

SUBMISSION TO THE UN SPECIAL RAPPORTEUR ON FREEDOM
OF RELIGION OR BELIEF

IN ADVANCE OF HIS REPORT TO THE 77TH SESSION OF THE
GENERAL ASSEMBLY IN SEPTEMBER 2022

Joint Report Submitted on 11 July 2022



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1. INTRODUCTION

Tibet Advocacy Coalition and Free Tibet present this submission in response to the [call for inputs](#) issued by the Special Rapporteur on the right to Freedom of Religion and Belief to inform his report to the 77th Session of the General Assembly in September 2022.

This contribution focuses on practices of the Chinese authorities that discriminate against Tibetans in Tibet enjoying spiritual and religious traditions, customs and ceremonies; the destruction of religious and cultural sites; control over the Tibetan Buddhist Reincarnation system; forced assimilation; and the extensive system of residential schools which have separated at least 800,000-900,000 Tibetan children aged 6-18 from their families and communities. The report recommends urgent measures to be taken by the Chinese authorities to ensure they uphold their international legal obligations.

2. DESTRUCTION OF TIBETAN BUDDHIST RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL SITES

2.1 Drago County

Since October 2021, Drago County in Kardze, in Kham (CH: Luhuo County, Garzê Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province), eastern Tibet has been the target of a series of demolitions including sites and objects of deep religious and historical significance to local communities. These include a Buddhist school; a prayer wheel building; a 99-foot-tall statue of the Buddha that was funded by local Tibetans to prevent natural catastrophes; a 45-foot-tall statue of Guru Rinpoche;¹ a 30-foot statue of the Buddha of Future and its temple; a revered Buddhist leader's residence and the monastery's prayer flags, which were taken down and burned.² The crackdown took place two weeks after Chinese Communist Party (CCP) official Wang Dongsheng, was nominated the Party Secretary of Drago County.³

Paramilitary troops have been deployed to the area and random phone inspections of local Tibetans have also been underway since the demolitions. At least ten local Tibetans in Drago County have been detained and tortured for reasons as minor as showing distress at the demolitions. The detainees were subjected to interrogations, severe beatings, including cold water being poured on them during freezing winter weather. A number of them fell unconscious.⁴

¹ Guru Rinpoche is an 8th century Tantric master

² 'Destruction of Buddha statue, prayer wheels and prayer flags in Drago County', Tibet Watch, 24 December 2021: <https://www.tibetwatch.org/news/2021/12/24/99ft-buddha-statue-and-45-prayer-wheels-forcibly-demolished-with-prayer-flags-taken-off-and-burned>

³ Wang Dongsheng was previously involved in mass demolitions at Larung Gar (see 2.2 below)

⁴ 'Another giant statue of Buddha torn down in Drago County', Tibet Watch, 6 January 2022: <https://www.tibetwatch.org/news/2022/1/6/another-giant-statue-of-buddha-torn-down-in-drago-county>

2.1.1 Recommendations

Tibet Advocacy Coalition and Free Tibet encourages the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief to make the following recommendations to the Chinese authorities:

- Immediately cease the destruction of cultural heritage in Tibet, including religious sites or objects;
- Immediately cease the policy of “political re-education” for Tibetans;
- Immediately withdraw security forces, including CCP members, from all the Tibetan monasteries and nunneries, including on the Monastic Management Committees;
- Undertake a full and impartial investigation into all allegations of torture and other ill-treatment.

2.2. Larung Gar and Yarchen Gar Buddhist Institutes

Two key examples of the CCP’s treatment of Tibetan Buddhism have been campaigns to overhaul the Buddhist communities of Larung Gar and Yarchen Gar. Established in the 1980s both sites have great influence in the Tibetan Buddhist community. Chinese authorities repeatedly interfered in the affairs of both communities during the 1990s and 2000s, including forcibly evicting large numbers of residents and demolishing homes. This state interference has drastically escalated in recent years.

Larung Gar is one of the largest and most significant Tibetan Buddhist institutes in the world. It is located in Serthar County in Kardze), Kham, eastern Tibet (CH: Sêrtar County, Garzê Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province). Between July 2016 and by May 2017, 4,828 residents were removed from Larung Gar and 4,725 buildings demolished. Residents were offered no prior consultation about the plans. The removals were accompanied by new security restrictions and restrictions on residents’ freedom of religion. Authorities also stipulated that screening procedures be installed, requiring residents to show ID cards proving that they lived at the site.⁵ In 2016, 2017 and 2018, residents were issued with orders not to gather to observe the religious festival of Dechen Shingdrup and were instead required to mark the event alone in their residences.⁶

