

SHADOW OF DUST ACROSS THE SUN: HOW TOURISM IS USED TO COUNTER TIBETAN CULTURAL RESILIENCE



AS INFLUENCE OF TIBETAN BUDDHISM GROWS, CHINESE AUTHORITIES DEVELOP NEW MEASURES OF CONTROL AT WORLD FAMOUS INSTITUTES OF LARUNG GAR AND YACHEN GAR





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Cover photo:

Nuns being expelled from Larung Gar carry their bags for departure.
(Image circulated on social media, identifying details have been removed).

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The demolitions and expulsions at Larung Gar and Yachen Gar witnessed since July 2016 are part of an unfolding political strategy involving more aggressive measures in order to curb and manage the growing influence and number of monks and nuns at these important monastic centers of study and Buddhist ethics in eastern Tibet, the largest such institutes in the world. Now, at the same time as undermining religious practice and teaching and stepping up intrusive security measures, the Chinese authorities are using this very interest in Tibetan Buddhism to attract domestic tourists, leading to fears of further diminishment of these monastic communities, popularly known as 'encampments' or 'chogars' in Tibetan.

This ICT report, which is informed by first-hand sources and eyewitness testimony from the area earlier this year and in the second half of 2016, documents:

- Major construction work in the vast valley at the foot of Larung Gar to build a new tourist village and other developments - revealing that tourism is now being used as a tool by the Chinese authorities to confront revivalist trends of Tibetan religious and cultural expression and contain monastic growth.
- Infrastructure construction for tourists is described as if this peaceful religious institute were a war zone, with the official media describing the work as a "tough political fight".
- New images depict construction work at Yachen Gar, the other major monastic center in Kardze (Chinese: Ganzi) in Sichuan, eastern Tibet, including the building of a new road and construction to attract tourists, while homes are razed and nuns and monks are displaced.
- Heightened security and surveillance at both Larung Gar and Yachen Gar and local towns, including new mobile police stations and intensified militarization in urban areas nearby, consistent with more systematic and intrusive measures across eastern Tibet since the wave of self-immolations began in Ngaba, Sichuan in 2009.
- Official plans for urbanization and tourism focused on presenting an official version of Tibetan religious culture and a 'happy Kardze', involving an emphasis on non-religious elements of Tibetan culture, aligned with longer-term strategies to contain dissent, 'manage' religious activities and ensure Party control across the prefecture.

The severe measures being taken by the authorities at these Buddhist institutes in the Tibetan area of Kham appear to reflect strong concern about their growing influence and popularity in the PRC as well as in Tibet. Both Larung Gar and the other important monastic encampment in eastern Tibet, Yachen Gar, have drawn thousands of Chinese practitioners to study Buddhist ethics and receive spiritual teaching since their establishment, and have bridged Tibetan and Chinese communities.

Matteo Mecacci, President of the International Campaign for Tibet, said: "The new evidence presented in this report calls into question the entire basis of the demolition of homes and expulsion of nuns and monks, which have caused such distress. It cannot be possible for the Chinese authorities to claim there is overcrowding and not enough space for genuine religious practitioners given the extent of construction over a vast area in this remote valley. These new developments at the world famous institutes of Larung Gar and Yachen Gar, so precious for Chinese as well as Tibetans, risk undermining the long-term survival of these vital study centers for the promotion and practice of Buddhist teachings that are otherwise difficult to access or non-existent in regular monastic institutions and nunneries due to political restrictions."

Six United Nations Human Rights Council experts have made public a joint intervention made to the Chinese government expressing deep concern about the demolitions at Larung Gar and Yachen Gar. The six UN experts said that they had made a submission to the PRC in November, 2016 stating that the developments at the Buddhist institutes violate international human rights laws and "seem to be concerted attacks on tangible and intangible cultural heritage, which constitute serious violations of cultural rights of current and future generations."¹

Demolitions and expulsions at influential religious institutes

"As digging machines and people demolish the residences of nuns, the shadow of dust blocks the sun. [...] Tales of sadness fill the mountains and valleys. [...] We, the humble people, are not allowed to remain in this place. Our houses cannot take roots on the sides of the hills. [...] Students are forcefully taken away from their lamas. [...] Dharma brothers and sisters; let us not allow them to break down the sacred knots of our bond [...] Our dharma brothers and sisters, who are forcefully kicked out, please do not be sad. Those of us who are allowed to remain will stay strong. Truth is on our side."

– From 'Larung Gar' by Woesel Nyima²



Nuns at Larung Gar during the expulsions
(Image circulating on social media)

Larung Gar and Yachen Gar have achieved widespread popularity among both Tibetans and Chinese as non-political hubs dedicated to monastic education, academic learning and Buddhist ethics since the mid-1980s when they were founded. Chinese bloggers have described Larung Gar as one of "the most important places to visit in a lifetime". But they have been targeted under three consecutive Chinese Communist Party administrations from Jiang Zemin in 2001 – when hundreds of homes were razed and nuns and monks expelled – to Hu Jintao and now under Xi Jinping, who is believed to have referred to Larung Gar by name in the sidelines of a Politburo meeting.³

The demolitions at Larung Gar in Serthar (Chinese: Seda) county in Kardze (Chinese: Ganzi) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan (the Tibetan area of Kham) were first outlined in an order issued by the county government – which stated that homes for all but 5,000 monks, nuns and laypeople would be demolished, and that: "By September 30, 2017 the population of the encampment must be limited to 5,000 persons".⁴ It seems that the

1 The full communication is at: <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownLoadPublicCommunicationFile?gld=22816>. The UN Experts who issued the communication are as follows: Karima Bennoune, Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights; John H. Knox, Special Rapporteur on the issue of human rights obligations relating to the enjoyment of a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment; Maina Kiai, Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association; Leilani Farha, Special Rapporteur on adequate housing as a component of the right to an adequate standard of living, and on the right to non-discrimination in this context; Rita Izsák-Ndiaye, Special Rapporteur on minority issues; Ahmed Shaheed, Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief.

2 English translation of a prose poem in three parts entitled 'From Larung Gar' by Woesel Nyima that was posted on WeChat on October 5, 2016, and translated by High Peaks Pure Earth. The post has either been deleted or removed from WeChat.

3 This was apparently a comment made to a Tibetan delegation from Sichuan on the sidelines of a Party Congress meeting. It is not clear when the comment was made.

4 ICT report, July 25, 2016, <https://www.savetibet.org/demolitions-begin-at-larung-gar-monastery-for-the-world-as-religious-teachers-urge-calm/>.

demolitions have now been fast-tracked and are due to resume within weeks. According to the Tibetan service of Radio Free Asia, a Tibetan source said that work is scheduled for completion by the end of March (2017).⁵

Tibetan sources estimate the number of destroyed homes at Larung Gar at around 1,300. In November (2016), Radio Free Asia reported that around 3,000 monks and nuns have already been expelled from Larung Gar.⁶



Demolition of homes at Larung Gar in 2016 (Image circulating on social media)

There have been mass expulsions of nuns and monks since demolitions began at Larung Gar religious institute in July, 2016. This image shows the expulsion of nuns in November, 2016. (Image circulating on social media)

While the Chinese authorities have well-established mechanisms for suppressing the flow of information from Tibet to the outside world, the harsh measures at Larung Gar have gained prominence via images and footage of events over the past few months circulating on social media.

