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Richard Klein

Touro Law Center, richardk@tourolaw.edu

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The World's Youngest Political Prisoner

by

Richard Klein

Every participant at an international human rights conference last June received a small pamphlet published by Tibetan supporters of Tibetan Buddhism's highest-ranking figure, the Dalai Lama. Entitled "The World's Youngest Political Prisoner," the pamphlet makes a plea for support for a young boy, now nine years old, who the Chinese government has allegedly kidnapped and detained. The Dalai Lama, who has been living in exile for forty years, claims the boy is the eleventh reincarnation of the Panchen Lama, the second holiest individual in Tibetan Buddhism.

The conference took place in Dharamsala, India, the headquarters of the Dalai Lama and his Tibetan Government-in-Exile. The story surrounding the selection of the Panchen Lama is a fascinating one—full of political intrigue, mystical ritual omens, visions, chants, dreams, divinations, and claims by the People's Republic of China (PRC) that it is more "religiously correct" and faithful to Tibetan Buddhism than is the Dalai Lama.

The Panchen Lama—or "Great Scholar"—is believed to be the manifestation of Buddha Amitabha, dating back to the sixteenth century. The concept of the reincarnation of a lama—where the soul of a dead lama is thought to have taken on the physical being of a newly born individual—is uniquely Tibetan.

Lamas are deemed to be on the threshold of enlightenment yet have postponed the final stage of nirvana (which would end the cycle of earthly rebirths) in order to be of assistance to the Tibetan people. Whereas, before his retreat, the Dalai Lama had historically been the sovereign ruler of Tibet, concerned with secular as well as spiritual matters, the Panchen Lama's focus has been exclusively spiritual and he is believed by some to be spiritually superior to the Dalai Lama. The Dalai is thought to be the reincarnation of the Buddha's body; the Panchen represents the Buddha's mind.

The tenth Panchen Lama died in 1989 under "mysterious" circumstances. (There are frequent hints by the supporters of

the Dalai Lama that the Chinese government had, in fact, poisoned the Panchen.) The potential impact of who would be named as the possessor of the reincarnated soul and therefore pronounced the eleventh Panchen Lama was immediately clear. The Panchen has historically played a critical role in the naming of the Dalai and, if the Chinese government controlled the eleventh Panchen, then it would have control over the choice of the next Dalai. And if the next Dalai were to endorse Chinese sovereignty over the people of Tibet, it would be a huge victory for the PRC. Perhaps only with the support of the Dalai Lama can the PRC attain the legitimacy in Tibet that it requires.

The communist, nonreligious PRC therefore decided, after the death of the tenth Panchen Lama, that it would commence a process, following religious tradition, to find the body in which the soul of the Panchen had lodged. The same country that had previously prohibited monasteries from engaging in the "feudal" and "reactionary" process of searching for the reincarnation of the lamas who had led their monasteries was now professing to be the expert in, and proponent of, the ritualistic search for a reborn high lama.

The Chinese government designated Chadrel Rinpoche, the senior abbot in the Tashilunpo monastery, the headquarters of the Panchen Lamas located 120 miles west of the Tibetan capital city of Lhasa, to begin the search. Some monks set out across mountainous Tibet, while others stayed above Lake Lhamo Latso, where it was believed the dead Panchen would be sending helpful information. According to Tibetan tradition, the Panchen Lama's spirit seeks out the body in which to be reborn and formulates symbols and signs to aid in discovering the reincarnation.

The monks stared at the lake using binoculars to scan for auspicious signs while chanting Buddhist mantras and conducting rituals with conch shells. After each visit to the lake, the monks returned to the embalmed Panchen Lama in the monastery to recite more prayers. (The state of death does not preclude an embalmed lama from being of assistance. For example, in the 1930s, when the reincarnation of the thirteenth Dalai Lama was sought, those assigned the task of beginning the search needed to know in which direction to begin. Purportedly, the body of the dead Dalai turned twice toward the east. The subsequent easterly search revealed in 1939 the boy who the world now recognizes as the current Dalai Lama.)

