

## Shugden in Kham

There is hardly any better evidence for the increasing influence of the Dalai Lama in Tibet, despite five decades of exile, than the impact of his stance on the Shugden cult in eastern Tibet, a region known to Tibetans as Kham, and the largest part of which spreads today over the western Sichuan province and the eastern part of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR). The Shugden cult, which the Dalai Lama has linked to conservative and sectarian attitudes, has virtually disappeared from this area where it once flourished like no where else in Tibet, except Lhasa. A declining, though aggressive group of Shugden supporters, however, continue a bitter struggle against local religious leaders who follow the Dalai Lama's line on Shugden, share his views about promoting the unity of Buddhism, and, typically, are active in running social projects. The most prominent case is that of Tenzin Delek Rinpoche; the most recent that of Phurbu Rinpoche (1). Features common to the Shugden leaders in the region are their links to former regional elites, the influence of returned exiles in their midst, their linkages within international networks, close association with Tibetan members of the Chinese authorities and direct or indirect affiliation to Trijang Rinpoche, the cult's most influential propagator in the late 20th century (2).

The Dalai Lama's public condemnations of the cult triggered three waves of popular reaction:

- In 1981, following the death of Trijang Rinpoche, the Dalai Lama started openly disapproving the cult. His position soon became popular knowledge throughout Tibet.
- His more vocal stance on the issue, after 1996, had a very serious impact on local Gelugpa (3) clerics, a number of whom still adhered to the cult out of loyalty to their teachers, and had felt uneasy about giving it up.
- With his speeches at the Kalachakra Initiation in Amravati, South India, in early 2006, rejection of the cult became a popular movement that swept across the region. By now, only a few Tibetans, clearly already set on a visceral anti-Dalai Lama and pro-China course openly stuck to the cult.

In the Kardze (Chin: Ganzi) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture (TAP), the Dalai Lama's message was further spread by the abbots and high lamas of various monasteries who brought up the subject in their teachings.

One prominent devotee of the cult, and the main leader of the Shugden worshippers in the Kardze region, is Jampa Phuntsog. He is a returnee from India where he was once a monk at the re-established Sera monastery in Mysore, South India (4). He is also a trained doctor of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM). From India, he went to Switzerland and then to mainland China where he received his medical training before he settled in the region, in the Shingsey area.

Because of the hostility of the local population around Shingsey, Jampa Phuntsog moved to Kardze town where, like other prominent Shugden followers in the town, he owns a large property. Besides his medical practice, he also runs a guesthouse owned by the local Shugden society. The guesthouse was initially located within the circumambulation path (Tib: *khora*) of Kardze monastery, but following the intervention of the late Kushok Kyabgon Tulku from the monastery, it was shifted to a new location close by, but outside the sacred perimeter around the monastery. Jampa Phuntsog often travels abroad and enjoys close relations with the authorities, both at a local and a higher level.

Jampa Phuntsog's brother, Geshe Thubten, is still based in Switzerland, where he and his teacher, Gonsar Rinpoche, run the Rabten Choeling Buddhist Centre at Mont Pèlerin above Vevey on the shores of Lake Geneva. It is one of the three main Shugden-oriented Tibetan Buddhist centres in the West and was founded by Geshe Rabten, who was also from Kardze (5). Jampa Phuntsog was instrumental in sending Geshe Phuga, who was once held in high esteem in the Kardze region, to the Swiss centre, where he became a staunch Shugden follower and close confidant of Gonsar Rinpoche. He now plays an important role as a liaison person with the Shugden followers in Mongolia.

Sources from the Kardze region link Jampa Phuntsog to the arrest of Geshe Sonam Phuntsog from Dargye monastery in 1999. Sonam Phuntsog had a history of tension with Shugden worshippers in the region, and his arrest was linked to an explosion at a construction site of a building, allegedly a clinic, financed by foreign Shugden followers. These allegations, however, appear to have been later dropped as he was sentenced for 'splittism'. He suffered ill health after his release and died in 2008. Geshe Sonam Phuntsog was a highly respected figure in the region and regularly organised long life prayers (Tib: *Temshug*) for the Dalai Lama. Jampa Phuntsog reportedly used to taunt local people that Geshe Sonam Phuntsog suffered bad health because he used to pray for the Dalai Lama's health.

There is a Shugden society in Kardze in which Jampa Phunstog's relatives and friends are prominent. It has only about 25 to 30 members, but enjoys support from the authorities.

There is a Shugden society with a more substantial following however, estimated at around 800, in neighbouring Markham (Chin: Mangkang) county, in Chamdo (Chin: Changdu) prefecture, TAR. It was founded in 1996, when the Dalai Lama started voicing his clear disapproval of the cult, and appears to play the informal role of an umbrella organisation in the region. Some of those who hold positions within the hierarchy of this group are:

- Tashi Dhondup,
- Tashi Rabten - public relations officer of the group
- Atsu from Drayab - head of the reception committee of the group.

