



Tibet's "Intolerable" Monasteries: The role of monasteries in Tibetan resistance since 1950



TIBET WATCH
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Tibet’s “Intolerable” Monasteries: **The role of monasteries in Tibetan resistance since 1950**

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Contents

Introduction.....	1
Background.....	4
Role of monasteries in Tibetan society	4
China and Tibetan Buddhism since 1950	5
Current situation	8
Labrang Tashikyil Monastery.....	11
Introduction.....	11
Human rights defenders from Labrang Tashikyil Monastery	12
Tourism and its impact	14
Intrusion by the State	15
Protests and events at Labrang Tashikyil Monastery since the 2008 uprising	17
Kirti Monastery.....	22
Introduction.....	22
Intrusion by the State	24
Protests and events at Kirti Monastery since the 2008 uprising.....	26
Nyitso Monastery	33
Introduction.....	33
Self-immolation protests in Tawu County.....	34
Uninvited guests at Tawu celebrations	37
Religious Institutions in Tibet Autonomous Region	41
Introduction.....	41
Shak Rongpo Gaden Dargyeling Monastery	42
Jhada Gon Palden Khachoe Nunnery	44
Additional protests and events in Nagchu Prefecture since the 2008 uprising	47
Conclusions.....	48
Bibliography.....	50

Introduction

This report examines the role of Tibetan Buddhist institutions in Tibetan resistance. In particular, the report will focus on several monasteries and one nunnery spanning all three traditional provinces of Tibet (Amdo, Kham and U-Tsang) to provide an overview of the breadth of resistance activities.



Traditional Tibetan areas



Tibet as divided by China

Prior to the Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1950, government was largely theocratic and religious institutions played a number of different roles. First and foremost, they were institutes of religious study and practice and developed influence based on the quality of their research and teaching in much the same way as prestigious universities. However, they also provided education for the lay communities that lived around them. They acted as financial institutes, offering loans but also investing in local agriculture, herding and other projects. They offered an arbitration service and resolved disputes between neighbours and families. Monks were strongly represented in the government and monasteries often acted as local political centres.

In the first few years of the occupation, very little changed. China trod carefully as it tried to induce the Dalai Lama to accept that Tibet was now an integral part of the People's Republic of China (PRC). The peaceful approach did not last, however, and Mao soon embarked upon a process of appropriation which saw many monasteries and nunneries stripped of their land and much of their property. This triggered a period of protest and unrest, culminating in the uprising of 1959. The response was swift and violent. Monasteries were subjected to aerial bombing; people were killed, arrested, sent to labour camps.

Perceived as bastions of traditional values, religious institutions in Tibet were systematically attacked again during the Cultural Revolution. Even private religious observance became illegal. The repression lifted somewhat with the death of Mao and the Cultural Revolution. The new leader, Deng Xiaoping, initiated a gentler approach and religion regained its place in day-to-day life in Tibet.

However, as they watched the temples and monasteries being rebuilt, Tibetan people enthusiastically re-embracing religious practice, Chinese authorities started to articulate their concerns. The influence of Tibetan Buddhism was once again considered a threat to China's control over Tibet.

Then, as now, monasteries were the focus of Tibetan civil society. Providing education in Tibetan language as well as religion, they have become cultural centres, while the monks and nuns within these institutes have become the guardians, protectors and strongest advocates of Tibetan culture, nationality and identity. As such, they are the front-line defence against China's attempts at cultural assimilation. This also means they are often first in the firing line when China fears social unrest. Consequently, China has tried everything from bribery to violence in its attempts to control religious institutes in Tibet and limit their influence.

As the relaxation that followed the Cultural Revolution was reversed, the monks and nuns who had suffered wave after wave of repression and violence became increasingly politicised. The protest that sparked the unrest of the late 1980s was staged by 21 monks from Drepung Monastery, just outside Lhasa. Monks and nuns continued to be at the forefront of the protests in Lhasa throughout 1987, 1988 and 1989, after which martial law was imposed by Hu Jintao, then Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Secretary of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR).



Tibetan monk leading protesters in Lhasa, 1987¹



Tibetan monks protesting at the Jokhang, Lhasa, 1988²

Many of the lay people who joined protests had been compelled to action because of restrictions on their own religious practice, coupled with witnessing the brutality suffered by respected religious figures and China's ongoing vilification of the Dalai Lama.

The moderate religious policies outside the TAR were not rolled back after 1989 like they were inside the TAR so the religious revival was able to continue. Larger monasteries outside the TAR were able to function and house thousands of monks until the mid-1990s after which the more relaxed policies also started to be reversed.

More recently, during the 2008 uprising, monks again led the protests and suffered the brunt of the subsequent crackdown. It is possible therefore to see a correlation between religious institutions and Tibetan political resistance. In addition to physically leading Tibetan resistance, monks and nuns are also critical to Tibet's digital resistance. Tibet's more influential monasteries have always had a strong contact network which once would have been used purely for sharing religious teachings and philosophy. Now the same networks are often used to ensure that news from inside Tibet makes it past China's "Great Firewall"³ and reaches people in exile. Some institutions, such as Kirti Monastery, are now developing or building new reputations on the basis of their activism as well as their religious influence.

Increasingly, China has focused their efforts on controlling the activities of monasteries: patriotic re-education, the imposition of 'work teams', surveillance cameras within monastery grounds, dedicated police stations, frequent inspections and numerous arbitrary regulations. However, decades of repressive policies have served to politicise Tibet's monks and nuns rather than subdue them.

The activities of the monasteries and nunneries described in this report vary greatly but all have been central to the ongoing Tibetan resistance. Some, like Kirti Monastery and Labrang Tashikyil Monastery,

¹ Photo credit: John Ackerly - <http://freetibet.org/about/resistance>

² Photo credit: AFP - <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/tibet/health-09012011143807.html>

³ The "Great Firewall" is the nickname Chinese netizens have given to the Chinese government's system for blocking certain online content from view in mainland China. As defined by China Digital Times: http://chinadigitaltimes.net/space/Great_Firewall

have been at the forefront of traditional protests. They have led demonstrations and established networks to ensure that information is transmitted outside of Tibet. Some, like Nyitso Monastery, have demonstrated their opposition to the occupation through prayer, religious gatherings and continued loyalty to the Dalai Lama. It is China's failure to respect freedom of religion which has turned these activities into political statements.

Buddhism in Tibet is an integral part of the social fabric and day-to-day lives. Attacks and restrictions on Buddhism in Tibet are, therefore, not peripheral issues; they are attacks on the Tibetan people, culture and way of life.



Tibetans at Labrang Tashikyil Monastery⁴

⁴ Photo credit: Kavita Dattani, Free Tibet

Background

Role of monasteries in Tibetan society

Due to repressive Chinese government policies, religious institutions play an important role in communities in Tibet today. Monasteries and nunneries provide an alternative to the state and they are vital places where Tibetan culture and language is protected and preserved. However, precisely because of the important place they occupy in Tibetan society and as a key aspect of Tibetan identity, monasteries also feel the full weight of China's occupation and are perceived as a threat⁵.

According to scholars Enze Han and Christopher Paik:

*"Monasteries in Tibet have historically acted as cultural and political centres for Tibetans, promoting a stronger sense of unity and identity among the people. The Chinese government's continual repressive measures towards Tibetan Buddhism have exacerbated Tibetans' frustration with the Chinese state and have made Buddhist monasteries nuclei of Tibetan political activism."*⁶

Prior to the Chinese invasion in 1950, Tibet had a very distinctive, theocratic form of government where religion and politics were inseparably linked to each other. The Dalai Lama, traditionally based in Lhasa, served as both spiritual and political leader and at least half of the government officials were monks. Lhasa was both the religious and political capital of Tibet.

Similarly, the thousands of monasteries and nunneries spread across the Tibetan plateau represented local centres of both religious and political power. Many of them developed significant influence based on the quality of their research and teaching, in much the same way as prestigious universities. They also played a central role in community life – both through direct family connections and also through the services they provided. These included religious services and teaching for lay people as well as for monks and nuns. Many institutions also offered secular education, including language, and provided an arbitration service, resolving disputes between neighbours and families. They granted loans, financed small and large scale trading enterprises and offered a safety net during economic crises. As financial institutions, monasteries were crucial agents in Tibet's development of international trade with India and Nepal. At the same time, they also helped local economies, as they reinvested their accumulated wealth into agrarian and herding activities. Some monasteries, such as Labrang Tashikyil, received material support from their local community in return, such as unpaid labour or financial contributions.

This economic system came to an end with the Chinese occupation: most monasteries and nunneries were shut down, their assets confiscated and loans cancelled. As a result of the complete dismantlement of the Tibetan economic system, the TAR and the Tibetan areas currently included in the Chinese provinces of Qinghai, Sichuan and Gansu are still among the poorest parts of China.

The nature of the role that monasteries and nunneries play in Tibetan society has changed significantly since the occupation began. Yet, they have remained a central aspect of communities across Tibet. Monasteries have continued to provide educational services, offering education in Tibetan language and also providing an alternative to the propaganda promulgated in government run schools. They have, in addition, continued to offer religious services and have played a key role in preserving and passing on

⁵ For an overview of freedom of religion in Tibet, see: *No Faith in the State; Tibetans Speak About Religious Restrictions*, Tibet Watch, 2007 - <http://www.tibetwatch.org/uploads/2/4/3/4/24348968/nofaithfinal.pdf>

⁶ *Dynamics of Political Resistance in Tibet: Religious Repression and Controversies of Demographic Change*, Enze Han and Christopher Paik, *The China Quarterly*, Volume 217, March 2014, pp 69-98

Tibetan culture and traditions. All of this has been subject to varying degrees of restriction over the decades (as described in the next section) but repression has so far failed to sever the bond between Tibetan religious institutions and their surrounding communities. On the contrary, given how integral Tibetan Buddhism is to Tibetan culture, monks and nuns have become guardians of that culture and, by extension, become closely associated with Tibetan national identity.

The influence of religion and religious institutions in Tibet concerns China greatly as it provides Tibetans with a political and social alternative to the occupying government. A Tibetan currently living in exile told Tibet Watch:

"The local authorities are mistrustful and dislike the strong bond between monasteries and the lay people, they try everything possible to break that bond. One method they use to create this distance is to provide a lot of government funds for non-monastic infrastructure projects and clearly specify that the funds shouldn't be directed to the monasteries or to any religious entities."⁷

Tibetan monks and nuns have also been at the forefront of protest and resistance throughout the occupation and many institutions have developed reputations for their activism as well as their teaching.

China and Tibetan Buddhism since 1950

During the first few years of the occupation, China initiated a process of gradual assimilation of Tibet and its culture into the new mainstream Chinese communist regime. Up until 1956, Tibetan monastic institutions were allowed to operate as they had prior to 1950. Beijing's aim was to induce Tibet's leader, the Dalai Lama, to formally recognize Tibet as an integral part of the PRC. In this early period, the Tibetan religious and socio-economic system co-existed with the Chinese occupation.

This situation started to change in 1955. Mao had previously launched a process of collectivisation of rural lands which saw landowners across the country losing ownership of their properties in favour of what was seen as more equal land distribution. In the first few years of the Chinese occupation this process had not been fully applied in Tibet. However, in 1955 Mao launched a campaign to accelerate land collectivisation and this time Tibetan areas were included. Authorities in Sichuan saw this as an opportunity to seize Tibetan land in the province: this eventually triggered revolts and protests across the monasteries of Sichuan province. The response was brutal: in 1956 they started aerial bombing and attacking the monasteries that had risen up.⁸

Parallel to the collectivisation process imposed by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), protests across the Tibetan Plateau continued for the next few years. In 1959, anti-China demonstrations erupted in Lhasa. These were heavily suppressed by the authorities - thousands of Tibetans were killed, arrested and sent to labour camps. The Dalai Lama fled into exile in India, followed by thousands of other Tibetans in the years to come. Initially, China sought to persuade the Dalai Lama to accept Chinese sovereignty over Tibet. As they realised the futility of these attempts they changed their approach to one of vilification and started depicting the Dalai Lama as an extremist and a threat to China's national unity. In fact, the Dalai Lama has spent the past few decades promoting what is known as the Middle Way Approach, calling for genuine autonomy for Tibet rather than independence from China. Nevertheless, China continues to misrepresent his position and any sign of loyalty to the exiled Tibetan spiritual leader is subject to punishment, which can include lengthy prison sentences.

⁷ Sonam Dorjee, 43, from Lhokha (Ch: Shannan) County, interview taken by Tibet Watch in Dharamsala, India, on 21 December 2015

⁸ *Arrested Histories: Tibet, the CIA, and Memories of a Forgotten War*, Carole McGranahan, Duke University Press, 2010

China-Tibet relations deteriorated following the 1959 uprising and many religious institutions found themselves expropriated of their assets and stripped of any official recognition. Monasteries were seen as intrinsically disloyal to the CCP and their power and influence were systematically crushed by the authorities. Many institutions were shut down and monks were incarcerated or forced to join work units across Tibet⁹. Despite the dismantlement of the religious system, Tibetans could still profess religion in their private lives and Tibetan Buddhism was still openly practiced all across Tibet.

The situation worsened considerably in 1966. In an attempt to increase his own power and popularity across China, Mao launched the Cultural Revolution. During the ten years that it lasted, authorities promoted the systematic destruction of 'old' values and traditions, which were seen as the root of exploitation and inequality. It was believed that once these were abandoned, China would become a new socialist society, free from capitalism and 'class enemies'¹⁰. Religion was one of the main targets of this campaign and it was openly attacked across the country and specifically in Tibet. In just two years, all remaining religious vestiges were destroyed and even private religious practice became illegal. The slightest display of religious feeling was seen as a deviation from the new, strict, atheist culture and could lead to torture and imprisonment.

Mao died in 1976 and with his death the Cultural Revolution ended. Deng Xiaoping became the new leader in China and, in 1978, he launched an era of reforms which affected many aspects of society. After decades of seclusion, China once again opened up to the outside world and foreign influence. Deng's reforms also tried to bring about reconciliation between the state and religion. Both private and public religious practice became legal once again and monastic institutions were restored.

At the end of 1978 Deng Xiaoping invited the Dalai Lama to send a delegation to Tibet to investigate conditions first hand. The first fact-finding delegation arrived in 1979 and included the Dalai Lama's older brother, Gyalo Thondup. Believing that Tibetan people had completely abandoned religion and turned their back on their religious leader in exile, the Chinese authorities warned local Tibetans not to assault the delegation. This turned out to be a gross misunderstanding of the spirit of the Tibetan people. The welcome was overwhelming: tens of thousands of people received the delegation with huge displays of jubilation, shouting "long live the Dalai Lama" and "Tibet is independent". These events showed how even 30 years of Chinese rule and the horrors of the Cultural Revolution had not been able to wipe out religious belief and loyalty to the Dalai Lama from the hearts and souls of the Tibetan people.

During the 1980s, Deng Xiaoping continued his efforts to revitalise Tibetan culture and religion. Article 36 of the 1982 Chinese Constitution officially granted religious freedom in China and Tibet and a significant number of temples and monasteries were rebuilt.

However, local authorities were surprised by how quickly and enthusiastically Tibetan people re-embraced Buddhism once the ban was lifted. Religious activity began to flourish at a pace which was considered dangerous and local authorities quickly started implementing measures to curb and limit the extent of the revival. This included the creation of 'democratic management committees' for monasteries. These are composed of government officials and 'patriotic' monks and were established to replace the monastic bodies which had for centuries managed the religious and administrative life of monasteries and nunneries.

