

UNESCO approves controversial World Heritage Tibet nomination

On 7 July, the UNESCO World Heritage Committee approved a controversial application by the Chinese government to inscribe a vast Tibetan area of lakes, wetlands and wildlife as a World Heritage site. This is despite clear contravention of the values and guidelines of the international cultural body.



The project area as defined by the IUCN official mission to Kekexili. ([Click for larger view](#))

China's bid before UNESCO was for the 45,000-square-kilometer Hoh Xil nature reserve (or Kekexili in Chinese and Achen Gangyap in Tibetan), and the 32,000 square km Sanjiangyuan, the Three Rivers Reserve, which encompasses the headwaters of the Yellow, Yangtze and Mekong rivers. The area, twice the size of Belgium, is part of the high-altitude plateau in Qinghai Province, and home to over 200 animal species, including the endangered Tibetan antelope (chiru).

Ahead of the Committee meeting,

the International Campaign for Tibet (ICT), in a report entitled [Nomads in 'no man's land': China's nomination for UNESCO World heritage risks imperilling Tibetans and wildlife](#), revealed how the nature reserve is in the middle of three major reserves that increasingly exclude normal Tibetan land use such as nomadic herding, and situate the state as the sole agency of control, not least to encourage mass tourism. A scientific evaluation team that travelled to Hoh Xil last year to carry out an official UNESCO

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TIBET BRIEF

A REPORT OF THE INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET



AUGUST 2017

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The Chinese authorities have described Hoh Xil as ‘no man’s land’, which has provided them with the justification to claim that no evaluation was needed with regard to human beings and therefore human rights. But Tibetan pastoralists have co-existed peacefully for centuries with wildlife, protecting the land and its species (Photo: Diane Barker, Instagram: Heartofasia108)

mission, also raised serious concerns about the nomination. They cited the exclusion of herders and dangers to wildlife posed by an engineering corridor that runs through the area. The mission, carried out by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), admitted that local people had expressed concerns about relocations – a significant acknowledgement, given the dangers faced by Tibetans or local Chinese people who dare to raise even moderate concerns about projects prioritised by the Beijing leadership. But in a conclusion that appears inconsistent with the report, IUCN concluded that the nomination should still be approved.

In effect, Hoh Xil’s inscription represents an endorsement from the UN cultural body of the Chinese policies of displacement of Tibetan nomads from their land, as well as the criminalisation of traditionally productive and sustainable activities such as pastoralism and the gathering of medicinal herbs. As stated by ICT representative and Chinese grasslands policy specialist Tenzin Choekyi after the decision, this is despite a scientific consensus in China and beyond that indigenous stewardship and herd mobility are essential to the health of the rangelands. It also goes against clear UNESCO World Heritage and IUCN guidelines on protecting the

rights of local and indigenous people and preservation of their culture, which include the concepts of “FPIC” (free, prior and informed consent), and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.



According to the [2017 World Heritage Watch Report](#), Tibetan mobile pastoralism and migratory herds of wild animals co-existed for thousands of years in Hoh Xil, with Tibetans playing a key role in protecting the rich wildlife of the area, including the Tibetan antelopes or chiru (tsö in Tibetan).

After the nomination was approved, the Chinese government nevertheless issued a statement in response to ICT’s report, stating that it will “fully respect the will of the local herders and their traditional culture, religious beliefs, and lifestyle”; an acknowledgement that the UNESCO World Heritage Committee and the IUCN need to ensure is held to account.

The inscription of Hoh Xil on the World Heritage List seems to be in line with the Chinese authorities’ strategy to use World Heritage listing as “branding” to promote mass tourism, and boost the economy in the area. China has also announced that next year it will nominate the whole of [the old town of Lhasa](#) as a World Heritage site. This, and further recent developments such as a Chinese [application](#) to UNESCO to recognize the Tibetan traditional medicinal system of Sowa Rigpa as part of its intangible cultural heritage, may mean serious consequences for Tibetan culture. ■

Liu Xiaobo's death - an indelible blot on the history of the Chinese Communist Party

The International Campaign for Tibet is utterly saddened by the death of Liu Xiaobo, and offers its deepest condolences to his family and friends.



