China steps up discredited attempts to control Dalai Lama's succession

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- Chinese Communist Party authorities have stepped up efforts to control the succession of the Dalai Lama by hosting their first major training on reincarnation involving monks from prominent Tibetan monasteries. Signaling their desire to exclude the Dalai Lama from playing any role in his own succession, a senior official at the training said the reincarnation system is "never a religious-only issue or a living Buddha's personal right" but "an important representation of the Communist Party of China's strategies and policies in the region." This statement can also be seen as a blunt warning to any Tibetans loyal to the Dalai Lama.¹
- At the same time, the Chinese-installed Panchen Lama, whom Beijing is using to help gain control over Tibetan Buddhism, has been on an "inspection tour" of monasteries and villages in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), including in sensitive areas close to the Indian border. China’s leader Xi Jinping is expected to visit India soon after the upcoming 70th anniversary of the People’s Republic of China on Oct. 1.
- Later this year, the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) is convening a Special General Meeting of Tibetans from across the international Tibetan diaspora. The meeting agenda includes a discussion on the relationship between the Dalai Lamas and the Tibetan people.
- Beijing’s intensive focus on controlling the Dalai Lama’s succession reflects its frustration at its own lack of legitimacy among Tibetans. Despite the harshness of the Chinese Communist Party’s campaigns against religion, loyalty to the Dalai Lama among Tibetans remains constant. The Dalai Lama has made it clear that only he has authority over his reincarnation, an authority that is accepted by Tibetans, by followers of Tibetan Buddhism worldwide and by the international community.

According to Chinese state media, around 100 Tibetan Buddhist monks from 73 monasteries attended a “training session on reincarnation for a living Buddha” that started on Aug. 23, in which they studied government “management of the reincarnation system” and the Communist Party’s approved version of history and rituals for reincarnation.²

The training underlined the Chinese government’s message that it will prevent any involvement of the Dalai Lama in his own reincarnation, and in turn shut down any possibility of a return to his homeland. The state media outlet Global Times reported that “holding a training session suggested that reincarnation, written in government regulations and embedded in Tibetan Buddhism, will be carried out properly and not affected by any individual or the ‘Dalai Lama's separatist clique,’” citing researcher Penpa Lhamo (Chinese transliteration Bianba Lamu), head of the South Asia Institute of

¹ Suolang Renzeng (Chinese transliteration of Sonam Rinzin), a Tibetan official who is deputy chief of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference Tibet Autonomous Regional Committee, was cited as saying by Global Times on August 25, 2019, http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1162625.shtml
² Global Times, August 25, 2019, http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1162625.shtml
the Tibetan Academy of Social Sciences.³ (Penpa Lhamo has previously blamed the “Dalai clique” for “manipulating” Tibetan monks to set themselves on fire, upholding the official Chinese government position on self-immolation.)⁴

The latest official statements on reincarnation include much more blunt and explicit references to the Dalai Lama in comparison with Beijing’s 2007 “Management measures for the reincarnation of living Buddhas in Tibetan Buddhism” (also known as Order No. Five), which stated for the first time in legislation that all reincarnated lamas (known as “tulkus”) must have Chinese government approval.⁵ While these earlier measures clearly emerged from an acute awareness of the Dalai Lama’s continued influence in Tibet, and a political imperative to supplant him, he was not specifically named in Order No. Five.

The current Communist Party boss of the TAR, Wu Yingjie, received the monks and other delegates at the closing ceremony of the reincarnation training on Aug. 29. At the closing ceremony, Wu emphasized the importance of reincarnation being under Communist Party control in the heightened period prior to the 70th anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic of China on Oct. 1.

Wu stressed that it was necessary “to take Xi Jinping’s new era of socialism with Chinese characteristics as the guide, do a good job in the management and training of living Buddhas in accordance with the law, and constantly promote Tibetan Buddhism to adapt to the socialist society [in order to contribute to] our region’s long-term development and long-term stability.” He referred to the importance of welcoming “the 70th anniversary of the founding of New China with outstanding achievements.”⁶

Wu also emphasized the importance of “Sinicization” of the Tibetan Buddhist religion, saying that it is “interpreted in accordance with the requirements of contemporary China’s development and in line with the Chinese traditional culture.” In January, China announced a five-year plan of “Sinicization” to “integrate” religions “with Chinese culture,”⁷ which involves unprecedentedly systematic efforts to mold and shape Tibetan Buddhism to the dictates of the Communist Party in line with increased regulations that have already deepened religious oppression over the last decade. Altogether, this presents a historic threat to the survival of Tibetan religious identity.⁸

