



This picture has the title "Praying for world peace" and shows the Director of the *State Administration of Religious Affairs*, Mr. Ye Xiaowen (L1) and the Vice-director, Mr. Qi Xiaofei (L4), and other officials during the concluding ceremony of "The First World Buddhist Forum" at Putuoshan island.

Introduction

Egil Lothe and Knut Espen Arnesen from the *China Project* of the *Oslo Coalition on Freedom of Religion or Belief* participated from 14 – 17 April 2006 in the conference "The First World Buddhist Forum" (FWBF) that took place in Hangzhou, Zhoushan (Putuoshan) and Shanghai in China. The two are both members of the *Buddhist Federation of Norway*, the former being the President of this organisation as well as the leader of the *China Project* of the *Oslo Coalition*.

The Oslo Coalition on Freedom of Religion or Belief is an international network based in Oslo of representatives from faith communities, NGOs, international organizations and the academia, with the aim of promoting freedom of religion or belief. It works on a project basis, cooperating with partners with a similar agenda in a number of countries. Its methods for promoting freedom of religion or belief include partnerships with organisations and institutions in other countries, facilitation of new religious networks, organisation of conferences and support of useful studies, in the field of freedom of religion or belief. *The Oslo Coalition* does not engage in monitoring but

focuses on dialogue and collaboration through inter-religious conferences and, above all, through support of practical interfaith cooperation at local, regional and national levels. *The Oslo Coalition* was established by the participants of the *Oslo Conference on Freedom of Religion or Belief*, which was held in August 1998 in the context of the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The activities of the *Oslo Coalition* are based on the “Oslo Declaration on Freedom of Religion or Belief”, which was adopted by the Conference. In 2001, it was signed by leaders of all major Norwegian faith communities.

Since 2000 the *Oslo Coalition* has been engaged in an ongoing dialogue with China on freedom of religion or belief with the *State Administration of Religious Affairs* (SARA) as partner and facilitator.

The conference had for some time been announced by the Chinese as an unprecedented event in the history of Buddhism in China, being the first Buddhist international conference to take place in the country. The *Oslo Coalition* therefore considered participation by our Buddhist members important in the context of the ongoing dialogue on freedom of religion or belief. Our view was that participation at the conference might also give insight into how Chinese policies on religion are being enacted at present as well as extending our contacts with our Chinese partners, in particular those from Chinese Buddhist circles. Having the opportunity to meet with participants from the Chinese Buddhist Diaspora might also help us get a better understanding of the religious situation in China.

Buddhism in China

In our dialogue with China the *Oslo Coalition* has put emphasis on contextualizing the issues regarding freedom of religion to include the traditional Chinese religions such as Buddhism, Daoism and Chinese folk religion. Buddhism is officially described as the largest religion in China. Different figures regarding the number of adherents are given such as “more than 100 million”. In general it may be said that Chinese statistics on religion are not very precise. This may have something to do with the symbolic significance of figures, encouraging a tendency to use lower figures than the real ones, following traditional Communist discourse of downplaying the importance of religion. However, applying clear definitions and categories regarding the religious beliefs of the Chinese is by no means a simple matter. Leaders of the *Buddhist Association of China* suggest that there are about 300 million Buddhists in China today. A more useful approach for our purposes may be to consider contemporary religious trends. In 2000 the government referred to 13.000 Buddhist temples in China. This year it referred to “more than 20.000”ⁱⁱⁱ which implies an increase of 54%. Verifying this statement by looking at specific areas, one may consider an example such as Shanghai where there were said to be 60 Buddhist temples in 2000 (according to official publications) with the number having increased to 85 this year, an increase of 42 %. The fact that new Buddhist temples are, in many cases, established in places where they have not existed for many decades, suggests that such official figures may be regarded as credible. Such figures, along with other information regarding recent developments, suggest that Buddhism is in a process of strong expansionⁱⁱⁱ. The relationship between the Chinese state and Buddhism has therefore hardly become less interesting during this period.

Also adding significance to the dialogue on freedom of religion or belief is the fact that Tibetan Buddhism in the PRC is organisationally a part of the *Buddhist Association of China*. Chinese Buddhism is therefore also interesting as a gateway to Tibetan Buddhism with its particular issues in the field of freedom of religion.

As far as the *Oslo Coalition* is concerned the interaction with the *Buddhist Association of China* has run parallel to the dialogue with the *State Administration of Religious Affairs* (SARA). For instance, in 2004 the Beijing division of SARA approached the delegation of the Oslo Coalition in order to ask for the cooperation of the *Buddhist Federation of Norway* (BFN) regarding a visit to Norway by a delegation of representatives from Beijing SARA as well as Buddhist monks and nuns from various temples in the capital. As President of the BFN I had the pleasure of hosting the delegation during their visit to Oslo during the autumn of 2004. It may also be mentioned that my participation at international Buddhist conferences during the last few years in Thailand has also given me opportunities to develop our contacts with the *Buddhist Association of China* as well as the *State Administration of Religious Affairs* who have both been well represented at these conferences. Our participation at these conferences also gives our Chinese partners opportunities to know us better, something that is a prerequisite for mutual confidence.

The organisers of the conference

The organisers of the “First World Buddhist Forum” were the *Buddhist Association of China* (BAC) and the *Religious Culture Communication Association of China* (RCCAC). BAC constitutes the organizational structure of Buddhism in China and works, as politically required, closely together with the Chinese state. The close ties between these organisations and the state was very apparent during the conference. The RCCAC clearly represented the Chinese state, since its President, Mr. Ye Xiaowen and its Vice-president Mr. Qi Xiaofei are respectively the Director and Vice-director of the *State Administration of Religious Affairs* (SARA).

