

DESECRATION IN DRAGO COUNTY:

DESTRUCTION OF TIBETAN RELIGIOUS HERITAGE,
ARBITRARY DETENTIONS AND TORTURE

JANUARY 2023



FREE TIBET 


TIBET WATCH
བོད་གནས་ལྟ་ཞིབ་



As with other areas in Tibet, the main reason for increasing Chinese repression in Kham Drago is first to eradicate Tibetan identity and Tibetan culture. Secondly, to eliminate those influential Tibetans who are conscious of freedom and rights of Tibetan people and thirdly, to abolish Tibetan language and education centres.

A Tibetan Monk from Drago County now in exile, 31 January 2021

A note on the spelling of Drago:

The events described in this report take place in a county in eastern Tibet named Drago. However, there are variations of other spellings: **Drango**, **Draggo** and **Dragko**. Although there are differences in the English spelling, they all refer to the same place with one Tibetan spelling i.e. འགྲུག་ཁོང་གི་རྫོང་།

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Since October 2021, residents of Drago County in Tibet have been under siege, with their cultural and religious heritage coming under attack and locals being detained, tortured and subjected to “re-education”.
- Located in the historical Tibetan province of Kham, Drago County is known for its strong sense of Tibetan identity and resistance against the ruling Chinese government and has been subject to interventions by occupying Chinese authorities since at least 2008, with notable crackdowns in 2009 and 2012. This report provides new details about both crackdowns.
- The demolitions in Drago targeted sites and objects of central importance to the religious and cultural life of the local community. Most notably, these include three colossal statues of the Buddha that were destroyed, evoking the Taliban’s destruction of Buddhist statues in Afghanistan 20 years earlier. Other sites and items that were destroyed include:
 - a Buddhist school
 - a building housing 45 giant prayer wheels;
 - Residence of a revered spiritual leader
 - Drago monastery’s prayer flags, which were taken down and burned
- This report provides new evidence of the scale of destruction, the consequences for local Tibetans, and an intensified level of securitisation that local Tibetans have described as a second ‘Cultural Revolution’¹.
- At least ten local Tibetans in Drago County were detained and tortured during the period covered in this report, sometimes for reasons as minor as showing distress at the demolitions. The detainees were subjected to interrogation and severe beatings, with a number of them falling unconscious due to severity of torture, and one of them, a woman, being drenched with cold water in freezing winter weather.
- For the first time, the report documents a new extrajudicial facility used for political ‘education’, and information about a military base and prison. This evidence of an extrajudicial facility adds to previous reports of Tibetans – particularly released prisoners and other “key persons” monitored by Public Security Bureaus – being arbitrarily detained and “re-educated” in Tibet without any formal charges, and after the formal abolition of the 56-year-old system of Re-education-Through-Labour² in 2013.
- New information about security crackdown in the months following the 2012 mass protest is also presented in this report, including primary schools being temporarily used as places to detain and torture protesters, and a police shooting at an entire family of a protester and their dog at their home, and dragging bodies downhill on a motorbike.
- Tibet Watch has found that the crackdown on freedom of religion and culture in Drago escalated under Wang Dongsheng, the newly nominated Party Secretary of Drago, who was previously involved in mass demolitions and expulsions of thousands of monks and nuns in a famous Tibetan Buddhist Institute called Larung Gar.
- The findings in this report demonstrate that, at a minimum, the acts of the police and local authorities have violated Tibetans’ rights to self-determination and freedom of religion, education, expression and assembly. They have also restricted Tibetans’ freedom to take part in cultural life, as well as their rights to privacy, liberty, security of person and freedom from torture.

METHODOLOGY

This report focuses on events in Drago County in eastern Tibet between October 2021 and June 2022. It was written and researched by Tibet Watch, a Tibetan research organisation affiliated with Free Tibet. Tibet Watch was established in 2006 to carry out in-depth research on human rights violations in Tibet. Following its invasion by the People's Liberation Army of China in 1950, Tibet has become one of the most closed-off and repressive countries in the world. Tibetans live under close surveillance and anyone caught sharing information about human rights abuses with the outside world will invariably be detained and charged with state security crimes. Tibet Watch was established with the purpose of overcoming these barriers, of exposing human rights abuses and highlighting Tibetan resistance. The research is carried out in the different native languages of Tibet and in Chinese.

In the last few years China's abuses have escalated in Tibet, with individuals subjected to torture, imprisonment, and even death for harmless activities that would not attract any notice almost anywhere else in the world, simply because they sent messages to friends or contacts overseas. 'Crimes' as arbitrary as sending money to friends overseas, contacting those in exile, keeping pictures of the Dalai Lama, being part of an unregistered chat group, or even just knowing someone who has done any of these things can be enough to provoke a violent and prolonged crackdown by Chinese state forces.

As a result, few are able to take the risk of sharing information outside of Tibet and research for this report had to draw heavily on interviews with individuals outside China who have detailed knowledge of the events described in it. We are grateful to Tsewang Dhondup la, a Tibetan who survived a shooting in 2008 protest in Drago County, who escaped Tibet and has so bravely chosen to share his story and knowledge. Other individuals remain anonymous to protect themselves and others from Chinese government reprisals. Tibet Watch interviewed these sources in depth, and cross-checked their information with other sources. We were provided with images and footage which substantiates our findings, but we are not making these public as it may endanger these sources.

We would also like to extend our gratitude to Matthew Akester for providing us valuable feedbacks, and to Tsering Tsomo la, Executive Director of Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy, for sharing insights into our report findings.

The research was undertaken under a range of restrictions and surveillance on Tibetans both in and outside Tibet. Since 2008, non-violent protests by Tibetans have been brutally suppressed by police killings and mass detentions. The heightened surveillance since then, the threats to their safety, and the monitoring by village-based *cadres* of the CCP have rendered even moderate expressions of dissent and discontent against the Chinese government impossible. As with all Tibetan areas since the 2008 Tibetan Uprising, independent human rights monitors and journalists are denied unfettered, or often any, access. Paramilitary troops and civilian spies have been widely deployed in Drago County since the recent demolitions to monitor Tibetans' day-to-day activities and prevent them from protesting or expressing their views even in a moderate way. Random phone inspections have also been ramped up to prevent any information from reaching

the outside world. The fear induced by police surveillance is transnational. Local Tibetans communicating with Tibetans-in-exile outside Tibet and the diaspora are monitored with special attention. Despite living outside Tibet, their online communication, especially on WeChat is heavily monitored, and activities by friends and families abroad can be observed by informers. Exile Tibetan sources are also at risk and this can be heightened in countries where they lack legal status, so they must be protected too, particularly if they still know people or have families inside Tibet.

We supported these interviews with open source information such as studying satellite imagery, and Chinese state sources where possible.

The research would not have been possible without the determination of Tibetan researchers who provided insightful analysis, particularly during the worsening crackdown in the region. We are grateful to Tsering Wangyal Shawa for the map and we would also like to thank Radio Free Asia for providing information about the satellite images.

Finally, we salute the moral courage of Tibetans inside Tibet for their determination to keep their religion, culture and language alive even seven decades after its invasion.

CONTENTS

| | |
|---|----|
| Executive Summary..... | 3 |
| Methodology..... | 4 |
| 1. Location of Drago County..... | 7 |
| 2. Repression in Drago County prior to October 2021..... | 8 |
| 3. Repression in Drago County, October 2021 – June 2022..... | 12 |
| i. The demolition of religious and cultural institutions..... | 12 |
| ii. Arbitrary detentions and torture..... | 19 |
| iii. Re-education Centre..... | 20 |
| 4. Religious and cultural significance of the demolished sites..... | 25 |
| Three Jewels of Buddhism..... | 25 |
| People’s Buddha..... | 25 |
| Prayer Wheels..... | 26 |
| Drago Gaden Monastic School..... | 27 |
| Drago Monastery..... | 28 |
| Guru Rinpoche..... | 29 |
| 5. Legal Framework and Recommendations..... | 30 |
| i. Freedom of religion..... | 30 |
| ii. Cultural rights..... | 30 |
| iii. Right to education..... | 31 |
| iv. Forced evictions and the right to an adequate standard of living..... | 32 |
| v. Freedom of expression..... | 32 |
| vi. Freedom of thought..... | 33 |
| vii. Arbitrary detention..... | 33 |
| viii. Torture and ill-treatment..... | 34 |
| ix. Phone searches and the right to privacy..... | 34 |
| 6. Recommendations..... | 36 |
| 7. Contacts..... | 38 |
| Notes..... | 39 |

1. LOCATION OF DRAGO COUNTY

The events detailed in this briefing took place between late October 2021 and June 2022 in Drago (Ch:Luhuo) County. Drago County is located in Kardze in the historic Tibetan region of Kham. Under the Chinese occupation, Drago County is governed as part of Kardze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan Province.



Drago County located in eastern Tibet in the historical Tibetan province of Kham. Area encircled in red represents Tibet. The pink lines represent how Tibet has been divided up under the Chinese occupation.

2. REPRESSION IN DRAGO COUNTY PRIOR TO OCTOBER 2021

Tibetans in Drago County are known for their strong sense of Tibetan identity and acts of resistance against the Chinese government. The crackdown on local Tibetan protests in 2008, 2009 and 2012 has therefore been exceedingly severe. Drago County was an information black hole in the following years with details of these protests and those killed unknown.

