

# Beijing eyes Buddhist resurgence

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SERTHAR, China (RNS) Breathless but beaming, Sheng Zisu sounds confident after five months in a maze-like Buddhist encampment high on the eastern Tibetan plateau, nearly 400 miles from the nearest city.

"Look around. They could never find me here," Sheng, 27, said of parents so anxious about their only child's turn to Tibetan Buddhism that they have threatened to kidnap her.

Sheng is far from her home -- and from the bars where she used to drink and the ex-boyfriends she says cheated on her. She is here with 2,000 other Han Chinese at the Larung Gar Buddhist Institute in Serthar, Sichuan province, the rain-soaked mountainous region of southwest China.

The province is far from the central government in Beijing, and is also a traditional gateway to Tibet, where China's Communist Party has suppressed Buddhists, sometimes brutally, for decades.

Holy chants and red-robed devotees spill down hillsides blanketed by red wooden cabins, where monks, nuns and disciples spend hours in meditation. More than 2 miles above sea level, Larung Gar is among the largest Tibetan Buddhist academies in the world, with about 10,000 mostly Tibetan students.

The academy and its rising number of converts from China's dominant ethnic group, the Han Chinese, reflect a remarkable and quiet recovery for Buddhist teachings here. Along with a building boom of new or expanded Buddhist monasteries and teaching facilities in the Ganzi Tibetan autonomous prefecture, it amounts to a reversal of some of the damage from Chairman Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution.

Mao's efforts to strip China of capitalism and religion resulted in the destruction of hundreds of Buddhist temples and the deaths of thousands of monks. Just a decade

ago, the institute survived a crackdown in which Chinese officials ordered the partial destruction of its buildings.

Mao's vision has given way to a more capitalistic and seemingly more tolerant version of communism. But Buddhism's broadening popularity here is stoking tension between Buddhist monks who demand religious freedom and their longtime foe: Communist Party leadership 1,500 miles away.

In Ganzi and neighboring Aba Prefecture, 10 Tibetans -- monks, former monks and one nun -- have set themselves on fire since March, mostly in recent weeks. At least five have died from their protests for religious liberty, exile groups and China's state media Xinhua say.

Through acts of defiance -- from self-immolations to the destruction of Communist propaganda signs -- Ganzi Tibetans are showing resentment toward their Chinese overlords and loyalty to their exiled spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama.

Talks between the two sides in recent years have gone nowhere. The Dalai Lama, the spiritual head of Tibetan Buddhism, blames the recent deaths on Chinese officials' "ruthless policy, illogical policy." Beijing accuses "the Dalai Lama clique" of fanning the flames of protest.

"These self-immolations are caused by being oppressed and denied religious rights," said Dukthen Kyi, a researcher at the Tibetan Center for Human Rights and Democracy in Dharamsala, India.

In Ganzi, many people welcome the growing number of Chinese students but complain their own freedoms will be restricted as long as the Dalai Lama remains in India, his home since 1959.

"I am proud so many Han Chinese come to Serthar to study, as it will help relations between the Han and Tibetan peoples," said Tashi Dengzhu, a yak and sheep herder who lives south of Serthar.

But, "we want the Dalai Lama, our leader, to come home," said Dengzhu, 55. "I know it will be very difficult."

Chinese visitors frequently describe Tibetan Buddhism as purer than the Buddhism sporadically practiced by more than 100 million Chinese in cities and towns teeming with temptation. Just how many Han Chinese have converted to Tibetan Buddhism is

a sensitive and unanswered question in China.

"Ethnic Han who wish to study Tibetan Buddhism in Tibetan areas are often denied permission for long-term study there," according to a U.S. State Department report on religious freedom, released in September.

"Tibetan Buddhism is more attractive than other religions because many Chinese think it's mysterious," suggests Xu Jun, an analyst at Sichuan University's Center for Tibetan Studies.

One reason: The faith offers psychological comfort amid China's rapid social and economic changes, Xu said. The pursuit of material wealth drives most of China, but businessman Ye Liping has opted out.

"I earned \$25,000 a year, and I had a happy family, that's what all the world wants," recalled Ye, 40, from Guangzhou in steamy south China. Two years ago, Ye gave up everything -- his marketing job, apartment, car, wife and child -- for the monastic hardships of life at Larung Gar.

"I sometimes wonder what my daughter looks like now," Ye said, "but I have no regrets."

Han Chinese students have risen from 1,000 when she arrived seven years ago to over 2,000 today, said Yuan Yi, a shaven-headed nun from southeast Fujian province. But the senior Tibetan lama they follow, Khenpo So Dargye, refused to discuss the Chinese student body he heads.

Such caution reflects the academy's troubled past and ongoing vulnerability. Founded in what was an uninhabited Larung valley in 1980, the institute became so popular it attracted a large-scale government assault in 2001. Hundreds of homes were demolished and thousands of residents evicted, according to exile groups.

But don't expect Han converts to soften Beijing's hardline Tibet policy, cautioned Thubten Samphel, spokesman for the Tibetan government-in-exile. Their numbers are dwarfed by China's 1.3 billion population, and their motives are apolitical, he said.

"Through Buddhism, Chinese students will come to a better understanding of the values of Tibetan culture, and realize there is no innate sense of anti-Chineseness in Tibetan culture," Samphel said. "We hope and pray that the same attitude and

understanding will be shown by the Chinese Communist Party."

*(Sunny Yang contributed to this report.)*