INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET

A Six-Year-Old Boy Was Disappeared By Chinese Police In 1995. He Has Never Been Seen Since.

The Trump Administration should press President Xi to allow an American official to meet with the Panchen Lama.



Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, recognized in 1995 as the 11th Panchen Lama at age six.

The Story

In 1995, Chinese police seized a six-year-old boy shortly after he was recognized as one of Tibetan Buddhism's most prominent religious leaders. Thirty-one years later, no independent observer has been allowed to verify his whereabouts or well-being. His enforced disappearance is a clear violation under international human rights law.

WHO IS HE?

Name: His name is Gedhun Choekyi Nyima.

Title: Most people know him by his title: the 11th Panchen Lama.

Rank: The Panchen Lama is one of Tibetan Buddhism's most senior spiritual figures, and traditionally the leader of Tashi Lhunpo Monastery in Shigatse, Tibet.

Age: He was six years old when he was disappeared. Would be 37 years old today.

Distinction: He was the world's youngest political prisoner, disappeared when he was just six years old. His case is also considered one of the world's longest unresolved disappearances, and he is currently one of the longest-held political prisoners on Earth.

WHAT HAPPENED

- **May 14, 1995:** The Dalai Lama recognized Gedhun Choekyi Nyima as the 11th Panchen Lama — the reincarnation of the 10th Panchen Lama, who died in 1989.
- **May 17, 1995:** Chinese authorities took the boy and his family into custody. He has not appeared in public since.
- **Soon after:** Beijing installed a different boy, Gyaltsen Norbu, as its own choice of Panchen Lama. He is not recognized by the Dalai Lama or accepted by Tibetan Buddhists, but has taken on an increasingly public role in China, including meetings with President Xi Jinping.

WHAT DOES CHINA SAY?

The Chinese government has periodically stated that Gedhun Choekyi Nyima is alive, graduated from college, holds a job, and is living an ordinary, private life that he and his family do not wish disturbed.

China has not produced independently verifiable evidence to support these claims. And:

NO United Nations representative has met him.

NO foreign government has been allowed to meet him.

NO independent journalist has been allowed to interview him.

NO independent observer has been allowed to verify his well-being.

How China Justifies Its Own Panchen Lama

China has falsely claimed the authority to confirm Tibetan Buddhist religious leaders, fabricating a highly inaccurate historical record and utilizing an invalidated artifact known as the Golden Urn. Beijing says any recognition of a Dalai Lama, Panchen Lama, or other senior reincarnate lama is invalid unless it goes through the Golden Urn and wins central government approval – a rule formalized in 2007.

THE GOLDEN URN

The Golden Urn is a lottery-style ceremony in which candidates' for reincarnated Tibetan Buddhist lamas names are written on slips, placed in a ceremonial urn, and drawn at random. It dates to 1793, when the Qing dynasty imposed it to give the Manchu emperor a check on Tibetan Buddhist succession. It was used sporadically in the decades that followed, was never recognized as legitimate among Tibetans and Tibetan Buddhist spiritual leaders, and was discarded entirely by the time of the fall of the Qing dynasty – until the Chinese Communist Party seized on it as a justification for interfering in the traditional process of selecting Tibetan Buddhist religious leaders.

Why The CCP's Process Is Compromised

- The Chinese government is led by the Chinese Communist Party, which officially identifies as atheist.
- By the time China convened the Golden Urn ceremony for the Panchen Lama, Gedhun Choekyi Nyima – the boy the Dalai Lama had already recognized using traditional methods – had disappeared from the process entirely. Eyewitness Arjia Rinpoche, a senior Tibetan Buddhist master who escaped into exile says he the CCP staged the golden urn "drawing" to serve its agenda.
- China's insistence on the use of the Golden Urn clearly reflects their political agenda rather than any valid religious belief system, providing a means for the CCP to interfere in the religious freedom of Tibetan Buddhists.
- Tibetan Buddhists consider the Golden Urn process historically invalid and a political imposition by an outside atheist government, not a recognized part of Tibetan Buddhist tradition, which identifies reincarnations through a complex process initiated by senior lamas – not by lottery.

