

China's Selection of the Dalai Lama: Control, Controversy, and the Future of Tibetan Buddhism.

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Abstract: The succession of the 14th Dalai Lama presents a complex political and spiritual conflict, highlighting tensions between Tibetan religious autonomy and Chinese state control. Traditionally a sacred process led by Tibetan monks, the identification of the next Dalai Lama is now disputed by Beijing, which asserts legal authority over the reincarnation process. In contrast, the 14th Dalai Lama insists his successor will be chosen by Tibetan religious authorities and born outside Chinese-controlled territory. This impasse risks the emergence of two rival Dalai Lamas, intensifying divisions within Tibetan Buddhism and complicating global diplomacy. This study employs a qualitative methodology, analyzing historical records, religious texts, legal frameworks, and policy documents. It draws on expert commentary, case studies such as the Panchen Lama and international reactions to examine the broader implications. By synthesizing perspectives from Tibetan leaders, Chinese officials, and global stakeholders, the paper explores issues of religious freedom, cultural identity, and geopolitical influence.

Key words: Dalai Lama, Tibetan Buddhism, Reincarnation, Avalokiteshvara, Monastic traditions, Golden Urn, Tibetan uprising, Middle-Way Approach.

I. Introduction

The question of who will succeed the 14th Dalai Lama has become one of the most politically sensitive and spiritually complex issues in modern geopolitics. At the heart of this issue lies a controversial assertion, the Chinese government's claim that it has the authority to approve or even select the next Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism. This assertion has drawn sharp criticism from Tibetan communities, human rights organizations, and governments around the world. The situation raises broader questions about religious freedom, cultural preservation, and state control. The succession of the Dalai Lama spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism and a powerful symbol of Tibetan identity has become one of the most contentious religious and political issues of the 21st century. Traditionally rooted in centuries-old rituals, visions, and spiritual signs, the recognition of a new Dalai Lama has always been an exclusively religious matter carried out by senior Tibetan monks. However, since China's annexation of Tibet in 1950 and the 14th Dalai Lama's subsequent exile to India in 1959, Beijing has increasingly sought to control the reincarnation process, asserting legal and historical claims over Tibetan Buddhism.

At the heart of the controversy lies a fundamental clash between religious freedom and authoritarian control. While China insists that its role is grounded in historical precedent and legal authority, the 14th Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, and the Tibetan Buddhist community in exile firmly reject Beijing's claims. The Dalai Lama has made clear that only the Tibetan people and religious authorities specifically the Gaden Phodrang Trust have the right to decide his reincarnation, which he has stated will occur outside Chinese-controlled territory. This ongoing standoff raises the real possibility of two rival Dalai Lamas in the future, one chosen by Tibetan Buddhists in exile, the other appointed by the Chinese state. As the current Dalai Lama approaches the end of his life, the stakes could not be higher. This succession struggle is not only a test of spiritual legitimacy, but also a reflection of deeper tensions over cultural autonomy, religious freedom, and the reach of state power. The outcome will shape the future of Tibetan Buddhism, influence international diplomacy, and define the legacy of one of the world's most revered religious leaders.

II. Objective

1. To examine the historical process of selecting the Dalai Lama and its religious significance in Tibetan Buddhism.
2. To investigate the controversy surrounding China's claim to authority in the reincarnation process of the next Dalai Lama
3. To evaluate the future of Tibetan Buddhism under increasing Chinese influence and surveillance

III. Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative methodology grounded in historical, political, and religious analysis to explore the succession controversy of the 14th Dalai Lama. Primary data includes official statements from the 14th Dalai Lama, legal documents such as China's State Religious Affairs Bureau Order No. 5 (2007). Secondary data is sourced from academic journals, government reports, international human rights organizations, and reputable news media to provide context and differing perspectives. Historical analysis is used to trace the origins and evolution of the Dalai Lama's reincarnation tradition, including the Qing dynasty's introduction of the Golden Urn system.