In 2008, the Tibetan Uprising swept throughout the whole of Tibet prior to the Beijing Summer Olympics. That year, on 24 March³ and 8 June⁴ Tibetans of Drago County also took to the streets to protest. At least 300 Tibetans took part in both of the mass protests and called for freedom in Tibet and for the Chinese government to let His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama return to Tibet. The protests were violently crushed with police beating unarmed peaceful protesters with iron rods and firing tear gas and live ammunition at them.

When the following Tibetan New Year approached, Tibetans observed it with the boycott⁵ of celebrations. The silent mourning pervaded across Tibet as well as in the Tibetan exile and diaspora communities abroad.

On 25 March 2009, the first anniversary of the 2008 March Uprising of Drago, 27-year old monk Phuntsok Rabten from Drago Monastery posted flyers at numerous locations: a police station downtown in Gyeszang area, bridgehead of Shara Thang, and iron curtains of shops which flanked the national highway dissecting through the county. The flyers contained messages that urged fellow Tibetan farmers not to cultivate their crops as an act of solidarity to honour those killed and brutally beaten in the 2008 protest.

As he was sticking flyers on the wall of an automobile repair shop near Walung Town, Chinese police authorities chased after him. Although Phuntsok managed to flee the scene on a motorcycle, the police caught and killed him several kilometres away at the midline of a hill in Wadag Town. He was beaten with an iron rod and electric baton and pushed off a 30 foot roadside cliff. After his family recovered his dead body to perform funeral rites at the sacred site of Larung Gar, they saw that he had broken bones throughout his body.

The silent mourning had also been suppressed three weeks earlier in Ngawa, a county seven hours drive away from Drago County, where Tibetans have fiercely defended their homeland since the People's Liberation Army of China's invasion from the east. The Chinese authorities had forbidden the Great Prayer Festival (Tib:ཚེ་འཕུལ་སྐྱོན་ལམ་ཚན་ལོ་) which was to commence on the fourth day of Tibetan new year. For local Tibetans, the restriction was in addition to surveillance that had been heightened since 16 March 2008 when several thousands of monks and lay people protested and over twenty people were killed in what would later become known as the "Ngawa Massacre"⁶.

Then, in the early afternoon of 27 February 2009, the third day of Tibetan New Year, 20-year-old Tapey, a monk from Kirti Monastery whose ordained name was later known to be Lobsang Tashi⁷, walked alone in the street of Ngawa County town's market area and set himself on fire carrying a home-made Tibetan national flag with the Dalai Lama's photo at its centre⁸. People's Armed Police stationed nearby shot him and he was immediately taken away⁹. Photos received by International Campaign from Tibet (ICT) show his burnt body lying alone on the ground surrounded by at least three police armed with guns¹⁰.

Army trucks and armoured vehicles of People's Armed Police, a Chinese paramilitary organisation, drive into Drago in late (27-28) January 2012 to lay siege to the county.



There were no known reports of self-immolations in the next year. But on 16 March 2011, the third anniversary of “Ngawa Massacre”, the second self-immolation took place; Phuntsok, a 20 year old monk from the same monastery as Lobsang Tashi set himself on fire shouting for the long life of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Two months later, ICT reported that 15 separate incidents of peaceful protests erupted in neighbouring Kardze County town, in which at least 30 Tibetans were detained¹¹. The protesters called for freedom, the release of local and respected religious teachers, and for the Dalai Lama to return home.

After three months, Drago County Public Security Bureau officers detained Pema Rinchen, a writer from Drago County. Prior to the arrest, he had travelled across Tibet and distributed two thousand copies of his new non-fiction *Look* in which he wrote about the 2008 Tibetan Uprising, including interviews with torture survivors¹².

In the next month, not far from Drago, the third self-immolation protest took place in the neighbouring Tawu County. This was followed by a series of young Tibetans in neighbouring regions burning themselves in protest – a vast majority of them in Ngawa¹³. Three Tibetans, one each from Kardze, Tawu County, and Chamdo, self-immolated in October, November and December 2011 respectively¹⁴.

The self-immolations continued in Ngawa into early January 2012 and then, on 22 January, posters were put up once again in Drago County which said that that day was Chinese New Year and that there was no Losar [Tibetan New Year] in Tibet. It further stated that on the day of Chinese New Year, the unnamed person will self-immolate, and that the people of Drago must not let the corpse fall into the hands of the Chinese government.

The next morning, on 23 January 2012, Public Security Bureau officials arrested many Tibetans in and around Drago County under suspicion of putting up the posters¹⁵. The same day, Tibetans from neighbouring counties¹⁶ converged in the streets of Drago in their thousands – shouting in unison the demands of the 2008 protests; They marched from the trijunction of the market area towards County Police station, demanding the Chinese government to let His Holiness the Dalai Lama return to Tibet and shouted slogans calling for his long life. The protestors also shouted that there was no freedom in Tibet, and that they wanted freedom. Police officers fired on an unarmed crowd – killing 49-year-old nomad Yonten and severely injuring at least 36 others. Other protesters took them to Drago Monastery for prayers and emergency treatment of wounds.

The New York Times¹⁷ and the British Broadcasting Corporation¹⁸ reported the shooting. The following day, large crowds from Tawu County drove into Drago County in around 40 cars and gathered outside the monastery in solidarity.

We have now been able to find information about the security crackdown in Drago County that followed the shooting. On either 26 or 27 January 2012, People's Armed Police arrived in a convoy of armoured vehicles, and the county was put under military siege. Tibetans were arrested in their hundreds. After the county centre prison ran out of its capacity to keep the overflowing number of arrestees, they were taken to primary schools where they were beaten and interrogated.

They were forced to confess the purpose of protests, the organising members, details of everyone present at the monastery for solidarity prayers offerings, and the whereabouts of other protesters. They were also subjected to patriotic education (Tib: རྒྱལ་གཅེས་ཚོས་གཅེས།) – a campaign that has been launched after Tibet's invasion during which Tibetans are forced to denounce their spiritual leader His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama. After the Tibetans refused to turn in names of other protesters, the police used footage recorded by surveillance cameras for identification and arrested around 100 Tibetans – including students – who were sent to Bamey Prison located in Tawu County. Throughout this period, many young children were completely alone and hungry at home, as parents and elders in their family had been arrested.

Violence ensued with the Chinese police firing upon an entire family of a Tibetan protester, including their dog, a Tibetan mastiff. Described by the source as a "rainstorm of bullets" (Tib: རྩེ་མདུས་དྲལ་ཆར།), the shooting was reported by Tibetan media outlets¹⁹ but not covered in wider English language media. Encircled at their home, the gunfire killed two brothers: Yeshi Samdup and his cousin Yeshi Rigsel²⁰. Their sibling Yonten Sangpo was shot in his neck and Sanglha, their mother who was in her 70s, was shot in her left hand. Yonten's wife was tied outside her home in handcuffs while their house was ransacked by the police authorities; a sacred golden statue and some cash kept at their house was seized and their motorcycle was burned. Five little girls were also wounded. The police then tied a noose around the neck of Yeshi Samdup and Yeshi Rigsel and dragged their bodies downhill. Even as Yonten was profusely bleeding from the gunshot in his neck, he was forcibly taken to the police station and beaten without mercy.

On the same day, another protester aged 40, Tsering Gyaltzen, a monk from Drago Monastery, was also tracked down by the police and severely beaten which broke his spine. It was too late when he was handed over to the county hospital, and he died. His body was neither returned to his family²¹. In the same hospital where Tsering died, Sanglha's left hand was amputated and the five wounded girls were treated for injuries sustained during the police firing.



Signs of beating of Phuntsok Rabten's body seen during funeral rites performed in Larung Gar.



Yonten, 49, shot by People's Armed Police during the protest of 23 January 2012 in Drago County.

Random arrests and beatings of passers-by continued in the following month, as did an intensive campaign of patriotic education.

One of the Tibetan protesters, Gonpo Rinzin, was repeatedly summoned for patriotic education but he did not attend. Then on 29 March 2012, the 25-year-old stabbed himself to death before being detained by the security personnel. He told his family that it was better to die from one's own hands than being in the hands of the Chinese government.

Between January and April 2012, 36 protesters, aged between 20 and late 60s, were charged for various political crimes and given sentences ranging from one year to life imprisonment²². Most of them, including three senior monks of Drago Monastery, were sent to Bamey and Dhardo prisons, where they were forced to undergo "reform through labour" without proper food²³. As a result, three of them – Tsewang Namgyal, former principal of Gaden Monastic School; Tengya, the abbot of Drago Monastery; and another monk whose identity is protected for security concerns – continue to suffer despite being released. Six years of torture has left them with severe damage to their legs and internal organs and suffering with insomnia, constant headaches and loss of mobility.

Eight still remain in prison serving various terms. These include two monks from Drago Monastery named Tashi Dhargyal and Namgyal Lhundup, who are serving 14-year prison sentences, as well as four residents of Likhogma Township named Kundrub, Jewai, Kuntho and Sonam Lhundup who are serving prison terms of 11, 12, 13 years and a life sentence, respectively. Two unidentified Tibetans are also serving 11-year sentences for their participation in the 2012 protests.

