

The Chinese Communists Find Religion
The Struggle for the Selection of the Next Dalai Lama

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Lhamo Thondup was just two years old when he was recognized as the reincarnation of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama. The Great Thirteenth, as he is popularly known, had died in Lhasa in 1933 at the age of fifty-eight. The team charged with finding his new incarnation was composed of leading lamas from monasteries in Tibet, and some were eminent reincarnations themselves. Clues and omens unique to Tibetan Buddhism—some provided by the Thirteenth Dalai Lama himself—guided their search. The Dalai Lama had intimated that his reincarnation would be found in the east. Thus, when the head of the embalmed Great Thirteenth was discovered to have turned overnight from facing south to pointing northeast, the search team was certain which direction their journey should take. When the regent in charge of the search visited the sacred Lhamo Lhatso Lake and gazed into its deep blue waters, the characters for “Ah,” “Ka,” and “Ma” appeared, and he saw a hilltop monastery with a golden roof and an ordinary farmer’s house with strangely configured gutters.

The “Ah” led the search team to the Amdo region of eastern Tibet, then governed by the Hui (Muslim) warlord Ma Bufang as *Qinghai*, as the region is known in Chinese. The “Ka” and the vision of a monastery led them to Amdo’s Kumbum monastery, one of Tibetan Buddhism’s leading seats of religious learning, built by the founder of the *Gelugpa*, or Yellow Hat, school of Buddhism to which all Dalai Lamas have belonged. From Kumbum monastery the search team was led to Taktser village and the house with strange gutters, where they met Lhamo Thondup. When the little boy correctly chose from an assorted selection of articles only those previously owned and used by the Thirteenth Dalai Lama, the search committee knew that the new Dalai Lama had been found.

On 6 July of this year, millions of Tibetans around the world celebrated the eighty-second birthday of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, the man most refer to simply as “His Holiness.” For Tibetans in exile, the celebrations were held openly and without fear, with religious ceremonies, song and dance performances, and holiday meals. For followers inside China, where even photographs of the Dalai Lama may be forbidden, recognitions of the occasion were surreptitious and discreet—an extra offering on the altar where the family’s protective Buddhist statues stand guard, perhaps. While the Dalai Lama’s health continues to be remarkably good, and he believes that he could live to well past one hundred years, anxieties about the future of the Dalai Lama as both a man and an institution are rife. The Chinese government on the one hand and the Dalai Lama and his followers on the other are at apparently irreconcilable odds over what the future of the Dalai Lama will be.

The first and most fundamental question is whether the tradition of reincarnation will continue upon this Dalai Lama’s death—whether the current Dalai Lama will be followed by a new, Fifteenth Dalai Lama. If this Dalai Lama is to be reincarnated, the question is how and by whom the choice will be made. Most vexing of all perhaps is the issue of where the next Dalai Lama might be found. The Fourteenth Dalai Lama has lived in Dharamsala, India since 1959 when he and a devoted entourage of bodyguards and fighters fled by night after long simmering popular anger against the Chinese in Lhasa had led to a massive, spontaneous protest that the Dalai Lama and his government were powerless to stop. Despite years of discussions, the Chinese government has still not allowed the Dalai Lama to return home.

From the official Chinese perspective, only the central government of China can decide whether the institution of the Dalai Lama can survive or end.¹ That decision seems already to have been made. There will be a Fifteenth Dalai Lama, and the Chinese government will choose him. Any candidate put forward directly by the Dalai Lama would be declared illegal. The process by which the Chinese would make the choice has yet to be fully articulated, but some clues are provided in the guidelines drawn up by the State Religious Affairs Bureau in 2007 for the process of choosing reincarnations of Tibetan “living Buddhas.” Buddhist Associations and management committees within key monasteries in China are likely to guide the search, and final approval would rest with the State Council, the country’s highest level of government power. The process would likely include the process used (apparently only twice) during the Manchu dynasty, of pulling a slip of paper from a golden urn containing the names of the several final candidates.² The rules leave little doubt that the next Dalai Lama will be found in China. They specify that no foreign individual or institution can be involved in the process. The Dalai Lama is equally clear that only he has the right to decide whether he will be

¹ Chris Buckley, “China’s Tensions with Dalai Lama Spill into the Afterlife,” *New York Times*, 11 March 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/12/world/asia/chinas-tensions-with-dalai-lama-spill-into-the-afterlife.html> (date accessed: 26 April 2018).

