



CHINA'S ATTEMPT AT PLAYING BUDDHIST POLITICS FAILS AND REVEALS SCHISMS IN PARTY'S UNITED FRONT

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A combination of factors provided a severe setback to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s efforts in late April 2012, to play politics with Buddhism and use it to further China's strategic agenda.

Important among them are the CCP's apparent unwillingness to address the issue of the growing incidence of self-immolations among Tibetan Buddhists; inability to calm restiveness in Tibet and Tibetan-populated areas in China; and policy of consistently excluding the Dalai Lama including absence of contact with him or his emissaries. One prominent factor, cited by reports filtering out of Beijing, is the factional in-fighting within the CCP's United Front Work Department (UFD), which handles all matters relating to China's non-communist entities and ethnic minorities, including Tibet and the Dalai Lama.

Beijing had planned, for the first time, to demonstrate its influence in Nepal and among that country's Buddhists by organising an international convention in Buddha's birth-place of Lumbini between April 27-30, 2012. To maximize impact, it decided to concurrently convene its third World Buddhist Forum in the Hongkong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) to project its influence within the global Buddhist community and among Buddhists in China, as well as enhance the legitimacy of 22-year old Gyaincain Norbu, the Chinese-appointed 11th Panchen Lama.

China's interest in Lumbini first became public in June 2011, when a Chinese government-sponsored NGO with dubious credentials namely, the Asia Pacific Exchange and Cooperation Foundation (APECF), proposed a US\$ \$3 billion development plan for Lumbini to the Nepalese government. The plan was on the verge of being approved without consultation with Lumbini's inhabitants who, once alerted, got agitated. There were serious protests from elsewhere too. The composition of APECF's board

is revealing and hints strongly at its links with the CCP and the People's Liberation Army (PLA).

Xiao Wunan, a senior CCP cadre who is Deputy Director of an office of China's National Development and Reform Commission in Western China, is Executive Vice President of the Foundation. He is also Vice President of the World Buddhist Peace Foundation, which originally proposed and later helped organise the Beijing-sponsored World Buddhist Forums, and was formerly Vice President of the editorial board of the journal 'Study on Maoism'. Xiao Wunan views the proposed university in the Lumbini project as bringing together all three Buddhist Traditions, namely Mahayana, Tibetan Buddhism and Theravada and rivalling the university planned at Nalanda. The Executive Director of the Foundation is Eric Tay, who graduated in 1993 from China's Air Force Institute of Engineering. He owns companies in Beijing and Shenzhen which invest in commodities and energy resources. The appointment of Nepal's pro-Beijing Maoist leader Prachanda, as Vice Chairman of the APECF, emphasises China's interest in Nepal. Prachanda claims a major role in getting China's support for this project.

Following protests and to soothe ruffled Indian feathers, the Nepalese government dropped plans to approve the APECF's proposal, but indication of its unwillingness to reject China's proposal was the constitution of the Greater Lumbini National Development Directive Committee (GLNDDC) under the Chairmanship of Pushpa Kamal Dahal, better known by his nom de guerre 'Prachanda'. The GLNDDC, whose members include Dr Manglasiddhi Manandhar of CPN-UML, Dr Minendra Rijal of Nepali Congress and Nepal's Culture Minister, Gopal Kiranti — who had ordered removal of the Namoodri Brahmin priests from the Pashupati Nath Temple where they have been traditionally employed through the centuries — took the initiative to organize the three day 'international' event in the Buddha's

birthplace of Lumbini, which was scheduled to open on April 28, 2012.

UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon's visit was to be the highlight and accord the event international 'recognition'. He was to be accompanied by UNESCO Director General Irina Bokova and both were

to co-chair an international conference on Lumbini with UCPN-Maoist Chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal. An International Peace Conference was scheduled to be held in Lumbini on April 30. China's agenda was evident in the exclusion of the Dalai Lama from this essentially Buddhist event and comment of a GLNDDC member, that the Dalai Lama could visit after "the leadership of China will find ways to deal with His Holiness the Dalai Lama, which will be respectful of the Chinese people"! Ban Ki Moon's decision to visit Lumbini predictably attracted widespread media criticism in Nepal. The UN Secretary General's initial acceptance of the invitation to attend this event and, incidentally also send a message of greetings to the third World Buddhist Forum held in Hong Kong, is intriguing.