A woman wearing a Tibetan flag holds a photo of Liu Xiaobo during a vigil honoring his legacy on 13 July in New York. The vigil was also a protest against continued human rights abuses in China. (Photo: Associated Press)

The outspoken critic of the Chinese government and Nobel Peace Prize laureate died on 13 July from liver cancer in a Shenyang hospital in Liaoning Province. He was eight years into an 11-year prison sentence, after he called for democracy, rights and a multi-party system in [Charter 08](#).

A literary critic, writer, professor, activist and a giant of human rights and democracy, Liu Xiaobo was also a tireless supporter of the Tibetan people. As early as 2000, two years before the resumption of dialogue between representatives of the

Dalai Lama and Beijing officials, he wrote an article supporting the Dalai Lama's position on autonomy for Tibet within the People's Republic of China, saying that the position was "not only well-founded morally, but practically, it is a sincere expression for peaceful negotiations". In March 2008, Liu Xiaobo's name was also among the original 29 signatories of a [12-point petition](#) to the Chinese authorities calling for dialogue between the Chinese government and the Dalai Lama. It noted the "serious mistakes" of China's policies in Tibet, and criticized the Chinese government's response to the protests in Tibet as lacking "a style of governing that conforms to the standards of modern civilization."

Unfortunately, by not heeding to domestic and international humanitarian requests to respect the will of Liu Xiaobo to be treated abroad, the Chinese Government has shown that it does not deserve to be considered the major world power as it purports to be. The tragic circumstances of Liu Xiaobo's death will remain as an indelible stain on China's history.

The International Campaign for Tibet now joins the growing call for China to lift all restrictions on the wife of the late Nobel Peace Prize laureate, and allow her to leave the country if she wishes to. An artist, poet, and human rights defender, Liu Xia was placed under arbitrary house arrest and heavy surveillance by the Chinese authorities after her late husband was awarded the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize. Her current location is unknown - although she was recently seen in an [online video](#) (which may have been filmed under duress) saying she is recovering from her husband's death and will "readjust" in time. ■

EU diplomats pay rare visit to Tibet

From 26-30 June, a 22-member delegation of EU and EU member states officials paid a rare official visit to the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR).

Apart from Lhasa, the 22-member delegation, which was composed of the EU Ambassador to Beijing Hans Dieter Schweisgut and diplomats from a number of EU member states, including the Czech Republic, Portugal, Slovakia, Spain and the United Kingdom, travelled to the city of Nyingchi in the eastern part of the TAR, and visited the Potala Palace, Jokhang Temple, Sera Monastery, Tibet University, Dabu Hydropower Station, Lulang International Tourism Town, Tashigang Village Family Hotel, Mainling Farm and other places. The trip, which consisted in a series of meetings and talk with the local leadership, covered many areas, including economy, culture, education, ecology and tourism.

Following the visit, there has unfortunately been no public information from the EU delegation in Beijing -or the participating member states- on its overall objectives, format and content. ICT deplores this lack of transparency, which raises serious concerns regarding the EU's communication strategy vis-a-vis Tibet, in particular as the Chinese state media were on the contrary very quick on presenting a biased and one-sided account of the visit -which could damage the EU's image if not counterbalanced by its own version. ■

Major live fire drill in Tibet amid China-India border dispute highlights political imperatives

On 16 July, amid weeks of serious border tensions with India, China released footage of a major military live-fire assault exercise in the Tibet Autonomous Region, highlighting political imperative and its military capacity on the plateau.



A screenshot from Chinese state media of live fire military drills on the Tibetan plateau.

The announcement of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) military drills comes amid tensions between India and China over a disputed border area near the junction of Sikkim, Bhutan and Tibet known as Doklam (referred to in Tibetan as Droglam, the nomads' path). [Footage](#) released by Chinese state media shows soldiers using flame-throwers, rocket-propelled grenades and heavy machine guns to strike bunkers, and various types of heavy weapons, including mortars, self-propelled howitzers, multiple rocket launchers and anti-tank missiles in a display of firepower. A new type of tank was also trialled.

Reports by Chinese state media did not disclose the location of the live fire military exercises, except to say that the brigade responsible for frontline combat missions has long been stationed around the middle and lower reaches of the Brahmaputra (Tibetan: Yarlung Tsangpo; Chinese: Yarlung Zangbo) River. The Brahmaputra flows into India from Arunachal Pradesh, which China claims as 'South Tibet', a cause of unresolved tensions between India and China. However, looking closely at the terrain visible in the stills and footage, the exercises could have taken place in Chamdo (Chinese: Changdu) or Nagchu (Chinese: Naqu) in the Tibet Autonomous Region instead of close to the border with Arunachal Pradesh in India.