IV. Background

The tradition of recognizing Dalai Lamas dates back to the 15th century, with each reincarnation identified through spiritual signs, visions, and rituals conducted by senior Tibetan monks. However, after China's annexation of Tibet in 1950 and the 14th Dalai Lama's exile to India in 1959, Beijing has increasingly sought to assert its authority over Tibetan Buddhism. China claims it has the legal and historical right to approve all reincarnations of high-ranking lamas, including the Dalai Lama, through a controversial law requiring a "reincarnation permit." This assertion is based partly on the Qing dynasty's

involvement in Tibetan affairs and partly on China's broader strategy to maintain control over its ethnically and religiously diverse territories.

The Dalai Lama is the spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism, traditionally believed to be the reincarnation of Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva of compassion. After the death of a Dalai Lama, a search is conducted to find his reincarnation, typically among young Tibetan boys, guided by religious signs and rituals. The current Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso (14th Dalai Lama), was born in 1935 and recognized in 1939. He fled to India in 1959 after the Chinese annexation of Tibet. The controversy over China's selection of the Dalai Lama is rooted in a long-standing dispute between the Chinese government and the Tibetan Buddhist community, particularly the exiled Tibetan leadership and followers of the current 14th Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso.

V. China's Position and Legal Framework

The Chinese government maintains that it has final authority over the recognition and approval of all reincarnations of Tibetan lamas, including the Dalai Lama, based on historical precedent and its legal control over religious affairs.

Historical Claim: China asserts that during the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), the central government established authority over Tibetan Buddhism, including the reincarnation system. The use of the Golden Urn system (introduced in 1793 by the Qing court) is cited as precedent. This method was designed to prevent manipulation of the reincarnation process and involved drawing lots from a golden urn to identify high lamas.¹

Religious Management: China sees the Dalai Lama not only as a religious figure but also historically a political leader, and it insists that no reincarnation can occur without the approval of the Chinese government. Beijing accuses the current 14th Dalai Lama (Tenzin Gyatso) of political separatism and says his claim to unilaterally decide his reincarnation is illegal and invalid.²

VI. Legal and Regulatory Framework

In 2007, the Chinese government introduced State Religious Affairs Bureau Order No. 5, a regulation requiring government approval for all reincarnations of Tibetan lamas. This effectively places the power of recognition in the hands of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which is officially atheist. China relies on a set of laws and religious regulations to enforce its stance on the Dalai Lama and reincarnation more

¹ Max., Oidtmann, Forging the Golden Urn, The Qing Empire and the Politics of Reincarnation in Tibet, Columbia University Press.

² China says Dalai Lama has no authority to decide on his reincarnation - The Economic Times, Jul 06, 2025,

broadly. State Religious Affairs Bureau Order No. 5 (2007): Titled "Management Measures for the Reincarnation of Living Buddha's in Tibetan Buddhism".³ Provisions:

- All reincarnations must be approved by the government.
- Unauthorized reincarnations are deemed "illegal and invalid."
- The Golden Urn process must be used unless exempted by the state.
- Religious institutions must apply for approval at multiple government levels.
- This law essentially nationalizes the process of recognizing reincarnated Tibetan lamas.
- Constitution and Religious Affairs Law

China's Constitution (Article 36) guarantees "freedom of religious belief" but also emphasizes that religion must not be used to "disrupt public order" or "harm national unity." The Regulations on Religious Affairs (updated in 2017) reinforce tight state supervision over all religious organizations, personnel, and practices.⁴

VII. Controversy on China's Selection of the Dalai Lama

The Dalai Lama is the spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism and historically also held political leadership in Tibet. Traditionally, reincarnation is the method of succession, when a Dalai Lama dies, a new one is found through a spiritual search based on religious signs and rituals. After China annexed Tibet in 1950, the Dalai Lama fled into exile in India in 1959 following a failed uprising against Chinese rule. China's control over the Dalai Lama's succession reflects its broader policy of asserting sovereignty over Tibet and reshaping religious institutions to align with Communist Party authority. The dispute has deep spiritual, cultural, and geopolitical stakes, and is likely to intensify after the current Dalai Lama's death. The controversy surrounding China's role in selecting the next Dalai Lama is a complex and deeply political issue, touching on religious freedom, Tibetan autonomy, and China's geopolitical influence.⁵