⁹ Under the Chinese Communist Party rule, for more than 30 years the population was forcibly organised into work units. These were units of economic production, social welfare and political control. Virtually everybody was assigned to a work unit which would establish where one lived and worked. Work units also facilitated security surveillance, thus playing a major role in establishing political control over groups and individuals.

¹⁰ "Class enemy" was a Communist term often used to describe individuals or groups of people who were seen as "enemies" of the revolution.

As expressed by Tibet scholar Ronald Schwartz:

"The monasteries represent the reappearance of a Tibetan civil society, outside state control, that had lain submerged for two decades. The reforms opened a space in Tibetan society for the re-creation of the one cohesive institution that Tibetans are able to identify as their own. As such, the monasteries have come to signify Tibetan nationhood and survival, and thus have become the principal battleground for Tibetan resistance to the Chinese state."¹¹

Thus, after an initial period of openness, during the mid-1980s Chinese authorities actively curtailed the revival of Tibetan Buddhism. This gave way to a new wave of anti-China protests in monasteries across Tibet, which lasted for a period of five years. These protests, led by young monks and nuns, began on 27 September 1987 and gave voice to the frustrations and sufferings of a people who, despite the lifting of the ban on religion, were still severely oppressed.

China's reaction to the new wave of Tibetan resistance was violent and brutal: thousands of people were beaten, arrested and killed as the authorities intensified their control over the Tibetan population. Tourists and other foreign visitors were prohibited from entering Tibet and the entire area was placed under surveillance. In the years that followed, the limits placed on religious practice became even more rigorous and Chinese authorities sought to control every aspect of Tibetan Buddhist life.

In 1995 the Chinese government kidnapped Gedhun Choekyi Nyima (pictured right), the five-year-old boy who had been recognised by the Dalai Lama as the 11th Panchen Lama, the second highest ranking religious figure in Tibetan Buddhism. At the end of the same year China enthroned a child selected by Chinese authorities as Panchen Lama, regardless of clear opposition from within Tibet and abroad. Throughout 1996 monks belonging to monasteries in Shigatse (Ch: Rikaze), a prefecture level city in the TAR where the Panchen Lama usually resides, opposed the intrusion of the Chinese government into religious affairs and, specifically, the kidnapping of the boy recognised as the new Panchen Lama. Several arrests followed these demonstrations, while many monks were forced to leave their monasteries.¹² This incident marked an embitterment of relations between China and the Tibetan exile community headed by the Dalai Lama.



Following the kidnapping of the Panchen Lama, a new set of strict regulations were imposed on monasteries. These included a limit on the number of monks and nuns who could be enrolled at each institution; the establishment of an entry exam for new prospective monks and nuns; a ban on students younger than 18 joining monasteries or nunneries; restrictions on monks and nuns visiting other institutions for religious or educational purposes; and, most notably, the establishment of police stations within or in the immediate proximity of major monasteries.

It was also around this time that 'patriotic re-education' programmes were introduced in a systematic way, with Chinese administered 'work teams'¹³ regularly visiting monasteries and nunneries to deliver political training sessions. During patriotic re-education programmes, monks and nuns are taught to love China and

¹¹ *Circle of Protest: Political Ritual in the Tibetan Uprising*, Ronald Schwartz, Columbia University Press, 1994, p.17

¹² TIN News Review No.25, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/tibet/china/panchen.html>

¹³ Work teams (*Tb: ledon rukhag*) are placed in monasteries and nunneries which China considers to be politically active or 'troublesome' in other ways. The teams are comprised of government officials and can vary in size from three to 20 individuals, depending on the size of the monastery. The length of their visits can also vary from five days to four months, although some make repeat visits which can equate to a near permanent presence.

the CCP, forced to denounce the Dalai Lama and required to admit that Tibet is an inalienable part of China. Those who refuse to sign documents where they formally denounce the Dalai Lama and accept China's distorted version of history are often incarcerated, tortured and forced to leave their monastic institutions. This process built up a new kind of frustration and resentment towards the Chinese authorities and government, which has been felt by lay and religious people alike.

In 2007, Chinese interference into religious matters in Tibet grew even further, as the Chinese State Religious Affairs Bureau Order No. 5 established that all reincarnated Rinpoches are subject to the approval of the Chinese government.

This was the backdrop to the 2008 protests that spread across Tibet. On 10 March 2008, a group of around 300 monks from Drepung and Sera Monasteries took to the streets in Lhasa, commemorating the 1959 uprising and demanding the release of six monks who had been imprisoned the previous October. On this occasion, between 50 and 60 monks were arrested. On 14 March, new protests erupted in the Tibetan capital and, in the following weeks and months, monks and nuns from monasteries across the whole of Tibet staged anti-China demonstrations.

According to the Central Tibetan Administration in Dharamsala, India, the number of demonstrations that erupted in Tibet in 2008 alone was as high as 344. All of these protests were brutally suppressed by the Chinese authorities and police. The Central Tibetan Administration reports that an estimated 227 Tibetans were killed in the crackdown, while 6,810 protesters were arrested.¹⁴

Current situation

China's repressive measures aimed at Tibetan Buddhism affect the full spectrum of religious activity in Tibet. On one hand, China seeks to control Buddhism from the top by dictating the reincarnation of Tibetan lamas – the most well-known example of which is China's kidnapping and replacement of the Panchen Lama. On the other hand, China intrudes into the day-to-day activities of individual monasteries by, for example, limiting the number of initiates allowed at any institution or placing travel restrictions on monks and nuns. Chinese authorities also impose various petty rules and regulations on monasteries:

"The authorities also place a huge administrative burden on monasteries, they investigate monastery finances thoroughly and make them account for all the funding they receive, even hospitals and schools do not have to do that."¹⁵

In addition, local officials monitor for signs of loyalty to the Dalai Lama. Many monasteries and nunneries even have work teams close by or stationed inside the monastery walls. Monks and nuns are forced to show their loyalty to the Chinese Communist Party and must even fly the Chinese flag on their buildings¹⁶. Heavily-armed security forces intimidating religious gatherings are a common scene.

Following the wave of protests in 2008, China's repression of Tibet has grown stronger and stronger and, despite China's claims to the contrary, freedom of religion has been severely restricted. Monasteries and

¹⁴ 2008 Uprising in Tibet: Chronology and Analysis, Department of Information and International Relations, Central Tibetan Administration, 2008, <http://tibet.net/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/tibetprotest2008.pdf>

¹⁵ Sonam Dorjee, 43, from Lhokha (Ch: Shannan) County, interview taken by Tibet Watch in Dharamsala, India, on 21 December 2015

¹⁶ This became official policy within the TAR in 2011 – all monastic buildings, including individual residences, were ordered to fly the Chinese flag. In addition, all buildings were to display portraits of the CCP leadership. Work teams often carry out inspections but the thoroughness of monitoring is not consistent across the region.

nunneries have been shut down and security cameras have been installed inside monasteries, nunneries and at crossroads in Tibetan townships to record even the slightest sign of dissent.

Attendance at religious gatherings and festivals is often restricted, whether they are public or private. Those who are allowed to attend are often monitored and the presence of significant numbers of security forces at religious gatherings is becoming a common sight.



Troops assembled outside Kumbum Monastery during the annual Monlam Prayer Festival in March 2015

While China often claims that security forces are deployed for the good of the people, in order to maintain peace and stability, the impact of their presence on local Tibetans is generally intimidating rather than reassuring. An eye-witness who attended the festival told Tibet Watch "I was so afraid I forgot to pray".

Patriotic re-education programmes have grown in number and frequency and these are often described as a source of considerable distress for the religious community across Tibet. Concurrently, state intrusion in the management of monasteries' day-to-day life is steadily escalating.

Over the past few years China has dedicated growing efforts to the vilification of the Dalai Lama. Chinese state media regularly publish articles and statements where the Tibetan religious leader is described as an extremist, a splittist and a traitor. While devotion to the Dalai Lama is still strong in Tibet, China constantly introduces new measures in the hope of curbing his popularity and influence. For example, in February 2016 in Drango County (Ch: Luhuo), Sichuan Province, a public order was circulated instructing people to hand into the authorities any pictures of the Dalai Lama in their possession and shops were banned from selling them¹⁷. At the same time, elsewhere in the region, two high-ranking monks were arrested for carrying out prayer gatherings for the Dalai Lama's good health¹⁸.

¹⁷ "Severe punishments" for Dalai Lama photos, Free Tibet, 3 February 2016, <http://www.freetibet.org/news-media/na/severe-punishments-dalai-lama-photos>

¹⁸ 70-year-old Tibetan prisoner dies in detention, Free Tibet, 15 February 2016, <http://freetibet.org/news-media/na/70-year-old-tibetan-prisoner-dies-detention>



Prayer gatherings for the Dalai Lama's good health, held in Kham, eastern Tibet, in January 2016

As noted above, China's has made various attempts, over the years, to interfere with matters of reincarnation. Most recently, in January 2016, the State Administration of Religious Affairs published an online database of official Rinpoches, where all reincarnated lamas which have been approved by the central government are listed. According to the Chinese government, those who are not part of this list are not to be recognised as authentic. The Dalai Lama, head of Tibetan Buddhism's largest school, is not to be found on this database.

Tibetans continue to resist the constant repression and intrusions into their lives and, since the uprising of 2008 was suppressed, we have seen a range of new forms of protest emerge. Since 2009 there have been 144 cases of recorded self-immolation protests¹⁹, and 63 of these were undertaken by religious people or former monks and nuns. It is worth noting that these protests encompass the entire Tibetan population: from teenagers as young as 15 to adults in their 60s, men and women, lay and religious people. China's reaction to self-immolations has included threatening and detaining the family members of those who set fire to themselves and banning any form of funeral rites for the dead protesters.



Sonam Yarphel, solo protest, 26 November 2014

More recently, demonstrations have taken the form of solo protests, often carried out by young monks in the main streets of Tibetan townships and villages. These protests often include calls for the long life of the Dalai Lama, human rights and freedom for Tibet. They often last just a few minutes, as the protester is quickly captured by police and arrested.

A western visitor to Ngaba County, who was later interviewed by Tibet Watch, described having seen two monasteries. One was known to play an active role in Tibetan resistance. It was in a state of

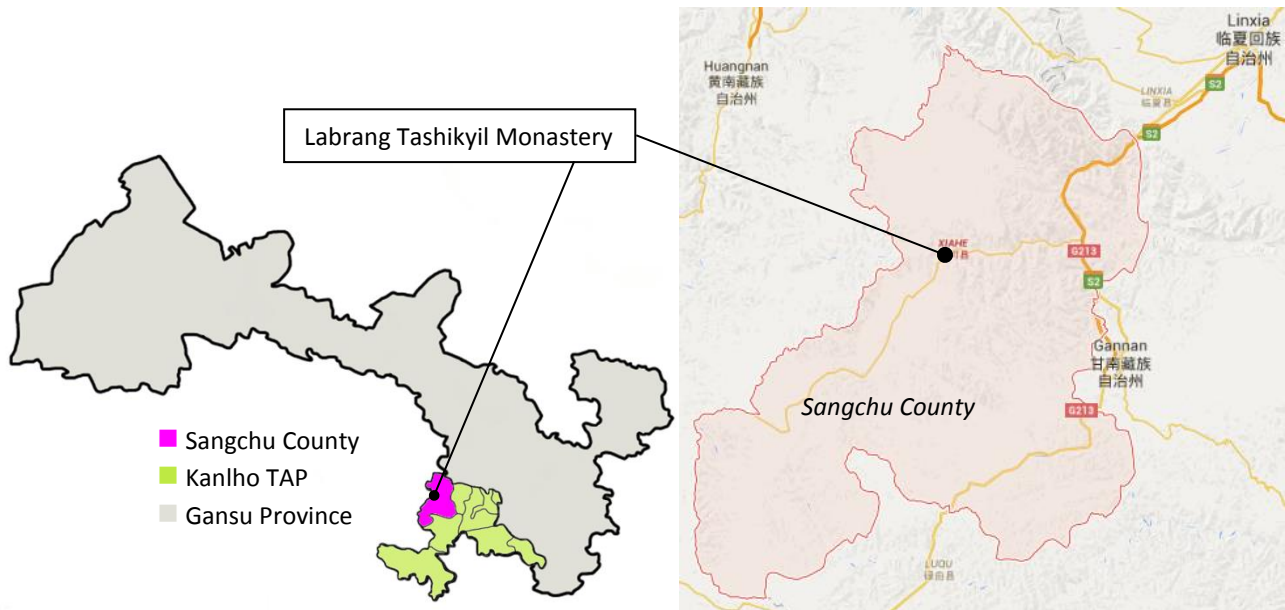
disrepair and had a leaky roof. The other had no such reputation and had been recently renovated - thanks to a number of generous donations, many of which had come from Chinese benefactors as Tibetan Buddhism becomes more popular across China.

¹⁹ Number correct as at end of March 2016

Labrang Tashikyil Monastery

Introduction

Labrang Tashikyil Monastery is a Gelugpa²⁰ monastery situated in Sangchu County in what was traditionally part of the Tibetan province of Amdo, in north-eastern Tibet. It currently lies within Kanlho Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture (TAP) in Gansu Province²¹. It was founded in 1709 by Ngawang Tsöndrü, the first Jamyang Zhepa²², at a time of great proliferation of Gelugpa institutions.



Satellite view of Labrang Tashikyil Monastery and surrounding buildings

Labrang Tashikyil Monastery is situated in an ethnically diverse region where several different civilisations, such as Tibetans, Mongols and Manchu/Chinese, historically interacted with each other. Muslim groups had also settled in the area long before the establishment of Labrang Tashikyil Monastery.

²⁰ The Gelug School is the school of Tibetan Buddhism founded by Tsongkhapa and of which the Dalai Lama is the head.

²¹ Sangchu (Ch: Xiahe) County, Kanlho (Ch: Gannan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Gansu Province

²² Jamyang Zhepa is the title given to the highest ranking teacher at Labrang Tashikyil Monastery.

The diversity of the region enabled Labrang Tashikyil Monastery to develop a strong, strategic position vis-à-vis the competing political influences:

"More than a religious enclave, it was a powerful Tibetan institution that managed to negotiate a political balance of power among volatile regional forces."²³

Labrang Tashikyil Monastery developed into one of the main Buddhist monastic universities, with academic curricula specialising in art, philosophy, rituals and medicine, among other subjects. Its reputation grew and it attracted visiting scholars from many different monastic institutions across Tibet. In a short time, a number of satellite monasteries arose around Labrang, hosting different colleges and housing monks who would support the functioning of the monastic institutions in the area.

Life in Labrang remained unaltered for the first few years of the occupation. However, in 1958, Labrang Tashikyil Monastery was closed down for a period of four years following anti-Chinese demonstrations that had occurred in the region. During this time, many buildings were damaged or destroyed and pilgrims were banned from visiting. In the years between 1962 and 1965, religious life was permitted to a limited extent, but this openness suddenly came to a halt in 1966 with the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. Until 1979 all forms of religious life were forbidden and it was only in 1980 that the monastery was officially reopened and some of the damaged buildings repaired.

Sangchu (Ch: Xiahe), the closest town to Labrang Tashikyil Monastery, was opened up as a tourist destination for foreign visitors in 1980. Post-Mao authorities soon recognised the potential of monasteries for attracting tourists and, in 1982, Labrang Tashikyil Monastery was declared a national protected cultural site by the State Council, a national body that lists major cultural and historic sites and designates them for state protection. Yet, this did not prevent authorities and some locals from destroying or altering parts of the historical site. In fact, just two years after the recognition of Labrang Tashikyil Monastery as a national protected cultural site, the abbot's summer residence was turned into a hotel.

Human rights defenders from Labrang Tashikyil Monastery

The following three profiles introduce monks who have been influential in leading resistance activities at Labrang Tashikyil Monastery and whose testimony has influenced this report.

