



INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET



## PARTY ABOVE BUDDHISM

# CHINA'S SURVEILLANCE AND CONTROL OF TIBETAN MONASTERIES AND NUNNERIES

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# PARTY ABOVE BUDDHISM: CHINA'S SURVEILLANCE AND CONTROL OF TIBETAN MONASTERIES AND NUNNERIES

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## Front page caption:

Monks and nuns being “commended” by the Party and United Front Work Department officials in January 2021 in Chonggye (Qiongjie) County, Lhokha (Shannan) City for “complying with four standards and striving to be advanced monks and nuns.”

(Source: United Front Work Department and Chonggye County Party Committee)



## Note on the Political Geography of Tibet:

Tibet was traditionally comprised of three main areas: Amdo (north-eastern Tibet), Kham (eastern Tibet) and U-Tsang (central and western Tibet). The Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) was set up by the Chinese government in 1965 and covers the area of Tibet west of the Dri-chu (Yangtse river), including part of Kham. The rest of Amdo and Kham have been incorporated into Chinese provinces, where they were designated Tibetan autonomous prefectures and counties. As a result most of Qinghai and parts of Gansu, Sichuan and Yunnan provinces are acknowledged by the Chinese government to be “Tibetan.”

ICT uses the term “Tibet” to refer to all Tibetan areas currently under the jurisdiction of the People’s Republic of China.

With regard to access, the different political divisions of Tibet have broadly different levels of restrictions. The Tibet Autonomous Region is generally more restricted than areas administered by Qinghai, Gansu,

Yunnan, and Sichuan provinces, while Dechen prefecture in Yunnan typically experiences fewer restrictions than much of the rest of Tibet. The system of requiring every foreigner who enters the Tibet Autonomous Region to acquire a special entry permit is unique within the People’s Republic of China; no other province-level region in China requires this. When noteworthy, this report will mention relevant differences in the access policies of different jurisdictions.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the highly securitized contemporary Tibet, Buddhist monks and nuns form the single largest group assailed by the government of China for their persistent resistance against the state's destruction of Tibetan culture and identity. Since the pan-Tibet 2008 popular protests, Chinese authorities have intensified surveillance and control and assimilationist policies. With the scrapping of nominal autonomy, made public in 2012, Chinese authorities have imposed heavier surveillance and control on the monastic communities in Tibetan monasteries and nunneries.<sup>[1]</sup>

For decades, Tibetan monks and nuns have borne the brunt of the Chinese Communist Party's targeted security and religious policies. Implementation of pervasive securitization policies has led the monastic community to persistently resist the authorities, who in turn have led even harder repression in the name of maintaining "stability" and "public order."

In Tibet today, the monks and nuns live in a suffocating environment under constant surveillance and control measures meant to limit their physical activities. They are also under constant pressure to change their ideological underpinnings, which are based on Buddhist philosophy. The authorities require the monks and nuns to "correct" their thoughts by checking themselves and criticizing each other. Although the latest official data is not publicly available, the state media outlet China Daily stated in fall 2015 that as many as 6,575 cadres from different levels in the party and government hierarchy work in the 1,787 monasteries in the "Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR)."<sup>[2]</sup> Averaging the officially sanctioned figure means that three to four cadres have been assigned to every monastery in the TAR.

There are no real data on the demography of monks and nuns in Tibet. The government of China claims that there are 1,787 monasteries and 46,000 monks and nuns in the TAR. However, this figure has remained static at least in the past 23 years and does not include the monks and nuns in Tibetan areas outside the TAR.<sup>[3]</sup>

Under current Chinese President Xi Jinping, the repression of the monastic community has escalated even further. With the dramatic securitization of Tibet during the reign of Chen Quanguo, party secretary of the TAR from 2011-16, the current focus is on ideological control and transformation to support the Chinese state.

Xi Jinping's drive to "Sinicize" (meaning to bring under state control) all religions in China "in order to contribute to the realization of the Chinese dream of national rejuvenation" is not an empty threat.<sup>[4]</sup> He has followed up on this announcement with words and actions through a series of methodical steps undertaken within the party-state system. Sinicization of religions as an official policy was first initiated during a Central United Front Work conference in mid-2015, reaffirmed during the National Religious Work Conference in April 2016 and finally publicly declared at the 19th Party Congress in 2017. To achieve the goal, Xi Jinping made structural changes in the party-state system by putting the United Front Work Department (UFD) in charge of overseeing the implementation of religious policy. Placing a mass organ of the CCP above the state administration has been a regular occurrence recently in several policy fields, especially in discipline inspection.

Although the UFWD always played an important role in Tibet policy in the past, especially since the establishment of its seventh bureau dealing with Tibetan affairs in 2005, this structural change gave an arm of the CCP even more power and significance in overseeing the implementation of the policies in Tibet and in particular controlling the monastic community. This is also confirmed by the tripling of the budget for the UFWD in the TAR in the past five years.



*Monks and nuns at the symposium on the “four standards” read handouts issued by Chinese officials. (Source: Tibet Daily)*

Through the implementation of central policies, the UFWD ensures that the Sinicization of the monastic community is thoroughly carried out following the mandatory “four standards” policy for religious clergy.<sup>[5]</sup> UFWD activities in the monasteries ensure that the monastic community recognizes that the party and its leaders are more important than the precepts of Buddhism and of their religious figures. Much against the religious sentiments of the monks and nuns, the CCP has implemented an anti-Dalai Lama policy for the last 26 years following its adoption in 1994 during the third Tibet Work Forum. The political indoctrination campaigns in the monasteries also demand the implementation of the law on reincarnation, first stipulated in September 2007, providing the CCP with ultimate authority in approving reincarnate religious leaders with the aim of supplanting and weakening the authority of legitimate Tibetan religious leaders.<sup>[6]</sup>

Traditionally the Tibetan monastic community is bound by its code of conduct found in the Buddhist canons. All the monastic affairs are conducted with the canons as the source of authority. However, the implementation of policies in the monasteries require the monastic community to hold the Communist doctrine and leaders as higher authority than the canons even on spiritual matters. By manufacturing a monastic community compliant to the Communist leaders and doctrine, the Chinese government has profoundly violated and diluted the authenticity of Tibetan Buddhism.

