



CCAS

Centre for China Analysis & Strategy
中国分析及策略中心

21 August 2026

CHINA'S EFFORTS TO LEGITIMISE CHINA-APPOINTED XITH PANCHEN LAMA APPEARS TO HAVE DIFFICULTIES

by JAYADEVA RANADE

China has long sought to undermine the XIVth Dalai Lama's influence among Tibetans. With the demise of the Xth Panchen Lama, Beijing perceived an opportunity to eventually take over the leadership of Tibetan Buddhists and portray itself as the leader of Buddhists worldwide, but its success in promoting the China-appointed Panchen Lama seems to have run into difficulties.

2. Beijing incarcerated the Xth Panchen Lama's reincarnation selected by the XIVth Dalai Lama and in 1995 replaced him with Gyaltsen Norbu (Ch. Gyaincain Norbu), who it subsequently enthroned as the XIth Panchen Lama. Gyaltsen Norbu was, incidentally, the third in the list of candidates presented to the XIVth Dalai Lama by the Search Committee set up to find the reincarnate Panchen Lama.

3. For years there was no information about the whereabouts of the young Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, selected by the XIVth Dalai Lama as the reincarnation of the Xth Panchen Lama. It was only in 2015 that Norbu Dunzhub, a member of the Tibet Autonomous Region's United Front Work Department, revealed the fate of the now 26-year-old Gendun Choekyi Nyima. He said "The reincarnated child Panchen Lama you mentioned is being educated, living a normal life, growing up healthily and does not wish to be disturbed". The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee (CC)'s United Front Work Department (UFWD) has, however, been steadily working towards getting Gyaltsen Norbu accepted by the Tibetans as the legitimate Panchen Lama. It also initiated efforts to introduce him to the wider international Buddhist community and secure their recognition.

4. Accordingly, Gyaltsen Norbu was taught religious texts and practices by tutors appointed by the Chinese authorities and after some years sent on tours to Tibet to give religious teachings for gaining acceptance as the Panchen Lama. Reports suggest, though, that while Tibetans regard him as a "learned monk" they are as yet unwilling to accept him as the Panchen Lama. Gyaltsen Norbu's sojourns in Tibet have also been short and irregular. It was only after 2018 that he began staying in Tibet for longer stretches of time of up to three months or more.

5. China has also sought to introduce Gyaltsen Norbu to the international community of Buddhists and begin the process of his acceptance as the XIth Panchen Lama. The CCP CC UFWD organised the first World Buddhist Forum in Zhejiang province in 2006. Chinese President Xi Jinping was at that time the Party Secretary of Zhejiang. China has thus far held six World Buddhist Forums and Gyaltsen Norbu has attended all six. Beijing has also been attempting to bring the China-appointed Panchen Lama to the Buddha's birthplace at Lumbini in Nepal as part of the effort to 'legitimise' him and introduce him to Tibetan Buddhists in the Indo-Himalayan belt. Two determined efforts by the CCP CC UFWD have thus far failed.

6. But there are signs that possibly Gyaltsen Norbu is not measuring up to the Chinese leadership's requirements. Oddly, when Politburo Standing Committee member and Chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) Wang Huning stayed behind after Xi Jinping's visit

to Tibet and visited Tashilhunpo Monastery in Shigatse on August 23, 2025, the official media did not mention the Panchen Lama as among those who received him. Tashilhunpo has been the traditional 'seat' and monastery of the Panchen Lama. Photographs in the local media at the time showed him standing among the other monks meeting Wang Huning. Later, China's official media reported that the Party Secretaries of Shanghai and Sichuan had separately advised Gyaltsen Norbu to study harder, work diligently to adapt Tibetan Buddhism to socialism with Chinese characteristics, and promote ethnic unity among Tibetans and Han Chinese.

7. The level of intervention by China's leadership escalated on June 6, 2025, when Chinese President Xi Jinping received Gyaltsen Norbu in Beijing in the presence of Politburo Standing Committee members Wang Huning and Cai Qi and Politburo member and Head of the UFWD Li Ganjie. Xinhua's report on the meeting indicated that the Chinese leadership was unhappy with the progress made by him in his religious studies.

8. According to China's official news agency Xinhua, Chinese President Xi Jinping, "received" Gyaltsen Norbu, the China-appointed Panchen Lama in Zhongnanhai in Beijing on June 6, 2025. During the meeting, Xi Jinping urged Gyaltsen Norbu to take the 10th Panchen Lama as a role model and strive to become a highly accomplished Tibetan Buddhist reincarnated lama who is deeply respected by both monastic and lay communities. He urged him to contribute more significantly to promoting ethnic unity, religious harmony, and the stable development and progress of Tibet. Congratulating Gyaltsen Norbu for his progress in "various areas", Xi Jinping emphasized the importance of continuing the patriotic and religious traditions of Tibetan Buddhism and firmly safeguarding "national unity and ethnic solidarity." He urged Gyaltsen Norbu to deepen his religious studies, improve his overall knowledge, and take an active role in fostering a strong sense of Chinese national identity, promoting the Sinicization of religion, and contributing to Tibet's modernization. Xi Jinping also stressed the importance of self-discipline, respect for law and religious precepts, and cultivating noble character and moral integrity.

