
MONASTIC POLITICS AND THE LOCAL STATE IN CHINA: AUTHORITY AND AUTONOMY IN AN ETHNICALLY TIBETAN PREFECTURE

Ben Hillman

On a November morning in 2003, several officials from the county bureau of ethnic and religious affairs paid a visit to the local Tibetan Buddhist monastery. They were there to enforce a government ruling demanding the reinstatement of an expelled lama. Angered by this interference in their affairs, some monks attacked the county officials with sticks and clubs. Other monks came to the aid of the officials and fights broke out across the monastery, forcing the monastery's abbot to flee. The conflict among the monks spilled out into the town and locals joined the brawls. But instead of responding harshly to the melee, local Party and government leaders adopted a conciliatory approach.

This article investigates the origins of the conflict and the changing nature of relations between the monastery and the local government since the revival of religious institutions in the 1980s. The analysis touches upon a number of themes in contemporary Chinese politics and society, including the state's relations with non-state institutions and the increasing significance of religion and ethnic identities in local society, in an effort to illuminate the complexity of forces driving political change in China today.

Religion and Religious Institutions in China

One of the most salient features of change in post-Communist China has been the revival of pre-Communist forms of social organization. With the state's moral authority in decline, many traditional forms of association have reemerged to provide communities with alternative institutions of social and economic cooperation and interpretive frameworks for culturally shared symbols and collective values.¹ The search for new forms of cooperation and social meaning

¹ See Jun Jing, *Temple of Memories, History, Power and Morality in a Chinese Village* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).

underlies the robust revival of religious activity across China in recent years. Evidence of the renewed significance of religion can be seen in the revival of local festivals, the building of temples, the renovation of sacred sites and the increasing numbers of worshipers at churches, mosques and temples.² In rural China in particular, temple and religious associations have come to play an increasingly prominent role in community life. One study showed how a temple association in Fujian took over from the village administration in funding and organizing road-building and other rural infrastructure.³ In another village a religious revival enabled village leaders to attract funds from the overseas Chinese community, leading to a shift in power structures within the village.⁴ Similarly, in a formerly nominally Muslim Hui village in southwest China, the rehabilitated mosque became a mechanism for allocating material resources, a focal point for collective identities, and an alternative locus of political power within the village.⁵ In a wealthy urban part of Fujian Province, the local chapter of the China Buddhist Association, a semi-government agency, was increasingly penetrated by influential members of the Buddhist community who were able to use the association to organize members, negotiate with the local government and advance their collective interests.⁶

But despite the growing number of case studies about the salience of religious organizations in China, we still know very little about how religious authorities interact with state institutions at the local level. Do religious organizations present a challenge to local Party authority, as has been argued by a

² According to the publication *Zongjiao tuanti* (Religious Groups), in 2003 China was home to 90.5 million Mahayana (Han) Buddhists, 19 million Muslims, 15 million Protestants, 7.6 million Tibetan Buddhists, 4 million Catholics, 3 million Daoists and 2 million Theravada Buddhists. For more details on China's religious revival in general see Donald McInnis, *Religion in China Today: Policy and Practice* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1989); Peng Yao, "Zhongguo zongjiao de xin qushi" (New Trends of Religion in China), *Shijie zongjiao yanjiu* (Studies in World Religions) (March 1995), pp. 19-23; and Arthur Waldron, "Religious Revivals in Communist China", *Orbis*, Vol. 42, No. 2 (Spring 1998), pp. 323-32.

³ Lily Lee Tsai, "Cadres, Temple and Lineage Institutions, and Governance in Rural China", *The China Journal*, No. 48 (July 2002), pp. 1-27.

⁴ Irene Eng and Yi-min Lin, "Religious Festivities, Communal Rivalry, and Restructuring of Authority Relations in Rural Chaozhou, Southeast China", *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 61, No. 4 (2002), pp. 1259-85.

⁵ Ben Hillman, "The Rise of the Community in Rural China: Village Politics, Cultural Identity and Religious Revival in a Hui Hamlet", *The China Journal*, No. 51 (January 2004), pp. 27-52.

⁶ Yoshiko Ashiwa and David Wank, "The Politics of China's Buddhist Revival: Government, Association, and Temple", published in Japanese as "Bukyou Fukou no Seiji Gakku: Kyogo suru Kikou to Seitousei", in M. Hishida (ed.), *Gendai chūgoku ni okeru kokka to shakai* (State and Society in Contemporary China) (Tokyo University Press, 2000).

central Party circular?⁷ Are religious organizations recapturing the moral authority that the Communist Party has lost? In what ways are religious organizations and the state able to co-opt one another? This study addresses these questions by exploring the changing relationship since the 1990s between leaders of a Tibetan Buddhist Monastery and local government officials in a remote western region. It draws on two years of fieldwork in southwest China and is based on participant observation, more than 40 in-depth interviews with government and religious officials, and many informal discussions with local Tibetan Buddhist monks.

The Monastery

S Monastery is located in a province outside the Tibetan Autonomous Region in a prefecture that contains a sizable Tibetan population.⁸ I will not reveal its exact location in order to protect the identities of those involved. However, it can be noted that the monastery is situated in a region that has no history of serious discord between the local Tibetan population and the Chinese state in either the pre-Communist or Communist eras. The monastery was founded in 1679 during the reign of the Fifth Dalai Lama, and when the Communists brought their revolution to the area in 1950, the monastery was home to approximately 1300 monks.⁹ Communist leaders confiscated monastery lands and many of the monks were forced to join land reform work teams or return to their villages. The Communists enlisted the support of servant monks who had been treated badly under the old monastic hierarchy and, like poor peasants in the countryside, these monks made eager new leaders of the Communist-organized work teams. Following the 1959 uprising in Lhasa, local authorities received instructions to dismantle the monastery as a religious institution. This was followed by two ideologically driven decades of repression of religious activity and the forced secularization of monks. During the Cultural Revolution, the monastery was completely demolished by Red Guards. In this period monasticism was smashed and the monks who had remained there were forced to undergo “re-education”.

After Mao’s death in 1976, Beijing’s new reformers recognized that the Cultural Revolution’s assault on religion and traditional values had been counter-productive, and this realization paved the way for a new era of religious tolerance

⁷ James Miles, *The Legacy of Tiananmen: China in Disarray* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), p. 181.

⁸ Tibet is a somewhat ambiguous entity. Today it usually refers to the Tibetan Autonomous Region, although it is sometimes used in reference to the much larger area in which ethnic Tibetans live, incorporating parts of modern-day Qinghai, Gansu, Sichuan and Yunnan Provinces (ethnographic Tibet). S Monastery is located in one of these provinces outside of the TAR.