Police brutality in Drago County continued in the following years in Drago County. On 10 March 2015, the 56th anniversary of the Tibetan Uprising²⁴, a young man named Tamdin who was travelling on his motorbike was shot in his right leg by Chinese authorities after he refused to pull over²⁵. He was en route to offer incense and prayer flags to local deities.

Then, on 26 January 2016, around a week after His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama left his exile residence in Dharamsala to the United States for a medical treatment, image and footage emerged on social media accounts of Tibetans-in-exile showing hundreds of Tibetans of Drago – both monks and lay people – congregating outside Chokri Monastery with an open display of a giant portrait of the Dalai Lama,²⁶ and praying for his health. Four departments of the county responded to the prayer gathering by issuing a joint notice, ordering shops and stores to turn in the Dalai Lama's photos by 2 February 2016²⁷.

The following summer, on 24 August 2017, 30 security personnel in Kardze brutally beat a group of around ten Tibetans on a hillside of a village of Drago County, where they had gathered for a picnic after finishing some prayer rituals²⁸.

As with continuing crackdowns in Tibetan areas across occupied Tibet since the 2008 Tibetan Uprising, the grievances of Tibetans in Drago County are neither acknowledged by the Chinese government nor are Tibetans given any scope to express their grief. Their demands clarified during and after 2008 protests still remain unaddressed as the Dalai Lama, now aged 87, continues to live in exile. More recently, since October 2021, their religion and culture have seen crackdowns through a series of arbitrary detentions and the demolition of a Buddhist school, 45 huge prayer wheels and three giant statues deeply revered by the local Tibetans and pilgrims alike.

3. REPRESSION IN DRAGO COUNTY, OCTOBER 2021 – JUNE 2022

i. The demolition of religious and cultural institutions

Top Chinese Communist Party (CCP) official Wang Dongsheng²⁹, an official linked to the demolitions of thousands of monks' and nuns' homes at the famous Buddhist institute of Larung Gar, also in Kardze prefecture, became Party Secretary of Drago County in mid-October 2021³⁰. It was an ominous sign. Two weeks later, on 30 October, 2021, Deputy Party Secretary and County Head Deng Jianguang, the second highest CCP official of Drago, visited the immense Buddha statue, its nearby Buddhist school and Drago monastery in Sengdeng Village (Tib:སེང་ལྷེང་།, Ch:Sedelong) . The official website of Drago County reported³¹ the visit as an inspection of “land chaos and illegal construction sites” during which two other sites, Yi-nya Township (Tib:ཡི་ལྷ་གྲོང་ཚོ།) and Huancheng Road, were also surveyed with a team of government officials.

Actions were taken the next day on 1 November 2021 with the demolition of a local Buddhist school in Sengdeng Village. Despite the school being built on land that is under the ownership of Drago Monastery, the local authorities said that the buildings infringed upon local land-use laws. Prior to the demolition, in late October 2021, the police summoned two senior monks from Drago Monastery, Palga and Nyima³², to the County police station and threatened them to convince local Tibetans to demolish the school themselves within four days. They told the pair they would confiscate the wooden panels of the school buildings and seize the land if the deadline was not met³³.

Under such threats, the residents were forced to dismantle the school. Video footage smuggled out of Drago County shows Tibetans huddled around the school and taking the school buildings apart, assisted by tractor cranes and carrier trucks. As a result of the school's demolition, over 100 monk students who boarded on the campus were deprived of a modern Buddhist education that imparted knowledge of both ancient Buddhist philosophy and foreign languages: Tibetan, English and Chinese. The school had been closed previously after the 2012 protests, and managed to reopen under more restrictive conditions with around 30 students aged below 18 barred from re-joining the school.

Government officials said that a 'media office' will be built in its place, according to unofficial sources. One Chinese media initially reported that the demolition of an “illegal construction site” took place on 1 November, but it was later removed from the internet.

County Mayor and Deputy Party Secretary Deng Jianguang (centre) during his inspection visit in Drago County on 30 October 2021.

IMAGE: LUHUO.GOV.CN





Drone footage shows of religious sites in Sengdeng Village prior to demolition: the golden-roofed Drago Monastery (centre left), the 99-foot-tall Buddha statue under a white canopy (top centre), a row of prayer wheels (bottom right) and the L-shaped Gaden Namgyal Monastic School (centre right).

IMAGE: WALK CHINA/YOUTUBE



This satellite image shows an alternative view of the religious sites in Sengdeng Village before they were demolished: Drago Monastery (centre, top left), the 99-foot-tall Buddha statue under a white canopy (top right), a row of prayer wheels (bottom left) and the L-shaped Gaden Namgyal Monastic School (centre left).

IMAGE: GOOGLE EARTH

Translation of text in screenshot image :
On 1 November, in accordance with the relevant regulations of (Implementation Regulations for PRC Law of Land Administration, Urban and Rural Planning Law of the People's Republic of China), the illegal construction of Sedelong Village, Xindu Town had been ordered to complete the main building to be demolished.



The Public Security Bureau which was established below Drago Monastery after mass protests erupted in Drago County in late January 2012.



The Public Security Bureau (bottom left) constructed below Drago Monastery, next to Gaden Monastic School (centre).

IMAGE: WALK CHINA/YOUTUBE



Tractor cranes, carrier trucks and local Tibetans gather to demolish to Gaden Monastic School within four days under coercion.



Torn down roofing of the concrete blue-roofed house in front of Gaden Monastic School.



Wood panels of the school's roofing being lifted off by crane.



Local Tibetans loading wooden panels onto a carrier truck.



Then on 27 November, the Chinese authorities once again summoned Palga and Nyima, and forced them to accept the demolition order of two giant statues of Buddha. Officials repeated the same order that they must convince local Tibetan devotees to comply. The pair were told that if they followed the instructions, they could keep the sacred contents inside the giant statues (which were used to consecrate them). According to various sources, both of the senior monks were detained on that same day, denied adequate food, and tortured. Their detention lasted over a week.

The demolitions went ahead with local Tibetans once again being compelled to assist with the destruction, according to various accounts. This time, the demolitions expanded in scale targeting two colossal statues of Buddha and 45 prayer wheels – all items of great religious significance to the Tibetan community³⁴.

From 12 December onwards, 45 huge prayer wheels and a 99-foot-tall Buddha statue were destroyed. The local Chinese authorities said that a statue of that height was not allowed, although the monastery had requested and gained vocal approval in 2015 from the then Head of Drago County.

Then from 21 December onwards, a 30-foot-tall statue of Maitreya – Buddha of Future – was pulled down along with the temple housing it. The Chinese authorities cited “fire access” as the justification for the demolition of the temple. Local officials forced Tibetan monks and influential villagers in Drago to assist with these demolitions, despite the distress that this would cause them. The residential quarter of Venerable Walung Rinpoche, which also served as accommodation for monks, was also demolished with machinery. Prayer flags on top of the monastery and its vicinity were also removed and burned.

Armed paramilitary troops were deployed in large numbers at the crossroads of Sengdeng Village to prevent local Tibetans from protesting while informers were distributed across Drago County to gather intelligence on local Tibetans’ reactions to the demolitions. These pre-emptive security measures were intended to compound the work of police authorities stationed in the Public Security Bureau located just next to the Gaden Monastic School, as well as CCP members working in Drago Monastery under the Monastic Management Committee.

According to a source, the local Tibetans liken the demolitions of sacred sites and the violence used against monks and laypeople to the Cultural Revolution³⁵ (1966–1976) – a campaign of demolition and persecution launched by the late Chairman Mao Zedong. Prior to the Cultural Revolution, more than 97 percent of Tibet’s monasteries had already been razed to the ground³⁶.

A monk from Drago County who now lives in exile highlighted the main reasons of ongoing repression by the Chinese government as being “first to eradicate Tibetan identity and Tibetan culture, secondly, to eliminate those influential Tibetans who are conscious of freedom and rights of Tibetan people, and thirdly, to abolish Tibetan language and education centres.”

The Chinese authorities of Drago County continued the demolition into 2022. The next demolition took place southeast from Drago County, 15 kilometres southeast from Sedelong Village in Shara Thang (Tib:ཤ་ར་ཐང་།), Nyimo Township (Tib: ཉི་མོ།). This time the statue demolished was of an eighth-century Indian Tantric master Guru Padmasambhava, which stood three storey high outside Chanang Monastery (Tib:ཆ་ནང་དགོན།, Ch:怡龙寺).

Satellite image taken before demolitions on 11 February 2020: Maitreya Buddha's Temple (red pin) and the residential compound (L-shaped building in front).

IMAGE: GOOGLE EARTH / RADIO FREE ASIA



Satellite image taken after the demolitions on 1 January 2022 shows Maitreya Buddha's temple (red pin) is completely gone and only a few building structures remain of the *Labrang* (residential compound).