Those removed from Larung Gar were required to sign documents stating that they would not return. They were then driven to their native regions of Tibet, which for some residents included locations over 1,700km away. Former residents were not permitted to join new monasteries and nunneries upon returning to their native regions, and some were subjected to patriotic re-education or humiliating performances including being forced to dance in front of an audience of CCP members in their religious robes.⁷ Three nuns from Larung Gar took their lives in protest against the demolitions in the summer of 2016.⁸ In February 2017, six UN special rapporteurs expressed concern at the demolitions, removals and

⁵ Tibet Watch, November 2016; 'Destroying Heaven: China's campaign of destruction at Larung Gar', Free Tibet and Tibet Watch, October 2017 www.freetibet.org/files/Larung%20Gar%20report-web.pdf

⁶ 'China Bans Major Prayer Festival in Larung Gar for Third Consecutive Year', RAdio Free Asia, 25 October 2018: <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/tibet/DechenShingdrup-10252018162233.html>

⁷ Tibet Watch, November 2016; 'Destroying Heaven: China's campaign of destruction at Larung Gar', Free Tibet and Tibet Watch, October 2017 www.freetibet.org/files/Larung%20Gar%20report-web.pdf, p.9

⁸ Ibid., p.11

other restrictions in Larung Gar, noting that China's actions violated the residents' rights to an adequate standard of living and right to take part in cultural life.⁹

Similar measures were imposed on Yarchen Gar, a community of over 10,000 Tibetan Buddhists located in Pelyul County in Kardze, eastern Tibet (CH: Baiyü County, Garzê Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province). Many of its residents are female, giving the community its nickname, the City of Nuns.

In 2017, local authorities issued an order stipulating that 3,500 homes be torn down and that residents¹⁰ were forbidden from renovating homes or building new structures.¹¹ Further to the demolitions, at least 3,500 of monks and nuns were¹² forcibly evicted from their homes and places of worship in Yarchen Gar in 2019, contrary to international law. Satellite images showed that just under half of the western side of the site had been leveled and showed the clear contrast of the site from 2013 to 2019.¹³ The western half of the site is where Yarchen Gar's nuns live and prior to the demolitions consisted of some 13,000 dormitories. A checkpoint has been installed on the road to the site along with numerous security cameras while security forces have been deployed inside the site reportedly to monitor residents.¹⁴



Satellite imagery of the west bank of Yarchen Gar on 3 April 2018 (left) and 24 August 2019 (right)

⁹ U.N. Special Rapporteurs on Cultural Rights, Human Rights and the Environment, the Right to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly, Adequate Housing, Minority Issues, and Freedom of Religion or Belief, Joint Statement concerning severe restrictions of religious freedom in Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, AL CHN 10/2016 (Nov. 7, 2016)

<https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=22816>

¹⁰ Free Tibet, 24 August 2017,

<https://web.archive.org/web/20220126071926/https://www.freetibet.org/news-media/na/thousands-residents-yarchen-gar-ordered-tear-down-their-own-homes>

¹¹ Free Tibet, 25 September 2018,

<https://web.archive.org/web/20211029020513/https://www.freetibet.org/news-media/na/china-restricts-renovations-yarchen-gar>

¹² Radio Free Asia, 11 June 2019, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/tibet/EVICTED-06112019163506.html>

¹³ Images of Yarchen Gar demolitions, 2019, Free Tibet <https://www.flickr.com/photos/freetibetorg/albums/72157711045432981> ; 'China has destroyed large areas of one of Tibet's biggest Buddhist sites, satellite images reveal', Tibet Watch, 1 October 2019:

<https://www.tibetwatch.org/news/2019/10/1/bebidukptw4lynoqcykpiilfdcauoo>

¹⁴ 'Further evictions and repression at Yarchen Gar', Tibet Watch, 8 July 2019:

<https://www.tibetwatch.org/news/2019/7/23/further-evictions-and-repression-at-yarchen-gar>

showing the demolition of houses.

Local sources stated that around 7,000 people were forcibly removed from Yarchen Gar in 2019. Testimonies smuggled out of Tibet stated that at least some of the residents who were removed in 2019 were held in internment facilities and subjected to patriotic re-education before being released. One nun took her life after she was returned to such a facility for continuing to protest against her removal.¹⁵

2.2.1 Recommendations

Tibet Advocacy Coalition and Free Tibet encourages the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief to make the following recommendations to the Chinese authorities:

- Immediately halt any further planned evictions from and demolitions at Larung Gar or Yarchen Gar, and ensure that all current and expelled residents are allowed to practice Tibetan Buddhism without discrimination, intimidation or coercion, as well as ensure that both sites remain a site of religious worship for the local Tibetan community;
- Lift all freedom of movement restrictions, on all current and expelled residents of both sites, and ensure that they are allowed to exercise rights to freedom of belief and religion, and to take part in cultural life, without government interference or discrimination. This must include lifting restrictions on remaining at both sites, as well as traveling to other religious festivals and sites across all TAPs and in and out of the TAR;
- Remove any surveillance measures from both sites including security cameras, security personnel, checkpoints and restrictions on who can visit the community;
- Immediately halt all measures of patriotic re-education, for current and expelled residents of Yarchen Gar, and give a full account of how many residents have undergone patriotic re-education.
- Investigate the circumstances of reported suicides at Larung Gar and Yarchen Gar, including allegations of beatings in the internment camp and hospital.