⁹ County records show 1226 monks in residence in 1901. See also Joseph Rock, *The Ancient Na-khi of Southwest China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1947), p. 249.

and revival. In 1983 S monastery lay in ruins with a population of only 15 monks, mostly old men who served as “caretakers”, but reconstruction of the monastery was begun with compensation from the government and help from the local population. Over the next few years, the number of monks admitted to the monastery grew steadily to more than 400 in 1994 and over 700 by 2002. S Monastery’s rejuvenation is not unique—across China today there are more than 100,000 practicing Tibetan monks.¹⁰

The growth of the monastery mirrored the growth in religious activity in local communities. This was made possible not just by a more tolerant political environment but importantly also by increases in local incomes during China’s market reform period. Some households spent their increased income on rebuilding *stupas* (Buddhist shrines) and renovating sacred sites. For others, increased wealth meant that they could afford to send a son into the monastery, a great honour for a Tibetan farming family. As the number of monks in the monastery increased, villagers helped to rebuild the monks’ quarters, and the increasing number of monks meant that religious services were more readily available to the community. Villagers began to demand these services at an increasing rate. Monks relate that they do not have time to attend to all the requests they receive. Typical duties that they perform in the villages include officiating at funerals, saying prayers for the sick and the newborn, and offering blessings to new enterprises. They are regularly consulted on the identification of auspicious dates for the planting of crops or for the transfer of cattle to different pastures.

While central Party policy paved the way for the monastery’s revival, county government leaders retained regulatory control. The Religious and Minority Affairs Bureau (RMAB)¹¹ rehabilitated the monastery’s administration in 1984 by establishing a Monastery Management Committee (in Chinese, *Siguanhui*). It was composed of senior monks under the supervision of the government’s RMAB and the Party’s United Front Work Department (UFWD). The Monastery Management Committee was in charge of appointments, reconstruction and religious education, the latter posing particular challenges after a generation-long hiatus in training clergy. It also controlled all of the monastery’s funds, including monies raised from ritual services, but monks were allowed to keep the individual donations that they received from worshipers. This amounted to very little, so the management committee required families to sign guarantees of livelihood support before admitting their sons to the clergy. Unlike pre-revolutionary times when the monastery supported its clergy through a feudal

¹⁰ Matthew Kapstein has used reliable data to arrive at an approximate figure of 120,000. That means that there are now more Tibetan *monks* in China than there are *Tibetans* in exile. See Kapstein’s “A Thorn in the Dragon’s Side: Tibetan Buddhist Culture in China”, in Morris Rosabi (ed.), *Governing China’s Ethnic Frontiers* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004), p. 230.

¹¹ This is known as the Religious Affairs Bureau in non-ethnic-minority regions.

system of land rents, the new generation of monks had to be self-supporting. Importantly, the RMAB did not follow its counterpart in the Tibetan Autonomous Region in enforcing the law that prohibited the admission of monks below the age of eighteen.¹² Self-financing and the admission of monks as young as six or seven years old allowed for a rapid expansion of the ranks.

Monastic Politics Since the 1990s

The monastery's revival and relations with the county government proceeded without serious conflict in the first part of the 1990s. While government officials kept a close eye on monastic affairs, the old monks were happy that their monastery had been rejuvenated and that new recruits could follow in their footsteps. There were also many government officials, particularly ethnic Tibetans, who were pleased to see the monastery active once again. For them, it represented the sophistication of Tibetan culture, and its expansion served to bolster pride in local identity. According to Tibetan historian Tsering Shakya, "Buddhism had always been seen as the core of Tibetan identity, and its clergy the epitome of 'Tibetanness'".¹³ The increasing assertion of ethnic identity has become commonplace in post-Communist China. While expressions of local identity were frowned upon by the nation-building Communist Party from the 1950s through the 1970s, contemporary reformers understand that, as localities jostle for investment and competitive advantage, it is only natural that they assert their distinctive identities.

The centrality of S monastery in the expression of local ethnic identity underlay a growing complexity in relations between the clergy and local political leaders and a shift in the balance of power between them. Previously, the county government had been able to exert a strong influence over the monastery by stacking the Monastery Management Committee with pro-government clergy. The county Party committee had rewarded leading monks who accommodated themselves to the government in the 1960s and 1970s with salaried posts in the county People's Congress and Political Consultative Committee.¹⁴ Other positions with government salaries and minimal work commitments were

¹² Tibet Autonomous Region monasteries had also been allowed to recruit child monks prior to the 1987–88 protests. The new rule was a punishment for the disturbances. For more details on monasticism in the TAR during this period see Melvyn Goldstein, "The Revival of Monastic Life in Drepung Monastery", in Melvyn Goldstein and Matthew Kapstein, *Buddhism in Contemporary China: Religious Revival and Cultural Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), pp. 1–45.

¹³ Tsering Shakya, *Dragon in the Land of Snows: A History of Modern Tibet Since 1947*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 419.

¹⁴ During this period monks were forced to undergo 'socialist education' and were strongly encouraged by Party activists to voluntarily turn in their robes and adopt a secular lifestyle. For more on this, see Melvyn Goldstein, "The Revival of Monastic Life".

available in the local branch of the China Buddhist Association, a semi-autonomous body that works with the RMAB to regulate Buddhist institutions and activities.¹⁵ The head of the prefecture-level branch had married twice and had a reputation for drinking and gambling with government officials.

However, a new generation of monks was emerging who wanted to reclaim the monastery from the “political lamas” (*zhengzhi lama*).¹⁶ This new generation was increasingly confident of the respect and authority that they enjoyed in the community. Tensions soon emerged between the new generation of monks and the political lamas over the use of funds that were flowing into the monastery from increasingly prosperous worshipers and tourists. The younger monks wanted the money to be spent on religious education, to send them to study at other monasteries in China and abroad, and to invite teachers from outside.¹⁷ As educational institutions, Tibetan monasteries operate at different levels. If compared with a secular system, S Monastery offers training approximating to high-school standard. Monks seeking more advanced education need to enroll at other monasteries. Very few monks undertake such advanced studies and those who do so join an elite group of monastic scholars and administrators. But because the monasteries in Tibet that provide advanced education and teachers were known to be hotbeds of anti-Party and anti-Chinese sentiment, the county government pressured the “political lamas” to resist the demands for new educational linkages.

Instead, county government leaders advocated investing available funds in the beautification and modernization of the monastery’s facilities. The area was now officially open to tourism, and under the leadership of a new prefectural governor, local government agencies had begun promoting Tibetan culture to woo visitors. (The prefecture in China is the level of government above the

¹⁵ The China Buddhist Association (*Zhongguo Fojiao Xiehui*) is one of eight formally sanctioned religious associations in China. The others represent various other religions.

¹⁶ In Chinese, the Tibetan title “lama” is often used interchangeably with the common word for monk, *heshan*, but there is an important distinction. A lama is a spiritual teacher or guru who attains monastic rank through advanced study of Buddhist philosophy, and is usually recognized as an incarnation. Monks, however, are not educated to this level (many are illiterate) and carry out other tasks in the monastery. The lamas also learn prayers and rituals for officiating at ceremonies. Because of the centrality of lamas and the hierarchical nature of monastic life, the Buddhism practiced by Tibetans, Mongols and other groups such as the Naxi and Pumi is often referred to as Lamaism.

¹⁷ The main centers of learning can be found within larger monasteries such as Labrang, but independent centers have sprung up across ethnographic Tibet. The largest of these is the remote Higher Buddhist Studies Institute at Serthar Monastery in western Sichuan founded by Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok in 1980. The institute had 9,300 residents in 2000 before provincial authorities cracked down on its expansion and enforced a student quota of 1,400 (Matthew Kapstein, “A Thorn in the Dragon’s Side”, and various media).

county.)¹⁸ At the heart of the governor's development strategy was a plan to make the region a more convenient place than Lhasa for Chinese tourists from the eastern seaboard to "experience" Tibet. As the crown jewel of the area's Tibetanness, the monastery had become the first stop on the tourists' itinerary.

