



CHINA IN CONTEXT AND PERSPECTIVE

## The party in monk's robes

### The cultivation of global Buddhism within CCP influence operations

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#### Abstract

The involvement of agencies across the PRC party-state in the cultivation of religious figures abroad points to the importance the CCP attaches to religion as a vessel of political influence. United front organs such as the Buddhist Association of China have targeted foreign religion since the Mao era, naturally extending a core domestic constituency. Beyond united front work, agencies from the CCP foreign affairs system and military intelligence also engage in religious influence abroad. The party's influence agencies wear different robes to their engagement with religion in different foreign locales. This note samples this versatility of CCP influence work by reviewing three loci of the party's exploitation of Buddhism. In Mongolia, the party embraces the Qing empire's legacy, resuming a role as patron of Tibetan-transmitted Buddhism and overseer of reincarnation processes to counter the Dalai Lama's influence. These imperial robes are, in fact, only recycled from what the party donned in Japan already under Mao: Buddhist exchanges as tokens of "peace" and "friendship" transcending politics helped build political ties that remain active today. In a Western country like Australia, Buddhism's minority status allows CCP-linked Buddhist groups to reach mainstream politics by supplying officials with an easy shortcut to an image of multicultural engagement. Reincarnation, anti-militarism and multiculturalism, we finally observe, are concepts the party wears but does not genuinely espouse. Religion, we conclude, helps elucidate ideology's role in influence work: foreign élites are as easily won by a Leninist party's promises to "reform" or freely trade as an abbot might be by its donation of a monumental statue.



## 0 Introduction: Religion and the CCP's multi-system influence work

As a channel to the mainstream of foreign societies, religious organisations naturally attract the interest of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) influence agencies. CCP-friendly religious leaders can propagate narratives aligned with party policy, supporting its initiatives in target countries while deflating criticism of human-rights abuses in China, in particular the repression of non-approved religious practice.

Coopting foreign élites ranks high enough among the CCP's priorities to involve multiple components of its party, state and military structures. Analysing external influence work as conducted by various *systems* of agencies — subsets of the bureaucracy united by shared tasks, such as propaganda or foreign affairs, and common leadership mechanisms — helps understand the relative importance of specific influence targets to the party. Arrays of security, foreign affairs, propaganda, united front or trade organs each have, as it were, their natural targets abroad. When a single target domain engages several systems simultaneously, that arguably signals its importance for the party's external work. This note uses the CCP's multi-system engagement with religion abroad to identify that domain's centrality in influence operations.

Managing organised religion is a core function of the CCP *united front system*.<sup>1</sup> Like in other Asian and European Leninist party-states established after the Second World War, party-controlled religious organisations led by coopted religious figures aim to make the faithful a constituency within the communist-led social order.<sup>2</sup> The **Buddhist Association of China (BAC, 中国佛教协会)**, established in 1953, aims, according to its constitution, to “unite Buddhists” and “guide them to love the country and love religion” while “support[ing] the leadership of the CCP”.<sup>3</sup> The BAC is managed by the **State Administration of Religious Affairs (SARA, 国家宗教事务局)**, a united front agency reduced since 2018 to an external nameplate of the **United Front Work Department (UFWD, 统一战线工作部)** under the CCP Central Committee.<sup>4</sup> Both of

<sup>1</sup>The CCP Central Committee's 2018 reform plan stated the Central United Front Work Department is responsible for the “unified management of religious affairs” (“中共中央印发《深化党和国家机构改革方案》”, 新华, 21st Mar. 2018). The first comprehensive discussion of the CCP united front system is Alex Joske, “The Party speaks for you: Foreign interference and the Chinese Communist Party's united front system”, *ASPI Policy Brief* 32 (2020). The fundamental post-Mao era treatment of CCP united front work remains Gerry Groot, “Managing transitions: the Chinese Communist Party's united front work, minor parties and groups, hegemony and corporatism”, PhD thesis, University of Adelaide, 1997.

<sup>2</sup>On state-managed Buddhism in North Korea, see, e.g., 이지범, “북한불교의 어제와 오늘”, 불교평론 5 (2000); Bernard Senécal, “Buddhists in the Two Koreas: North-South Interactions”, *Journal of Korean Religions* 4:2 (2013). On coopted Catholic organisations in Eastern Europe, Stanislav Balík and Jiří Hanuš, *Katolická církev v Československu 1945-1989*, Centrum pro studium demokracie a kultury, 2013, pp. 23 ff.; Paweł Skorut, *Front Jedności Narodu. Od narodzin idei do upadku politycznego pozoru*, Attyka, 2015, p. 67; Bogdan Kolar, “The Priestly Patriotic Associations in the Eastern European Countries”, *Bogoslovni vestnik* 68:2 (2008).

<sup>3</sup>“中国佛教协会章程”, BAC, 21st Apr. 2015.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.* For SARA's merger into the UFWD, “中共中央印发...” The merger made SARA director Wang Zuo'an 王作安 a UFWD deputy head (“王作安：坚持我国宗教中国化方向”, UFWD, 21st Mar. 2022). He was recently succeeded in both posts by Cui Maohu 崔茂虎 (“崔茂虎任中央统战部副部长、国家宗教事务局局长 王作安不再担任”, 中国经济网, 7th June 2022). As with other nominally non-state organisations, BAC's secretary-general appears to embody the link to the effectively superordinate party-state agency. Since 2016, the post has been held by Liu Wei 刘威, who previously headed SARA's 1st Department, responsible for contacts with Buddhism and Taoism (“中国佛教协会第九届理事会秘书长、副秘书长名单”, BAC, 2016; “中国佛教协会在京举办 2022 澜湄流域佛教交流会”, 禅风网, 2022; “中国佛教协会秘书长刘威简历”, 凤凰佛教, 17th Apr. 2015; “国家宗教事务局主要职责内设机构和人员编制规定”, SARA via gov.cn, 7th Aug. 2008). As in other policy systems, the party organ's control of the



the UFWD's religious affairs bureaus participate in the management of Buddhism.<sup>5</sup> As Ye Xiaowen 叶小文, a former SARA director and UFWD bureau chief, once put it, religious work is "an important united front task" that seeks to "win hearts" by "doing good work on religious figures", since they typically "lead, guide and organise" the faithful's religious practice.<sup>6</sup>

While its primary purview is domestic, the BAC became internationally active already in the Mao era, presaging today's top monks' role as proxies for the party's engagement with global Buddhism. Zhao Puchu 赵朴初 (1907–2000), a lay Buddhist leader who held leading roles at the BAC since its establishment, gained Premier Zhou Enlai's support for using Buddhism as an unofficial carrier of PRC diplomacy with Japan in the absence of official relationships, using religion to let "the unofficial lead the way, promoting the official through the unofficial" (民间先行, 以民促官), a frequent motto of "people's diplomacy".<sup>7</sup> By the dawn of the Xi era, united front officials felt confident enough with their control of key religious leaders to advocate a role in the party's global influence work for the Tibetan tradition of Buddhism, even though such control still demands extensive repression efforts.<sup>8</sup>

This external activity places the party's religious hierarchs among its instruments in international influence operations, a set of tasks that include but go beyond mere united front work. As the discussion below will show, the CCP's efforts to coopt foreign Buddhist organisations involve influence agencies outside the united front system. These include the **Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (CPAFFC, 中国人民对外友好协会)**, a 'people's diplomacy' body managed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.<sup>9</sup> Intelligence agencies also participate in Buddhist influence operations, as illustrated in our examples by the role of one of the PLA's main intelligence units, currently known as the **Political Work Department Liaison**

nominally non-governmental entity is reproduced at lower levels of administration, often more explicitly. A county-level UFWD's role organising the corresponding Buddhist association's peak meeting yields a recent example ("滑县召开佛教协会第二届代表大会", Root in Henan, 31st Dec. 2020).