Why Does This Matter Right Now?

It's about the future, not just the past. China has said it intends to use the same Golden Urn process to select the next (15th) Dalai Lama after the current one passes away. The Dalai Lama has said his successor will be found outside China, setting up a likely dispute between a CCP-selected Dalai Lama and one recognized by the exile Tibetan Buddhist establishment and embraced by Tibetan Buddhists at large – a repeat, at a much larger scale, of what happened to the Panchen Lama in 1995.

> For Tibetan Buddhists, the Panchen Lama is one of the tradition's most well known spiritual leaders, alongside the Dalai Lama. The two roles are linked – each has historically played a part in recognizing the other's reincarnation. That's part of why this matters geopolitically: the Panchen Lama is expected to play a role in identifying the next Dalai Lama, whenever that succession occurs.

President Xi Jinping is expected to make a state visit to the United States on September 24.

The request is simple: The Trump Administration should press President Xi to allow an American official to meet with the Panchen Lama.

If the Panchen Lama is alive and well, why has no independent observer been allowed to meet him?

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A Timeline of Thirty-One Years

1995 The Dalai Lama recognizes six-year-old Gedhun Choekyi Nyima as the 11th Panchen Lama. Tibetan spiritual practice requires the Panchen Lama to receive care and instruction at Tashi Lhunpo Monastery. Instead, days after being proclaimed the true reincarnation of the 10th Panchen Lama, Gedhun Choekyi Nyima and his family disappear from their home. The Chinese government denies his detention for twelve months, admitting on May 28, 1996, that they were holding the boy and his parents.

1998 The Clinton administration says it has repeatedly urged China to permit access to the Panchen Lama and suggests allowing a respected international figure to meet him. President Clinton also raises human rights concerns in discussions with Chinese leaders.

1999 The Clinton administration requests access. Assistant Secretary of State Harold Koh publicly discloses he has asked Chinese officials for permission to visit the Panchen Lama. Chinese officials reply that the boy is "fine" but refuses to allow a meeting.

2002 The U.S. House of Representatives passes a resolution calling on China to release the Panchen Lama and allow him to fulfill his traditional religious role.

2005 Senior State Department officials press Chinese authorities to allow international observers access to the Panchen Lama and his family. China refuses. The State Department's annual human rights report notes that every international request to meet the Panchen Lama in order to verify his well-being has been refused.

2014 President Obama meets with the Dalai Lama. Although the meeting was not focused exclusively on the Panchen Lama, President Obama publicly reaffirms U.S. support for protecting Tibetan religious traditions and human rights. The administration continues to raise Tibet-related concerns through diplomatic channels.

2017 Representative James McGovern and USCIRF Commissioner Tenzin Dorjee publish an op-ed calling on China to provide authenticated video evidence of the Panchen Lama's well-being. The request follows a congressional hearing on religious freedom in Tibet. McGovern formally becomes the Panchen Lama's congressional advocate through the Defending Freedoms Project.

2020 Secretary of State Mike Pompeo marks the 25th anniversary, calling on China to immediately make public the Panchen Lama's whereabouts. China states publicly, for the first time, that he is a "college graduate with a job" — with no verification offered. The Tibetan Policy and Support Act reaffirms that decisions regarding Tibetan Buddhist reincarnations belong to Tibetan Buddhists, not governments.

2021 - 2024 The Biden administration continues to raise the case. The State Department reports U.S. officials, including the Secretary of State, the Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, the Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues, and the U.S. Ambassador to China, continue to raise concerns about the Panchen Lama's disappearance with Chinese officials.

2025 Senate Foreign Relations Committee leaders renew the call. On the 30th anniversary of the Panchen Lama's disappearance, the Republican chairman and Democratic ranking member jointly call for credible information regarding his well-being and for his immediate release.

2026 Thirty-one years after his disappearance, no independent observer has been permitted to verify his whereabouts or well-being.