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Buddhist soft power, Chinese-style



Aerial view of the Buddhist city of Lingshan

When you see the Dalai Lama's permanent smile and the recent self-immolations of young Tibetans, you would hardly think the Beijing regime was winning the battle on the Roof of the World. You'd be wrong. China is poised to succeed in winning the comradeship of Tibetan souls, not through re-education camps, but through Buddhism, seen as a common DNA of Chinese and Tibetans.

China very quickly understood the political leverage associated with Buddhism, which currently has close to 300 million Chinese followers throughout the country.

Although the official patriotic Buddhist Association of China (BAC) was established in 1953, it has been since Deng Xiaoping came to power in 1981, that religion has played an official role in the construction of the new China. The aim was to mobilise all forces in the building of a modern socialist state and to serve Chinese interests abroad. Religious groups were required not only to show unswerving loyalty to the Communist Party of China (CPC) and the government, but also to be self-financing. This last point is important inasmuch as the allocation of these funds remains today under the control of State and Party, including a proportion that is difficult to calculate and that comes to them as their right and lawful dues.

Jiang Zemin endorsed this policy at the 14th CPC National Congress in 1992. He even went as far as making "spiritual civilization" a feature of "socialism with Chinese characteristics". This action was used not only to justify the value of "harmony" as the basis of Chinese public order and a sign of allegiance to the CPC, but also to project a softer image of China to the outside world.

The climax came at the 17th CPC National Congress in 2007 when the former President Hu Jintao referred for the first time to the notion of "soft power",

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underlining the strategic importance of including religion, especially Buddhism, in the development of Chinese power and the strengthening of links not only with overseas ethnic Han Chinese (92% of the population of Mainland China) and Tibetans, but also with other ethnic groups of China. This was a very useful diplomatic ploy, both as far as Asian neighbours were concerned and in the competition with India, the birthplace of Buddhism and the troublesome host of the Dalai Lama.

It is key to understand that the specific forms of Chinese Buddhism (“Han Buddhism”) have deeply shaped Chinese culture from philosophy to politics and arts, and even medicine, since the Han dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE).

It is no surprise that it would also easily become an effective instrument of influence elsewhere, particularly in the US and more recently in Europe, including Switzerland, where it’s been growing in the wake of the Confucius Institutes that are sprouting up like mushrooms following the rain.

China is now investing heavily in presenting itself as the defender and benefactor par excellence of Buddhism. The creation of the “World Buddhist Forum” should, in particular, be seen in this context: this outstanding triennial event, launched in 2006, is attracting thousands of participants from 50 different countries. Most recently it has taken place in Lingshan, a sort of Pharaoh-like Vatican for Buddhism, in Wuxi, less than an hour from Shanghai.



World Buddhist Forum 2009, held in Wuxi, China

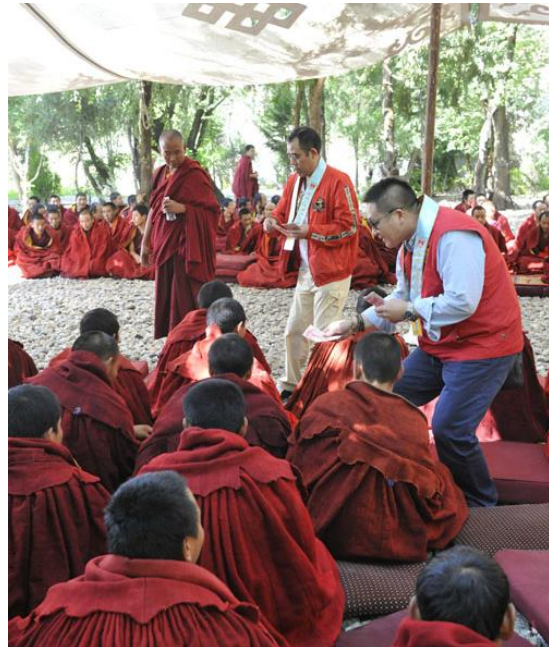
The results are there for all to see. Chinese “monk-diplomats” are sent to every country, in particular to India, Nepal and Bhutan. They are welcomed with open arms, their cases full of millions of dollars for renovating local places of pilgrimage and building new temples. One way of making yourself lots of friends and comrades, including the Tibetans and their supporters...

