

The Dalai Lama, reincarnation and China's mounting Tibet problem
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Dalai Lama Illustrated/Getty Images© Illustrated/Getty Images

Mongolian-American boy unveiled as the third most important spiritual leader in Tibetan Buddhism. An American-Mongolian boy has been identified as the tenth incarnation of the Khalkha Jetsun Dhampa Rinpoché, the third highest-ranking spiritual leader in Tibetan Buddhism.

According to [The Times](#), the boy, believed to be around eight years old, was pictured for the first time participating in a ceremony alongside the 87-year-old Dalai Lama in Dharamshala, in the Indian state of Himachal Pradesh, earlier this month.

It was during this ceremony that the Dalai Lama announced to some 600 Mongolian followers and 5,000 monks and nuns that the tenth reincarnation of the Khalkha Jetsun Dhampa Rinpoché had been found.

Outside Buddhist and diplomatic circles the news went almost “unnoticed”, but in Mongolia it “provoked intense excitement among Buddhists, contempt among secular nationalists and alarm among those who fear that it will provoke the rage of the country’s huge and powerful neighbour, China”, said the paper.

The child will now find himself “at the centre of a tense geo-political ‘chess game’ being played out between powerful governments in east Asia”, said [The Times](#), “and the survival of one of the world’s leading religions may depend upon the outcome”.

How are spiritual leaders found?

The Jetsun Dhampa is a highly respected figure in Tibetan Buddhism and is considered the faith’s leader in Mongolia. The child, who reportedly has a twin, has now been recognized as the third most important spiritual leader in the religion, behind only the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama.

Tibetan Buddhists believe that after death the soul of a lama, or spiritual leader, “is reincarnated in a child, who is identified after lengthy rituals and divination’s”, said [The Times](#).

But “such recognition have often been a point of tension between [Tibet](#) and China”, said [CNBC](#), “as China claims sovereignty over Tibet and seeks to control the recognition of reincarnated leaders”. China has previously said it will only recognize Buddhist spiritual leaders whom its own government-approved appointees have chosen.

Will the move anger China?

The recognition of the tenth Khalkha Jetsun Dhampa Rinpoche has left [Xi Jinping](#)’s administration “stumped”, according to [First Post](#)’s opinion editor, Utpal Kumar. He added that no one would be “surprised” if China attempted to orchestrate a media campaign to ensure that the next Dalai Lama has Beijing’s blessing, while pressuring countries like India and Mongolia not to entertain such “Tibetan ‘fancies’”.

China has a long history of exerting control over Tibetan Buddhism’s spiritual leaders. In 1995, “the government kidnapped the second-highest Buddhist spiritual figure, the Panchen Lama, when he was six”, said [The Washington Post](#). “He and his family have not been seen since.”

Speaking to [The Times](#), Robbie Barnett, a Tibetan Buddhism expert at SOAS University of London, said that the announcement of the new Jetsun Dhampa could be “taken by China as a challenge to their past claim to sole authority in choosing lamas”. He added:

“These things can cascade into confrontation with China, which could penalize Mongolia in damaging ways.”

In 2016, the Dalai Lama made a series of visits to Mongolia. Beijing responded to the visits by “canceling diplomatic meetings, delaying loans and closing the border” with the country, said [The Times](#). The Mongolian government subsequently yielded to pressure, declaring that he would not be permitted to visit the country again.

Mongolia’s government is yet to comment on the latest developments, partly due to “a fear of China, based on its responses in the past”, said Barnett, highlighting “the extraordinary predicament of landlocked states that are completely vulnerable to powerful neighbour”.

Who will replace the Dalai Lama?

The appearance of the new Jetsun Dhampa could “represent a kind of rehearsal for an even more important reincarnation: that of the Dalai Lama himself”, said [The Times](#).

Traditionally the successor has been “determined by a group of disciples close to the previous holder of the title, who seek the reborn person of the Dalai Lama after his death”, said [The Washington Post](#).

“But the Chinese government has indicated it may name its own Dalai Lama, in hopes of controlling his statements and teachings.”

The Dalai Lama has predicted that his successor will not be found on Chinese-controlled territory, and instead could emerge from another country where Tibetan

Buddhism is practised, such as India, Nepal, Bhutan or Mongolia. “Such a development would give new life to the faith, but place the country in question in the sights of China’s government,” said The Times.

According to his own visions, he will live to 113, so he thinks “discussions of his death are premature”, said [The Observer](#) in 2021. But the “power struggle” for who will choose his reincarnation has already begun.

“We are looking at the highly likely situation that when the 14th Dalai Lama dies, there will be two Dalai Lamas named in his place,” Robert Barnett, a Tibetan expert, told the paper.

“One selected on the basis of instructions left behind by His Holiness the Dalai Lama and one chosen by the Chinese Communist party.”