At the heart of the debate is who has the authority to recognize the next Dalai Lama, a traditionally spiritual process that China insists must include state involvement, while Tibetans and the current Dalai Lama argue it is a purely religious matter. The Dalai Lama is believed to reincarnate after death. A search for his reincarnation is conducted by senior Tibetan monks, who look for spiritual signs and perform rituals to identify the child believed to be the next Dalai Lama. The current (14th) Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, has stated that only he can decide whether and where he will reincarnate. The controversy over China's selection of the Dalai Lama is rooted in a long-standing dispute between the Chinese government and the

³<https://tibet.net/joint-statement-to-repudiate-the-so-called-order-no-5-of-chinas-state-administration-of-religious-affairs-on-management-measures-for-the-reincarnation-of-living-buddhas-in-tibetan-buddhism/>, Joint Statement to Repudiate the so-called Order no. 5 of China's State Administration of Religious Affairs on Management Measures for the Reincarnation of 'Living Buddhas' in Tibetan Buddhism

⁴ State Administration for Religious Affairs of the People's Republic of China (SARA), Order No. 5 (2007).

⁵ Dalai Lama. (2011). Statement on the Issue of His Reincarnation. DalaiLama.com

Tibetan Buddhist community, particularly the exiled Tibetan leadership and followers of the current 14th Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso.⁶

VIII. The Dalai Lama's Response

The 14th Dalai Lama has unequivocally rejected China's claims. He has stated repeatedly that the decision to reincarnate and how the process should unfold, is entirely up to the Tibetan people and the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. In a 2011 statement, he said he might choose to reincarnate outside of China or even end the lineage altogether if the political context made genuine reincarnation impossible.⁷ The Dalai Lama has also suggested that the next incarnation could be a woman, a break with precedent that underscores his focus on compassion and inclusivity over rigid tradition. The 14th Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, has taken a clear and resolute stand: only the Tibetan Buddhist leadership—primarily his own Gaden Phodrang Trust—should have the authority to select his successor, rejecting any interference by the Chinese government.⁸ He has even raised the possibility of a democratic system to identify his successor or appointing a regent-like figure. Leave instructions for his followers to find his successor without Chinese involvement.⁹

Gaden Phodrang Trust's Authority In July 2025, marking his 90th birthday, the Dalai Lama affirmed that the Gaden Phodrang Trust established by him and based in Dharamshala is solely responsible for identifying the 15th Dalai Lama, according to centuries-old traditions. China has no role in this process.¹⁰ **Birth in the "Free World"** He stated his reincarnation will occur outside Chinese-controlled territory, underscoring that the next Dalai Lama would be born in a "free world," directly opposing China's plan to locate the reincarnation within Tibet and subject it to state control.¹¹ **Opposition to China's Golden Urn System:** China insists on using the Qing-era Golden Urn lot-drawing method and governmental approval for reincarnated lamas, but the Dalai Lama and his representatives have denounced this as a "state-controlled lottery" with no spiritual legitimacy.¹² **Rejection of a Beijing-Appointed Dalai Lama** He

⁶ Global Times. (2020). China has final say on Dalai Lama reincarnation: official.

⁷ [The Office of His Holiness The Dalai Lama | The 14th Dalai Lama](#).

⁸ Dalai Lama's succession plan sets up potential clash with China - The Washington Post, Dalai Lama lays out succession plan, denying Chinese efforts at control, July 2, 2025.

⁹ [The Office of His Holiness The Dalai Lama | The 14th Dalai Lama](#)

¹⁰ [theweek.in+4reuters.com+4indiatoday.in+4](#), [What is the trust that will identify the Dalai Lama's successor? | Reuters](#), What is the trust that will identify the Dalai Lama's successor?, [Krishna N. Das](#), July 2, 2025

¹¹ [as.com+4reddit.com+4hindustantimes.com+4](#).https://www.reddit.com/r/GeopoliticsIndia/comments/1j8ljef/dalai_lama_says_his_successor_to_be_born_outside/?utm

¹² [timesofindia.indiatimes.com+15theweek.in+15nypost.com+15](#).<https://www.theweek.in/news/world/2025/07/02/damned-lies-tibetan-official-slams-china-for-hijacking-dalai-lama-succession-process.html?utm>, 'Damned lies': Tibetan official slams China for 'hijacking' Dalai Lama succession process, July 02, 2025.