The initial stage of the Chinese government's search for the Panchen Lama led to twenty-eight possible candidates. Each candidate was then tested to see if he could identify objects, especially religious paraphernalia, that had been in the possession of previous Panchen Lamas. What the government didn't know was that its trusted Rinpoche had sent the names of the candidates to the Dalai Lama—a most horrid betrayal. The Chinese officials' trust of Rinpoche was more than just an act of faith; he had proven himself. In 1993, he informed on five monks who he had seen reading the outlawed autobiography of the Dalai Lama and who had also, according to Rinpoche, listened to the Voice of America; the monks were all subsequently arrested. Shortly thereafter, Rinpoche was presented an award by

the Chinese government for shaping the Tashilunpo monastery into a "Resplendent Model of Safeguarding the Unification of the Motherland by Displaying the Spirit of Patriotism."

Whether Rinpoche suggested to the Dalai Lama the candidate he thought to be the reincarnation of the Panchen Lama is somewhat unclear. It has been reported that, according to Tibetan tradition, each candidate's name was placed in a separate ball of dough and, when all the balls were mixed together, the ball with the name Gedhun Choekyi Niyami seemed to fly up to the Dalai Lama. "It's like magic" was the Dalai Lama's reported response in 1995, as he proceeded to deem the six-year-old Gedhun to be the eleventh reincarnation of the Panchen Lama. The official proclamation of the determi-



nation made by the Dalai Lama claimed that, when as an infant and first able to speak, Gedhun had stated, "I am the Panchen, my monastery is Tashilunpo. I sit on a high throne."

The Chinese government wasted no time. Within days, Gedhun and his family were detained and apparently brought from Tibet to China. One thousand Chinese soldiers armed with assault rifles reportedly surrounded the Tashilunpo monastery to restrict any celebration of the Dalai Lama's naming of the eleventh Panchen Lama. Chadrel Rinpoche was arrested for revealing state secrets.

One can't help but wonder why the Dalai Lama announced his designation of the reincarnated Panchen, with all the accompanying fanfare, while the boy was still in PRC-controlled Tibet. Was the Chinese government's immediate detention of the six-year-old so unexpected? Certainly the Dalai Lama couldn't have been so naive as to have believed what he stated at the time of his designation of Gedhun: "It is my hope that the Chinese government will extend its understanding, cooperation, and assistance." The Dalai Lama knew that the PRC had devoted years to its search for the reincarnation and must have realized that it would not just stand idly by. Other young reincarnated lamas had in fact been brought from Tibet to Dharamsala before their reincarnated status had been made public. Supporters of the Dalai Lama could have arranged for Gedhun to have been brought to Dharamsala before the official announcement was made.

In any case, the Chinese government then proceeded to play "more religious than thou," even though the "thou" in this case was the revered Dalai Lama and the PRC was notorious for its intolerance of religious practices. The Dalai was attacked for failing to follow religious mandates and therefore, government



Left: Gedhun Choekyi Nyami, the eleventh Panchen Lama, as proclaimed by the Dalai Lama in 1995

Right (top): Gyaltsen Norbu, the eleventh Panchen Lama, as proclaimed by PRC officials

Right (bottom): Bome Qamba Lozhol, chair of the Chinese Buddhist Association and member of the PRC search group, selects the Chinese-designated Panchen Lama using the Golden Urn



officials insist, his attempt to select the Panchen Lama runs "counter to the dignified and deeply felt religious rituals of Buddhism, and [is] a calamity for Tibet and its religion." The Chinese government maintains that the final choice of a reincarnation of a Panchen Lama can

that his process of selection did include such rituals as making offerings before special images of the Buddha, as well as the *thangka* of Palden Lhamo (the female protector of Tibet), and performing special prayers invoking the names of prior Panchen Lamas.