<sup>5</sup>See, e.g., "中央统战部十二局、十一局有关人员来浙江调研佛教寺院管理问题", 浙江省民族宗教事务委员会, 19th Apr. 2019. SARA Buddhist affairs cadres moved to the UFWD's 11<sup>th</sup> (general) and 12<sup>th</sup> (functional) bureaus, established during the 2018 reform (Alex Joske, "Reorganizing the United Front Work Department: New Structures for a New Era of Diaspora and Religious Affairs Work", *China Brief* 19:9 (2019); for the bureaus' names (resp. 宗教综合局, 宗教业务局), see, e.g., "卢献匾率队赴中央统战部和全国人大汇报工作", 广西人大网, 4th Mar. 2019; "2020 年全国劳动模范和先进工作者名单", 人民日报, 25th Nov. 2020; "马玉飞: 在决战脱贫攻坚一线, 我想为老百姓多做点事情", 北京师范大学校友总会 via 北京日报, 18th Nov. 2021). A SARA 1<sup>st</sup> Department (cf. n. 4)) deputy director headed the UFWD 12<sup>th</sup> Bureau's Buddhism Division (佛教处) after the merger, while a SARA former 1<sup>st</sup> Department Buddhism Division director moved to the UFWD's 11<sup>th</sup> Bureau ("倪忠扬副主任出席第十五届普陀山南海观音文化节开幕式暨南海观音开光二十周年庆典", 浙江省民族宗教事务委员会, 20th Nov. 2017; "中央统战部十二局...", "宗教局: 佛道教场所被承包乱象得到一定程度遏制, 法音 4 (2014); "中国基督教神学教育委员会第三次会议在汉召开", 湖北省民族宗教事务委员会, 1st Apr. 2021).

<sup>6</sup>叶小文, "我们共产党人要有团结信教群众的本事", 光明网, 15th June 2015.

<sup>7</sup>温金玉, "玄中寺在中国净土宗史上地位的再检讨", in 中国净土宗研究, 宗教文化出版社, 2008, via 淨土宗.org; 殷实, "唤起日本人民对日本军国主义侵华战争的反省", 法音 7 (2015); 陈长松, "赵朴初 伟大的爱国主义者 中国共产党的亲密朋友", 中国宗教 6 (2021), via UFWD; 陈益群, "赵朴初心目中的周恩来", 团结报 via 中国统一战线新闻网, 17th Feb. 2022.

<sup>8</sup>While non-compliant Tibetan Buddhism remains a target of violent repression, the CCP manages enough of the Tibetan clergy to use Tibetan-transmitted Buddhism as a foreign policy tool. The argument is developed in Jichang Lulu, "State-managed Buddhism and Chinese-Mongolian relations", University of Nottingham China Policy Institute: Analysis / Jichang Lulu blog, 29th Nov. 2017.

<sup>9</sup>On the CPAFFC's institutional position within the foreign affairs system and its transparent disjointness from the united front system, see Jichang Lulu, "Repurposing democracy: The European Parliament China friendship cluster", Sinopsis, 26th Nov. 2019, p. 21; Charmian Goh et al., "Unbundling systems: Foreign affairs reform in China's provinces", Sinopsis, 11th Apr. 2021, p. 5 et passim.

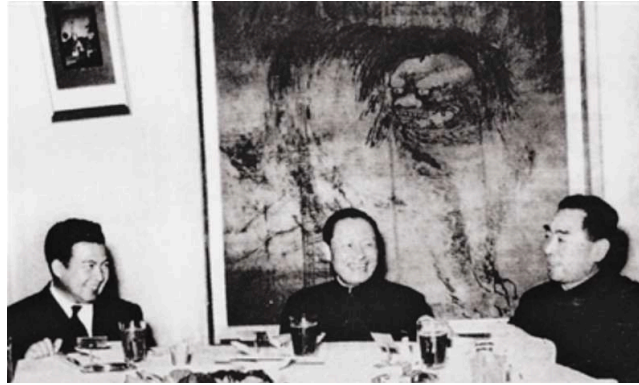


Figure 1: Zhao Puchu (middle) and Zhou Enlai (right) in the Guangji 广济 Temple in Beijing in 1952. Source: 中国统一战线新闻网.

**Bureau (PWD/LB, 政治工作部联络局).**<sup>10</sup> These exchanges are in turn coopted to facilitate access to targets in mainstream politics. The evidence thus points to the CCP's use of global religion as a tool in influence work, rather than as a mere extension of domestic religious policy.

This note uses a systems-based approach to analyse aspects of the party-led bureaucracy's engagement with global Buddhism within influence operations, demonstrating religion's importance as a favoured target of intelligence and other modes of influence beyond united front work. Three cases compare CCP influence actors and tactics exploiting Buddhism's prestige in target societies. Section 1 samples the united front system's exchanges with monasteries in Mongolia, which combines extensive ties with PRC-friendly groups with the less intuitive cultivation of a mainstream that remains on good terms with the Dalai Lama. In Japan, discussed in Section 2, this dual cooption of the periphery and the mainstream becomes clear as a global, and older, tactic, as does the involvement of not just united front, but also foreign affairs and intelligence agencies. In Section 3, a final case study on a cluster of Buddhist groups in Australia shows that even a minority religion can serve as a bridge to cultivate the political mainstream when a framing is chosen that appeals to local élites. In these engagements, Section 4 concludes, multiple systems within the CCP's influence apparatus exploit religion's intrinsic versatility: religious groups' adaptations to local society can be borrowed into party-state agencies' efforts to cater to the traditions and ideologies of their targets.

Previous work on the CCP's relationship with Buddhism abroad has generally focused on its united front work component, or simply reduced it to frames popular in

<sup>10</sup>The PWD/LB is the successor of the Liaison Department (联络部) under the PLA's General Political Department. The general departments were dissolved during the 2016 PLA reform (on which see, e.g., 杉浦康之, “中国人民解放军の統合作戦体制 — 習近平政権による指揮・命令系統の再編を中心に”, 防衛研究所紀要 19:1 (2016)). The fundamental treatment, written before the institutional reform, is Mike Stokes & Russell Hsiao, “The People's Liberation Army General Political Department: Political Warfare with Chinese Characteristics”, Project 2049 Institute, 14 Oct. 2013. The continuity between the former GPD Liaison Department and the new PWD Liaison Bureau is stated, e.g., in an account of a 2019 event held at a memorial site built by the former, published on the website of the Central Party School-supervised Yan'an Spirit Research Society (中国延安精神研究会) (陈龙狮, “纪念隐蔽战线无名英雄尤柳门在台英勇就义 65 周年追思会在京隆重举行”, 中华魂网, 21st May 2019; “中国延安精神研究会简介”, 中华魂网, 10 Feb. 2022).



commentary on international relations.<sup>11</sup> Attempting to set the cultivation of foreign Buddhism against the background of the CCP's multi-agency external influence operations, this note analyses known and new material under a systems-based paradigm. The first case study borrows from one of the authors' ongoing series of articles on CCP exchanges with Mongolian Buddhism. The Japan case includes reanalyses familiar historical and contemporary exchanges, as well as lesser-known data on the CCP's relationship with mainstream Japanese Buddhism. Some of the Australian material was previously covered by local media. Its analysis here is supplemented with new information on institutional networks.