Also of interest was the fact that eight prominent Buddhist masters (monks) were listed as the initiators of the conference. Among these, five were distinguished monks, representing the BAC, while three were Chinese monks from outside the PRC such as the head of the *Buddhist federation of Hong Kong*, Ven. Kok Kwong as well as Ven. Hsing Yun and Ven. Wei Chueh who are two of the leading monks in Taiwan. During the conference it became clear that there were also broad contacts with the Buddhist Diaspora outside China. In our view this was an interesting feature of the conference which may be regarded as significant for the development of Chinese Buddhism in the PRC.

We arrived at Shanghai Airport on Wednesday 12 April and were well received by representatives of the organisers and taken by car to our hotel in Hangzhou a few hours drive to the west. About 1000 representatives from more than 30 countries had been invited. I took the opportunity to connect my laptop to the Internet and noticed that a few Catholic homepages containing news and reports about Catholicism in China (incidentally also containing reports that portray the government in positive ways) were not accessible, while another international Buddhist news page that often contains reports about the Dalai Lama (and sometimes portraying the

Chinese authorities in a negative light) was readily accessible. Generally speaking, the blocking of information on the Internet, that takes place in China, is a point of irritation to foreign visitors to the country that do not contribute to the impression of progress that China likes to convey to visitors.

Press Conference

Being delegates we were not invited to the press conference the same evening where the "Chinese" Panchen Lama, Bainqen Erdini Qoigyijabu, made his appearance^{iv}. His participation in the conference had not been announced beforehand and thus came as something of a surprise.



Bainqen Erdini Qoigyijabu, recognised as the 11th Panchen Lama in China^v

In connection with the press conference the Chairman of "The National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference", Mr Jia Qingling, who is also a prominent member of the CCP, made his appearance, thus stressing the strong official character of the conference.

The coverage of the conference in Chinese media

As far as we were able to ascertain, the conference was given a high profile in Chinese media. Prominent persons, such as Mr. Ye Xiaowen, went rather far in stressing the positive impact of Buddhism on the Chinese society. The quote below from *China Daily* is typical of this discourse:

As a religion with "profound ideas of harmony and a conception of peace," Buddhism could relieve strain and stress among people and between them and nature, thus enhancing social accord, said Ye Xiaowen, chief of the State Administration for Religious Affairs.

China was working hard to build a harmonious society and advocated the construction of a world where harmony played a significant roll, he said.

Promoting the Buddhist spirit of harmony, peace and benevolence would undoubtedly push forward this ethic in China and the world, Xinhua News Agency quoted Ye as saying.

"As a responsible country China has had its own deep thoughts and a measure of foresight in the promotion of world harmony," Ye said.

"Religious beliefs are one of the important social forces from which China draws strength," he added. (*China Daily*, April 11, 2006)

Similarly Mr. Qi Xiaofei was quoted:

"The forum represents a new and active endeavour by Buddhism to contribute to harmony," said event spokesman Qi Xiaofei. ...

Qi, also secretary-general of the China Religious Culture Communication Association (CRCCA), said all religions are treated equally in China.

Apart from Buddhism, China's main religions include Taoism, Islam and Christianity.

But Buddhism has a relatively more profound influence among Chinese people, Qi said, because its teachings of equality, benevolence and harmony are similar to the concepts of peace and harmony in traditional Chinese culture.

Advocating the Buddhist spirit and applying the religion's wisdom will help people achieve peace of mind, and facilitate the realization of lasting peace in the world, he told a press conference.

(*Peoples Daily Online*, April 13, 2006)

The conference

The actual conference started on Thursday morning 13 April in *The People's Congress Hall of Zhejiang Province*. After the Buddhist ceremonial opening Ms Liu Yandong, Vice-chairman of *The National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference* (CPPCC), gave the opening speech^{vi}. A greeting letter from the secretary general of the UN, Mr. Kofi Annan, was then read by the former head of Hong Kong (SAR), Tung Chee-hwa. After the opening ceremony came sessions of speeches that followed more or less the same pattern during the two and a half days the conference lasted. The talks consisted of sessions of short speeches by Buddhist leaders from the PRC, as well as from a number of other countries, to the assembled participants. This manner of organizing the conference gave a larger number of participants the opportunity to read papers relating to the three main themes of the conference: "Unity and cooperation of Buddhism", "Social responsibilities of Buddhism" and "Peace Mission of Buddhism". Several hundred contributions had been received in advance by the organisers and a three volume publication (the first two volumes in Chinese and the last one in English) had been prepared. These were distributed to the participants at the outset of the conference. About seventy of these papers were presented in an abbreviated form during the conference. I was not among those who spoke during the conference but my paper on the topic of "Peace Mission of Buddhism", where I emphasized social justice, human rights as well as inter-religious dialogue as important components of a Buddhist approach to peace building, was included in the proceedings^{vii}. As already mentioned, the format of the sessions gave space for the largest possible number of speakers, while giving a very limited

opportunity for the audience to ask questions or to give comments or express opinions. Clearly, response from the audience was not a high priority for the organisers. Only during the morning session on the last day of the conference were questions allowed. It must be said, however, that the choice of format of the sessions was reasonable in view of the wide variety of cultural, educational and political backgrounds of the participants. This format thus gave opportunities for a broader selection of expressions. This was particularly important as the assembly included participants ranging from American Buddhists from Texas to Buddhist representatives from North Korea. The majority of the contributors, however, were Chinese Buddhists, many of them representing Chinese Buddhism outside the PRC.

During the conference, we were given a unique opportunity to listen to numerous presentations and to engage in conversations with individuals involved in the current revival of Chinese Buddhism. Thus we were able form a more comprehensive picture of contemporary Chinese Buddhism from within as well as from without the PRC. The trend of thought expressed, clearly represented the developments within (Han) Chinese Mahayana Buddhism that can be traced back to the monk Taixu who lived from 1890 to 1947. His reformation of Chinese Mahayana Buddhism was in many ways a Buddhist "aggiornamento" stressing, far stronger than before, a social oriented approach, relating Buddhism to the challenges of the modern world. The background for this new interpretation of Buddhism was the crisis in Chinese Buddhism caused by its encounter with the modern world during the last part of the nineteenth century and throughout much of the twentieth^{viii}. During the conference it was apparent that this understanding of Buddhism was a unifying ideological foundation for Chinese Mahayana Buddhism inside as well as outside the PRC.