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But to ensure the loyalty of these new legions of ambassadors, the Chinese authorities still need to supervise them, properly wrapped in the gentle robes of Buddhist soft power.

1) The supervision of monks

To understand this, one needs to remember the dual system of government in the Middle Kingdom. Executive, legislative and judicial levels of administration coexist with their corresponding levels of the parallel communist authority, which always take precedence. In religion, one finds this dualism on the one hand in the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA), part of the State Council (the Government), and on the other hand, the United Front Work Department (United Front), one of the four main bodies of the Central Committee of the CPC.



Chinese officials from the Jade Temple (Shanghai)

Originally, the United Front was responsible for ensuring that the proletariat and other social classes carried out the orders of the CPC. Today, the mission of the United Front has grown to include all social and political classes; it is also the body that co-opts and closely monitors leaders of non-communist political parties. Very much in evidence abroad, the United Front is said to work in a quasi-official capacity, as an influence service in its own right.

On the level of religion, it determines the doctrine of the five official religions and regulates the national associations that come under their umbrella¹.

For its part, SARA is the administrative arm. It grants (and rescinds) permission for places of worship to be opened, inspects them, acts as a compulsory mediator in all administrative procedures concerning religious bodies and confers on, or withholds from clerics the right to practice their religion. In effect, SARA directly nominates and controls all the high-ranking Chinese clerics.

¹ Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity. Judaism is widely tolerated and respected, particularly because of its secular roots in the Kaifeng region, but it is not officially recognised.

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Taiwanese monk Hai Tao exposing his accreditation from SARA

At the end of the day, they ensure strict compliance with the religious practice guidelines of the United Front.

In other words, religious authority in China needs three forms of validation – from SARA, from the United Front and from one of the five official religious associations (the BAC for Buddhism, as mentioned above).

Such triple accreditation system means that you either agree 100 per cent with the system, even if you're abroad (namely in Taiwan), or you're immediately excluded from the right to work in Mainland China (e.g. to teach, raise funds, manage charitable projects etc.). Clerics thus have no choice other than to actively support the system, in other words to be faithful ambassadors – and this is what they are trained to be. To this end, the support of Taiwanese monks, most of them accredited by Mainland China, has been essential.

2) Taiwanese support

The prime mover in the rapprochement with Taiwanese Buddhism was Zhao Puchu, who founded the BAC in 1953. The calculation was simple: because Buddhists have always ranked among the most influential Taiwanese business people, they were given incentives to invest heavily in the Motherland, with the help of the senior Taiwanese abbots already accredited by Beijing. Among these, Master Hsing Yun, founder of the very powerful Fo Guang Shan School with millions of followers around the world, played a key role. He and another patriarch, the late Master Sheng Yen, particularly influenced one of the former Taiwanese Ministers of Defence, Dr Chen Li-an. In favour of the return of Taiwan to the Motherland, and a committed Buddhist, he offered huge financial support for the handpicked Tibetan leaders listed as “patriots”, some of whom were in exile and were soon to be ‘approved’ by the Chinese regime. One of these, Akong Rinpoche, based in Scotland but with an important charity fundraising branch in Zurich (Ropka International), was, on his own admission, recruited by the United Front in 1983². He was given particular responsibility for financing the “Tibet Development Fund”, an official body intended to fill Chinese rather than Tibetan coffers in the region. Akong proved very good at this diversification of the “Tibetan cause” funding, raising huge sums of money from European donors.

² Interview Rokpa magazine, France, May 3rd, 2007.

