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CHINA: Xinjiang - Mongolian minority isolated from fellow-Buddhists abroad

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

While ethnic Mongolian Buddhists in China's Xinjiang-Uighur autonomous region say they can generally practise their faith without serious government pressure, some told Forum 18 News Service in the Bortala-Mongolian autonomous prefecture that maintaining contact with fellow Buddhists abroad is almost impossible. They said all visits by lamas from Mongolia require special permission, while they cannot visit foreign Buddhist centres. They added that portraits of the Tibetan Buddhist spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama, are banned in temples.

Ethnic Mongolian Buddhists in China's north-western Xinjiang-Uighur autonomous region told Forum 18 News Service in early September that while they can generally practise their faith without serious pressure from the authorities, they are banned from keeping portraits of the Tibetan spiritual leader the Dalai Lama in temples and contact with fellow Buddhists in nearby Mongolia is almost impossible. Lamas from Mongolia are unable to visit, as this requires special permission from the authorities, while local Mongolian Buddhists cannot visit Buddhist centres abroad. The only possible pilgrimage available to local Buddhists is to visit temples in Chinese Tibet.

Most of Xinjiang's estimated 140,000 ethnic Mongolians are found in the Bortala-Mongolian autonomous prefecture, which borders Kazakhstan. The prefecture's capital Bortala (Bole in Chinese) is 200 kilometres (125 miles) north of Ghulja (Yining in Chinese), capital of the neighbouring Ili-Kazakh autonomous prefecture, and 600 kilometres (375 miles) west of Xinjiang's capital, Urumqi. There are much larger populations of ethnic Mongolians in China's Inner Mongolia autonomous region, which borders Mongolia itself.

The lama of Bortala's Buddhist temple, Suke Oma, told Forum 18 in the town on 5 September that Mongolians make up around 60 per cent of the prefecture's population (the second most numerous national grouping is Han Chinese, followed by ethnic Kazakhs). However, he reported that local Mongolians are heavily assimilated into the Chinese population, with young people preferring to speak to each other in Chinese rather than in Mongolian.

Suke Oma seemed less concerned by restrictions on portraits of the Dalai Lama and on foreign contacts than other local Buddhists Forum 18 spoke to. He reported that the authorities do not obstruct the construction of Buddhist temples, but maintained that as Mongolians are "not particularly devout" the three temples currently functioning locally are "quite sufficient". Even these temples are filled with worshippers only on major festivals, he told Forum 18.

Forum 18 found that the Bortala autonomous prefecture has many holy places connected with paganism rather than with Buddhism. For example, numerous hills made up of piles of stones tower above the mountain Lake Sayram, 80 kilometres (50 miles) south-west of Bortala. Any Mongolian passing one of these holy places has by tradition to stop and place another stone on the pile.

For more background information see Forum 18's Xinjiang religious freedom survey at

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=143

A printer-friendly map of China (including Xinjiang) is available from

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=china>

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