Other notable members are:

- Jampa Wangden
- Tashi Ngodup
- Hantze
- Phu Tsering
- Yamphel

All of these people are from Markham. Another prominent member of the group is known as 'Xinpi', he is a Tibetan from Markham but is also a resident of Taiwan.

The group meets in the last week of each month in Markham. A member of the group, known simply as Phuntsog, is responsible for organising the

meetings. The group does not have a monastery, and so the venue of the meetings often changes, but they are mostly held in a spacious house owned by a member called Nyima, from Lhoka prefecture (Chin: *Shannan*) in the TAR. About two or three years ago, Nyima arranged a tour of the Sushen Rimbu area near Nyagchu (Chin: *Yajiang*) for a group of six monks from the re-established Sera monastery in Mysore, South India, where proponents of the Shugden cult were still practising. Next to the United Front Work Department (Chin: *Tong zhan bu*; Tib: *Thongdon phu*) of the Chinese Communist Party, Gangchen Lama, who is based in Italy, is the principal sponsor of this group. Gangchen Lama is the most aggressive critic of the Dalai Lama outside Tibet and he actively propagates the Shugden cult, both within Tibet and abroad from his operational base in Kathmandu. He is a frequent visitor to China and Tibet and supports the Chinese-appointed Panchen Lama(6).

With an estimated 3,000 Shugden followers in the area, Markham appears to be a stronghold of the cult, but the overwhelming majority of local people have given up the cult and subject those who continue to do so to scorn and ridicule, calling them Chinese stooges.

The most prominent Shugden leaders in the region, all of whom have been campaigning against those monks, monasteries and the local population who remain loyal to the Dalai Lama, are:

- Lama Wangchuk - from Markham.
- Rinjung, a chairman (Chin: *zhuxi*) of the local Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC)(7) in Chamdo, also from Markham.
- Zongtrul Tulku - third rank Tulku and a vice-chairman of TAR, as well as "*Head [(Chin: *zhuren*)] of Chamdo*"(8)
- An unnamed Rinpoche from Holung.

Their leader is Lama Wangchuk, who organises campaigns in Markham's monasteries to pledge allegiance to the Shugden cult and criticise the Dalai Lama. He was behind similar campaigns in Chamdo monastery in the past. He repeatedly denounced photographs of the Dalai Lama in monasteries to the authorities. On one such occasion, which allegedly happened in late 2008, the monastery in Markham was raided following his complaints. Photographs of the Dalai Lama were discovered in monks' rooms and were removed by cadres. As the cadres were Tibetans themselves, they carried away the photographs while holding them to the top of their heads, as Tibetans do to show respect to objects of veneration. The incident made Lama Wangchuk a laughing stock in Markham.

As in Kardze, the cult's leaders in Markham maintain close relations with the two most prominent Tibetan Shugden proponents in the West, Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, head of the New Kadampa School(9), and Gangchen Lama.

TibetInfoNet sources mention three Shugden centres in Markham:

- Rowo Gonsa, which has 20 members
- Chotsokha, which has 40 members and is headed by Kushok Pala, an ex-monk from Drepung Loseling monastery in Mundgod, India. He is now a close associate of Lama Wangchuk.
- Norbuling Gon, Lama Wangchuk's monastery in Markham. The group here is said to have only eleven members.

On 10 February 2009, as tensions over the fiftieth anniversary of the 1959 uprising were mounting, Lama Wangchuk made a complaint to the authorities about two popular abbots, Gen Ngawang Chinden and Ngayong from Wooser monastery in Markham, accusing them of stonewalling efforts to promote Shugden worship, and asked for action against them.

In 2007, Yosir Rinpoche of Tsawa Khangtsen, a college within the re-established Sera Mey monastery in India, visited Markham. During this visit, Lama Wangchuk and Rinjung, chairman of the Chamdo CPPCC, complained to the authorities, arguing that the Rinpoche would exert an anti-Shugden influence, and asked for his immediate deportation.

Two years before that, Konchok Chonden, a monk from the re-established Sera monastery, along with another monk from the re-established Drepung monastery in India, visited the Nyagchu area and toured Rabten Gon, Tsatong Gon and Menri monasteries. As they expressed negative opinions towards the Shugden cult, the monks of Rabten monastery asked the visiting monks to leave and return to India.