has declared that any Dalai Lama appointed through Chinese state intervention will not be recognized by the Tibetan exile community or global supporters of Tibetan Buddhism.¹³

Potential Schism Ahead Observers warn that China may install its own rival Dalai Lama whom they would officially recognize leading to the possibility of two parallel claimants (one chosen by exiled Tibetan religious bodies, one imposed by Beijing).¹⁴ Historical Control Since 2007, China's Religious Affairs Regulations have mandated state approval for high lama reincarnations, aiming to institutionalize governmental control. Tibetan leaders argue that this breaches centuries of Tibetan religious authority.¹⁵ Middle-Way Approach Despite all this, the Dalai Lama continues to promote autonomy not independence for Tibet, advocating a peaceful coexistence within China while preserving Tibetan culture and religion.¹⁶

IX. The Panchen Lama Precedent

A significant flashpoint was the 1995 selection of the Panchen Lama, the second-most important figure in Tibetan Buddhism. The Dalai Lama recognized a six-year-old boy named Gedhun Choekyi Nyima as the 11th Panchen Lama, but Chinese authorities detained the boy and installed their own candidate. Gedhun has not been seen publicly since, and his fate remains unknown. This precedent has led many to fear that Beijing will similarly impose its own choice for the next Dalai Lama.¹⁷

X. The Future of Tibetan Buddhism

As the 14th Dalai Lama nears the end of his life, Tibetan Buddhism stands at a crossroads. The future of the faith and its most visible leader will depend not only on spiritual decisions but also on geopolitical maneuvering. The ultimate outcome may redefine Tibetan identity for generations and set a precedent for how modern states engage with ancient religious institutions. The controversy over the Dalai Lama's succession is a clash between religious freedom and state control, and between Tibetan cultural identity and Chinese sovereignty claims. The outcome will shape not just Tibetan Buddhism, but the global

¹³ [bhaskarenglish.in+10time.com+10secure.freetibet.org+10](https://www.bhaskarenglish.in+10time.com+10secure.freetibet.org+10). [Miranda Jeyaretnam](https://www.mirandajeyaretnam.com), [Dalai Lama Makes Major Statement About Future | TIME](https://www.time.com/7299462/dalai-lama-statement-birthday-successor-reincarnation-tibetan-buddhism-china-explainer/?utm_source=twitter&utm_medium=social), Jul 2, 2025, With Future in Doubt, 90-Year-Old Dalai Lama Says He Will Not Be the Last.

¹⁴ [reddit.com](https://www.reddit.com), [https://time.com/7299462/dalai-lama-statement-birthday-successor-reincarnation-tibetan-buddhism-china-explainer/?utm](https://time.com/7299462/dalai-lama-statement-birthday-successor-reincarnation-tibetan-buddhism-china-explainer/?utm_source=twitter&utm_medium=social), With Future in Doubt, 90-Year-Old Dalai Lama Says He Will Not Be the Last.

¹⁵ [timesofindia.indiatimes.com+7en.wikipedia.org+7en.wikipedia.org+7](https://www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com+7en.wikipedia.org+7en.wikipedia.org+7), [https://www.the-week.in/news/world/2025/07/02/damned-lies-tibetan-official-slams-china-for-hijacking-dalai-lama-succession-process.html?utm](https://www.the-week.in/news/world/2025/07/02/damned-lies-tibetan-official-slams-china-for-hijacking-dalai-lama-succession-process.html?utm_source=twitter&utm_medium=social), Damned lies': Tibetan official slams China for 'hijacking' Dalai Lama succession process, July 02, 2025.

¹⁶ [reuters.com+3dalailama.com+3en.wikipedia.org+3](https://www.reuters.com+3dalailama.com+3en.wikipedia.org+3), [https://www.dalailama.com /messages / tibet/middle-way-approach?utm](https://www.dalailama.com/messages/tibet/middle-way-approach?utm_source=twitter&utm_medium=social), His Holiness's Middle Way Approach For Resolving the Issue of Tibet

¹⁷ BBC News. (2020). China's kidnapped child: The mystery of the Panchen Lama. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-52773659>.

response to religious oppression and cultural autonomy. A Split in Succession, It's likely that two rival Dalai Lamas will emerge, one chosen by Beijing and another recognized by the Tibetan Buddhist community in exile. This would create a schism within Tibetan Buddhism, similar to the ongoing controversy over the Panchen Lama, where China's selected figure is largely rejected by exiled Tibetans.

