

## GEOPOLITICS OF RELIGIOUS SOFT POWER POLICY BRIEF #4

# THE CHINESE STATE'S GLOBAL PROMOTION OF BUDDHISM

By Yoshiko Ashiwa and David L. Wank

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**The global promotion of Buddhism as a form of soft power by the Chinese state is unprecedented in the modern world. Recent efforts to incorporate Buddhism into Chinese foreign policy build on decades of collaboration between the Communist Party of China and Buddhist clerics through the state religious system. Under current President Xi Jinping, the Chinese state is directing more resources for Buddhism to serve the political and economic rise of China through religion and culture. Projecting Chinese Buddhism as soft and sharp—that is, state-controlled and targeted—power ultimately seeks to influence the societies and politics of Buddhist-majority countries, Western states, and Asian competitors to China.**

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Under Xi Jinping, the state religious system has become increasingly implicated in efforts to support the growing political and economic power of China abroad by adding religious overtones to China's existing portfolio of cultural and linguistic diplomacy.
- Beijing pursues a multifaceted and flexible approach to promoting Chinese Buddhism abroad, with its specific modalities varying depending on whether the target country is a Buddhist-majority nation, a Western state, or one of China's Asian competitors.
- The enduring efficacy of Beijing's promotion Chinese Buddhism in countries of strategic interest will depend on whether such efforts can remain sufficiently differentiated from perceived political interference from China.



This brief is a product of the Geopolitics of Religious Soft Power (GRSP) project, a multi-year, cross-disciplinary effort to systematically study state use of religion in foreign affairs.

*The conclusions and recommendations of this Berkley Center publication are solely those of its author(s) and do not reflect the views of the center, its leadership, or its other scholars.*

## INTRODUCTION

Since Xi Jinping became leader of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 2012, the Chinese state has been globally promoting Chinese Buddhism. The aim is not to spread belief in Buddhism as religion but rather to further the aspiration of the Communist Party of China (CPC) for China to be recognized as a country that has inherited a civilization in the modern world. This aspiration is expressed in the "China Dream," Xi's vision of China regaining the glory of the Tang dynasty (618 CE to 907 CE), the time when Buddhism from India was Sinicized into Chinese culture and flourished. Buddhism also underlies Xi's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). It overlaps with the historical passage of Buddhism from India to China, but now is the time to spread Buddhism from China to other Asian countries and beyond.

The global promotion of Buddhism reflects a view that the rise of a China as an economic and political power needs to be accompanied by cultural and religious power. Xi has emphasized that throughout history, the status and influence of China has depended not on military power or expansion but rather on the powerful appeal and attraction of Chinese culture.<sup>1</sup> He said, "The excellent Chinese traditional culture is the outstanding advantage of the Chinese nation and our deepest cultural soft power."<sup>2</sup>

While Xi sees Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism as foundations of Chinese civilization, he favors Buddhism to convey it in the modern world.<sup>3</sup> Buddhism is already a world religion, present as religion in many Asian countries and as religion and culture in Western countries. We see the Chinese state's global promotion of Buddhism as analogous to the historical rise of European global power accompanied by Christianity.

The key claim of this policy brief is that the Chinese state's global promotion of Buddhism operates as both soft power and sharp power.<sup>4</sup> We call it sharp power because

the operation occurs through the state system of religion to control religion and use it for the domestic and international aims of the CPC.<sup>5</sup> This system was created shortly after the 1949 founding of the PRC, and under Xi it has been actively using religion and culture to further the PRC's recognition as a great power.

It is instructive to point out that the PRC is the world's largest Buddhist country. It contains all three Buddhist traditions: Mahayana Buddhism practiced by Han Chinese, Theravada Buddhism practiced by the Dai people, and Vajrayana Buddhism practiced by Tibetans and Mongolians. In 2012, there were 33,000 Buddhist temples, 240,000 clerics, and 38 Buddhist seminaries in the PRC.<sup>6</sup> Now, possibly up to half a billion Chinese visit Buddhist temples as a custom to pray to the Buddha, bodhisattvas, and other deities for health and fortune, although few have taken vows as Buddhist devotees.

This brief has two sections. First, it surveys the origins and development of the state system of religion in the early 1950s until the current global promotion of Buddhism under Xi Jinping. Second, it examines the policies and strategies under Xi to promote Chinese Buddhism all over the world, extending beyond Buddhist communities and countries to Western countries, to influence the societies and politics of these countries as soft power and sharp power.