Initially, to pay for cleaning and other administrative expenses, the Monastery Management Committee had begun charging a token entry fee of two *jiao* (US\$0.08). As the number of tourists expanded, however, the cash-poor county government began to realize the monastery's earning potential. In 1996, the RMAB pressured the Monastery Management Committee to increase the ticket price by ten times, to two yuan (US\$0.30), and then set up its own ticket office to collect the fees. The county appropriated half of this money and gave the other half to the Monastery Management Committee. In 1998 the entrance fee was raised to ten yuan (US\$1.20), and by 2000 the county government share of this revenue was estimated at over 2,500,000 yuan (US\$350,000), a valuable source of off-budget revenue for the cash-strapped county.¹⁹

Many of the younger generation of monks were disgruntled by the county's appropriation of the funds and assumed (probably correctly) that Monastery Management Committee officials had been bought off. Members of the RMAB whose job was to report on internal politics in the monastery relayed the disquiet to county Party officials. The county subsequently announced that it was re-investing the gate takings in the monastery's facilities and was seeking additional funds for a series of construction projects, including a new car park and a gilded monastery temple rooftop. A number of county bureaus used the opportunity to lobby higher levels to raise more funds, and the tourism bureau eventually succeeded. According to one county official, the policy was designed to appease the monks while simultaneously expanding capacity for growth in tourism.

Monastic Politics and Factional Rivalry

As the monastery continued to grow in the latter half of the 1990s, the competition for influence and control over resources also increased. When monks enter the monastery, they live within a residential unit called a *khangtsen*. *Khangtsens* are organized along geographical lines; sometimes large villages have their own *khangtsen* at the monastery, but more often than not a *khangtsen* represents a township-sized area. The *khangtsens* fund themselves through donations from pilgrims and benefactors from their home regions, but they also compete over access to the larger monastery's resources by seeking to place lamas in the Monastery Management Committee and in the coveted position of

¹⁸ The prefecture serves as an agent of the province in supervising policy implementation carried out by the county. While the county is responsible for most local political decision-making, this prefecture government continues to play a leading role in regional economic development planning.

¹⁹ Source: S County government. Because the area is a designated ethnic minority region, fiscal transfers provide for 80 per cent of local government expenses.

abbot, chief of the monastery's administrative affairs and director of the Monastery Management Committee. The abbot serves a maximum six-year term, and his office functions like an executive, with three minister-like advisors independent of the Monastery Management Committee: these are the *Gego* (head of discipline), the *Umdze* (head of prayer sessions) and the *Lama Shunglenba* (head of studies). Only a lama who has passed the *geshe* (in Chinese, *gexi*, Tibetan Buddhism's equivalent of a doctorate) is eligible to become abbot, and at S Monastery only 11 lamas held this qualification.²⁰

The abbot can recommend monks for appointment to the People's Political Consultative Committee and to the People's Congress at the county and prefecture.²¹ These jobs are largely ceremonial and entail very few responsibilities, but come with comfortable salaries and access to influence beyond the walls of the monastery.²² The abbot is also a key figure in the identification of *tulkus* (incarnate lamas, known as *huofo* or "Living Buddhas" in Chinese). Identification as a *tulku* provides status and influence to talented and ambitious monks.

The abbot's power is fortified by the independent fortune that he can amass by blessing visitors to the monastery.²³ The largest donors are wealthy Buddhist entrepreneurs, most of whom are Tibetan, but an increasing number of donors come from other parts of China and even from Taiwan. A second source of income comes to the abbot from the increasing number of tourists and pilgrims from other parts of the country. Tourists are so impressed by "privileged" access to a "high lama" that they frequently leave donations of several hundred yuan. When one member of a tour group sets this precedent, the others typically follow. A former abbot (1996–2001) actually gave commissions to guides who brought groups of free-spending tourists to him.²⁴ He then distributed part of this largesse

²⁰ The *geshe* examination consists of several grueling days of written and verbal tests and can only be undertaken at one of the main monasteries in Lhasa. For more details on the *geshe* and the system of authority within Tibetan monasteries, see Martin A. Mills, *Identity, Ritual and State in Tibetan Buddhism: The Foundations of Authority in Gelukpa Monasticism* (London: Routledge, 2003).

²¹ According to *Beijing Review* (19–25 August 1996) p. 21, in the Tibetan Autonomous Region representatives of religious groups occupied 615 such positions at the regional (provincial) level of government and below.

²² Such behavior is not necessarily frowned upon by Buddhists, because financial support is difficult to maintain. In fact, Tibetan monks have a long history of engaging in trade and business activities outside the monastery.

²³ As is the Tibetan custom, the abbot would give visitors a string pendant as a symbol of his blessing. Although the abbot was not a *tulku*, one tour guide explained that the tourists did not know any better—they assumed he was a great holy man because of his impressive offices and because the guides encouraged the mystique.

²⁴ Interviews with tour guides from three companies in June 2004.

among the members of his *khangtsen* and on *khangtsen* facilities, earning him popularity in those quarters but fueling jealousies in others. Estimates put the abbot's annual income at 2–4 million yuan (US\$250,000–\$500,000).²⁵

While tensions between *khangtsens* and the monastery elite can best be understood as a competition over resources, internal conflicts are often expressed in theological terms. Monastic elites invoked differences in belief and doctrine to gain leverage in their factional struggles. Ever since the late seventeenth century, the *khangtsens* have been divided into two factions, one of which advocates, and the other of which opposes, worship of the controversial Tibetan deity Dorje Shugden.²⁶ Shugden worship dates back to the fifth Dalai Lama (1617–82), who strove to unite Tibetan Buddhist sects under one banner. Drakpa Gyaltsen, abbot of the great Drepung Monastery in Lhasa, saw this as a threat to the doctrinal purity of the dominant Yellow Hat sect and plotted a rebellion against the Dalai Lama. When the plot was uncovered, the Dalai Lama sentenced the abbot to death, but followers believe that his spirit became Dorje Shugden, or “Powerful Thunderbolt”, who protects the Yellow Hats from beyond.²⁷ Today this Tibetan deity is frequently depicted as a ferocious warrior wearing a necklace of human skulls and riding a snow lion through a sea of boiling blood, a figure who promises great rewards to his followers and painful retribution to his detractors. Tibetan Buddhists are split between those who see Shugden as an important protector of the Yellow Hats sect and those who see him as a superstitious distraction from Buddhism's central teachings.

In 1996 the current Dalai Lama issued a decree effectively banning worship of Shugden.²⁸ Tibetan Buddhists everywhere were forced to take a position on the

²⁵ Estimates from monks and local government officials during interviews in March 2004. This includes donations from tourists, pilgrims, local businesses and overseas Buddhist associations. While not all of this money can be considered income *per se*, the abbot has discretion over its use.

²⁶ Shugden is sometimes also transliterated as “Shungden” and is known to Tibetans by various names including “Jachen” and “Derge”.

