



# Choosing the Next Dalai Lama: Sectarian and Geopolitical Dimensions of Incarnate Successionism in Tibetan Buddhism

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## Choosing the Next Dalai Lama: Sectarian and Geopolitical Dimensions of Incarnate Successionism in Tibetan Buddhism

*By Joshua Snider*

### SYNOPSIS

*This article explores the complex process of selecting the next Dalai Lama, examining internal sectarian dynamics within Tibetan Buddhism and external geopolitical pressures, especially from China and India. It highlights the risks of politicising religious succession and the evolving role of Tibetan leadership in exile.*

### COMMENTARY

On July 2, the Dalai Lama, on the occasion of his [90th birthday](#), affirmed that the institution of the Dalai Lama will persist after his passing. He also reiterated his 2011 declaration, which details the process for identifying his successor, with the Gaden Phodrang Trust holding exclusive authority over the succession. The approach taken by the Dalai Lama and his office in managing this transition is significant. It will be crucial in deciding whether this historic lineage maintains its spiritual legitimacy in the face of increasing political interference or faces potential fragmentation due to external pressures. This statement was followed by a [missive from the Chinese government](#), affirming Beijing's role in managing sectarian dynamics within the Tibetan Buddhist Sangha.

This short piece examines two distinct but related issues: the internal issues within the Tibetan Buddhist Sangha and the geopolitical context in which these issues unfold, with a particular focus on the roles of external actors, notably the governments of the People's Republic of China and India.

## **Background: The Tibetan Buddhist Sangha and “Political Buddhism”**

To understand succession dynamics within Tibetan political leadership, we need to briefly examine two facets of Tibet's version of “political Buddhism”: the intra-sectarian dimensions within the Tibetan Buddhist Sangha, which governs how the recognition of incarnate lamas functions – including the Dalai Lama – and the Dalai Lama's role as a religio-political leader.

Tibetan Buddhism comprises four distinct, functionally autonomous [schools or “lineages”](#): Nyingma, Kagyu, Sakya, and Gelug. The Dalai Lama belongs to the Gelug lineage and is the titular head of State, and since 1959, the head of the Tibetan government-in-exile. Each lineage has its leadership structure.

Consequently, while the Dalai Lama is a powerful figure and serves as the political voice of the Tibetan people, he does not make decisions on behalf of other lineages. For example, the Nyingma and Kagyu lineages, along with their respective leaderships, are not directly answerable to the Dalai Lama.

Regarding roles, “Lamas” are senior lineage holders with ecclesiastical and administrative responsibilities within their communities. The succession of leadership within lineages is governed by an intricate incarnate system (across all lineages). When a Lama passes away, their [reincarnation is recognised](#), and after appropriate training, that individual assumes the duties of the predecessor. Incarnate Lamas exist across all lineages, and when these individuals pass away, a search is conducted to identify their next incarnation.

The salient point is that the legitimacy of this system relies on mutual recognition, in which senior Lamas from different lineages participate in the recognition process.

Therefore, the search and recognition of the next Dalai Lama, according to tradition, involve other important lineage holders across different sects. Conversely, the recognition of significant lineage holders in other sectors involves acknowledgement from the Dalai Lama. The Dalai Lama thus plays a consequential role, and considerable attention has been devoted to how future successions may unfold, particularly given that this is the first such process since the Tibetan government escaped to India. In this sense, there are [geopolitical dynamics](#) at stake in the system of selecting incarnate Lamas.

## **The Geopolitical Dimension**

China's interest in managing the Dalai Lama transition, or the recognition process, is a strategic aspect of its broader [geopolitical interests](#), rooted in maintaining sovereignty and regional stability. The Tibetan spiritual and political leader symbolise Tibetan identity and autonomy, and Beijing views his influence as a challenge to its control over Tibet. China's government asserts that the Dalai Lama is subject to state-approved succession procedures, emphasising the importance of adhering to Chinese laws and sovereignty over religious matters.

Historically, China's interest in controlling the Dalai Lama's transition stems from its desire to prevent any opposition or independence movements that could inspire

Tibetan separatism. The Chinese government has taken measures to influence religious institutions, promote patriotic education, and install state-approved religious leaders. This control extends to selecting the next Dalai Lama, possibly through government-sanctioned mechanisms like the Chinese Buddhist Association or similar bodies, to neutralise the spiritual leader's influence.

Internationally, China's approach aims to project strength and sovereignty, discouraging external influences that might support Tibetan independence or human rights advocacy. Managing the Dalai Lama's succession serves as both a domestic policy tool and an assertion of China's territorial integrity, ensuring that Tibetan religious leadership aligns with Beijing's political framework.

There is also a regional dynamic at play. India has hosted the Tibetan government in exile since 1960 and currently hosts between [70,000 and 80,000](#) stateless Tibetan refugees. In addition to the Tibetan refugee population in India, who are not Indian nationals, India has its own ethnic Tibetan population in the Himalayan territories of Ladakh and Sikkim. And then there is Bhutan, which is an independent, mostly ethnic-Tibetan absolute monarchy that maintains deep defence and trade ties with [India](#). In this sense, China's geopolitical interests are twofold: first, to quell separatism in its Tibetan territory, and second, to manage Tibetan Buddhism in the broader Himalayan world, outside its sovereign territory.

One of the primary ways China has sought to achieve favourable outcomes in the Himalayan world is by intervening in the internal succession process across various Tibetan Buddhist lineages. Over the past 30 years, China has become increasingly assertive in its efforts to manage the internal processes within the Tibetan Buddhist Sangha, particularly concerning the selection of incarnate Lamas, including those who have a say in recognising the next Dalai Lama.

The case of the Panchen Lama stands out in this regard. The Panchen Lama is the second highest-ranking Lama in the Gelug school. On May 14, 1995, the Dalai Lama acknowledged [Gedhun Choekyi Nyima](#) as the Panchen Lama, the 11th reincarnation of his predecessor, who had passed away in 1989. This decision angered Chinese officials, who disapproved of the selection. Three days afterwards, the boy, along with his family and teacher, was kidnapped and has been missing ever since. A few months later, the Chinese government appointed [Gyaltzen Norbu](#) as the Panchen Lama.

## **The Future of Tibet**

China's assertiveness regarding the succession within Tibetan Buddhist lineages reveals the extent to which it seeks to manage religious life within its territory and its near abroad in the Himalayan world. To the extent that China's interests are evident, exerting direct influence over the recognition of incarnate lamas and trying to impose its own Dalai Lama is counter productive. Not only will a Chinese-picked Dalai Lama resolutely lack legitimacy in all corners, but it will make Beijing appear needlessly authoritarian in the Himalayan world.

There is also a need to distinguish between the future of Tibet as a political construct (and the political aspiration of ethnic Tibetans in China) on one hand, and the future of Tibetan Buddhism on the other. While Tibet was a theocracy, and in this sense,

there was no functional separation between the state and the Sangha, the dynamics of post-1960s absorption and Sinification of Tibet have changed this reality.

Moreover, as the remaining Tibetan refugees are resettled in third countries and integrated into India, the role of the Tibetan Government in exile will likely change in the coming decades. In this sense, the role of the Dalai Lama as a political leader of the Tibetan people will no doubt change.

It is also important to remember that Tibetan Buddhism does not rise and fall with the Dalai Lama. The lineages of Tibetan Buddhism are functionally autonomous, and there is a great deal of independence within the lineages outside Chinese territory.

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