



## INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET

### **Monks who studied in India banned from teaching in Tibet; new ruling bans schoolchildren from religious activity**

<https://www.savetibet.org/monks-who-studied-in-india-banned-from-teaching-in-tibet-new-ruling-bans-schoolchildren-from-religious-activity/>

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- Highly educated Tibetan monks who studied in India are being banned from teaching Buddhism when they return home to the Lihang area in eastern Tibet. The new ruling by the Chinese authorities is an indication of China's denial of religious freedom to Tibetan Buddhists who seek to receive teachings from qualified masters, as monks who have studied in India are highly valued for their deep understanding of the teachings. It is also a chilling signal of the Communist Party's intentions of eradicating the Dalai Lama's influence and using religion as an instrument to achieve hardline political objectives.
- In another alarming measure, the Chinese authorities have prohibited Tibetan schoolchildren in the Tibet Autonomous Region from engaging in traditional devotional practices during the holy Buddhist month of Saga Dawa, which began yesterday (May 16).

### **Monks "wrongly educated in India" banned from teaching in Lihang**

A report in the Chinese official media this week stated that "monks wrongly educated in India are banned from teaching Buddhism to residents of Litang [Tibetan: Lihang] county" in Kardze (Chinese: Ganzi) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan. The Global Times report on May 15 (2018) cited Zhu Weiqun, who heads up the Ethnic and Religious Affairs Committee of the government's main political advisory body, saying that: "As some monks received education overseas from the 14th Dalai Lama clique - whom China regards as separatists - it is necessary to tighten supervision so as to avoid the clique using local Buddhists to conduct separatist activities."<sup>1</sup>

The report said that only monks who had received the People's Republic of China-administered version of one of the highest levels of Tibetan Buddhist scholarship, the Geshe degree, would be allowed to teach Buddhism in the area. While the article specifically referred to Lihang, Tibetan sources have confirmed that the Chinese authorities have been imposing the same restrictions elsewhere, including at the important and influential monastery of Labrang Tashikyil in the Tibetan area of Amdo, present-day Gansu Province. Monks who studied in India have long been unable to

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1102208.shtml> Zhu Weiqun is the former deputy head of the United Front Work Department and one of the most prominent critics of the Dalai Lama. See International Campaign for Tibet report, May 2, 2016, 'The "poisonous fruit" of Tibet's religious policy as China publishes "Living Buddha" database', <https://www.savetibet.org/the-poisonous-fruit-of-tibets-religious-policy-as-china-publishes-living-buddha-database/>

teach in monasteries in the Tibet Autonomous Region, including in the three main religious institutions of Sera, Drepung, and Ganden.

There are fears that the ruling will extend elsewhere in the context of the Party authorities drive to control Tibet using religion, in a more systematic approach recently articulated in an official White Paper published on April 8 (2018).<sup>2</sup> The Chinese government conflates peaceful religious practice with ‘threats’ to China’s security, creating a more dangerous political environment for monks, nuns, and lay Buddhists, and isolating them further from the Dalai Lama and Tibetan Buddhists outside China.<sup>3</sup>

A former monk from Labrang monastery said: “Over the years many Tibetans have travelled to the Tibetan Buddhist monasteries in southern India to study for the highest Lharampa (Geshe) degree. They also have the opportunity of receiving teachings from the Dalai Lama, and important religious leaders from other schools such as the Karmapa. While some remain in India to teach monks, often they really want to return home to Tibet to educate local people, and they are hugely respected for their scholarship and their attendance of teachings by the Dalai Lama. Now this is being stopped, it is a dangerous escalation of threats faced by Tibetan Buddhists in Tibet.”

Monks who studied in India tend to be more highly respected and influential in Tibetan communities than those who study for the qualification of Geshe Lharampa, the equivalent of a doctorate, in the PRC. The Chinese authorities began to initiate their own version of the Geshe Lharampa qualification in 2004, although the official media acknowledges that the history of Lharampa “goes back 400 years.”<sup>4</sup> Global Times stated that some 105 monks in the Tibet Autonomous Region have been awarded the Chinese-administered version of the degree since 2004.<sup>5</sup>

At least two Geshes who were educated in India have already been expelled from Lithang monastery in the Tibetan area of Kham, according to the Tibetan service of Radio Free Asia. In a report on May 16, RFA cited a source saying that: “The two Geshes, Lobsang Dondrub and Lobsang Choepak, were both educated at Sera monastery in India and graduated with Lharampa degrees. [...] “Several other Geshes who returned to Tibet after being educated at Sera are facing a similar situation, and Chinese authorities are not even allowing them to join the monastery at Lithang.”<sup>6</sup>

The Global Times assertion that the education for Tibetan Buddhist monks in India is illegitimate and “wrong” is consistent with recent claims by Chinese officials that Tibetan Buddhism originated in China, countering the reality of its origins in ancient India and its development over the course of hundreds of years in Tibet long before the advent of Chinese rule. A statement by Executive Deputy Head of the United Front Work Department Zhang Yijiong at a press conference in Beijing last October that Tibetan Buddhism is “a special form of religion that originated within China” even

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<sup>2</sup> A White Paper entitled ‘China’s Policies and Practices on Protecting Freedom of Religious Belief’ was published by the State Council Information Office of China in Beijing on April 3, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Revised rules on religious activity issued by the Chinese State Council on September 7, 2017 consolidate far-reaching powers of the Communist Party state over people’s lives and beliefs, and are a further threat to the continued survival of Tibetan Buddhism in Tibet. International Campaign for Tibet report, September 18, 2018,