While it hints strongly at China's influence, a key role was played by Xiao Wunan, who has worked hard to revive the Lumbini proposal ever since it was scuttled last year. Xiao Wunan used his wide network of contacts and friends in South Korea, developed over the years through his various Buddhist exchange projects with Korean monasteries and academic Buddhist Studies scholars. Xiao Wunan traveled especially to South Korea in September 2011, to meet his contacts and work out a strategy to contact Ban Ki Moon. Later, in October, one of the APECF Co-Chairmen and a retired Australian Ambassador to South Korea from 2001-2005 with business interests in mining ventures in China, Colin Heseltine, was requested to set up a meeting in Australia with a traveling Ban Ki Moon specifically to discuss re-floating of the Lumbini project and to obtain the UN Secretary General's endorsement. That Ban Ki Moon and his mother are both devout Buddhists would have helped. Prime Minister Baburam Bhattarai followed up Xiao Wunan's efforts with an official invitation to Ban Ki Moon on March 16.

There are indications that at some stage Xiao Wunan worked with the UN. The UN official with whom the Lumbini Memorandum was signed last July was Hu Yuandong, who till July 2011 had worked for 20 years in China for the Investment &

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1983 to 1989.

Despite Xiao Wunan and the CCP Central Committee (CC) UFWD's efforts, however, the events planned in Lumbini failed to attract the necessary publicity and the conferences failed to materialise. Reports additionally suggest that differences exist within the CCP's United Front Work Department (UFWD), with one group siding with the military and security establishment which favours a firmer governmental grip over Nepal rather than pushing ahead with this 'soft power'.

Beijing's other major initiative in *kasayapolitik*, or Buddhist politics, this April was to host the third World Buddhist Forum from April 25-27, 2012, in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR). The objective of the third World Buddhist Forum continued to be to obtain legitimacy and support of the domestic and global Buddhist community and enhance tacit recognition of the Chinese-selected Panchen Lama, thereby seeking to confirm Beijing's role in approving the selection of high-ranking monks including the Dalai Lama. The latter assumes significance following the Dalai Lama's assertion last September that Beijing has no legitimacy in such selections. The forums are additionally intended to project China's global leadership of Buddhists.

While China's official media publicized that over a thousand religious personages, monks and leading scholars from 50 countries attended, the failure of prominent religious leaders to attend the event considerably muted its impact.

A large number of Buddhist religious personages, monks and scholars, including from India, were invited to the Forum. Many had attended earlier Forums. Beijing's special targets have been Tibetan Buddhists and the effort is to influence them, sow division in the Tibetan refugee community and undermine the Dalai Lama. China is simultaneously intent on spreading its influence among the Tibetan Buddhists who mainly inhabit the Indo-Himalayan belt.

Zhu Weiqun, Executive Vice Director the CCP CC's UFWD who attended

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the Forum, read out a message from CCP CC Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC) member Jia Qinglin on the opening day. Later, Wang Zuo'an, Director of the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA), told the gathering that the Chinese government is "firmly committed to the policy of freedom of religious beliefs, values the positive role played by all religions, including Buddhism, and dedicates itself to promoting harmonious relations among religions". In his first public appearance outside mainland China, the Chinese Communist Party-appointed 11th Panchen Lama, Gyaincain Norbu, delivered a keynote speech on the Buddha Dharma. The Forum decided that Lingshan of Wu Xi, a city in the east China's Jiangsu Province, will be the permanent venue of the World Buddhist Forum.

Among the greetings messages received by the Forum, was one from UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon. He said the proposals raised by the forum would be "helpful for the work of the UN in the fields of peace, development and human rights"!

Virtually no prominent religious personages attended the Forum. Absent were the supreme religious patriarchs, prominent religious personages and delegates from Myanmar, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, Mongolia, Russia and Japan despite the close government level relations between China and these countries.