This report documents the recent policy developments and institutional changes at the heart of the Chinese Communist Party’s strategy toward the Tibetan Buddhist monastic community that have led

to new measures of control and surveillance of this core tenet of Tibetan Buddhism and ultimately of Tibetan culture. The report argues that these developments represent a further, even more imminent threat to the survival of authentic and self-determined Tibetan Buddhism and Tibetan culture.

## INTRODUCTION

The national and cultural identity of Tibet is inextricably linked to Tibetan Buddhism. For centuries, the monastic community has served as the custodian of Tibetan Buddhism. As practitioners, they have kept alive their traditional religious system and rich culture throughout the ebbs and flows in Tibet's history. Their words and deeds act as moral and ethical guidance for the society to follow. This has been achieved through the unbroken transmission of lineages of canonical text teaching, despite decades of intense obstacles.

The monastic community has been on the front lines of resistance to protect religious freedom and Tibetan identity. In the late 1980s, Tibetan monks and nuns participated in large numbers, along with lay people, openly and publicly, against the Chinese government's policies in Tibet, eventually leading to martial law in Tibet's capital of Lhasa in 1989.<sup>[7]</sup> In 2008, Tibetan monks and nuns were an important part of the resistance across the Tibetan plateau that resulted in a crackdown by the Chinese authorities.<sup>[8]</sup> The monastic community is therefore the single most targeted group in Tibet. The Chinese authorities view it as inimical to their rule.

The Chinese government is obligated by international human rights standards to ensure that the Tibetan monastic community's rights and the rights of Tibetan Buddhist practitioners are respected, and that the state does not interfere with the expression of religious practice. China vehemently maintains the position that religious freedom and the rights of the monks and nuns are ensured through its policies and laws. However, the reality is far from the official claim.

This report will examine the surveillance and controls imposed on the Tibetan monastic community in light of the "Sinicization" and "compliance with the four standards and striving to become advanced monks and nuns" policies declared by the central government of China.

## POLICIES

Despite over 60 years of its direct rule, the Chinese Communist Party has not been able to secure the support of the people in Tibet. Decades of oppression have not enabled the CCP to establish the legitimacy of its rule in Tibet with sustained resistance by Tibetans. Apparently in fear of not being able to consolidate its legitimacy in Tibet, and indicative of the insecurity of its rule, the party ever more fiercely uses harsh rhetoric and introduces far-reaching laws and regulations in Tibet. Securitization has expanded to cover almost all aspects of life.



*Surveillance cameras control room at Kirti Monastery in Ngaba (Aba), Sichuan.  
(File photo: ICT)*

For the party, achieving the ultimate objective of “long-term stability” in Tibet is a work in progress to integrate the Tibetan people in the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.” Multiple policies have been implemented over decades to secure its rule in Tibet: marked by outright violent tactics and innumerable ideological political campaigns.

The overarching policies to achieve “long-term stability” in Tibet involve multiple aspects, including measures defined under misleading neutral terms such as “stability maintenance” and “social management.” The hard approach of stability maintenance (known in Chinese as *Weiwen*) has become a multiagency juggernaut in the party-state system for achieving security in Tibet through policing, internet censorship, blacklisting individuals, planting informants and proactive surveillance using big data to preemptively “eliminate unseen threats.” It includes the collection of blood sample genetics, mandatory photo IDs, facial recognition artificial intelligence and cameras everywhere. Social management as a carrot-and-stick policy seeks instead to prevent social unrest by providing services, but also empowering the government to suppress dissent.<sup>[9]</sup>

Sinicization as a policy prescription from Beijing requires Tibetan Buddhist institutions, doctrine and leaders to conform with Chinese society and to be subservient to the party leadership and its core values. This policy prescription comes in the wake of the Communist Party’s consolidation of power to assert China’s power in the outside world, taking advantage of the favorable external and internal environment.

Following the revisions in September 2017 to the 2005 Regulations on Religious Affairs, the Chinese authorities launched the “four standards” policy in the monastic community beginning in 2018. The four compulsory standards—“political reliability,” “profound in religious knowledge,” “moral integrity capable of impressing the public” and “to play an active role at critical moments”—in essence require

the monks and nuns to be party and government propagandists by embracing socialism with Chinese characteristics.<sup>[10]</sup> They are also required, as exemplars popularly trusted, to spread official messaging to the Tibetan masses.

The goal of the policies and regulations on religion and the monastic community is to adapt Tibetan Buddhism to the socialist society led by the party. Surveillance and control of the monastic community is implemented to ensure the monastic communities' compliance with the party and government and to ensure that "patriotism" trumps religion. In China, patriotism has a specific and sinister meaning. It is defined as "love for the motherland, socialism and the Communist party."

## METHODS OF SURVEILLANCE AND CONTROL OF MONASTIC COMMUNITY

The surveillance and control of the monastic community is done through a sophisticated network of both human and electronic means. The methods deployed on the monastic community are of dystopian proportions and aim at its political neutralization. Not only are physical activities surveilled and controlled, but the institutional method attempts also to stifle the inner world of the monastic community through ideological control. In a milieu predicated on trust and intimacy, of close bonds between teacher and student, sealed by vows, the suspicions caused by intrusive human intelligence gathering severely compromise the basis of meditative progress.

Multiple party and government bureaus are involved in controlling the monks and nuns to ensure the "social management" of monasteries. Besides the United Front Work Department maintaining oversight on all aspects of religious and ethnic policies for neutralization of monks and nuns, the party and government bureaus from different levels exercise control over the monastic community. For example, 24 party and government entities maintain control of monasteries in Ngaba (Chinese: Aba) Prefecture as per article 4 of the "Notice of the People's Government of Ngaba Prefecture on Issuing the Interim Measures for the Administration of Tibetan Buddhist Affairs in Ngaba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture" issued in 2009.<sup>[11]</sup>

On a daily basis, the monastic community's life is surveilled and controlled by the "management committees," cadres and police stationed inside the monastery, and subjected to overall surveillance systems used in the whole of Tibet.