The Chinese government, however, wasn't content with merely denouncing the lack of religiosity of the Dalai Lama and with kidnapping his designated eleventh Panchen Lama. (The PRC, as a signatory to the International Convention on the Rights of the Child, had to respond to inquiries from the United Nations Committee for the Rights of the Child about the whereabouts of the boy; the PRC responded, "He has been put under the protection of the Government at the request of his parents," adding that the "protection" was necessary to safeguard the boy from being kidnapped by the Dalai's supporters.) Chadrel Rinpoche was replaced and the Chinese government continued its search for the "real" reincarnation. Seventy-five senior lamas were brought from Tibet to Beijing to aid in determining in what body the Panchen soul had lodged. The final candidates were presented with possessions of prior Panchen Lamas to see if the objects were "remembered" and would be identified.

The final selection of the reincarnation was broadcast over Chinese television as though it were a state as well as a religious ritual. When Gyaltsen Norbu was selected in 1995, it was reported he immediately (though only six years old at the time) pledged his patriotic devotion to the PRC and declared his love of Buddhism. And although a comprehension of Buddhism has proven quite difficult for many mature people, don't worry about this six-year-old; according to Chinese officials, "The eleventh Panchen Lama has grasped the basic knowledge of Buddhism and is able to display to religious believers his great wisdom and extraordinary serenity." Some of the details the Chinese government fed the Tibetans to win admiration and sympathy for its choice were probably more than even the greatest PRC supporter would care to know: "He has learned to love his vegetables and rises at 6:30 AM for morning exercises and carefree play. His ringing laughter resounds throughout the monastery in the quiet morning." In fact, young Gyaltsen seems to be every parent's dream. Government officials report him as saying, "My most important duty now is to absorb as much knowledge as possible from my teachers."

The supporters of the Dalai Lama branded the Chinese government's designated Panchen Lama a "pretender," to which Chinese officials responded in kind. They circulated thousands of photos of their "real" Panchen throughout Tibet and banned any public display of the photo of the Dalai's choice. Both the PRC and the Dalai Lama declared the issue of the selection of the eleventh Panchen Lama was a religious one, unaffected by political concerns. Yet the political conflict that has resulted is grand. A Dalai Lama that disapproves of Chinese rule and doesn't support or cooperate with the PRC is a major thorn and a great embarrassment to the government. And two young boys, used for more than three years as political pawns, have sparked a match that is destined to be played by each side with all the moves they can muster.

only be realized by use of the Golden Urn. Use of the urn dates back to the late eighteenth century. Tradition requires writing the names of the final candidates for the reincarnation on ivory tablets. A chopstick is then used to draw out the name of the appropriate individual. The procedure is to take place in front of a statue of the Buddha in Lhasa's Jokhang Temple, Tibet's holiest shrine; the Buddha is deemed to be guiding the choice. (In reality, the Golden Urn has only been used to select two of the ten prior Panchen Lamas.)

The Dalai Lama has not lived in Tibet since 1959, when he fled to India because, as he stated, "every Tibetan in Lhasa could see that the Chinese were preparing to shell my palace and that my life would be in danger if I stayed there." (The Chinese government's version is that the Dalai had attempted to lead a revolt against Chinese rule; when that failed, he fled in disgrace.) The Dalai Lama had not met any of the candidates and had never even authorized the monks residing in exile at the Tashilunpo monastery in India to conduct their own search for the reincarnation. Chinese officials, therefore, proceeded to blast the Dalai's choice as a fake, adding that the selected boy had, in fact, once drowned a dog. In response, the Dalai insisted

The views of the Dalai Lama regarding the effects of the Chinese integration of Tibet into the People's Republic of China in 1951 are, obviously, quite at variance with those of the PRC. Certainly, there has been a devastating attack by Chinese government forces on Tibetan monasteries and brutal, if not murderous, treatment of monks and nuns. Mao Tse-tung's Cultural Revolution, as well as the policies of the PRC's Great Leap Forward campaign, led to a decimation in the number of functioning monasteries from 2,500 to ten. By 1972, the number of monks and nuns totaled only 1,000—as compared to at least 150,000 to 200,000 before 1959.

Any attack on the monasteries in Tibet is a fundamental attack on the culture and way of life as well. The monasteries serve as the focus of Tibetan life—as educational institutions preserving the Tibetan values and history, as medical centers and as social-welfare agencies catering to those in need. It is because of this all-encompassing role that the monasteries are seen as such a threat—the PRC wants the Communist Party to be the socializing agent. The monasteries have also served since the Dalai Lama's departure from Tibet in 1959 as political institutions attempting to preserve the thoughts and standing of the Dalai. It is for this reason that Chinese officials regard the monasteries as seats of opposition, representing a separatist threat to the government.