Video of heavy vehicles dismantling wooden homes next to signs proclaiming 'construction site' have circulated, with the chanting of monks audible in the background. Even the responses of nuns to the evictions have circulated, depicting fellow nuns with hands in prayer position, weeping, or sinking to the ground in despair as their friends leave in convoys of coaches.⁷

5 RFA report, January 23, 2017, <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/tibet/resume-01232017154922.html> Another RFA report stated that hundreds of nuns coming from Tibetan areas of Sichuan are meanwhile being housed in temporary camps of two-storey buildings set up in desolate areas of the province until more permanent accommodation can be found. RFA, December 9, 2016, <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/tibet/nuns-12092016144033.html>.

6 Radio Free Asia report, November 4, 2016, <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/tibet/classes-11042016154905.html>.

7 Many monks and nuns were compelled to sign a document stating that they would not return to Larung Gar. The text of the document, which circulated on social media, was as follows: "In accordance with the requirements of promoting regulation work in the Serthar County Larung Five Sciences Buddhist Academy, I left the Larung Five Sciences Buddhist Academy and will, after returning home, as always continue to love the country and love religion, and abide by the law. I solemnly promise not to return to the Serthar County Larung Five Sciences Buddhist Academy, except to carry out relevant formalities during large-scale Buddhist activities."



Nuns being expelled from Larung Gar carry their bags for departure (image circulating on social media)



*Nuns and monks gather, preparing for expulsion on December 24, 2017
(Image circulating on social media)*



Police look on near Larung Gar during a wave of expulsions of monks and nuns (Image circulating on social media)

When a group of 500 nuns from Golog (Chinese: Guoluo) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in neighboring Qinghai, were expelled in the latest round of removals on December 24 (2016), around 10 monks and nuns fainted from distress as they said goodbye, according to Radio Free Asia. Although the authorities at first ignored the incident, the monks and nuns were later taken for emergency treatment.⁸

Monks and nuns who have been expelled have been forced to undergo 'patriotic education' in their home areas.⁹ In one video that emerged in recent months, expelled nuns, apparently undergoing 'patriotic education', singing a song to Chairman Mao, with lyrics proclaiming: "Chinese and Tibetans are children of one mother". In another video, 12 Tibetan nuns wearing robes believed to have been expelled from Larung Gar are depicted performing a modern dance routine to a famous pop song, 'The Song of the Emancipated Serfs', associated with official Communist Party celebrations.¹⁰

At Yachen Gar, another important religious encampment also in Kardze (Chinese: Ganzi) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan, nearly a thousand nuns who lived

8 Radio Free Asia report, December 27, 2016, <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/tibet/grief-12272016145406.html>.

9 A Tibetan source confirmed to Radio Free Asia that political classes were being held for Larung Gar evictees across the region. "All those who have been forced to leave Serthar have to undergo patriotic re-education for about six months on arrival in their home localities," he said. (<http://www.rfa.org/english/news/tibet/classes-11042016154905.html>).

10 The footage and images can be viewed on this video about Larung Gar produced by the Department of Information and International Relations, Central Tibetan Administration, on Tibet TV: <https://www.facebook.com/10march1959/videos/10154109132280382/>. According to a social media posting by Robert Barnett on December 1, 2016, "The song was originally performed in front of Chairman Mao in 1959, and the banner above the stage reads 'Graduation Art Show for the Law and Politics Training Course for Buddhist Monks and Nuns, Gongbujiangda County'. The video is from Kongpo Gyamda county, in Nyingtri (Linzhi), Tibet, and is believed to have been filmed on Nov 10. The nuns must have been forced to perform this dance, presumably as a form of public humiliation, since such performance violates their religious vows. The nuns are probably among those recently expelled from Larung Gar monastic encampment in Serta (Sichuan)."

frugally in simple homes and dedicated their lives to the study of Buddhist scriptures and the practice of meditation were compelled to leave the institute in Pelyul (Chinese: Beiyu) county. They were left homeless and sent back to their families following an order to families by officials from the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), stating that there would be severe consequences for those who did not recall their relatives from studying at the two religious institutes.



Debris of recently demolished monastic residences is evident in the nuns' quarters at Yachen Gar depicted in these images from late 2016. Nearly a thousand nuns who lived frugally in these residences and dedicated their lives to the study of Buddhist scriptures and the practice of meditation, were left homeless and sent back to their families. (Image: ICT)

A 'tough political fight': creating a tourist infrastructure at Larung Gar

New images and reports from the area reveal that construction work at the institutes has raised serious fears of a new threat in addition to the destruction of homes and displacement of religious practitioners.

"Monks and nuns who remain at Larung Gar have already endured distress and trauma over the demolitions and removal of monks and nuns," said a Western scholar who has visited the area recently. "Now they are frightened that this important place, known for the scholarship and serious study possible there, will be reduced to a superficial attraction for temporary visitors and spiritual seekers."

In the valley at the foot of Larung Gar, for the past year major construction work has been in progress, with the aim of creating a tourist center, according to information from the area. Images included with this report show billboards labeled with the name of the construction company, Hua Xi, that make the political imperative of construction work on a tourist site very clear in an article in the state media¹¹ entitled: "Hua Xi starts a tough fight in Serthar". Using language as if the construction company were working in a war zone, the article stated that

¹¹ On the following website, http://www.huashi.sc.cn/news/huaxi_news/5651.html, August 6, 2015, 'Hua Xi starts a tough fight in Serthar' by Yin Zhi-He Xu Ping Tang Qing. A translation into English by ICT of the first paragraph is as follows: First, the companies were required to raise awareness from top to bottom, to act quickly and coordinate actions, to put the "Three Strictly and Three Really" into practice, and to complete constructions tasks on time. Second, branch offices and project departments were required to discuss the politics and the overall situation, fully understand the particular qualities of the project, inserting a high degree of political responsibility and a daring spirit into the construction work, fight a tough fight, win benefits for society, and raise the bright flag of Huaxi during the construction process of Kardze. The third was rapidly forming and improving the project team, establishing project departments staffed by capable young people with high political quality and business ability, and selectively appoint project department Party secretaries playing a leading role as the Party's fighting force and doing propaganda work. Fourth, companies allocated special funds that were earmarked to allow the project to start early. Fifth, personal received propaganda and education regarding the Party's ethnic and religious qualities and how to respect local folk customs."