Jamyang Jinpa



Jamyang Jinpa was born to a nomadic family in December 1986 in Sangkhog Village in Sangchu County.²⁴ At the age of 12 he became a monk at Labrang Tashikyil Monastery.

Jamyang Jinpa joined the large-scale protests that took place in Labrang from 14-16 March 2008. In April that year, Jamyang Jinpa was also one of 15 monks who protested in front of a group of foreign journalists who were being given a tour of Labrang Tashikyil Monastery by the Chinese government. Following the protest, the monks fled to the hills and remained in hiding to evade arrest. In May 2009,

²³ *Labrang Tashikyil Monastery: A Tibetan Buddhist Community on the Inner Asian Borderlands, 1709–1958*, Paul Kocot Nietupski, Lexington Books, 2011, p.xviii

²⁴ Sangkhog Village, Sangchu (Ch: Xiahe) County, Kanlho (Ch: Gannan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Gansu Province

after a prolonged period in hiding and on the run, Jamyang Jinpa and two of his fellow Labrang Tashikyil monks, Lobsang Gyatso and Jigme Gyatso, reached safety in India.

The Tibet Watch field team interviewed Jamyang Jinpa on 14 January 2016, in Dharamsala, India.

Jigme Guri



Jigme Guri is often known by his alternative names: Jigme Gyatso, Labrang Jigme or Akhu Jigme. He was born in 1966 to a farmers' family in Sangchu County. At the age of 13, he left for Labrang Tashikyil Monastery to become a monk.

He later became a senior figure in the monastery - he was Deputy Director of Labrang's 'Democratic Management Committee' and was Director of Labrang's Vocational School. However, Jigme Guri spent many years under the local authorities' suspicion. In February 2006 he travelled to India to participate in teachings being given by the Dalai Lama. On his

return he was detained for 40 days, despite having travelled on a valid passport.

Golog Jigme



Golog Jigme, also known as Jigme Gyatso, was born in 1969 in Sertar County²⁵, the third of five children. He became a monk at Labrang Tashikyil Monastery at the age of 15.

Golog Jigme became well known in the local area for being a tireless cultural and social activist. He taught children about Tibetan culture, advocated for Tibetan language and assisted in relief efforts after a magnitude 4.9 earthquake struck Jyekundo (Ch: Yushu), eastern Tibet, in April 2010.

It was for assisting filmmaker Dhondup Wangchen in the making of the documentary "Leaving Fear Behind" in 2008 for which Golog Jigme was first imprisoned.

Fortunately, Golog Jigme was able to escape safely from Tibet, finally reaching the Tibetan Reception Centre in Dharamsala on 18 May 2014. Golog Jigme was listed by Reporters Without Borders among their list of "100 Information Heroes" on World Press Freedom Day 2014. He later received political asylum in Switzerland and currently lives in Zurich.

The Tibet Watch field team interviewed Golog Jigme during May and June 2014, in Dharamsala, India.²⁶

²⁵ Sertar (Ch: Seda) County, Kandze (Ch: Ganzi) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province

²⁶ For an in-depth interview with Golog Jigme, see Tibet Watch July 2014 Thematic Report: http://www.tibetwatch.org/uploads/2/4/3/4/24348968/an_interview_with_golog_jigme_gyatso.pdf

Tourism and its impact

Since the early 1990s, Labrang has been promoted by China as 'Little Tibet'. At the time, the TAR was seen by the Chinese government as the centre of Tibetan nationalist activities and Labrang was considered a much more docile area, where tourists were less likely to witness sudden protests. From the mid-1990s onwards, Labrang became a major destination for Chinese domestic tourists and groups of travellers have long outnumbered Tibetan pilgrims.

As a consequence, Chinese, Tibetan and Hui Muslim groups alike have often demolished historical buildings of what once comprised Labrang Tashikyil Monastery to create space for shops, restaurants and hotels to accommodate thousands of tourists. Since 2007, a new wave of renovation has hit Sangchu and Labrang, erasing and changing some of the most traditional cultural markers of the region.

In 2008, Labrang joined the wave of protests spreading across Tibet and the military presence in the area increased enormously. Sangchu County became subject to some of the heaviest surveillance in Tibet. In March 2008, the government imposed the first of two bans on tourism in the county which lasted for a combined duration of 13 months. Labrang's economy, which by that time largely depended on tourism, suffered greatly from the ban. Nevertheless, due to the limited involvement of local Tibetans in tourism, those who were hit the hardest were the Chinese and Hui Muslim populations with investments in local hotels, restaurants and tourist infrastructure. In the latter half of 2009, tourism was once again restored in Labrang and since then the monastery has become an increasingly popular destination.

With the investments brought into the area through the *Xibu Da Kaifa* (Open Up the West Campaign)²⁷ communication routes have improved greatly and, in 2013, an airport was opened in Sangchu County, making it easier for tourists to reach the monastery. For foreign tourists, Labrang is a popular alternative to the TAR during times of closure and also for those who cannot afford to reach Lhasa and other parts of the TAR.

As in many other parts of Tibet, the development of tourism has brought very limited benefits for the local Tibetan population, who are often excluded from the tourist market. Moreover, hordes of travellers represent a disruption of religious and social life in Labrang as well as in many other religious sites across the Tibetan plateau.

A New York Times article published in October 2013 describes how the Chinese government carefully curates an "idyllic picture of sacred devotion [...] which hopes to convince visitors that Tibetan religion and culture are swaddled in the Communist Party's benevolent embrace. But behind closed doors, many of the monastery's resident monks complain about intrusive government policies, invisible to tourists, that they say are strangling their culture and identity."²⁸

These controls and disruptions are described by Jamyang Jinpa, in an interview given to Tibet Watch:²⁹

"Usually a monastery is a quiet place and it is a place for learning Buddhist Philosophy and to practice religion. But nowadays a huge number of tourists come to our monastery every day, and our

²⁷ China launched the 'Open Up the West' Campaign in 1999, which involved a shift in central investment towards those central and western provinces whose economy was lagging behind compared with the industrialised eastern and coastal areas.

²⁸ *Tibetans Call China's Policies at Tourist Spot Tacit but Stifling*, Dan Levin, New York Times, 24 October 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/25/world/asia/tibetan-monks-describe-a-web-of-unseen-controls.html>

²⁹ Jamyang Jinpa, 29, formerly a monk at Labrang Tashikyil Monastery, interview taken by Tibet Watch in Dharamsala, India, on 14 January 2016

monastery has become like a tourist place. They disturb our studies and we are worried that the nature of our monastery changes if tourists continuously come to our monastery.

I also heard that the guides are not free to explain whatever they like, they were allowed to introduce only holy images inside the temple and the history of the monastery. If tourists ask about His Holiness the Dalai Lama, they are not allowed to answer."

Intrusion by the State

Tourism is not the sole disruptive force that has been imposed on Labrang Tashikyil Monastery. Heavy handed polices have been forcibly applied and the very role of Labrang as a centre for learning is under threat due to the intrusive measures from the state.

For example, since the early 2000s, despite a long tradition of Tibetans joining monastic institutions from a very early age, only monks over the age of 18 have been permitted to join Labrang Tashikyil Monastery and undertake religious education. In addition, access to the monastery is now limited to students from the geographic area around Labrang:

"The Chinese government has placed controls on the number of monks at our monastery, in earlier times we had around 3,000 monks, but later they issued a new law which said only 1,000 monks were allowed to stay at the monastery. Whenever Chinese officials came to our monastery, our young monks had to hide somewhere in order to prevent being seen by them. Sometimes we had to hide for a whole day in the store room and wood store room. [...] They also said that only monks from Kanlho in Gansu Province could stay at the monastery and those from other provinces were not allowed to stay."³⁰

By allowing only monks and students from Kanlho but not from other areas of Tibet, Labrang Tashikyil Monastery's great tradition as an interprovincial educational centre is being eroded.

Prior to 2008, the monastery used to organise educational activities for lay students who lived in the area around Labrang, teaching Tibetan language and philosophy. Yet, since the uprising, these projects have also been prohibited by authorities:

"Before 2008, [...] we carried out many activities of preserving Tibetan language and culture through debates and arranged Tibetan language class and basic Buddhist philosophy for the children living nearby the monastery during their summer and winter vacation, they also learned English from those monks who had returned from India. But after 2008's mass protests, the authorities [...] stopped students from coming to our monastery to learn."³¹

Imposing limits on the number, place of origin and age of students and on the educational programmes for the lay community has had a negative impact on the general level of education in the area. Young children now have no other option but to enrol at schools run by the state, where they risk being exposed to strong Chinese propaganda from a very early age. At the same time, the teaching of Tibetan language and culture has been severely limited in schools.³²

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² The restrictions imposed on education in Tibetan language often lead to student protests and unrest, such as the large scale protests that started in Rebkong (Ch: Tongren) County, Qinghai Province, in 2010 and then spread to Gansu Province and other areas. For more info, see <http://freetibet.org/news-media/pr/student-protests-marginalisation-tibetan-language-spread>

Religious education within Labrang Tashikyil Monastery is frequently disrupted by the compulsory patriotic education programmes imposed by local authorities.

"Soon after 2008's mass protests they carried out patriotic re-education campaigns every day at our monastery, held meetings for the entire day and the main meaning of it was to be against His Holiness the Dalai Lama and not have contact with separatists (exile Tibetans).

[...] They usually used to carry out the patriotic re-education programmes through many ways, but the main object and meaning of it were the same - to criticise His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Sometimes they brought documents to our monastery which were difficult to read and told us to sign them. They advised us to sign it, saying that it wasn't a big matter, but after we signed it we came to know those documents were against His Holiness the Dalai Lama."³³

Despite the fact that in 2009 Labrang was once again open to tourism, this did not mean that control over the area was relaxed and surveillance over Labrang Tashikyil Monastery from local police and military is still heavy:

"During sensitive times like Tibetan New Year (Losar) and 10 March (Uprising Day), a huge number of police were situated adjacent to our monastery, police were displayed on both sides of the street near our monastery and they used to carry out military training every morning and placed restrictions on all travellers, especially those who were from outside of Labrang County. [...] We faced particularly attention and harassment from the police, they usually considered us as people who like violence"³⁴.

These displays of power and control from Chinese authorities have a strong impact on the day-to-day functioning of the monastery, as well as on the wellbeing of monks and their studies:

"We didn't feel safe and felt afraid whenever Chinese police came to our monastery and took a few monks with them. Such things always happened since 2008's mass protests, so, such kinds of movement disturbed our mental peace and how could we study and practice with such fears."³⁵

China's presence is still highly tangible and its involvement in religious matters remains intrusive. During his interview, Jamyang Jinpa described a new office which has been established within the perimeters of Labrang Tashikyil Monastery with the aim of overseeing the general management of the institution. The authorities even have a say on issues that relate to the monastery's internal functions, such as monastic assemblies:³⁶

"Before, suppose someone became a monk yesterday, they could attend the monastic assembly tomorrow, it was very easy, but nowadays with the new system established in our monastery it became very hard to attend the monastic assembly. Some monks waited ten years to attend the

³³ Jamyang Jinpa, 29, formerly a monk at Labrang Tashikyil Monastery, interview taken by Tibet Watch in Dharamsala, India, on 14 January 2016.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Joining the monastic assembly is an important step as only members are entitled to the accommodation and small stipend provided by the monastery. Non-member monks must pay for their own food and accommodation. In addition, only members can receive a degree from the monastery upon completion of their studies. Prior to the 2008 uprising, monks would join the monastic assembly after passing the relevant exam. Restrictions imposed by the Chinese authorities mean that now only a small group is allowed to join the monastic assembly each year. In most monasteries this group is selected on academic merit, with places being awarded to those who score the highest marks in the entrance exam.

monastic assembly but still it was hard. If someone cannot attend the monastic assembly then he doesn't have any rights from the monastery."³⁷

The strong state intrusion into the management of Labrang Tashikyil Monastery, the limits imposed on education and the negative impacts of patriotic education programmes and tourism have not gone unnoticed among the monks or the local community. Tension and frustration has been building up for decades and it is regularly expressed through demonstrations and protests.

Protests and events at Labrang Tashikyil Monastery since the 2008 uprising

2008

As the 2008 uprising took hold in Tibet, the first protest at Labrang Tashikyil Monastery started on 14 March 2008. Hundreds of monks took part and were joined the following day by thousands of local people from the surrounding area.

On 21 March Jigme Guri was detained and questioned for two days at the People's Armed Police guesthouse in Sangchu County, despite not having participated personally in the protest. From there he was driven to a prison in the nearby town of Linxia and kept in custody for 42 days, during which time he was beaten and tortured to the point where he nearly died. He was taken to hospital and released on bail once he had recovered enough to return to his monastery.

Golog Jigme was arrested for the first time on 23 March. He was initially taken to Sangchu County police station, where he was beaten and interrogated for two nights and one day. He was then transferred to Manker Prison, where he remained overnight and his monk's robes were forcibly removed. His time there overlapped with Jigme Guri. From Manker, Golog Jigme was taken to Kachu Prison, where he was tortured and interrogated for two days and one night. He was then returned to Sangchu County police station for one night before being transferred to a hotel. He spent five days there without ever discovering the name or the location. Afterwards, he was taken to a torture centre, about 3km from Kachu military hospital. He was eventually released on 12 May.

On 9 April, a group of monks from Labrang Tashikyil Monastery disrupted a government organised media tour for foreign journalists with a protest.

Jamyang Jinpa was one of the monks who organised the protest:

"The protest was organised by me and two of my monk friends. Around 15-20 monks also joined us in the protest. I don't know who they were, but I clearly know that two of them died after this protest.

[...] We heard on Radio Free Asia that some foreign journalists would come to our monastery. We thought it was a good opportunity to tell the truth and show our pain and sorrow under Chinese repressive laws, so we secretly prepared a big Tibetan national flag for the peaceful protest. On 8 April 2008, some of us heard that they had reached an airport near Labrang. Some said they would come to our monastery that day. We were staying alert and noticing every movement in the monastery. It was around 11:30 / 12noon when we saw some foreigners coming to the front of our monastic assembly hall. We thought they were the journalists as, during that time, foreigners were

³⁷ Jamyang Jinpa, 29, formerly a monk at Labrang Tashikyil Monastery, interview taken by Tibet Watch in Dharamsala, India, on 14 January 2016.

rarely seen at our monastery, so we carried the Tibetan flag and protested in front of them. Fortunately, they were the journalists we expected.

After the protest all of us went to the hills or remote areas to avoid being arrested by police. On 14 April 2008, a huge number of police came to our monastery and searched all the monks' quarters and arrested around 280 monks from our monastery."³⁸



Monks protesting at Labrang Tashikyil Monastery on 9 April 2008³⁹

After this incident, Labrang was secluded from tourism and visits from outsiders. Yet, the protests did not stop.

On 3 September Jigme Guri released a 20-minute video testimony through Voice of America's Tibetan service detailing the torture he had suffered in detention. He subsequently went into hiding for a short time but was arrested from his monastery quarters in November and remained in custody until 3 May 2009.

Meanwhile, Labrang Tashikyil Monastery had been re-opened to tourists in October.

2009

There was a significant military build-up in the Labrang area around 7-11 February, in advance of the Losar, Tibetan New Year, celebrations. However, given the events of 2008 and the number of Tibetans who had died or been injured or arrested during the crackdown, Tibetans all over Tibet vowed not to celebrate Losar as a symbolic and commemorative act.