The so-called management committees came into existence starting in 2011 after the government scrapped the nominal autonomy—first introduced in 1962 and reinstated in 1980 after the Cultural Revolution— in monasteries for direct rule.<sup>[12]</sup> According to Human Rights Watch, the decision to impose direct rule came in the wake of a research project initiated by the United Front Work Department following the popular protests in Tibet in 2008. The purpose of that report was to identify who was to be blamed for Tibetan protests. Unlike the government maintaining indirect rule through the "Democratic Management Committee" in monasteries of elected monks and nuns approved by members of their monastery or nunnery, the Management Committees are installed directly by the government for "political stability" and to "establish harmonious monasteries."



*A cadre instructing monks at Yizhang Monastery to abide by the law on reincarnation.  
(Source: Chamdo City United Front Work Department)*

The officially installed Management Committees comprise cadres and monks and according to Human Rights Watch, the new arrangement is referred to as “combination of management by administration with self-rule” of monasteries.<sup>[13]</sup> The cadres stationed in the monasteries can come from different levels in the party and government hierarchy. State media outlet China Daily in September 2015 revealed 6,575 cadres work in 1,787 monasteries in the TAR.<sup>[14]</sup> Averaging the officially sanctioned figure means that three to four cadres have been assigned to every monastery in the TAR. Their role is to intrude and micro-manage thoughts, activities and behaviors of the monastic community in accordance with the party’s policies, and state laws and regulations. A common tactic employed by cadres in monasteries is to surveil and control by establishing “friendly rapport” with the monks and nuns to learn about them and their family members for tailored indoctrination campaigns. Tibetologist Robert Barnett told Radio Free Asia in 2012 that a directive to the cadres stationed in the monasteries came with the instruction to “... ‘make friends’ with one monk, and keep a file on that monk’s thinking.”<sup>[15]</sup> This is standard United Front work encapsulating the essence of the concept of a united front. In April 2020, Phurbu Sichoe, a member of the Standing Committee of the Party Committee in Toelung Dechen district and the head of the district’s United Front Work Department instructed his cadres to maintain a ledger of problems investigated regarding each and every monk in every monastery to be rectified one by one.<sup>[16]</sup> This exhaustive dossier is the electronic equivalent of the *dang’an* dossier each work unit’s party members kept on the workers, often recording trivia, until a pattern of behavior was deduced.

The other agency that surveils and controls monks and nuns on a day-to-day basis are police officers from the Public Security Bureau, as they are stationed inside the monasteries. Permanent stationing of police stations inside the monasteries started after the pan-Tibet uprising in 2008. Since then the PSB maintains proactive surveillance of monasteries against any act deemed to transgress laws on stability.

Chinese police maintain routine surveillance of everyone in their jurisdiction via the national identification card (Chinese: *shenfen zheng*).<sup>[17]</sup> Police maintain a database of every citizen’s personal details—ID number, name, date of birth, ethnicity, sex and address—with links to their residence permit (*hukou*) and the *dang’an* file containing work-related data. This baseline of surveillance allows the police to track an individual’s “routine details of life...to detect the unexpected and decide whether to investigate it,” according to Peter Mattis and Mathew Brazil in the book “Chinese Communist



Espionage: An Intelligence Primer.” Any hint of “separatism,” China’s hyperbolic term for Tibetan rights activism, can result in being blacklisted in the system on top of receiving a term of imprisonment. For instance, Gendun Sherab, a 50-year-old Tibetan monk who was blacklisted after being expelled from Rabten Monastery in Sog (Ch: Suo) county for his political views was arrested three years ago for sharing on WeChat a letter from the Dalai Lama recognizing a reincarnate teacher of Sera Je Monastery living outside Tibet in the Tibetan diaspora. Unable to get medical treatment because he was blacklisted, he died on April 18, 2020.<sup>[18]</sup>

The active presence of police forces the monastics to constantly ask themselves whether anything they do could be considered illegal. Because China’s laws are chronically vague, it is hard to know when one has crossed the line, until it’s too late. The prevalence of prosecutions for the crime of “picking quarrels and provoking trouble” is high, and many Tibetans have been declared guilty for expressing dissent from the official line.



*Showcasing Hikvision facial recognition camera capability to identify ethnic minorities.*

CCTV cameras are massively deployed for surveillance of the monasteries within and outside their vicinities. It is the single largest convenient tool used by law enforcement agencies to maintain surveillance of the monastic community, retain a cumulative record, and proactively crush any hint of dissent. Unlike other sophisticated tech tools, CCTVs are visible and part of the monks and nuns’ daily life. The presence of ever-watching cameras within the monasteries produces a suffocating environment for the monastic community. With offices in Lhasa, Hikvision, a government of China controlled entity, is the leading company providing surveillance cameras and other tech tools used to develop an intrusive environment in not only the monasteries but in the whole of Tibet.<sup>[19]</sup> The New York Times reported that Hikvision, the company specializing in cameras and software for image processing, began to phase out its “minority recognition function” in 2018, citing an anonymous company employee.<sup>[20]</sup> This could not be verified independently.

It is known that the Chinese authorities use advanced facial recognition and artificial intelligence technology for surveillance in Tibet, classifying Tibetans as a problematic group under its rule. Monks and nuns are subject to the same surveillance as all other Tibetans.

China is deeply interested in further enhancing its high-tech surveillance capabilities in Tibet. Demand for big data analytics and high-tech surveillance for “public order” in Tibet is driving Chinese technology companies to market their AI and big-data capabilities. According to a report by Nikkei Asia, five tech giants of China—Alibaba, Baidu, Tencent Holdings, iFlytek and SenseTime—have projects in the TAR. SenseTime, an AI startup, has a venture capital unit in Lhasa described as “investment activities.”<sup>[21]</sup> Tencent has an investment unit in Nyingchi (Ch: Linzhi). Alibaba also has set up an investment unit in Lhasa. iFlytek has a joint research project with Tibet University. Beijing-based Wiseweb Technology Company and Tibet University jointly launched a big data center in September 2018 based on “tourism information.”<sup>[22]</sup> The center has the dual purpose of not only boosting tourism, but ensuring regional “stability” and political unity with mainland China. Wang Sheng, deputy manager of Wiseweb, states that: “The real time monitoring could give a warning to the government on negative social events.” In other words, the government will use it to crack down on Tibetan activism or any activities broadly deemed a violation of public security and order.