While inside the Larung Gar Buddhist Academy demolitions of monastic quarters are ongoing, outside the main entrance large-scale construction work is in progress to turn the large valley into a tourist resort with hotels and guest-houses as well as new offices and facilities for local authorities (Images: ICT).

the construction project would not only be arduous in terms of the remote location and lack of infrastructure at Larung Gar (in Luo Duo county in Chinese) but also that it would be a "tough fight" requiring strong "political responsibility".



This image, taken at Larung Gar Buddhist institute in fall, 2016, shows a sign at one site of the Chinese construction company Huaxi which reads: "Congratulations to the [Huaxi] Sichuan Sixth Branch for achieving special top status as general contractor in building construction" (Image: ICT).

The Chinese state media reported that the construction work got underway after six companies "held multiple special meetings, at the three levels of company, branch offices, and project department, making the project's political influence and importance clear." The offices and departments involved "were required to discuss the politics and the overall situation, fully understand the particular qualities of the project, inserting a high degree of political responsibility and a daring spirit into the construction work, fight a tough fight, win benefits for society, and raise the bright flag of Huaxi during the construction process of Kardze." The same article mentioned that Party secretaries would act as the "Party's fighting force".

According to information from the area, the buildings under construction are likely to be part of a push to develop the area with new guest-houses or facilities for temporary visitors rather than long-staying monastics as part of a broader official plan to re-shape and develop the area. According to various Tibetan sources, tourist attractions are likely to include Tibetan restaurants, souvenir stores, horse-riding centers, trekking, and organized visits to the now world-famous Larung Gar.

Some new footage, most of which appears to have been shot during the expulsions of nuns on October 30 (2016), shows cranes close to the main gate of Larung Gar, with newly-built construction on the hillside. These buildings are large concrete structures, apparently different to the wooden huts that feature in much of the monastic community.



These images show ongoing construction of a large building most likely to host tourist services, guest houses, travel agencies, trekking and horse riding facilities in an attempt to boost the local economy and capitalize on the increasing cultural and spiritual attractions of Serthar among Han Chinese tourists (Images: ICT).

Emphasis on secular elements of Tibetan culture in tourism drive

To maximize the benefits of the tourist industry in various areas, the local government has emphasized key secular elements of Tibetan culture such as the epic of King Gesar¹² and horse race festivals – largely because of their non-religious and non-monastic nature. In Serthar (Chinese: Seda) town in Kardze, the authorities have inaugurated a massive museum and cultural center dedicated to the legend of King Gesar with an interest in generating from tourist-oriented attractions such as exhibitions, dances, plays, and summer performances by local actors and dancers.

¹² Believed to date from the 12th century, the epic relates the heroic deeds of the cultural hero Gesar, the fearless lord of the legendary kingdom of Ling.

At Yachen Gar, the equally popular monastic encampment, with an estimated population of over 10,000, current residents have experienced similar demolitions of monastic quarters.¹³ The authorities' justification for the demolitions is the enlargement and paving of roads, creation of pavements and reinforcement of river banks in order to facilitate better conditions for traffic. But according to recent information from the area, the Chinese authorities have ambitious plans to bring tourists to Yachen Gar, too.



These images show dwellings at the Yachen Gar Buddhist Institute with new curbside construction consistent with plans for redevelopment in the area. Around 200 dwellings in the monks' quarters were demolished to make room for the construction of the curbside. While some locals agree that paved roads and sidewalks are good improvements, others complain that authorities treat monasteries unfairly. (Image: ICT)

Political context: systematic security measures in Serthar and beyond

The developments at Larung Gar and Yachen Gar are part of a complex and interconnected network of policies and approaches by the Chinese Party state in Tibetan areas of Sichuan, Qinghai, Gansu and Yunnan. While rigorous and oppressive measures including an increase in Communist Party personnel at 'grass roots' levels have been in place since the 2008 protests in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), new security measures to eliminate dissent and enforce compliance to Chinese Communist Party policies are now being increasingly observed in the eastern Tibetan areas of Kham and Amdo – linked particularly to the wave of self-immolations that began in Ngaba, Sichuan, in 2009.

These new measures being rolled out in Tibetan areas of the provinces of Qinghai, Sichuan and Gansu are part of an intensified control agenda set at the highest levels in Beijing.¹⁴

According to an observer recently in the area, Public Security Bureau (PSB) and police mobile stations have been placed in various towns in Sichuan including Serthar near to Larung Gar. The eyewitness said: "These are equipped with video cameras, special rifles and weaponry, and digital luminous displays warning the populace to maintain order and harmony and respect Chinese laws. Typically, no vehicles with passengers inside are allowed to stop in the vicinity of mobile stations. These mobile stations create heightened tensions and further pressure

¹³ According to ICT sources, soon after demolitions last year, some 300 Tibetan monks and a few dozen nuns who have been expelled were allowed to prolong their stay at Yachen Gar for only a few weeks in a tent camp set up immediately outside the perimeter of the monastery in basic conditions.

¹⁴ ICT report, February 16, 2016, 'Tightening of an invisible net: new security measures in eastern Tibet', <https://www.savetibet.org/tightening-of-an-invisible-net-new-security-measures-in-eastern-tibet-heighten-surveillance-control/>.



Dorje Rinchen ablaze after he set fire to himself on October 23, 2012 in Labrang.



This image shows a white police vehicle, center, that is used as a mobile police station in the main town square in Serthar (Chinese: Seda). The mobile police stations are a new initiative in the town consistent with the new emphasis on security in the area.

on the daily lives of Tibetans, particularly considering that most Tibetan towns in Eastern Tibet (Sichuan and Qinghai) have seen an increase of military presence and construction of large military facilities, including in Serthar in recent years."

The same source said that similar check posts featuring PSB and traffic police officers have been established not only in urban centers but also on all chief traffic arteries connecting major towns and villages. There is also PSB presence in all major monasteries and any religious institution with a substantial monastic presence including Larung Gar and Yachen Gar, including increased video surveillance, with the movements of monks and nuns closely watched.

Strength of Tibetan identity in Kardze and a history of resistance

The crackdowns in Kardze have been particularly tough given its history of resistance to Chinese rule, and the continued strong sense of Tibetan Buddhist identity and culture among Tibetans. The Chinese authorities describe it as an "arduous" struggle to "maintain public order and safeguard stability" in Kardze (Ganzi Daily, January 4, 2008), referring obliquely to the county's "remote location" and "historical reasons", a reference to the high number of peaceful protests and dissent in the region, and continued loyalty to the Dalai Lama.¹⁵ Kardze, one of 18 counties in the prefecture, has been the site of more known political detentions of Tibetans than any other county outside the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) since the late 1980s.

Five years ago, the town square in Serthar, near Larung Gar, was "covered in blood" after police opened fire on hundreds of Tibetans who had gathered peacefully at the time of Tibetan New Year (Losar).¹⁶

¹⁵ Based on data available in the Congressional-Executive Commission on China (CECC) Political Prisoner Database (PPD). (CECC, Party, Government Launch New Security Program, Patriotic Education, in Tibetan Area).