²⁷ According to legend, all manner of calamities befell the Tibetan world after his death and only the most elaborate of rituals could suppress his vengeful spirit. Over the centuries since, the spirit of Dorje Shugden has been invoked by Yellow Hat leaders to suppress the Nyingma and Kagyu sects. See Donald Lopez, *Prisoners of Shangri-La: Tibetan Buddhism and the West* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

²⁸ The ban extended to office holders in his administration and effectively excommunicated ordinary worshipers who continued to propitiate the spirit. This was followed by a crackdown in several of the main Tibetan monasteries in India. In February 1997 a senior lama close to the Dalai Lama and two of his pupils were slain in a ritual-style killing. The lama was a respected scholar and head of the Buddhist School of Dialectics in Dharamsala and had served as the Dalai Lama's liaison with the Nyingmapas, the sect with which Shugden permits no compromise. No charges were laid but it was widely believed to be an act of retribution by Shugden fanatics. On the Shugden conflict generally, see Donald Lopez, *Prisoners of Shangri-La*, especially pp. 188–96. On the murders, see Tony Clifton,

issue. Under the leadership of senior lamas, S monastery divided more clearly into pro- and anti-Shugden factions. Three *khangtsens* favored the continued worship of Shugden, while eight were opposed, but the combined population of the three *khangtsens* was larger than the eight. The repercussions of this dispute extend beyond the monastery walls into sensitive domains of national politics. The Dalai Lama had opposed Shugden worship because its exclusivity frustrated his efforts at forging a pan-Tibetan identity,²⁹ but the Shugden controversy provides the Chinese government with an opportunity to launch a counterattack. Government spokespeople have claimed that, unlike in the Tibetan communities in exile under the rule of the Dalai Lama who have been forbidden to worship Shugden, Shugden worshipers in China can enjoy genuine freedom of religious practice.³⁰

According to one senior lama from Sichuan, the Chinese government naturally allies itself with the Shugden supporters, not just to undermine the Dalai Lama, but because most Shugden worshippers come from Eastern Tibet, from areas that were only ever loosely under Lhasa's jurisdiction and are today integrated into the Chinese provinces of Sichuan and Yunnan.³¹ Monks who had traveled across these areas note that the central government has allocated a disproportionate amount of funds since 1996 to pro-Shugden monasteries to assist them with construction and renovations.³² Evidence of local government favoritism toward the pro-Shugden faction began to emerge at S Monastery in 2003 when monks applied for permission to undertake studies in India. Despite equal numbers of applications from all *khangtsens*, of the 12 monks who were issued travel documents, only one was from an anti-Shugden *khangtsen*. Similarly, in 2004, one of the monastery's smallest and (previously) poorest *khangtsens* began to build an elaborate new prayer room and residence for its handful of members. Financial support had been obtained from Beijing through a network of pro-Shugden lamas with access to officials at the highest level.³³

"Did an Obscure Tibetan Sect Murder Three Monks Close to the Dalai Lama?", *Newsweek*, 28 April 1997.

²⁹ The specter of Shugden haunts the fourteenth Dalai Lama's political project just as it hindered the political vision of his fifth incarnation more than 300 years earlier.

³⁰ See, for example, Vol. 7, No. 6 of the magazine *China's Tibet*, in which an article by Wei She ridicules the Dalai Lama's religious intolerance of an "innocent guardian of Tibetan Buddhist doctrine".

³¹ Interview August, 2004, and Donald Lopez, *Prisoners of Shangri-La*, pp. 196-200.

³² Examples are the Kumbum and Labrang monasteries. See "Holiday Resort", *The Economist*, 13 April 1996, p. 32.

³³ Interviews with monks, August 2004 and April 2005.

S monastery's abbot in 1996 was from a pro-Shugden *khangtsen*. When he retired from his duties in 2001, the anti-Shugden coalition hoped he would be replaced with one of their own. But the anti-Shugden *Geshe*³⁴ were too old and the only monk to have obtained the qualification recently was a Shugden propitiator. The Monastery Management Committee hoped that, being a young and energetic lama of the new generation, he would be popular across factions. The abbot surprised everyone, however, when, contrary to the policy of his predecessor, he overtly encouraged Shugden worship. He caused a stir in the monastery by arranging for a statue of Shugden to be hidden behind the display of a newly commissioned *thangka* (Buddhist mural) of the Future Buddha. Graffiti sprang up in the monastery attacking the abbot and Shugden. One inscription read, "Don't keep pigs in your kitchen", meaning that Shugden was not clean and should not be associated with Tibetan Buddhism. Pro-Shugden monks retaliated by leaving 'reminders' of the deity in sacred places associated with Tsongkhapa, the revered founder of the Yellow Hat sect.

Monastic Factionalism and Escalating Conflict

As the monastery grew, conflicts between the factions emerged with greater frequency and intensity. In 2001 representatives from an anti-Shugden *khangtsen* complained to the RMAB (not to the Monastery Management Committee, of which the abbot was chair) about the increasing amount of tourist traffic along the road adjacent to their quarters, and asked that the road be sealed off. When officials consulted the (pro-Shugden) abbot, he objected because he traveled frequently by car and used the road to access his own residence.

The anti-Shugden *khangtsen* tried another approach. As part of China's Great Western Development strategy since 2000, local governments were tasked with improving rural infrastructure and "modernizing" villages.³⁵ One important aspect of this program was the building of public toilets.³⁶ Employing the state's development discourse, the monks drew up plans for a public toilet that would symbolize the joint modernization goals of the monastery and the government, and would be useful for the many tourists walking around the monastery. Officials at the RMAB thought it was an excellent idea. But the toilet facilities were positioned to obstruct the road that the monks had wanted blocked!

³⁴ *Geshe* becomes a title for those lamas who have attained the qualification.

³⁵ See the articles in "China's Campaign to 'Open up the West': National, Provincial and Local Perspectives", special issue of *The China Quarterly*, No. 178 (June 2004).

³⁶ Officials in several township governments told me in 2003 that they were under increasing pressure to ensure that every village in their jurisdiction had a concrete public toilet. See also the case of a model village that arranged for each household to build a toilet before President Jiang Zemin made an inspection tour, in Chen Guidi and Chun Tao, *Zhongguo nongmin diaocha* (An Investigation into the Chinese Peasantry) (Beijing: Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe, 2004).

Monks from the abbot's pro-Shugden *khangtsen* were furious when the toilets went up in front of their compound.³⁷ Senior figures among them complained to the county government, and a work crew was immediately organized to demolish the facility, demonstrating the superior influence of the pro-Shugden faction. But this heavy-handed intervention sparked anger among the anti-Shugden group. Some of its members decided to launch a mass protest outside the county government offices. The second-ranking lama in the *khangtsen* discouraged them and said it was more appropriate to send a group of representatives. Lama T was a "political lama" who not only enjoyed good relations with officials in the county and prefecture governments but was a member of a tiny minority in the *khangtsen* who worshiped Shugden. His *khangtsen* colleagues suspected that he was undermining their interests from within.