*Real-time tourist monitoring screen installed at Tibet University can also be used to ensure political stability.  
(Source: Global Times)*

State media outlet Xinhua in March 2020 reported that a cloud storage center will be built in Lhasa. The data center that will become operational in 2021 is claimed to service investment and trade between Chinese companies and other companies in South Asia.<sup>[23]</sup> It will also store data for “local Tibetan firms in the electricity, finance and Internet industries.” Big data projects are expected to be included in the 14th five-year plan in 2021 as per the CCP’s “guiding opinion” and the impending roll-out of the Social Credit Score, which automatically assigns rewards and punishments, according to trustworthiness ratings.

The Chinese Communist Party’s objective is to leverage big data analytic capabilities to strictly and comprehensively monitor and control China’s population. China’s public security forces have perhaps been the most enthusiastic to adopt big data analytics.<sup>[24]</sup> In the absence of laws that limit the collection of data for public security, such powerful tools significantly enhance the Ministry of Public Security’s ability to quickly cross-reference criminal records with virtually any other data considered relevant to apprehending alleged criminals. Moreover, improvements in big data analytics directly support the strict monitoring and control of individuals for any signs of perceived disloyalty or other transgressions. Biases and targeting of the monastic community cannot be ruled out.

Surveillance of, internet and social media activities of monks have deeply affected the monastic community as they are at the forefront of resistance against the Communist Party of China’s atrocities in Tibet. WeChat is popular among the monastic community as it is the dominant social media app in Tibet subject to state laws on content control. Monks have faced arrest for messages deemed “illegal” for sharing images of the Dalai Lama or talk about the state of the Tibetan language.

A recent research report by The Citizen Lab of the University of Toronto showed that WeChat not only surveilled users in Tibet and China, but also globally. This research is true in the case of Tibetan WeChat users including the monks and nuns. For example, two monks from Tsang Monastery in Ba Dzung, Tsolho (Hainan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Qinghai, were arrested on April 16, 2018 for “illegal” photos and articles on WeChat.<sup>[25]</sup> Similarly, Sonam Palden, a 22-year-old monk at Kirti Monastery in Ngaba County was arrested in September 2019 for his post on the deplorable state of Tibetan language under Chinese policies.<sup>[26]</sup> In August 2019, Rinchen Tsultrim, a 29-year-old monk at Nangshik Monastery in Ngaba, was arrested for posting his opinions about Tibetan issues on WeChat. He has been held in detention incommunicado for over a year, preventing him from communicating with the outside world.<sup>[27]</sup>

## UNITED FRONT WORK DEPARTMENT AS “MAGIC WEAPON” TO NEUTRALIZE TIBETAN MONKS AND NUNS





*The Party and United Front Work Department hold a work summary and “commendation” ceremony on Jan. 19, 2021, for the conduct of “Complying with the Four Standards for Monks and Nuns” in Nedong (Naidong) District in Lhoka (Shannan). (Source: United Front Work Department and Nedong Party Committee)*

At the core of control of the Tibetan monastic community is the United Front Work Department (UFWD). This hitherto relatively low-profile department in the Chinese party-state system has been promoted as the de facto policy development and central coordinating body for activities across the party-state agencies. This warrants a brief discussion of the UFWD and its role in Tibet.

In September 2014, Xi Jinping’s speech at the 65th anniversary of the founding of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference revealed his vision for the UFWD’s role. Xi said, “The United Front is the victory of the Communist Party of China in the cause of revolution, construction, and reform. It is an important magic weapon to realize the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.”<sup>[28]</sup> In order to strengthen the party’s power over the state organs responsible for religious affairs, a series of bureaucratic reorganizations were made to bring religious affairs under the CCP’s “magic weapon” mass organ—the United Front Work Department.<sup>[29]</sup> The UFWD reports directly to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China. By structurally putting the UFWD in charge of all issues dealing with religion and ethnic affairs, the party removed the façade that state organs and not the party maintains direct control over state affairs, especially those dealing with ethnic and religious affairs.

The UFWD works closely with the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC). The chairman of the CPPCC heads the Central United Front Work Leading Small Group and the Central Committee Coordinating Small Group for Tibet Work. The CPPCC sets the United Front strategy. Bureau seven of the UFWD or Tibet Bureau, created in 2006, is responsible for work in Tibet.

With a structure of 12 bureaus and four sub-committees at the central level, the UFWD plays a central role in ethnic and religious affairs, according to Alex Joske of the Australian Strategic Policy

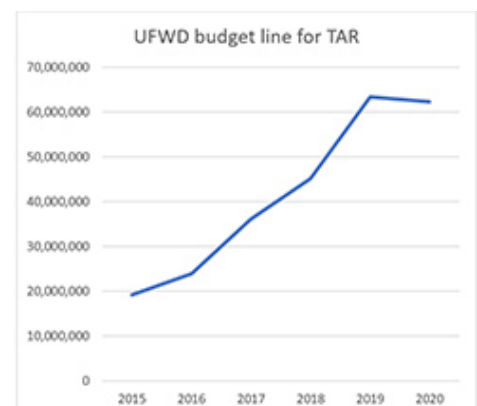
Institute.<sup>[30]</sup> Another observer pointed out that “These bureaus display the outsized role ethnic minorities and non-Party representatives (无党派代表人士) play in the CCP’s efforts to secure said groups’ support.”<sup>[31]</sup>

In overhauling three bureaus dealing with religion, ethnic affairs, and the Chinese diaspora, the party in 2018 revealed the policy areas of priority for its rule.<sup>[32]</sup> This overhaul of the religious affairs work comes in the wake of an assessment report carried out by the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI) on the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA). The 2016 report blamed SARA for the “weakening of party leadership and deficiencies in party building.”<sup>[33]</sup> Consequently, SARA was disempowered in 2018 and the religious affairs work was shifted to Bureaus 11 and 12 of the UFWD, according to Joske.<sup>[34]</sup> With this reorganization, the central leadership empowered the UFWD with day-to-day oversight and direct control over all religions in China, including Tibetan Buddhism. The goal of this reorganization was to achieve the CCP’s objective to Sinicize all religions and bring them tightly under the party’s control. Even before this reorganization, the UFWD had a central role in the Chinese government’s Tibet policy. In the dialogue process between the Dalai Lama’s envoys and the Chinese government, including during the most recent phase of 2002 to 2010, it was always the UFWD that represented the Chinese government.