## 1 Mongolia: The party resumes imperial religious policy

With Tibetan-transmitted Buddhism as its main religion and an often PRC-averse public, Mongolia best shows the CCP's resumption of China's historical use of religion as an external policy tool.<sup>12</sup> Control over Tibetan and Mongolian religious institutions, once endowed with political power, was central to China's imperial expansion into Central Asia under the Qing and again under Mao Zedong.<sup>13</sup> The Dalai Lama, the re-incarnating leader of the most powerful school of Tibetan Buddhism, in the late Qing mostly aligned with imperial power, came to challenge it when the 14th lineage holder escaped the PRC's "liberation" of Tibet. Dharamsala — the current Dalai Lama's seat in exile — and India's government have competed with Beijing to influence the religious institutions of Mongolian Buddhism.<sup>14</sup> The implications go beyond one country: Mongolian Buddhism, in the Vajrayāna tradition received from Tibet, is itself a world religion, mainly present in China, Mongolia and the Russian republics of Buryatia and Kalmykia.<sup>15</sup> The PRC's comparatively moderate complaints on the Dalai Lama's involvement in the ongoing process to enthrone a new reincarnation of 'Outer' Mongolia's highest lama, the Jebtsundampa འཇམ་དབྱངས་པཎ་ཌེ་པ་ Khutugtu, highlights the challenges a centre of Vajrayāna authority outside Beijing's control poses to party policy.<sup>16</sup> CCP

<sup>11</sup>A recent overview of the political role of exchanges with external Buddhism since the early years of the PRC, focused on the BAC, is 學愚, “當代中國佛教外交與政治宣傳, 人間佛教研究 5 (2013). Coopted religion as a CCP foreign policy tool is treated as an extension of the domestic-diasporic domain of united front work in Jichang Lulu [as 'Miguel Martin'], “Global Religion and the United Front: The Case of Mongolia”, *China Brief* 18:12 (2018). Examples of later publications that reverted to the clichéd notion of 'soft power' and its derivatives, unanchored from any analysis of Leninist influence work, include Yoshiko Ashiwa & David Wank, “The Chinese State's Global Promotion of Buddhism”, Berkley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs, 11th Nov. 2020; Gregory V. Raymond, “Religion as a Tool of Influence: Buddhism and China's Belt and Road Initiative in Mainland Southeast Asia”, *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 42:3 (2020) — both overwhelmingly reliant on English-language material.

<sup>12</sup>This section largely summarises and updates material in Lulu, *op. cit.*; idem, “State-managed Buddhism...”; idem, “Thinking outside the Urn: China and the reincarnation of Mongolia's highest lama”, University of Nottingham China Policy Institute: Analysis / Jichang Lulu blog, 21st Mar. 2017; and a forthcoming paper, previously circulated as conference notes as idem, “PRC religious policy and relations with Buddhism in Mongolia under Xi Jinping”, July 2018.

<sup>13</sup>For a recent treatment of Qing reincarnation politics, see Max Oidtmann, *Forging the Golden Urn: The Qing Empire and the Politics of Reincarnation in Tibet*, Columbia UP, 2018. On PRC reincarnation policy, Martin Slobodník, “A Difficult Rebirth: Tibetan Reincarnations in the Spotlight of Chinese Religious Policy”, *Studia Orientalia Slovaca* 10:1 (2011).

<sup>14</sup>For recent comments on Indian Buddhist diplomacy in Mongolia and elsewhere, see Jayadeva Ranade, “Buddhism: A New Frontier in the China-India Rivalry”, Carnegie India, 17th Mar. 2017.

<sup>15</sup>On the Mongol tradition of Buddhism, whose analysis is rendered obscure by popular conceptions of Mongolian religion as 'Tibetan', see Johan Elverskog, “Tibetocentrism, Religious Conversion and the Study of Mongolian Buddhism”, in *The Mongolia-Tibet Interface: Opening New Research Terrains in Inner Asia*, ed. by Uradyn Bulag & Hildegard Diemberger, Brill, 2007.

<sup>16</sup>Lulu, “Thinking outside the Urn...”.





influence activities targeting Mongolian Buddhism are not limited to supporting figures opposed to Dharamsala: united front agencies have devoted as much attention to the cultivation of the Dalai Lama-friendly mainstream.

A PLA intelligence front's role in the publication of an unusually explicit set of recommendations on reincarnation policy showed that control over global Mongolian Buddhism as a task involves structures beyond the united front system. In 2011, a think tank affiliated with the energy company CEFC published a pseudonymously signed article discussing China's stakes in the Jebtsundampa reincarnation issue. The article called on the PRC to counter Dharamsala's influence by leading the establishment of a "unified system for the search, recognition and final announcement" of reincarnate Mongolian lamas in China, Russia and Mongolia.<sup>17</sup> CEFC, now defunct, was part of a cluster of organisations linked to what is now the PWD Liaison Bureau, and thus effectively a military intelligence front.<sup>18</sup> Its at times bribe-fuelled cooption activities have targeted political leaders and well-known think-tank commentators, notably in the United States, Serbia, the Czech Republic and at the United Nations.<sup>19</sup>

Support for forces opposing the Dalai Lama makes the CCP a visible participant in disputes within Mongolia's Buddhist establishment. Actions by the country's main temple, the Gandan in Ulaanbaatar, contrary to CCP plans to guide global Mongolian Buddhism have often met the vocal criticism of the abbot of a rival monastery, on occasion picked up by PRC state media.<sup>20</sup> This rival abbot maintains a friendly relationship with the PRC party-state: his interlocutors have included UFWD, SARA and BAC cadres.<sup>21</sup> Instantiating the CCP's support for opposition within global Vajrayāna to the Dharamsala-centred mainstream, BAC leaders also maintain exchanges with the country's main temple associated with Dorje Shugden, a deity whose followers

<sup>17</sup> 納蘭, "蒙古承認尊丹巴 [sic] 帶來的影響", 信報財經新聞, 26th Nov. 2011, reproduced on the CEFC website.

<sup>18</sup> See n. 10.