9. Chinese President Xi Jinping meeting the China-appointed Panchen Lama is rather unusual. The presence at the meeting of the senior most CCP cadres dealing with Tibet and Tibetan Affairs suggests that some major issues have probably been discussed and, from Xi Jinping's publicised comments, that the CCP leadership is unhappy with Gyaltsen Norbu's efforts thus far to establish himself.

10. More recently, during his current visit to Tibet, Gyaltsen Norbu met the Party Secretary of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) Wang Junzheng on August 3. The meeting was reported by the official media which mentioned that Wang Junzheng advised him to work hard in accordance with what Chinese President Xi Jinping had told him at the meeting in June 2025. Wang Junzheng also set out a number of political tasks for Gyaltsen Norbu. He called on him to study, understand and implement Xi Jinping's instructions, fulfil his responsibilities and strengthen political guidance. Wang Junzheng asked him to guide monks, nuns and believers to understand the significance of the CCP's "Two Establishments", study the Party's theories and maintain a high degree of consistency with the CCP Central Committee under Xi Jinping in ideology, politics and action. He also instructed him to uphold what Chinese authorities described as national unity and territorial integrity and to continue the officially promoted tradition of successive Panchen Lamas of "loving the country and religion, protecting the country and benefiting the people". Wang Junzheng further called on Gyaltsen Norbu to cultivate support for the CCP, the state and socialism among monks, nuns and believers; publicise laws concerning ethnic unity and progress; strengthen what the authorities called the "sense of community for the Chinese nation"; and continuously enhance the "Five Identifications". Wang Junzheng also instructed him to adhere to the direction of the Sinicisation of religion, implement the CCP's basic policy on religious affairs, strengthen what the report described

as the “rational interpretation of Tibetan Buddhist doctrines and religious rules”, and publicise the TAR Regulations on Religious Affairs and other laws and regulations. He asked Gyaltzen Norbu to guide religion towards integration with what Chinese authorities called “fine traditional Chinese culture” and adaptation to socialist society.

11. Despite these efforts though, the Chinese leadership seem to harbour some doubts about Gyaltzen Norbu's reliability or religious capabilities. His visibility in the official Chinese media has dropped appreciably. Virtually no mention has been noticed of religious teachings imparted by him in the six months till June 2026. There are, however, instances of these being reported in China's social media, but not by the official media. For example, in May this year the China-appointed Panchen Lama attended a religious symposium in Jiangsu Province and gave teachings but this was not reported by China's official media. The reduced coverage of Gyaltzen Norbu's activities by the official Chinese media, at a time when the CCP is trying to promote him and have him accepted as the Xlth Panchen Lama by Tibetans in China and the wider global Buddhist community, is odd. Subsequent to his meeting Xi Jinping last year, however, the official media covered his arrival in Tibet on July 30, 2026.

12. Equally odd is the visit by Tai Situ Rimpoche of the Karma Kagyu Sect of Tibetan Buddhism to Tibet at this time, when there is uncertainty surrounding the XIVth Dalai Lama's reincarnation. Such a visit could not have materialised without permission from Beijing. According to Chinese social media posts he was reported to be in Kham, specifically in Dege, in Tibet on August 10. Tai Situ Rimpoche, a Regent of the Karma Kagyu Sect of Tibetan Buddhism, had organised the "escape" of Uyghen Thinley Dorje, who was enthroned at Tsurphu Monastery in TAR as the XVIIth Gyalwa Karmapa, and clandestinely brought him across to India. He has been the mentor and spiritual guide of Uyghen Thinley Dorje. Uyghen Thinley Dorje, who has a sizeable following among Tibetan Buddhists, has been staying abroad for many years and has since acquired Dominican nationality. Tai Situ Rimpoche, who usually stays in his monastery in Bir, Himachal Pradesh, is known to have contacts with Chinese officials including of the UFW and officials in TAR. The Chinese authorities are also known to favour followers of the Karma Kagyu sect in Tibet. It is unclear whether Tai Situ Rimpoche's visit is linked to procedures regarding selection of the XIVth Dalai Lama's reincarnation or promoting Uyghen Thinley Dorje.

13. At the same time the CCP continues efforts to discredit and undermine the XIVth Dalai Lama. Recent examples are the particularly hard-hitting article in Global Times and another on a Chinese portal, which listed a number of allegations against the XIVth Dalai Lama. Beijing also continues to pressurise governments not to receive the delegations representing the Central Tibetan Administration. A recent effort to restrict activities by Tibetans or media outlets associated with Tibetans is the request by senior Chinese officials to the Indian government not to permit Falungong or Tibetan and pro-Tibet media outlets at events where Xi Jinping would be present during the BRICS Summit in mid-September. Interestingly, the request has come prior to Beijing confirming that Xi Jinping will attend the BRICS Summit scheduled for mid-September.

(The author is a former Member of the National Security Advisory Board and is President of the Centre for China Analysis and Strategy.)