<https://www.savetibet.org/chinas-revised-religious-regulations-threaten-survival-of-tibetan-buddhism/>

<sup>4</sup> According to the Geshe Lharampa office of Jokhang Temple, the first Geshe Lharampa exam at the temple was in 2004. (China Daily, April 3, 2014, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2014-04/03/content\\_17405288\\_3.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2014-04/03/content_17405288_3.htm))

<sup>5</sup> Global Times report, May 16, 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Radio Free Asia report, May 16, 2018, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/tibet/banned-05162018125900.html>

contradicts Xi Jinping's earlier acknowledgements that Tibetan Buddhism has its origins in India.<sup>7</sup> Zhang Yijiong's histrionic comments were intended to demonstrate the pre-eminence of the PRC as a global leader in Buddhism, undermining the position of India where Buddhism originated, as well as challenging the Dalai Lama – who frequently emphasizes that Tibetan Buddhism is heir to the Nalanda tradition of ancient India.<sup>8</sup>

In this way, “Buddhism becomes a brick in the construction of Chinese nationalism”, in the co-option of Tibetan Buddhism by the Chinese state to achieve its political objectives.<sup>9</sup> New and more restrictive measures to ‘Sinicize’ Buddhism were set in place before the important 19th Party Congress in October 2017.

The Global Times article on May 16 reported that Lithang county in Kardze holds ‘patriotic education’ classes every year for those who received their Geshe degree in India. “Those who behaved improperly at the patriotic classes or showed ‘any signs of separatist intent’ are strictly monitored and banned from teaching Buddhism to the public,” the Global Times reported.

The new developments reflect an increasingly repressive environment in Lithang, an area of immense historical, cultural and religious significance to Tibetans. In the 1950s, the region was one of the centers of resistance to the People's Liberation Army, and the 16th century Lithang monastery, one of the largest and most important in the region, was bombed by Chinese forces in 1956. In 2015, there was a deepening crackdown in the area following the death of a revered religious and community leader, Tenzin Delek Rinpoche, who had been serving life in prison. Restrictions were intensified this year, and Tibetans from Lithang who went to a teaching by the Dalai Lama in January in Bodh Gaya, India, were recalled and made to undergo political re-education. “The Chinese were very repressive in dealing with them,” a Tibetan source told Radio Free Asia.<sup>10</sup>

## **Ruling prohibits families from engaging in religious activity during important Buddhist festival**

Local authorities in Chamdo, a major city on the eastern Tibetan region of Kham, have circulated an order prohibiting families from engaging in any of the religious and devotional practices associated with the holy Buddhist festival of Saga Dawa, which began yesterday (May 16).

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<sup>7</sup> Zhang Yijiong went on to say that although it is true that it has been “influenced by other religions and other cultures” (a reference to India) “[...] it is not acquired religion. It is originated [sic] within China; it has its roots in China. So it is an example of being Chinese. It has Chinese orientation.” International Campaign for Tibet report, ‘Xi Jinping cements grip on power at Party Congress: new leaders revealed and their influence on Tibet policy’, November 1, 2017, <https://www.savetibet.org/xi-jinping-cements-grip-on-power-at-party-congress-new-leaders-revealed-and-their-influence-on-tibet-policy/>

<sup>8</sup> For instance, see ‘Tibetan Buddhism is the heir to ancient India's Nalanda tradition: His Holiness the Dalai Lama’, January 1, 2018, <http://tibet.net/2018/01/tibetan-buddhism-is-the-heir-to-ancient-indias-nalanda-tradition-his-holiness-the-dalai-lama/>

<sup>9</sup> Zhang Yijiong's outlandish claim was also countered in the Chinese state media just days afterwards, when a Chinese researcher, Hu Zhiyong, stated that: “It is true that Buddhism originated from India, but the religion thrived in China after it was localized to make it better adapt to the Chinese society.” Global Times, “India culture controls China” remarks a trick to boost national pride: experts’, by Zhao Yusha, October 25, 2017.

<sup>10</sup> Radio Free Asia report, May 16, 2018, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/tibet/banned-05162018125900.html>

A notice to parents of children at the Chamdo (Chinese: Changdu) City #2 Municipal Kindergarten stated that “in order to advance their ideological education” children should not be taken to monasteries or religious events, and that parents should also not attend those events themselves. In a reminder of the stringent powers of the security state, the notice warned that: “The higher authorities will be covertly watching, and those who break regulations will be dealt with”.

A similar order was issued last year at Jebumgang Middle School in Lhasa, condemning religious activities as ‘superstitious’ and banning families from participating in religious activities during Saga Dawa.

This ruling will deeply affect Tibetan families; devotional practices and altruistic behavior are particularly important during Saga Dawa, which commemorates the birth, enlightenment and death of the Buddha. It is known as the Month of Merits, and believed that all positive and negative actions are multiplied millions of times over.

A translation of the notice from Tibetan into English is as follows:

### **Notice to Parents**

During the 4th Tibetan month or Saga Dawa, based on an order from the TAR Education Affairs Committee, the Municipal Peoples Government, and Municipal Education Bureau, parents are advised

1 In order to advance their ideological education, children may not be taken to monasteries or religious events;

2 As guardians of children, parents themselves may not go to monasteries or religious events;

3 The higher authorities will be covertly watching, and those who break regulations will be dealt with;

4 If daily checks by schools on absent pupils reveal that they have secretly been taken to monasteries or religious activities, they will be directly handed over to the Education Bureau;

5 Parents are requested to support the schools’ work through managing the safety of their children.

Chamdo #2 Municipal Kindergarten  
May 14th 2018