<sup>19</sup> On the links between CEFC and the rest of its PLA intelligence cluster, see Stokes & Hsiao, *op. cit.*, pp. 26 sq. et passim. While CEFC itself eventually encountered difficulties in the US and China, the larger PLA intelligence cluster it belonged to and networks it helped build remain active. On CEFC's successful cultivation of global élite figures, see, e.g., Sinopsis and Jichang Lulu, "United Nations with Chinese Characteristics: Elite capture and discourse management on a global scale", Sinopsis, 25 June 2018. In the US, CEFC's activities easily attracted the participation of popular commentators on Chinese affairs, such as the economist Jeff Sachs, the former journalist Orville Schell and the 'think-tankers' Bonnie Glaser and Michael Swaine (see, e.g., "第五届“中美对话”研讨会", CEFC, 7th July 2014; Orville Schell, "Managing the Transition in Global Economic Leadership", *China Eye* (CEFC) 9 (2016) (excerpted from Schell's speech at CEFC's 8th Sino-US Colloquium); J. Michael Cole, "Chinese Propaganda: Coming Soon to a Conference Near You", *The Diplomat*, 23rd Sept. 2015). A Belgrade-based think tank whose establishment CEFC claimed to have "fully funded" is still active, led by former Serbian foreign affairs minister and United Nations General Assembly president Vuk Jeremić and "advised" by Sachs and politicians and international organisation officials (Filip Jirouš, "China's Serbian Proxy Highlights How Beijing Captures Elites", *Balkan Insight*, 30th June 2019; "Board of Advisors", Center for International Relations and Sustainable Development). On the Czech case, where a leading figure in PLA intelligence networks became an "advisor" to the president, see Martin Hála, "United Front Work by Other Means: China's 'Economic Diplomacy' in Central and Eastern Europe", *China Brief* 19:9 (2019).

<sup>20</sup> In 2016, the Dalai Lama visited Ulaanbaatar on the Gandan's invitation. PRC state media quoted the rival lama's criticism of the invitation ("中方要求蒙古国不允许达赖窜访 切实履行在涉藏问题上的承诺", 环球时报, 19th Nov. 2016). On the visit and inaccurate reporting on its aftermath by PRC, then Western media, see Jichang Lulu, "The costs of normalisation: Norway and Mongolia respond to Chinese sanctions", *China Policy Institute: Analysis / Jichang Lulu blog*, 22nd Feb. 2017.

<sup>21</sup> "蒙古国佛教代表团一行到雍和宫参观交流", 北京市东城区人民政府, 11th Aug. 2016; "邢海明大使会见中国佛教协会代表团", 驻蒙古国大使馆, 27th Sept. 2016.



Figure 2: The Dashchoilin Maitreya under construction in Sichuan, 2013. Source: Жавзандамба хутагт төв.

resent the Dalai Lama's disapproval of aspects of their worship.<sup>22</sup> While some of these ties with the periphery have earned the party the domestic reproduction of propaganda points, their usefulness is limited in a society where proximity to China is often unpopular.<sup>23</sup>

The CCP-controlled religious establishment has used financial investments to cultivate Mongolia's Buddhist mainstream. The prominence of Dashchoilin monastery, Ulaanbaatar's second largest, extends beyond Mongolia's borders. Its abbot, a senior member of international Buddhist organisations, is active in exchanges with India and has repeatedly met with the Dalai Lama, without that stopping the temple's decades-long exchanges with PRC clergy and officialdom.<sup>24</sup> Starting in the mid 2000s, these exchanges gave the Dashchoilin what neither Delhi nor Dharamsala had done: substantial help rebuilding the monumental Maitreya statue that put the temple's predecessor at the centre of the capital's religious landscape for over a century until

<sup>22</sup>On these exchanges, see Lulu, "Global Religion...", n. 4, with further references on the Dorje Shugden controversy.

<sup>23</sup>On Mongolian anti-Chinese sentiment, beyond the extremist fringe occasionally familiar to superficial Western media coverage, see Franck Billé, *Sinophobia: Anxiety, Violence, and the Making of Mongolian Identity*, University of Hawaii Press, 2014, ch. 1.

<sup>24</sup>Choiiljavyn Dambajav, the Dashchoilin's abbot, is a vice president of the World Fellowship of Buddhists, whose activities the CCP has oscillated between boycotting and supporting ("Office bearers", WFB; Holmes Welch, *Buddhism under Mao*, Harvard UP, 1972, p. 211; "中国佛教协会发言人就中国佛教代表团退出第26届'世佛联'韩国大会发表谈话", 新华 via gov.cn, 15th June 2012; "第27届世界佛教徒联谊会大会在宝鸡法门寺隆重开幕 俞正声发来贺信", 陕西日报 via 共产党新闻网, 17th Oct. 2014). On Dambajav's Indian and other international contacts, see Ц. П. Ванчикова & М. В. Аюшеева, "Зуун хурээ и современный Дашчойлин хийд, Гуманитарный вектор 4:44 (2015). The Dashchoilin's exchanges with the PRC go back to the 1990s ("Эмгэнэл", Зүүн Хүрээ Дашчойлин хийдийн албан ёсны хуудас via Facebook, 23rd Jan. 2021). Exchanges with CCP united front officials did not cease after Dambajav's meetings with the Dalai Lama ("Дээрхийн гэгээнтэн XIV Далай лам Монголд ирлээ", inet.mn, 7th Nov. 2011; "མཉམ་པ་རྒྱལ་བ་འཕེལ་བའི་ལོ་འཁོར་ལྗོངས་ཀྱི་ཆེན་མོ་ཐུགས་བརྟན། (3)", gyalwarinpoche.com, 22nd Nov. 2016; Ч. Үл-Олдох, "Далай лам: Би энх тайван, амар амгалангийн төлөө байдаг", Зууны мэдээ, 24th Nov. 2016; "朱维群访问蒙古国佛教寺庙", 驻蒙古国大使馆, 2nd Aug. 2011; "Монголын шашны салбар Хятадын халдварт өвчинтэй тэмцэх ажлыг дэмжиж байна, БНХАУ Монгол Улсад суугаа ЭСЯ, 27th Feb. 2020).



Figure 3: The Dashchoilin Maitreya in Ulaanbaatar, March 2018. Courtesy of Pawel Szczap.

the communist régime destroyed it in 1938.<sup>25</sup> The Maitreya was eventually built in Sichuan and installed in the Dashchoilin in 2018 (see figures 2, 3) as a donation from Yonghegong temple in Beijing, outpacing a competing Dalai Lama-blessed Maitreya complex still under construction outside the capital.<sup>26</sup>

The CCP's cultivation of Mongolia's Buddhist clergy also creates links to the country's political élite. Sain Nomuun monastery in Nailakh District may not count among Ulaanbaatar's main temples, but its abbot's connections make it an ideal target for influence work. Exchanges between the Sain Nomuun and its PRC interlocutors have involved not only its abbot, Sainbuyangiin Nergüi, but also members of his family and their business group.<sup>27</sup> Nergüi's brother Amarsaikhan, once an attaché at the Mongolian embassy in Beijing, held senior city-level political roles in Ulaanbaatar until 2021, when he became deputy prime minister.<sup>28</sup> Their elder brother Otgonbayar, the founder of the business that helped build the monastery, had a political career of his

<sup>25</sup>On the old Maitreya statue and its significance, see A.M. Позднеев, *Монголия и монголы*, vol. 1, Императорское Русское географическое общество, 1896, p. 93; Zsuzsa Majer & Krisztina Teleki, *Monasteries and Temples of Bogdiin khüree, Ikh khüree, or Urga, the Old Capital City of Mongolia in the First Part of the Twentieth Century*, 2006, p. 32; Johan Elverskog, "Maitreya, Shambhala and the End of Buddhist Empire", in *Faith and Empire: The Art of Politics in Tibetan Buddhism*, ed. by Karl Debreczeny, Rubin Museum of Art, 2018. Plans to rebuild it go back to the 1990s; Chinese help was being discussed with the PRC religious establishment by the mid-2000s. (Ванчикова & Аюшеева, *op. cit.*; "Зүүн хүрээний майдар бурхан "эргэх ирнэ", Olloo, 15th May 2007; "Ирээдүй цагийн Майдар Бурхан", buddha.mn, 15th Oct. 2013).