¹⁶ ICT report and images, February 2, 2012, <https://www.savetibet.org/photos-of-tibet-crackdown-emerge-from-scene-of-recent-shooting/>.

The mechanisms for control over religious practitioners in Kardze are well established, and were underlined in two Party meetings at prefectural level in January (2017). At a meeting on January 11, Kardze Party Secretary Liu Chengming asserted the importance of the role of Party cadres and monastic management committees in religious institutions not in terms of religious practice, but with the political agenda of "resolutely combating all kinds of criminal and separatist acts and strengthening the propaganda and education of patriotic and law-abiding to monks and nuns in Buddhist monasteries".¹⁷ 'Separatism' is a political term used in the context of an aggressive anti-Dalai Lama campaign in which the exiled religious leader is blamed for inciting dissent in Tibet, including for the protests that swept across the plateau in 2008, and for the self-immolations beginning in 2009. The use of the word 'patriotism' in relation to monks is also political, referring to the need for monks and nuns to be loyal to the Chinese government first, above their religious practice.

The political mantra of the CCP authorities is to "adapt Tibetan Buddhism to socialism"; central policy states that religion should be accommodated and utilized, but kept firmly under Party control. This has led to the development of administrative and legal mechanisms that enable the authorities to clamp down on religious activities they define as a threat to 'social stability' and 'national unity' while claiming they are operating according to a 'rule of law'.

Party Secretary of Kardze Liu Chengming emphasized these messages in a further official meeting on January 6 (2017) when he said: "Firstly, we must seek to build a civilized and harmonious monastic management, to promote the adaptation of Buddhism to socialism. Secondly, we must upgrade the monastic management as the starting point to promote regularized management of religious affairs according to the law. Thirdly, we must focus on monasteries as the key to maintaining normal and orderly development. Fourth, we must strengthen law enforcement as a priority in Buddhist monasteries to crack down on all separatist activities and sabotage. Fifth, we must firmly grasp the initiative of the Party's Buddhist monastic management policy."¹⁸

Creating a 'beautiful Ganzi' to attract tourists

The Chinese Communist Party characterises Tibetan support for the Dalai Lama and protection of Tibetan national identity as obstacles to its elaborate ambitions to re-shape the Tibetan plateau for its own purposes and ensure the domination of the Party, and so prioritises infrastructure construction and tourism as key elements of its strategic objectives in Tibet.

Further details of plans in Kardze to attract investment and more tourists to the area were underlined in a research paper by a Chinese scholar on local tourism obtained by ICT which states that the tourism industry and urbanization development in Kardze (Chinese: Ganzi) "must convey and reflect three major images of the region – 'Beautiful Ganzi', 'Harmonious Ganzi', and 'Happy Ganzi' as benchmark".¹⁹ The paper adds that urbanization in

¹⁷ Translation from Chinese into English by ICT. The meeting was detailed in the state media online at: http://paper.kbcmw.com/html/2017-01/12/content_89197.htm.

¹⁸ This appeared in the state media online at: http://paper.kbcmw.com/html/2017-01/07/content_89025.htm. Translation of this extract from Chinese into English by ICT.

¹⁹ The paper is dated February 2017, and was produced by Associate Professor Wang Xinggu at the Sichuan Minzu University who is also senior researcher at Tourism Science Research Department at the Tourism Research Institute of Sichuan Minzu College, and published in the Journal of Sichuan Minzu College (Vol 26 No 1). Relevant sections from the Chinese used in this report were translated by ICT.

Kardze accompanied by tourism has been accelerated, stating that in 2014, the level of urbanization in Kardze (Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture) has reached 26.87%, compared to 15.36% in 2000.

The same article also referred to some areas in Kardze being developed for 'red tourism', a reference to the marketing of sites of CCP 'revolutionary' significance to an older generation of tourists nostalgic for an earlier era and who often have the leisure and the money to travel. The tourism paper refers to a focus on locations of 'historic and cultural significance' such as sites of the 'Long March' of the Red Army in Kardze, saying that "attractive locations for tourists" would be created around these sites.²⁰ For Tibetans in Kardze, this type of tourism has disturbing connotations – it often involves the marketing of sites where numerous Tibetans were killed, and where attempts were made to eviscerate Buddhist culture.²¹

Lithang monastery in Kardze, for instance, the site of a visit by a foreign delegation²² in 2016 to promote investment and tourism, was virtually destroyed in 1956 by the invading Chinese army at the time of intense Khampa resistance.²³

The paper by the Chinese scholar concludes that because: "There is a strong correlation between tourism industry and urbanization", the construction of urban infrastructure and tourism facilities will be stepped up [in Kardze]. It outlines plans for: "Tibetan customs leisure vacation, historic and cultural sightseeing, Tibetan customs appreciation, tourism and Tibetan village tourism community so as to establish a new-type [sic] urbanization pyramid grade system in Ganzi."²⁴

The new tourist construction at both Larung Gar and Yachen Gar is in the context of major development programs in surrounding urban areas. Serthar town has been developed and expanded considerably in the past five years, consistent with ambitious plans being implemented across Tibet to bring large numbers of Chinese tourists to scenic sites and cultural landmarks.

It is a complex evolving picture. Undeniably, in Serthar as well as elsewhere in Tibet this has enabled many local Tibetans to benefit from businesses such as guest-houses or small shops. But this 'commodification' of Tibetan culture coexists with a trend of increasing repression of Tibetan cultural identity and a crackdown of unprecedented depth and scope.

Even in areas where tourism thrives, the Chinese authorities have also shown that they are prepared to shut down access if there is a conflict with the priorities of the security state. For the whole of this month (March

²⁰ Chinese state media report on 'Long March footprints in Ganzi', <http://english.cctv.com/2016/10/20/VIDEWoQDnm9BR8wSHlgYe6hu161020.shtml>.

²¹ The state media terms Tibet's 'Red Tourist Sites' as "the places where Tibetans stood against aggression and where Tibet launched its peaceful liberation and democratic foundations." (Xinhua, November 30, 2009, <http://chinatibet.people.com.cn/6827352.html>).

²² A month before the demolitions at Larung Gar began (in July 2016), diplomats from several countries including the UK, Canada, Germany, Australia and Poland went on an official visit to Kardze, and were photographed at Lithang (Chinese: Litang) monastery. Their visit was close to the one-year anniversary of the death in prison of prominent and much-loved monk Tenzin Delek Rinpoche, who was born in Lithang and studied at the monastery. See ICT report, July 13, 2015, <https://www.savetibet.org/death-in-prison-of-revered-tibetan-religious-leader-armed-forces-deployed-as-tibetans-express-their-grief/>.

²³ See account in Jianglin Li's 'Tibet in Agony: Lhasa 1959', Harvard University Press, 2016.

²⁴ Ibid.