## UNITED FRONT WORK DEPARTMENT IN THE TAR

The reorganization of the UFWD and the vital role it plays as the party’s “magic weapon” are reflected in Tibet as well. The budget of the UFWD in the TAR clearly reveals this prominence. Although the International Campaign for Tibet believes that the officially published UFWD budget for the TAR does not reflect the full reality, analysis of it nonetheless provides useful insights. In five years, the budget for the TAR regional level UFWD almost tripled from 23.9 million yuan in 2016 to 62 million yuan in 2020.<sup>[35]</sup> The biggest spikes in budget came in 2017 and in 2019. In 2017, Xi Jinping began his second term as president of the People’s Republic of China, having set the stage for his UFWD vision during his first term. In his second term, the UFWD was set to implement his vision for the “rejuvenation of China.” Tibet was no exception.

<b>2020</b>	<b>62,324,600</b>	<b>1.8%</b> ↓
<b>2019</b>	<b>63,450,800</b>	<b>40.4%</b> ↑
<b>2018</b>	<b>45,188,000</b>	<b>24.8%</b> ↑
<b>2017</b>	<b>36,197,000</b>	<b>51%</b> ↑
<b>2016</b>	<b>23,968,800</b>	<b>24.3%</b> ↑
<b>2015</b>	<b>19,272,300</b>	



*UFWD budget increment in percentage.*

The Communist Party of China’s revelation of its master project for all religions, including Tibetan Buddhism, was made at the 19th Party Congress in October 2017. Sinicization of religion is the official slogan, and a priority for Xi Jinping as he followed through with both rhetoric and measures.<sup>[36]</sup> His first indication of policy appraisal and reorganization came in 2014.

In 2016, Xi called specifically for the Sinicization of religion.” By Sinicization, Xi conflates Chinese culture and himself as its incarnation. He meant institutions and the clergy should serve the state’s “highest interests” by keeping leadership and core values of the CCP and state socialism as greater than the religious cannon.<sup>[37]</sup> “[T]he current state-directed Sinicization entails the complete domestication of religions to rid them of any transcendent commitments or moral visions at variance with state ideology,” according to Professor Xi Lian of Duke Divinity School.<sup>[38]</sup>

## DECONSTRUCTING STATE MEDIA PROPAGANDA ON “EDUCATIONAL” ACTIVITIES FOR THE MONASTIC COMMUNITY

An analysis of state media reports on activities in monasteries and nunneries in the TAR reveal the deployment of far-reaching ideological controls and indoctrination activities, with a brief halt in March 2020 due to the outbreak of the coronavirus epidemic in Wuhan.

The UFWD ensures that the monastic community’s thoughts and actions are not only controlled for the objective of “long-term stability,” but channeled toward the goal of the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.” To achieve both the objective and the goal, a host of mechanisms are deployed to surveil and control the monks’ and nuns’ thoughts and actions and push the monastic community away from its traditional religious system and toward the one designed by the party. An analysis of select state media reports on “educational” activities in the monasteries is as follows.

The UFWD ensures that the Tibetan monastic community holds “Chinese national consciousness” and compliance with the party’s policies and the state’s laws and regulations governing religious affairs. For example, a faculty meeting of United Front work in Ngari (Ch: Ali) Tibetan Autonomous prefecture on May 10, 2020, emphasized that their work should further ensure that the monastic community develops a consciousness as Chinese nationals and have consciousness only for the country and its laws. The meeting also emphasized making the monks and nuns follow the Chinese version of rights and obligations. Implementation of the party’s policy on religion and the state’s laws and regulations governing religious affairs was required in the monasteries.<sup>[39]</sup> Consciousness as Chinese nationals means shifting identity and fully assimilating the self to be loyal to the one Chinese race, *Zhonghua minzu*.

For the achievement of the objective of “long term stability,” controlling the monastic community’s loyalty to the party and the denunciation of the Dalai Lama—a policy adopted at the 1994 Third Tibet Work Forum—continued to be implemented in 2020. During a video conference for the development of “education activities” on “Complying with the Four Standards to be Advanced Monks and Nuns” in April 2020, Liu Zhiqiang, deputy secretary of the party committee in Lhoka (Ch: Shannan) City, ordered a “focus on dealing with the major political struggles of the 14th Dalai Lama’s death and reincarnation” for stability maintenance.



*Monks and nuns being “commended” by the Party and United Front Work Department officials in January 2021 in Chonggye (Qiongjie) County, Lhokha (Shannan) City for “complying with four standards and striving to be advanced monks and nuns”. (Source: United Front Work Department and Chonggye County Party Committee)*

A clear instruction like this, given at a conference attended by 11 party and government agencies in controlling the monastic community, ensures that the denunciation of the current Dalai Lama and demanding recognition of an eventual state approved reincarnation of the Dalai Lama are built into the curriculum part of “education activities” in monasteries. Liu Zhiqiang ordered tight control of the Tibetan Buddhist monasteries, likening them to a “bull nose” to maintain social stability.”<sup>[40]</sup> A ring through the bull’s nose means one can lead it wherever you wish. Similarly, Wangchuk (Ch: Wang Jiu), the deputy head of the UFWD and secretary of the party group of Ngari Prefecture Ethnic and Religious Affairs Bureau, called for resistance to the penetration of monasteries by the Dalai Lama’s supporters and for making the monks and nuns politically reliable for China and an example for the public to follow.<sup>[41]</sup>