The highest ranking attendees were the Junior Khamba Lama and Chief Abbot of the Dashicholing Monastery of Mongolia, Ch. Dambajav, and the Mahasangharaja of Dhammayutta Sangha of Cambodia, Ven Bour Kry. Others included the Secretary General of the World Fellowship of Buddhists, Thailand, Phallop Thaiarry who has business interests in China and is CEO for South East Asia of the Avis car rental agency; Rector of the Mahachulalongkonrajavidyalaya University (MCU) and Chairman, International Conference of UN Day of Vesak, Thailand, Ven Prof Dr Phra Dharmakosajarn; President Buddhist Association of Taiwan, Ven Ming Kuang; Buddhist Aid Foundation, Bangladesh, Bhikku Sunandapriya; and Vice Chancellor of the Buddhist and Pali University, Colombo, Sri Lanka, Ven Prof Ittademaliye Indasara Thero.

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Approximately a dozen persons from India attended. They included Ven Dhammaviryo, reportedly of doubtful antecedents and a critic of the Dalai Lama; Dr KTS Sarao, Head of the Department of Buddhist Studies, Delhi University; and Ven Sanghasena Mahthera, a Theravada monk of the Mahabodhi International Meditation Centre in Leh (Ladakh) and Head of the India chapter of the Buddha Light International Association (BLIA), Taiwan. Quite surprising is the congratulatory message sent by Dr. Ravindra Panth, Director of the Nava Nalanda Mahavihara (Deemed University), India!

Among those attending were, predictably, avowed critics of the Dalai Lama namely, Akong Tulku of Samyeling Monastery and the Rokpa Trust, Scotland and Gangchen Lama, Founder of the LG World Peace Foundation, Italy and worshipper of the Shugden Diety which is actively supported by the Chinese authorities. Interestingly, many of those who attended the 60th anniversary celebrations of the 'peaceful' liberation of Tibet last year were not present.

Importantly, the third World Buddhist Forum revealed the factionalism inside the CCP's United Front establishment. It was prompted by the Xiao Wunan-led APECF's bid, for the first time, to take charge. The

APECF established a Hong Kong-registered company, 'Link-wise', to handle all communications and funds for this and future World Buddhist Forums. The two earlier World Buddhist Forums held by China in 2006 and 2009 were organized by the CCP CC's UFWD with assistance from the local provincial authorities. The creation of APECF, however, introduced a rival organization and the latest move prompted pronounced differences in approach. Reports suggest that Wang Zuo'an, Director of the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA), declined to release funding for the third World Buddhist Forum unless the money already disbursed so far to APECF was first accounted for. Consequently, the Hong Kong Buddhist Association, which hosted the Forum, received only approximately US\$ 1.75 million and that too barely a month or two earlier. It had to raise the rest of the funds on its own. Indicative of the extent of the rift was that Xiao Wunan, though one of the original promoters of the World Buddhist Forums, pointedly did not attend the third World Buddhist Forum.

The differences within the UFWD could be reflective of the infighting underway at the highest echelons of the CCP. Jia Qinglin, fourth ranked PBSC member and Chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), owes a lot to Jiang Zemin whose intervention protected him when he was tainted by a scandal during his term as Party Secretary in Fujian in the mid-1990s. 1947-born Zhu Weiqun, Executive Vice Director of the UFWD, joined the CCP in 1970 during the Cultural Revolution and seems to be an upward mobile cadre. He did a stint in the General Office in 1991-99 and has since then spent a long time in the UFWD. He is a member of the 17th CC. Wang Zuo'an, the youngest official in the UFWD

was born in 1958 and joined the CCP in 1985. He succeeded Ye Xiaowen as Director of SARA when Ye was promoted as Minister in 2009 and transferred to be Party Secretary of the Central Institute for Socialism. Ye was known to have a hard-line non-compromising approach towards the Vatican, on the Tibet issue and the Falungong. Though reputed to be personally affable, Wang Zuo'an is credited with having the same ideological approach, namely that religious freedom is an innate right which it is only the Party's prerogative to bestow or determine. Xiao Wunan, who according to rumours circulating in Beijing is associated with Xi Jinping, does not fit into the mould.



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