When the monks finally acquiesced in Lama T's alternative plan to send a small group of representatives to protest at the county government headquarters, he himself then declined to participate. Instead, he chose to avoid the brewing conflict between his fellow monks and the secular authorities by taking a sabbatical to Lhasa. In his absence, an ambitious rival led his disgruntled colleagues to expel the lama from their *khangtsen*. According to monastic regulations, a monk cannot belong to a monastery without belonging to one of its *khangtsens*, and so his name was removed from the *khangtsen* registry and then from the central registry kept by the abbot, completing his excommunication.

When Lama T heard what had happened, he rushed back from Lhasa, but *khangtsen* officials would not reinstate him. Lama T immediately besought contacts in the local Party and government to support him. But while he had built good relations with local officials over the years by supporting government policies, not all local officials in positions of influence were in agreement over how to deal with this potentially explosive issue. Local policy was still evolving in reaction to developments at the monastery, and political leaders were groping for ways to deal with newly powerful lamas and their factions, many of whom had strong ties to influential officials at various levels in the state hierarchy and to members of the local business elite. Several senior county leaders had begun their careers when monasteries were considered remnants of a feudal past and were accustomed to authoritarian methods of regulating religion. Many of them resented the new authority that lamas enjoyed. These officials were well aware of the popular local saying, "a month of talking by a government cadre is not worth one word uttered by a lama". Some even saw the monastery as a direct threat to the local state's capacity to govern, influencing, for example, the way villagers voted in village elections.³⁸ But there were also a number of government officials

³⁷ Not accustomed to modern sewerage systems, Tibetans prefer to keep such amenities a long distance from their living quarters.

³⁸ Interview with officials in the county Civil Affairs Bureau, the agency responsible for implementing and administering village elections (March 2004).

who recognized that the monastery was revered by an increasingly devout Tibetan Buddhist community. Many of these officials were Buddhists themselves. Not surprisingly, this latter group of officials tended to be ethnic Tibetans, while the former group was largely comprised of officials from other ethnic groups, of which some, but not all, were Han. Nevertheless, in this Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, key positions were occupied by ethnic Tibetans, and unless instability reached a level that alerted Beijing, local officials would determine the political response.

Despite differences of opinion over Lama T's predicament, a number of county and prefecture officials of both persuasions supported his campaign for reinstatement. After all, it made sense to have pro-government lamas in senior positions at the monastery. They enlisted the support of the head of the local chapter of the Buddhist Association, a weak front organization with only three staff on government salaries.³⁹ The head asked the abbot to intervene on Lama T's behalf, but the abbot explained that, while he sympathized, the *khangtsen* had followed monastic procedure strictly and that it was his duty to uphold procedural integrity. The officials then consulted the newly appointed county Party secretary, a Tibetan, who was nervous about further intervention into the conflict. He suggested that instructions would need to come from "higher up". Following this "suggestion", Lama T's government supporters assisted him financially in a trip to the provincial capital. The head of the local Buddhist Association introduced him to sympathetic representatives from the association's provincial office. His cause was eventually taken up by a provincial deputy governor and at least two officials in the provincial RMAB, who issued a document instructing the county to intervene in the matter and to ensure that Lama T was reinstated at S monastery.⁴⁰

In October 2003 county officials from the RMAB went to the leaders of Lama T's *khangtsen* to demand his reinstatement, but the *khangtsen*'s administrative heads rejected the official demand. The government officials reportedly insulted the monks, before seeking out the abbot's ministers. The meeting that ensued was cordial, but the advisors warned the officials that they were getting involved in very sensitive matters, with potentially dangerous repercussions. According to one witness, the county officials scoffed at the warning, and demanded to be shown the central registry; the ministers refused. Incensed by this recalcitrance, the officials marched up to the abbot's office, where they seized the registry and reinserted Lama T's name; witnesses say that

³⁹ Ashiwa and Wank have observed that the Xiamen branch of the Buddhist Association was an active civic association that played a powerful role in the rise of a local temple. A possible reason for the difference is that there are a large number of educated lay Buddhists in Xiamen who were actively involved in the association and who could bring resources and influence to its operations. See Yoshiko Ashiwa and David Wank, "The Politics of China's Buddhist Revival". In Tibetan areas the local Buddhist Associations have been more tightly controlled.

⁴⁰ Interview, deputy chair, county People's Political Consultative Assembly (April 2004).

the young abbot was uncomfortable, but did not protest. Monks from the opposing faction said that he acquiesced because he was afraid that the county might interfere with his financial control over donations—because an abbot could serve for only one term, it was a once-only chance to secure a comfortable future.

But while the heads of the monastery were unwilling to oppose the aggressive intervention by the county government, the monks from Lama T's *khangtsen* exploded in rage. They surrounded the officials as they descended the stairs from the abbot's quarters, and shouted at them. Some monks carried sticks and began threatening the officials with violence. Panicked and outnumbered, the county officials begged the angry monks to wait for the Party secretary to arrive. But the monks began to assault the officials, who managed to flee, although not before one of them sustained injuries requiring hospitalization for a week. The angry monks continued their rampage, but redirected it at their enemies within the monastery. Assuming that the abbot had collaborated with the officials, the monks stormed into his office and vandalized it. Fights broke out around the monastery grounds, and the abbot fled in the company of bodyguards.

Interestingly, none of the officials at the center of the melee were ethnic Tibetans. Two of them were Han, and two were from other ethnic minority backgrounds. Nevertheless, while portrayals of a Han state dominating passive ethnic minorities are common in the Western literature on ethnic relations in China, it would be wrong to portray this incident as a Han-Tibetan conflict. In the county government, Tibetans tend to be over-represented in proportion to the total population, in both clerical and leadership positions. An official inside the RMAB told the author that the reason only non-Tibetans were at the monastery that day is that, while their Tibetan colleagues supported the action, they were afraid to get involved. Non-Tibetans, whether Han or officials from other ethnic backgrounds, were less concerned about how their actions might be perceived by the Buddhist community. In the county's government and Party agencies, an equal number of ethnic Tibetan and non-ethnic-Tibetan officials were to express dismay at the RMAB's interference in the monastery's internal affairs.

When the monastery incident erupted, both Tibetan and non-Tibetan officials in the county and prefecture seemed ill-prepared to handle the situation. Their muddled response reflected internal disagreement as well as nervousness. But while officials mulled over the crisis in secret meetings, pro-Shugden monks organized protests to demand formal sanctions against their rivals. A week after the riot, more than 200 monks marched *en masse* to the county government demanding to see the magistrate. Denied an audience, they returned to the monastery and expelled all the tourists from inside its walls, shutting down the showpiece of the region's tourism-driven development. It was a clever tactic that threw local officials into panic. Crisis meetings were held into the night, while skirmishes broke out in the monastery and across the town between pro- and anti-Shugden forces. By now, members of the public had joined in the fights, in support of monks from their home villages. But their allegiance was to kin, rather than to a cause.

Dealing with the Crisis: Crack Down or Conciliate?