³⁸ Jamyang Jinpa, 29, formerly a monk at Labrang Tashikyil Monastery, interview taken by Tibet Watch in Dharamsala, India, on 14 January 2016

³⁹ Photo credit: Reinhard Krause / Reuters, <http://www.uprisingarchive.org/labrangmt.html>

On 10 April, Golog Jigme was arrested for the second time and held at a police detention centre in Sangchu County. He was released on 29 July but suffered continued harassment from the police, was followed by at least two undercover policemen and all his phone calls were tapped. Every week he had to report to the county police about his daily activities and had to seek permission to travel outside of Kanlho TAP.

In May 2009, Jamyang Jinpa and two of his fellow monks, Lobsang Gyatso and Jigme Gyatso, finally reached safety in India. They had been on the run and in hiding since the protest in front of foreign journalists on 9 April 2008.

On 14 May two monks from Labrang were arrested during a raid on their residences. The names of the two monks are not known but it was the fourth time since the 2008 protests that they had been arrested.

2011

On 26 February, Sangye Gyatso died. He was one of the monks who had arrived in exile with Jamyang Jinpa in May 2009. He had suffered a prolonged period of illness, including during the time they had been in hiding.

On 3 April, Jamyang Jinpa died. This was not the same Jamyang Jinpa who had arrived in exile in May 2009 but was part of the same protest group at Labrang. He did not manage to evade arrest following the protest and was tortured in detention. His mistreatment caused health problems which ultimately led to his death.

On 20 August Jigme Guri was re-arrested at a hotel Tsoe City (Ch: Hezuo), Kanlho Prefecture, by around 40 Public Security Bureau (PSB) officers. The PSB officers raided Jigme Guri's room and seized around 30 portraits of the Dalai Lama, two laptops and other computer equipment. It was only in early October that the Kanlho PSB confirmed to Jigme Guri's brother that they were holding him at the PSB Detention Centre.

2012

At the start of the year, on 1 January, an official warrant for Jigme Guri's arrest was retrospectively issued, stating that Jigme Guri was charged with engaging in activities aimed at splitting the country.

On 27 May, two self-immolation protests took place in front of the Jokhang Temple in Lhasa – the first to take place in the Tibetan capital since the protests began. One of the protestors was a 19-year-old man named Dorje Tseten from the Labrang area. His death was reported by Chinese state media.

Early in September, Golog Jigme's residence in Labrang Tashikyil Monastery was suddenly demolished during the middle of the night. It then became apparent that Golog Jigme himself had disappeared, which greatly worried his family and friends. News later emerged that he had been arrested on 22 September and was being held incommunicado. However, he managed to escape on the night of 30 September and went into hiding in the mountains.

Towards the end of October, two self-immolation protests took place in Labrang. The first, on 22 October, was carried out by a Tibetan man in his 50s, named Dhondup. The protest took place around 9:30 a.m. and was the first to take place at the monastery itself. Police tried to remove the body but were prevented by the monastery manager and other monks.

The second protest took place the following day, 23 October. Dorjee Rinchen, a 58-year-old local man, set fire to himself by Woeden market near Labrang Tashikyil Monastery and it was reported that he died at the

scene. An eyewitness reported that, after hearing of the self-immolation, monks from Labrang Tashikyil Monastery tried to go to the protester's home to offer prayers but were stopped by security forces on the way. The monks offered prayers on the spot before returning to the monastery.

On 18 November, a Tibetan woman, named Yangmo Kyi, and ten others were arrested in Sangchu County after being accused of involvement in Dorjee Rinchen's self-immolation protest which took place the previous month.

On 28 November, the Gansu Province PSB issued an arrest warrant for Golog Jigme for alleged murder charges. The arrest warrant and a large cash reward announcement were distributed via text message and local Tibetans were urged to contact the PSB with information about Golog Jigme's whereabouts.

2013

January: Yangmo Kyi sentenced to three years in prison for alleged involvement in Dorjee Rinchen's self-immolation protest in Labrang. Dugkar Gyal sentenced to four years for the same crime. Four others received sentences of between seven and twelve years for 'intentional homicide', due to their alleged roles in trying to prevent Dorjee Rinchen's body from falling into the hands of the police and military.

On 17 February a 49-year-old man carried out a self-immolation protest close to Labrang Tashikyil Monastery. Namlha Tsering had four children, the eldest of whom was a monk.

2014

On 18 May, Golog Jigme arrived at the Tibetan Reception Centre in Dharamsala, India.

On 5 September, Jigme Guri was formally sentenced to five years in prison, after having already been held for three years. He was convicted of "suspicion of instigating national separatism".

2015

In March a large number of security forces deployed across Amdo to monitor crowds gathering for religious festivals. Checkpoints and barracks were set up to inspect Tibetans. Armed police vehicles arrived at Labrang Tashikyil Monastery where at least 12,000 Tibetans had assembled to participate in the unveiling of a religious painting.

On 5 June, three monks from Labrang Tashikyil Monastery were detained: Chunggey Jinpa and his classmates Kalsang and Jamyang. A fourth monk named Kalsang Monlam was also arrested on the same day.

In June there was, once again, a build-up of military in Sangchu County, this time in advance of the 80th birthday of the Dalai Lama and local Kalachakra Buddhist teachings.

On 18 November, Yangmo Kyi was released from prison and returned home in secret.

Since the wave of self-immolations started in 2009, the area around Labrang has seen 29 lay and religious people alike carrying out self-immolation protests to show their opposition to Chinese rule. Concurrently, Chinese presence in the area has escalated and monks from Labrang Tashikyil Monastery are under constant pressure and close scrutiny. It has become increasingly dangerous for them to communicate with

exiled groups and, in some instances, Labrang Tashikyil monks have been arrested for their contacts with the 'Dalai clique' or western media. Talking about his fellow monks, Jamyang Jinpa said:

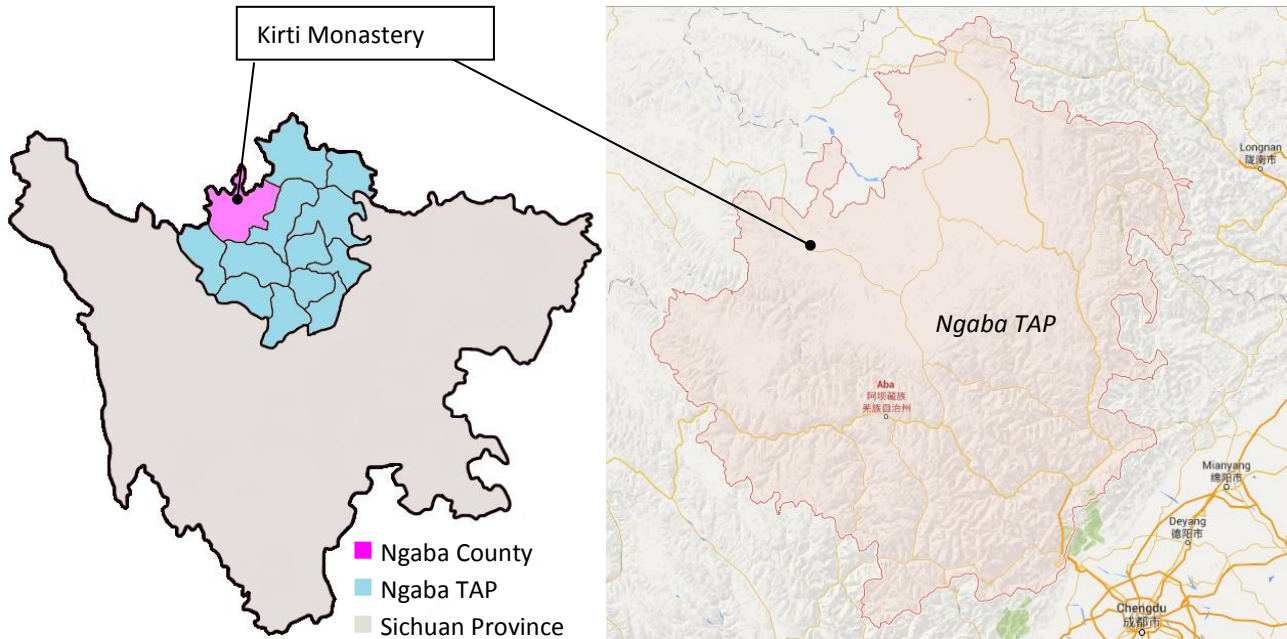
"They were afraid to speak as the Chinese government had warned them not to have any contact with the outside. Someone also told me that it was better for me not to contact them for their safety, so I haven't contacted them since September 2015."⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Jamyang Jinpa, 29, formerly a monk at Labrang Tashikyil Monastery, interview taken by Tibet Watch in Dharamsala, India, on 14 January 2016.

Kirti Monastery

Introduction

Kirti Monastery is situated in Ngaba (Ch: Aba) County, in the Tibetan province traditionally known as Amdo, in north-eastern Tibet. Ngaba County currently lies in Ngaba Prefecture in Sichuan Province.⁴¹ Kirti is a Gelugpa monastery and has a tradition that dates back to the 14th century.



A satellite view of Kirti Monastery and the surrounding area.

The lineage of Kirti Monastery's religious leadership is believed to originate with Rongchen Gendun Gyaltzen (1374-1450), a disciple of Lama Tsongkhapa (1357-1419), a famous Buddhist scholar whose teachings formed the basis for the establishment of the Gelug tradition. Rongchen Gendun Gyaltzen founded the first temple about 100 kilometres south of Ngaba. The site remains an important pilgrimage place. Over the coming centuries, the Kirti Rinpoches established strong ties with the local rulers of Ngaba,

⁴¹ Ngaba (Ch: Aba) County, Ngaba (Ch: Aba) Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province

developing a prominent position for themselves and the monastery. It was with the support of the local rulers that the eighth Kirti Rinpoche was able to establish, in 1870, what is now known as Kirti Monastery.



Kirti Monastery

As in the case of Labrang Tashikyil Monastery, this happened during a time of great proliferation of Gelugpa institutes. However, while other monasteries in the region were subject to the power of the local Ngaba rulers, Kirti Monastery remained independent while enjoying the benefits of patronage. The influence of Kirti Monastery continued to grow, extending into the provinces of Sichuan and Gansu. Kirti Monastery now has 18 affiliated monasteries under its leadership, the main ones being Taktsang Lhamo Kirti Monastery, Tsodun Kirti Monastery and Hortsang Kirti Monastery⁴².

Perhaps because of its eastern location, Kirti Monastery had an early taste of Chinese repression when Mao's army passed through Ngaba during the Long March⁴³ in 1935. The area was plundered and soldiers also looted and destroyed several monasteries, killing civilians and monks alike. Resistance was organised by the local population but was easily defeated by the high number of the Chinese forces. Kirti Monastery was invaded, the central prayer room occupied and sacred images looted and destroyed. According to the current (exiled) Kirti Rinpoche⁴⁴, it was at this time that Mao first realised the potential of the Tibetan lands and started planning the invasion that eventually took place in 1950.

In the early years of the occupation, the Kirti Monastery assembly hall housed the so-called 'religious affairs office' set up by the Chinese authorities and only a limited number of monks were allowed to stay in the monastery⁴⁵. From 1958 onwards a plan of 'democratic reforms' was carried out in Ngaba Prefecture and during the Cultural Revolution a committee of Red Guards was established in the area. According to Kirti Rinpoche, the effects of the Cultural Revolution were devastating:

⁴² *Taktsang Lhamo Monastery*, Gray Tuttle, 2011: <http://places.thlib.org/features/24125/descriptions/1268>

⁴³ The Long March took place between 1934 and 1935, during China's civil war, and saw the army of the Chinese Communist Party trekking over 6,000 miles to escape from the ruling Kuomintang (KMT or Chinese Nationalist Party). The Long March marked Mao's ascent to power.

⁴⁴ The 11th Kirti Rinpoche was born in Amdo, Tibet, in 1942. He was recognised as the reincarnation of the 10th Kirti Rinpoche in 1945 and enthroned in 1946. Kirti Rinpoche followed the Dalai Lama into exile in 1959 and has lived in exile in India ever since. Kirti Monastery in exile is based in Dharamsala, India.

⁴⁵ *Wounds of Three Generations, Kirti monastery in exile*, 2010, translated by Matthew Akester, <http://historicaldocs.blogspot.co.uk/2013/05/destruction-of-tibetan-buddhism-tibetan.html>

*"All these campaigns, enforced one after another, led to the imprisonment of hundreds of thousands of Tibetans, torture, public struggle sessions, famine and other forms of inhuman persecution. [...] All religious institutions were destroyed. [...] In short a policy to eliminate the entire Tibetan people was carried out."*⁴⁶

As a consequence of the complete ban on religion imposed by central Chinese authorities during the Cultural Revolution, Kirti Monastery was forcibly shut down and largely destroyed. It was only in 1991 that it was rebuilt and opened to the public.⁴⁷

Intrusion by the State

China has kept Kirti Monastery under tight surveillance since it was reopened in 1991. Nevertheless, it didn't take long for Kirti monks to stage new protests against the Chinese authorities. A year after the monastery's re-establishment, on 1 May 1992, eight Kirti monks were imprisoned for staging an anti-China demonstration. In 1998 a new wave of arrests took place in Kirti Monastery as monks openly opposed the newly established patriotic education programmes that were held within the monastery.

As with many other monasteries across Tibet, China has imposed strict regulations on the management of the monastery and the monks' day-to-day life.

Kanyag Tsering⁴⁸, a monk from Kirti Monastery currently in exile in Dharamsala, said in a recent interview with Tibet Watch:

"The Chinese government is not allowing outsiders to come and study at our monastery. For example, monks from Kham and TAR are not allowed to come and study at Kirti Monastery. It is difficult for monks from outside of Ngaba to study in our monastery."

"[...]Monks are not allowed to travel to Lhasa to study. And if the monks manage to travel, the monks from Ngaba are regarded as people with a serious disease. Such are the problems. And sometimes the Chinese government does not permit teachings by the lama in the monastery, and if they do give permission, they decide how many can attend. They made the rules and regulations that suit them and we have to follow those rules and regulations."

This takes place against a long tradition of monks receiving their religious formation and teaching at different monasteries, thus creating constant interaction and knowledge sharing among monastic institutions across Tibet. By imposing such regulations, Chinese authorities are drastically curbing the interaction between monks belonging to different institutions, which ultimately damages the overall standard of religious education in Tibet.

In addition, since 1997 Kirti Monastery has been one of the main targets in Ngaba for patriotic education:

"A number of patriotic re-education programmes are carried out in the monastery and it has become a prime target of the Chinese government. In 1997, when the patriotic re-education campaign first begun, there were around 30 monasteries in Ngaba but it first came to Kirti Monastery saying that if

⁴⁶ Testimony of Kirti Rinpoche to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, 2011, <http://www.savetibet.org/testimony-of-kirti-rinpoche-chief-abbot-of-kirti-monastery-to-the-tom-lantos-human-rights-commission/>

⁴⁷ *Le Tibet*, Marc Moniez, Christian Deweyrdt, Monique Masse, 1991, p. 513

⁴⁸ Kanyag Tsering, Kirti Monastery, interview taken by Tibet Watch in Dharamsala, India, on 15 January 2016

the patriotic re-education programme succeeds in Kirti Monastery, it will automatically do so in all the other monasteries.

[...]During our times in 1997 or 1998, they gathered the monks and delivered their speech in which they spoke badly about religion and accused His Holiness the Dalai Lama of being a separatist. But after 2008, in 2011, it changed⁴⁹.