The UFWD’s co-optation of the Tibetan monastic community and its ensurance of compliance with the state’s regulatory framework on religion, with emphasis on laws specific to Tibetan Buddhism, are seen in activities that highlight the party-state asserting authority over reincarnations. An exhibition on China’s narrative on Tibetan Buddhism’s reincarnation tradition was launched in Lhoka (Ch: Shannan) City in May 2020 to publicize and implement the “Measures of the Management of the Reincarnation of Living Buddhas in Tibetan Buddhism.” The monastic community is prevented from exercising its traditional method of recognizing reincarnate teachers and is required to follow the reincarnation procedures established by the party to install its approved candidate. The procedure for searching for the reincarnation of Buddhist teachers requires following only the controversial method of drawing lots from the golden vase. To ensure its control on reincarnate lamas—most importantly the reincarnation of the current 14th Dalai Lama—the CCP has adopted regulations that decree the search for reincarnate lamas should only happen within China’s borders and be approved by Beijing. The exhibition, which was attended by leaders from the party-state and representatives of state-approved

religious associations, was later opened by government officials down to the village level and to the whole society, including middle and elementary school students.<sup>[42]</sup>

In another report by Chamdo City United Front Work Department, the Management Committee of Yizhang Monastery in Lhorong (Ch: Luolong) County, Chamdo (Ch: Changdu) City, organized all monks in the monastery to study the “Management Measures for the Reincarnation of Living Buddhas of Tibetan Buddhism” in May 2020. The classes required the monks to abide by the policies and laws of the party and state regarding reincarnation of Tibetan Buddhist teachers in accordance with the party-state’s version of history, religious rituals and procedures for Tibetan Buddhism.<sup>[43]</sup>

## “FOUR STANDARDS” MAKING RELIGIOUS PRACTICE SUBSERVIENT TO LOYALTY TO PARTY







*Propaganda exhibition in Lhasa for 100 monks and nuns from Chushur (Qushui) County undergoing “Complying with Four Standards for Monks and Nuns.” The exhibition projects Tibetan reincarnation system as being managed by the central government of China between Yuan through Qing dynasties. (Source: United Front Work Department and Chushur County Party Committee)*

The National Religious Work Conference in 2016 saw Xi Jinping calling for the party to consolidate its United Front with religious communities in order “to achieve the Chinese dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.”<sup>[44]</sup> With the revision of the Religious Affairs Regulations in 2017 putting into practice the proceedings of the National Religious Work Conference, an ideological control

policy titled “Four standards for being an advanced monk and nun” began to be deployed in the Tibetan monastic community beginning in 2018.

The four standards policy required the monastic community to

- 1) *Comply with the standard on political reliability, and strive to be advanced monks and nuns with a steady and distinctive stance.*
- 2) *Obey the standards on religion by creating harmony, and strive to be advanced monks and nuns for diligent study and strenuous training.*
- 3) *Follow the standards of moral integrity capable of obedience to public, and strive to be advanced monk and nuns for law-abiding and noble morality.*
- 4) *Obey the standard that work at the critical times, strive to be advanced monks and nuns for playing active role.*<sup>[45]</sup>

The four standards policy in essence requires the monastic community to be loyal to the Communist Party of China and embrace socialism with Chinese characteristics.

For example, at a symposium on “Following the four standards and striving to be advanced monks and nuns” held in Lhasa in December 2019, TAR Party Secretary Wu Yingjie, who presided over the meeting, required the monastic community to be grateful to the party for their “benefits” and to be loyal followers of the party. He also required the monks to “firmly establish a correct view of the motherland, nation, history, culture and religion.”<sup>[46]</sup> In other words, the monastic community is prevented from forming and expressing their thoughts on Tibet’s history and culture, and instead is required to toe the party’s approved version of China’s history, culture, and religion. As a long-standing policy of repressing the monastic community’s loyalty to the Dalai Lama, the party secretary required the monastic community to criticize the Dalai Lama in their respective monasteries in the name of the unity of China and social stability.

During a nine-day reeducation program held in May 2020 for the representatives of the monastic community in Qinghai province, the Provincial Party Secretary Wang Jianjun instructed the monastic community to adhere to the “four standards” and to encourage the religious believers toward supporting the party and government. In making Tibetan Buddhism embrace socialism with Chinese characteristics, the head of the TAR United Front Work Department, Gonpo Tashi, called on the monastics to follow the Sinicization of Tibetan Buddhism by adhering to the party’s policy on religion, by complying with the laws and regulations on religion, and by implementing the officially sanctioned law on reincarnation of religious teachers. He also instructed the monastic community to make a lifelong commitment to the “four standards,” as they provide guidance in enhancing their “mental capacity and action.” He required the monastic community to respect the leaders of the Communist Party of China and socialism with Chinese characteristics and to help further flourish the tradition of “loving your country, loving your religion” for the unity of the motherland, ethnic unity, religious harmony and social stability.<sup>[47]</sup>

Similarly, the UFWD organized the first round of a three-year ideological control program targeting monks and nuns in the 18-50 year age range that was launched in Dechen Prefecture in May 2020. The weeklong “classes” for a first batch of 62 monks and nuns covered a range of topics, including political theory, religious policies and regulations, and patriotism. The purpose of the “training” was to politically direct the monastic community toward “socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era” and integration of Xi Jinping’s ideas on religion in the practice of Tibetan Buddhism.<sup>[48]</sup>



*Glimpse of a classroom during the weeklong political training in May 2020 for monastic community in Dechen Prefecture, Yunnan. (Source: Yunnan Net-Shangri-La Net)*

Phurbu Sichoe (Ch: Pubu Siqu), a member of the Standing Committee of the Party Committee in Toelung Dechen district and the head of the district's United Front Work Department, held a meeting in April 2020 on "four standards" for his cadres during which he revealed the surveillance and control tactics used for the ideological control on the monastic community. He instructed the cadres to apply the ideological control policies, tailoring them according to the perceived risks and problems identified in each monk and nun in every monastery. "Based on the problems investigated in each monk and nun in every monastery, a ledger should be maintained for rectification of them one by one," Sichoe instructed the cadres in attendance at the mobilization and deployment meeting for "education activities" of "compliance with the four standards and striving to become advanced monks and nuns".<sup>[49]</sup>