## BUDDHISM AND THE STATE RELIGIOUS SYSTEM IN THE PRC

Since 1949, the PRC has been ruled by the CPC, an atheist political party that forbids its members from believing in religion and predicts religion's demise. Nevertheless, the CPC has recognized the existence of five religions in the PRC since the founding of the country—Buddhism, Catholicism, Daoism, Islam, and Protestantism. This is because the CPC recognizes that the use of state power to

eliminate religion would be too divisive among the population. To control religious belief, the CPC has created a state system of institutions and organizations that mobilizes religions to work for aims defined by the CPC.<sup>7</sup>

Aspects of the state religious system predate the founding of the PRC. The scope of “religious freedom” in the PRC constitution began with discussions in the Republic of China, founded in 1912 as the first modern Chinese state.<sup>8</sup> The system’s global propagation of nationalistic forms of Chinese Buddhism as universal values and ethics was foreshadowed in the 1920s by Ven. Taixu, a famous advocate for the modern reform of Chinese Buddhism.<sup>9</sup> The operation of the system is part of the CPC’s united front, a strategy devised in the 1930s to identify and co-opt influential persons in non-CPC groups to work for CPC aims.<sup>10</sup>

The current system was founded in the early 1950s. Its key institution is patriotic religion, expressed in the slogan “love country, love religion.”<sup>11</sup> This basically means that clerics must obey the CPC and work for its goals. Another institution is the constitutional right of “religious freedom.” It protects the “religious belief” of individuals but not collective practices. Religious rituals and teachings are only allowed within temples, while the activities of foreign religious organizations in China are not permitted.

The system has three key organizational actors. The most powerful is the United Front Work Department (UFWD), the CPC organ that manages the party’s relations with non-party groups, including religious communities. It develops the CPC ideological position towards groups to determine if they are friends or enemies, so as to co-opt the former while isolating the latter.

The second actor is the State Administration of Religious Affairs (SARA), an organ of the government that turns CPC ideology into religious policy and supervises implementation.<sup>12</sup>

Third, is the Buddhist Association of China (BAC), composed of influential clerics, that adjusts state religious policies to Buddhism and ensures the compliance of clerics and devotees. The entire system is managed behind the scenes by the UFWD’s control of personnel appointments and communication channels.

The operation of the system since its founding can be divided into three periods. Below, we examine its development in each period regarding uses of Buddhism for international relations. This examination also illustrates the growing importance of religion to the CPC.

During the first period, from the early 1950s until the Cultural Revolution (1966), Buddhism was used for diplomacy with Asian Buddhist countries. The aim, described by Holmes Welch, an expert on Chinese Buddhism, was as follows: “In any Asian neighbor, whenever a segment of society like the sangha came to look to China as a model or fell under the domination of a pro-Chinese faction, it slightly increased the internal pressure on the government of that country to adopt a pro-Chinese foreign policy.”<sup>13</sup>

The UFWD, coordinating with the PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, devised strategies, while BAC clerics were the visible face of implementation. Strategies included lending Buddha relics and giving funds to rebuild temples in other countries, creating bilateral Buddhist friendship associations, and having BAC clerics take leadership in international Buddhist organizations.

The diplomacy’s effectiveness was limited, as many countries were anti-communist and did not recognize the PRC. The BAC formed friendship associations with only a few countries, while international organizations resisted BAC efforts to politicize them. For example, in 1961, the World Fellowship of Buddhists meeting in Phnom Penh refused the BAC request to expel the Taiwan delegation, prompting the BAC to walk out.<sup>14</sup>

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The second period is from 1979 to the early 2000s. It began with CPC re-recognition of religion after the Cultural Revolution and new market economy policies, and it ended when Buddhism had recovered and China's economy was among the world's largest. The revival of Buddhism helped persuade overseas Chinese businesspeople that the CPC was no longer following "leftist" ideology and that they were welcome to come worship and invest in the PRC.

Relic visits resumed to improve China's image in other countries after the violent suppression of the 1989 student movement and unease at China's growing economic influence. A relic visit to Taiwan in 2002 stressed the cultural unity of China, even while underscoring that Buddhism on the island came from the mainland. The BAC initiated the China-Korea-Japan Friendship Buddhist Exchange Association, showing that PRC was now an active center of Buddhism in the world.

The third period started in the early 2000s as the CPC came to see China as a world power and emphasized traditional Chinese culture. Chinese leader Hu Jintao, assuming office in 2002, used the Confucian term "harmony" to refer to his new approach to reduce economic inequalities in China and manage international relations.<sup>15</sup> The BAC embraced "harmony" by emphasizing Buddhism as cultural practices, such as tea ceremony and meditation for the people.