The prefecture governor, who is himself Tibetan, had been away on business, but he returned immediately. Other local officials were afraid to make a decision in his absence. The governor's involvement meant that subordinate officials could be relieved of responsibility for any action taken, and if the governor put his name to a course of action, local factions would be less inclined to "leak" negative information upwards, a common strategy used to undermine rivals.⁴¹ With the governor's endorsement, the prefecture Party committee issued strong public reprimands to the county officials who had started the melee.⁴² They offered Lama T a state pension in return for moving quietly away—an offer he had little choice but to accept—and they ordered police not to intervene in any disturbances involving monks, lest it inspire mass anti-government protests. The approach that the governor and leading Party officials adopted lies in stark contrast to the Party-state's treatment of Tibetan monasteries in Maoist times, and to the crackdowns within Tibet against Tibetan Buddhist activism in the late 1980s.⁴³

The prefecture governor and Party secretary agreed that it was essential for social and political stability that the abbot return to work in the monastery, but he required more coaxing. The RMAB dispatched a number of respected senior officials to request his return; in the end it took a visit from the governor, an act of great significance in political protocol, to persuade him. When a date was set for the abbot's return, the governor decided to mark the occasion with a ceremony to symbolize a restoration of peace. On the day of the abbot's return, a cavalcade of one hundred vehicles escorted him for the five-hour drive from his home village to the monastery. The police even allowed some of his supporters to carry clubs and sticks, signaling the abbot's autonomous strength. In cooperation with the RMAB, the abbot's advisors invited government and religious leaders to attend the welcoming ceremony and to give speeches. Senior lamas from outside the region were also invited, lending *gravitas* to the occasion. Representatives from each *khangtsen* presented the abbot with a *khata* (ceremonial scarf) but, in a defiant gesture that threatened to undermine the governor's conciliatory efforts, the abbot refused to accept *khata* from the anti-Shugden monks of the *khangtsen* that had forced his flight.

⁴¹ In their study of local state regulation of Buddhism in Xiamen, Ashiwa and Wank also noted local officials' concern for "maintaining autonomy within their jurisdictions from the central authorities", as their key concern was to "maintain flexibility in legitimating their interests and actions". See Yoshiko Ashiwa and David Wank, "The Politics of China's Buddhist Revival", p. 36.

⁴² Personal communication with UFWD official, June 2004.

⁴³ Street protests by Tibetan monks and nuns in Lhasa in October 1987, March 1988 and March 1989 resulted in several deaths and the declaration of martial law. See Xu Mingyu, *Yingmou yu qiancheng* (Conspiracy and Devotedness) (Hong Kong: Mirror Press, 1999), pp. 147-61.

While the details of this story about the monastery and about relations between the monastery and local government are interesting, we are still left with the challenge of making sense of it all. An ongoing dilemma for China's leaders since the 1949 revolution has been to what degree the state and Party should intervene in non-state organizations. The Maoist state was extremely interventionist, but at times local state actors recognized that they could not control everything, nor was it desirable to do so. Since the reforms of the 1980s, the trend has been to disengage from political control at the grass roots, although it must be noted that Tibetan areas have faced periodic crackdowns when local organizations have become too big. The recent experience of the Serthar Monastery is one example.⁴⁴

But the behavior of local authorities was shaped by another set of factors that are entangled in the politics of the reform era. For one, economic growth indicators are part of the criteria by which senior local government leaders are judged by their superiors. More and more localities in China are basing their economic development strategies on real and imagined competitive advantage, and this region's strategy, under the leadership of the prefecture governor, has been to promote the area's Tibetanness as a magnet for tourism. Both the prefecture and county governments now earn more in revenue from the tourist industry than from all other sectors combined. The monastery is crucial to the area's Tibetanness and open conflict between it and the county government would jeopardize local development plans, and no doubt several political careers.

Economic development is a key source of legitimacy for local leaders in contemporary China. They face twin pressures from above and below to improve the economy, and in this jurisdiction the Tibetan religious and cultural revival is a key ingredient for achieving this. By aligning himself with ethnic and religious rejuvenation, the governor also separately creates a "legitimizing universe" for himself in the eyes of the people. Simultaneously, he earns accolades from superordinate levels of government for pursuing a development strategy that is clearly working, and one which conjures an image of a thriving Tibetan community in China. But while the governor's concern for promoting Tibetan culture is not in doubt, the material outcomes of the strategy are his clear priority. In a book he published in 2001, the governor wrote, "Improving material livelihoods are the only way to win the people's hearts",⁴⁵ and his actions suggest that he considers material development and cultural revival to be complementary. Not surprisingly, he had begun to position himself and his government, not as "lord" of the monastery, but as its benevolent patron.

One way of understanding the changing relationship between the monastery and the local state is as an exchange of "autonomy" for "loyalty".⁴⁶ As suggested

⁴⁴ See note 17.

⁴⁵ The bibliographic details of this book are omitted to preserve the anonymity of the locale.

⁴⁶ Pitman Potter argues that this has been a defining characteristic of the state's relations with religious institutions since the reforms, as state authority in post-Communist China is rooted

by social contract theories, this exchange does not take place by written agreement, but rather evolves in reflection of changing social and political realities. As an example of the existence of such a tacit contract, only a few months after the abbot was safely reinstalled in the monastery another large ceremony was held to celebrate the opening of an elaborate, enormous prayer hall in honor of Tsongkhapa, the founder of the Yellow Hat sect of Tibetan Buddhism. Even though Tsongkhapa represents the doctrinal purity of the Yellow Hats, and Shugden its wrathful guardian, the construction of the temple had continued during the dispute, in a remarkable demonstration of unity within the monastery and of monastery–government cooperation. The abbot had funded the interior decorations, and the county government had funded the external construction.

On the day of the prayer hall's inauguration ceremony, crowds began assembling at the monastery from the early hours of the morning. Elderly people found themselves high perches from which they could watch the ceremony. Officials from the county, prefecture and provincial governments sat alongside senior lamas in the VIP seats on the podium in front of the adobe edifice. The master of ceremonies, a local TV personality, began by introducing the great Tibetan Buddhist tradition of the region, and then invited important monastery and government leaders to speak. All spoke of "loving the country and loving the Buddhist religion" (*aiguo aijiao*) and of the importance of the monastery and the government working together for the development and common prosperity of the mountain region. Leading monks did not seem at all compromised by their participation in this choreographed public relations exercise. In fact, it was a perfect opportunity to pay their debt of loyalty to their "patron". Despite the internal divisions, on such occasions monastic leaders were able to overcome their differences and present a unified and harmonious image. The lamas recognized that their public image had been tarnished by the internal squabbles, and the ceremony highlighted how their good relations with the county and prefectural governments enabled them to reap benefits for the Buddhist community.

In another local government initiative in the aftermath of the monastery crisis, the prefecture Party committee organized a tour of the Tibetan Autonomous Region and invited leaders of each of the *khangtsens* and other senior lamas to participate alongside government officials. While one Party chief claimed that it was an exercise in building good relations between monks and the Party (a responsibility of the Party's United Front Work Department), another Party insider said it was really designed to remind the monks how lucky they were in contrast to the more repressive atmosphere in the Tibet Autonomous Region's larger monasteries.⁴⁷

more in consent than coercion. See Pitman Potter, "Belief in Control: Regulation of Religion in China", *China Quarterly*, No. 174 (June 2003), pp. 317-37.

⁴⁷ Interviews with prefecture and county Party officials, June 2004.