Patriotic education and surveillance have both increased significantly since 2011. On 16 March 2011, 20-year-old Phuntsog from Kirti Monastery self-immolated as a form of protest against the Chinese government. Fellow monks took him to Kirti Monastery in order to protect his body and prevent him from being taken by the police. More than 1,000 monks and 400 lay people sat in front of the monastery to impede the authorities. Over 300 monks were arrested and surveillance on Kirti Monastery grew tighter:

"In 2011, the patriotic re-education programme was carried out for the longest period of time. There are many monks in the monastery and they divided the monks into groups, maybe about 50 groups, and appointed officials to each group. Because there were about 50 groups, they needed a large number of officials. There were about 600 officials from various regions.

The officials ran the programme like a class and it lasted for about 7 months, starting from 16 March 2011. They also screened propaganda films where they praised the Chinese Communist government and sometimes screened films showing how bad the USA is. Sometimes Chinese historians were invited to speak and they would talk about how Tibet was never an independent country. At the end, we had to appear for a test after the programme concluded."⁵⁰

Since 2008, and even more so since 2011, the military presence within Kirti Monastery has grown exponentially:

"During 2008 and 2011, the situation inside the monastery was like an army cantonment, the monastery premises were filled with military.

[...]in 2008, armed forces came to the monastery and were stationed there for almost the whole year.

In 2011, they came again and were stationed inside the monastery for many months. During those times, they were not only stationed inside the monastery but also outside the monastery and they restricted the movements of monks going in and out of the monastery. Due to this, the monastery also suffered from a shortage of food supplies."⁵¹

Close surveillance on Kirti Monastery extends to the public spaces around the monastery grounds. Security cameras have been installed to record movement and even the slightest form of resistance to local authorities. Communications by phone or internet and also monitored:

"The situation still continues to remain oppressed. For example, the installation of CCTV cameras in and around the monastery, market and everywhere. This is same with other monasteries, there may be a difference in the number of cameras. The cameras were also installed in small village offices in areas about 10 kilometres from Ngaba County."

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

"It is very difficult to contact inside Tibet. [...] The people from whom we obtain information live under Chinese rule and we have to be responsible for their safety. It becomes very difficult for us. It is not okay to contact them but it is not okay to not contact them as well and under such circumstances, we contact them and it is a great risk. These days, there is less information and it takes more time to get the information. This shows the increase in restrictions. The surveillance on phone calls has become more serious."⁵²

What happens at Kirti Monastery has repercussions for the local population in Ngaba. After the self-immolation of Phuntsog in 2011, the Ngaba lay community strongly opposed the Chinese police and the arrest of hundreds of monks from Kirti Monastery:

"In 2011, the Chinese government arrested around 300 monks from Kirti Monastery and the local Tibetans demanded the release of the monks, threatening that they would kill themselves and would hand over their identity documents. The Tibetans also slept by the entrance of the monastery."⁵³

Kirti Monastery is located near Ngaba town, where the county's office and main market are situated and where it is easy for Chinese authorities to keep the monastery under closer surveillance. In addition, a large police station has recently been built next to the monastery grounds.

Protests and events at Kirti Monastery since the 2008 uprising

2008

On 16 March 2008, the monks of Kirti Monastery joined the wave of protests that had swept the entire Tibetan plateau. When a group of residents of Ngaba, headed by several monks, staged a peaceful protest the police reacted with disproportionate violence and, according to the exiled Kirti Rinpoche, shot at and killed 23 Tibetans.



16 March 2008 – The caption reads: "The bodies of the Tibetans who were killed by Chinese soldiers during the peaceful demonstrations were carried to Kirti Monastery for prayers."

In the immediate aftermath of the demonstrations, the police surrounded Kirti Monastery and made it impossible for monks to communicate with anybody outside the monastery. According to the exiled Kirti

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

Rinpoche⁵⁴, on this occasion the police searched monks' quarters, confiscated and destroyed sacred scriptures and forced monks to stamp on the Dalai Lama's picture. Around 100 monks were arrested.



Troops deployed in Ngaba in response to the 2008 protests

On 8 April, Chinese authorities shut down a school run by Taktsang Lhamo Kirti Monastery in Dzoenge County. The main reason cited for the closure was participation by students in protests in March. The same school had previously been shut down in 1998 and 2003, although subsequently reopened each time.

2009

Since 2008, the monks of Kirti Monastery have become some of the most active in Tibet in terms of leading resistance to Chinese rule.

"During 2008 [...] the monastery premises were filled with military. The studies or activities inside the monastery were discontinued. And because the monks have seen and experienced all of these situations, they are more politically aware and interested."⁵⁵

On 27 February 2009, Tabe, a monk in his 20s from Kirti Monastery, carried out the first self-immolation protest in Tibet at around 1:40pm local time in the market area of Ngaba County. Security forces shot at his body, extinguished the flames and took him away.

Tibet Watch collected the testimony of an eye witness to the first self-immolation and the news was reported by Free Tibet:

"Taba, a Tibetan monk in his 20s from the local Kirti Monastery, walked alone from the monastery along the market road into Ngaba town at around 1.40pm Beijing time. He was shouting slogans and holding aloft a self-drawn Tibetan national flag. On arriving in the main town area, Taba poured petrol over himself and set himself alight. According to sources he was immediately surrounded by several armed Chinese police. The eyewitnesses reported seeing the armed police pointing guns at Taba after he had set himself alight and then heard three separate gun shots. The monk immediately fell to the ground."⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Testimony of Kirti Rinpoche to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, 2011, <http://www.savetibet.org/testimony-of-kirti-rinpoche-chief-abbot-of-kirti-monastery-to-the-tom-lantos-human-rights-commission/>

⁵⁵ Kanyag Tsering, Kirti Monastery, interview taken by Tibet Watch in Dharamsala, India, on 15 January 2016

⁵⁶ Tibetan monk shot by Chinese police after setting himself alight in tense Ngaba, Free Tibet, 27 February 2009, <http://freetibet.org/news-media/pr/2729>

Tabe initially survived the self-immolation but his whereabouts and current condition remain unknown.

Even though the next self-immolation was to take place two years later, on 16 March 2011, successive self-immolations became more frequent and took place all over Tibet, reaching a height in 2012. Of the 144 recorded cases of self-immolation protests taking place between 2009 and end of March 2016, 43 were by people from Ngaba County, and 13 of these were by monks from Kirti Monastery.

Kanyag Tsering describes how self-immolations are embedded in a decades-long evolving process of anti-China protests:

"Since the Chinese government invaded Tibet in 1949, Tibetans have never stopped protesting and never accepted the Chinese government as our own government. In this process, we had fought with arms and many were killed, arrested and sentenced, then came a time when people protested by pasting posters and leaflets. Then in 2008, a large number of Tibetans took to the street protesting and many were killed and injured. After that, no mass uprising happened. Then came a series of people setting their bodies on fire as a form of protest. These forms of protests have evolved and self-immolation protests didn't happen overnight."⁵⁷

After initial surprise at this new form of protest, the authorities soon turned to the protesters' families as a way of deterring others from self-immolating. Close relatives of self-immolation protesters have repeatedly been arrested under the accusation of murder or friends or fellow monks have been accused of helping with a "separatist" act. Monks are prohibited from performing funeral prayers and rituals after a self-immolation and those found disobeying this order are often arrested.

Kanyag Tsering believes that the reason why self-immolation protests have declined in number over the past two years lies in the official reaction from the Chinese government:

"When a self-immolation protester succumbs to his injuries, the Chinese government cannot do much harm to him but they cause huge problems for their families, relatives and friends. Under such circumstances, people may feel that I can sacrifice myself for Tibet's cause but I cannot bear my family and friends to undergo these troubles. I think how we respond to the Chinese government and how the Chinese government responds to us is related."⁵⁸

Kirti Monastery has seen the highest number of monks carrying out this new form of protest: since 2014, 13 of such protests have taken place in Ngaba.

2011

On 16 March a 20-year-old Kirti monk named Phuntsog carried out a self-immolation protest on the main road from Ngaba town to Kirti Monastery. The protest took place on the anniversary of the 2008 shootings in Ngaba. A large crowd of lay people and monks gathered to try to put out the flames but police detained and beat them. Phuntsog, who initially survived the self-immolation, was taken to Kirti Monastery. Security forces surrounded the monastery and police patrolled the streets of Ngaba. Over 1,000 monks, joined by 300-400 lay people, sat outside the gate of Kirti Monastery to prevent security forces from entering. Phuntsog died from his injuries around 3:00 am on 17 March.

Following the protest, Tibetan students in Barkham (Ch: Ma'erkang) County in Ngaba were held under lockdown at their school after going on hunger strike in solidarity with Phuntsog and in protest at the situation in Ngaba.

⁵⁷ Kanyag Tsering, Kirti Monastery, interview taken by Tibet Watch in Dharamsala, India, on 15 January 2016

⁵⁸ Ibid.

On 12 April, Lobsang Dhargye, Tsekho and Dorjee, monks from Kirti Monastery, were arrested on suspicion of involvement with the 16 March self-immolation protest by Phuntsog. Later in the month, on 21 April, two people were killed while trying to prevent the forcible removal of over 300 monks from Kirti Monastery. The deceased were Dhunko, male, 60, from Ngaba town and Sharkyi, female, 64, from Nagtsang, Ja Township, Ngaba County.

On 9 June, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Hong Lei denied the detention of 300 monks from Kirti Monastery and claimed that the local authorities had taken some monks for 'legal education'.

On 19 August, officials distributed a new document to the monks of Kirti Monastery. According to the document, any monk who had visited India, committed political crimes, or refused to attend patriotic re-education classes could be forced to leave the monastery. A few days later, on 30 August, six Kirti monks were convicted of having a connection to the self-immolation protest carried out by Phuntsog and were given prison sentences.

On 10 September, a further three monks from Kirti Monastery, Lobsang Dhargye, Tsekho and Dorjee were sentenced to 2-3 years of "Re-education Through Labour" by the Ngaba Prefecture Public Security Bureau (PSB) for their alleged involvement with the self-immolation protest.

On 26 September there was a double self-immolation protest by two monks from Kirti Monastery, Lobsang Kalsang and Lobsang Konchok, both thought to be aged between 18-19 years old. Lobsang Kalsang was the brother of Phuntsog, who carried out the protest in March.

The two protests in September were followed by a series of five further self-immolations in October:

- 3 October – a Kirti Monastery monk named Kalsang, thought to be 18-19 years old.
- 7 October - a former Kirti Monastery monk named Choephel, aged 19.
- 7 October - a former Kirti Monastery monk named Khayang, aged 18.
- 15 October - a former Kirti Monastery monk named Norbu Dathul.
- 17 October - a nun named Tenzin Wangmo, at Sumdo Bridge, located below Mame Nunnery in Ngaba County.

In addition to these protests, a 29-year-old Kirti monk named Lobsang Phuntsok was arrested on 17 October and later sentenced to eight years in prison with four years' deprivation of political rights. On 20 October a 36-year-old Kirti monk named Lodo was arrested and the following month, on 21 November, a 42-year-old Kirti monk named Gyatso was arrested. No clear reasons were given for the arrests.

2012

A significant number of self-immolation protests took place in Ngaba during 2012, many of which were connected to Kirti Monastery. The first of these took place on 6 January, with former Kirti monks Tennyi and Tsultrim both carrying out protests on the same day. Tennyi died on the 6th while Tsultrim died the following day. A third protest took place on 14 January, carried out by former Andu Monastery monk, Lobsang Jamyang. The protest was followed by clashes between security forces and local Tibetans, including Kirti Monastery monks who were trying to protect the protester's body. Tibet Watch confirmed at the time that at least one woman was shot.

In February there were three self-immolation protests connected to Kirti Monastery: Rigzin Dorjee, a 19-year-old former monk, on the 8th; Tenzin Choedron, a nun from a nearby nunnery, on the 11th; also Lobsang Gyatso, a Kirti monk, on the 13th.

March saw six self-immolation protests with a connection to Kirti Monastery take place:

- 4 March - Rinchen, mother of four, in front of the police station established by the main gate into Kirti Monastery.
- 10 March – Gepey, Kirti Monastery monk, 18 years old, near a military camp close to the monastery.
- 16 March – Lobsang Tsultrim, a 20-year-old Kirti monk.
- 28 March - Lobsang Sherab, a Kirti monk in Cha Township, Ngaba County.
- 30 March - Tenpa Dargye, aged 22, and Choemi Palten, aged 21, both Kirti monks.

On 27 May, a 25-year-old former Kirti monk named Dargye carried out a self-immolation protest in Lhasa. According to Kirti Monastery in exile, by June 2012, there were 300 officials living inside Kirti Monastery to monitor the monks and their activities. On 26 June a 21-year-old Kirti monk named Lobsang Tsering was arrested from the monastery. Yet the protests continued.

On 17 July, 18-year-old Lobsang Lobzin carried out a self-immolation protest inside Tsodun Kirti Monastery, a branch of Kirti Monastery in Barkham County.⁵⁹ On 6 August, Kirti monk Lobsang Tsultrim, aged 21, carried out a self-immolation in Ngaba. Then, on 13 August, there was another double self-immolation protest by Kirti monks Tashi, aged 21, and Lungtok, aged 20. Their protest took place in a prayer wheel enclosure on the grounds of Kirti Monastery. Lungtok died at the scene while Tashi was severely beaten by security forces after the flames were extinguished and later died of his injuries.

These protests were followed by two arrests. On 13 August Chinese state media reported the arrest of Kirti monk Lobsang Kunchok, aged 40, for “goading eight people to set themselves on fire, three of whom died, since 2009⁶⁰”. Two days later, on 15 August, state media also reported the arrest of Lobsang Tsering, 31-year-old nephew of Lobsang Kunchok, for passing on information about self-immolations to Tibetans in exile and for “inciting further self-immolations”.⁶¹

Later the same month a further two self-immolation protests took place, both on 27 August. The protesters were cousins, Kirti monk Lobsang Kelsang, aged 18, and former monk Lobsang Damchoe, aged 17. The incident took place near the eastern gate of Kirti Monastery and both died in hospital. Lobsang Kelsang’s roommate at Kirti Monastery was taken into police custody.

On 7 November there was a triple self-immolation protest carried out by monks from nearby Ngoshul Monastery in Ngaba County: Dorjee, aged 15, Samdrup, aged 16, and Dorjee Kyab, aged 16.

On 8 December, 24-year-old Kunchok Phelgye set himself on fire in front of the main assembly hall of Taktsang Lhamo Kirti Monastery in Dzoegye County, where he had been monk since 2010.

⁵⁹ Barkham (Ch: Maerkang) County, Ngaba (Ch: Aba) Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province

⁶⁰ Two suspects detained for inciting self-immolation in SW China, Xinhua, 9 December 2012, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2012-12/09/c_132029258.htm

⁶¹ Ibid.

2013

In January, state media reported that Kirti monk Lobsang Konchok, who had been arrested in August 2012, had been sentenced to death with a two-year reprieve⁶² and stripped of his political rights for life. His nephew, Lobsang Tsering, was sentenced to 10 years in prison and stripped of his political rights for three years.

There were two self-immolation protests in February. Kirti monk Lobsang Namgyal, aged 37, set himself on fire outside the PSB office in Dzoeye County⁶³ on 3 February. Later in the month, on 25 February, a monk from Diphu Monastery named Sandhag set himself on fire on the main street of Ngaba.

On 9 March, just before the anniversary of the 10 March uprising day, a 29-year-old Kirti monk named Tsepak was arrested at his aunt's home near the eastern part of Kirti Monastery. Then, on 16 March, Kirti monk Lobsang Thokmey, aged 28, carried out a self-immolation protest on the 5th anniversary of the 2008 shootings.

On 8 April, Dzoeye County government in Ngaba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture issued a 16-point document that threatened to punish villagers, monks and others in the area if any further self-immolation protests occurred. Similar threats were made to friends and relatives of those who had self-immolated in neighbouring areas, including Ngaba County. However, the notice failed to prevent further protests from taking place.