IMAGE: PLANET LABS / RADIO FREE ASIA



Satellite image taken before the demolitions began on 19 November 2019. Here, the white canopy is seen intact and it shelters the 99-foot-tall Buddha statue. Image: Google Earth / Radio Free Asia



Satellite image taken after the demolitions, 1 January 2022, shows that half of the white canopy is torn down the statue reduced to rubble. Image: Planet Labs / Radio Free Asia



Satellite image taken before the demolition, on 3 October 2019, shows the circular dome of Guru Rinpoche statue. Image: Planet Labs / Radio Free Asia



Satellite image taken after the demolition, on 25 February 2022, shows the circular dome on the ground and the empty throne of Guru Rinpoche statue. The temple to its right is also completely razed. Image: Planet Labs / Radio Free Asia



Although the demolition appears to have begun in early January, information about it emerged in late February, delayed by a communication clampdown in the region. Chanang Monastery had valid documents for the statue and the statue was not demolished immediately when the order was first announced. However, monks at the monastery were later forced to carry out the destruction of the statue of Guru Rinpoche. The reason provided by Chinese authorities for its demolition is not known.

Satellite images³⁷ taken on 1 January 2022 by Planet Labs and published on Radio Free Asia revealed that the golden-roofed temple housing the 30-foot-high Maitreya statue and the red-roofed residential compound in front of it were completely cleared. Further downhill from the monastery, half of the white canopy sheltering the 99-foot-high Buddha statue was also reduced to rubble.

Another image of Chanang Monastery taken on 25 February 2022, shows the statue's circular roofing structure on the ground and an empty cement throne where the Guru Rinpoche statue once stood. The temple to its right was also completely razed.

Photographic evidence obtained by Tibet Watch shows an empty corridor without a roof and columns of walls that once separated the 45 giant prayer wheels. The sites of the Gaden Monastic School, Maitreya Buddha's temple and the residential quarter were also seen to be cleared and deserted.

ii. Arbitrary detentions and torture

Local authorities made a point of ensuring that revered monks were coerced to make local Tibetans accept the demolitions. As a result of this pressure, local Tibetans were later directly involved in the demolitions or, at a minimum, forced to witness them. This appears to have directly led to several detentions. Ten Tibetans were arbitrarily detained by Chinese authorities for supposedly expressing visible displeasure at the demolitions or disapproval of plans to construct a poultry and pig farm in Yi-Nya Town or because they sent information of Drago's demolitions and detention to contacts outside of Tibet.

All 10 detainees were beaten and tortured. Due to the heightened communication restrictions, six of them have been identified: Palga and Nyima, Abbott and Treasurer of Drago Monastery respectively; Nyima and Tashi Dorjee, both monks from the Drago Monastery; a woman named Lhamo Yangkyi who had cold water poured on her in detention despite the freezing winter weather; and a layman named Tsering Samdup. Although the four other detainees remain unidentified, one of them is known to be a monk whose eyes were reported to be severely damaged after torture in detention. A number of them have fallen unconscious due to the severity of torture.

Dates of their detention are not known except for Palga and Nyima, who were both detained on 27 November prior to the statues' demolition, and Tashi Dorje, who was arrested on either 1 or 2 January 2022.

iii. Re-education Centre

According to sources, the detainees in Drago were taken to an extra-legal facility in the county's suburbs which has not previously been known about; they called it a "re-education" centre (Tib:སློབ་གསོ་ཁང་།, Ch:学习班). While it is rare to identify location of extralegal re-education facilities with such precision, there have been numerous reports of extralegal detention for reeducation over the past decade. The reports of re-education in extralegal centres show that the practise of re-education continues even after the abolition of the 56-year-old system of Reeducation-Through-Labour by the National People's Congress in December 2013.³⁸

Satellite imagery of the site taken on 29 January 2012 by Apollo Maps also shows a new structure at the site with indications of ongoing construction activities.

By March 2015, an L-shaped building of approximately 4,932.14 m² had been built, surrounded by walls.

Tibet Watch has now established that what locals refer to as the re-education centre is located at around two kilometres north-east from the 99-foot-tall Buddha statue beside G317 national highway at the bend of River Nyichu (Ch:Niqu). Sources confirmed that it was where large numbers of armies were stationed following January 2012 protests. The Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy has also identified the same facility being used for "re-education", adding that the building was formerly a police station³⁹.

Satellite image taken on 29 January 2012 (left) show ongoing construction at the site of reeducation centre (left) and after its completion (right) in February 2020.

IMAGE: APOLLO MAPPING



The facility where all the Tibetans detainees were beaten, interrogated and tortured following the demolitions. It was constructed two kilometres north-east from where the 99-foot-tall Buddha statue once stood, along G317 national highway at the bend of River Nyichu.



Re-education facility in north-eastern suburb of Droga.



Satellite imagery analysis of Drago County for the same time period i.e. between May 2011 to March 2015 , further revealed construction of another facility⁴⁰ in the southern suburbs of Chigrey. Sources identify it as a prison and explain that it was constructed in 2013.

The construction of both the prison and the “re-education” centre in the county’s suburbs were thus carried out within the same time period. It was then followed by demolition of the prison located in the county centre between Linglong Road, Zhangu Road and Houer Boulevard and Jianshe Road. The county centre prison was last seen on Google Earth in March 2015. Satellite image of the area taken in September 2019 shows that there was no longer any building at the site of county centre prison.

The construction in the suburbs appears to have been carried out due to the need to expand the capacity of security facilities in case large numbers of arrests like in January 2012 protests recur. Anecdotal accounts of that time revealed that Tibetans arrested in connection to the protest outnumbered the capacity of county prison due to which primary schools in Drago County were used to interrogate and torture the protesters.

Another facility in the suburb has now also been identified which now reveals that Drago County is surrounded by three security facilities. Known by the wider world for the first time, sources call this facility a military base. It is located near the Shingchu River in the northwestern outskirts of Drago. The building was not newly constructed; It was previously a Forestry Nursery Bureau which was left abandoned after a massive flood hit mainland China, resulting in loss in the forestry employment sector. Following the January 2012 protests, the building was repurposed and used as a military base.

Satellite image of the prison in the centre of Drago County taken in March 2015 (left). After demolition satellite image of the prison taken in September 2019 (right).



New prison constructed in the southern suburbs of Chigrey in Drago County.

IMAGE: GOOGLE EARTH



Time Lapse of construction of Drago County's new prison (bottom left) in the suburbs of Chigrey in relation to the demolition of the prison in county centre (top).

IMAGE: GOOGLE EARTH



Satellite view of security facilities around Drago County (circled): Military base (centre left), prison (bottom left), and re-education centre (top centre).

IMAGE: GOOGLE EARTH



Torture in Re-education Centre

Facilities such as the one referred to by locals in Drago as the re-education centre have been reported in other parts of Tibet as well. The most detailed and recent first-hand found so far account of torture in the re-education centre in Tibet is a diary of an unnamed monk who was forcibly returned from his monastery in eastern Tibet, Amdo to his hometown in Sog County⁴¹ in central Tibet. He wrote: "...the officials from the National Security Office took me to a newly built prison called Reform Through Re-education Centre (Tib:Lobso Yo-srang Tenay Khang)⁴²." He wrote that one of the officials said to him, "You are going to a school, not to a prison⁴³".

Despite this claim, the treatment he received was a range of physical and mental torture: making him stand still for three hours facing the wall, learn nationalistic songs within three days, compulsory runs in the mornings, food deprivation, standing in the sun without any movement, beatings for those showing slightest movement, denouncing His Holiness the Dalai Lama during "class" – which took place in the night sometimes. Furthermore, he saw many other Tibetan detainees in the centre dressed in military uniforms, most of whom he learnt afterwards were monks and nuns. He also saw the nuns who lost consciousness during the military drills being taken away and sexually abused by the officers.

The diary entry was extremely detailed but the exact location of the facility has not been identified so far. Although his account dates from 2017, the "re-education centre" could have been in existence well before his detention under the leadership of Chen Quanguo, Party Secretary of the so-called Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR)⁴⁴ from August 2011 to 2016, during which he oversaw an unprecedented mass detention of lay Tibetans who were returning home after pilgrimage in India. In early 2012, there were reports of hundreds of Tibetan pilgrims being subjected to re-education in extra-judicial facilities like hotels, schools and military bases in Tibet Autonomous Region⁴⁵.

Comparison of the monk's account of re-education in "Reform Through Re-education" with an account of an Uyghur woman's life in "Transformation through Education" in East Turkestan shares striking similarities of indoctrination tactics. The Uyghur woman was detained from 2017 to 2019 in what she recalled being known as the "Transformation Through Education" camp. In both the facilities, the detainees were beaten, forced to do military drills, attend night "classes" and forced to criticise themselves by looking down on their identity; She wrote⁴⁶: "we were ordered to deny who we were. To spit on our own traditions, our beliefs."