But while both sides were determined to convince the public that the crisis was resolved, tensions within the monastery continued to simmer, and local government leaders recognized that more decisive action would need to be taken to prevent further disturbances. After several weeks of negotiations, it was agreed that the offending *khangtsen* would be fined the token sum of 1000 yuan (US\$125). Significantly, no one was held personally responsible for the assault on the county government officials. As a further gesture of conciliation to the many who had been outraged by the government's intervention, the RMAB removed its staff from the monastery and handed over its fee-collecting functions to the monks. The county agreed to let the monastery have full control over entrance fees, even though the Monastery Management Committee would still need to seek RMAB's approval on how it used the half of the funds that previously went into government coffers. This was a mere formality, because the money was now held at the monastery. The United Front Work Department left only one representative in the monastery as a "special envoy" (*tepaiyuan*).

These events suggest that there is considerable flexibility in the way authorities at the local level can deal with sensitive ethnic and religious issues. Such discretion is granted to regional authorities in China in regard to "soft" policy areas such as religion, education and cultural events and institutions. In discussing another part of China, Adam Chau argues that, unlike birth control and other "hard" policy targets, state religious policy is vague, allowing considerable room to maneuver.⁴⁸ The same might be said of the mandate of the Religious and Minority Affairs Bureau, an agency authorized to issue its own regulations on religious practice, guided only by general principles.

A further example of conciliatory approaches to ethnic and religious conflict can be seen in the county government's treatment of Tibetan returnees. In the 1990s, Tibetans who had fled to India following the anti-Communist uprisings of the late 1950s began to move back to China in search of economic opportunities. Initially, the county authorities kept them under close watch. One member of this community told the author that he was frequently followed and that he was certain that his telephone was bugged. In recent years, however, the county's United Front Work Department has given these families lavish gifts at Chinese New Year and invited them to attend official celebrations to mark the (slightly different) Tibetan New Year. At the 2003 and 2004 celebrations, government leaders gave speeches in front of a giant painting of the Potala Palace in Lhasa, a powerful symbol of Tibetan identity. Such a display at an official event would have been unthinkable only a few years earlier. Returnee families were also invited on officially sponsored trips, and taken to popular destinations around China including the Great Wall and the terracotta warriors in Xi'an. These trips were intended to inculcate a sense of supra-ethnic Chinese identity, using subtle persuasion rather than coercion and indoctrination.

⁴⁸ Adam Yuet Chau, "The Politics of Legitimation and the Revival of Popular Religion in Shaanbei, North-Central China," *Modern China*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (2005), pp. 236-78.

The discretionary powers exhibited by the local state stand in sharp contrast to the political situation in the Tibetan Autonomous Region. Matthew Kapstein finds little prospect there for independent religious institution-building. Reasons for the different political climate include the Lhasa monasteries' historical connection with the Dalai Lama's government-in-exile and the frequent involvement of monks in political activism.⁴⁹ Another important difference is that Tibetan identity within Tibet is province-wide, a territorial unit upon which some Tibetan groups base their claim for political independence.⁵⁰ S Monastery was the center of a smaller, prefecture-sized Tibetan community outside Tibet proper. It was a "safe" place to promote Tibetan Buddhism and Tibetan identity, because this posed no threat to the integrity of the central state. In fact, the area was small enough to remain under the capital's radar.

Religion and Local Governance

During the reform years, there has been increasing concern among central Party leaders that the rise of religion is a threat to Party-state authority. A 1990 circular, for example, noted that "religious activities and party activities compete for participants, compete for time, and compete for space", and that this new force "damages the Party's image, corrupts the will of Party members, and seriously disrupts the building of grassroots Party organizations in the countryside".⁵¹ These concerns are reflected in the Party's 2004 regulations for religion and a recent campaign to promote atheism in schools. But at the grass roots, Party and government leaders see religion in a different light. Particularly in poor, ethnic minority regions, local Party and government leaders are under pressure to maintain stability and promote economic development on inadequate budgets and tax bases. Increasingly—and this is true all over China—local governments recognize that they cannot govern society alone, and that other social forces must be mobilized to assist.

Perhaps the greatest change in relations between the local government and the monastery since the Maoist era is that the monastery has gradually evolved from a subject of government into a partner in governance.⁵² This was clear from a number of discussions that I had with local officials across a wide variety of

⁴⁹ Matthew Kapstein, "A Thorn in the Dragon's Side".

⁵⁰ Tibetan independence advocates have typically laid claim to a much larger area incorporating the ethnic Tibetan parts of other Chinese provinces. China's Tibetan Autonomous Region is, however, seen as the heart of that nation.

⁵¹ Cited in James Miles, *The Legacy of Tiananmen*, p. 181.

⁵² "Governance" is an overused and potentially vague term. Here I use it to refer to the general management of society's affairs, including both formal government and social organizations that distribute resources and manage conflict. A useful discussion of the term in this and other usages can be found in the introduction to Jon Pierre and B. Guy Peters, *Governance, Politics and the State* (London: Macmillan, 2000).

departments. The overwhelming majority of local officials saw the work of religious institutions and religious leaders as complementary to local government objectives. One county official put it simply: "We live in a backward part of China. Our job is to improve the living conditions and the 'quality' (*suzhi*) of the people. The lamas teach the people how to live better—they advise them against drinking and gambling and encourage mutual aid". A deputy governor of the prefecture agreed: "I see a direct link between religious activity and spiritual and material development in communities. Take D village, for example: they have no religion there, and that is where we have the most social problems like drinking and gambling. The villages that are doing better have religion. I am a Tibetan Buddhist, but I would say the same for Christian and Muslim communities."

The governor and other Party leaders also understood that increased religious activity was a draw card for investment. The numbers of tourists were increasing every year, in line with a growing fascination with Tibet evident in eastern China. In a joint project with property developers, the county government has proposed to develop a tourism precinct in the vicinity of the monastery, complete with shops, restaurants and hotels, designed to make the area competitive with Lhasa as a tourist destination for middle-class Chinese who want to experience Tibetan culture. The project depended on support from the monastery—initially the government had even tried to convince the monastery to borrow money and become a partner. The deputy magistrate overseeing the project told me that it was sensible to offer the monastery a stake in its success, but also admitted that he was struggling to raise capital, as the banks were no longer lending money to the already heavily indebted county. The government wanted the monastery as a partner so that the gate takings could be used as collateral.

Inasmuch as the prefecture governor has staked his credentials on making the region a leading Tibetan area in China, he has committed himself to a number of projects that promote Tibetan culture, including a dance troupe and an annual arts festival. He is often seen on provincial and national television promoting local Tibetan products. And his concern for "development with Tibetan characteristics" earns him popularity in the region. The governor is regularly seen in the company of lamas at important meetings and events. He insists that representatives from the monastery participate in local development planning meetings, knowing that villagers are more likely to support initiatives that have monastic blessing. By aligning himself with the monastery, the governor acquires a moral dimension to his authority. While villagers can often be heard disparaging other Party-state cadres, no one speaks ill of the governor.