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Hsing Yun greets President Xi Jinping in Beijing, January 2013

But even more importantly, in 1992 he engineered the “discovery”, and then the official recognition by SARA, BAC and the United Front, of one of the two “17th Karmapas” (“Karmapa” is a title that has been conferred on successive heads of the very influential Kagyupa branch of Tibetan Buddhism since the twelfth century)³. The Chinese-approved Karmapa’s short name is “Ogyen Trinley” and was said to be seven years old at the time of his recognition.



Akong with the young Ogyen Trinley in 1992 in Tibet

Akong’s dedication to the Chinese motherland earned him many very significant honours, such as being part of the social circle (guanxi) of Jia Qinglin, the former Number 4 in the regime during the presidency of Hu Jintao.

³ In spite of this, another Karmapa, called Trinley Thaye Dorje, was installed by Tibetans only in India, in accordance with the traditional rules of the Kagyu School, and outside of Chinese and other political influence.

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Interview in London (23.10.2006) with Jia Qinglin and Akong

A regular at Chinese official events, Akong was counted as a main honour guest at a ceremony to mark the 60th anniversary of the so-called “peaceful liberation” of Tibet in Lhasa, in summer 2011.



Extract from a video uploaded by Tibetans to denounce “traitors”. Akong is the sixth from the left in the second row, just behind his direct patron, Zhu Weiqun, Number 2 in the United Front

He was also appointed a member of the executive of the highly nationalistic China Association for the Protection and Development of Tibetan Culture, an offshoot of the United Front, which plays a key role in the ‘normalisation’ of Tibet. Yet, despite the protection he enjoyed at the very highest level, he was assassinated in western China in October 2013, in mysterious circumstances.

Akong’s exploits could never have succeeded without the unswerving support of Dr Chen Li-an and some other well-placed Tibetans that Chen Li-an bankrolled.

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Chen Li-an with Ven. Thrangu Rinpoche who is a key ally of Chinese interests

At the time, the fact that the Beijing regime had involved overseas Tibetans together with Taiwanese assumed to be pro-Western, in appointing Ogyen Trinley as a Karmapa, allowed them to create the impression of independence and authenticity. It was so well done that even the Dalai Lama decided to support this investiture in an apparent politically conciliatory gesture to China.

This was namely in the hope that in return he would be able to establish another high-ranking and famous hierarch in Tibetan Buddhism called the “Panchen Lama”, awaiting official recognition. But the Chinese refused and it is well known that the child designated by the Dalai Lama was immediately removed by the Chinese authorities, who substituted the candidate of their choice. The Dalai Lama then decided on the 1st of January 2000 to smuggle the young Ogyen Trinley to his own residence in India. But this too perilous to be plausible escape in the middle of the Himalayan winter – and the links proven to exist between the Beijing regime and the young Ogyen Trinley’s mentors – led the Indian authorities to place him under quasi-house arrest as soon as he arrived in India. This situation remains unchanged to this day, with his movements limited to the ceremonial and, very occasionally, the pastoral (e.g. he was allowed to leave India only three times in almost 15 years; US in 2008 and 2011 and Germany in 2014).

In effect, he and his entourage are suspected by the Indian authorities of playing an active role in the sinicisation of the Tibetan community in exile in India, and seen as a risk in destabilizing the entire border region with China where they are present in some numbers, particularly in the state of Sikkim where there is a strategic border crossing with Tibet.

3) The Sinicisation of Tibetans in exile

Buddhism is the cement of Tibetan identity; a feature of particular note is devotion to the masters of teaching and meditation: the lamas. These lamas are organized in a very subtle hierarchy with the heads of the great traditional lineages (including the Karmapas) at the top, with some lamas recognized as “reincarnated” by their peers. Inside Tibet, only the Chinese authorities have the right and power to decide who is a reincarnated lama and grant them the status of “Living Buddha”, a title that necessarily implies being part of an acknowledged Chinese hierarchy.

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What all these lamas have in common is that they are respected and revered in a very powerful relationship of spiritual allegiance, even at the risk of manipulation and the abuse of power, which is very difficult to counteract. In contrast, the relationship between Chinese Buddhists and their Han clerics, while very respectful, is much less devoted. So it took some time for the authorities in Beijing to get the measure of this difference between Tibetan and Han Buddhism.



