



INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET

Top Chinese political advisor makes “inspection tour” of Tibetan region

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The highest-ranking Chinese official to visit the Tibet Autonomous Region this year brought with him a familiar message of controlling Tibetans’ religion and culture, while implying that more repression could be on the way.

In his “inspection tour” of the Tibetan cities of Lhasa and Shigatse from July 6 to 8, 2020, Wang Yang, China’s top political advisor, called on the people to make efforts in “resolutely combating separatism” and in “the promotion of patriotism to further adapt Tibetan Buddhism to the socialist society,” according to Chinese state media outlet Xinhua.

Wang is a member of the standing committee of the Political Bureau and chairman of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference. Ranking fourth in the Chinese Communist Party hierarchy, he is the senior most party leader to visit the TAR in 2020.

Chinese state media reported that during his latest visit, Wang emphasized, “that the work related to ethnic and religious affairs concerns the enduring peace and stability of the region, asking for further research into the history of the community of the Chinese nation to improve public awareness of ethnic unity and progress.”

Promote patriotism to “Sinicize” Tibetan Buddhism

During meetings in Lhasa, Wang commended the TAR party committee for ensuring “peace and stability” in the region, according to Xinhua.

He directed the party members to ensure that “the Tibetan Buddhists hold national law as greater than the canon” and that monasteries and religious activities are subservient to the national law.

He called for “promotion of patriotism to further adapt Tibetan Buddhism to the socialist society.”

This statement is further evidence of the CCP policy of promoting ideological re-education both in Tibetan monastic institutions and among the general population.

It also suggests that this policy will continue unabated in the near future and could even escalate further with the implementation of the Guidelines for Patriotic Education in the New Era.

New guidelines

The guidelines, which the CCP Central Committee and the State Council jointly released in November 2019, define patriotism as “love for the motherland, socialism and the communist party.”

In practice, China's promotion of "patriotism" was present in Tibet prior to the adoption of the revised Guidelines last year. Following Chinese President Xi Jinping's call for the party to consolidate its United Front Work Department with religious communities to "achieve the Chinese dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation," the UFWD conducted rigorous indoctrination campaigns in Tibetan monastic institutions across the TAR and Tibetan areas outside the TAR.

Since 2018, the UFWD has focused on the so-called "four standards" for religious policy in monasteries and nunneries in Tibet. The four standards require monastic communities to be "profound in religious knowledge," "politically reliable," "convincing in morality for public acceptance" and "playing an active role at critical moments."

"Sinicizing" ethnic and religious work for long-term stability

During Wang's visit to the homes of relocated villagers, industrial parks and religious institutions, he emphasized that "ethnic and religious work is related to the long-term stability of Tibet" and "tackling poverty is not only an economic task but also a political task."

Party members should "resolutely carry out anti-secession struggles" in the name of "safeguarding the reunification of the motherland and strengthening national unity ... with consciousness of the Chinese National Community as the main line," Xinhua quoted Wang's instructing party members during his inspection trip.

Decoding development photo ops

Besides stressing the importance of long-term stability in the TAR as the party's ultimate objective, Wang posed for photo ops during his inspection tour to highlight China's development policies in Tibet. Photos in Xinhua show Wang in a relocated Tibetan family's home, at a kindergarten and at a greenhouse.

In projecting an image of the party's benevolence to Tibetans, state media released an image of Wang in comfortable conversation with a relocated Tibetan family in their new home in Kochak New Village (Chinese: Guojiaxin) in Shigatse. The family is dressed in their best bright attire with a low-rise Tibetan-style table in front of them adorned with bowls of jerky, dried cheese, deep-fried Tibetan biscuits.

The photo depicts a positive atmosphere suitable for a Tibetan New Year celebration. In contrast, the party entourage led by Wang projects an image of workaholic party leaders in unglamorous navy-blue zippered windbreakers, obeying a dress code to project an image popularized by President Xi of busy and accessible party leaders sweating hard for the prosperity of Tibetan families.