2017), for instance, Lhasa and the Tibet Autonomous Region are closed to tourists coinciding with the anniversary of the Tibetan Uprising in March 1959 and the related protests across Tibet in March 2008.²⁵

In areas of eastern Tibet where there have been self-immolations, access is blocked to tourists – such as in Ngaba (Chinese: Aba) in Sichuan, where the first self-immolation in Tibet of a monk occurred on February 27, 2009. Following self-immolations and unrest in 2012 and 2013, the four towns of Darlag (Chinese: Dare), Gabde (Chinese: Gade), Pema (Chinese: Banma), and Jigdril (Chinese: Jiuzhi) in Golog (Chinese: Guoluo) Tibet Autonomous Prefecture in Qinghai were declared "not open" (Chinese: bu kaifang) to tourism (although this usually applies uniquely to non-Chinese tourists), according to ICT sources.²⁶ The increased presence of PSB officials and enhanced security measures are visible in these towns and on main roads and highways, according to a recent eyewitness account.

Tourism will 'restrict religious freedom': testimony from Larung Gar

When demolitions began at Larung Gar last July (2016), the local authorities denied the destruction of the institute, describing the demolitions as a 'construction development' that is part of a process of "accelerated urbanization" towards "a more orderly, beautiful, secure and peaceful land."²⁷

According to interviews carried out in the area, officials told local people in Serthar that the demolitions at Larung Gar were due to concerns for over-population, unregistered residency, fire hazards, and poor safety measures. Visitors to Larung Gar and Yachen Gar over the past few years have confirmed that conditions were poor, with no paved streets and rivers of mud in the pathways between the wooden homes when it rained. On January 9, 2014, around 100 nuns' homes were destroyed when a fire swept through the Larung Gar complex.²⁸ But dealing with fire hazards and improving infrastructure would be possible without mass demolitions and expulsions.²⁹

A Westerner who recently visited the area and spoke to numerous local Tibetans confirmed the "widespread conviction among the local population that the recent events at Larung Gar are not in any way motivated by safety and modernizing concerns." The Westerner, a researcher, told ICT: "They speak of, on the contrary, local policy and strategic objectives that prioritise the limitation on monastic population and target development of programs

²⁵ Tour operators announced on websites early in January that the 'annual closure' of Tibet to foreigners would run this year from February 25 to April 1, with all foreigners being instructed to leave before February 24. See ICT statement, January 27, 2017, <https://www.savetibet.org/tibet-locked-down-and-travellers-banned-during-sensitive-anniversary/>

²⁶ This included the self-immolation of Lama Sobha from Golog on January 8, 2012, following peaceful protests in Pema (Chinese: Banma) county, Golog, and in Ngaba and Kardze, Sichuan. Before his self-immolation, Lama Sobha, who was in his early forties, recorded a tape that was later found wrapped in his robe saying that he was offering the sacrifice of his life and body "as a token of long-life offering to our root guru His Holiness the Dalai Lama and all other spiritual teachers and lamas." Hundreds of Tibetans gathered in the Darlag area to mark Lama Sobha's death and to express their sadness. (ICT report, February 1, 2012, <https://www.savetibet.org/harrowing-images-and-last-message-from-tibet-of-first-lama-to-self-immolate/>).

²⁷ Palkho, the Serthar County United Front Work Department Secretary, said that: "Online it has been said that 'Larung Gar will be demolished,' 'it's the end of Larung Gar,' 'the monks and nuns will be removed,' 'the authorities are destroying and sweeping away a holy religious place,' and so on. This is totally untrue, and irresponsible." Palkho added that: "In this year Lo-Nor Township is being upgraded to a town, and because Larung Gar monastery is close to Lo-Nor township it will naturally be integrated into the overall planning and construction." Using official language that avoids making any reference to buildings being demolished, Palkho was cited as saying: "The motivation of this construction development is to build a more orderly, beautiful, secure and peaceful land where people can practice peace of mind, study more precisely, and allow the elderly to live more comfortably, and at the same time accelerate the pace of urbanization and development in Lo-Nor town." Translated into English by ICT, from a Chinese county level website: <http://www.ganzixinwen.com/wh/kzrw/zxzj/n9662.html>.

²⁸ Radio Free Asia report, January 10, 2014, <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/tibet/fire-01102014181943.html>

²⁹ An editorial in the New York Times on December 5, 2016, observed, "If the government were interested in health and safety, it could help construct new sewers and homes to relieve the crowding. But, of course, it's done nothing of the sort."



Hundreds of dwellings and meditation huts were demolished in the nuns' quarter at Yachen Gar at the time these photos were taken in the fall 2016 in order to build new routes for sanitation, emergency, and fire department vehicles. Many nuns, however, worry the real scope of such projects is to improve the experience of mass tourism at the site (Images ICT).

that aim at improving the use and learning of Tibetan language, and revivalist trends of Tibetan religious and cultural traditions. Many believe that behind the evictions and destruction is an interest in transforming the now world-famous Buddhist institutes into a tourist destination, which will further dilute the authentic culture."

An educated Tibetan man in his sixties in the Serthar area said that tourism is being used in Tibet to assist official efforts to restrict religious freedom: "Tibet is being turned into a huge tourist destination. Religious activities will be increasingly minimized and contained in monasteries. These will be limited in terms of demography and housing. This is the main objective of the Chinese government with regards to Buddhism, and we Tibetans have no power to influence any of these plans.

"The Chinese government is and continues to be atheist and for the Communist Party religion has little to do with prosperity and development in a modern society. Guesthouses and fancy hotels inside and immediately outside monastic environments will grow to host more and more Chinese tourists, with the purpose of improving the local economy and at the same time detracting time from monastics' education and activities. After all, this is what [the government and the Communist Party] cares about. This already happened at Kumbum [Chinese: Tae'rsi monastery in Qinghai], and the great monasteries in Lhasa [Sera, Drepung, and Ganden monasteries]."

The expulsions at Larung Gar and Yachen Gar follow mass expulsions of monks and nuns from many monasteries and nunneries in Tibet, particularly those institutions that are influential, important centers of religious education, and associated with peaceful protests. After monks from the 'Great Three' monasteries in Lhasa of Sera, Drepung and Ganden took to the streets in March 2008, the monastic population has been subject to intensified suppression and the strengthening of control mechanisms. Hundreds of monks have been expelled and arrested from these three monasteries, leading to serious fears for their survival as religious institutions. Monks in other areas of Tibet, who traditionally visited these monasteries for period of study and teachings, are no longer allowed to do so.

The significance of Larung Gar and Yachen Gar: centers for the promotion of ethical values and cultural protection

"Notwithstanding the tremendous scientific and technological advancements of this age, humanity has been at disarray in improving and creating inner peace and tranquility in our lives. Increasingly, we have seen people committing abysmal acts of dread and depravity. Even though it has left many in despair, there is a prevailing attitude in many parts of the world that the Tibetan culture may offer an antidote to nurture and maintain a peaceful mind, and this attitude is not brought about by a casual attraction to the culture but a deep appreciation and acquaintance with the culture."

– Khenpo Tsultrim Lodroe, Larung Gar³⁰

"The sad battles of this year and these months will be written down. May the three jewels protect our dharma brothers and sisters."