Tibetan Buddhism, which has been moulded by a rather different history, does not give the impression of having adopted this modernist ideological foundation. Incidentally Tibetan Buddhism was not allocated much time during the conference, although a number of Tibetans (mostly from the PRC) were present. The contemporary controversies related to the political role of the Dalai Lama, suggests a more problematic context for an active participation of Tibetan Buddhists on the Chinese arena. The fact that neither the Dalai Lama nor the seventeenth Karmapa were invited was no surprise, although journalists raised questions during the press conference regarding their absence. Only a few Tibetan representatives from the exile community participated in the conference.

The "Chinese" Panchen Lama

The appearance of the "Chinese" Panchen Lama at the inauguration of the conference in the morning on Thursday 12 April was not previously announced and marked his debut in an international setting. He gave a brief speech in Tibetan which was quite up to standard as far as its Buddhist content was concerned, although he emphasised rather heavily the predictable points regarding patriotism. Claims made by some foreign journalists that he was met with "cold shoulders" by the other delegates could neither be confirmed nor dismissed, by our observations in the conference hall. However, after the morning session on the first day of the conference he did not appear again during the conference. We also noticed that he did not participate in the grand religious ceremony on the island of Putuoshan where the conference was formally concluded. We got the impression that his participation

in the conference was to test response of the audience in view of his future international engagements.

Was this a truly religious conference?

In our view the conference was implemented in accordance with its stated purpose conveyed in the invitation letter. The foci of the conference were very much on the three main themes mentioned above. The fact that the organisers had sought the cooperation of Buddhists from outside the PRC also contributed to a greater confidence among the participants in the conference as a genuine religious event. Of the two monks leading the meetings one was the distinguished young Abbot Shi Ming Yi from Singapore whose English was very fluent and who handled the assembly with great acumen. The organisers were apparently well aware of the fact that a number of prominent Asian Buddhist leaders were present at the conference. In such a setting any promotion of political agendas would have been counterproductive. Thus there was no mention of issues that might have given the participants a feeling of being used in a political project. The PRC participants made no statements about the Falungong, the Dalai Lama or the Taiwan issue. However, although the conference was solidly religious that does not mean that it was without political significance or that political motives were absent from the Chinese government's involvement in this project (see "General conclusions").

"Zhongguo, fojiao daguo"

In addition to the sessions in the conference hall there was the customary banquet, as well as visits on the second day to two old temples situated at the famous West Lake outside Hangzhou. In one of the temples a relic of the Buddha was placed on the main altar. The religious atmosphere was palpable among the visiting participants of the conference as well as among the devotees in the temple (see picture below).



This picture from the temple where a relic of the Buddha was displayed has the title "Journalists visit Jingci Temple" and shows a rather unusual combination of journalism and religious devotion^{ix}.

Later in the evening we were taken to a show of music, song and dance, inspired by Buddhism, in a modern concert house. The show was well received by the audience and Mr. Ye Xiaowen and the leaders of the BAC were clearly pleased as they entered the stage to congratulate the artists. Mr. Ye Xiaowen, who seems to have a tendency to speak in “big letters”, called out to the audience: “Zhongguo, fojiao daguo”. This statement was not translated. It means something like: “China is the great country of Buddhism” and occasioned a few discussions at the breakfast tables on the following morning regarding his intentions for expressing himself in this way. Several of the Chinese Buddhists we talked to interpreted his attitude to Buddhism as genuinely positive. One distinguished monk was of the opinion that the Chinese political leaders are worried that many Chinese have lost much of their sense of identity and moral orientation and that they consider this a serious problem as China is challenged by various forms of religious fundamentalism. At the same time the monk suggested that the current cooperation between Buddhists and the Chinese government is based on pragmatic considerations: “They use us and we use them”. However, he expressed great optimism regarding the future of Buddhism in China: “This is only the beginning!”

We also noted that Mr. Ye Xiaowen in his concluding remarks at the end of the conference gave a short exposition of a parable from the *Avatamsaka-sutra* (one of the sacred scriptures of Mahayana Buddhism) which was also favourably commented upon by participants we met^x.

The conference was concluded by noon on Saturday 16 April. During the last session the audience was allowed to put questions to the speakers on the stage. One of the monks from Sri Lanka used the opportunity to draw attention to the situation for Buddhists working in the Middle East (particularly from Sri Lanka and Thailand) claiming that their right to freedom of religion is being grossly violated in certain Muslim countries. Although one would not expect China to take up an issue such as this one, there is reason to expect increased awareness among Buddhists about this issue.

Incidentally, we would like to mention that on the first day we were immediately recognized by Mr. Ye Xiaowen who greeted us most heartily. Besides we also used the opportunity to offer him the book *Facilitating Freedom of Religion or Belief: A Desk book*, the result of a major project of the Oslo Coalition^{xi}.

The religious ceremony on Putuoshan

As soon as the participants had left The People’s Congress Hall of Zhejiang Province they were transported by plane to Zhoushan for the ceremonial conclusion of the conference which was to take place on Putuoshan island the following day.

Putuoshan is one of the four sacred Buddhist mountains (*mingshan*) in China and is the holy abode of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara (Guanyin) and has been a centre of Buddhist worship since the time of the Tang dynasty. In 1214 CE the place was designated a centre for worship of Guanyin by an imperial order and is today famous for its ancient monasteries where presently 500 - 1000 monks and nuns live (compared to about 2000 before 1949)^{xii}.

Much of the considerable amounts of money spent by the conference organisers seemed to have been used on improvements in this area such as new roads, as well as an impressive array of banners and decorations etc. After being checked in at a local hotel we had some time to explore the island on our own. It was evident that Putuoshan is continuously being developed as a site for pilgrimage. New temples have been harmoniously placed among the older ones without much change in architectural style. These ancient temples had also been nicely renovated. According to information received, the number of hotel beds was now about 20.000. During the last decade the island had reportedly received more than one million pilgrims and tourists annually with the number having increased to 2.7 million in 2005.