3. CONTROL OVER TIBETAN BUDDHIST REINCARNATION

Despite the Chinese government's promotion of atheism and oppressive policies against religion, Beijing has developed a strategy to exert control over Tibetan Buddhist reincarnation.¹⁶ These efforts escalated

¹⁵ 'Tibetan Nun Expelled From Buddhist Center Commits Suicide in Internment Camp', Radio Free Asia, 14 February 2020 www.rfa.org/english/news/tibet/nun-02142020172455.html

¹⁶ Reincarnation is central to Buddhist belief and practice, rooted in the concept of the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth (samsara). In Tibet, the Buddhist doctrine of rebirth took on the distinctive form of recognizing chains of rebirths of particular lamas, referred to in the West as 'reincarnate' or 'incarnate' lamas.

in 1995 when the six-year-old Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, the 11th Panchen Lama, was abducted and China's own candidate Gyaltzen Norbu was installed in his place.¹⁷

A harsher line on reincarnation was further consolidated by the 2007 'Measures of the Management of the Reincarnation of Living Buddhas', which states that reincarnations may not be recognised without Party state approval and that 'living Buddhas' must live in the PRC. The measures also state that any recognition of tulkus outside the PRC is illegal – which prepares the ground for the Chinese authorities to invalidate reincarnation lineages outside the PRC and therefore the Dalai Lama's selection outside China.

China's strategy to exert control over Tibetan Buddhist reincarnation includes an insistence that it is the prerogative of China to recognise the next Dalai Lama, and is designed to target not only Tibetans but also the broader international community, as a means to secure authority in occupied Tibet, and build influence and dominance across the Tibetan Buddhist world. In 2011, Beijing rejected an authoritative statement by the 14th Dalai Lama that he may appoint someone as his successor while he is still alive,¹⁸ a concept familiar to the Buddhist community.

For the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan people, what is at stake is the survival of the Tibetan Buddhist civilization, endangered as never before by Xi Jinping's policies in Tibet, which aim at the elimination of a separate Tibetan religious and cultural identity and history. The Chinese leadership is aware of the centrality of the Dalai Lama to Tibet and its future, and Beijing's aggressive stance is fuelled by anxieties over the ability to maintain the occupation and their control.

New oppressive strategies for reincarnation developed by China include:

- Intensified political education and indoctrination extended to ordinary Tibetans - including in strategically significant areas close to India's border.
- The cultivation of senior religious and secular figures loyal to the Party. These figures are seen as central to efforts to install and endorse China's own chosen Dalai Lama candidate.
- Training of young incarnate lamas detailed on an official Chinese Communist Party database in a network of government-run institutes.¹⁹
- Substituting religious pilgrimages for supervised tours to 'red' sites such as to Mao Zedong's birthplace or military bases.²⁰

These measures of escalated control have resulted in imprisonment, torture, and even death.²¹

¹⁷ China's public relations plan to promote Gyaltzen Norbu is key to the process to install their own Dalai Lama candidate. After nearly three decades, Beijing's candidate is not recognised as legitimate by the majority of Tibetans.

¹⁸ 'Dalai Lama Keeps Firm Grip on Reins of Succession', New York Times, 5 October 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/06/world/asia/06iht-letter06.html>

¹⁹ 'The 'poisonous fruit' of Tibet's religious policy as China publishes 'Living Buddha' database', International Campaign for Tibet, 2 May 2016, <https://savetibet.org/the-poisonous-fruit-of-tibets-religious-policy-as-china-publishes-living-buddha-database/>

²⁰ 'Tibetan 'Living Buddhas' compelled to show allegiance to Party at birthplace of Mao Zedong, International Campaign for Tibet, 8 November 2016, <https://savetibet.org/ict-inside-tibet-news-and-analysis-of-emerging-developments-in-tibet/#1>

²¹ A lama in his eighties, Tulku Dawa, was sentenced to seven years in prison and his death hushed up after he was suspected of communicating with the Dalai Lama over a reincarnation in his monastery - Human Rights Watch, April 6, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/04/06/how-chinas-authorities-aim-control-tibetan-reincarnation> ; In 2020, a monk in Nagchu (CH: Naqu) was tortured and died after being found to have a picture on his phone of a young boy recognised as a reincarnate lama by the 14th Dalai Lama in India. According to Tibetans in exile with connections in the area.