## EFFECTS OF CONTROL AND SURVEILLANCE ON MONASTIC LIFE AND PRACTICE OF TIBETAN BUDDHIST RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

- The surveillance and control measures imposed on the Tibetan monastic community are leading to a slow and steady decay of monasteries as centers of education and learning, a role they maintained for centuries while the Tibetan Buddhist civilization flourished. Such measures restrict monks from traveling freely between monasteries in pursuit of teachers and knowledge in different parts of Tibet and abroad. Since children are not allowed to study at monastic schools anymore, in contrast to the traditional monastic education system, which recommends beginning early in life, the spread of religious knowledge is prevented by the state. The connection between generations of teachers and students is broken to stifle transmission of knowledge with the goal of a slow decay of the Tibetan Buddhist civilization.

The rationale behind the traditional system of monastic education is succinctly explained by a former monk of Labrang Monastery. He told the International Campaign for Tibet: “In Tibetan monasteries, young monks are raised to be protectors of their own culture and Buddhist values from a young age. And then when they grow up, they pass on this education to a young monk, so that it goes full circle. I learned from older monks at my monastery, and when I was in my early 30s, I then taught the young monks, not only about the scriptures and studying, but also how to do their homework, how to behave, and how to do practical tasks such as fetching water and cleaning. When young monks are forced to leave the monasteries, this vital connection between generations is broken.”<sup>[50]</sup>

- The intensive surveillance and control of the monastic community has led to either the expulsion of monks for not complying with the official policies, or to their voluntary departure due to constant harassment by officials creating an unbearably suffocating environment for them. According to a Tibetan scholar in Tibet, not identified for security reasons, “There has been a major decline in the number of monks and nuns, with some monasteries and nunneries virtually empty ... The dwindling number of monks and nuns who remain face serious challenges in carrying out their religious practice.”<sup>[51]</sup> Such observations from the field are important for assessing the real situation on the ground, rather than relying on state propaganda repeating information about a static monastic demography for decades.

An accurate demography of the Tibetan monastic population is not available. China’s 2001 white paper, “Tibet’s March Toward Modernization,” stated that there were 120,000 monks in the 1950s, citing a government survey conducted then.<sup>[52]</sup> The same white paper claimed 46,000 monks and nuns in the TAR as the demography of monastics in 2000. The officially sanctioned figure of 46,000 monks and nuns cited by state agencies and media has been repeated over the years. State media outlet Xinhua in March 2019 continued to report the “current” monastic population in the TAR as 46,000 monks and nuns; a figure left unchanged for more than two decades.<sup>[53]</sup>

- With the government of China maintaining ever-tighter surveillance and control of Tibetans, flagrantly ignoring international obligations to respect their rights, the flow of information on human rights abuses from the ground has decreased dramatically. Ramped up surveillance has led to the arrest of monks, which in turn has had a deterrence effect inside Tibet and in exile on exposing such violations. Kanyag Tsering, who is in exile and is the principal point of contact for monks in Kirti Monastery in Ngaba County, told the Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy, “The pressure on your conscience is immense when many who provided you information are detained and tortured ... what really troubles me is that I am somehow responsible for making my friends go to prison.”<sup>[54]</sup> Such exasperation is common among many Tibetans who had hoped for positive interventions by the international community only to be left disappointed with their loved ones landing in jail for taking the risk in reporting human rights abuses to the outside world.
- Since the monastic community live in a compact community, surveillance of monks and their activities within the monasteries is mainly done by the management committees, police officers, cadres and embedded informants. CCTVs are ubiquitous within the monasteries, but deployment of high-tech surveillance within the monasteries does not seem to be the norm for now.

The constant gaze by the party-state for misdemeanors or noncompliance with official policies suffocates the monastic community in their daily lives. This suffocation is compounded by the regulatory framework used to control their life and religious practice. The monks and nuns stay quiet in the face of repression for fear of further escalation.

- Imposition of the government's direct rule on the monasteries by scrapping their nominal autonomy has led to deepening repression inside the monasteries. The monks and nuns no longer even have nominal decision-making representation in the monasteries to raise their collective concerns.

This top-down direct rule is building frustration within the monastic community, compounded by the gaze and intrusion into their lives. For now, the monastic community has chosen to silently swallow down the atrocities. But the building frustration is bound to vent at some point in the future, as has been the case in past cycles of repression and resistance.

- Surveillance and control to ensure that religious leaders are a bridge between the party, religious community and believers have mixed effects. State-approved religious leaders heap praise on the Communist Party leaders as saviors of the people and the motherland during their discourses and engagement with the public. The Chinese government-appointed Panchen Lama, Gyaltzen Norbu, is one vocal proponent of the party's rule in Tibet. Most others reluctantly follow the party's diktat for practical reasons, but not wholeheartedly.
- The regulations on controlling the reincarnation system is discrediting Tibetan Buddhism's unique reincarnation system. By controlling the selection of Tibetan religious teachers' reincarnations, the UFD is breaking the religious and spiritual bond of the Tibetan people with their beloved teachers. Against the customary and traditional practice of recognizing reincarnate teachers purely as a function of religious leaders, state regulations, which stipulate that administrative entities and the State Council have the authority to deny or approve reincarnations, are discrediting the centuries-old traditional Tibetan Buddhist practices.