The first day at Putuoshan ended with a religious ceremony at the largest monastery on the island. This ceremony, "The Transmission of the Lamp", was a procession through the grounds of the monastery, where we, together with a few thousand local Buddhists, carried candles which were finally placed on the altar in the main shrine. Incidentally we were somewhat surprised when we saw that Ye Xiaowen had joined the procession with his colleagues, all carrying a candle.



Participants of the "First World Buddhist Forum" gathered to pray for world peace in front of the statue of Guanyin^{xiii}.

Sunday morning on 16 April the grand concluding ceremony took place in front of the outdoor statue of Guanyin. The ceremony was a great show of traditional Buddhist pomp and circumstance with 108 Buddhist masters from various denominations leading the prayers in front of the participants as well as the Chinese political representatives headed by Ye Xiaowen. Regarding the latter it must be noted that their behaviour was rather remarkable, as they, in the same way as the Buddhist believers do during religious ceremonies, folded their hands in devotional salutation (see picture on first page of this report). In the Chinese context this is quite unusual, as officials present at religious functions maintain a passive behaviour indicating that they are not participating in the actual devotions. The fact that two of the representatives, in the picture referred to, do not fold their hands also emphasises this point.

An important part of the ceremony was the reading of the declaration of the conference. It was a well written summary of the global challenges facing Buddhism that most Buddhists would have approved. Speeches by Qi Xiaofei (FWBF) and Jiamuyang Luosangjiumei Tudanquejinima (Jamyang Lobsang Gyurme Tubten Choekyinyima), the Tibetan Vice-president of the BAC, concluded the ceremony. From what we could observe the media coverage of the ceremony (and the conference in general) was rather extensive. According to *People's Daily Online* the ceremony was broadcasted live on national television.

After this ceremony those of the participants staying on the island were taken on a trip to the most important temples on Putuoshan. This gave us also an opportunity to become better acquainted with some of the other participants of the conference. Of special interest to us were the delegates from North Korea (DPRK) with whom we entered into conversations. It was particularly fascinating to watch how they participated in the prayer ceremonies (chanting of the Heart Sutra) led by their South Korean coreligionists in the temples we visited. Being somewhat sceptical about the North Koreans' religious credentials we still got the impression that at least some of them were genuine believers. Although their claims that there were "a lot of Buddhists" in the DPRK did not strike us as very credible we still found this encounter valuable and would recommend taking up further contact with Buddhist circles in the DPRK in the future.



Knut Espen Arnesen (L1) and Egil Lothe (L2) during the ceremony at Putuoshan^{xiv}.

Those of the participants who were lodged on the neighbouring islands participated in a ceremony for the laying down of the foundation stone of the monument on which the "Putuoshan Declaration" would be engraved. This monument is going to be erected at the site of the new Buddhist College to be built on this island close to Putuoshan. From other sources we had learned that Ye Xiaowen, about a year earlier, had participated in the ceremony inaugurating this project. To learn more

about this future Buddhist College, which, according to our sources, would cost more than 300 million Yuan, we asked one of the local nuns for information. She told us that the college was planned to be completed by 2007 and that it would accommodate about 2000 students.



Leading officials and monks laying the foundation stone for the monument of the Putuoshan declaration^{xv}.

Our brief impressions of Putuoshan island suggests that its character as a sacred place of pilgrimage has been rather well preserved. However, a particular future challenge is to avoid making the island become a victim of its own success by receiving visitors in excess of what it can accommodate without damaging its natural and religious environment.

Shanghai

The last stop on the journey of the conference was Shanghai where we arrived on Monday 17 April. A first performance of a Buddhist symphony concert had been added to the program just before the conference began, taking advantage of the fact that most of the foreign participants would leave China through Shanghai. Thus the organisers had an opportunity to show the delegates something of the "new China".

We managed a boat trip on the Huangpu river, a visit to the "Pearl Tower" and a trip with the fastest train in the world, before going to a brand new concert hall in the Pudong area of Shanghai to experience the message of Buddhism expressed through Western classical art. This concert was a contrast to the traditional Buddhist world of Hangzhou and Putuoshan and was probably also intended to symbolize the role of Buddhism in modern China. Interestingly this concert was also performed afterwards in Shenzhen and Guangzhou with Ye Xiaowen attending.



Monks and officials at the Buddhist symphony concert in Shanghai^{xvi}

Postscript I: conference in Bangkok

Of some relevance to this report was the invitation extended to the President of the *Buddhist Federation of Norway* to participate in an international conference taking place in Bangkok 7 – 10 May. Marking the sixtieth anniversary of the Thai monarch, the conference gathered around 1500 foreign delegates along with an equal number of Thai representatives. A delegation from the *Buddhist Association of China* led by its Secretary General, Ven. Xue Cheng, also attended the conference. Present was also the leader of the foreign division of SARA, Ms Guo Wei. Somewhat surprisingly I was drawn into a discussion about the Falungong movement in my talks with the Chinese Buddhist monks. The attitude of the monks from the BAC is clearly shaped by their experience with Falungong in the years before the crackdown in 1999. The relation between the *Buddhist Association of China* and Falungong has for years been rather antagonistic. The need to argue for the principles of the rule of law particularly in relation to unpopular movements (to which objections may be raised) was naturally important to me, although I probably did not succeed in bringing that aspect of the issue into focus. However, initiating such discussions will in a long term perspective be important in order to broadening the discussion on freedom of religion. I also referred to this discussion with Ms Guo Wei, mentioning to her the pre 1999 discussions among the Chinese Buddhists regarding Falungong. The point quoted below from the joint communiqué of the conference reflects some of the discussion:

(11) to record the success of the First World Buddhist Forum held in April in Zhou Shan, China, the convening of which was supported in the 2005 International Buddhist Conference on the United Nations Day of Vesak in Bangkok, Thailand, and to affirm that Falungong is not in accordance with the fundamental teachings of Buddhism^{xvii}.