In addition to these reports, Chinese military sources confirmed the transport of what was described as "tens of thousands of tonnes" of military equipment, including army vehicles and troops to the Tibetan plateau in June.

The militarization of the Tibetan plateau – backed by grass roots propaganda work and comprehensive surveillance – comes under the general rubric of 'stability work' as emphasized by China's President and Party Secretary Xi Jinping. The latest display of military capacity underlines a prominent political message that has been emphasized by Xi Jinping, which is that: *"To rule the country, it is imperative to rule the frontiers; to rule the frontiers, stabilizing Tibet must be done first"*. Party officials connect political 'stability' in Tibet with the security of the entire PRC. In Chinese political language, 'stability' is a coded reference to the need to crush any form of dissent and ensure allegiance to the CCP authorities in order for them to pursue their strategic and economic objectives on the plateau without impediment. Military capability in the border areas is being emphasized this year due to the 19th Communist Party Congress due to be held in the fall, at which Xi Jinping is expected to consolidate his power. ■

Two further Tibetans self-immolations in exile in July 2017



Tibetan self-immolators Dhondup and Tenzin Choeying shown in undated photos received by Radio Free Asia.

Two Tibetans living in India have set themselves on fire in July 2017, bringing the number of Tibetan self-immolators in exile to 10.

Dhondup (also known as Passang Dhondup), a wood painter at Norbulingka Institute - a centre for the preservation of Tibetan culture and art - set himself ablaze and died at the end of July, in the first self-immolation to occur in Dharamsala, home of the Dalai Lama and the Central Tibetan Administration. The 49-year-old, who was born in Gyantse (Chinese: Jiangzi) in Tibet and had arrived in India in 1991, had been working in Norbulingka institute from 2012, according to Tibetan media. The incident occurred at about 3pm on 29 July, in an area near Lhagyal Ri (on the pilgrimage route that goes around the Tibetan Temple and the residence of the Dalai Lama), a place where Tibetan gather to perform rituals such as burning incense. A resident of the elderly people's home next to the pilgrimage route said

she heard the sound of something burning, and someone shouting "Long live the Dalai Lama". Dharamsala police found three bottles of kerosene close by the body, as well as a small Tibetan flag.

Dhondup's protest was the second self-immolation by a Tibetan living in India this summer. On 14 July, a young Tibetan student set himself on fire in Varanasi, shouting 'Victory for Tibet'. **Tenzin Choeying**, believed to be in his twenties, doused himself with kerosene and set fire to himself in the entrance of a residential hall at the Central University for Tibetan Studies. Choeying believed that under Chinese rule Tibetans should be allowed to learn their own language, one source said. He initially survived, but died from his injuries on 22 July. Following his death, his parents have [urged](#) Tibetans not to resort to self-immolation, saying young people must fight for the cause through education and non-violence.

Self-immolation protests by Tibetans living in exile are relatively rare compared to the dramatic number of 150 Tibetans who have now set themselves ablaze in Tibet (according to ICT's sources, [10 self-immolations by Tibetans have occurred in exile](#) as of 31 August 2017). It is nevertheless in exile that the first Tibetan self-immolation in the current wave of such protests took place: Thubten Ngodrup set fire to himself in Delhi on 28 April 1998, as police broke up a hunger strike, and he later died in hospital. ■

Italian government confirms the right of Tibetan refugees to travel to Italy but detains Uyghur exile group leader, raising fears of Chinese interference in Europe

ICT has joined the Tibetan Community in Italy, the Italy Tibet Association and the Italian Buddhist Union in seeking to reverse a decision by Italian authorities in India that denies visas to Tibetan refugees from India traveling to Italy,

In response to a parliamentary question, the Government reiterated the existence of legislation guaranteeing the right of Tibetan refugees to obtain an Italian visa. The Government only partially admitted that deeply alarming and inaccurate information had been published by the

Italian consulates in India considering documents held by Tibetan refugees unsuitable for travelling to Italy. The Government assured the restoration of the practice of granting visas following the procedures so far applied and which never generated any particular problems.