On 24 April, Kunchok Woser and Lobsang Dawa, both monks at Taktsang Lhamo Kirti Monastery in Dzoeye County, set themselves on fire in front of the monastery prayer hall. They were followed by 18-year-old monk Kunchok Sonam from Soktsang Gelugpa Monastery in Ngaba County, who set himself on fire on 20 July.

2014

After a gap of almost seven months, self-immolation protests resumed on 13 February. Lobsang Dorjee, a 25-year-old former Kirti monk was taken away by security forces after setting himself on fire and died the next day in hospital.

On 16 March, the 6th anniversary of the 2008 shootings saw a self-immolation protest by Lobsang Palden, a Kirti monk in his 20s. Lobsang set himself on fire in the main street in Ngaba town. Police extinguished the fire and took him to the hospital, where he died from his injuries on 21 March.

On 2 April a non-fatal, solo protest was carried out in Ngaba town by Kirti monk, Lobsang Gyatso, aged 20. He shouted slogans calling for the Dalai Lama's return and for freedom in Tibet. He then returned to Kirti Monastery after the protest. On 15 April he was arrested and sentenced to three years in prison.

A similar solo protest took place later in the month, on 26 April. Kirti monk Lobsang Tenpa, aged 19, carried out his protest in Ngaba town with a handmade Tibetan flag. Police and security forces immediately arrested him and took him to the County Detention Centre while his room at the monastery was searched. Locals described the situation in Ngaba as tense, with armed patrols on the streets and CCTV cameras

⁶² This is effectively a suspended death sentence which is commuted to life in prison if the prisoner demonstrates good behaviour during the stipulated two-year-period.

⁶³ Dzoeye (Ch: Ruo'ergai) County in Ngaba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture

constantly monitoring for any activity. On 7 November Lobsang Tenpa was sentenced to two years in prison by the Intermediate People's Court in Barkham County.

Another solo protest took place on 26 December. Kirti monk Lobsang Trinley, early 20s, walked down Ngaba town's main street carrying a large photo of the Dalai Lama with the Tibetan flag in the background. He shouted slogans calling for the long life of the Dalai Lama and for freedom in Tibet before being stopped by police and security forces and arrested. The local area was placed under lockdown with restrictions on the movement of local Tibetans and communications were cut. Later, in the evening of the same day, Lobsang Lungrig, a 20-year-old monk, was detained at Kirti Monastery. No reason was given for his arrest.

2015

This new form of solo protest continued through 2015 in Ngaba. On 7 March, Kirti monk, Gedon Phuntsok, was arrested while walking down Ngaba town's main street carrying a photo of the Dalai Lama and shouting slogans for the Dalai Lama's return, freedom and equality.

On 17 March, Kirti monk Lobsang Kalsang was similarly arrested while carrying a photo of the Dalai Lama, throwing prayers printed on paper into the air and shouting slogans for Tibetan freedom. On this occasion, security forces in riot gear were deployed in the town following the protest.

After a break of six months, there was a period of fairly intense activity in September. The first protest took place on the 7th and Kirti monk Lobsang Kalsang, aged 19, was arrested while shouting slogans calling for freedom in Tibet. Two days later, on 9 September Kirti monk Jampel Gyatso, aged 21, was detained after walking down the main street carrying a large portrait of the Dalai Lama and shouting slogans calling for freedom for Tibet and the long life of the Dalai Lama. His room in the monastery was also searched.

On 10 September, three separate solo protests took place in Ngaba town:

- Kirti monk Adrak staged a solo protest in the morning and was arrested. Local Tibetans continue the protest, leading to many being beaten and detained.
- At around lunchtime, two unnamed Tibetan youths shouted protest slogans in the same street. Local Tibetans again took up the protest and a 64-year-old Tibetan woman called Guemo was detained.
- At around 9:00 pm, another Kirti monk called Lobsang, aged 22, held a solo protest walk along the main street shouting slogans and was immediately detained by police.

The following day, 11 September, local police detained five monks from Kirti Monastery on their way to a religious retreat. Four of the five were released three days later, on 14 September, but Lobsang Sonam, aged 22, remained in custody.

On 23 September, a solo protest was staged in Ngaba town by a young Kirti monk, 15-year-old Lobsang Jamyang, who shouted slogans for Tibetan freedom and the return of the Dalai Lama.

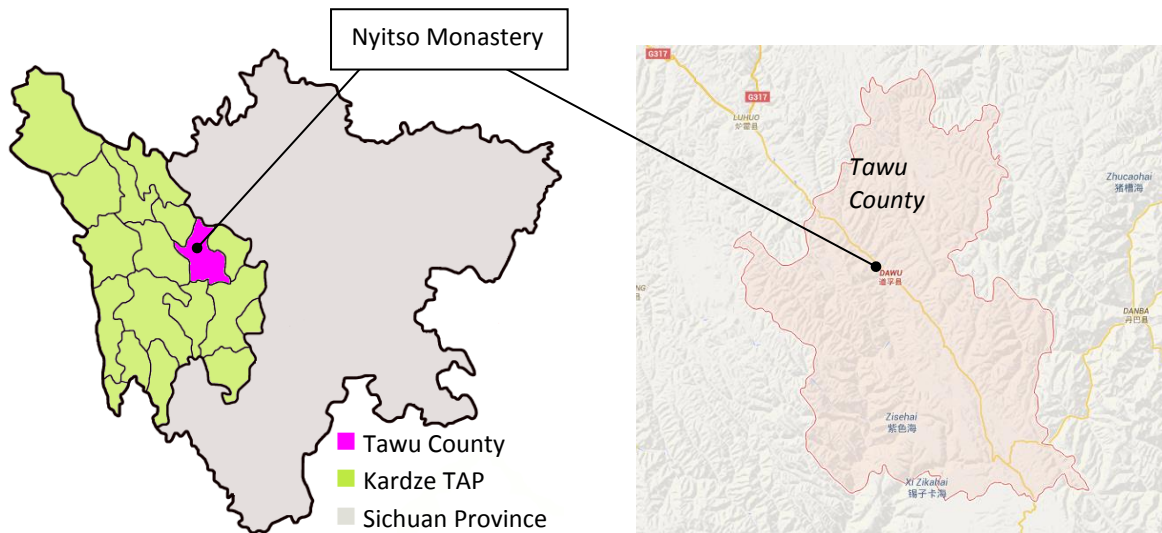
On 2 November, Lobsang Kalsang, who had carried out a solo protest earlier in the year, in March, was sentenced to three and a half years in prison. He is currently serving his sentence in Mianyang Prison, Sichuan Province.

In December, Gedon Phuntsok, who also carried out a solo protest in March, was sentenced to four years in prison. He is also serving his sentence in Mianyang Prison, Sichuan Province.

Nyitso Monastery

Introduction

Nyitso Monastery is situated in Tawu (Ch: Daofu) County, in the Tibetan province traditionally known as Kham, in north-western Tibet. Tawu County currently lies in Kardze Prefecture in Sichuan Province.⁶⁴ Nyitso Monastery is the largest Gelug institution in Tawu County and is one of the 13 monasteries built by Hor Choegyal Ngawang Phuntsok, a disciple of the 5th Dalai Lama, in the 17th century.



In recent years, Nyitso Monastery has become a focal point of resistance for the Tawu community and a place of gathering during repressive incidents. The abbot and monks have often played key roles at such times, including acting as interlocutors between the community and authorities.

Despite this peaceful role, the monastery is viewed by the Chinese government as “not-so-well-disciplined” and has been subject to various controls since the late 1990s.⁶⁵ This has included the need for monks to apply for permits, restrictions on visitors, restrictions on religious gatherings, arrest of monks who refuse to cooperate and the establishment of a new police station specifically to monitor monastery activities. These controls have only increased in recent times. Tibet Watch sources report that a large number of plainclothes police have been deployed around the monastery since 10 March 2015.



⁶⁴ Ngaba (Ch: Aba) County, Ngaba (Ch: Aba) Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province

⁶⁵ *No Faith in the State*, Tibet Watch, 2007, pp 6-9: <http://www.tibetwatch.org/uploads/2/4/3/4/24348968/nofaithfinal.pdf>

There have been a number of self-immolation protests in Tawu, most of which have had some connection to Nyitso Monastery. The monks and the local community have also demonstrated unswerving loyalty to the Dalai Lama and the area has developed a reputation for the scale of his birthday celebrations.

Self-immolation protests in Tawu County

There have been six self-immolation protests in Tawu County and five of them have had some connection to Nyitso Monastery.

- Tsewang Norbu (aka Norko), 15 August 2011
- Palden Choetso, 3 November 2011
- Wangchen Dolma, 14 June 2013
- Tinley Namgyal, 15 April 2014
- Kalsang Yeshe, 23 December 2014
- Tenzin Gyatso, 20 May 2015

Two of the protesters were Nyitso monks, a third chose the monastery as the location of her protest, the body of a fourth was sheltered within the monastery in order to prevent confiscation by security forces and the fifth gave rise to a number of protests involving Nyitso monks and the monastery itself.

The first protest was carried out by a 29-year-old Nyitso monk, Tsewang Norbu, also known as Norko. He set himself on fire on Chume Bridge (Ch: Bing He Lu) in the centre of Tawu at 12:30pm (local time) on 15 August 2011. Tsewang Norbu drank petrol, sprayed himself with petrol and then set himself on fire. He was heard calling out: "We Tibetan people want freedom", "Long live the Dalai Lama" and "Let the Dalai Lama return to Tibet". He died at the scene.

Following his self-immolation and death, internet cafes, shops, restaurants and schools were ordered to close; some telephone lines were also blocked in an effort to control news of Tsewang Norbu's protest spreading across Tibet and to the outside world. Tsewang Norbu's body was kept inside Nyitso Monastery until it was taken away for cremation.

Unusually, Chinese state media reported and confirmed his death on 15 August 2011, stating:

"A monk died after setting himself on fire Monday in a Tibetan community in southwest China's Sichuan Province, local authorities said. Tsongwon Norbu⁶⁶, a monk at Nyitso Monastery in Dawu County of Garze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, set himself on fire at 12:40 p.m., the Dawu county government said in a press release. Tsongwon Norbu, 29, was a native of Dawu County. It was unclear why he had burnt himself. The local government has launched an investigation."⁶⁷

People's Armed Police (PAP) surrounded Nyitso Monastery and large numbers of local people were also there, trying to protect the monastery. Armed checkpoints were set up across the town and the PAP, reportedly in groups of 40-50, were billeted across the town and on the roads connecting Tawu to other major towns as a response to the incident⁶⁸.

⁶⁶ Tsongwon Norbu is the spelling of Tsewang Norbu's name as used by Xinhua news.

⁶⁷ Monk sets himself on fire in SW China, Xinhua, 15 August 2011, http://www.china.org.cn/china/2011-08/15/content_23216156.htm

⁶⁸ Graphic photograph emerges from Tibet of monk Tsewang Norbu engulfed in flames, Free Tibet, 18 August 2011, <http://freetibet.org/news-media/pr/graphic-photograph-emerges-tibet-monk-tsewang-norbu-engulfed-flames-1>

Tsewang Norbu was followed by a 35-year-old nun named Palden Choetso, from Geden Choeling Nunnery. She also carried out her protest on Chume Bridge, at 12:40 pm (local time) on 3 November 2011. Palden Choetso drank petrol, doused herself with it and then set herself on fire. She was heard calling out: "Long live the Dalai Lama" and "Let the Dalai Lama return to Tibet".

Police carrying metal batons reportedly prevented people standing nearby from helping her. It is believed she died at the scene and her body was taken to the local Nyitso Monastery. Monks, people from the town and nuns from Geden Choeling Nunnery gathered at Nyitso Monastery to pray for her.

The internet in Tawu was cut off and there were restrictions on movement into and out of the town. The People's Armed Police had been in the area since Tsewang Norbu's self-immolation in August and so were on hand to station themselves outside Nyitso Monastery immediately after Palden Choetso's body was brought there.

Two years later, a 31-year-old nun, Wangchen Dolma, set fire to herself outside Nyitso Monastery. She carried out her protest on 11 June 2013 at around 5pm local time. Wangchen Dolma was taken to a hospital and confirmed dead three days after her protest on 14 June 2013 at around 8pm. Her body was cremated by the authorities, who caused additional distress to Wangchen Dolma's family by refusing to hand over her body or ashes and stopping them performing the traditional funeral rituals.

A clampdown on communications in Tawu County immediately followed the self-immolation protest. Authorities also prevented local people from visiting the family to pray and show solidarity. The family were ordered not to contact people about Wangchen Dolma's protest or visit the monastery.

The following year a 32-year-old nomad, Tinley Namgyal, set fire to himself in the Tawu area. His protest took place around 12pm (local time) on 15 April 2014.

Later the same year a 37-year-old monk from Nyitso Monastery, Kalsang Yeshe set himself alight. His protest took place on the morning of 23 December 2014, outside a police monitoring station located close to the monastery. During the protest he shouted slogans calling for the return of the Dalai Lama and that Tibetans need freedom.

Monks from Nyitso Monastery tried to prevent security forces removing his body but the police deployed tear gas and opened fire with live ammunition, injuring a monk's left arm. The injured monk refused to go to hospital as he was afraid of being arrested.

Following the self-immolation, hundreds of members of the local community gathered and told the police they wanted Kalsang Yeshe's body returned for traditional funeral ceremonies. Kalsang Yeshe's body, however, was taken to Dartsedo (Ch: Kangding), approximately 150km from the scene of the protest, to prevent further disturbances. The monks of Nyitso Monastery were later informed that Kalsang Yeshe's body had been cremated and the remains thrown into the Dadu (Ch: Dadu He) river in Dartsedo.

On 18 May 2015, Tsewang Choephel, a 29-year-old monk from Nyitso Monastery was arrested. The official reason for his arrest is unknown although local Tibetans believe it could be due to Tsewang Choephel's presence at Kalsang Yeshe's self-immolation protest. During that protest, Tsewang Choephel had expressed his anger and frustration against China's authorities. Since then he had been under constant police surveillance. His whereabouts and condition are still unknown.

Two days after Tsewang Choephel's arrest, a local man, 35-year-old Tenzin Gyatso, set himself alight close to government offices in Tawu County. His protest took place around 8pm (local time) on 20 May 2015.

A few days prior to his protest, the area had been subjected to intensive campaigning by officials from township and county levels in the area to discourage and intimidate local Tibetans, as the authorities feared they planned to celebrate the 80th birthday of the Dalai Lama. Local Tibetans believe Tenzin Gyatso set himself ablaze mainly to protest the massive deployment of security forces in the area⁶⁹.

Following Tenzin Gyatso's self-immolation protest, local people and monks from Nyitso Monastery tried to stop the police from confiscating his burning body. Police arrested ten people - six men and four women - and beat them while in detention. The four women were released in the evening of 21 May. It also confirmed on 21 May that Tenzin Gyatso had died.

On 22 May, monks from Nyitso Monastery and some local community representatives went to Tawu County's administrative offices to request the release of the remaining detainees and to explain why Tibetans were carrying out protests. They explained that Tibetans were carrying out self-immolation protests because they were suffering so much under the repression of the authorities.



In response, the Deputy Governor in Tawu County, Gong Jiansheng, told them that "they could supply petrol to those who wanted to self-immolate".

It is not clear exactly what he meant or intended to communicate with this statement. It is possible he may have been suggesting that local Tibetans could supply petrol to each other if they wanted to self-immolate. Tibet Watch believes the statement also communicates his personal attitude towards the potential deaths of local people. Regardless of how the statement is interpreted, it remains at odds with China's official policy on self-immolation.