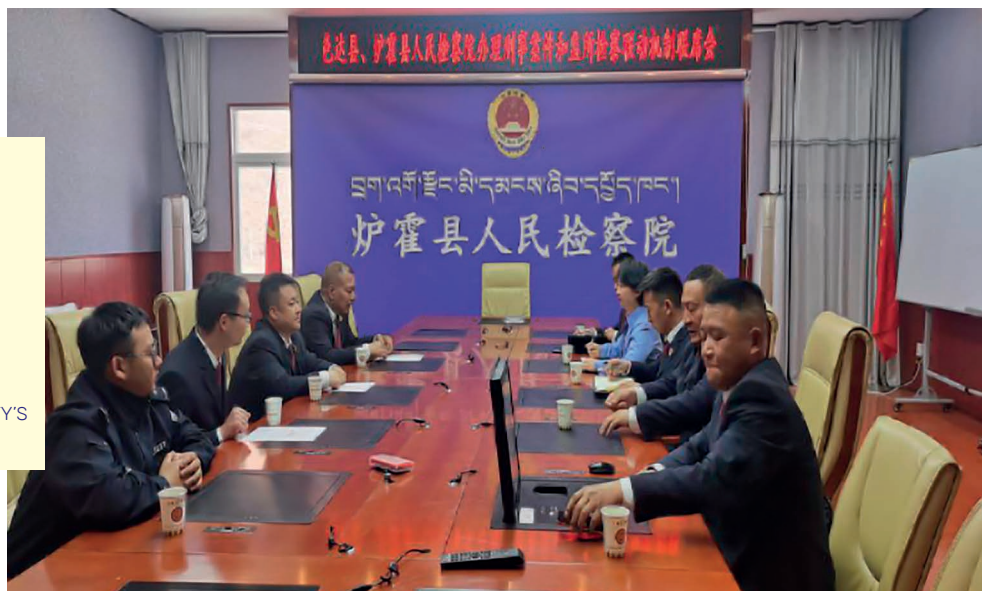
In Drago County, detainees who were arrested since late October 2021 were taken to the "re-education centre" in the north-eastern suburbs and subjected to interrogations and severely beaten, with a number of them losing consciousness due to the severity of the torture.

Many Tibetans from Likhogma (Tib: ལི་ཁོག་མ་གྲོང་ཚོ།) Township in Drago County have also been taken to the same "re-education centre". Throughout these detentions, random phone inspections have continued to take place outside in Drago County.

Detentions continued into early January 2022⁴⁷, as did more arrests in connection with the demolitions. According to sources, two men, Asang and Dota, and a woman named Nortso were detained after they returned from a pilgrimage in neighbouring Serthar County. Their detention is possibly a result of them having photographs of the Buddha statues on their social media accounts.

Officials from the courts of Serthar and Drago County gathered for discussion and signing of “Cooperation Mechanism for Handling Criminal Cases and Prison Prosecutions”.

IMAGE: QQ CHANNEL OF SERTHAR COUNTY'S PEOPLE'S PROCURATE.



Drago County police transferred them to the custody of authorities in Drag-yab County (Ch: Zhag'yab County), Chamdo City, Tibet Autonomous Region, where the Chinese authorities have been monitoring families of exiled Tibetans with special attention for the past two years, and even forced them to install a spyware on their cell phones. Many nuns have been detained there in what ICT calls a “Re-education Centre”⁴⁸. One of them, Lobsang Tsomo, was detained in mid-November 2021 for contacting Tibetans living abroad and released after three months.

While drafting this report, Tibet Watch learned that a group of detainees held in Drago County's “re-education centre” was released and that in April 2022, Chinese authorities forced Tibetan monks to sign a letter of confession claiming that it was them who destroyed the giant Buddha statue in December last year.

In the same month, according to a news article published by Serthar County People's Procuratorate on 6 April 2022, the courts of Serthar and Drago County signed ⁴⁹ the “Cooperation Mechanism for Handling Criminal Cases and Prison Prosecutions”, a joint mechanism which is expected to enable stricter implementation of “internal control management mechanism” between the two neighbouring Tibetan counties, both of which underwent sweeping desecration of their religious heritage and series of detentions under Wang Dongsheng's leadership.

Two Tibetan counties underwent sweeping desecration of their religious heritage and series of detentions under Wang Dongsheng's leadership.

4. RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE DEMOLISHED SITES

Three Jewels of Buddhism

The Buddha, his doctrine and the monastic community form the three fundamental constituents of Buddhism. For this reason, Tibetan Buddhists begin their opening prayers by reciting a verse three times that pays homage to three “jewels”⁵⁰ until one attains the state of Buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings.

སངས་རྒྱལ་ཚེས་དང་ཚོགས་ཀྱི་མཚོག་རྣམས་ལ།
བྱང་ཆུབ་བར་དུ་བདག་ནི་སྐྱབས་སུ་མཚེ།
བདག་གི་སྤྱོད་སོགས་བགྱིས་པའི་བསོད་ནམས་ཀྱིས།
འགྲོ་ལ་པན་ཕྱིར་སངས་རྒྱལ་འགྲུབ་པར་ཤོག།

In the Buddha, the Dharma and the Supreme Assembly
I take refuge until I attain enlightenment.
Through the merit of practising generosity and so on,
May I attain Buddhahood for the benefit of all beings.⁵¹

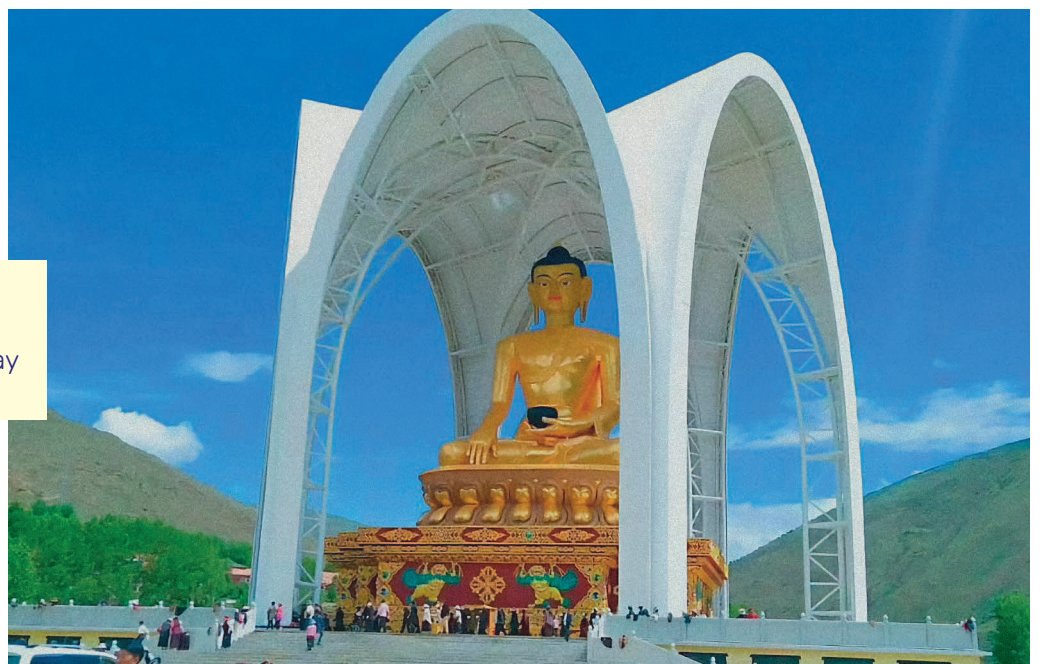
Therefore, the demolition of the Buddhist school, statues and detention of members of the monastic community are unquestionably a direct attack to the foundations of Buddhism and by extension an attack on the Tibetan people’s religion, culture and identity.

People’s Buddha

The 99-foot-tall bronze Buddha statue is colloquially known as People’s Buddha (Tib:མི་དམངས་ཀྱི་སྐུ།). Its construction was an initiative led by the local community who are mostly farmers and nomads.

A 12-member volunteer group called the Association for Statue Construction (*Kusheng Tsokpa*) was set up to collect the financial contributions from the local people and oversee the plan of the statue’s construction. The group consisted of volunteer Tibetan representatives from the Tibetan villages of Drago County. Local Tibetans saved income gained from selling harvest and animal produces and their donation towards the construction was around 40 million yuan (over £4.6 million).

Tibetans and pilgrims on circumambulation around *People’s Buddha* during day and night.



After three years of collaborative efforts, the construction was completed on 5 October 2015 and was built to prevent famine, war and natural disasters – including earthquakes which have claimed thousands of lives in Drago in the past. According to a news article⁵² published by China News on the 40th anniversary of the 1973 earthquake, “the disaster killed 2,204 local people, demolished 80 households, leaving 43 orphans while the County seat and other places were razed to the ground.”

The statue was therefore symbolic of the desire of Tibetans to prevent further disasters. From setting up a group to collect money for artisans and learned monks performing a consecration of the statue, the People’s Buddha was sacred and stood as a witness to Drago Tibetans’ hope of not re-experiencing a catastrophe like the 1973 earthquake. Ever since its completion, it had been kept accessible day and night for devotees to carry out prayers and circumambulations.

The crackdown on such local initiatives for environmental protection undermines social practices and disrupts the continuity of Tibetan tradition and indigenous responses towards disasters which are increasing in frequency and magnitude with the climate crisis. These normal forms of community activities were declared illegal in the Tibet Autonomous Region in February 2018 under the umbrella term of “underworld forces”⁵³.

Prayer Wheels

The prayer wheel’s house in Drago County were built in the lower slopes of the sacred hill, close to Drago Monastery and its school. It is also the beginning of the circumambulation for locals and pilgrims.

