

BUDDHISM UPDATE JULY 2010

4 UPDATES

Dalai Lama embraces social networking, interacts directly with Chinese citizens using Twitter

August 4, 12:17 AM · Elizabeth Maclin - Dalai Lama Examiner

In May of this year, the Dalai Lama held a ground-breaking conversation with the people of China by answering questions live on Twitter during a visit to New York. According to the official website of The Office of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, 1558 Chinese people submitted 317 questions. 11,705 Chinese 'netizens' then voted for the ten most important questions. His Holiness responded in depth to these ten questions from his home in Dharamsala, India on July 16, 2010. His responses were released on the Chinese-language version of the website on July 19, 2010. The questions and their answers were then translated into English and released on the English-language website yesterday, August 2, 2010.

The session was a rare opportunity for the Dalai Lama to interact directly with Chinese citizens without the Chinese government acting as 'middle-man'. His Holiness took the opportunity to clear the air about some widely-held misconceptions, including the fact that he and the Tibetan Government in Exile are not pushing for a fully liberated Tibet but for a measure of ethnic autonomy within the larger People's Republic of China.

The hour-long event was suggested by Wang Lixiong, a Chinese writer and convert to Tibetan Buddhism who lives in Beijing. The two met on Friday, May 21 in a New York hotel room. Wang wrote an open letter to the Dalai Lama dated May 5, requesting the online chat. 'For years, there have been only official statements about the issue of Tibet inside China,' the letter said. 'No doubt, it's hard for people to know the truth about Tibet.'

It is uncertain how many people inside China were able to read the Dalai Lama's tweets. Twitter is blocked in China, but the social networking site has become popular enough that thousands of Chinese have found ways around the controls. According to The Huffington Post, Wang's Twitter feed (where the comments were posted) had more than 8,000 followers that day.

The Dalai Lama remains a very sensitive issue for China. The Chinese government objected strongly when Barack Obama welcomed him to the White House in February of this year. China's official position is that Tibet has been a part of its territory for centuries. Many Tibetans, however, say the region was functionally independent for most of its history and

call the Dalai Lama their spiritual and political leader. He fled the region 51 years ago and now lives in Dharamsala, India.

You can see the full English-language text of ten questions and His Holiness' answers here: <http://www.dalailama.com/news/post/568-his-holiness-the-dalai-lama-tweets-with-the-chinese-people>

You can also email the Office of His Holiness the Dalai Lama with your own questions and comments:

ohhdl@dalailama.com

China's Shaolin temple in world heritage list

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Economic Times, India

BEIJING: The Shaolin temple, China's ancient Buddhist monastery and the home of martial art kung fu, has now become a UNESCO world heritage site.

Nestled in Mount Songshan of Central China's Henan province, the monument of Zen Buddhism was added to the World Heritage List during a meeting of UNESCO's World Heritage Committee in Brasilia, Brazil Sunday, China Daily reported.

The new addition became China's 39th site in the list which include 28 cultural sites and seven natural tourist spots in the country.

UNESCO said the historical architecture complex stands out for its great aesthetic beauty and its profound cultural connotations.

The complex is composed of 11 traditional structures, including the Shaolin temple, the Observatory, Songyang Academy, Taishi Towers and Zhongyue Temple.

With a history of more than 2,000 years, these monuments feature various architectural styles brimming with ancient Chinese culture.

They provide the world with a glimpse into ancient Chinese religion, philosophy, customs and scientific development, said Yang Huancheng, an expert of ancient architecture.

Shaolin temple's abbot Shi Yongxin said the UNESCO recognition was a privilege.

"For the monks, living in a world-recognised heritage site is a wonderful experience, but at the same time, our responsibility to protect the temple becomes even graver," he said.

"I'm also looking forward to the addition of Shaolin kung fu into UNESCO's intangible heritage list," Shi added

NPR - National Public Radio, USA

Beijing Finds Common Cause With Chinese Buddhists

by Louisa Lim

July 22, 2010

Listen to the Story: http://public.npr.org/anon.npr-mp3/npr/atc/2010/07/20100722_atc_07.mp3?dl=1

[Fourth of five parts]

Four years ago, eight senior monks, clad in scarlet-and-saffron-robos, filed in front of a golden Buddha and began chanting on stage in the eastern Chinese city of Hangzhou. It marked an important turning point in China's attitude toward religion.

This was the first World Buddhist Forum, attended by more than 1,000 monks, and held in China. Never before had the officially atheist country sponsored such a large religious conference.

The moment signaled Beijing's new proactive approach to religion and, in particular, its support for Buddhism, possibly as a counterweight to the explosion of Christianity in China.

Tensions still remain in Beijing's relationship to Tibetan Buddhism, particularly given believers' loyalty to their exiled spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama. He is viewed by the Chinese government as a "splittist," with the aim of dividing China.

But Chinese Buddhism is not seen to be politically problematic in this way.

Some academics estimate there are 20 million Buddhists in China, and Buddhism has been at the forefront of the changing role of religious institutions, particularly when it comes to charity.

*** A Pioneer In Buddhist Charity Work

Monks from Nanputuo Temple, a monastery with a thousand years of history in the southeastern coastal city of Xiamen, led the way. In 1994, they set up the country's first Buddhist philanthropic foundation, says the Venerable Zhengxin, an official with the foundation.

"This motivated other Buddhist organizations to take part in charitable work," he says.

The foundation is now one of the most developed religious funds in China, with annual audits, a newspaper and a magazine.

Much of its income comes from its 45,000 members, who each donate about a \$1.50 per month. One office worker, surnamed Lei, admits he joined as a result of peer pressure.