<sup>26</sup>Jichang Lulu, "Ulaanbaatar monastery gets monumental Maitreya from China, Jichang Lulu blog, 1st Sept. 2017; Isabelle Charleux, "The Grand Maitreya Project of Mongolia: A Colossal Statue-cum-Stupa for a Happy Future of 'Loving Kindness'", *Contemporary Buddhism* 21:1–2 (2021).

<sup>27</sup>This paragraph overlaps in content with Lulu, "Global Religion..."

<sup>28</sup>"Монгол Улсын Шадар сайд С.АМАРСАЙХАН, Онцгой байдлын ерөнхий газар, 10th Feb. 2021.





own, peaking with his tenure as a minister in the mid 2000s.<sup>29</sup> Yinshun 印顺, a BAC vice chairman, has directly cultivated Nergüi. The monks' exchanges, predicated, as Yinshun put it, on propagating the dharma "following the BRI express", have included mutual visits, discussion of the Chinese side sending "teachers" to "help raise the level of Buddhist culture of the temple's monks" and interactions with the Sainbuyan family's company.<sup>30</sup> The relationship has brought the CCP valuable endorsements of its global endeavours, from religion as well as politics. In 2017, the Sain Nomuun provided the first contingent of foreign trainees to the Tibetan Academy of Buddhism in Beijing, received by the Panchen Lama, BAC head Xuecheng and SARA officials.<sup>31</sup> That year's edition of Yinshun's South China Sea Buddhism Roundtable in Shenzhen saw Nergüi deliver a speech endorsing PRC policy from BRI to territorial expansionism ("All lamas and Buddhist countries support the One-China Policy").<sup>32</sup> In 2021, now as deputy prime minister, Nergüi's brother sent congratulations to the event, illustrating the successful transition from religious to political influence.<sup>33</sup>

## 2 Japan: Buddhism in the first arena of CCP influence work

The dual cultivation of the mainstream and periphery of Buddhist institutions reproduces in Mongolia tactics first tested in Japan. The CCP's half-century-old ties with Japanese religious groups has yielded endorsements of CCP policy of transnational significance. A PRC-friendly religious political group has become an irreplaceable coalition partner of Japan's largest political party. Cultivating Japanese Buddhist groups, likely the CCP's earliest international religious influence operation, already involved agencies from both the intelligence and united front apparatuses.

Ties with Japan's Buddhist institutions, cultivated since the Mao era, now allow the CCP to present an international image of mainstream religious endorsement for its foreign policy. The Jōdo-shū 浄土宗, one of Japan's mainstream Buddhist schools, may be the best example. Zhao Puchu's contacts with Jōdo leaders evolved into the establishment of two of the BAC's early official partners in Japan, the Japan-China Buddhist Friendship Society (日中友好仏教協会) and the Japan-China Friendship Jōdo Shū Association (日中友好浄土宗協会) in the 1970s.<sup>34</sup> The latter continues to embody the school's China ties. In 2016, by which time the Jōdo had dispatched over 200 friendship delegations to China, the BAC celebrated the relationship by awarding the title of "China-Japan Buddhist Friendship Ambassador" to Fukuhara Ryūzen 福原隆善, dharma master of a major Jōdo temple and vice president of the friendship asso-

<sup>29</sup> Alan J.K. Sanders, *Historical Dictionary of Mongolia*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2017, p. 646. The prison sentence that emanated from Otgonbayar's ministerial tenure did not terminate his business or political life. In 2012, local media listed him as the 68th richest Mongolian (Т.Гэрэл, "Монголын топ 100 тэрбумтан" баячуудын жагсаалт", 24tsag.mn, 21st Sept. 2012). He stood for election again in 2016, unsuccessfully ("Монгол Улсын Их Хурлын 2016 оны сонгууль – Улсын Их Хурлын сонгуульд 33-р тойрогт нэр дэвшигчдэд өгсөн хүчинтэй саналын тоо (Санал өгөх тоо 1)", Сонгуулийн ерөнхий хороо).

<sup>30</sup> "蒙古善妙寺方丈乃尔贵·赛布彦一行参访海南省佛教协会", 凤凰佛教, 20th Aug. 2017; "海南省佛教协会会长印顺大和尚率团访问蒙古国 共创中蒙佛教关系发展新篇章", UFD, 16th June 2017; "蒙古乌兰巴托 SainN[o]muun 寺方丈 sainbuyanNergui 参访三亚南山寺", 南海佛教网, 2017.

<sup>31</sup> Lulu, *op. cit.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> "2021 南海佛教深圳圆桌会举行 缅甸高僧呼吁各方携手合作", 缅甸金凤凰报, 20th Dec. 2021.

<sup>34</sup> "中日佛教友好交流回眸", BAC, 21st Nov. 2013; 李贺敏, "无著天亲隔海望 与君世世为兄弟——日本友人水谷幸正先生访华侧记", 法音 8 (2004).



ciation.<sup>35</sup> The relationship helped the CCP united front system build its transnational Buddhist discourse power: the Jōdo-shū was one of the initiators of the China-Korea-Japan Buddhist Friendly Exchange Conference in 1993, an annual event inspired by Zhao Puchu.<sup>36</sup> The themes of a recent edition, as relayed by SARA, included “building a community of shared future for humankind,” a staple Xiist term that functions as synecdoche for a CCP-dominated global order.<sup>37</sup>

More overtly than in Mongolia, military intelligence is involved in the cultivation of Buddhist groups in Japan, building ties outside the orthodoxy represented by the main schools. The China Association for International Friendly Contacts (CAIFC, 中国国际友好联络会), a front of the PLA Liaison Bureau and its predecessor agency, has built a decades-long relationship with the Agon-shū 阿含宗, one of Japan’s ‘new religions’.<sup>38</sup> Military intelligence’s role goes back to the early years of the CCP’s relationship with Agon-shū, initiated less than a decade after the religion’s establishment.<sup>39</sup> The relationship continues to this day.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>35</sup> 张晓曦, “中国佛教协会授予日本净土宗人士‘友好使者’荣誉”, 中国新闻网 via 凤凰佛教, 29th Oct. 2016. The title was first given to Jōdo leader Mizutani Kōshō 水谷幸正 (“水谷幸正”; 妙熙, “從鑑真大師到星雲大師”, 人間福報, 26th Apr. 2018).

<sup>36</sup> 崔滢周, “불교의 세계화 공동추진 합의-제 1 차 韓中日 불교회의 결산”, 중앙일보, 25th May 1995; 张晓曦, *op. cit.*; “第十六次中韩日佛教友好交流会议”, BAC.

<sup>37</sup> “织宽编长中韩日三国佛教‘黄金纽带’助力构建人类命运共同体——第二十二次中韩日佛教友好交流会议在珠海举行”, SARA, 30th Oct. 2019. On Xi’s “community”, see Nadège Rolland, “Beijing’s Vision for a Reshaped International Order”, *China Brief* 18:3, 2018.