This decision comes after the brief detention in Rome on 26 July by Italian police, apparently under Chinese's pressure, of one of the top leaders of a prominent Uyghur exile group who was due to speak about the restrictions

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imposed on his people.

Dolkun Isa, the General Secretary of the Munich-based World Uyghur Congress, was detained briefly by the Italian police's General Investigations and Special Operations Division (DIGOS). They prevented him from addressing the Italian Senate, where he had been invited to participate in a conference entitled "SOS Rule of Law: Uyghur Emergency" organised by the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO) and the Nonviolent Radical Party, Transnational and Transparty.

DIGOS officers, working on the pretext of an identity check, eventually released Dolkun Isa after 3pm, saying they would run his information against a database with the International Police

Organisation, Interpol. When he asked why he had been detained, they told him that they had been acting upon a request from the Chinese authorities.

Dolkun Isa has been labelled as a 'terrorist' by the Chinese government, and was issued with an Interpol Red Notice several years ago. However, this was ignored by German authorities, who deemed it a "political warrant". But in November last year, Interpol elected a senior Chinese public security official, Meng Hongwei, as its new president, sparking fears that China could use the position to its advantage.

ICT strongly condemns this detention, which represents a breach of Mr. Isa's freedom of expression and is totally unacceptable in a free and democratic country like Italy. It also raises serious concerns about China's growing influence

in Europe and abroad. This was indeed not the first time that Dolkun Isa, a German passport holder, has been prevented from standing up for the rights of his people on an international stage. Last April, he was [escorted out](#) of the UN premises in New York during the session of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, without any explanation. In the past, he has also been stopped from speaking at the UN in Geneva, as well as in South Korea and Turkey.

Meanwhile, Chinese authorities continue to intensify their oppressive policies in East Turkestan. After banning Muslim Uyghurs from growing long beards or wearing veils, and even from fasting during Ramadan, they recently issued a new directive [prohibiting the use of the Uyghur language in schools](#), with threats of "severe punishment" to anyone contravening the order. ■

Tech giant Apple accused of "aiding" China's censorship efforts

Against the backdrop of China's ever-intensifying Internet censorship drive, Apple has removed a number of Virtual Private Network (VPN) applications from its Chinese store over the summer.

VPN applications allow users to mask their identity online to access online content that has been censored or blocked by their internet service provider. In China, they have been widely used by internet users wishing to bypass the "Great Firewall", the nickname for the sophisticated internet filters that China uses to stop its people from accessing Facebook, Google and Twitter, as well as foreign news media outlets. These VPN apps have been particularly instrumental for Tibetans activists inside Tibet who wish to safely pass information about

the situation in Tibet (which is otherwise closed to the outside world), as a secretive surveillance network called 'Skynet' has divided the area into a closely monitored grid.

But in January, the Chinese Ministry of Industry and Information Technology announced that all developers offering VPNs must obtain a licence from the government. Following the removal of some of its VPN apps from its Chinese store, Apple CEO Tim Cook said he disagreed with China's position but had

to comply with the country's laws.

The move, which follows tightening restrictions on the internet - a broader strategy to consolidate President Xi Jinping's power and counter foreign influence - has received strong criticism in the media and the tech industry, who [accused](#) the tech giant of "aiding China's censorship effort". "If Apple views accessibility as a human right, we would hope Apple will likewise recognize internet access as a human right [the UN

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Political Prisoner Focus

Release of famous Tibetan singer Kelsang Yarphe



Tibetan singer Kalsang Yarphe is greeted with ceremonial scarves (khatas) following his release from prison. (Photo sent by a Radio Free Asia listener)

According to information published by Radio Free Asia and the Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy (TCHRD), Kelsang Yarphe, a well-known Tibetan singer in his 40s, has been freed from prison. He was released on 10 July, after serving a four-year term for writing songs that encourage unity amongst Tibetans, and for them to speak Tibetan.

Back in on July 2013, Kelsang Yarphe, a native of Machu County (Ch: Maqu) in the Tibetan area of Amdo, was detained by authorities in Lhasa and taken to a detention centre in Chengdu where he remained incommunicado until his [sentencing](#) in November 2014. He was

primarily targeted for his many popular *dunglen* songs (also known as “guitar songs of the national pride” (*la rgya'i rdug len*)). These expressed pride in Tibetan identity, which the Chinese authorities found subversive, [TCHRD report](#) says.