The image projects grateful Tibetans enjoying a high quality of life, thanking the party's "correct" poverty alleviation policy of relocating Tibetans from their ancestral lands in order to create a "moderately prosperous society." Wang posed for similar photos while visiting Tibetan families during his previous two visits to the TAR.

In reality, China is leading an urbanization and relocation program with the important goal of imposing effective surveillance of Tibetan families. By relocating herders and farmers into a concentrated area, the CPP aims at increasing its surveillance and control of Tibetans.

On many occasions, the result of the forced relocations is that the Tibetans bear a major portion of the cost of building their new houses and find themselves in debt and impoverished. The nomadic and farming skills of Tibetan nomads become irrelevant while living in new “socialist villages” and in a state-led cash economy.

Chinese miseducation in Tibet

The other photo is that of a smiling party entourage led by Wang while visiting a kindergarten in a village in Shigatse built for Tibetans relocated as part of the state’s poverty alleviation program.

In a photo reminiscent of the CCP’s portrayal of former Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao as accessible “Grandpa Wen,” Wang strikes a paternalistic pose, lovingly patting a Tibetan girl’s head and seemingly encouraging the child to be a loyal Chinese citizen.

Two children in the classroom in the photo wear a uniform jacket with the name of their kindergarten in Tibetan script on the back of the jacket. While the image implies that the Chinese government promotes the Tibetan language, in reality, the government has forcibly made the Chinese language the medium of instruction for Tibetan children starting from kindergarten.

This is part of the Chinese government’s larger scheme to erase Tibetan identity and to rapidly Sinicize ethnic Tibetans. Also, in recent years, most local schools across Tibet have closed while schools in counties expanded to push Tibetans toward urbanization.

Human Rights Watch, in its report on China’s “Bilingual Education” Policy in Tibet, raises concern at the increasing number of state-funded kindergartens—1,028 kindergartens in the TAR by April 2017 teaching more than 96,700 children—which train “pre-school children in the Chinese language,” “unnecessarily coming at the expense of children’s fluency and ability to adequately speak Tibetan.”

Fake solidarity with workers

Another photo of a smiling Wang in conversation with “happy workers” at a fruit and vegetable cultivation greenhouse in Panam (Bainang) County in Shigatse wishes to project the message of a party leader in solidarity with hardworking Tibetans.

Contrasting what is presented in the picture, Emily Yeh of the University of Colorado describes in “Taming Tibet: Landscape Transformation and the Gift of Chinese Development,” a reality where most of the large-scale greenhouses in Tibet are run by Chinese migrant entrepreneurs who rent land from Tibetans and leave the soil dead with excessive chemical fertilizers when they exit the market.

Large-scale greenhouses run by Chinese migrant entrepreneurs operating on economies of scale render small-scale greenhouses run by Tibetans uncompetitive and suitable only for home consumption.

Seven visits to Tibet

Wang’s recent inspection trip to the TAR is his third since he became chairman of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference in 2018. The areas he visited are listed below:

- July 6-8, 2020, visited Shigatse and Lhasa
- August 19-21, 2019, visited Purang (Burang) and Tsadha (Zhada) counties in Ngari (Ali) Prefecture
- August 24-26, 2018, visited Nyiningtri (Linzhi), Lhokha (Shannan) and Chamdo (Changdu)

Besides visiting the TAR, Wang also undertook inspection trips to Tibetan-inhabited areas in other Chinese provinces.

- July 16-17, 2019, visited Kumbum (Taer) monastery and Yushu in Qinghai
- May 25-27, 2019, visited Kardze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan
- Oct 15-16, 2018, visited Gyalthang (Xianggelila) town, Takchonggag (Hutiaoxia) town and Dechen in Yunnan.
- May 21-23, 2018, visited Manma village in Sangchu (Xiahe) county, and Labrang Monastery in Kanlho (Gannan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Gansu.



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