In 2006, the BAC reintroduced itself to global Buddhist society by convening the World Buddhist Forum, the first major international religious conference in the PRC. Under the theme of "harmonious society," it furthered dialogue among the Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana schools. Also, Chinese clerics began establishing branch temples abroad. In 2008 the Zhonghua (China) Temple was founded at Lumbini, Nepal, the birthplace of the Buddha, thereby establishing a Chinese presence at this most sacred Buddhist site. Its abbot, Ven. Yinshun, would become a BAC

vice president and key global promoter of Buddhism.

After the rise to power of Xi Jinping in 2012, the PRC religious system began working more actively to use religion and culture to support the growing political and economic power of China as expressed in the "China Dream."

## THE GLOBAL PROMOTION OF BUDDHISM UNDER XI JINPING

In 2015, the BAC Ninth National Congress formally recognized the global promotion of Chinese Buddhism as a key activity.<sup>16</sup> It called for Chinese Buddhism to "go out" (*zou chuqu*) of China to other countries in order to "tell the Chinese story well" to their peoples so they could realize China's accomplishments and peaceful intentions. These efforts were referred to as "soft power" (*ruan shili*), "public diplomacy" (*gongyi waijiao*), and "person-to-person diplomacy" (*renjian waijiao*) and linked to the BRI.<sup>17</sup>

The congress determined promotion was necessary because Chinese Buddhism was relatively weak around the world in terms of status and influence. This situation was attributed to earlier BAC strategies that focused only on Buddhist communities or occurred only inside China, like the World Buddhist Forum. The congress noted that Tibetan Buddhism and Theravada Buddhism were globally recognized "brands," while Japan and Taiwan had successfully spread their Buddhisms to many countries. It called for new approaches to promote Chinese Buddhism, including Buddhist cultural activities, joint research with foreign scholars, and overseas branches of Buddhist temples in China.

We see the BAC emphasizing three discursive forms of Buddhism in its promotion. One is "Sinicized Buddhism" (*Zhongguohua fojiao*). Sinicization has long referred to the historical process by which Buddhism from North India adapted to



China in the Tang dynasty and flourished. Now, the term has been politically adapted to refer to the incorporation of Chinese values, such as harmony, into Chinese Buddhism.

A second form is “Chinese Buddhism” (*Zhongguo fojiao*). This term previously referred to the coexistence of the Mahayana, Theravada, and Vajrayana traditions in China under the umbrella of BAC, but it now also refers to Chinese Buddhism as the center of all Buddhisms in the world.

The third is “Buddhist culture.” This refers to Chinese Buddhist-inspired values and practices that people can pursue as lifestyles and hobbies without questioning matters of belief or understanding Buddhist teachings.

The global promotion relies on clerics educated in the state-approved Buddhist academies in the PRC in the 1980s, after the Cultural Revolution. They understand CPC discourses and expectations for religion, as well as how to cooperate with the state religious system. Some are temple abbots and BAC members who actively cooperate with the CPC, such as the aforementioned Ven. Yinshun. Others go abroad to obtain resources, including funding for projects and enhanced recognition in China and overseas. For clerics abroad, cooperating with the system helps maintain links to the PRC.

BAC clerics recognize that their promotion of Chinese Buddhism abroad relies on their greater openness to religion and multiculturalism in other countries. This is evident in the comments of a BAC vice-president that branch temples are “overseas bases for the spread of Chinese Buddhism and Chinese culture, which is beneficial to enhancing the country’s cultural soft power.”<sup>18</sup> He expressed optimism for their establishment because of the different ideologies in other countries.

The strategies to promote Chinese Buddhism in a particular country reflect that country’s history of Buddhism, strategic importance to the CPC, and immigration from the

PRC. Below, we identify three categories of countries according to their attributes and the strategies deployed by the PRC religious system for each.

First are Asian countries with Buddhist majorities that are economically dependent on China, including Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, Mongolia, and Sri Lanka. Key strategies include:

1. establishing bilateral Buddhist friendship associations;
2. setting up Buddhist broadcasting networks;
3. organizing joint religious and cultural rituals, such as praying for peoples’ health during the coronavirus pandemic and commemorating historical Buddhist ties between the countries;
4. providing funds to restore temples;
5. inviting foreign Buddhists to participate in BAC-initiated regional Buddhist conferences, such as the South Seas Shenzhen Buddhist Round Table;
6. undertaking joint Buddhist scholarship and student exchanges;
7. engaging in charity and disaster relief projects; and
8. investing in Buddhist-themed BRI infrastructure to appeal to populations in these countries and enhance the position of their leaders.