<sup>38</sup> The CAIFC-Agon relationship was previously noted in Russell Hsiao, “A Preliminary Survey of CCP Influence Operations in Japan”, *China Brief* 19:12 (2019); Alex Joske, “The Party speaks for you...”, pp. 15 sq. A recent treatment of Agon-shū in the context of new religions is Erica Baffelli & Ian Reader, *Dynamism and the Ageing of a Japanese ‘New’ Religion: Transformations and the Founder*, Bloomsbury, 2019, ch. 1. On CAIFC’s position within the military intelligence cluster that included, e.g., CEFC (cf. n. 19), see John Garnaut, “China gets into the business of making friends”, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25th May 2013; Stokes & Hsiao, *op. cit.*, p. 11 et passim. For early evidence of the continuity of links between the new Liaison Bureau and the CAIFC system, note that the name of Shen Haichao 沈海潮, identified as a Liaison Bureau cadre in a 2017 social media post by a Zhejiang Province Military District account, coincides with that of a former vice chair of the Fujian chapter of CAIFC, who held a post at the association until 2018 (“腊月里的温暖, 在军属心底如花绽放”, 钱塘兵事 via 微信, 12th Jan. 2017 (cf. “53 个‘移动征兵办’服务百万之江青年”, 中国国防报, 30th Mar. 2017); “理事会”, 福建省国际友好联络会; “福建省民政厅行政许可公告 (2018 年 05 月 07 日至 05 月 11 日)”, 福建社会组织, 14th May 2018). Publications on Japanese new religions by CAIFC personnel signal that the agency’s interest goes beyond Agon-shū (see, e.g., 邵宏伟, “浅析日本新宗教中的民族主义倾向”, 日本学刊 6 (2008) (on whose author’s posts, which have included that of CAIFC office chief, Stokes & Hsiao, *op. cit.*, p. 63 n. 152; “我会组团访问日本”, CAIFC, 20th Aug. 2013; “日本政治、社会研究学者邵宏伟”, 日本学刊, 14th Jan. 2016)). PLA intelligence’s religious affairs purview further manifests itself in CAIFC personnel appointments: Wang Jian 王健, former secretary-general of BAC, concurrently with SARA, then at the UFW 11th Bureau, has sat on the CAIFC council since at least 2011 (“中国国际友好联络会第四届理事会理事”, CAIFC, 26th Dec. 2011; “中国国际友好联络会第五届理事会理事”, CAIFC; “组织结构”, CAIFC; “国家宗教事务局党组关于韩松王健任免的通知”, SARA, 22th Sep. 2015; “中央统战部十一局王健副局长一行来校商谈继续培养培训爱国宗教界人士事宜”, 中国人民大学, 23rd May 2019).

<sup>39</sup> Agon-shū was officially established in 1978 on the basis of its founder Kiriya Seiyū’s 桐山靖雄 previous organisation (Baffelli & Reader, *op. cit.*, p. 50). Agon-shū’s exchanges with BAC (at least some of which take place “through CAIFC”) had begun by 1986 (“中国佛教代表团应邀访问日本 出席阿含宗万灯会”, BAC via 中佛网, 22nd Aug. 2016; “中国佛协协会演觉副会长会见日本阿含宗代表团”, 佛教在线, 10th June 2019). Agon-shū and CAIFC “formally established a long-term friendly cooperation relationship” in 1989 (*ibid.*).

<sup>40</sup> Exchanges have involved SARA cadre (“日本阿含宗中国事务局局长史学军等拜访我会”, BAC, 7th May 2018) as well as, within CAIFC, Major-General Xin Qi 辛旗, a PLA intelligence officer (“友联会与阿含宗为北大北外师生颁奖”, CAIFC, 19th Dec. 2018; Stokes and Hsiao, *op. cit.*, pp. 21 sq.). Leading religious affairs cadre accompanied CAIFC to meet Agon-shū founder Kiriya Seiyū and to attend his funeral (“王健秘书长随中国国际友好联络会组团访问日本阿含宗”, BAC, 16th Feb. 2013; “中国佛教代表团出席日本阿含宗桐山靖雄葬礼”, BAC, 17th Oct. 2016). More recent interaction has manifested itself in the Agon Kiriya Cup (阿含·桐山杯), a go competition jointly organised by the CAIFC and the Chinese Go



Figure 4: Ikeda Daisaku and Zhou Enlai in 1974. Source: *Sōka Gakkai*.

The importance of non-mainstream religious groups to influence operations becomes manifest in the CCP's cultivation of a Buddhist group and its political arm. *Sōka Gakkai* 創価学会, a lay organisation outside the Buddhist mainstream, grew in the first two post-war decades to become a political force, with pacifism among its principles. In 1964, *Sōka Gakkai*'s leader established *Kōmeitō* 公明党, a political party that continues to rely on the religious group as a core constituency and has by now become an indispensable coalition partner to the ruling Liberal Democratic Party.<sup>41</sup> The group's growing political power conceivably motivated Zhou Enlai's instructions to build ties with it in the 1960s.<sup>42</sup> Ties have only continued to flourish since the Mao era, with top party-state cadres regularly meeting with *Kōmeitō* leaders.<sup>43</sup> The CPAFFC, an agency in the foreign affairs system that the CCP typically deploys to by-pass state-to-state relations, has often mediated exchanges between the CCP and these groups, helping them continue unimpeded during periods of frosty official relations between the countries.<sup>44</sup> *Kōmeitō* and *Sōka Gakkai*'s friendship with the CCP has repeatedly impacted Japan's China policy. *Sōka Gakkai* leader Ikeda Daisaku 池田大作 began

Association and sponsored by Agon-shū (第 22 届阿含·桐山杯中国围棋快棋公开赛成都开幕, 新华, 11th Sep. 2021).

<sup>41</sup> *Kōmeitō*'s 1964 founding statement committed the new party to "the Buddhist philosophy of absolute pacifism" as the world's only "salvation from the horror of war" (quoted in Levi McLaughlin, "Electioneering as religious practice: A history of *Sōka Gakkai*'s political activities to 1970", in *Kōmeitō: Politics and Religion in Japan*, ed. by George Ehrhardt et al., IEAS (Berkeley), 2014, p. 67). On *Sōka Gakkai* and *Kōmeitō*, see, e.g., Erica Baffelli, "Sōka Gakkai and Politics in Japan", *Religion Compass* 4:12 (2010); Anne Mette Fisker-Nielsen, *Religion and politics in contemporary Japan: Soka Gakkai Youth and Komeito*, Routledge, 2012, pp. 34 sqq.

<sup>42</sup> "中日友好使者池田大作：与周总理结下深厚友谊", 海南日报 via 中国新闻网, 20th June 2011; "遍地开花的友谊", 创价大学北京办事处.

<sup>43</sup> Just like Zhou Enlai would receive *Kōmeitō* leaders in the 1970s (see n. 45), top PRC leaders including the CCP's current general secretary and his predecessor met *Kōmeitō*'s top figures (罗辉, "胡锦涛在人民大会堂会见日本公明党党首太田昭宏", 新华网, 8th Jan. 2007; 谭晶晶, "李克强在人民大会堂会见日本创价学会副理事长", 新华 via gov.cn, 12th Jan. 2012; 赵成, "习近平会见日本公明党党首山口那津男", 人民日报 via 共产党新闻网, 26th Jan. 2013).