The weight of tight restrictions on everyday life, re-education campaigns and pro-Shugden activities conducted by anti-Dalai Lama groups, has led a large number of monks from Chamdo monastery, and Dzogdon monastery, the largest in Markham county, to leave for India. They now mostly reside in Sera Jey monastery in Bylakuppe. In order to maintain religious activities in these now depleted monasteries, the Shugden groups have been striving to re-populate them with the children from amongst those families that are still sympathetic, in and around Markham, and elsewhere. However, they have not been able to make much headway due to the dwindling number of Shugden followers in general. Even the families of Shugden supporters have proved reluctant to allow their offspring to join the monasteries, as this would identify them to their neighbours as Chinese dupes and expose them to the hostility and ridicule that this would entail.

A further recent Shugden related incident concerned the current abbot of the Lithang monastery, Khenpo Apa Tulku. His candidacy in the nominations for abbot faced strong public disapproval as he was rumoured to be a Shugden devotee. In the wake of his low popularity, he felt compelled to issue a statement in which he denied being involved with the cult. It is only after he did this that the public accepted his appointment. However, soon after he became abbot, he was perceived to be getting rather close to Chinese officials and then he began issuing anti-Dalai Lama statements on television and other media. He was also accused of distributing doctored VCDs that contained interviews with common people openly professing their faith in the Dalai Lama. Parts of the statements were removed and Apa Tulku altered the VCDs to present the Dalai Lama as a separatist, using abusive words for him. As a result, the abbot is highly unpopular in Lithang.

#### Notes:

1: See Tibetan monk on trial for weapons charge: [www.tibetinfo.net/content/news/11004](http://www.tibetinfo.net/content/news/11004).

2: Trijang Rinpoche was one of the current Dalai Lama's two preceptors and a disciple of Pabongkha Rinpoche, who gave the Shugden cult a new impetus in the early 20th century. In the early years of exile, Trijang Rinpoche and Shugden followers were often resented because of their dominance in the Tibetan institutions until the Dalai Lama gradually introduced significantly integrative reforms.

3: The Gelugpa school of Tibetan Buddhism was politically dominant in Tibet for at least the last three centuries. The Dalai Lama belongs to this school but rejects the Gelugpa supremacist stances represented by the Shugden cult followers within the school. The teacher-disciple loyalty, a crucial feature of Tibetan Buddhism, through which Shugden worship, or any other school tradition for that matter, is passed on across generations, is a major element of the Shugden issue.

4: He originally hails from a wealthy family from Shillong, India.

5: Geshe Rabten, born in early January 1920, studied at Sera monastery in Lhasa, and went into exile in 1959. In 1964, he was appointed as a religious assistant to the Dalai Lama who instructed him to teach Buddhism to Western students in 1969, before sending him in 1974 to Switzerland to become abbot of the first Tibetan monastery in Europe in Rikon, close to Zürich. He retired in 1979 to found a new Buddhist centre under the name Tharpa Choeling, before he passed away in 1986. Geshe Rabten was a disciple of Trijang Rinpoche and as such was a proponent of the Shugden cult, at least until the Dalai Lama started speaking against it. After Geshe Rabten's death, the centre, Tharpa Choeling, was renamed Rabten Choeling and his main disciple, Lama Gonsar, a monk from an aristocratic background, became the director. He also took charge of Tenzin Rabgye Rinpoche, Geshe Rabten's reincarnation, as well as of the reincarnation of Trijang Rinpoche, who eventually disrobed and now lives in the USA. At the height of the Shugden controversy in India, Rabten Choeling became a refuge for many Shugden followers from the re-established Sera Jey monastery in India.

6: On Gangchen Lama, see also: "3/14", the new TAR party secretary, a "last ditch-struggle" and "the heads of monks and nuns". <http://www.tibetinfo.net/content/update/20>; Allegiance to the Dalai Lama and those who "become rich by opposing splittism" <http://www.tibetinfo.net/content/update/61>; Sowing dissent and undermining the Dalai Lama <http://www.tibetinfo.net/content/update/116>

7: The CPPCC consists of representatives of non-Party organisations and functions as a sort of second chamber to the People's Congress, the rubber-stamping parliaments at central, provincial and local levels. In Tibetan regions, it includes members of the 'patriotic upper strata', i.e. leading religious figures and former aristocrats who support the Communist Party. It is the main public organ of the United Front and meets regularly to express support on Party policies.

8: Note that the source is not specific about Zongtrul Tulku's exact position.

9: Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, who was also a disciple of Trijang Rinpoche and is also from eastern Tibet, was excluded from the re-established Sera Jey monastery in India in 1996 for his strong worded statements about the Dalai Lama on the Shugden issue. He went on to declare the Gelugpa tradition as degenerated and create his own school, which he named the New Kadampa Tradition. The group maintains a successful and very well organised network of centres and monasteries in most western countries as well as in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Southeast Asia. The western monks and nuns who occasionally stage protests against the Dalai Lama during his

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