This state intervention into religious matters not only creates schisms within the broader religious community, but also stifles the religious communities' belief system for having to deal with fake reincarnate teachers. By requiring all reincarnate teachers to be reborn within China, a move clearly made to manipulate the reincarnation of the 14th Dalai Lama, the religious community remains anxious as the current Dalai Lama advances in age. For six centuries since the 14th century, the reincarnations of the Dalai Lamas have been recognized in accordance with traditional Tibetan Buddhist practices. With state regulations now in place to control the appointment of the next Dalai Lama, the monastic and the broader religious community are silently worried about the decay and demise of the institution of the Dalai Lamas in Tibet. Sensing this anxiety, Tibetan religious leaders in the diaspora resolved in November 2019 that the "authority of decision concerning the way and the manner in which the next reincarnation of the XIV Dalai Lama should appear solely rests with His Holiness the XIV Dalai Lama himself. No government or otherwise will have such authority. If the Government of the People's Republic of China for political ends chooses a candidate for the Dalai Lama, the Tibetan people will not recognize and respect that candidate."<sup>[55]</sup>

- Chinese authorities use “public health and safety” regulations to control and influence the population of the monastic community. The use of public safety regulations to implement mass expulsions has caused the discontinuation of studies, the displacement of monks and nuns, and the decline of monastic institutes. Often, expelled monks and nuns had to undergo humiliating and degrading treatment by forcing them into non-monastic activities as part of political reeducation.

This is clearly exemplified in the mass expulsion of monks and nuns at Larung Gar and Yachen Gar. By mid-2017, over 6,700 monks and nuns were expelled from Larung Gar Buddhist Institute in Serthar County, Sichuan, and over 1,500 dwellings at the institute were razed to the ground.<sup>[56]</sup> The monks and nuns were not only forced to discontinue their education—some were able to resume in monasteries in their hometowns—but were also required to attend political reeducation sessions involving singing nationalistic songs in praise of the party and motherland dressed in military fatigues.

Similarly, over 6,000 monastics were expelled from Yachen Gar Buddhist Institute in early 2019.<sup>[57]</sup> Any hope of joining monasteries in the Tibet Autonomous Region stood no chance in the face of administrative measures explicitly restricting monks and nuns from traveling freely in pursuit of knowledge.



*Picture of Yachen Gar taken in November 2020 revealing the scale of destruction.  
(Photo shared by Katia Buffetrille)*



*Yachen Gar in 2013 before the destruction. (Photo: Drog-ga)*



*Nuns forced to leave Yachen Gar. (Source: Tibet.net)*

## EFFECTS ON THE AUTHENTICITY OF RELIGIOUS LIFE IN TIBET

The policies and measures to control the Tibetan monastic community produce a profound and negative impact on the practice, transmission and preservation of Tibetan Buddhism. The Communist Party of China and its mass organ UFWD not only control the ideas and thoughts developed within

the traditional Tibetan Buddhism system, but also proactively coerce the system to become Chinese through the Sinicization of Buddhism, a five-year plan reportedly launched in January 2019.<sup>[58]</sup>

Sinicization as a process to assimilate the identity of Tibetans is not new, as for decades the Chinese government has been trying to socio-culturally integrate and assimilate Tibetans into Chinese society. However, the Sinicization policy launched by Xi Jinping is particularly concerning because it specifically targets Tibetan Buddhism as a religion.

The authenticity of Tibetan Buddhism has been profoundly affected by the policies and measures imposed to control Tibetan Buddhism and the monastic community. The content of the teachings have been regulated to assure control and political indoctrination on “patriotism” for China. The relentless political campaigns in the monasteries and nunneries to “love your country and love your religion” coerce the monastic community and the religious leaders to self-censor their ideas and thoughts from public domains.

The Tibetan idea of the flourishing of Buddhism and the monastic community through dedicating one’s lifetime to the study and practice of the teachings has been controlled through government intervention. The minimum age requirement to join the monastic community, which is 18, is leading to a dwindling monastic population. The new generation of monks and nuns would be significantly smaller in number and their knowledge development would start much later in their adolescent life than would be the case through the system of traditional training right from childhood.

The reincarnation system is unique to Tibetan Buddhism and has been followed for centuries by recognizing reincarnate teachers and maintaining the bond between teachers and students with the continuation of a religious mission. State decrees and measures on the reincarnation of Tibetan religious teachers intervene directly to break the authentic Tibetan practice in favor of state and party ideology. The political indoctrination campaigns in Tibetan monasteries coerce the monastic community to comply with state decrees and measures on the reincarnation system. Unlike the traditional custom of a particular religious community following the traditional process of recognition of a reincarnate teacher, the Chinese state, by requiring its method of selection in accordance with its policies and measures, directly intervenes to stifle the authenticity of Tibetan Buddhism. Fundamentally, all the reincarnate teachers are required to get government permission to reincarnate and to be included in the government-maintained reincarnation database introduced in 2016.

Traditionally the Tibetan monastic community is bound by its code of conduct found in the Buddhist canons. All the monastic affairs are conducted with the canons as the source of authority. However, the implementation of policies in the monasteries requires the monastic community to hold the communist doctrine and leaders as higher authority than the canons even on spiritual matters. By manufacturing a monastic community compliant to the doctrine of a one-party state, the authenticity of Tibetan Buddhism is profoundly being attacked and diluted.

International law provides for a number of safeguards for freedom of religion or belief, which are codified in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which the People’s Republic of China has signed, but not ratified; in the Convention of the Right of the Child, ratified by China; and notably in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which has been ratified by the People’s Republic of China. While the former protect rights pertaining to freedom of religion or belief, the latter addresses the protection of cultural rights that guarantee the freedom to practice one’s culture. Tibetan Buddhism is an integral part of Tibetan culture, and hence the cultural rights of



Tibetan Buddhist practitioners enjoy the protection of international law. The control and surveillance exerted by the Chinese state over Tibetan Buddhism, and in particular over monastic life, inhibit the rights of Tibetan nuns and monks to freely practice and develop their religious life. As former United Nations Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Religion or Belief Heiner Bielefeldt notes, “freedom of religion or belief does not protect religious traditions per se, but instead facilitates the free search and development of faith-related identities in the broadest sense of the word.”<sup>[59]</sup> This means that Tibetan Buddhism can only flourish if its traditions, its canons and its rules are learned, transmitted and further developed freely—i.e. free from the intervention of the Chinese state, and particularly free from control and surveillance.



*A surveillance camera in Lhasa disguised as a prayer wheel. (Photo: Woesser)*



## NOTES

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