<sup>44</sup> CPAFFC leaders have participated in *Kōmeitō* meetings with top PRC leaders (谭晶晶, *op. cit.*). In 2014, a concert co-organised with a *Sōka Gakkai*-affiliated group gave CPAFFC president Li Xiaolin a chance to meet with Prime Minister Abe Shinzō ("日中友好を舞劇で表現", 公明党, 8th Oct. 2014; "日媒: 安倍与李小林看中国舞剧 展交流姿态", 参考消息网, 9th Oct. 2014; cf. 郑青亭 & 常红, "专家: 日各界代表团访华有助"融冰"但效果有限", 人民网, 7th May 2014).

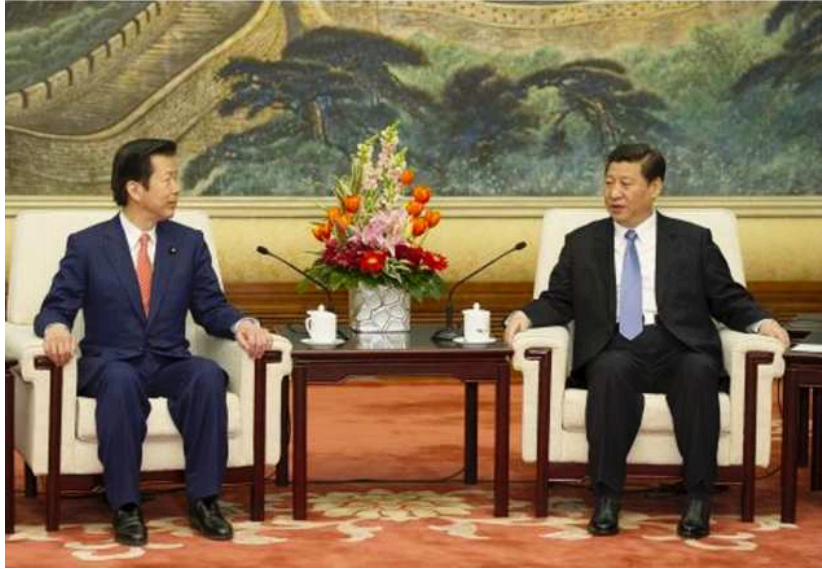


Figure 5: Xi Jinping with Kōmeitō leader Yamaguchi Natsuo 山口那津男 in 2013. Source: 人民日报.

discussing normalising relations with the PRC in 1968, with Kōmeitō leader Takeiri Yoshikatsu 竹入義勝 subsequent meetings with PRC officials then serving as the basis for Japan's 1972 recognition of the PRC.<sup>45</sup> CCP leaders have repeatedly praised Kōmeitō for advancing "Sino-Japanese friendship".<sup>46</sup> In 2021, Kōmeitō sought to tone down the Japanese parliament's responses to the human rights situation in China, warning that "unnecessary diplomatic problems" could arise if Japan imposed sanctions and stating that there were "no grounds for confirming" the PRC's human-rights violations in Xinjiang.<sup>47</sup>

### 3 Australia: Xiist Buddhism, purveyor of multicultural tokenism to the political class

Less intuitively, coopted monks can serve CCP influence work in locales where only a minority practises Buddhism. Their use relies on versatile, target-tailored cultivation: while a shared tradition can motivate ties between united front hierarchs and Buddhist-majority countries, Buddhism's status as a minority religion can make it attractive to Western politicians seeking to display multicultural associations. In Australia, a BAC-blessed association and a Xiist monk's endeavours instantiate the overlap between the CCP's efforts to control global Buddhism and its political influence operations in the West.

<sup>45</sup> On Ikeda's 1968 call for normalisation, see 別枝行夫, "戦後日中関係と公明党", 北東アジア研究 29 (2018); "日中邦交正常化倡言 (1968 年 9 月 8 日)", 池田大作中文网. On Takeiri's meetings and their significance, "Record of the First Meeting between Takeiri Yoshikatsu and Zhou Enlai", 1972, via Wilson Center; Yuki Abe & Masahisa Endo, "Kōmeitō's Uncertain Decades between Religion and Politics", in Ehrhardt et al., eds., *op. cit.*, p. 87.

<sup>46</sup> 罗辉, *op. cit.*; "习近平会见日本客人", 外交部, 15th Dec. 2010.

<sup>47</sup> "公明・山口代表「根拠なければ」 ウィグル対中制裁に慎重姿勢", 産経新聞, 30th Mar. 2021.





The Australia China Buddhist Council's (ACBC, 澳中佛教总会) leadership is diverse enough to include a monk who once claimed to help cure cancer, but less eclectic when it comes to PRC politics. Wang Xinde 王信得 (Zhiji 智及), whose career as a performer and purportedly miraculous healer in China was cut short by a prison term, arrived in Tasmania in 1989, where he would eventually establish a Buddhist academy and become an ACBC vice president.<sup>48</sup> The ACBC is a BAC partner: established a year after BAC president Xuecheng expressed a "hope" to see "Buddhism play a bigger role in Australia's multiculturalism", the council has maintained exchanges with the BAC beginning with Xuecheng's attendance at its inaugural event in 2018.<sup>49</sup> The council's united front links go beyond the BAC: senior members and initiators of the ACBC have ties with united front agencies and have held roles in prominent CCP-linked groups in Australia, notably the Australian Council for the Promotion of the Peaceful Reunification of China (ACPPRC).<sup>50</sup> Wang Xinde has been, in addition to ACBC vice president, among the ACPPRC's executive vice presidents and the head of its Tasmanian branch.<sup>51</sup> The council's inaugural president was Huang Xiangmo 黄向墨, who formerly presided the ACPPRC and was eventually expelled from Australia after an intelligence agency reportedly found him to be "amenable to conducting acts of foreign interference".<sup>52</sup>

The ACBC and Wang's academy have proved useful platforms for CCP officials to engage with Australian politicians and officials undeterred by the council's overt Xiism and clear party links. State and federal politicians, a New South Wales police representative, as well as a former SARA official (now with the UFWD) attended ACBC's in-

<sup>48</sup>“薄伽梵智及维摩诘宗师荣获第五届全球华人影响力盛典建国 70 周年杰出华人宗教领袖奖”, 爱华新闻网 via 金刚禅国际总会资讯网, 22nd Aug. 2019. Wang's healing activities in the 1980s benefited from the support the government then accorded to pseudoscientific practices centred on the *qigong* movement. On Wang's career in China and his cooperation with state entities, see 李宝奇, “王信得与金刚禅气功”, 体育文史 4 (1990). By the mid-1980s, Wang was publishing on martial arts technique as inspired by Tantric Buddhism (王信得, 少林绝命腿, 北京体育学院出版社, 1989; “少林金刚禅自然门” 介绍, 金刚禅国际总会资讯网). On Wang's claim that he was imprisoned, Anne Mather, “From faith healer to prisoner and then ... Tasmanian exile”, *The Mercury*, 6 August 2005. On the PRC security apparatus's support for Falun Gong, a *qigong* group that would later become a target of CCP repression, see Jichang Lulu and Filip Jirouš, “Back to the Cheka: The Ministry of Public Security's political protection work”, Sinopsis, 21st Feb. 2022, p. 11 and references therein.