– Woesel Nyima³¹

Calls for calm and self-sacrifice

The impact of mass demolitions and expulsions at both Larung Gar and Yachen Gar has been devastating, but religious teachers there have urged calm and self-sacrifice in order to preserve the institutes in the long-term.

This approach, grounded in the dharma teachings, has discouraged protests at an emotional and distressing time not only for the religious community but for Tibetan laypeople in the local area. When one group of local people decided to protest the expulsions and demolitions, according to Tibetan sources, religious leaders at the institute asked them not to do so.³²

A letter from a Tibetan at Larung Gar that was posted on WeChat and later deleted or removed epitomized this approach: "Show kindness and compassion to those who are soaked with hatred, those who are harmful to everyone, and those who show fake smiles and expressions. Everyone knows those who hide hatred deep inside and with their power they harm others from the sides and from the centre. [...] I am a source of your irritation and perhaps even a source of your healing. Isn't my family yours? If so, isn't it like cutting of your own head? Isn't your path same as mine? Aren't we serving the same master? Isn't destroying us the same as destroying yourself?" The writer, named as Woesel Nyima, added: "I write about these in secret."³³

³⁰ Article translated into English and posted by "High Peaks Pure Earth" on September 15, 2014, <http://highpeakspureearth.com/2014/an-urgent-call-for-the-protection-and-preservation-of-tibetan-language-by-khenpo-tsultrim-lodoe/>.

³¹ Translation by "High Peaks Pure Earth", ibid.

³² The popular Buddhist teacher and writer, Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Rinpoche, noted this with a Facebook posting on January 22 (2017): "When the Serta Larung demolition began for whatever reasons, Khenpos Tsultrim Lodro and Sodargye firmly told their followers not to react at all. So no single cry of anger was heard and no harsh word uttered through the whole demolition. That is the practice taught by someone called Sakyamuni Buddha – not to slander when slandered, not to respond to harsh words with more harsh words, not to beat others when beaten."

³³ "High Peaks Pure Earth", ibid.

Larung Gar has become increasingly prominent in recent years, and since the demolitions of 2001, as one of the most important centers of Tibetan Buddhism worldwide. It first pioneered its revival in the early years of relative liberalization in the 1980s, following the destruction and chaos of the Cultural Revolution. One of the Khenpos (abbots) of Larung Gar, Khenpo Sodargye, who has over 1.5 million followers on Chinese social media Weibo, became the first Buddhist monk to be featured on a major Chinese magazine cover and has lectured about Tibetan Buddhism at prominent institutions including Beijing University and Qinghua University.

Centers for the promotion of ethical values

Importantly, Larung Gar and Yachen Gar (which was led by the late Khenpo Achuk Rinpoche) have become centers for the promotion of ethical values and cultural preservation. Religious teachers at Larung Gar have advocated for vegetarianism, promoted the use of Tibetan language,³⁴ and inspired a new set of Buddhist values that address animal welfare, not to wear animal fur on the trim of traditional coats or to fight with weapons. This follows the teachings of the founder of Larung Gar, the charismatic master the late Khenpo Jigme Phuntsog, who emphasized the importance of Buddhist ethics and codes of monastic discipline.

In a paper about Buddhist ethics at Larung Gar, scholar Holly Gayley writes: "The influence of Larung Buddhist Academy is keenly felt across the Tibetan plateau not only because of the prominence of its founder and its scale as an institution – with more than ten thousand monks and nuns – but also because many of the monastics who study there return to their home monasteries, bringing with them attitudes shaped by leading voices at Larung. This means that ethical reform has fanned out to areas surrounding Serta, such as Dzamthang, Drango, Ngawa, and Nyagrong, and also leapfrogged to places further away like Yushu (in Qinghai)."³⁵

Predominantly established within the Nyingma tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, today these communities are places for traditional instruction and contemplation rather than temporary facilities set up for special occasions. Until now, most monks and nuns have moved to these religious encampments from their home monasteries, some temporarily, and others permanently, to gain access to specific Buddhist instructions emerging from the spiritual attainments of their teachers. Traditional study curricula, given in an ecumenical and non-sectarian environment, include philosophy, logic-epistemology, and debate.

Strong link to Chinese Buddhists

There has always been a strong link with Chinese Buddhists, and Larung Gar was critical in shifting perceptions among many Chinese, establishing the strong gravitational pull of the teachings of the Tibetan masters in the PRC. David Germano, a Tibetologist at the University of Virginia who has spent long periods at the institute,

³⁴ Khenpo Tsultrim Lodoe at the institute has coordinated a team of language specialists and scholars representing all Tibetan regions to collaborate on the compilation of a trilingual (Tibetan-Chinese-English) dictionary of new vocabulary terms. Two volumes have been published in the past five years: the Chinese-Tibetan-English Illustrated Dictionary of New Daily Vocabulary and the Chinese-Tibetan-English Dictionary of New Daily Vocabulary. In an article about the importance of the Tibetan language, he wrote: "Language is the fundamental lifeline of a culture. It is the reservoir of identity and the most precious gem of a nationality – of a people." (posted by High Peaks Pure Earth on September 15, 2014 at: <http://highpeakspureearth.com/2014/an-urgent-call-for-the-protection-and-preservation-of-tibetan-language-by-khenpo-tsultrim-lodoe/>).

³⁵ 'Reimagining Buddhist Ethics on the Tibetan Plateau' by Holly Gayley, University of Colorado, Boulder, Journal of Buddhist Ethics, Volume 20, 2013, <http://blogs.dickinson.edu/buddhistethics/2013/08/04/reimagining-buddhist-ethics-on-the-tibetan-plateau/>.

writes that when Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok was alive: "Not only are there Chinese monks and nuns resident in [Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok's] Golog centre and Chinese lay Buddhists periodically making the long pilgrimage there, I have heard reports of Khenpo literally being mobbed by Chinese Buddhists or simply the curious seeking his blessings or teachings during visits to Chengdu."³⁶

The current religious masters at the institute teach in both Tibetan and Chinese. One of the teachers, Khenpo Tsultrim Lodoe, highlighted the growing interest not only among Chinese in Tibetan Buddhist culture, but also globally, when he wrote: "With the spread of Tibetan Buddhism and culture in many parts of the world including Europe and the United States in the 20th century, innumerable scholars and educated individuals around the world have come to appreciate the significance of the Tibetan culture and its heritage.