Prayer wheels are an integral part of the religious life of the monastic and especially the lay community, for whom they are publicly accessible and daily prayer and circumambulation. Spinning the prayer wheels clockwise is also a centuries-long tradition of Tibetans. Scrolls of scriptures embedded inside each of the 45 giant prayer wheels contain hundreds of thousands of Buddhist mantras. Turning the prayer wheel into circles with a sincere meditation on the mantra’s meaning is believed to awaken the Buddha nature in the person committing to the circumambulation.



View of the prayer wheels house from the entrance gate.



A Tibetan nun spinning a prayer wheel clockwise on *kora* (circumambulation).

Drago Gaden Monastic School

Drago Gaden Monastic School was initially established in 1990 in another area before relocating to its most recent site in 2014. Many learned monk scholars contributed towards its preservation including the late Akong Rinpoche, who established the first ever Tibetan Buddhist monastery in the west: Samye Ling⁵⁴, in Scotland, in 1967. He was a revered reincarnated lama and Tibetan spiritual leader, who was exiled after the Tibetan Uprising of March 1959 against the illegal Chinese occupation.

Akong Rinpoche had worked incredibly hard for the preservation of Tibetan identity. In 2013, he was brutally stabbed to death along with his nephew Loga and assistant Chime Wangya in Chengdu city over a financial dispute. Following the court verdict of death penalty for two men convicted for the murder, his brother, Lama Yeshe Losal Rinpoche, who is nowadays the abbot of Kagyu Samye Ling, oldest son Jigme Tarap, Director of the Edinburgh-based Akong Rinpoche Foundation, as well as the Karmapa – the head of the Kagyu school of Buddhism to which Samye Ling and the victims belonged – called for clemency towards the defendants and expressed their wish that the death penalty not be imposed on them⁵⁵.

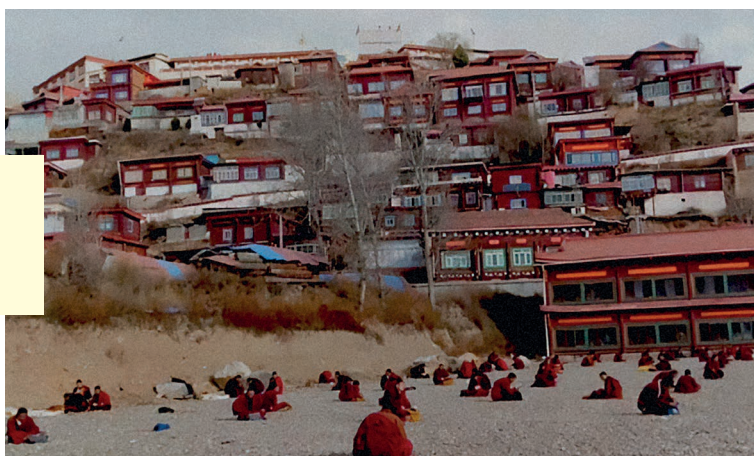
Amongst numerous humanitarian projects Akong Rinpoche initiated in Tibet, he also provided financial aid to the students of Drago Gaden Monastic School in the form of regular pocket money.

Prior to the demolition, the school provided a free boarding facility to over 100 students and had around 50 small-to-medium-sized rooms. With classes ranging from different languages – Tibetan, Mandarin Chinese, English – to Madhyamika and other Buddhist studies, a broad curriculum was taught free of charge with profound intellectual rigour. As such, the school offered a modern Buddhist education which was made possible by collective hard work and sacrifices of many learned scholars and individuals.

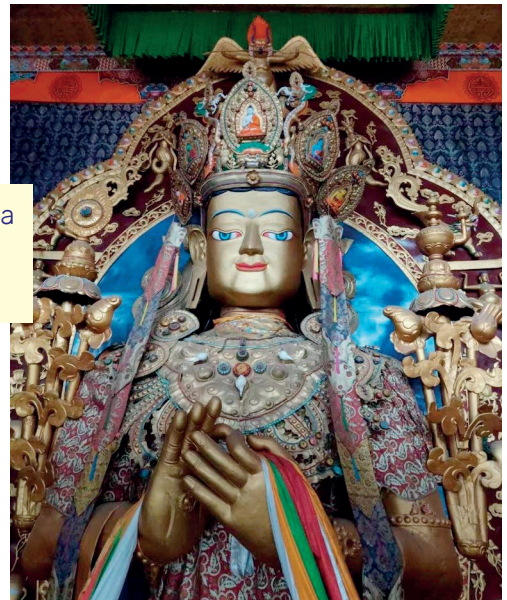
The Chinese government's repeated crackdown on the Buddhist school in Drago County has previously disrupted their education with some monks being sent to state schools and others disrobing and becoming laymen. Following the recent demolition, over 100 monk students – some of whom also hail from neighbouring counties of Tawu and Minyak – have no longer been able to continue their education. Social and educational activities held at the school like writing competitions have also come to an end.

Monk students of Gaden Monastic School doing morning self-study outside the classroom.

IMAGE SOURCE: TCHRD



The Maitreya Buddha statue at Drago Monastery.



Drago Monastery

Tehor Drago Gaden Nampar Gyalway Ling, also known as Drago Monastery, was located at the midline of Dorje Phagmo (Tib: འཇིགས་པག་མོ།) sacred hill. The gold-roofed temple formerly to its right housed the 30-foot-high statue of Maitreya – Buddha of Future – and the red building in front of it was the *Labrang* where the Venerable Walung Rinpoche and several monks resided. The location made Drago Monastery a perfect vantage point to see Sengdeng Village and its religious sites.

Four educational sections operated under the monastery: medicine, tantra, dialectics and Buddhist philosophy. This monastic institution housed over 700 years of history and produced many prominent Buddhist scholars of different sects and Bon tradition in the past⁵⁶. Amongst numerous high-ranking spiritual leaders who visited Drago Monastery in the past, some include the 90th throne-holder of the yellow-hat Gelug tradition, Second Mila Tehor Kyorpon Rinpoche, Geshe Sonam Gonpo and lineage masters of Keutsang Rinpoche⁵⁷.

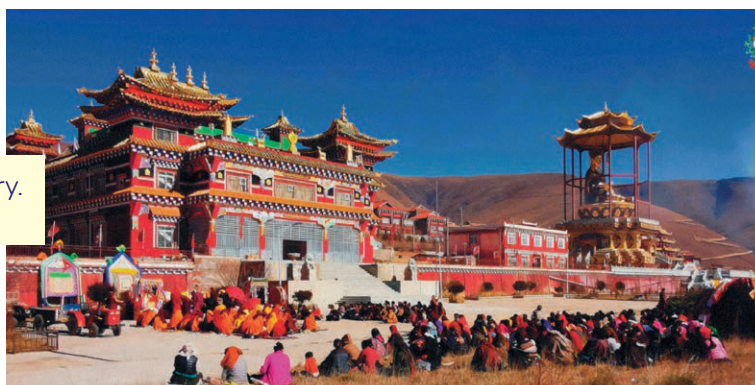
Following the non-violent mass protests of January 2012, a Monastic Management Committee constituting CCP members was set up in the monastery to oversee the monks' daily activities, while a police station was built on the lower slope of the same hill. The establishment of the committee came in line with a change in monastic management in 2012 under Chen Quanguo, Party Secretary of the Tibet Autonomous Region from 2011 to 2016-, when he announced that government or Party officials would be stationed in almost all monasteries permanently.⁵⁸

Drago Monastery before demolition: pictured is the golden-roofed temple (top right), which housed the 30-foot-tall Maitreya Buddha statue as well as the Residence of Venerable Walung Rinpoche and of several other monks (bottom right).

IMAGE: WALK CHINA/YOUTUBE



A religious gathering at Chanang Monastery.
(PHOTO: QIALS.COM)



Guru Rinpoche

The statue of eighth-century Indian Tantric master Guru Padmasambhava was built 15 kilometres south-east from Sengdeng Village, outside Chanang Monastery (Tib: མ་ནང་དགོན་, Ch: 恰龙寺) in Shara Thang (Tib: ཤ་ར་ཐང་), Nyimo Township (Tib: ཉི་མོ་). The 45-foot tall bronze statue was gilded with gold and silver and it is found along the right side of the river flowing towards Tawu County.

Also known as Guru Rinpoche, he is a central figure in the Nyingma Buddhist lineage, who is said to have been invited to Tibet by the king Trisong Detsen to assist in the founding of the first Buddhist monastery in Tibet.

According to the catalogue of the monastery in Drago County, Chanang Monastery was constructed in 1703 by the Nyingma lama Choktrul Taklha Pema Wangchuk Rinpoche. The monastery belongs to the Nyingmapa school of Tibetan Buddhism and is deeply revered and rich with relics and holy items. Prior to the Chinese occupation of Tibet, around 500 monks lived and studied there but there are only around 50 monks there these days.

Prior to the Chinese occupation of Tibet, around 500 monks lived and studied at Chanang Monastery, but there are only around 50 monks there today.

5. LEGAL FRAMEWORK AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The destruction carried out across Drago County included the demolition of a school, artefacts of cultural and religious significance to the local community and monks' residences – violating both international and Chinese standards protecting the rights to freedom of religion, right to education, right to adequate housing and their social and cultural rights.