3.1 Recommendations

Tibet Advocacy Coalition and Free Tibet encourages the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief to make the following recommendations to the Chinese authorities:

- Affirm support for the 14th Dalai Lama as the legitimate authority on his succession;
- Oppose any effort by the Government of the People’s Republic of China to select and appoint Tibetan Buddhist religious leaders, including any future Dalai Lama, by adopting national legislation;
- Immediately repeal the Religious Affairs Regulations of 2017, including Article 36 which requires that the succession of living Buddhas in Tibetan Buddhism is approved by the Chinese Communist Party;
- Immediately repeal the “Measures on the Management of the Reincarnation of Living Buddhas in Tibetan Buddhism” which violate international human rights law and standards, including by requiring Chinese state approval for Tibetan Buddhist reincarnations, and declaring any recognition outside the PRC as illegal in an effort invalidate reincarnation lineages;
- Provide proof of the whereabouts and well-being of Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, the 11th Panchen Lama of Tibet, and call for an independent monitor to be given immediate access to corroborate his situation and the extent to which he is able to enjoy and exercise his rights.

4. RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS AND THE FORCED REMOVAL OF TIBETAN CHILDREN FROM THEIR HOMES

The Chinese government has established a vast network of colonial boarding schools in Tibet, housing an estimated 800,000 to 900,000 Tibetan students aged six to 18,²² as well as an estimated 100,000 Tibetan children aged 4 to 6 years old living in pre-schools.²³

Touted by the Chinese government as a means of providing education to a sparse and far-flung population, the schools are the cornerstone of an assimilationist agenda intended to preempt threats to CCP control by eliminating ethnic differences. The impact of the colonial boarding school experience on Tibetan children and their families – including psychological and emotional trauma – and the implications for whole generations of Tibetans and the long-term survival of Tibetan identity are grave.

Tibetan parents are compelled to send their children to boarding schools due to a lack of alternatives and are unable to advocate for other options in Tibet’s repressive environment. Individual accounts show that intimidation and threats are used to coerce reluctant parents to send their children to such schools.

²² Tibet Action Institute, “Separated From Their Families, Hidden From the World: China’s Vast System of Colonial Boarding Schools Inside Tibet,” 2021, pg. 24, available at: https://s7712.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/2021_ColonialBoardingSchoolReport_Digital.pdf

²³ Tibet Action Institute, ‘Eyewitness: China Operating Mandatory Boarding Preschools Across Tibet’ <https://tibetaction.net/2022/05/24/eyewitness-confirms-mandatory-boarding-preschools-operating-across-tibet/> 24 May 2022.

Separated from their families, Tibetan children are unable to practice their religion or access the most authentic expressions of Tibetan culture and traditions, in violation of both the children’s and their parents’ rights as set forth in Article 18(4) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which China has signed though not ratified. The ICCPR notes that “[t]he States Parties to the present Covenant undertake to have respect for the liberty of parents and, when applicable, legal guardians to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions.” The same convention provides that everyone shall not only have the right to freely choose their religion but to “manifest [their] religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.

Additionally, China’s colonial boarding school system and its increasing use of Chinese as the medium of instruction, as well as the way in which it alienates Tibetan children from their own cultural heritage, violates parents’ and children’s internationally enshrined rights with regard to linguistic and cultural choice and freedom. The ICCPR notes “In those States in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities exist, persons belonging to such minorities shall not be denied the right, in community with the other members of their group, to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practise their own religion, or to use their own language.”²⁴ As recently as 2020, in a communication to the Chinese government, a United Nations Committee (the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination) raised concerns about the Chinese government’s replacement of Tibetan with the Chinese language as the medium of instruction in schools, and its persecution of Tibetan language rights advocates.²⁵

4.1 Recommendations

Tibet Advocacy Coalition and Free Tibet encourages the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief to make the following recommendations to the Chinese authorities:

- Halt the implementation of China’s colonial boarding school system;
- Halt the use of state propaganda, political ideology, and indoctrination at all levels of the school curricula and ensure that Tibetan students are permitted to learn about their own history, culture, and religion;
- Reverse the deceptively-named “bilingual education” policy that replaces Tibetan with Chinese as the medium of instruction and ensure that all Tibetan children are able to use Tibetan in every aspect of their schooling;
- Grant the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief immediate, meaningful, and unfettered access to Tibet.

²⁴ UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, “International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, article 27,” December 19, 1966, available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/ccpr.aspx> (accessed November 25, 2021).

²⁵ UN Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights, “Communication of the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination dated 24 November 2020 to the government China,” available at: https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CERD/Shared%20Documents/CHN/INT_CERD_FUL_CHN_43684_E.pdf (accessed November 25, 2021).