According to some sources, Yarphe was accused of helping to organize Lhasa-area concerts called Khawai Metok (or Snow Flower) in 2012, in which he sang an upbeat, catchy song titled ‘Fellow Tibetans’. After the concert, the Chinese authorities raided shops and confiscated the DVDs, although copies had already been widely distributed in Tibetan-populated areas of China’s Qinghai, Gansu, Sichuan, and Yunnan provinces. Lyrics include: *“Tibetans! We must practice written & spoken Tibetan language/ It is our duty to grasp the spoken and written Tibetan/Tibetans! It is our duty to grasp the spoken and written Tibetan/Tibetans! We must unite, must unite/All the three provinces must unite/Following the idea of unity/Tibetans!”*

Yarphe has written several other well-known Tibetan songs such as “The Homeland of the Gesar of Ling,” “Modern Tibetans,” and “Dragon’s Thunder Welcomes the Spring”, and had frequently performed at both government and private concerts. His arrest came amidst a national crackdown on public assertions of Tibetan national and cultural identity, which particularly affected intellectuals, artists, bloggers, writers and singers, as related in ICT’s 2015 report: [The teeth of the storm: lack of freedom of expression and cultural resilience in Tibet](#). ■

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has even ruled it as such) and would choose human rights over profits,” wrote VPN developer Golden Frog’s president Sunday Yokubaitis in a [blog post](#). According to many observers, Apple’s decision is indeed driven by economic interests, as it is currently in harsh competition with local low-cost smartphone manufacturers (such as Huawei, Xiaomi and Oppo), and does not want to risk angering Beijing. In a [letter](#) to Tim Cook, the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression David Kaye, referring to Apple company’s stated commitment to freedom of expression, also requested more information on the company’s decision. In particular, he asked whether Apple took into account instruments such as the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.

It is not the first time a tech giant has tried to win the favour of Beijing in hopes of expanding its business to China – Apple has already pulled apps from its China store that mention the Dalai Lama, as well as the New York Times newspaper app. In December 2014, Facebook similarly [deleted](#) a post including a video of a self-immolation in Tibet, because it allegedly violated the social media platform “community standards” - this despite Facebook being already banned in China.

ICT is concerned by this growing tendency of businesses playing into the Chinese government’s censorship efforts, as it threatens the freedom of expression and Tibetans’ basic human rights, and prevents information about their oppression from reaching the wider world. ■

Reading Suggestions



China's New Regime of Reward and Punishment, by Gabriel Lafitte

In this series of four articles published on his blog www.rukor.org in July 2017, Tibet expert Gabriel Lafitte takes a stand on China's rapidly expanding Orwellian regime of data driven punishments and what he calls the "laboratory of the surveillance state", and the consequences for Tibet. An insightful and chilling analysis well worth reading.

→ <http://rukor.org/making-sincerity-mandatory/>

Prayer-wheel-shaped cameras are being installed all over the Barkhor in Lhasa. (Photo circulated by Tibetans in exile on social media).



China Tears Down the Tibetan City in the Sky, published in The Diplomat

A year on from the beginning at the dismantling at Larung Gar, UK-based journalist Steve Shaw reports on how a young Canadian-Chinese traveller was able to reach the Tibetan Buddhist Institute and witness that the Chinese authorities' concern for safety and security is really no more than another case of economic interests and development "trumping cultural and historical sensitivity" in Tibet.

→ <http://thediplomat.com/2017/08/china-tears-down-the-tibetan-city-in-the-sky/>

Government-hired workers tasked to demolish Larung Gar's cabins during a break from work while Larung Gar's monks and nuns amble by, resigned to the larger forces affecting them. (Photo: David Chan for The Diplomat)

UPCOMING EVENTS

► 10 SEPTEMBER:

Visit of His Holiness the Dalai Lama to Derry-Londonderry, Northern Ireland, UK (*more information at <https://www.childrenincrossfire.org/involved/events/dalai-lama/>*)

► 12-14 SEPTEMBER:

Visit of His Holiness to Frankfurt, Germany (*more information at <http://dalailama-frankfurt.info/>*)

► 11-29 SEPTEMBER:

36th Session of the United Nations Human Rights Council

► 18 OCTOBER:

19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China

► SECOND HALF OF 2017:

16+1 Summit (Central and Eastern European countries and China) in Hungary (tbc)