Cultural Identity at Stake For many Tibetans, the Dalai Lama is not just a spiritual figure but a symbol of their national and cultural identity. A state appointed Dalai Lama would likely lack legitimacy among Tibetans and could be seen as a puppet of the Chinese state. **International Diplomacy** The global community will likely be pressured to choose which Dalai Lama to recognize. This could become a flashpoint in China's relations with countries that host Tibetan communities or support religious freedom.

XI. Findings

- China asserts that it has the ultimate legal and historical right to approve all reincarnations of Tibetan lamas, including the Dalai Lama.
- The 14th Dalai Lama, strongly opposes Chinese interference in the reincarnation process. He insists that the selection of his successor is purely a religious matter, rooted in centuries-old Tibetan Buddhist tradition, and should be managed solely by the Gaden Phodrang Trust and senior Tibetan monks without state intervention.
- There is a high likelihood of two rival successors to the 14th Dalai Lama—one selected by the Tibetan exile community through traditional religious practices, and another appointed by the Chinese government via the Golden Urn system.
- This would create a major schism within Tibetan Buddhism, similar to the unresolved controversy over the Panchen Lama.
- The Dalai Lama symbolizes Tibetan cultural identity and autonomy; a state-appointed successor would likely be seen as illegitimate, intensifying Tibetan resistance and resentment.
- The Dalai Lama succession issue has global implications, as countries may face pressure to choose sides, risking tensions with China and fueling debates on human rights and religious freedom.
- China's 1995 detention of the Dalai Lama's chosen Panchen Lama and imposition of its own candidate highlights fears of political interference in Tibetan Buddhist reincarnation practices.

XII. Conclusion

The succession of the 14th Dalai Lama is no longer a purely spiritual matter it has evolved into a deeply contentious political and cultural struggle that reflects the broader conflict between Tibetan religious autonomy and Chinese state control. At the center of this controversy lies a stark contradiction: a centuries-old spiritual tradition, rooted in Tibetan Buddhist practices and sacred rituals, now faces a direct challenge from a modern, atheist state intent on asserting authority over religious succession. China's claim

to legal and historical oversight codified in regulations like the 2007 *Order No. 5* is seen by many Tibetans, human rights advocates, and international observers as an attempt to politicize and nationalize a spiritual process. The Chinese government's insistence on using the Golden Urn system and enforcing reincarnation permits effectively undermines the spiritual legitimacy of the process and reveals a broader strategy aimed at controlling Tibetan identity and suppressing dissent through religious co-optation. In contrast, the 14th Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, has taken a firm stance against Beijing's involvement. He has clearly stated that only Tibetan Buddhist authorities particularly the Gaden Phodrang Trust have the right to determine his reincarnation. His declaration that his successor will be born outside Chinese-controlled territory is a direct repudiation of China's claims and sets the stage for a potentially historic schism in Tibetan Buddhism.

This looming possibility of two rival Dalai Lamas one endorsed by the Chinese government and the other recognized by the Tibetan exile community raises urgent questions about legitimacy, religious freedom, and international recognition. The precedent of the Panchen Lama, where China's chosen figure is rejected by the Tibetan diaspora, suggests that a similar outcome is likely for a state-appointed Dalai Lama. Ultimately, this dispute transcends the issue of religious succession. It embodies the broader tensions over cultural preservation, spiritual self-determination, and the limits of authoritarian power. As the 14th Dalai Lama ages, the decisions made in the coming years will not only determine the future leadership of Tibetan Buddhism but will also influence the global discourse on religious autonomy, minority rights, and the intersection of faith and politics. In the end, the true test will be whether the world recognizes and upholds the spiritual agency of an oppressed people—or allows a sacred tradition to be redefined by political force.

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