Further violations emerged from these demolitions and expulsions; the treatment of Tibetan residents of Drago County includes arbitrary arrests, torture and ill-treatment, re-education and surveillance, violating residents' rights to freedom of expression, liberty, security of the person and equal treatment before the law and violations of the right to freedom from torture.

Under these international human rights standards, the People's Republic of China is not only required to halt these human rights violations but also provide redress for the residents of Drago County for the destruction of their cultural heritage, arbitrary detentions and torture, and investigate and hold to account those responsible.

i. Freedom of religion

The demolition of religious artefacts and buildings, compelling monks to participate in the destruction and the monitoring of monks' daily activities violate both domestic laws on freedom of religion in the People's Republic of China and China's international obligations under international human rights treaties and customary international law.

Article 36 of the Constitution of the People's Republic of China states that "citizens of the People's Republic of China enjoy freedom of religious belief" and that "[n]o State organ, public organisation or individual may compel citizens to believe in, or not to believe in, any religion.⁵⁹ The right of Tibetans to peacefully practice their religion without fear of discrimination, intimidation or coercion is also enshrined in articles 18 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which China has signed though not yet ratified.⁶⁰

The protection of religious sites and symbols, such as the demolished Buddhist statue and the prayer wheel house is further protected by Human Rights Council resolution 6/37 (1981), which urges states "to exert the utmost efforts, in accordance with their national legislation and in conformity with international human rights and humanitarian law, to ensure that religious places, sites, shrines and symbols are fully respected and protected and to take additional measures in cases where they are vulnerable to desecration or destruction", language recalled in article 4(b) of Commission on Human Rights resolution 2005/40.⁶¹

ii. Cultural rights

As well as being the religion of the majority of Tibetans, Tibetan Buddhism is also tightly interwoven with Tibetans' sense of national identity, history and culture. The demolition of Tibetan cultural and religious sites, the destruction of a school that was teaching Tibetan culture and the use of punishments such as forced re-education and political indoctrination violate residents' right to take part in cultural life, as enshrined under article 22 of the UDHR and also in article 15 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). This right is also explicitly provided for children in article 30 of the Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC).

Further to abstaining from “interference with the exercise of cultural practices and with access to cultural goods and services”, article 15 of the ICESCR also requires the Chinese government to take “*positive action*” (emphasis added) to ensure that the conditions for full “participation, facilitation, and promotion” of cultural life are met. This can be found in General comment number 21 on article 15.1(a) of the ICESCR by the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.⁶²

The demolition of Drago Gaden Monastic School and expulsion of students with no obvious alternative place of education represents interference in Tibetan’s right to participate in cultural life and also restricts the teaching of Tibet’s culture, history and religion to future generations. In her 2011 report, the independent expert in the field of cultural rights defines cultural heritage as “to be understood as encompassing the resources enabling the cultural identification and development processes of individuals and groups, which they, implicitly or explicitly, wish to transmit to future generations.”⁶³ The report states that “[t]he right of access to and enjoyment of cultural heritage forms part of international human rights law, finding its legal basis, in particular, in the right to take part in cultural life, the right of members of minorities to enjoy their own culture, and the right of indigenous peoples to self-determination and to maintain, control, protect and develop cultural heritage.” The report adds that “[t]he right of access to and enjoyment of cultural heritage includes the right of individuals and communities to, inter alia, know, understand, enter, visit, make use of, maintain, exchange and develop cultural heritage, as well as to benefit from the cultural heritage and the creation of others.”⁶⁴

Again, there are also proactive steps that the Chinese government should be taking to facilitate the protection of Tibetans’ religious and cultural heritage and hold those responsible to account. The 2016 Report of the Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights recommends that states take appropriate legislative, administrative, educational and technical measures to prevent, avert, stop and suppress intentional destruction of cultural heritage, explicitly recommending that states should “[t]ake all steps necessary to facilitate prosecution of those responsible for intentional destruction of cultural heritage, [...] at the national or the international level, in accordance with relevant international standards; and to this end, collect and preserve evidence needed for such prosecution.”⁶⁵

It is important to stress that United Nations Special Rapporteurs covering a range of human rights issues, including the Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights, have previously contacted the Chinese government to remind them of their international obligations related to the demolition of sites of cultural and religious significance. In 2016, six Special Rapporteurs contacted the Chinese government in relation to the mass expulsion of religious practitioners and demolitions within the religious communities of Larung Gar and Yachen Gar, in which they reminded them of the above standards.⁶⁶

iii. Right to education

The destruction of Drago Gaden Monastic School and the expulsion of at least 100 students – depriving them of an education – violates various international and Chinese standards on the right to education.

It is important to note that the demolition of Drago Gaden Monastic School is part of a wider regulation of education in occupied Tibet, which can be seen in closures and demolitions of Tibetan-language schools elsewhere in Tibet, restrictions on monasteries teaching the Tibetan language to lay people and in findings by the Tibet Action Institute that Chinese government policy has seen at least 800,000-900,000 Tibetan children aged 6-18 separated from their

families and communities and put into boarding schools.⁶⁷ If Drago Gaden Monastic School was targeted for its role in teaching the Tibetan language or Tibetan Buddhism, it would violate provisions in the Convention on the Rights of the Child stating that a child belonging to a “minority” (a term rejected by many Tibetans who prefer to be identified as an occupied people, but used by the Chinese government itself) shall not be denied the right “to enjoy his or her own culture, to profess and practise his or her own religion, or to use his or her own language”.⁶⁸

The interference by the Chinese government in the education of Tibetan children violates article 13 of the ICESCR, which provides for primary education to be “compulsory and available free for all”. The same article notably also highlights the agency that parents have in choosing an appropriate school for their children, rather than those enforced by a government, stating that “[t]he States Parties to the present Covenant undertake to have respect for the liberty of parents and, when applicable, legal guardians to choose for their children schools, other than those established by the public authorities, which conform to such minimum educational standards as may be laid down or approved by the State and to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions.”⁶⁹ Likewise, article 18 of the ICCPR, states that “[t]he States Parties to the present Covenant undertake to have respect for the liberty of parents and, when applicable, legal guardians to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions.”⁷⁰

Paragraph two of the aforementioned General comment 21 by the CESCR on the right to take part in cultural life adds that this right is “intrinsically linked” to the right to education “through which individuals and communities pass on their values, religion, customs, language and other cultural references”, and that the State must abstain from “interference with the exercise of cultural practices and with access to cultural goods and services” and, at the same time, take “positive action” to ensure that the conditions for full “participation, facilitation, and promotion” of cultural life are met.⁷¹

The Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination has also previously raised concerns about the Chinese government’s intervention in Tibetans’ education, notably the replacement of Tibetan with the Chinese language as the medium of instruction in schools, in both in China’s review by the Committee in 2018 and in a communication in 2020.⁷²

iv. Forced evictions and the right to an adequate standard of living

The demolition of monks’ residences was carried out without consultation or notification, meeting the definition of forced evictions as detailed by the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights,⁷³ as well as a number of articles under international law protecting the right to an adequate standard of living.⁷⁴ It should be noted that both the ICCPR and the ICESCR specify that such rights must be “exercised without discrimination of any kind as to race, [...] religion [or] national or social origin”.⁷⁵ The evictions of monks also infringed on their “security, peace and dignity”, which are recognised in General comment number 4 on article 11.1 of the ICESCR as being part of the right to housing.⁷⁶

The practice of forced evictions was recognised as a “gross violation of human rights” by the Commission on Human Rights, which, in Resolution 1993/77 on Forced Evictions, urged governments “to undertake immediate measures, at all levels, aimed at eliminating the practice of forced eviction” and to adopt all necessary measures giving full protection against forced eviction, based upon effective participation, consultation and negotiation with affected persons or groups.”⁷⁷

v. Freedom of expression

The arrest of Tibetans for acts such as sharing information about, voicing displeasure of or simply appearing to be upset by the demolitions violates the People's Republic of China's obligations to respect freedom of expression under articles 19 of the UDHR and the ICCPR. While article 19 of the ICCPR does allow for some restrictions, such as restricting freedom of expression to preserve national security or public order, the use of surveillance and arrest in Drago County to prevent Tibetans from sharing information about the demolitions at Drago Monastery does meet the threshold of necessity required by the ICCPR.⁷⁸

The targeting of Tibetans specifically for sharing images of the Buddhist statues or being visibly upset at the destruction of their culture are also clear violations of articles 5.d(vii) and 5.d(viii) of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, which respectively state that the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion and the right to freedom of opinion and expression "without distinction as to race, colour, or national or ethnic origin, to equality before the law".