<sup>49</sup>On the 2013 visit, see “中国佛教协会代表团一行到澳大利亚访问”, 丰财园在线佛教网, 28th Mar. 2013. For the Xuecheng quote, “中国佛教代表团访问澳大利亚”, BAC, 7th Apr. 2013. The ACBC was established in 2014 (“Australia China Buddhist Council Limited”, Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission). For Xuecheng's attendance of the inaugural event, “澳洲楞严学院举行般若法师升座庆典暨澳中佛教总会成立揭牌仪式”, 菩萨在线, 14th Apr. 2018. These exchanges have continued. In late 2019, the ACBC invited a BAC delegation to Australia to prepare for the First Buddhist Forum of Australia China and New Zealand 2020, which had been scheduled for February 2020 (“中国佛教代表团应邀访问澳大利亚”, BAC, 4th Dec. 2019).

<sup>50</sup>Like about a hundred similarly named entities worldwide, the Australian reunification council is effectively a local chapter of the China Council for the Promotion of Peaceful National Reunification (CCPPNR), a united front agency led by UFWD cadre (Joske, *op. cit.*, p. 46 n. 135; John Dotson, “The United Front Work Department Goes Global: The Worldwide Expansion of the Council for the Promotion of the Peaceful Reunification of China”, *China Brief* 19:9 (2019); “领导机构”, CCPPNR).

<sup>51</sup>“组织架构”, ACPPRC; “澳洲中国和平统一促进会塔州分会宣告成立”, ACPPRC, 17th Oct. 2017.

<sup>52</sup>“澳中佛教总会在悉尼举行盛大欢迎晚宴”, 澳视网, 15th Apr. 2018. On Huang Xiangmo, see Joske, *op. cit.*, pp. 20 sqq. Another two ACBC co-initiators, Ven Tan (陈星惠) and Eng Joo Ang 洪永裕, have held leading positions at the ACPPRC (“澳中佛教总会举行新闻发布会”, 澳洲新快网, 29th Mar. 2018; “组织架构”). Both have received united front appointments in China: the former has been an overseas member of the All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese (ACFROC), a diaspora-focused united front agency; the latter was an overseas delegate to the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, the peak united front body (“Dr Chin Ven Tan”, HealthShare.com.au; “第十次全国归侨侨眷代表大会聘请中国侨联第十届委员会海外委员名单”, ACFROC, 1st Sep. 2018; “洪永裕会长简介”, 澳洲福建会馆).





Figure 6: Cheng Jingye (second from left), PRC ambassador to Australia, BAC chair Xuecheng (front row, third from left) and Huang Xiangmo (front row, fourth from left) at Xuecheng's welcoming banquet in April 2018. Source: 澳视网.

augural event in 2018.<sup>53</sup> Politicians and other elite figures have attended Wang Xinde's Tasmanian Buddhism academy's New Year banquets.<sup>54</sup> In 2013, Wang gave a painting of Xi Jinping and his wife to the state's premier (figure 7).<sup>55</sup>

By offering politicians an easy shortcut to an image of minority engagement, such CCP-linked Buddhist entities allow the party to effortlessly associate politicians and elites in democratic countries with figures whose public views they would normally find politically toxic. Australian politicians eager for photo opportunities with the ACBC and Wang Xinde may not have bothered to study his treatment of "the latest policies enacted by the motherland" and Buddha's teaching as "guidance for everything we do"<sup>56</sup> or his views on Xi's "China dream" and "China's might" bringing to the world "cosmic positive energy" that "controls the universe and the earth".<sup>57</sup>

<sup>53</sup> "澳洲楞严学院举行..." Pei Biao 裴飏, the PRC religious affairs official, used to work for SARA. He was at the UFWD by late 2018 ("2018 中国佛教讲经交流会在杭州佛学院隆重开幕", 杭州市人民政府, 19th Nov. 2018).

<sup>54</sup> Attendees have included, e.g., Concetta Fierravanti-Wells, who addressed the 2015 event on behalf of then PM Tony Abbott and would later become a minister; Catryna Bilyk, a Tasmanian senator who spoke at the 2017 event on behalf of Bill Shorten, then leader of the opposition; and Will Hodgman, a three-term Tasmanian premier later given a diplomatic post ("文明因交流而多彩 文明因互鉴而丰富——澳大利亚塔州中国佛教学院、金刚禅佛教弘扬中华优秀传统文化纪实", BAC, 2015; "聯邦反對黨黨魁代表", 金剛禪國際總會資訊網, 4th Feb. 2017).

<sup>55</sup> "Brief Introduction of our school", TCBA. Four years later, the former premier, Lara Giddings, also attended the launch of Wang's Tasmanian reunification council, together with the Tasmanian legislator and former Hobart mayor Rob Valentine ("澳洲中国和平统一促进会塔州分会...").

<sup>56</sup> Matthew Denholm, "Sect leader tells faithful: follow Beijing 'in everything'", *The Australian*, 1st Oct. 2018.

<sup>57</sup> The Master was praising Xi's 2013 Russia visit (a "simultaneously defensive and offensive" move) noting that "China and Russia share the same values: safeguarding justice, fairness and peace" ("主席訪俄 獨領風騷", 聖密龍講 242 (24th Mar. 2013), transcript via 澳大利亚塔州中国佛教学院, 3rd Mar. 2015).



Figure 7: Wang Xinde gives a painting to Tasmanian Premier Lara Giddings, 2013. Source: [TCBAA](#).

## 4 Conclusion: One party, many robes

When they talk to senior monks, participants in officially blessed religious exchanges are effectively talking to functionaries and satellites of the CCP-driven political system. The Buddhist Association of China, a frequent interlocutor of foreign religious and political figures, is a component of the CCP united front system, led by monks the party has nurtured. Administratively untethered satellites abroad, such as party-aligned Buddhist organisations, assist organs like the BAC in the quest to utilise global Buddhism as a tool in influence activity. Their overt Xiism is not merely declamatory: as the evidence above shows, they actively cooperate with PRC agencies.

Using a systems-based approach, the case studies above have helped assess the importance of religion within external influence operations, beyond united front work. The faithful abroad extend a core united front constituency. As the case of Mongolia shows, the CCP extrapolates methods of domestic united front work, such as training monks in party-controlled institutions, to the cooption of foreign religion. UFWD and BAC officials have long been most visible in the Buddhist exchanges described in all three locales discussed in this study. The cultivation of foreign religion is not, however, limited to the united front system: e.g., the CPAFFC, a foreign affairs organ, is prominent in interactions with Sōka Gakkai and Kōmeitō. A PLA intelligence agency's involvement in this work — direct in Japan, in Mongolia at least oblique — adds to growing evidence that united front and other systems serve as vessels for intelligence work.

This note has shown the CCP wearing different robes to approach global Buddhism's diversity. The legacy of the Qing's patronage of Vajrayāna can motivate renewed ties with monasteries in Mongolia. Sōka Gakkai's anti-militarism can rhyme with themes of peace — which euphemistically refers to the disarmament of China's rivals. In Australia, CCP-linked entities can offer cheap tokens of minority engagement to politicians and officials seeking a multicultural image. Tradition, peace and multiculturalism — hardly traits of CCP religious policy at home — are motifs the party can adopt to



cultivate targets that value them. By coopting religious groups abroad, the party gets to borrow for political influence work memes religion has long benefited from.

Religion is, in turn, just one robe worn in influence work. The party coopts through religion, but bans it among its members. Likewise, it wears other ideologies that appeal to targets it cultivates: free trade, socialism, sustainability, market reforms, human rights, anti-racism. The party doesn't believe in these any more than in reincarnation.

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