Second are Western countries with recent histories of Buddhism and growing popular appreciation of Buddhist culture as Asian culture in daily life. In these countries, we see efforts to build Chinese Buddhist temples to further Buddhist cultural activities. These are especially visible in such countries as Australia and Canada with strong multiculturalism policies and sizable immigrant communities from the PRC, accounting for at least 3% of the population.

*Without well-considered strategies, the global promotion of Buddhism may trigger results that are contrary to CPC expectations.*

For Buddhists and Chinese tourists, these projects are sites for worship and pilgrimage, while to the general populations of these countries, they are presented as Chinese cultural theme parks. Notably, temple-building and Buddhist culture activities are not promoted in Buddhist-majority Asian countries, as these would offend populations that already have their long Buddhist traditions.

Third are strategies for Asian countries—India, Japan, Taiwan—that the CPC sees as geopolitical rivals and that the BAC views as competing for global status in Buddhism. In 2017, the Nanhai Buddhist Academy opened in the PRC, with strong state backing, to compete with India's recently revived Nalanda University as the world center of Buddhist teaching. The academy is a center for creating Buddhist culture and Sinicized Buddhism, as well as Buddhist friendships by inviting clerics from other Asian countries for study.

Regarding Japan, Chinese clerics and devotees are recovering the Shingon school of the Vajrayana tradition that disappeared in China but still exists in Japan. This will create an alternative Chinese Vajrayana school to Tibetan Buddhism within the PRC. Regarding Taiwan, Buddhist clerics undertake charity and cultural activities in other countries that may compete with those of Taiwan-based Buddhist organizations, such as Fo Guang Shan and the Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation.

What is the effectiveness of these strategies? First, many activities—such as conferences, rituals, and inviting people (clerics, politicians, ministers of culture) to the PRC—further the aim of the UFWD to develop ties with individuals who may become favorably disposed to the PRC.

Secondly, temple-building projects in other countries may bolster the status of the Chinese clerics associated with them in the eyes of host country societies and

governments. This can increase PRC-linked voices in the public sphere of these countries, offsetting those of Buddhists that the CPC considers competitors, such as the Dalai Lama.

Thirdly, giving resources to major Buddhist temples and schools can create dependencies and pro-China factions in Buddhist-majority countries. These factions may have influence in their polities to advance PRC interests, such as acknowledging the authority of Chinese Buddhism and silencing Buddhist opposition to BRI projects.

The future effectiveness of these strategies may rest on two tendencies of Chinese state promotion of Buddhism. One is the degree to which Sino-centric and nationalistic Chinese Buddhism appeals to the Buddhist and non-Buddhist populations of other countries. Second is the degree to which the populations and politicians of other countries come to view the promotion as politicizing and resist it.

Most recently, these two aspects are becoming more pronounced. In 2018, the CPC announced that the administrative functions of SARA would be merged into the UFWD. This signals the growing importance of religion to the CPC and its intention to more closely manage Chinese Buddhism in advancing national interests. In 2020, one of these interests has been using Buddhism to counter negative impressions of China due to the global COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>19</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

The above discussion has shown how the Chinese state's global promotion of Buddhism under Xi Jinping is an accretion of decades of CPC ideology towards religion and experience of working with Buddhist clerics through the state religious system designed to use religions for state purposes. In 2015, the global promotion of

Buddhism was clarified and expressed at a BAC congress, directing more state resources for Buddhism to serve the political and economic rise of China through religion and culture.

The global promotion of Chinese Buddhism as soft and sharp power is unprecedented in the modern world. The closest parallel is the Japanese military government's use of Buddhism in its colonial empire in the early twentieth century. This use sought to legitimate Japan's invasion of Asian Buddhist countries, but history shows that it caused strong anti-Japanese sentiments.<sup>20</sup>

The current Chinese state promotion of Buddhism is operating on a much vaster scale. An issue that the CPC will have to face is how Sinicized Buddhism representing Chinese great civilization will cooperate with other locally embedded Buddhist traditions in Asian countries, as well as Westernized Buddhism that seeks ecumenicism. Without well-considered strategies, the global promotion of Buddhism may trigger results that are contrary to CPC expectations.