Postscript II: Tibetan delegation from the PRC visiting Norway

Before the departure from Oslo of the two Norwegian participants of the “First World Buddhist Forum” the representatives of the “Steering committee of the China project

of the Oslo Coalition” were invited to a meeting with officials of the Chinese Embassy in Oslo. During this meeting the officials asked if the *Buddhist Federation of Norway* would accept hosting a delegation of Tibetan academics and religious leaders, including a “Living Buddha” (reincarnate lama) visiting Norway later this year. As leader of the BFN I accepted the request, based on positive experiences with a similar visit in 2004. During the previous visit we had organised an extensive program which gave both sides opportunities to get acquainted with the viewpoints of the other side that also included discussion on freedom of religion / human rights. In our experience, positive relations, based on mutual respect, is essential for a genuine dialogue where each part has a real interest in listening to the other part. We interpret requests for such visits as developments towards greater trust and openness. The occurrence of such delegations visiting Norway may also be regarded as valuable progress in the ongoing dialogue with China on freedom of religion or belief.

General conclusions

As already mentioned, a conference such as the “First World Buddhist Forum” has obviously wider implications than the purely religious ones. The most apparent results are connected to issues of foreign relations where China has interests for which this conference was clearly useful. At the same time it is our impression that the “First World Buddhist Forum” may also be significant as an indication of ideological changes in the Chinese society.

The conference in the context of foreign relations

In the field of foreign relations (which include internal issues that have become internationalised) three main concerns may be detected:

Firstly in relation to the question of Tibet: Through this conference China gained positive publicity as a country expressing good will and support to Buddhism. This is obviously an asset in the struggle to define the truth about Tibet that goes on between, on the one hand, the Tibetans living in exile and their supporters (as well as those Tibetans living in China opposing present policies) and, on the other hand, the Chinese government and those who support it. Seeking legitimacy for the “Chinese” Panchen Lama through his participation in the conference was obviously of great relevance in this context.

Secondly in relation to the Taiwan issue. “Playing the Buddhist card” is something which the Chinese government has done for a number of years, most conspicuously through the exchanges of Buddhist relics (which appears to have been very successful). Through their participation in organising the conference leading monks from Taiwan have become even more closely involved with their co-religionists in China and through them with the Chinese government. The Buddhist engagement can be seen as part of the efforts of the Chinese government to promote attachments to the mainland among the population in Taiwan. Through Buddhism, which has deep historical roots in China, the Chinese Buddhists in Taiwan are reminded of their links to the motherland. The fact that Buddhism in China is now going through a period of considerable growth increases the prospects of success for this strategy.

Thirdly in relation to improving relations with the Buddhist (or Buddhist influenced) countries in Asia. Being seen as a nation supporting Buddhism is obviously something that gives approval by many in the participating countries and provides China with a capital of good will in its relations to them.

Other reflections

Some of the foreign media interpreted the conference as an expression of good will, directed towards the USA and other Western countries, in relation to freedom of religion in China. Our impressions of the conference make us inclined to dismiss this interpretation. In our view Buddhist Asia, and in particular the Chinese Diaspora (as well as Macao, Hong Kong and Taiwan) was the targeted audience of this conference to a much larger extent than Western countries.

In addition we would like to refer to a point we consider relevant in this connection, mentioned by Ye Xiaowen in his public statements about the importance of Buddhism for the Chinese society. In our view Ye Xiaowen stressed the distinctness of China and its moral foundations. Ye Xiaowen's emphasis on the value of the indigenous traditions of China is incidentally also suggested by the ongoing establishment of the so called "Confucius Institutes" abroad (promoting the study of the Chinese language, not Confucian thought) where the chosen designation is clearly not completely arbitrary^{xviii}. This suggests an interpretation of the conference as an expression of Chinese cultural identity based on its traditional religions and philosophies among which Buddhism has a prominent place.

The conference in a national context

Although the conference may be related to interests connected to foreign relations our impressions are that the signals it conveys about an ideological reorientation of the Chinese society may be regarded as more significant. The appearance of the political leaders at the conference, the coverage in the Chinese media^{xix}, and available information about the development of Buddhism in China, all points in the same direction: that the political leaders of China increasingly recognise the cultural and social value of Buddhism and other religions in the contemporary situation. The slogan of the conference: "A harmonious world begins in the mind" is very much a reference to the government's slogan about a "harmonious society" as suggested by the comment of Ye Xiaowen:

"Buddhism's philosophy is also a major reference for China's 'harmonious society' concept," said Ye Xiaowen, the top official in charge of the country's religious affairs. (*People's Daily Online*, 10 May 2006)

As already mentioned it was our impression that the audience targeted by the conference was not Western observers of the conditions of Buddhism in Chinese society, but rather the Chinese Buddhist Diaspora who knows thoroughly the real situation of Buddhism in China. These Buddhists also participated in organising the conference itself. What we saw here was an example of a partnership where the aspirations of Chinese Buddhists from outside the mainland to promote the reconstruction of Buddhism in China are welcomed by a government that for various reasons shares this objective. However, distinguishing between the national concerns of the government and its concerns related to foreign relations may often be difficult.

The government's embrace of Buddhism may appear somewhat surreal and surprising, considering the history of China under the rule of the CCP. Seeing prominent monks imprisoned for several decades, for basically no other reason than their religious faith, standing side by side with prominent members of the CCP, as they did during the previously mentioned concert in Shanghai, one naturally "rubs one's eyes"^{xx}. However, what we saw was, in our view quite real. The reason for this being not a mere showcase performance but an expression of a real change of policy (that has been going on for some years) is the multitude of observable facts that document the growth and increasing social acceptance of Buddhism as well as other religions in China.

