

A Tibetan soft Power: Revisioning Buddhism as a science of the mind in China

Speaker: Dr. Dan Smyer Yu

Chair: Mr. Ravi Bhoothalingam

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Institute of Chinese Studies, Delhi

The lecture conducted by Dr. Dan Smyer Yu was an endeavour to lay down a basic understanding of the essential linkage of science and religion. Through his topic “A Tibetan soft Power: Revisioning Buddhism as a science of the mind in China” Dr. Yu threw light upon the evolution of science as an instrument used by Tibetan Buddhist teachers to critique radical secularism in modern China. According to the speaker this linkage between Buddhism and science stood out as a central theme in contemporary Sino-Tibetan Buddhist encounter. Throughout his lecture he emphasised on the fact that according to Buddhism, science is a web of inter-connected social meanings and not merely any traditionally accepted system of knowledge.

While chalking out the agenda, Dr. Yu focussed on how social science and humanity was increasingly engaging in challenging problems. His concentration on trans-regionalism made the audience ponder upon issues like how religion made sense across the globe. The lecture focussed on contemporary issues pertaining to narrowing corridors between religion and science. He mentioned that Tibetan Buddhism has been reaching out to Chinese society since the early 1990s. China’s reform and opening up policy during the time facilitated what he called ‘Tibetanisation’. Tibetan lamas looked at it as an opportunity to revive their language, culture and tradition. Therefore, under this trend of Tibetanisation, Tibetan Buddhism gained momentum.

As far as the linkage between science and Buddhism is concerned, the speaker asserted that the phenomenon of what the Tibetan lamas are doing in China is different from what the Dalai Lama has been practising in the West. Further, he mentioned that ‘scientism’ has a strong base in China already. The concept of scientism was incorporated into the Chinese nation building process and had received further impetus in connection with China’s quest to develop itself as a market economy. He recollected that the cause for the failure of earlier developments such as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution were owing to the lack of scientists.

According to the speaker, for the Tibetans, re-legitimising the social presence of Tibetan Buddhism in China was a soft power. Scientism, hereafter, was projected as a new belief system, with it taking on a reflexive consciousness in spreading of a religion. He further explained that people in China were used to scientific language and did not accept purely Buddhist language. Buddhism respected scientific way of understanding causes and therefore, was accepted easily. Christianity, which was messianic in approach is similar to Communism

in his view and hence, its followers are increasing in numbers, which is a source of worry for the Party.

The speaker mentioned that Tibetan Buddhism as a world religion came from India and has been preserved through ages. Tibetan Buddhist lamas in China strive to spread Buddhism by using the language of science, which was useful, especially while working with Chinese intellectuals and younger generations born in the 1980's. The speaker further mentioned that science is important to the Chinese because the people still looked forward to economic development and believed that science would help in achieving this to a larger extent. He also spoke about how some Chinese critics observed that the morality of the people was going down as many were into money worshipping. China had the largest rates of depression and suicide. The Tibetan lamas chose to use a scientific language to reach out in response to these problems.

Tibetan Buddhism, he argued is taking charge of a wide spectrum of public issues. Tibetan lamas were pushing the society in China as Buddhism's social engagement. Tibetan lamas have chosen a very scientific language to reach out to the problems concerning Chinese society today. They are being allowed to even enter Chinese universities and conduct lectures about social ethics, morality, and globalisation and on how one understood the science of the mind.

Discussion

The first question was with regards the comparison made by the speaker between Christianity and Tibetan Buddhism. To this, the speaker replied that there is a lot of difference in the public presence of these two religions. Christianity may have more numbers than Tibetan Buddhism but Christianity does not have the public space that Tibetan Buddhism has; their social space is limited, and hence their public discourse is also very limited. He elaborated this by stating that theology of Christianity is very different from doctrines of Buddhism. Buddhism is a very inclusive religion. Linguistically, Buddhism is very extensive and it also has a long history in China. The basic outlook is different too. Buddhism did win a favour from President Xi Jinping and the entire topic tied up neatly with his project of using soft power of Tibetan Buddhism.

To another question, he replied that it is impossible for a person in China to practice both Christianity and Communism as a communist fails to remain so once he embraces Christianity. Both worlds are very different.

On being questioned how powerful was Tibetan Buddhism, the speaker replied that Tibetan Buddhism faithfully preserved most part of Nalanda tradition which Chinese Buddhism does not. Tibetan Buddhism is practice oriented. One needs wealth for different purposes. Wealth guarantees the leisure time which in turn guarantees Enlightenment. Tibetan Buddhism invokes rituals to generate wealth for spiritual satisfaction. Tibetan Buddhism has much to offer to the world.

Another question was about whether there are some similarities between the projecting and nurturing of charisma between the Communists and Tibetan Buddhists. The speaker explained that there was a difference in the charisma of Tibetan Buddhism and the Communist Party. He did not see the communist party as nurturing charisma. It was a collective rule but the selection process was a very elite choice. No one knows who is going to be the next President. The next President is never known before the official announcement. No charismatic Chinese leaders have actually emerged after Mao or Deng. It is now routine form one president to replace another.

Report prepared by Arpita Ghosh, Research Intern, Institute of Chinese Studies, Delhi.

About the Author

Dan Smyer Yu is Distinguished Professor and Founding Director of Center for Trans-Himalayan Studies at Yunnan Minzu University. He was a core member of the Trans regional Research Network (CETREN) at University of Göttingen, and a Research Group Leader at Max Planck Institute for Religious and Ethnic Diversity. He received his doctoral degree in anthropology from the University of California at Davis in 2006, specializing in trans-regional studies of ethnic relations, religious revitalizations, Sino-Tibetan Buddhist interactions, and globalization. His recent publications include *The Spread of Tibetan Buddhism in China: Charisma, Money, Enlightenment* (monograph, Routledge 2011) and *Mindscaping the Landscape of Tibet: Place, Memorability, Eco-aesthetics* (monograph, De Gruyter 2015). His current research directions are Trans boundary governance of natural and human heritages, water and religious diversity, religion and peacebuilding, comparative studies of secularisms in the greater Himalayan region.

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