² Central Government of the People’s Republic of China, “藏传佛教活佛转世管理办法 [Tibetan Buddhism’s Living Buddha Reincarnation Management Measures],” 国家宗教事务局令 [Order of the State Bureau of Religious Affairs], http://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2008/content_923053.htm (date accessed: 26 April 2018).

reincarnated, how the choice would be made, and where he might be found. But the Dalai Lama has yet to decide whether he actually will reincarnate, and recent public statements have aroused speculation that he may not. In conversations with Indian author Pankaj Mishra, the Dalai Lama seemed to call for the end of the institution, describing it as outdated and backward. In an interview with the BBC, he similarly suggested that the time may have come for the tradition to end while there is still a popular Dalai Lama. “There is no guarantee that some stupid Dalai Lama won’t come next,” he said, “Someone who will disgrace himself or herself. That would be very sad. So much better that a centuries old tradition should cease at the time of a quite popular Dalai Lama.”³

Despite his public and possibly whimsical musings, a document promulgated by the Dalai Lama in September 2011 remains his only official statement on his future. While the document makes clear that he has still not decided on whether to reincarnate, the process through which that decision will be made is spelled out. The decision will be made when the Dalai Lama is “about ninety” (which will be in 2025) and will be based on his consultations with “the high Lamas of the Tibetan Buddhist traditions, the Tibetan public, and other concerned people who follow Tibetan Buddhism.” He also explains that if a new incarnation is to be chosen, the responsibility would rest with his own personal office and be based on his own written instructions. The Dalai Lama also declared that any candidate chosen for political ends or by the People’s Republic of China would be considered illegitimate.⁴

If the Dalai Lama’s decision about whether to reincarnate really rests with the Tibetan lamas, the Tibetan public, and other followers of Tibetan Buddhism, the outcome of his consultations seems a foregone conclusion. The Fourteenth Dalai Lama is one of the most revered, popular, and beloved of those who have gone before him, and his proposed consultations will be with those who know him best and revere him the most. On a visit to Dharamsala not long ago, when I asked a young Tibetan woman what she thought might happen when the Dalai Lama leaves this world, she burst into tears. Minutes passed before she could compose herself. Her answer, when it came, echoed those of others with whom I had raised the question. “He is everything to me,” she said. “I’m afraid I could not live without him.”

Indeed, some Tibetans living inside China have proved that they literally cannot live without the Dalai Lama. Since widespread protests against Chinese rule swept the Tibetan plateau in 2008, 150 Tibetans, the majority of them young men, have set themselves on fire, whether in protest or despair.⁵ To the extent that individual cases are

³ “Dalai Lama concedes he may be the last,” *BBC*, 17 December 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-30510018> (date accessed: 26 April 2018).

⁴ His Holiness the Dalai Lama, “His Holiness the Dalai Lama’s Remarks on Retirement – March 19th, 2011” (remarks, public teaching at the main temple at Tsulagkhang, Dharamsala, 19 March 2011), <https://www.dalailama.com/messages/retirement-and-reincarnation/retirement-remarks> (date accessed: 26 April 2018).

⁵ International Campaign for Tibet, “Self-immolations by Tibetans,” <https://www.savetibet.org/resources/fact-sheets/self-immolations-by-tibetans/> (date accessed: 26 April 2018).

known, most died shouting the Dalai Lama's name and calling for his return to Tibet. While public opinion in Tibetan China is hard to gauge, everything we know suggests that the Dalai Lama continues to be revered. A world without a Dalai Lama is almost inconceivable to Tibetan Buddhists. Of course they would want a reincarnation.

Some, worried about the long interregnum between the discovery of a new Dalai Lama and his assumption of the office upon reaching majority, are calling for a rethinking about how the next Dalai Lama might be chosen. The interregnum, traditionally and almost inevitably, has been rife with political discord. Not only is endless jockeying for power among the people surrounding the immature Dalai Lama almost unavoidable, the regents charged with governing in the interim have sometimes been reluctant to cede power themselves. Several Dalai Lamas have been done away with before reaching majority, and others have died shortly after ascending the throne.

Some Tibetans in exile have begun discussing alternative methods—still Tibetan Buddhist in nature—that do not require the current incarnation to die before the new one is chosen. One method is through “selection,” a relatively straightforward process of convening a meeting of high lamas to choose the next Dalai Lama while the current one is still alive. The other is through a process of “emanation,” whereby the current, living incarnation “manifests” himself in another person, whether because that person has already reached a sufficiently high stage of spirituality and learning or because that person is deemed by strength of character to be worthy of being chosen as the Dalai Lama's disciple and hence trained as his successor. In this case, the Dalai Lama himself designates his own successor. Reincarnation by selection or manifestation both have the advantage of ensuring that the choice is incontrovertibly that of the living Dalai Lama and his highest spiritual advisors and would therefore be non-contentious, at least within the ranks of Tibetan Buddhist believers. The Dalai Lama himself is open to both of these methods. He mentions them in his official statement on reincarnation.