⁴ Penpa Lhamo was speaking in Berlin as the leader of a delegation from the TAR during German-Chinese Tibetan Culture Week 2013. According to an official media report of the exchange, Penpa Lhamo told a German group: “The main reason why some Tibetan Buddhist monks burning themselves is because they are manipulated and brainwashed by the Dalai Clique. For instance, before each incident happened, someone was already aware of the time and location and had a camera, and prepared people to prevent public and security personnel from rescuing the self-immolator.” In a clear disregard of the exile government’s position, she added that: “The ‘Tibetan government in exile’ openly appreciated such inhumane behaviour, and even takes instigating others to burn themselves as its policy”. October 23, 2013, http://www.chinatibetnews.com/lyrw/zxkj/201501/t20150130_263182.html
⁷ The Global Times highlighted this on September 7, 2017, when it stated: “The direction of religions is to integrate them with Chinese culture.” China passes five-year plan to sinicise Islam, as Beijing tightens grip on major faiths in China, January 9, 2019, https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/china-passes-five-year-plan-to-sinicise-islam-as-beijing-tightens-grip-on-major
The “training” on reincarnation involved influential figures in the TAR who are being primed by party authorities for involvement in the succession issue. The most critical figure in this approach is the Chinese-installed Panchen Lama, Gyaltse Norbu, who embarked on a major tour of the TAR this past summer. Gyaltse Norbu, known among Tibetans as “Gya Panchen” (Chinese Panchen), was briefed by Wu before his tour, and it is notable that his role appears to have been extended beyond the religious sphere to incorporate “survey and research” activities. It was in this context that Gyaltse Norbu’s visit to Jaggang village in Rutok, Ngari (Chinese: Ali) was undertaken.

While state media described Jaggang as a “typical plateau village,” it is close to a sensitive border. Jaggang is near Demchok in Ladakh, India, one of a number of areas described as “disputed” by Beijing on the “Line of Actual Control” stretching from eastern Ladakh to Arunachal Pradesh in India (the latter is claimed as “Southern Tibet” by the Chinese leadership). The dispute over territory in border areas is at the heart of India-China tensions, and there are frequent face-offs and transgressions between the Chinese and Indian troops in this area.

Chinese media featured images of Norbu chatting to villagers at Jaggang, with a backdrop of pictures on the wall of Xi Jinping and Mao Zedong, and reporting that he “carefully asked about the family’s production and living conditions. ‘Are there changes between your past and present life?’ ‘Are you keeping well; what about your knees?’ ‘Do you go out for a travel?’ ‘How do you keep warm in winter?’ ‘How do the livestock sustain when it snows?’ ‘How many TV channels do you get?’”

He also attended a ceremony at a monastery in Purang (Chinese: Burang) in Ngari, close to the border of Nepal and India, and the sacred pilgrimage site of Mount Kailash and Lake Mansarovar. In August 2018 Gyaltse Norbu visited the sacred lake of Lhamo Latso in Lhokha (Chinese: Shannan), TAR.

While in Ngari, the Chinese-selected Panchen Lama visited a monastery of the Sakya school of Tibetan Buddhism, indicating that the Chinese authorities intend him to represent all schools of Buddhism, not only the Gelug (Yellow Hat) school to which he belongs together with the Dalai Lama.

Most Tibetans do not recognize or accept Gyaltse Norbu; they are loyal instead to the the Panchen Lama recognized by the Dalai Lama, Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, whose whereabouts have been unknown since he was abducted by the Chinese government in 1995. Gedhun Choekyi Nyima’s absence has come to symbolize the anguish of Tibetans at China’s efforts to undermine and eviscerate their religious and cultural identity. Historically, the Panchen Lama has been one of Tibet’s most revered religious figures, with a unique relationship to the Dalai Lama. Some Panchen Lamas have previously played a role in the recognition and subsequent education of Dalai Lamas, and vice versa, which is why China feels control over the institution is considered to be so crucial.

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9 This was flagged from his arrival in Lhasa in June, when the state media reported: “On June 11, the Panchen Erdeni Choikyi Gyalo, a member of the Standing Committee of the National Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference and a vice president of the Buddhist Association of China, arrived in Lhasa by plane to conduct research and Buddhist activities.” China Tibet Online, June 28, 2019, http://eng.tibet.cn/eng/news/tibetan/201906/t20190628_6623271.html

10 Underscoring China’s claim to one of the disputed areas on the border with India, in October, 2017, Party Secretary and President Xi Jinping took the unusual step of writing to a Tibetan family to help them safeguard the zone.