"Some individuals maintain that like any other Western rendezvous with new ideas and foreign cultures; this embrace of Tibetan Buddhism and culture would drop and diminish. I would argue that this is mistaken or at least implausible, because the scope and nature of engagement with Tibetan Buddhism and culture by these people stands as robust and reasonable evidence to the contrary."³⁷

Monasteries in Tibet including Larung Gar and Yachen Gar also have an important educational role; they are similar to Western universities or schools. A young Tibetan from the Kardze area, who has worked in education and is familiar with the situation at Larung Gar, explained that the authorities have particular fears over uncontrolled demographic growth at both institutes, suggesting that this is why policies to limit teachers' freedom to accept large number of Chinese disciples are being suggested: "They are places where people can study Buddhism and learn Buddhist culture. Whenever a high lama gives teaching many people gather to listen to his words. The government then has decided to keep a limit to the number of people who can actually gather around the lama during his teachings including nunneries, monasteries, public teachings, and classes. And the limit is not applied to the number of people who attend the teaching, but also to the duration of the teachings. Typically, a long teaching session should not exceed two days. Another regulation regards invitations to external Buddhist teachers from other monasteries for short-term teachings. When the external teacher arrives he has to register his presence with the government many times with the police station and has to undergo a background check. Police officers in plainclothes or not would then attend the speech in order to check the content of the teachings and be sure that no politics or controversial issues are discussed.

"Therefore, all these measures contribute to the creation of an uncomfortable atmosphere among the Tibetans attending the teaching sessions. Ideally speaking, when listening to Buddhist teachings, the audience is supposed to be calm, quiet, and with a peaceful mind. But when the Chinese police and workers join the group listening to the Buddhist teachings they create an atmosphere of intimidation and anxiety. This is why we cannot really say that there is freedom of religion in Tibet."

Tibetan sources in the area also spoke about the pressures to preserve and protect the Tibetan language given official restrictions that emerge from the authorities' concerns over its links to Tibetan national identity.

³⁶ Cited in ICT obituary, January 3, 2004, <https://www.savetibet.org/charismatic-tibetan-buddhist-leader-khenpo-jigme-phuntsok-passes-away/>.

³⁷ Article translated into English and posted by High Peaks Pure Earth on September 15, 2014, <http://highpeakspureearth.com/2014/an-urgent-call-for-the-protection-and-preservation-of-tibetan-language-by-khenpo-tsultrim-lodoe/>.

A Tibetan teacher from the Ngaba (Chinese: Aba) area of Sichuan (Amdo) gave the following account of the difficulties, and the involvement of teachers at Larung Gar in seeking to improve scholarship in the Tibetan language: "One problem that we Tibetans are experiencing in terms of national identity is the endangered nature of our own national language. Only nomads and monastics in monasteries and nunneries use Tibetan language consistently. But the same cannot be said of ordinary Tibetans in China. In banks, government offices, police departments, transportation offices and stations, various offices and public spaces in general, Mandarin Chinese is becoming more and more widespread as the medium of communication. This is highly detrimental to the protection of the Tibetan language. There are people in Tibet who are trying very hard to protect Tibetan, but they meet government opposition when it comes to further their actions in that direction. For instance, one way to protect Tibetan language has been the creation of organizations or associations that would advocate for it. But these are rarely allowed in China and the government would close them immediately.

"Therefore, we Tibetans have not come up with good ideas on how to protect our own language yet. One example is the attempts in the past decade by a small group of Tibetan scholars from various areas of Tibet inspired by and under the leadership of Khenpo Tsultrim Lodro from Larung Gar to update Tibetan language. They succeeded in compiling a series of dictionaries and technical and specific terms that Tibetans have borrowed from colloquial Chinese have been given new Tibetan value. The illustrated dictionary was meant to assist especially Tibetan nomads and farmers and included a vast number of terms related to daily utensils, tools, and activities. This project is not complete as more words need to be added to the list, especially related to medicine, biology, physics, chemistry, science and technology. So in this regard, the situation is very bad because the old terms are easily being forgotten and the new technical ones do not have a Tibetan equivalent yet. But these scholars meet with consistent obstruction from the government when it comes to publishing these dictionaries and manuals in China.³⁸

"A number of highly influential Buddhist leaders have in the past tried to convince government officials of the innocuous and non-political nature of such publications. But no matter how influential their position, even they have failed to allow this project to continue. Even if the Chinese government insists that the law protects ethnic minorities' languages, in reality it is not like that. All documents are written in China and if officers write in Tibetan they might be reprimanded and derided by their superiors."

New measures to prevent "illegal propagation of Tibetan Buddhism"

The severe measures at Larung Gar and Yachen Gar also appear to emerge from the Chinese Communist Party authorities' concerns about the growing influence of the centers in terms of the rise in popularity in Tibetan Buddhism both in the PRC and beyond its borders. The late professor Eliot Sperling, a Tibet scholar who taught at Indiana University,³⁹ was cited by the New York Times as saying: "The party sees Tibet, inside and outside the Tibet Autonomous Region, as one of the more volatile regions and does not take kindly to alternate sources of authority, including moral and behavioral authority, and clearly the growth of Larung [Gar] is problematic."⁴⁰ Last November (2016), the provincial unit of the official Buddhist Association of China (BAC) issued a six-point

38 They are often forced to opt for independent printing, relying on private funds and/or donations, without an ISBN and usually abroad.

39 Eliot Sperling died on January 29, 2017. He was one of the world's leading historians of Tibet and Tibetan-Chinese relations and a MacArthur Fellow.

40 New York Times, November 28, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/28/world/asia/china-takes-a-chain-saw-to-a-center-of-tibetan-buddhism.html?_r=0.

directive last November calling for the prevention of the "illegal propagation of Tibetan Buddhism" in China's Zhejiang province, a major center of Chinese Buddhist teachings.⁴¹ The notice, which is translated into English by ICT below, stated that Tibetan Buddhist monks were not allowed to teach, receive students or hold religious activities without official approval, and that Chinese language monasteries should be guided to teach the doctrines "in accordance with Chinese Buddhism doctrine".

The stringent new measures appear to be aimed at preventing the influence of Tibetan Buddhism among ordinary Chinese, particularly as more Tibetan lamas are travelling in China, and more Chinese are going to study at centers like Larung Gar. At Larung Gar, when hundreds of monks and nuns were expelled and their homes demolished in 2001, Chinese students were among the first to be targeted, and were also singled out in the wave of demolitions that began last July (2016). The distinction between Chinese and Tibetan Buddhism has not been made so clearly before in official statements, and may portend a more divisive approach.

Significantly, the official statement refers to the Putuoshan Buddhist Association, a reference to the mountain of Putuoshan in Zhejiang, one of the four holy mountains of Chinese Buddhism. These four Buddhist mountains became the main pilgrimage destinations for China's Buddhists and developed into religious centers, with thousands of monks and nuns. Wutaishan, one of the other holy peaks in Shanxi province, is also very important for Tibetan Buddhists. The late Khenpo Jigme Phuntsog, who founded Larung Gar, made important pilgrimages here and first established the importance of Tibetan Buddhist teachings through his visits, marking the beginning of this growth in popularity of Tibetan Buddhism in the PRC.