Without trying to describe the whole issue of freedom of religion in China it may suffice to draw attention to a few singular areas indicating a positive development:

For instance there seems to be no longer a need to remind the Chinese government about the potential role of religions in providing social and humanitarian services to the Chinese society, as the *Oslo Coalition* and others did during previous visits to China. Today religious groups seem to have been granted opportunities for social and humanitarian activities of various scopes.

Concerning other issues such as the right of children to practise religion this is still a point on the agenda of the dialogue with China. However, on this point there seem to be some developments. In 2000, during the visit of the *Oslo Coalition*, our Chinese hosts stressed that the teaching of religion was the responsibility of the parents and took place in the homes of the children (although the reality was actually a little more complex). This year (2006) we observed on a homepage that a Buddhist Summer Camp in a temple explicitly referred to children between 12 and 18 as their target group. Besides, scholars describe extensive Islamic religious education of children taking place in many parts of China. We should therefore expect that the government will show Sunday Schools and the like in great numbers to future delegations visiting China.

When it comes to access to information about religion the development seems to be very good. An example is improved access to Bibles, which is an issue that we have brought up on several occasions on previous visits. Incidentally we have also noticed that ordinary bookshops usually carry a wide selection of books on religion (although the largest number of books seems to be on Buddhism, the other religions are also well covered). Similarly we noticed that many ordinary record shops carry a selection of Buddhist music. This is the case even at the airports such as in Beijing where we also noted books by Tibetan lamas in Chinese translations. The use of the Internet by religious groups has increased enormously during the last few years and has given them unprecedented possibilities to communicate their message to a wide audience as well as having given a large number of people easier access to religious knowledge. In the perspective of freedom of religion this is clearly a significant development.

The "First World Buddhist Forum" showed very clearly that the policy on religion of China is one where the state is directly involved in religious events on all levels. This

happens not only in domestic situations but to a large extent also abroad, as we have observed during the international Buddhist conferences that have taken place in Thailand during the last few years.

Regarding the question of whether Buddhism is becoming a privileged religion compared to the others, developments so far do in our view not warrant such a conclusion. However what seems clear is that the effects of policies that have been implemented during the last decades are now becoming more apparent. The political hurricanes that have raged over China during much of the twentieth century did appear to have wiped out the traditional Chinese religions. Buddhism coming back as the major religion is thus definitely a significant event^{xxi}. In the same way as in some of the former communist countries it seems that the situation in China is becoming normalised in the sense that people are rediscovering their historical religious roots. Among the Han this process seems to have caught real momentum only during the last decade. If this impression is confirmed by future developments it will have implications for the context of future dialogues between the West and China regarding the role of religions in society. From the Chinese side we will probably see a change of ideological reference from a traditional Marxist one to one that in some respects resembles the traditional imperial one where religions were given space to develop while being kept subservient to the power of the state. At the same time China faces the challenge to harmonise its legal framework regulating religion with the international conventions on human rights.

Some concluding remarks

Positive trends do not mean, however, that unacceptable restrictions no longer occur in China. Particularly in regions where the government considers strong measures of control necessary, such as in Tibet and Xinjiang, where separatism is regarded as a real threat, we notice that the government may go to great lengths in restricting religious freedoms^{xxii}. This is also the case with groups that are considered subversive (Falungong) or unwilling to abide by government regulations (certain Christian groups). It is also here that the most serious restrictions on the freedom of individuals happen (arrests, prison sentences, etc.).

Considering the fact that religions are given greater space in Chinese society one might conclude that there will be a development towards regulating the religious sector through legislative measures in accordance with international law as we see it happen in the economic sector. Although changes have taken place in the legal area in relation to religion, a shift from administrative measures to legal measures has not taken place. One may on the contrary conclude that the increased importance of religion have made the government more concerned with controlling religions firmly. If this is the case this will clearly be an important point to explore in future dialogues with China on freedom of religion.

Chinese often refer to China as a "society in transition". This perspective may also prove useful for the discussion about freedom of religion. The need for dialogue refers to what we see as undue limitations on the freedom of religion. The potential of dialogue is connected to the developments taking place in this area. Dialogue implies an ability to recognise positive trends of development while being honest about differences in thinking and practise in this area. To a greater extent than other forms

of communication dialogue requires the building of trust between the partners with a real mutual interest in listening to each other (although the motives for such an interest may not necessarily be the same). The goal of dialogue is a genuine exchange of thoughts and reflections so that both parties achieve a better understanding of the other's points of view. Concerning a topic such as freedom of religion or human rights it is presumably those with the most viable positions in relation to the international conventions on human rights that will have the greatest impact in such a situation. Whether a dialogue that achieves this goal will contribute significantly to real improvements in the area discussed will obviously depend on numerous other conditions. This last consideration will in itself not be a measure of its success or failure.

In connection with our work in the *Oslo Coalition* during a number of years it has been our experience that a serious long-term commitment has been necessary to develop our dialogue with our Chinese partners to the level we have achieved today. It also appears that bringing Chinese Buddhism into our discussions with them has a positive impact on the dialogue that we have with China concerning freedom of religion or belief. At the same time we would also emphasise the importance of an approach that is broad as well as inter-religious and interdisciplinary^{xxiii}. Giving due recognition to positive trends of development is important when we approach our partners on other issues where we think China may have considerably more potential for development.

Homepages:

<http://wbf.China.cn/> Half official homepage for "First World Buddhist Forum". Includes pictures from the conference and cutting from local newspapers.

<http://www.asianews.it/main.php?l=en> Catholic homepage based in Italy. Contains news focusing on China and Asia. Is rather critical with regard to violations of religious freedom etc. in Asian countries. Appears to be blocked in China.

<http://www.fjnet.com/> Buddhist homepage in China with daily news about Chinese Buddhism. An English (abridged) version of this homepage is now available at <http://news.fjnet.com/english/>

<http://www.hsstudyc.org.hk/> Catholic homepage in Hong Kong with focus on China. Contains substantial information and analysis on Catholicism that is also relevant for a general understanding of the religious situation in China. Balanced in its view of the government but appears to be blocked in China.