These days he is not alone in recognizing the special place of Tibetan monks in the region's local development. An increasing number of government officials recognize the influence that senior lamas, and especially *tulkus*, enjoy in the community and have sought to cultivate relations with them. Through the Buddhist network, senior monks often have good connections in Beijing, something local government leaders in the western regions can only dream of. It is therefore not surprising that local government officials frequently consult the

most influential *tulkus* in the region over matters of local government policy and future project ideas.

Some *tulkus* have used their prestige to start local enterprises, and some local entrepreneurs have invited them to join their boards of directors. Local entrepreneurs are often enthusiastic about working with monastic leaders on philanthropic activities like temple-building. Through such charitable works, the monks build close relations with entrepreneurs, and are able to use these contacts as a conduit for further access to Party and government leaders.⁵³

While employing lamas as salaried representatives in government bodies was once used as a strategy to *undermine* religious authority, in today's more complex political environment it gives the lamas more influence with local policy-makers. According to a deputy director of the county People's Congress, lamas are increasingly outspoken in political debates and are unafraid to criticize the government. The deputy chair of the county People's Political Consultative Committee concurs: "It's not difficult to ignore one or two complaints, but if many lamas are speaking out against something then the government comes under a lot of pressure to make changes". As one junior Party official joked with me, "the Party chiefs only need to see a mass of burgundy [monks' robes] and they panic. They'll do anything to keep those monks happy!"

Monks recognize that speaking with a united voice gives them greater influence with the local government. Heads of the various *khangtsens* met in a series of meetings during 2004 to repair relations among themselves. Senior figures advocated a return to former times when the differences in beliefs about Shugden could be put aside in recognition of the interest shared by all monks in seeing the Buddhist monastery grow and prosper. This was a positive step for monastic unity, but the specter of Shugden continues to lurk beneath the surface. At the end of 2004 the monastery hosted an important Tibetan Buddhist oracle who serves the Dalai Lama in India, and during one ceremony the oracle played corporeal host to the spirit of Dorje Shugden. The prefecture governor and other senior local leaders attended this private and unpublicized ceremony as special guests. While there were no protests from the anti-Shugden faction, it served as a reminder of the deep theological divide between the two camps, and the potential for those divisions to be manipulated for political purposes.

Concluding Comments

In asking how Tibetan monks can beat up a group of Chinese Communist Party officials and get away with it, this case study has addressed a number of issues regarding political change in contemporary China. First, it is apparent that local government responses to religious organizations are changing. Despite cautious central government attitudes to the activities of religious organizations, local officials sometimes find it prudent and even profitable to co-opt religious leaders

⁵³ The local proprietor of a building supplies company told me that he regularly passed on monastery "concerns" of which he was aware to his own friends in the government.

in local policy-making. This strategy enables local leaders like the prefecture governor to build legitimacy among the local population, people who are proud to see their region re-embrace its cultural identity. Even among non-ethnic-Tibetan officials, of whom there are many, there is widespread recognition that the prefecture's promotion of its Tibetan attributes has been critical to an explosion in tourism-driven local economic development. There are benefits to be gained from this even among the most self-interested of local officials. It is possible to hear non-ethnic-Tibetan officials say things like, "We Tibetans are like this", clearly identifying with the new trend. It is also important that the strategy helps local officials earn legitimacy with their superiors in higher levels of Party and government. Under pressure from above to deliver economic growth and social stability, they recognize that the Tibetan Buddhist revival can help them meet the development targets on the basis of which their performance is evaluated. On the social side, it has provided the local population with a stronger sense of community and identity, a moral consensus that so many communities have been searching for since the collapse of Communism.

This common interest in social and economic development also serves to contain conflict within the monastery. Both sides of the theological divide are happy to see the monastery symbolize a new era of cultural and material development. Some of the monks recognize that unity can be instrumental in protecting the monastery's broader institutional interests—to grow and prosper as a place of Tibetan Buddhist learning and worship. Monks have united, for example, to oppose government plans for tourism-related developments that threaten the monastery precinct's religious identity with unrestrained commerce. Indeed, monastic leaders have shown themselves increasingly willing to flex their institutional muscle to counter undesirable local government actions. This presents a double-edged sword to local state authorities. On the one hand, the monastery can serve as a powerful partner in the local government's pursuit of its social and economic policies. On the other hand, the co-optation of the monastery in local public management and planning increases the monastery's authority and autonomy. The attack on local government officials is an example of the increased assertiveness prompted by this newfound authority and autonomy.

Local Party and government leaders have faced a range of choices in responding to such assertiveness. When challenged and attacked by monks, they had the power, and some among them had the desire, to suppress the disturbance and arrest the agitators. Instead, as the case study demonstrates, in this prefecture they have adopted a subtler approach. This reflects partly the genuine respect that many local, particularly ethnic Tibetan, officials, hold for the monastery as a religious institution, and partly a concern for public image. But it also reflects local government authorities' recognition that the monastery is a useful partner in local governance, and that harming it would only mean harming themselves. Ultimately they sought to ensure a political settlement that was to the benefit of all involved. These officials accepted that the government had overstepped the mark in interfering in the monastery's affairs, and showed a willingness to accept responsibility for the consequences. Senior officials made private apologies to the

abbot and to the monastery's highest-ranked *tulkus*. Their efforts to accommodate the lamas and to treat the Tibetan Buddhist monastery as a symbol of a new era of cultural and material development was a sensible political strategy, and perhaps the only one that would enable local political elites to legitimate themselves both downward among the local populace and upward among their Party-state superiors.

While few local governments in China have a Tibetan monastery to deal with, most face similar challenges in responding to increasingly assertive religious institutions and other social forces. Whether they choose suppression or accommodation will depend on the ever-changing constellation of pressures in China's post-Communist political environment. But while we must hesitate to predict political behavior with any certainty, if the leading officials of a remote Tibetan prefecture recognize that a religious institution can be harnessed to help govern the new market society, it is highly likely that many local leaders across China have reached or will reach similar conclusions.

CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS ISSUE

Ben Hillman is a PhD student at the Contemporary China Centre of the Australian National University. His research focuses on local politics, rural development and ethnic relations in China.

Li Huaiyin is an Assistant Professor in history at the University of Missouri-Columbia and author of *Village Governance in North China, 1875-1936* (Stanford University Press, 2005). He is currently working on a book-length project about everyday life in rural China after 1949, focusing on Qin village in Jiangsu Province.

Pun Ngai is Assistant Professor at the Division of Social Science, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. She is the author of *Made in China: Women Factory Workers in a Global Workplace* (Duke University Press and Hong Kong University Press, 2005) and co-editor (with Agnes Ku) of *Remaking Citizenship in Hong Kong: Community, Nation and the Global City* (RoutledgeCurzon, 2004). Her current interests focus on global production, gender and labor in China.

Wu Fei recently received his PhD in anthropology from Harvard University and holds a position in the Department of Religious Studies at Peking University. His current research interests focus on two topics: suicide in China and Christianity in China.

Hong Zhang is an Assistant Professor in the Department of East Asian Studies at Colby College, Maine. She received her PhD in anthropology from Columbia University. She has done extensive ethnographic work documenting changes in marriage patterns, intergenerational relations, and family life in rural China. Most recently she has begun to conduct research in the Pearl River Delta area among young rural people from the interior provinces who come to seek wage labor and an urban life.