*Caption Translation: Gong Jiansheng, male, Tibetan, born November 1973, from Luhuo, Sichuan, holds an undergraduate degree, started working in July 1995, joined the Communist Party of China in June 1996, current Deputy Governor of the People's Government of Tawu, County Public Security Bureau, Party Secretary, Police Inspector, County Deputy Governor, Police Chief, overall in charge, Gong Jiansheng. Contact phone number: 13990466505.*⁷⁰

A western media outlet phoned Gong Jiansheng after Free Tibet publicised the statement he had made in the wake of Tenzin Gyatso's self-immolation protest. He declined to comment.

The remaining six male detainees were released in the evening of 22 May, after the meeting between Gong Jiansheng and the community representatives.

On 24 May, around 1,000 people, including the head of Nyitso Monastery and representatives of local villages, came together at a Nyitso monastic gathering (pictured right) calling for an end to oppressive rule in Tawu. In particular they protested the arrest and beating of the detainees.



⁶⁹ Tibetan man self-immolates after security and propaganda campaign, Free Tibet, 21 May 2015, <http://freetibet.org/news-media/pr/tibetan-man-self-immolates-after-security-and-propaganda-campaign>

⁷⁰ Screenshot taken from Tawu County Police website: <http://www.dfxgaj.com/News/View.asp?ID=106>

Uninvited guests at Tawu celebrations

Tibetans in Tawu have celebrated the Dalai Lama's birthday in their thousands in recent years, despite China's strict ban on doing so and often at great risk to the personal safety of all involved. Before 2011, Tibetans gathered every year on Machen Pomra Mountain to mark the Dalai Lama's birthday without incident. In more recent years, they have faced intimidation and violence. The following summary provides information on incidents that occurred in 2011, 2013 and 2015. Tibet Watch has not received any specific reports relating to events in 2012 or 2014. This may be because of the communication blackouts described below.

2011

Thousands of Tibetans celebrated the Dalai Lama's birthday on 6 July 2011 in Tawu despite the government banning any celebrations for the Dalai Lama and banning the gathering of crowds a few days earlier. The celebrations took place on the sacred Machen Pomra Mountain and the community had planned a larger celebration than the year before, with food and dancing. Hundreds of nuns from local nunneries climbed to the top of the mountain at around 6am to start prayers and incense burning. They found that a group of about 30 security personnel were already there in apparent anticipation of celebrations. The security personnel stopped the nuns making incense offerings. The nuns reacted by shouting for the return of the Dalai Lama. The nuns then left the mountain and walked towards the local stupa.

Meanwhile, thousands of people started to arrive at the mountain by car, motorcycle and on foot. Many were already planning to come, while others were contacted by the nuns by mobile phone and urged to go to the mountain to celebrate. An eyewitness who walked up the mountain to celebrate reported that by later in the morning hundreds of soldiers with automatic rifles had surrounded the top of the mountain where people were gathering. They even pointed their guns at the people but they did not stop the celebrations. Most people prayed, danced and burnt incense, while others displayed the banned photograph of the Dalai Lama and called for his return to Tibet. The celebrations lasted till about 4pm when the crowd dispersed voluntarily.

Lobsang Jinpa, a Tibetan from Tawu told Tibet Watch: "The fact that soldiers with guns are on our sacred mountains trying to stop us celebrating the birthday of our spiritual leader the Dalai Lama shows that there is no religious freedom in Tibet. ... I am proud of the people of Tawu for their devotion and their bravery in standing up to the guns."⁷¹

2013

On 6 July 2013, several hundred Tibetans, including monks and nuns, had gathered at the sacred Machen Pomra Mountain in Tawu to offer prayers to mark the 78th birthday of the Dalai Lama.

⁷¹ Tibetans celebrate the birthday of the Dalai Lama, Free Tibet, 10 July 2011: <http://freetibet.org/news-media/na/tibetans-celebrate-birthday-dalai-lama>



Tibetans gathered on Machen Pomra and a line of security forces approaching in the distance.

Security forces prevented people from reaching the incense offering stage on the top and later tried to prevent people from leaving. An argument ensued and some members of the security forces began to beat people. Some Tibetans responded by throwing stones. The security forces then opened fire.



Security forces advancing on the assembled Tibetans.

Tashi Sonam, a monk from Nyitso Monastery, was shot in the head and at least six others received gunshot wounds. A total of eleven people reported serious injuries at the hospital, but others did not seek treatment for fear of being detained. Among the injured was Jangchup Dorjee, a monk and brother of Palden Choetso, a nun who set herself on fire in November 2011.



Tashi Sonam's head injury being treated; wounds, possibly from rubber bullets, on Aga Tashi's back; Yama Tsering following treatment for his injuries.



Security forces blocking the passage of a car and Dolma Butri being taken away by car.

Around 20 people were arrested and we learned that at least one, 72-year-old Yama Tsering, was tortured by electric shock. He had also sustained an arm injury and four broken ribs earlier in the day. Lobsang Choedon, a nun, was beaten in detention and hospitalised as a result of her injuries.

Around 3,000 people gathered at Nyitso Monastery in protest on the evening of 6 July, threatening to remove their children from school and stop the cultivation of farmland. Local truck drivers also threatened to strike. The abbot and other senior monks went to the local detention centre at around 11pm (local time) to appeal for the release of the individuals who had been detained. Detainees were released and offered compensation, which they declined as it was inadequate and didn't address the wider political problems.

According to the Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy, Nyitso Monastery paid for all costs associated with the treatment of injured Tibetans in July 2013 after the police opened fire on crowds⁷².

⁷² Tibetans in critical condition after Chinese armed police shoot into crowd celebrating Dalai Lama's birthday, TCHRD, 9 July 2013, <http://www.tchrd.org/2013/07/tibetans-in-critical-condition-after-chinese-armed-police-shoot-into-crowd-celebrating-dalai-lamas-birthday/>

2015

In 2015 a large number of armed police were deployed in the Tawu area from 21 June onwards and communication lines were cut off as the government feared incidents taking place during the Dalai Lama's birthday period. Locals reported that phone lines were cut off and that it wasn't possible to use mobile phone apps such as WeChat.

Armed police were deployed and Machen Pomra was surrounded. Despite the intimidation, local Tibetans celebrated His Holiness' 80th birthday secretly in their homes or in groups at their local places in Tawu.



Tibetans celebrating the Dalai Lama's birthday in Tawu in 2015

It was not just the Tawu area that saw a communications blackout during this period. Some places did not have phone and WeChat for several days, some for weeks and WeChat had not been functioning for as long as two months in some Tibetan areas.

Religious Institutions in Tibet Autonomous Region

Introduction

In 2013, Driru County⁷³ in Nagchu Prefecture, became one of the focal points of Tibetan resistance.⁷⁴ Driru is one of the eastern counties in Nagchu Prefecture, neighbouring Nagchu County, and is home to a number of religious institutions which have all suffered in recent years. These include Drongna Monastery, Tarmoe Monastery, Rabten Monastery and Jhada Gon Ganden Khachoe Nunnery.

According to Robert Barnett, Director of Modern Tibetan Studies at Columbia University, "Driru is an area which historically has never been particularly amenable to control by a state. The Tibetan government itself was only able to get effective access to most parts of Nagchu in the 1920s. It was a self-managed area for hundreds of years, and it didn't identify with Lhasa for most of that time or with any other capital or outside control."⁷⁵

Until 2013, Driru County had no recent history of political resistance. It was the site of a mass uprising in 1969, which was brutally repressed, but since then the area had been relatively quiet. Nevertheless, authorities were concerned about the unrest spreading to other areas of the TAR and made every effort to suppress the protests and also news of the protests as quickly as possible.

One of the key triggers for the situation in 2013 was environmental exploitation by Chinese companies, particularly of the sacred Naglha Dzamba Mountain, which the Tibetan people believe is home to their local deity. There were protests against extraction work on the mountain in 2010 and again in May 2013. Many of the arrests which took place in 2013 targeted people believed to have played a leading role in the May protests, despite the local authorities promising at the time that no-one would be punished.

Events came to a head towards the end of September 2013 and there were large scale protests to which the authorities responded by bringing in armed security forces who did, on at least one occasion, open fire on the unarmed civilian protesters. As the mass protests started to die down, the number of individual arrests increased and many monks, nuns and religious leaders were targeted.

The crackdown spread to religious institutions and the most prominent monastery in the county, Drongna Monastery, was closed down in November 2013. Tarmoe Monastery and Rabten Monastery followed one month later in December 2013. Jhada Gon Palden Khachoe Nunnery has suffered from high levels of state intrusion and seen the majority of its nuns forced to leave.

Around the same time, monasteries in neighbouring Nagchu County⁷⁶ were experiencing similar issues. In particular, Shak Rongpo Gaden Dargyeling Monastery experienced a particularly severe crackdown which started in 2010 and culminated in 2013.

⁷³ Driru (Ch: Biru) County, Nagchu (Ch: Naqu) Prefecture, Tibet Autonomous Region

⁷⁴ For an in-depth overview of the incidents in Driru County 2013-2014, see *Driru County: The New Hub of Tibetan Resistance*, Tibet Watch, April 2014,

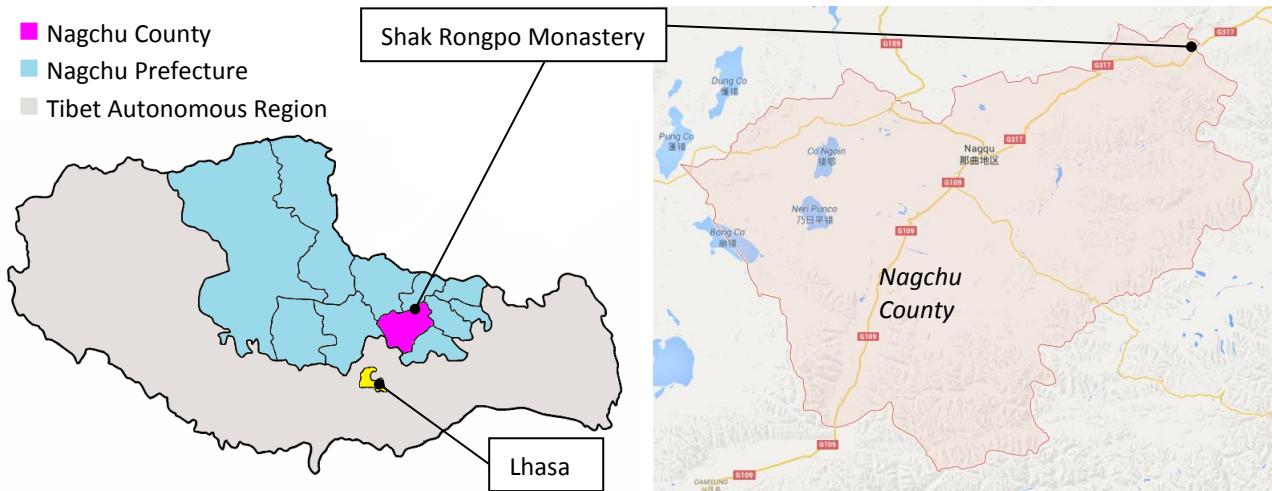
http://www.tibetwatch.org/uploads/2/4/3/4/24348968/driru_county_thematic_report.pdf

⁷⁵ Beyond self-immolations: the protests of Driru in 2013, Central Tibetan Administration, 24 January 2014, <http://tibet.net/2014/01/beyond-self-immolations-the-protests-of-driru-in-2013/>

⁷⁶ Nagchu (Ch: Naqu) County, Nagchu (Ch: Naqu) Prefecture, Tibet Autonomous Region

Shak Rongpo Gaden Dargyeling Monastery

Shak Rongpo Gaden Dargyeling Monastery is situated in Shakchu Township in Nagchu (Ch: Naqu) County.⁷⁷



Nagchu County has been home to Shak Rongpo Gaden Dargyeling Monastery since it was established, over 300 years ago, by the first Rongpo Choeje⁷⁸, Drubthob (Yogi) Lobsang Trinley. The monastery is a Gelugpa institution and was founded on the decree of the Great Fifth Dalai Lama after a prophecy conducted by the state oracle in the 17th century. Since the founding of the monastery, there have been eight reincarnations of the head lama, Rongpo Choeje.

The severe wave of repression suffered by the monks of Shak Rongpo Gaden Dargyeling and the population of the surrounding area started in April 2010. Members of the monastery were accused of contacting the Dalai Lama regarding the search for the reincarnation of the 8th Rongpo Choeje. Contacting the Dalai Lama is forbidden by the Chinese authorities who view him as 'splittist'. Authorities threatened that they would appoint a boy as the reincarnation of the Rongpo Choeje and that they would force locals to accept him - an unacceptable idea for Tibetans. Ultimately, Shak Rongpo Gaden Dargyeling was designated as "number one intolerable monastery"⁷⁹ and shut down.

The first measure introduced at Shak Rongpo Gaden Dargyeling was patriotic re-education. The programmes began in April 2010 and continued throughout the month. The entire monastery was forced to participate and the theme was the denunciation of the Dalai Lama.⁸⁰ The patriotic re-education programme also included the placement of permanent 'work teams' who monitored all activities within the monastery. Monks would have to seek approval from the team before holding any significant religious services or other activities.

Though patriotic re-education programmes were widely run throughout the Nagchu region, Shak Rongpo Gaden Dargyeling appears to have been singled out from the (approximately) 113 other monasteries for particularly harsh treatment. This could have been due to the alleged link between the monastery's 78-year-old Khenpo (Abbot) Dawa Rinpoche (commonly known as Dawa) and the Dalai Lama during the search for the ninth reincarnation of Rongpo Choeje.

⁷⁷ Shakchu (Ch: Xiaqu) Township, Nagchu (Ch: Naqu) County, Nagchu (Ch: Naqu) Prefecture, Tibet Autonomous Region

⁷⁸ Rongpo Choeje is the title given to the head Lama of Shak Rongpo Gaden Dargyeling Monastery.

⁷⁹ This rating means it is viewed as highly suspicious by the authorities in terms of believing Tibet to be a sovereign nation, possible contact with the Central Tibetan Administration and other forbidden activities.

⁸⁰ Demanding that Tibetan Buddhists denounce the Dalai Lama is an attack on the very basic tenets of their beliefs.

On 17 May 2010, security officials detained Khenpo Dawa, three monks and a lay person while the five were visiting Lhasa. Khenpo Dawa was placed under house arrest and stripped of all of his monastic titles. The authorities forced him to leave the monastery and held him incommunicado in an unspecified location in Nagchu. Although he was released from detention after one month, he was banned from any contact with Shak Rongpo Gaden Dargyeling Monastery.

Of the four others detained with Khenpo Dawa, Ngawang Thokmay, aged 35, was sentenced to two years in prison for keeping photos of the Dalai Lama in his room. One of the other monks and the lay person were released from detention after an unspecified amount of time. Tibet Watch has been unable to discover what happened to the third monk.

On 20 May 2010, less than three days after the arrest of Khenpo Dawa, over 50 local officials and about 150 armed police arrived at the monastery and, once again, forced political education on the monks, ordering them to denounce both the Dalai Lama and Khenpo Dawa. The monks were also instructed to sever all ties with Khenpo Dawa. They were told that he was no longer a reincarnated lama since he was a follower of the Dalai Lama and not loyal to the Chinese Communist Party.

The 'May 20 incident', dubbed as such by Chinese state media, led to the initial closure of the monastery in 2010 after the monks fled in order to avoid participation in the patriotic re-education programmes. The official denunciation of the Dalai Lama and the mistreatment of Khenpo Dawa took an emotional toll on the monastic community. The same day, 20 May, a 75-year-old monk named Ngawang Gyatso hanged himself in an apparent protest at the treatment of his fellow monks. The letter he left was confiscated by the authorities, who also ordered Ngawang Gyatso's fellow monks not to divulge the nature of his death to the outside world.