China analyst Jayadeva Ranade, President of the Centre for China Analysis and Strategy in Delhi, India, noted that there has been a marked increase in the number of Buddhists in China over the past 20 years, with their percentage in the population rising from 5% to more than 18% by 2015. Ranade wrote: "Buddhists in China are now estimated to exceed 300 million. The 88 million-strong CCP has been sensitive to the growth of any other organisation not controlled by the Party, viewing it as a potential threat to its monopoly on power."⁴²

According to ICT sources, Tibetan monks and nuns who fail to comply with instructions to leave Larung Gar have been threatened with serious repercussions for their families back home or even their home monasteries. Threats made include loss of jobs, closure of businesses, cutting of government pension, prohibition in trading in the caterpillar fungus *yartsa gunba* – a vital source of income for many families.

Similar tactics were used to threaten Tibetans who sought to attend a major religious teaching by the Dalai Lama, the Kalachakra, in India last month. Thousands of Tibetan pilgrims were compelled by the Chinese authorities to return to Tibet after travelling to India to attend a major teaching by the Dalai Lama at Bodh Gaya, a sacred Buddhist site, following systematic measures in Tibet to prevent them travelling out of the country at all, even though many had spent years obtaining passports for legal travel.

⁴¹ Zhejiang has also been one of the main centers of cross-removal and church closures in China recently, see: New York Times article: http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/22/world/asia/china-christians-zhejiang.html?_r=0.

⁴² Jayadeva Ranade, The Sunday Guardian, January 28, 2017, <http://www.sundayguardianlive.com/opinion/8169-china-s-communist-party-worried-about-rise-buddhism>.

A Tibetan in Bodh Gaya told ICT: "The Chinese authorities used methods that show they really know how to hurt people and force them to go home. Monks have been told that if they do not return home, they will have to leave their monasteries. With others, when warnings that they will lose their pension or job do not work, they threaten their families. Even if they do not care what happens to them, because being at the Kalachakra in the presence of His Holiness is so important, they obviously cannot accept that."⁴³

As well as Tibetans, Chinese pilgrims from the PRC were threatened with consequences if they did not return from the Kalachakra held at Bodh Gaya, an Indian town famous as the site of the Buddha's enlightenment, according to information received by ICT during the teaching.



Tibetan monks and nuns who fail to comply with instructions to leave Larung Gar have been threatened with serious repercussions for their families back home or even their home monasteries. Threats made include loss of jobs, closure of businesses, cutting of government pension, prohibition in trading in the caterpillar fungus yartsa gunba – a vital source of income for many families. Similar tactics were used to threaten Tibetans who sought to attend a major religious teaching by the Dalai Lama, the Kalachakra, in India last month, pictured here. Thousands of Tibetan pilgrims were compelled by the Chinese authorities to return to Tibet after travelling to India to attend a major teaching by the Dalai Lama at Bodh Gaya, a sacred Buddhist site, following systematic measures in Tibet to prevent them travelling out of the country at all, even though many had spent years obtaining passports for legal travel. (Image: Filip Wolak, <http://www.filipwolak.com/>).

The Chinese authorities were so concerned about seeking to prevent the Dalai Lama's influence even outside the borders of the PRC that according to the Nepalese press and other sources a temporary travel restriction to Nepal was issued just prior to the Bodh Gaya teaching. The Kathmandu Post reported in December (2016), a week

43 ICT report, January 9, 2017, <https://www.savetibet.org/tibetan-pilgrims-compelled-to-return-from-dalai-lama-teaching-in-bodh-gaya-india-china-calls-the-teaching-illegal/>.

before the Kalachakra began, that the Chinese government has asked its travel agencies and airlines to cancel all travel plans and bookings made until January 10 with immediate effect. Senior Nepalese government officials confirmed that the travel ban was connected to the Kalachakra in India, and the Kathmandu Post described it as "a surprise move that may be a major setback for Nepal's tourism that was of late encouraged by the flow of Chinese tourists."⁴⁴

While the Buddhist institute of Larung Gar in particular has come to the focus of international attention, the Chinese government drafted a revision of its religious affairs regulations in September 2016, seeking to consolidate a framework for the state's repressive approach towards religion. The revised regulations will contribute to an even more closely knit fabric of control. In September 2016, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights reiterated his deep concern over allegations of discrimination, torture and ill-treatment, enforced disappearances and deaths in custody of members of ethnic and religious communities,⁴⁵ acknowledging the already tense situation in Tibet and Xinjiang (East Turkestan).⁴⁶

Translation into English of a notice by the Zhejiang Buddhist Association, November 28, 2016

Zhejiang Buddhist Association: Notice on preventing and stopping the illegal propagation of Tibetan Buddhism in our province

City Buddhist Associations and Putuoshan Buddhist Association:

In order to conscientiously implement the Party's religious policies and the relevant national state laws and regulations, and to better maintain religious harmony and social harmony, in accordance with the request of the Zhejiang Province Ethnic and Religious Affairs Commission, the notice on the issue of preventing and stopping the illegal propagation of Tibetan Buddhism in our province is as follows:

- 1 Tibetan Buddhist monks are not allowed to hold abbotcies [sic] or participate in preaching the Dharma, give empowerments and receive students, arrange fire pujas, or hold other religious activities without approval in our province.
- 2 Buddhist Associations in our province, Buddhist activity venues, and Buddhist institutes and other organizations are not allowed to teach Tibetan Buddhist scripture or doctrine to the religious masses, or to hold Tibetan Buddhist activities, without approval.
- 3 Chinese-language monasteries and monks in our province should be educated and guided to teach the doctrine in accordance with Chinese Buddhism doctrine.
- 4 Buddhist clergy from outside our province who have been invited to preside over Buddhist activities or deliver Buddhist teachings shall be subject to the consent of the relevant Buddhist Association, and should be repor-

⁴⁴ Kathmandu Post, December 24, 2016, <http://kathmandupost.ekantipur.com/news/2016-12-24/china-issues-travel-restriction-to-nepal.html>.

⁴⁵ United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Opening Statement by Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, at the 33rd session of the Human Rights Council, www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=20474.

⁴⁶ See for more details on the draft regulations, International Campaign for Tibet, October 25, 2016: "Suffocating religious freedom in Tibet: China's draft regulations on religious affairs", <https://www.savetibet.org/suffocating-religious-freedom-in-tibet-chinas-draft-regulations-on-religious-affairs/>.

ted to the provincial Buddhist Association and the provincial Ethnic and Religious Affairs Commission for the record.

- 5 Religious personnel may not organize or host religious activities at non-religious activity venues without approval.
- 6 Group religious activities must be held in religious activity venues that have been registered in accordance with the law, or on other occasions they must be approved by a religious affairs bureau at the county level or above.

You are hereby notified.

Zhejiang Buddhist Association

November 28, 2016

Note on methodology

This report was informed by first-hand sources and eyewitnesses to the demolitions and new developments at Larung Gar and Yachen Gar over the last six months. It includes testimony from individuals interviewed in the area in the period after the demolitions began in July, 2016. Dates and information that could identify sources are not detailed here given the dangers for individuals in sharing information, in a political climate in which even moderate or mild expressions of views can be construed as political criticism and characterized as 'criminal'.