<http://www.oslocoalition.org> Homepage of "The Oslo Coalition on Freedom of Religion or Belief."

<http://www.putuoshan.org.cn/> Buddhist homepage of Putuoshan.

<http://www.sara.gov.cn/GB/> Official homepage of "State Administration for Religious Affairs" in Beijing.

<http://www.wbf.net.cn/english/> Official homepage for "First World Buddhist Forum" with programs, papers etc.

Notes:

ⁱ The picture is publicised on the homepage of "China Internet Information Center" (CIIC): <http://wbfc.china.cn/>

ⁱⁱ "China has at least 20,000 Buddhist temples and about 200,000 Buddhist monks and nuns, according to official statistics". (China Daily 04/11/2006 page2)

ⁱⁱⁱ However, regarding the number of monks and nuns, official sources still refer to the same figures as they did in 2000 ("about 200,000"). In this number about 120,000 Tibetan monks (and presumably nuns as well) are included, along with about 10,000 Theravada Buddhist monks. Regarding the number of Han Chinese monks and nuns the same sources refer to "more than 40,000". It is therefore of some interest when the vice president of BAC, Ven. Sheng Hui, at the national conference of the BAC in Nanjing 23 – 25 February 2006, informed the assembly that 26 ordination ceremonies had taken place during the last three years with a total of 12,068 monks and nuns having been ordained. The high number of monastics being ordained at each ceremony (an average of 464) suggests that these figures refer to Han Chinese Buddhism where such mass ordinations are common. In any case these figures suggest a significant increase in the number of monks and nuns.

^{iv} We assume that readers are familiar with the controversy regarding the identification of the eleventh incarnation of the Panchen Lama and do therefore not go into details about this issue.

^v The picture is publicised on the homepage of "China Internet Information Center" (CIIC).

^{vi} Since 2002 she has also been the leader of the "United Front Work Department (UFWD) of CCP Central Committee".

^{vii} The English volume is published as "A Harmonious World Begins in the Mind, Collected Works of The World Buddhist Forum English Collection," (ISBN 7-80123-759-5), Religious Culture Publishing House, Beijing 2006.

^{viii} Justin R. Riztinger's thesis on Ven. Taixu, *Taixu. To Renew Buddhism and Save the Modern World* is available on the Internet (<http://ccbs.ntu.edu.tw/FULLTEXT/JR-AN/102919.htm>). A more comprehensive study Taixu is offered by Don A. Pittman. *Toward a Modern Chinese Buddhism: Taixu's Reforms*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001.

^{ix} The picture is publicised on the homepage of "China Internet Information Center" (CIIC).

^x It appears, however, that Ye Xiaowen is in the habit of going rather far in speaking the language of his listeners: as he did in this speech that he gave in a church in Atlanta, USA, 29.05.06:

"The Bible is the message from God, but it has many different versions and is available in many different languages. The Church, also, is one part of God, but it works in different ways and has different kinds of organization. China and America are far apart in distance and different in historical background, cultural traditions and level of development; Therefore, the two nations need to enhance communication and seek common ground amid their differences. I believe that when God created man and woman, He did not want them to quarrel but to live in harmony with each other. Similarly, God divided the world into East and West, but He expects each to live together in the spirit of harmony, not confrontation".

The complete speech can be read on the homepage of SARA: <http://www.sara.gov.cn/GB/>

^{xi} In September 2004, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers in cooperation with the Oslo Coalition published the book *Facilitating Freedom of Religion or Belief: A Desk book* (Leiden 2004, eds. Tore Lindholm, W. Cole Durham, Jr. and Bahia G. Tahzib-Lie) which is described on the homepage of the Oslo Coalition:

The book provides historical and philosophical background on religious human rights, detailed analysis of applicable international norms and international procedural mechanisms for safeguarding these norms. It offers surveys of central areas of controversy, including analysis of areas such as registration of religious and belief organizations, emerging debates on religion and gender, parental and children's rights, new religious movements, proselytism, and conscientious objection. Other chapters describe practical approaches to promoting tolerance and understanding through education, inter-religious dialogue, joint religious efforts addressing shared social problems, and conflict resolution initiatives. The volume provides practical information regarding networking and other background issues that can help translate understanding of the applicable norms and procedures into action. Appendices provide texts of major international instruments on freedom of religion or belief.

^{xii} A good description of the history of Putuo mountain is given by Chün-fang Yü: "P'u-t'o Shan: Pilgrimage and the Creation of the Chinese Potalaka" (pp. 190 – 245) in Susan Naquin and Chün-fang Yü: "Pilgrims and Sacred Sites in China", University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1992.

^{xiii} The picture is publicised on the homepage of "China Internet Information Center" (CIIC):

^{xiv} The picture is publicised on the homepage of "China Internet Information Center" (CIIC):

^{xv} The picture is publicised on the homepage of "China Internet Information Center" (CIIC):

^{xvi} The picture is publicised on the Chinese Buddhist homepage <http://www.fjnet.com>

^{xvii} Published on the Internet at: <http://www.mcu.ac.th/vesak49/>

^{xviii} See however, this article: "Confucius can survive in this modern world" By Qin Xiaoying (China Daily 2006-05-16)

"An Australian student last month told visiting Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao that a Confucius Institute had just opened in his city. A few years earlier, in fact, the Chinese Government had decided to go all out in establishing Confucius Institutes overseas.

.....

Not to be overlooked is the enthusiastic assistance from governments of the institutes' host nations and many non-Chinese citizens. And, of course, there is the wisdom of Confucius behind all of this sincere help. Confucius' wisdom still appeals to people all over the world today.

That said, which jewels in the treasure trove of Confucianism, as the crystallization of ancient Chinese traditional culture, can benefit our troubled world? There are at least three invigorating mantras for humankind today.

The first one is "determination to achieve one's goals," which is best illustrated by this line from The Analects (Lunyu): "Like heavenly bodies faithfully following their own orbits endlessly, a superior man is always determined to strive for his goal in life."

