibetan community? Or can there be a favourable logic for the future Dalai Lamas to be born in Tibet, even though Tibet is not free and under Chinese occupation?

Fabienne Jagou

EFEO, Paris / CNRS, CCJ-CECMC

Maintaining Lineage and Leadership: Case Studies of Tibetan Buddhist Monasteries in Taiwan

From the early 1960s onward, Tibetan masters as well as Chinese masters teaching Tibetan Buddhism settled in Taiwan. There, they established communities of disciples and founded religious centers or monasteries. They contributed to the development of Tibetan Buddhism within Taiwanese society, in much the same way as the 14th Dalai Lama did following his visits and teachings in 1997, 2001, and 2009. These masters have since passed away, and nearly all of these monasteries are currently experiencing succession crises. Drawing on case studies, this presentation proposes to examine the importance of the founding master as well as the strategies implemented by disciples—both those who knew the founding master personally and those belonging to later generations—to maintain teaching activities, sustain member engagement, and perpetuate the work initiated by their master.

Carole McGranahan

Department of Anthropology, University of Colorado-Boulder

Grief and Rebellion: Interregnum Politics Between the 13th and 14th Dalai Lamas

The interregnum period in between the reign of Dalai Lamas is liminal, a time of tension and possibility. Undoubtedly, the period of succession transition from the 14th to 15th Dalai Lamas will be such a tense moment. Given the heightened politics of Chinese rule in Tibet and of the exile of the Tibetan government, the succession will be a combination of Tibetan historical precedent, Chinese political spectacle, and at heart, will be orchestrated in part by the 14th Dalai Lama himself. This will be both due to his own actions taken over the decades to prepare the government, community, and world for his successor, as well as the affective attachment that various communities have to the Dalai Lama as leader, religious teacher, and/or inspiration. In this paper, I return to the interregnum period following the death of the 13th Dalai Lama in

1933, a fraught time in Tibetan history vis-à-vis China. Chaos and political change in Lhasa reverberated throughout Tibet. Factions grew, former powerholders were arrested, and in eastern Tibet, loyalists to the 13th Dalai Lama revolted against the interregnum government in Lhasa. What lessons does the social and political implications of the religious succession of the 13th Dalai Lama have for us today?

Tabita Rosendal

Center for East and Southeast Asian Studies, Lund University

China's Buddhist strategic narratives in Sri Lanka — benefits and Buddhism?

While the economic impact of China's 'Belt and Road' Initiative (BRI) in Sri Lanka has been closely monitored in recent years, few studies have focused on the role of China's Buddhist narratives in furthering the countries' interests. By analyzing the Buddhist strategic narratives used in official Chinese and Sri Lankan statements, this article argues that under the BRI's 'people-to-people' bonds, Chinese and Sri Lankan officials have used the Buddhist history and exchanges between the two nations to advocate for BRI projects, and to strengthen their cultural ties. This article finds, more narrowly, that China's Buddhist diplomacy in Sri Lanka has increased since the BRI's inception, and that it has focused on enhancing bilateral relations and mitigating criticism of projects. China's strategic narratives have been somewhat successful, but since they are employed alongside economic investments, their precise impact is difficult to measure. More broadly, the CCP is increasingly positioning itself and the BRI through religious strategic narratives to mitigate criticism and further its interests and stature in the international system. However, while China's projection of Buddhist strategic narratives, in tandem with infrastructure investments, may ensure the BRI's continued implementation, this depends on the willingness of host countries of accepting these narratives.

Carsten Vala

Department of Political Science, Loyola University

Visiting Professor, KU Leuven

Lessons from the CCP's Approaches to Protestant TSPM Leadership Management for the Dalai Lama's Succession

Based on nationwide fieldwork from the 2000s to 2010s on Chinese Protestants in the People's Republic of China, I draw out lessons for how the Chinese Communist Party-state (CCP) may seek to influence the choice of the Dalai Lama's successor. In particular, I highlight the CCP's efforts to maintain popular legitimacy and also ensure its favored candidates assume leadership positions. I also explain how the Party-state works to sustain such legitimacy by surrounding popular religious leaders with loyalist secondary staff.

John Osburg

Department of Anthropology, University of Rochester

Bureaucratizing Religious Charisma: State Management, Moral Authority, and Tibetan Buddhism in Urban China

Since 2015, CCP governance of religion has been guided by the "Sinicization" (中国化) policy. This policy has the dual aims of curbing the perceived foreign linkages of religious institutions—Christianity, Tibetan Buddhism, and Islam in particular—and of using religion as a means of

promoting values deemed part of China’s “excellent traditional culture” (优秀传统文化). This policy marks a shift away from the relatively more tolerant, hands-off approach towards religion during the first few decades of the reform period, and, more fundamentally, it suggests that religious institutions should play an active role in the promotion of specific socialist core values and thereby contribute to the “Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation” (中华民族伟大复兴). Based on several years of ethnographic research with urban middle class Han Chinese followers of Tibetan Buddhism, I examine the ways in which they have responded to recent shifts in state management of Buddhism and how state efforts to co-opt religious charisma partly informs their attraction to Tibetan Buddhism. Due to the growing popularity of Tibetan Buddhism among China’s economic and cultural elite along with several high-profile incidents involving “fake” Tibetan lamas, the National Religious Affairs Administration has exerted tighter control over the reincarnation of Tibetan lamas and sought to restrict their activities in urban China. Despite these efforts, in my interviews, middle class Chinese describe being drawn to Tibetan Buddhism because they perceived Tibetan monks as largely immune from the moral crisis plaguing Chinese society, and they viewed its teachings as less tainted by party-state policies and ideological campaigns. Accordingly, Buddhists in my study often dismissed officially sanctioned messages from state-backed religious authorities (or those rumored to have close state ties) as “chicken soup for the soul” in contrast to what they consider to be the authentic Buddha dharma. This suggests that the party-state’s attempts to bureaucratically manage religious charisma to promote official ideology tends to bring issues of authenticity and political manipulation to the surface, thereby generating suspicion and cynicism and leading religious followers to seek out what they perceive to be untainted and authentic sources of moral authority.

Lobsang Sangay

Harvard Law School

Former Sikyong, Central Tibetan Administration

Geopolitics of Reincarnation, International Law, and the Institution of the Dalai Lama

From the Himalayan region through Central Asia and Russia—and extending into Southeast Asia—the Buddhist world is confronting an unprecedented challenge to religious authority, institutional continuity, and international law. The traditionally sacral process of reincarnation—historically governed by doctrinal principles, monastic authority, and communal consensus—has increasingly become subject to political intervention and Chinese state regulation, often in disregard of established norms of international law. As a result, the institution of the Dalai Lama now occupies a contested space at the intersection of religion, sovereignty, geopolitics, and international legal order.

What is at stake is not merely the tradition of reincarnation itself, but the durability of transnational religious institutions under conditions of authoritarian governance and intensifying geopolitical rivalry, further complicated by the global repercussions of the war in Ukraine. The question of the Dalai Lama’s reincarnation has thus emerged as a critical test of the resilience of Buddhist institutional autonomy, the capacity of faith communities to sustain legitimacy across political borders, and the limits of international law in constraining state interference in religious succession.

This study examines how Buddhist traditions across the Himalayan region, Central Asia, and Russia—and, by extension, Southeast Asia—are responding to these pressures. It asks whether religious faith and institutional continuity can be maintained when the mechanisms of spiritual authority are politicized and when international legal norms are selectively ignored.