Today, monks who refuse to accept the legitimacy of the PRC's choice of the eleventh Panchen Lama are expelled from the monasteries. The result is that only Chinese loyalists remain as monks or, perhaps, the monks who are Dalai Lama supporters just delude Chinese officials and do what it takes to stay on. The Dalai's Government-in-Exile recently reported that one individual, after observing the vicious treatment of some monks who had refused to accept the PRC's designated Panchen, simply died of heart failure because "he could not bear to see such atrocities inflicted upon the monks."

Continued primacy of the Tibetan language is also perceived by the Chinese government as creating obstacles to the goal of having the Tibetan people feel first and foremost a part of the PRC. Government-run schools have therefore emphasized the use of Chinese, which has added fuel to the Dalai Lama's claim that the government is engaging in the cultural genocide of the Tibetan people. Such fears receive added support when one considers the huge influx of Chinese people who have come

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into Tibet in recent years to live and to work. Freedom of expression is nonexistent for those who wish to advocate the independence of Tibet, to display the Tibetan flag, or to show support for either the Dalai Lama or his choice of the Panchen Lama—photos of either are prohibited.

The Chinese government has long claimed that the West—especially the United States—has aided the "Dalai Lama clique" in an attempt to negatively impact the world's perception of the PRC and to destabilize it. Such representations have recently received significant support with the release of a formerly classified U.S. Department of State report regarding activities of the Central Intelligence Agency. The CIA had secretly given, for many years, over \$1.7 million annually to the Tibetans in exile who oppose Chinese rule, including approximately \$180,000 per year directly to the Dalai Lama. It was also revealed that the United States had trained military personnel linked to the Dalai to engage in provocative acts near the Chinese border.

The Chinese government contends that its forces liberated Tibet from the feudal, backward, oppressive serfdom that had existed before 1950. How "feudal" Tibet was, in reality, is subject to debate and challenge,

but it does seem clear that a significant percentage of Tibetans worked for little profit on land owned by the monasteries or the lay aristocracy and were, indeed, quite impoverished and uneducated. The Chinese government has implemented and funded a series of programs designed to "modernize" Tibet. Roads exist now where infrastructure had been nonexistent, construction activity is widespread, medical care has improved, and many new schools have been built in areas where none had previously existed.

The Chinese government admits it made mistakes regarding its policies toward Tibet and, in the 1980s, there was a liberalization of its autocratic control. This resulted in an increase in the numbers of monasteries and monks, a release of prisoners who had been jailed for supporting the Dalai Lama, relaxed family-planning regulations, new educational opportunities for Tibetans in universities throughout the PRC, an increase in the number of Tibetans holding high positions in the Communist Party and in the administration of Tibet, and an increase in communication between the Dalai Lama and the Chinese government. Ironically, the Nobel Peace Prize received by the Dalai in 1989 may have actually prevented completion of an agreement permitting him to return to Tibet. The Dalai's supporters felt strengthened by the Nobel recognition and expected the world's new awareness of the tragedies in Tibet to internationalize the issue (which has occurred) and therefore lead to greater concessions by the Chinese government (which has not occurred).

The recent clash over the reincarnation of the Panchen Lama has proved to be a setback to a productive dialogue between the Chinese government and the Dalai Lama's Government-in-Exile. In September 1998, two individuals accused of being spies for the PRC were arrested near the

Dalai's residence in Dharamsala; Indian police had received reports that attempts might be made to murder the Dalai, who has recently referred to the contemporary period as "our time of greatest darkness." Certainly the decision of President Clinton to "delink" human rights concerns from the issues of trade and most-favored-nation treatment of the PRC was a setback. Clinton's appointment of a State Department official to be a "special coordinator" regarding U.S. concerns about Chinese abuses in Tibet is little compensation.