"A friend of mine was giving money to the fund," he says, "and I was influenced by him."

Donations are growing, as people have more disposable income: According to the foundation's own figures, donations grew by more than 11 percent in 2009 compared to the previous year. And the foundation is spending ever more as well, with total expenditures last year of almost \$1.75 million.

Over the past 16 years, Nanputuo's foundation has given out a total of about \$7 million in aid. That adds up to free medical aid for 210,000 people, 25 new schools and repairs for 67 other schools.

Another fund administrator, the Venerable Putuo, says local government officials choose which projects receive the money.

"Each project requires a survey, and we depend on [local officials from the] State Administration for Religious Affairs for that. They'll look at how much a place is suffering or the cost of medical equipment or whatever," she says. "Each project we've done in our 16-year history has been inextricably linked with the local government."

Such cooperation with religious institutions marks a significant advance from the Chinese Communist Party's recent turbulent history of religious intolerance.

Four decades ago during the Cultural Revolution, all religious worship was banned, including Buddhism. Temples were destroyed or turned into factories or storage facilities, precious relics were destroyed and monks were imprisoned, and in some cases even killed.

*** Cash-Strapped Local Governments Welcome Help

But today religious institutions around China are beginning to play a much larger role in aid work; the massive earthquake in Sichuan in 2008 was the turning point. Then, officials invited religious groups, including Buddhists, Christians and Catholics, to help in the aid effort.

At a local level, it's not uncommon for religious groups to operate medical clinics, build orphanages and donate money to the poor. Some religious charities are even contributing to fund public works projects, such as building roads and bridges.

Andre Laliberte of the University of Ottawa is researching Buddhist philanthropy in China.

"Local governments [that] are cash-strapped are only too happy to have donations from religious organizations [that] want to help them," says Laliberte.

But he says that work is happening in a very low-key way since "the [local governments] don't want to give credit, as that might increase the social capital of those institutions."

"It also looks bad for the state," he adds. "If it can't provide social services, then it becomes an issue of government legitimacy."

*** Temple, Local Economies Interconnected

One beneficiary of Nanputuo Temple foundation's largesse is a small, austere hospital for leprosy patients, situated next to a pig farm on the outskirts of Xiamen. It was originally located on this hilltop, away from residential districts, because of public fear of leprosy.

Some of the patients have lived at the facility for decades, abandoned by their families. The fund gives the hospital about \$3,000 a year. It's not much, but hospital director Chen Xichen says it makes a huge difference to patients.

"The foundation gave us money, electric fans and cookers, clothes, closets and beds," he says, gesturing at almost every single possession in one patient's room. "Sometimes I ask our patients what else they need, but they can never even think of anything else."

The economic function of Buddhist temples goes further still. Every year, at least 2 million visitors crowd into Nanputuo's courtyards.

The temple is a cash cow; its vegetarian restaurant caters to tens of thousands, and it has created business for sellers of incense and Buddhist trinkets.

Tourists hand over ticket fees of nearly \$900,000 a year. Some of that goes towards the temple's development and upkeep, but part of that revenue also goes to the local government, according to Li Xiangping from East China Normal University's Institute of Religion and Social Development.

"The development of the Buddhist economy is often interconnected with that of the local government economy, as they're driving each other," Li says. "The two sides may cooperate over the planning of tourist destinations and tourism revenues. This also helps build Buddhism's image."

In the past, money matters have caused disputes in the corridors where today Buddhist music is piped. In 1990s, a disagreement over the management of the restaurant at Nanputuo Temple culminated in a stand-off; militant monks held government officials hostage overnight, leading to a raid on the temple by special forces.

But today, the temple's relationship with the local government in economic terms is mutually beneficial.

*** Buddhism Promoted As Counterbalance

Academics such as Laliberte believe Beijing is also supporting Buddhism for another reason: to counterbalance the explosion of Christianity in China.

"I have reason to believe the Chinese government might be encouraging Buddhist institutions, simply because they're worried about the rapid spread of Christianity and Protestantism in particular," he says.

The government can't prevent demand for spiritual succor, Laliberte says, but adds:

"They can try to channel it and Buddhism is a good candidate. The infrastructure is there and Buddhist monks are willing to accept that role."

China's communist leaders are mobilizing all resources — including Buddhists — to build a "harmonious society," their latest watchword. As people grow richer, the temples are becoming more like multinational corporations, with their balance-sheets ballooning.

Their contributions to government coffers may not yet be huge, but they will surely increase over time. And China's pragmatic leaders are making sure the government is benefiting from the economic effects of this religious revival.

Pre-Buddhist Tibetan religious scriptures found

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LANZHOU, July 17 (Xinhua) -- Chinese specialists of Tibetan studies have discovered some well-preserved pre-Buddhist Tibetan religious scriptures in northwestern China's Gansu Province.

The Bon scriptures, handwritten in an ancient form of Tibetan script and bound into more than 500 books, were found in several Tibetan homes in Longnan City, said ethnic studies experts at Lanzhou University.

Judging from the characters, writing style and paper texture, the documents are about 1,000 years old and their content ranges from sutras to descriptions of ancient Tibetan rituals and customs.

Lanzhou University's ethnic studies center has established a special taskforce to study the documents. A university official said Saturday the results of the research were expected to be published before the end of the year.

The Bon religion prevailed in Tibet before the arrival of Buddhism. Its followers worshipped "natural spirits," like mountains and lakes.

In Tibetan, "Bon" means substance, implying Bon is a religion for all in the universe.

Editor: Wang Guanqun

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