12 A state media report stated that: “On July 22, the 11th Panchen Lama came to Khorchak Monastery, a famous monastery of the Sakya sect of Tibetan Buddhism. Khorchak Monastery, located in Burang County, was built by the Tibetan translator Rinchen Zangpo in the year 996 AD and is over 1,000 years old.” (July 29, 2019, http://eng.tibet.cn/eng/news/tibetan/201907/t20190729_6647115.html).
During the same tour of the TAR this past summer, Norbu travelled to Nagchu (Chinese: Naqu), where he reiterated the importance of “developing Tibetan Buddhism in the Chinese context and advancing Tibetan Buddhism to adapt to socialist society.”

**China warns India not to get involved in Dalai Lama’s succession**

Just as Gyaltser Norbu arrived in Lhasa, Tibet’s capital, in June, China gave a direct warning to India not to interfere in the process of the Dalai Lama’s reincarnation. A group of Indian journalists were invited to Lhasa, where they were told by Wang Neng Sheng, a Chinese official, that: "The reincarnation of the Dalai Lama is a historical, religious and political issue. There are established historical institutions and formalities for the reincarnation of the Dalai Lama. The Dalai Lama’s reincarnation is not decided by his personal wish or by some group of people living in other countries.”

Zha Luo, director at the Beijing-based China Tibetology Research Centre, a government-run think tank, was even clearer in his comments, saying that any refusal by India to recognize the future Dalai Lama chosen by China will impact bilateral ties. Zha Luo was reported by Indian newspapers as saying: “Since the reincarnation of the Dalai Lama is an important issue for China any friendly country or friend of China would not interfere or meddle on the issue.” But the same Indian newspaper report cited a spokesperson of the Ministry of External Affairs in Delhi saying in March last year: “The government of India’s position on His Holiness the Dalai Lama is clear and consistent. He is a revered religious leader and is deeply respected by the people of India. There is no change in that position. His Holiness is accorded all freedom to carry out his religious activities in India.”

China’s warnings to India on this matter will be under sharp focus during a visit of China’s leader Xi Jinping to Delhi in October. The Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) is also convening a Special General Meeting of Tibetans from across the world in October, and the agenda includes a discussion on the relationship between the Dalai Lamas and the Tibetan people. Under the Tibetan Charter in Exile, the CTA can convene such meetings of community representatives to discuss “emergency or significant public issues.”

**Tibetan disquiet over China’s efforts to subvert reincarnation system**

Fundamental to Tibetan Buddhism is the belief that the purpose of enlightenment is to benefit other living beings, rather than a personal quest for liberation. When a fully enlightened being chooses to manifest in an emanated human body in order to benefit all living beings, that emanation is referred to as a “bodhisattva”. The Dalai Lama is believed by Tibetan Buddhists to be an emanation of Avalokitesvara, the bodhisattva of compassion, known in Tibet as Chenresig.

“Since the pursuit of spiritual realization founded on the generation of altruism and compassion was the *raison d’être* of Tibetan Buddhist practice and institutions, it was presumed that lamas, or higher-status monks and spiritual masters (gurus in Sanskrit), who were most accomplished in this endeavor would choose to return and their reincarnations could be identified,” says the book “Sacred

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13 Official website, Tibet.cn, August 21, 2019, http://enq.tibet.cn/eng/index/bjtj/201908/t20190821_6667056.html The report stated that: “The Panchen Lama arrived in Nagchu on August 4 after carrying out various Buddhist and social activities in Ngari. [...] On August 8, the Panchen Lama held a discussion with representatives of religious circles in Nagchu.”


15 ibid.
China’s intensive efforts to subvert and co-opt the traditional process of reincarnation appear to reflect their insecurities and lack of legitimacy among Tibetans. But this systematic, all-encompassing political approach to controlling succession and appropriating traditions at the heart of Tibetan Buddhism has led to alarm among both elder Tibetan scholars and a younger generation who lacks the same historical context.

Elder scholar Jampel Gyatso, who is based in China and was one of the first generation of Tibetans to work with Chinese Communists, expressed this disquiet in an eloquent and bold essay that was briefly online in 2015. Gyatso referred to the party’s approach to reincarnate lamas in Tibet as the ‘poisonous fruit’ of policy developed over the last 50 years by the Chinese leadership, specifically referring to Ye Xiaowen, the former head of the State Administration for Religious Affairs.

Younger generation Tibetan intellectuals point to the dangers of Communist Party control over every Tibetan “tulku” (reincarnate lama), given the development of a complex framework of training and education. In addition to the training on the party’s position on reincarnation highlighted in this report, another new development has been the visits of Tibetan tulkus to “red” sites connected to Communist Party political heritage. On one such “patriotic” tour, young Tibetan lamas visited a memorial museum for Mao Zedong at his birthplace in Hunan and military bases. One of the young Tibetan “Living Buddhas” on the tour was pictured in the state media offering a "khata," or white blessing scarf, to a statue of Mao.