Framed picture of Ogyen Trinley wearing the clothes of Han monks, hanging on the wall of a Chinese temple (to the right of the photo)

They finally realized that if the true allegiance of the very hierarchical Tibetan Buddhists were to be harnessed to Han Buddhism, the entire community could be shifted towards a very spiritual devotion to the Chinese motherland. For this aim, a very subtle and complex religious doctrinal merging process of the Han and Tibetan Schools had to be organised, with a superior rank given to Han Buddhism.

Many lamas, both in Tibet and in exile, have successfully put this to the test through the gradual merger of the two versions of Buddhism. Thus in recent years, one can see Tibetan lamas assuming the ways of Chinese monks while at the same time introducing them to Tibetan practices. It is a fact that, although under strict Indian control, Ogyen Trinley has set an example in this respect.

This political ecumenism seems to work superbly, provided that the “face” of Tibetans (who consider their brand of Buddhism superior to the Chinese version) is not threatened. So as long as the hierarchies show mutual respect, and the donations continue to flow, some influential Tibetans play the game. This means that the monk envoys of the Chinese regime, who communicate directly with and ultimately convey the lamas in exile to the Chinese accreditation, are able to take advantage of all channels of influence within the Tibetan community in exile and their Western supporters. By the same token, the new generation of Tibetan lamas born, brought up

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and approved in China, benefit from the reflected glory of a community that went into exile with the Dalai Lama, in preaching a Sino-compatible Buddhist message in Asia, the US, Europe and beyond.

Now a number of 100% Han monks have already been anointed by “approved” Tibetan lamas and come to “bless” the Tibetan communities worldwide.



Meeting of Ogyen Trinley and the approved Han Master Ching Yao, in India, 2.12.2009



Ogyen Trinley with Chen Li-an's son "Khenpo Tengye" (L) and Hai Tao, (R) in India, December 2005

In short, Beijing is on the point of harvesting the devotional potential of the Tibetan community (and their Western followers) like ripe fruit. Ogyen Trinley is still playing a vital role in this. First, he speaks and writes fluent Mandarin. Next, he has never returned his BAC membership card, and neither SARA nor the United Front have yet withdrawn their support for him. He is thus the first Tibetan lama in exile

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to include specifically Han rituals in ancient Tibetan practices. His disciples follow unflinchingly.

Despite being under quasi-house arrest, Ogyen Trinley openly receives religious envoys from Beijing on Indian soil without fear of reproach from local authorities. He can count on one of Dr Chen Li-an's own sons for his Chinese translation secretariat when needed. This son even became a "Tibetan" monk and assumed a Tibetan name for the purpose. Actually almost all of Dr Chen Li-an's close family is involved, from his official concubine to his preferred daughter-in-law. At the same time, approved Chinese monks, such as the famous Master Hai Tao, a former Christian married with children, has been officially supported by Ogyen Trinley and now roams his huge network of centres and monasteries across the world, with his official blessing, preaching a message in compliance with his accreditation by Beijing.

Things went one step further in 2012 with a visit to Ogyen Trinley's residence. This time it was not simply of a cleric, but of Xiao Wunan, the man responsible for the Asia Pacific Exchange & Cooperation Foundation, yet another successful and respected branch of Chinese soft power.



Xiao Wunan visiting Ogyen Trinley (2012)

No doubt they discussed the very ambitious Chinese project to make Lumbini in Nepal, the historic birthplace of the Buddha, a mass pilgrimage destination equivalent to Mecca. This 3 billion dollar project clearly has the support of the Maoist allies of the Nepalese powers that be and provides, in particular, a Buddhist university and a tourist complex with hotels and conference centres, as well as an international airport. But it also includes a panoramic tower packed with electronic equipment several hundred metres from the ground with an unsurpassed view across the Indian border, only 4 kilometres from this spot.

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All this with the planned support of approved Tibetans? Enough to make the Indian military a little nervous.

Arnaud Dotézac