The desire to profit from the ever-expanding Chinese economic boom has led countries throughout the world to use words and not actions to protest human rights abuses in Tibet. The policy of "engagement" never worked in South Africa; the government there changed its policies only after sanctions and boycotts were in place. Yet the world seems not to have learned the obvious lessons from that experience. Those who desire money from setting up businesses and trading with the PRC have clearly won the battle over what policy to adopt in response to government abuses of human rights.

Tensions have also been heightened by the trial and imprisonment of Chadrel Rinpoche, the abbot who the PRC first designated to lead the search for the reincarnated Panchen. The trial was held behind closed doors because it involved "state secrets"; Chadrel, it was said, confessed everything. He was convicted on two counts of leaking state secrets (the names of the candidates) and colluding with separatist forces abroad (the Dalai Lama). The Dalai's supporters claim that Chadrel is on a hunger strike and in very poor health.

The Chinese government realizes it is no easy undertaking to win support throughout Tibet for its choice of the Panchen Lama. The boy's "donation" of thousands of dollars to aid victims of last winter's heavy snows in Tibet is unlikely to do the trick. Nor will the government's recurrent praise of its Panchen's religious development (Gyaltzen Norbu, now nine years old, can reportedly recite more than 4,000 pages of Buddhist scripture) win the day. For his "protection," the boy's exact whereabouts are unknown, but he is believed to be in the PRC province of Gansu "in school and living a free and happy life." (Chinese officials should have added that Gyaltzen is not quite living the typical ascetic life of a Tibetan monk; within weeks of being anointed as the Panchen Lama, he was presented with a luxury limousine, the type that has been used by the Communist Party leadership.)

Although Article 36 of the PRC constitution guarantees freedom of religious belief, it is clear that the Chinese government has regarded religion as a hindrance to the development of the socialist state. In the minds of Chinese officials, the practice of Tibetan Buddhism has presented even more of a threat since, the more consciously Tibetan and Buddhist one feels, the less one may wish to be a part of a nonreligious Chinese society. However, freedom of

religion entails the adherents being able to practice as *they* choose, and that means their religious leader and *not* the government ought to be able to select their religion's second most important spiritual figure.

The Dalai Lama's Tibetan Government-in-Exile has, probably for international audiences unaware of the role of the Dalai, analogized his function and authority to that of the Roman Catholic pope. The Chinese government's selection of the Panchen Lama is, it has been argued, analogous to Italy's prime minister selecting the next pope after the College of Cardinals has designated someone else. What the Tibetan Government-in-Exile is not likely to publicize is the fact that conflict and jealousies between the various Dalai and Panchen Lamas have not been uncommon. Political intrigue has historically plagued the Tibetan monasteries: of the past thirteen Dalai Lamas, four died young under mysterious circumstances and one Tibetan scholar has claimed that all four were poisoned.

The Dalai Lama is now sixty-four years old, and the Chinese government certainly hopes that, upon his death, the PRC-designated Panchen Lama will become *the* religious leader of Tibet. (It typically takes several years after a Dalai Lama dies to locate his reincarnation, who would be a child of only a few years of age when selected.) Support for the PRC expressed by the religious head of Tibet would go a long way toward legitimizing Chinese rule and, since the Panchen would play *the* crucial role in selecting and educating the next Dalai, the PRC would be home free. It is this exact fear, perhaps, that has led the Dalai Lama to recently intimate that he might declare himself *the last* Dalai to be the reincarnation of Avalokiteshvara, the Buddha of compassion, a 607-year-old lineage; subsequent Dalai Lamas could then be *elected* by a gathering of the highest monks living in exile in India choosing one of their number.

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The passage of time works to the detriment of the Dalai Lama's position. He is losing control over individuals who have given him their full trust and support but have seen no gains in forty years. Young Tibetans are especially restless and increasingly determined to not just stand by and watch the death of Tibetan culture and tradition. In 1988, the Dalai Lama renounced the goal of complete independence from the PRC and called for genuine self-rule—accepting PRC control of Tibet's foreign affairs and defense. This "middle way" approach, steeped as it

is in pragmatism, acceptance, and compromise, has nevertheless not received responses in kind by the Chinese government.