A Tibetan scholar who lives in China and whose views were conveyed to the International Campaign for Tibet, said: “China sees that Tibetan Buddhist monasteries were the center of politics, economy and culture of Tibetan areas in the history of their rule since the 1950s. In order to pass on their teachings and control a large population of Tibetan Buddhist monks and nuns, as well as to strengthen the political, economic, cultural and judicial functions of monasteries, it has developed a systematic and complex system of monastic internal management. This system even takes into account the different schools of Tibetan Buddhism and their different characteristics, in order to focus on how to better integrate the traditional modes of management into new Communist Party methodologies.”

Another Tibetan intellectual from Tibet, who cannot be identified due to the lack of freedom to speak openly, spoke about the “tough policies” developed in terms of training Tibetan reincarnate lamas. Referring to Tibetan tulkus officially approved by the Chinese authorities and included on China’s “Living Buddha” database, the scholar said: “Every single individual now on the official reincarnation

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18 Global Times (in English), November 6, 2016, and Tibet.cn in Chinese on November 5, 2016
19 “Living Buddhas” (Chinese: huofo) is a Chinese term which misrepresents Tibetan conceptions of the system. In his book “The Buddha Party”, John Powers writes: “[The use of this term] implies that tulkus regard themselves as buddhas, but most are believed to be bodhisattvas. Most are reincarnations of deceased religious figures, but only a few are construed as buddhas by the tradition. Most tulkus are thus better understood as buddhas-in-training following the path to awakening and working for the benefit of others.” (Oxford University Press, 2017).
20 In 2016 the development of an online database of Party-approved Tibetan Buddhist reincarnations was announced. This was consistent with the 2007 measures demonstrating the Party’s agenda to undermine and supplant the Tibetan religious hierarchy and weaken the authority of legitimate Tibetan religious leaders including the Dalai Lama. International Campaign for Tibet report, “The “poisonous fruit” of Tibet’s religious policy as China publishes ‘Living Buddha’ database, November 2016.”
database has to go through an entire political procedure, entirely separate to a religious training, in which they are advised about the need for their career and role in the religious community to motivate religious believers to love the Party, love the country and ‘social stability maintenance’ work, as well as the fight against ‘separatism’ and Dalai Lama. This training is focused on manipulating them to be a bridge between the Party and religious community and believers. That means that now the Tibetan reincarnations are becoming Communist-trained talents rather than religious leaders, which is very disturbing for the future of Tibetan Buddhism. The government is manipulating the role of reincarnation for engaging religious believers and conveying the Party’s ideology and propaganda to grassroots society. This is also creating a distance between reincarnate lamas and Buddhist believers as the Party is using them in this way. Also, the government is restricting the religious activities of those with reincarnate lama status who are not approved by the Chinese Communist Party.”

The Dalai Lama’s position, supported by the Tibetan people, is explicit in saying that only the Dalai Lama himself can decide issues related to his reincarnation. In a statement on Sept. 24, 2011, the Dalai Lama said: “Reincarnation is a phenomenon which should take place either through the voluntary choice of the concerned person or at least on the strength of his or her karma, merit and prayers. Therefore, the person who reincarnates has sole legitimate authority over where and how he or she takes rebirth and how that reincarnation is to be recognized. It is a reality that no one else can force the person concerned, or manipulate him or her. It is particularly inappropriate for Chinese Communists, who explicitly reject even the idea of past and future lives […] to meddle in the system of reincarnation and especially the reincarnations of the Dalai Lamas […] Such brazen meddling contradicts their own political ideology and reveals their double standards. Should this situation continue in the future, it will be impossible for Tibetans and those who follow the Tibetan Buddhist tradition to acknowledge or accept it.”21

For Tibetans, this closes off any possibility that options presented by Beijing, such as a Chinese-installed successor, could be legitimate.

The Dalai Lama’s authority and the principle of religious freedom is also upheld by US lawmakers; in April 2019, US Sen. Cory Gardner (R-Colo.) said at a hearing of a Senate Foreign Relations Committee subcommittee that the US Congress would not recognize a Dalai Lama chosen by the Chinese government.22 At a hearing of the Senate Foreign Relations Asia Subcommittee, Said Gardner: “Let me be very clear: The United States Congress will never recognize a Dalai Lama that is selected by the Chinese.” Gardner, who is also the subcommittee chairman, added: “His Holiness has laid out [his] succession. Only then will the US follow that succession.”

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