In July 2013, the monastery was re-opened but unresolved tensions soon flared up again. On 17 July 2013, a senior monk named Ngawang Lobsang, along with 17 other monks, submitted a petition to the local authorities calling for the reinstatement of religious ties with Khenpo Dawa and an end to the denunciation campaigns against the Dalai Lama. The petition was ignored. On 30 July, Shak Rongpo Gaden Dargyeling Monastery was shut down and any religious activities were forbidden from taking place there. All the monks were expelled. They were then required to report to the local government office every week and they were not allowed to travel beyond the borders of Nagchu County.

On 3 August a convoy of 20 military trucks were seen heading towards Shak Rongpo Gaden Dargyeling and setting up camp near the monastery.

On 24 August 2013, a group of Chinese Communist Party officials led by Wu Yin Jie, Deputy Party Committee Secretary of TAR, made an 'inspection' tour of Shak Rongpo Gaden Dargyeling, so the authorities forced all the monks to return. The monks were threatened with the arrest of their family members if they did not return to welcome the inspection delegation.

Specific monks were selected to welcome the delegation with traditional Tibetan scarves and were made to pose for television cameras, in an effort to present an impression of normal life in the monastery to the outside world. According to reports received by Tibet Watch, when the monks showed reluctance to greet the delegation, they were beaten by the authorities.

The local Communist Party Secretary, Gyaltsen Wangdrak, threatened those present during the inspection that "if you don't show happy facial expressions and do welcome by hand-clapping, you [have] committed political offences."

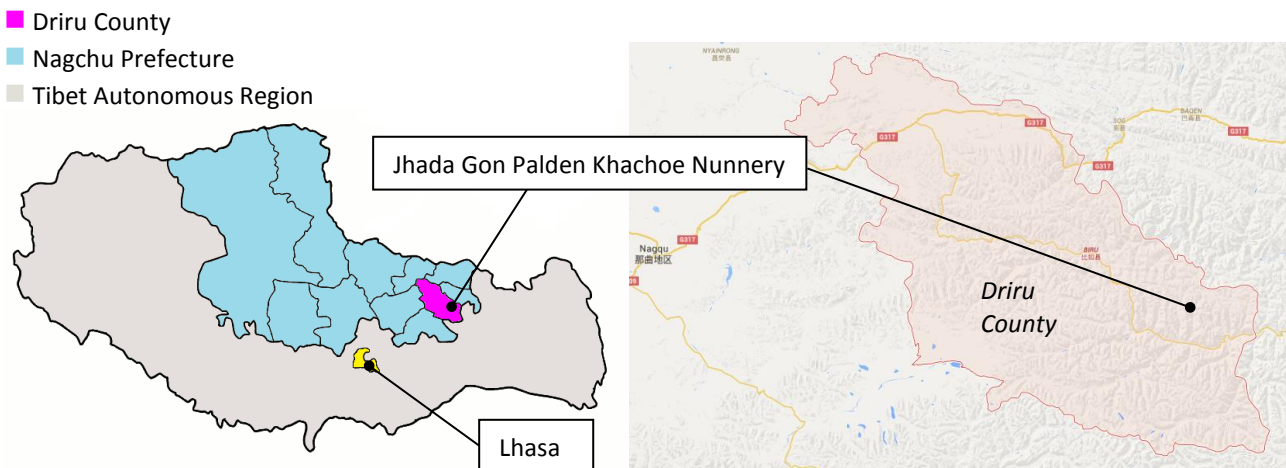
A large military presence was established near the deserted monastery. Five camps with approximately 2,000 military and 400 security personnel were deployed in the area. Armed soldiers patrolled the area and also monitored the population's movements between Driru County and neighbouring Sog County.

Following the significantly increased presence of security personnel, freedom of movement and communications became even more restricted than usual. Permits were required to travel outside of the area and identification checks at roadblocks were introduced. Local Tibetans reported that, with heavy surveillance and strict restrictions on movements, the region was like one large detention centre.

In January 2014 Shak Rongpo Gaden Dargyeling reopened under close surveillance from the authorities. No religious activities are allowed to take place inside the monastery without permission from authorities and the number of monks allowed is restricted.

Jhada Gon Palden Khachoe Nunnery

Jhada Gon Palden Khachoe Nunnery is a Gelugpa institution located in Benkar Township in Driru (Ch: Biru) County.⁸¹



As described above for institutions in Nagchu County, patriotic re-education was also used against monks and nuns in neighbouring Driru County. In an anonymous interview given to Tibet Watch in January 2016, a nun formerly of Jhada Gon Palden Khachoe Nunnery described the patriotic re-education programmes that were held at her nunnery, including details of an incident that took place in 2004 while she was still a nun there:

“Patriotic re-education programmes have been in place even before I escaped to exile [...] The intrusion into religious matters has been taking place forever. They conducted a lot of 'classes' for us, telling us to kill religious affinity and 'love the nation'. According to the government, monks and nuns are the lowest rung in our society. They consider us enemies and we are referred to as 'Red dogs'.

“During one of their campaigns to re-educate the nuns, the nuns all went on hunger strike and did not eat a morsel for days and nights. That frustrated the officials and they took us, individually, to a room and tried talking to us. We only responded by covering our heads with our robe and cried. They begged us to talk to them and tried to assure us that they didn't like forcing us either. They told us that just even reading the required writing would suffice but we resisted. We were ready to be taken

⁸¹ Benkar (Ch: Baiga) Township, Driru (Ch: Biru) County, Nagchu (Ch: Naqu) Prefecture, Tibet Autonomous Region

away together if they wanted but we did not give in.

*"We did our prayers and chanting and we did not give in. When we were being questioned over the identity of our teacher, we, a friend and I, pointed at each other as the teacher, thus saving the real identity of our teacher. When they decided to blame the Dalai Lama, all the nuns broke into tears."*⁸²,

In September 2015, Driru County Government issued new directives on "the need to intensify and deepen the work of cleaning up and reforming religious institutions".⁸³ These regulations imposed a limit on the number of monks and nuns who can join each monastic institution; prescribed the punishment for monks and nuns who attempted to illegally leave the county or take part in social disputes; limited the proliferation of unapproved religious activities or classes; and imposed state-recognised Rinpoches. If the regulations imposed by the State were not respected, heavy punishments would be imposed on monks, monasteries, police officials and family members of those monks and nuns infringing the law. In this way, the whole community was to be held responsible for any infringement and would share the impact of Chinese intrusion into religious matters.

The regulations also gave a great deal of attention to the internal management of monastic institutions and to the number of initiates that each monastery and nunnery can have. If "unauthorised" monks or nuns are found living in monasteries and nunneries in Driru County, the institution will be shut down and patriotic re-education imposed. Furthermore, those responsible for the presence of unauthorised monks or nuns will be evicted from the institution and the family of the unauthorised monk or nun will be deprived of welfare rights and banned from harvesting caterpillar fungus⁸⁴ for a number of years.

Matters relating to reincarnation and on the recognition of Rinpoches are also regulated. If a Rinpoche is recognised but not approved by the authorities, they can be evicted from their monastic institution and be forced to undergo six months of legal education.⁸⁵ Similar treatment is imposed on members of the lay community who revere Rinpoches not approved by authorities. In addition to the six months of legal education imposed on them, members of the lay community will be banned from harvesting caterpillar fungus for two years.

In September 2014, a large number of work teams descended onto Jhada Gon Palden Khachoe and expelled 26 nuns after they refused to criticise the Dalai Lama. As with other religious institutions in Tibet, a restriction on the number of registered pupils (in this case 140) had been placed on Jhada Gon Palden Khachoe and the unregistered 26 were expelled.

In the past, when the nunnery was being inspected, those not registered hid away in the mountains and returned once the work team had left. The expelled nuns, some from neighbouring Sog County, had nowhere else to continue their studies.

One year later, in late September 2015, the authorities expelled a further 106 nuns from Jhada Gon Palden Khachoe, then demolished the nuns' living quarters.

⁸² Anonymous nun, formerly of Jhada Gon Palden Khachoe Nunnery, interview taken by Tibet Watch in Dharamsala, India, on 18 January 2016

⁸³ This leaked document was translated and published by Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy and can be read in full on their website: <http://www.tchrd.org/document-exposes-intensification-of-state-sanctioned-religious-repression-in-troubled-tibetan-county/>

⁸⁴ Caterpillar fungus is naturally found in Tibet and is highly valued in the traditional medicine market. Many families in Driru rely on the harvest and sale of the caterpillar fungus as a main source of income for the entire household.

⁸⁵ These classes are designed to teach legal and civic awareness as well as to encourage participants to love 'the motherland' and take pride in Chinese national identity.



Images of Jhada Gon Palden Khachoe before and during the demolition

The expulsions and demolitions left many of the nuns homeless and seeking shelter. Attempts by nuns to find a place to live were made more difficult by Tibet's tight travel restrictions. Other nuns that were handed over to family members by officials in nearby townships were forbidden from carrying out religious practices, including praying and wearing their robes. The nuns that were allowed to stay in the nunnery were reported to have been forced by local authorities to undergo a "patriotic re-education" programme.

As relayed to Tibet Watch in interview:

"The last I heard any news about the nunnery, I think it might be shut down more or less, as they were only about 40-50 nuns left in the institution. About 40 of those nuns are supposedly kept to run the nunnery and about 12 or so to help the initial 40 with their duties. The reason stated for the expulsion of the 106 nuns and those before them was that the nunnery wasn't equipped with the required resources to take care of this number of nuns. They also stated that our nunnery quarters were not appealing and the government would build them very nicely set houses for them. The nunnery and the quarters for the nuns were all very sufficient for our needs, we built them ourselves with no help from the government.

But these expelled 106 nuns were not allowed to continue their lives in peace even outside the nunnery, they continued to make their lives miserable with strict surveillance and through ostracising. The expelled nuns are not allowed to seek patronage from other nunneries too. Their respective families are threatened to keep them under control. Jhada Gon Palden Khachoe Nunnery is a very sacred place. A lot of people came to visit it on their pilgrimages and receive blessings. Now, I don't think much is left of it. [...]

*To the outside world, they claim that we have religious freedom but we don't."*⁸⁶

⁸⁶ Anonymous nun, formerly of Jhada Gon Palden Khachoe Nunnery, interview taken by Tibet Watch in Dharamsala, India, on 18 January 2016.

Additional protests and events in Nagchu Prefecture since the 2008 uprising

2012

Four self-immolation protests have taken place in Nagchu Prefecture, all of which took place in 2012. Two were carried out by monks and two by lay people.

On 25 October two cousins, Tsepo, 20, and Tenzin, 25, carried out a double self-immolation protest near a government building in Nagchu. Both were monks at Benkar Monastery in Benkar Village. Tsepo died on the way to hospital following the protest. Tenzin was taken away by government officials and his wellbeing and whereabouts remain unknown.

2013

Sometime around 10 September, a local woman named Dolma Yangkyi, aggrieved by the situation in Shak Rongpo Gaden Dargyeling Monastery, attempted to kill herself by driving her motorbike into what was described as "hard ground". Prior to her motorcycle crash, Dolma Yangkyi called for a "stop to the aggravation both in the monastery and village, and withdraw the proposal of choosing the Rongpo Choeje by force". Dolma Yangkyi was hospitalized by her injuries. Her friends and relatives, including her two children, were denied access to her by the authorities.

Drongna Monastery in Driru County was closed down in November.



Images from Drongna monastery following the raid, showing rooms and halls taped off

In December, Thardhod Gyaltzen, chant leader and part of the monastic management of Drongna Monastery, was detained. He was sentenced to 18 years in prison after being convicted of separatism on the basis of being in possession of banned pictures and recordings of the Dalai Lama. He was well known for his promotion of Tibetan culture and Buddhism, both in the monastery and amongst the local community.

Tarmoe Monastery and Rabten Monastery in Driru County were both closed down in December.

Conclusions

The activities described in this report have ranged from solo protests to gatherings of thousands, from self-immolations to prayer ceremonies. They have taken place at monasteries and nunneries across all areas of Tibet. The methods vary in response to changing circumstances but these protests are all part of a continuous thread of resistance which dates back to China's invasion of Tibet in 1950 and which will continue until Tibet is free.

As we have shown here, monks and nuns and their institutions have been at the forefront of protests and other resistance activities in Tibet since the occupation began. However, they also act as catalysts for popular activity and Tibetan communities living around monasteries and nunneries tend to be more politically active.

China clearly understands that Tibetan Buddhism provides a focal point for Tibetan cultural and national identity. China also understands that Tibetan Buddhist institutions still provide people with far more than religious teaching – they provide education, language classes, assistance during times of hardship; they are sources of refuge during times of repression and leadership during protests; they provide and pass on information; they preserve cultural traditions; they offer advice and guidance to individuals or parties seeking to resolve disagreements. In short, they provide an alternative to the repressive government imposed on Tibetans by China. In addition, they are respected rather than feared and resented. This strengthens their influence and makes them, from China's perspective, a threat to China's own influence and control over the Tibetan regions.

In some respects China's perspective is correct – Tibetan monasteries and nunneries do threaten China's control over the Tibetan people. They help sustain traditional ways of life, including adherence to Tibetan Buddhism and devotion to the Dalai Lama. As guardians of cultural identity, they also frustrate China's attempts to assimilate Tibet and the Tibetan people.

Over the years, China has adopted different approaches towards Tibetan Buddhism and the influence of religious institutions. It has tried to control Buddhism, whether by imposing restrictions and regulations on monasteries and nunneries or by interfering in reincarnation processes. It has tried to buy the loyalty of institutions through gifts, donations or favourable treatment. It has tried to crush the spirit of resistance through intimidation and outright violence. It has also tried, persistently, to sever the bond between Tibetans and the Dalai Lama through a relentless campaign of vilification. None of this has succeeded. Instead, monks and nuns, monasteries and nunneries, have become increasingly politicised and contact networks that were once used for exchanging religious teachings are now used to communicate information about human rights abuses.

Having failed to control Tibetan Buddhism, China now perceives, and treats, acts of religious devotion as political protests. Loyalty to the Dalai Lama is almost equated with treason and expressions of Tibetan culture and identity are branded as splittism and sometimes even criminalised.

Yet, China frequently seeks to give the impression that it supports freedom of religion. The constitution states that all citizens have "freedom of religious belief", although this freedom is limited to "normal religious activities" without anywhere clarifying what that means. In 2015, China hosted the fourth World Buddhist Forum, which "aimed at exploring the cultural essence of Buddhism and highlighting its value to today's world in the hope that Buddhism will play a greater role in promoting exchanges and mutual learning between civilizations and the world's lasting peace and common prosperity". The event's promotional material went on to say that the theme of the conference was "highly relevant as it reveals our

earnest expectation for a better world where people live in harmony and work together to make a difference to our shared home".⁸⁷

The image of religious peace and harmony which China tries to present to the world is sharply at odds with the persecution and repression that takes place on a daily basis in Tibet. Consequently, the US Department of State has, since 1999, designated China as a "country of particular concern" under the International Religious Freedom Act and notes that this is due to "particularly severe violations of religious freedom". The designation was re-confirmed in the most recent International Religious Freedom Report.⁸⁸

It is clear that as long as China continues to trample on human rights and suppress freedom of religion in Tibet, monks and nuns will continue to lead Tibetan resistance.

⁸⁷ The Fourth World Buddhist Forum, <http://www.wbfls.org/ent/>

⁸⁸ International Religious Freedom Report, US Department of State, 2014, <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm#wrapper>

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