But whatever method is finally decided for the choice of the next Dalai Lama, a serious hurdle remains: Where is the next Dalai Lama to be found? Previous reincarnations have been found only in Tibet, China, and Mongolia. Without a new agreement between the Chinese government and the Dalai Lama, China and Tibet (because Tibet is now part of China) are not realistic possibilities.

Mongolia is one possibility. The ties between Mongolia and Tibetan Buddhism are long and deep. It was the Mongolian Altan Khan who bestowed the title of Dalai Lama, meaning Ocean of Wisdom, upon the head of the *Gelugpa* school of Tibetan Buddhism during his visit to Mongolia in 1577, after which he declared Buddhism the official religion of Mongolia. The Fourth Dalai Lama was from Mongolia. Buddhism remains the predominant religion, and the current Dalai Lama has made several visits, enthusiastically welcomed by tens of thousands of followers and fueling speculation and hope that the next Dalai Lama might be Mongolian.

China's strong protests against the Dalai Lama's trip to Mongolia last November put a damper on that possibility. The visit took place at the invitation of one of Mongolia's

leading Tibetan Buddhist monasteries and hence was not governmental, but China objected nonetheless. When the Chinese canceled meetings with Mongolian officials about a badly needed loan and imposed new transport fees that tied up truck traffic at the China-Mongolia border for days in sub-zero weather, the Mongolian foreign minister assured China that the Dalai Lama would not be invited again.⁶

China's growing power and assertiveness, its insistence that the Dalai Lama is a "split-tist" seeking independence for Tibet, its reluctance to distinguish between church and state, and its willingness to engage in economic punishment against countries that do not bow to its dictates have compelled several countries to cave into China's protests against visits by the Dalai Lama. While the Dalai Lama is still welcomed in the United States and many countries in Europe and Asia, Chinese protests are becoming louder. India, which has provided him sanctuary for nearly sixty years, is the one country where his welcome continues to expand.

But the Chinese government has recently also protested one of the Dalai Lama's visits in India.

Indian maps show the mountain town of Tawang as a tiny speck just east of the far northeastern border of Bhutan and just south of the border with Tibet. A line starting from the Tibetan capital of Lhasa going due south and just slightly east would pass through Tawang. Until the early twentieth century, Tawang was part of Tibet, and its small population is composed of both Tibetans and members of the Monpa tribe. Both practice Tibetan Buddhism. The Sixth Dalai Lama was born there.

In 1914, as a result of the Simla Convention, the border between India and Tibet shifted southward, putting Tawang just inside the Indian border in the state of what is now Arunachal Pradesh. The line of demarcation came to be known as the McMahon line and has been contested ever since. The Chinese never signed or recognized the Simla Accords and continue to regard the territory as theirs. When the Dalai Lama's older brother, Gyalo Thondup, passed through in early 1952, the residents greeted him with enthusiasm, showering him with eggs, cheese, and meat. They thought he had come to reclaim Tawang for Tibet.

The Fourteenth Dalai Lama first visited Tawang in March 1959, after his two-week flight from Lhasa. It was there, he says, that he first felt freedom. He spent several days resting in its magnificent ancient monastery, built by the Fifth Dalai Lama, and recuperating from the arduous journey that had left him sick and exhausted. Jawaharlal Nehru granted him asylum, and the Dalai Lama announced the formation of a new government in exile and publicly renounced the Seventeen-Point Agreement that had been signed between China and Tibet in 1951, ceding sovereignty over Tibet to China while promising a high degree of autonomy.

⁶ Edward Wong, "Mongolia, With Deep Ties to Dalai Lama, Turns From Him Toward China," *New York Times*, 30 December 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/30/world/asia/china-mongolia-dalai-lama.html> (date accessed: 26 April 2018).

In April 2017, the Dalai Lama was once more warmly welcomed in Tawang, and many he met during his visit expressed their dream that the next Dalai Lama would be born there.⁷ Some saw this visit as a possible scouting expedition. Indeed, with so many other possibilities so clearly closed off, India is an obvious place for a reincarnation to appear. Tawang, with its long history of Tibetan Buddhism, seems an ideal choice.