vi. Freedom of thought

The punishment of political or "patriotic" re-education is in practice a form of political indoctrination. Tibetans subject to political re-education, have routinely been commanded to swear allegiance to the People's Republic of China and to denounce their exiled spiritual leader, His Holiness the Dalai Lama. This violates the right to freedom of thought, belief, and religion, which is protected under article 18 of the UDHR and ICCPR. The ICCPR specifies that this right includes the freedom to have or adopt a religion of one's own choice, freedom to practice one's religion and explicitly states that no one should be subject to coercion which would impair their freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of their choice.⁷⁹

vii. Arbitrary detention

The arrests in Drago County between October 2021 and February 2022 again fit a wider pattern of discrimination against Tibetans, who are often accused of crimes against 'state security' – an opaque term which can refer to simple communication with a family member outside Tibet. Under the Chinese Criminal Procedure Law, people accused of these state security crimes are denied due process. The Criminal Procedure Law strips them of their right to a lawyer⁸⁰, and to an open trial⁸¹, and allows them to be held for indefinite periods of time in detention and held in an undisclosed location for interrogation.⁸² It also removes the right of family members of the detainee to be notified about the detention.⁸³ Family members may themselves be kept under surveillance at their homes⁸⁴. Evidence collected during the investigation process for criminal cases related to state secrecy is kept undisclosed, complicating any attempts for Tibetans to seek redress.⁸⁵

Despite these provisions, arbitrary detentions are illegal under international law, with both the ICCPR and UDHR providing for the right to liberty and security of persons.⁸⁶ Each of the cases of arrests recorded in Drago County appears to have been arbitrary, in that they took place without the detainee having committed a recognisable crime, or due to residents exercising their rights to freedom of thought and freedom of expression (articles 18 and 19) of the UDHR – one of the standards used by the Working Group on Arbitrary Detentions to determine that deprivation of someone's liberty is an arbitrary detention.⁸⁷

There is no evidence of basic due process protections such as detainees being granted a lawyer or being able to contest their detention. The ICCPR requires States parties to ensure that victims of violations of the Covenant have an effective remedy, determined by competent judicial, administrative or legislative authorities.⁸⁸ Such remedies must also be enforced by competent

authorities; any failure by the State to investigate allegations of violations could itself be a breach of the ICCPR.⁸⁹

As mentioned several times about, the violation of this right is also connected to Tibetans' unique identity, with ICERD stipulating that "[t]he right to security of person and protection by the State against violence or bodily harm" must be protected without "distinction as to race, colour, or national or ethnic origin".⁹⁰

viii. Torture and ill-treatment

Local sources in Drago County have reported all those detained since October have been tortured, including one detainee whose eyes were damaged and one detainee being tortured with cold water in freezing weather. These are clear violations of the Convention Against Torture, which is unequivocal in its absolute prohibition of torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. Article 2.2 of the Convention Against Torture states that "no exceptional circumstances whatsoever, whether ... internal political instability or any other public emergency, may be invoked as a justification of torture", superseding any claims that the Chinese government might make that protest or dissent from Tibetans represents a threat to security or stability.⁹¹ General comment number 2 (2007) on the Convention Against Torture is also clear that "States parties must ensure that the laws in practice are applied to all persons, regardless of ethnicity or of the reason for which the person is detained, including persons accused of political offences."⁹²

The use of torture is a longstanding and widespread problem in Tibet, and one that United Nations treaty bodies have raised directly with China. At the last review of China by the Committee Against Torture in 2016, the Committee noted that torture was "deeply entrenched" within the justice system of the People's Republic of China. This has been accompanied by numerous testimonies of torture from Tibetan former political prisoners and cases of deaths in police custody or prison.⁹³

Under international law, China is required to investigate allegations of torture impartially and promptly, protect complainants and witnesses and ensure that victims can obtain redress.⁹⁴ If those detained are brought to trial, any statements made by detainees as a result of torture must not be used as evidence in those proceedings.⁹⁵

ix. Phone searches and the right to privacy

The detentions of several Tibetans in Drago County may have been linked to content on their mobile phones. Articles 12 of the UDHR and article 17 the ICCPR provide that "no one shall be subjected to arbitrary or unlawful interference with his or her privacy", adding that "everyone has the right to the protection of the law against such interference."⁹⁶

The detention of local Tibetans in this regard also contravenes articles 19 of the UDHR and the ICCPR, which states that "the right to freedom of expression includes the freedom to seek, receive and impart information" through any media and regardless of frontiers.⁹⁷

The wider context of this monitoring is important in understanding how these surveillance measures discriminate against Tibetans on the basis of their identity. Tibetans, including the residents of Drago County, are routinely subject to close monitoring of their communications and the content of their mobile phones as part of the Chinese government's stated policy of "stability maintenance" in Tibet – the identification of the early signs of "separatism" among Tibetans, which includes the presence of images of the Tibetan flag and images of the Dalai Lama (both of which are integral to Tibetans' sense of identity) – on their phones⁹⁸. Article 26 of the ICCPR

states that “all persons are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to the equal protection of the law” and, further, that “in this respect, the law shall prohibit any discrimination and guarantee to all persons equal and effective protection against discrimination on any ground”, including race, language, religion, political or other opinion, and national or social origin.”⁹⁹

As well as being discriminatory, the monitoring and punishment of Tibetans for sharing images of the demolitions and the Buddhist statues is also disproportionate. Article 17 of the ICCPR provides that “no one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy” and that “everyone has the right to the protection of the law against such interference or attacks”. In its General comment on the ICCPR, the then-Human Rights Committee wrote that where States imposed restrictions on any of the rights in the Covenant, they must demonstrate their necessity and such measures must be proportionate to “the pursuance of legitimate aims in order to ensure continuous and effective protection of Covenant rights. In no case may the restrictions be applied or invoked in a manner that would impair the essence of a Covenant right.”¹⁰⁰ Since the surveillance measures are being imposed to prevent Tibetans from imparting information about the destruction of their cultural heritage, as outlined above in the section on freedom of expression, the surveillance measures cannot be said to be proportionate.

The use of torture is a longstanding and widespread problem in Tibet, and one that United Nations treaty bodies have raised directly with China.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

Free Tibet urges the Chinese government to:

- Respect the Tibetan people's rights to freedom of religion and culture and immediately cease practices such as demolitions that violate these rights.
- Collaborate with the Tibetan community to restore the demolished sites and statues with respect and in accordance to their spiritual leaders and traditional practices.
- Ensure that Tibetan children are able to access Tibetan language education at every stage of the curriculum and that there is no state interference or reprisals against schools and private tutors for teaching Tibetan culture and religion to Tibetan children.
- Immediately release all Tibetans who have been arbitrarily detained for peacefully exercising their rights to freedom of expression, imparting information, exercising their language, culture and religion, or who are otherwise in detention without having committed a recognisable offence.
- Ensure that all detainees are granted access to lawyers, medical treatment, regular contact with family members, and that food, clothing or other items left for them are not shared amongst staff of detention centres and prisons.
- Respect the fundamental right to life and privacy in communication of Tibetans, including online communication between Tibetans inside occupied Tibet and Tibetan exiles and diaspora.
- Provide visas, without any conditions, for exiled Tibetan refugees to reunite with their families and ensure their safety and freedom upon reunification.
- Recognise and uphold the right to freedom of expression and ensure that Tibetans are permitted to peacefully raise concerns about Chinese government policies.
- Conduct a full investigation into the allegations of torture and punish those responsible.
- Provide detailed adequate resettlement and compensation for any people made homeless following the demolition of monks' residences.
- Immediately cease the policy of "political re-education" for Tibetan detainees and withdraw security forces, including CCP members from all the Monastic Management Committees in Tibet's monasteries and nunneries.
- Guarantee Tibetans' right to self determination and address Tibetans' concerns about their country's status, and stop interference in the succession of Tibetan spiritual leaders, including His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama.

Free Tibet urges international governments to:

- Acknowledge that Tibet is still under the occupation of China and is one of the least free countries on earth.
- Push China to allow for a prompt, impartial and full investigation into the destruction of religious and cultural sites in Drago County.
- Recognise the geopolitical significance of Tibet in Asia's future and address Tibet's status in all talks with China.
- Publicly issue strong statements of support for the right of Tibetans to free speech, to education and to the right to participate in, facilitate and promote their culture.
- Raise Tibet as a specific agenda item in all human rights discussions and other bilateral meetings with their Chinese counterparts.
- Coordinate efforts with like minded countries in calling on the Chinese government's ongoing occupation of Tibet and its repressive policies in Tibetan areas.
- Push for open access to Tibet for diplomats, journalists and NGOs, including unimpeded movement within Tibet.
- Support Tibetans' right to self-determination, including, but not limited to, pushing for the Chinese government to restart dialogue with Tibetan authorities in exile.
- Free Tibet urges UN stakeholders and partners to:
 - Urge the Chinese government to implement the recommendations detailed above based on its obligations under international human rights law.
 - Push China to allow for a prompt, impartial and full investigation into the destruction of religious and cultural sites in Drago County.
 - Urge the Chinese government to respect His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama and cease attacks on him and to decriminalise the use of his image or mention of him inside Tibet.

7. CONTACTS



Free Tibet is a London-based international campaign organisation. We stand with Tibetans around the world. For their homeland, for their future and against China's brutal occupation.

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Tibet Watch works to promote the human rights of the Tibetan people through monitoring, research and advocacy. We are a UK registered charity with an office in London and a field office in Dharamsala, India. We believe in the power of bearing witness, the power of truth.

www.tibetwatch.org

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- 96 UDHR, article 12, ICCPR, article 17.1, 17.2.
- 97 UDHR, article 19, ICCPR, article 19.2.
- 98 See for example: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/05/22/relentless/detention-and-prosecution-tibetans-under-chinas-stability-maintenance>
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