Last spring, the increasingly radical Tibetan Youth Congress called for a hunger strike in New Delhi, India, to bring international attention to their plight. After weeks of subsisting on water and lemon juice, one of those fasting cried out, "Free Tibet," set himself on fire, and burned to death. His last plea was for the international community, and especially the United Nations, to come to the aid of the Tibetan cause. The Dalai Lama had visited the strikers to show his admiration for their commitment but also to express disapproval of the methods used. Yet even the Dalai realized that he had no immediate alternative to offer. He could just repeat his claim that the Tibetans had the world's support in large part because of admiration for the nonviolence of the Tibetan Buddhists.

Time is on the PRC's side. The Dalai Lama ages and, were he to die, the one force that has united the Tibetan opposition would fall. The radical adventurers would surely move forward, while the old, nonviolent guard might just stand by. Fundamental splits in the opposition would present the Chinese government with an opening to be more forceful in its authoritarianism. It wouldn't tolerate an *intifada* approach by Tibetan youth; the Tiananmen massacre is only ten years old and still viewed by the government as the appropriate way to have dealt with the demonstrating provocateurs.

Yet one must ask: isn't the PRC paying an awfully high price worldwide for its Tibet policy? As the international community becomes increasingly aware of Tibet, criticisms are expressed. Maybe neither trade nor joint ventures suffer but the reputation and standing of the PRC does. Surely the government is embarrassed in international forums when leaders stand up to attack its Tibetan policy. The adversary—the Dalai Lama—couldn't present a more sympathetic, loving, gentle image. Hollywood's central casting couldn't have created a better spokesperson for his cause than this fourteenth reincarnation of the Dalai Lama.

Did the Chinese government just dig itself in deeper with the conflict surrounding the Panchen Lama? Was it the wrong way to attempt to win the hearts and minds of the Tibetans? Were Chinese officials correct to hope that, with the Dalai Lama in exile, Tibetans would look to the PRC-designated Panchen Lama, once matured and living in Tibet, to be their spiritual leader? Or is there such resentment of the Chinese government's claimed adherence to Tibetan Buddhist ritual that its

choosing a Panchen Lama will backfire?

In Dharamsala, certainly, the detention by the Chinese government of the Dalai-designated Panchen is used as a nationalistic rallying cry. Small children draw pictures in school of the young Panchen in a jail cell being beaten by Chinese guards.

The drawings are notably similar to one another and reveal that the schooling of young Tibetans in India is extraordinarily politicized and focused, perhaps, on the probably unattainable goal of Tibetan independence from the Chinese devil.

To dominate the Tibetan people, one must control their religious leaders. Military and political domination wasn't enough; control over the spiritual realm was deemed "required" and therefore sought. It is astoundingly ironic that the Chinese government had imprisoned for at least nine years during the Cultural Revolution and the Great Leap Forward the very individual—the tenth Panchen Lama—whose reincarnated soul was the

object of its subsequent intensive, drawn-out, highly controversial search. It may be absurd, as well, that the government many believe has been involved in a systematic attempt to destroy Tibetan Buddhism is today proclaiming that it alone has the authority and the mandate to identify the reincarnated Panchen Lama.

This whole episode is surely one of the most bizarre occurrences in contemporary religious history. The Chinese government has engaged in a desperate attempt to gain the legitimacy in the eyes of the Tibetans that perhaps only the Dalai Lama could really impart. Since the Dalai has been uncooperative, the government has decided to try to humiliate him by ignoring and usurping his traditional right to select the next Panchen Lama. The PRC hopes that as its choice for the Panchen matures he will increasingly be accepted as the highest religious figure living in Tibet and that the Dalai Lama and his supporters will be seen as a clique of deserters and malcontents. This battle over the identification of the reincarnation of a holy man is an intriguing and egregious illustration of the manipulation of religion for political ends. ■

Richard Klein, a law professor at Touro Law School in Huntington, New York, has graduate degrees from Columbia University in international affairs and from Harvard University in law. He teaches an annual international human rights course in Dharamsala, India.



Drawings of the Panchen Lama by exiled Tibetan youths are notably similar to one another