But Chinese protests against the Dalai Lama's recent visit to Tawang had begun even while he was still en route. Arunachal Pradesh had been a Chinese target early in the 1962 Sino-Indian War, though most of the actual fighting took place in Aksai Chin, another disputed border area. The dispute has remained dormant for years, but China still claims both Arunachal Pradesh and Aksai Chin as its own. Whereas Deng Xiaoping once offered to forgo China's claim to Arunachal Pradesh if India conceded Aksai Chin, now China is offering India Aksai Chin in return for just the small northern part of Arunachal Pradesh that contains Tawang.⁸ China-India relations are entering a new phase of tension. The Chinese have accused Prime Minister Narendra Modi of taking a "different"—meaning more favorable—stance on the Dalai Lama issue and warned him against underestimating Beijing's determination to protect its core interests.⁹

Without major concessions, the likelihood is that there will be two Dalai Lamas, one chosen by the Chinese government and one selected according to the Dalai Lama's own instructions—one "official" Dalai Lama and one of the heart, as the Dalai Lama describes the possibility. Wherever the new Dalai Lama may be found, and however he may be selected, only the choice of the Dalai Lama will be legitimate, at least from the perspective of Tibetan Buddhists and all who believe in the freedom of religious belief and the separation of church and state. That legitimacy would only be enhanced if the new Dalai Lama were to be chosen by the method of selection or manifestation.

The possible legitimacy of the Chinese choice will be disadvantaged by the Chinese government's own lack of religious belief and its reliance on "established systems" of Tibetan Buddhism tracing back to the Qing dynasty, a period otherwise labeled by the Chinese government as "feudal." The party favors the process of reincarnation because it provides the opportunity for years of government schooling to instill "correct" values in the would-be Dalai Lama. Several past Chinese lama selections have gone badly wrong. The Tenth Panchen Lama, raised under the Chinese, wrote what must still stand as the most thorough and damning evidence-based critique of Communist Party rule written by a Chinese insider, for which the Panchen Lama spent years in prison.

⁷ Ellen Barry, "Dalai Lama's Journey Provokes China, and Hints at His Heir," *New York Times*, 6 April 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/06/world/asia/dalai-lama-successor-tibet-china-buddhism.html> (date accessed: 26 April 2018).

⁸ Ananth Krishnan, "China ready to go a deal with India for concessions in Tawang?," *India Today*, 2 March 2017, <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/aksai-chin-china-india-tawang-dai-bing-guo/1/895657.html> (date accessed: 26 April 2018).

⁹ "Unlike predecessors, Modi's stance different on Dalai Lama issue: China," *Times Now*, 5 April 2017, <http://www.timesnownews.com/india/video/unlike-predecessors-modi%E2%80%99s-stance-different-on-dalai-lama-issue-china/58777> (date accessed: 26 April 2018).

More recently, both the Arjia Rinpoche from Kumbum monastery and the Karmapa Lama, who stands third in the Tibetan Buddhist hierarchy, were raised under the party's watchful eye only to escape—the Arjia Rinpoche to the United States and the Karmapa Lama to India, outside Dharamsala.

The Tibetan government in exile is currently in a period of soul-searching about the fate of Tibet and Tibetans, focusing most intensely on what may be possible over the next fifty years. Optimistic predictions in this time of growing Chinese assertiveness in the world and intransigence with respect to the question of Tibet do not come easily. But in the long run, measured in centuries rather than decades, it is hard to believe that Tibetan Buddhism will not prevail. Tibetan Buddhism has already outlasted four dynasties and the Republic of China under Chiang Kai-shek. History suggests that authoritarian governments eventually fail while religion survives. Tibetan Buddhism has a good chance of outliving the People's Republic of China and the Chinese Communist Party but only if the institution of the Dalai Lama survives. Tibetan Buddhism needs a spiritual leader. Tibetan Buddhists need their spiritual guide. The institution is most likely to survive with a change in how the Dalai Lama is chosen. The alternatives are already on the Buddhist record and regarded as legitimate. Lobsang Sangay, the Harvard-educated, second-term prime minister of the Central Tibetan Administration in Dharamsala elected after the Dalai Lama withdrew from his political role, supports the method of emanation and hopes the decision will come soon. Many Tibetans hope that the Dalai Lama will not wait until he is ninety to decide. When I broached the subject with the Karmapa Lama a couple years ago, he too, said he hopes the Dalai Lama will make his decision soon.

That time, I hope, is near.

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