This means everyone should do his best to pursue, surmount, strive for and discover, never giving up when faced with difficulties and obstacles, just like the stars tracing their heavenly paths.

The second one is keeping "an open heart and mind." According to Confucius: "Like the earth hosting everything under the sun, a gentleman achieves ultimate virtue by embracing everything indiscriminately." Only those with ultimate virtue can keep such a boundless

openness and, in the same logic, one's virtue is only as great as the extent he keeps his heart and mind open.

The third one is the "harmony of man with heaven (nature)," which means human beings are integral parts of nature and must not do anything to jeopardize the integrity of nature, otherwise nature as a whole will be in trouble or even be completely destroyed.

Just think about it and ask yourself, who can argue that these three highlights are not still relevant today? And is there any better inspiration than the three gems of human wisdom for pursuing harmony between individuals, between an individual and society, between humankind and nature and between nations?

Some people might ask, isn't such essence of Confucianism already obsolete? Does it still make sense for the reality of today? Can such knowledge, based on moral principles and self-perfection, really help the world overcome the most urgent problems?

Indeed, the best of traditional Chinese culture, represented by Confucianism, combines philosophical thinking, ethical upbringing and humanitarian caring. It is the ultimate summary of all achievements in areas such as economy, politics, sciences and humanities made by Eastern societies through thousands of years of tireless practice, and of Eastern people's spiritual activities and their directions.

Naturally, it has to contain some traces of universal principles and human aspirations, especially its extraordinary emphasis on respect for humanity, the culmination of humanity and man's social responsibilities. These should not only work as a candid reminder and lesson for today's materialistic mindset, but also rhyme with what Western culture has to offer and head for the same end goal.

Didn't Humboldt and Schiller, seen as spiritual vanguards of Western universities, set unmistakable missions for such institutions of higher learning?

They believed education in the end can shape personality, forge ethics, train and teach those who can appreciate truth, virtue and beauty and who can realize human dignity. The end purpose is "to make all strengths of individuals into a loftiest and most harmonious whole."

In light of reverence for ethical principles, respect for humanity and the pursuit of truth, virtue, beauty and harmony, it is not hard to see at all how similar the thoughts of Confucius and those vanguards of Western education are.

This, I assume, is the reason why Confucius Institutes are so popular throughout the world".

The author is a researcher from the China Foundation for International & Strategic Studies

(China Daily May16, 2006 page4)

^{xix} See for instance this article:

"Rediscovering Buddhism

Buddhism underlines spiritual elevation and aloofness from worldly affairs. But it is more than a spiritual safe haven.

Under the theme "a harmonious world starts from the heart," the ongoing World Buddhism Forum features a high-profile accent on the convergence between Buddhist wisdom and the secular world's need for societal harmony.

Solidarity of international Buddhist circles is only one of the three main topics of the grand religious gala, the other two being Buddhism's social responsibilities and its commitment to peace.

As they light up and pass on Buddhist lights of eternity symbols of ever-lasting cleansing and enlightenment of the human soul tomorrow night and pray for world peace the day after, representatives of the world's Buddhist community will be telling us they share our mundane concerns. They will also be issuing an invitation for all of us, believers and non-believers alike, to share a Buddhist perspective on our ideals of peace and harmony.

They can expect a very positive resonance in the real world. The presence of high government and Party officials at yesterday's opening ceremony says it all.

That is not only a mere gesture of endorsement. Ye Xiaowen, head of the State Administration for Religious Affairs, on an earlier occasion disclosed the authorities' appreciation of the ancient religion's value as a valid moral reference for present-day China and the world.

Buddhism had constructive roles in Chinese history, and contributed greatly to national unification and social stability.

The Buddhist concepts of equity, benevolence, appropriateness and harmony are also deeply embedded in traditional Chinese culture. It is actually impossible to distinguish between the Confucian and Buddhist elements in our cultural tradition.

In his deliberation on the Buddhist understanding of harmony and the national leadership's proposals of a "harmonious society" and a "harmonious world," an eminent Buddhist monk from Jiangsu Province has found vast common ground.

The Buddhist idea of harmony emphasizes equality as well as gratitude and repayment between living creatures, along with appropriateness in dealing with nature. That, says the monk, is exactly what the political leaders are calling for in their appeals for societal and world harmony, and a "scientific perspective on development."

The supportive atmosphere surrounding such a religious event bespeaks the authorities' rediscovery of Buddhism's positive social impacts.

It is a blessing for all if Buddhist teachings about mercifulness, compassion, tolerance and sincerity have a larger audience in our society.

We do not have to convert to Buddhism and aspire to the attainment of nirvana to benefit from it, and to benefit us all". (*China Daily* April 14, 2006)

^{xx} One prominent monk having such a background is Ven. Benhuan, presently the abbot of the Hongfa Monastery in Shenzhen, Guangdong, and one of the founders of the First World Buddhist Forum. According to the biography published on the temple's homepage (www.hongfasi.com) this monk was arrested in 1958 during the "anti-rightist" campaign and spent a total of 22 years in work camps before he was rehabilitated in 1980.

^{xxi} In this picture we should, however, not forget the role still played by traditional Chinese folk religion. Researchers suggest that more than 500 million Chinese (mainly in rural areas) are involved in activities connected to traditional Chinese folk religion.

^{xxii} We are not here talking about the state proscribing the general practise of religion in these areas (which by all accounts is taking place extensively, in some cases with state funding of buildings etc.). What available reports suggests is a tighter control on religious institutions than what is generally the case in other parts of China as well as restrictions on the practise of religion of particular groups of people such as officials, teachers and students.

^{xxiii} In this connection we refer to the example of our cooperation regarding an international conference in Oslo in December 2006 on the topic of “Law and religion in transitional societies” with the “Institute for Global Engagement” in Washington DC and with the “Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Institute for the Study of World Religions” in Beijing, including legal experts from a number of countries.