## NOTES

1. See, for example, Xi Jinping's speech at the Forum on Literature and Art Work (October 15, 2014). Available at [www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-10/14/c\\_1116825558.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-10/14/c_1116825558.htm) [in Chinese].
2. Xi Jinping's speech at the National Conference on Propaganda and Ideological Work (August 20, 2013). Available at <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n/2013/0821/c64094-22636876.html> [in Chinese].
3. Confucianism's weak institutional basis and Daoism's character as indigenous Chinese religion are seen as limiting their capacity to represent Chinese civilization to the world. See, for example, Xi Jinping's speech at UNESCO Headquarters (March 27, 2014). Available at [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjdt\\_665385/zyjh\\_665391/t1142560.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/zyjh_665391/t1142560.shtml).
4. Christopher Walker, "What is 'Sharp Power'?" *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 3 (2018): 9–23.
5. The analysis and insights expressed in this brief draw from an ongoing research project and are, thus, tentative.
6. Ji Zhe, Gareth Fisher, and André Laliberté, eds., *Buddhism After Mao: Negotiations, Continuities, and Reinventions* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2019).
7. The exception is during the Cultural Revolution when the state encouraged the suppression of religion.
8. Yoshiko Ashiwa and David L. Wank, eds., *Making Religion, Making the State: The Politics of Religion in Modern China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).
9. Don A. Pittman, *Tai'xu's Reforms: Towards a Modern Chinese Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001).
10. Lyman Van Slyke, "The United Front in China," *Journal of Contemporary History* 5, no. 3 (1970): 119–135.
11. After the Cultural Revolution, the foundational document of Chinese religious policy is "Document 19: The Basic Viewpoint and Policy on the Religious Question during Our Country's Socialist Period" (CPC Central Committee, 1982). Available at [https://is.muni.cz/el/1421/jaro2011/KSCB023/um/24029748/Document\\_no.\\_19\\_1982.pdf](https://is.muni.cz/el/1421/jaro2011/KSCB023/um/24029748/Document_no._19_1982.pdf).
12. Until 1997, SARA was called the Religious Affairs Bureau. The name change reflected the heightened CPC concern regarding religion after the 1989 student movement and the growing wealth of society.
13. Holmes Welch, *Buddhism Under Mao* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), 169.
14. Welch, *Buddhism Under Mao*, 213–214.
15. In 2008, the CPC launched the Confucius Institutes, among China's first initiatives seen by the leadership as "soft power." Confucius Institutes have since become controversial in North America and Europe for interfering with academic freedom.
16. For a summary of the congress, see Chen Xingqiao, "The Significance, Bottlenecks, and Strategic Thinking of Chinese Buddhism Going Out," [Zhongguo fojiao zou chuqu de yiyi, pingjing ji qi zhanlue sikao] *Foxue yanjiu* (2015). Available at <http://www.chinabuddhism.com.cn/yj/2015-07-21/9189.html>.
17. For the introduction of the soft power concept into Chinese policy circles see Hongyi Lai, "Introduction: The Soft Power Concept and a Rising China," in *China's Soft Power and International Relations*, ed. Hongyi Lai and Yiyi Lu (London: Routledge, 2012), 1–20.
18. Zhou Fang, "Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference National Committee member Ven. Juexing: Chinese Buddhism Should 'Go Out,'" [Quanguo zhengxie weiyuan juexing fashi: zhongguo fojiao ying zou chuqu] *Zhongguo Minzu Bao* (March 5, 2014). Available at [www.cssn.cn/zjx/zjx\\_zjsj/201403/t20140305\\_1020038.shtml](http://www.cssn.cn/zjx/zjx_zjsj/201403/t20140305_1020038.shtml).
19. Yoshiko Ashiwa and David Wank. "Special Report: COVID-19 Impacts, Chinese Buddhism, State Control, and Soft Power," *Religion and Diplomacy* (April 20, 2020). Available at <https://religionanddiplomacy.org.uk/2020/04/20/special-report-impact-of-covid-19-on-chinese-buddhism-and-soft-power/>.
20. Nam-Lin Hur, "The Sōtō Sect and Japanese Military Imperialism in Korea," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 26, no. 1–2 (1999):107–134.

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## ABOUT THE PROJECT

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The Geopolitics of Religious Soft Power (GRSP) project represents a multi-year, cross-disciplinary effort to systematically study state use of religion in foreign affairs. Through a global comparison of varying motivations, strategies, and practices associated with the deployment of religious soft power, project research aims to reveal patterns, trends, and outcomes that will enhance our understanding of religion's role in contemporary geopolitics.

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