Chinese response to Tibet reciprocity bill signals its fear of US support for Tibet
Giant thangka painting of mass murderer Mao is assertion of ‘red culture’ in Tibet


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• As Chinese authorities reacted angrily against President Trump signing into law the Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act, they stepped up criticism of the Dalai Lama, republishing baseless negative articles that exposed China’s fear of the new law, which received strong bipartisan and bicameral support in the US.
• Local authorities in an area of eastern Tibet launched a “clean-up” drive to eliminate pictures of the Tibetan religious leader and replace them with pictures of Chinese President Xi Jinping and other Chinese leaders.
• In a development that would be unthinkable in Chinese cities such as Beijing or Shanghai, a massive image of Mao Zedong has been created in a Tibetan area in the form of a Tibetan thangka (a Buddhist religious painting), involving 12,000 people in its production and costing more than 4 million yuan ($580,000). It is a move apparently designed to assert Tibetan subjugation to the image of Mao, who was responsible for the invasion of Tibet in 1949-50. Its announcement coincided with statements from Xi emphasizing the Communist Party’s dominance at important meetings in Beijing in December 2018.

China “resolutely opposed” to Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act

China showed it was rattled in its reaction to President Trump signing into law the Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act (RATA), which seeks to address the lack of reciprocity in US–China relations and promote access to Tibet for US officials, journalists and other citizens by denying entry to the US for Chinese officials deemed responsible for restricting access to Tibet.¹

Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying said on Dec. 20, 2018 that China “resolutely opposed” the law, which she said “sent seriously wrong signals to Tibetan separatist elements.”²

In response to RATA, Chinese state media decided to target the Dalai Lama, indicating that Beijing realizes it has not succeeded in undermining his authority and influence on the global stage.

The Global Times, which is published in English and targets an international audience with an often aggressive message, published an article headlined “Tibet authorities lambast Dalai Lama in series of articles as US passes Tibet Reciprocal Access bill,” referring to unusually long and baseless editorials blaming the Dalai Lama for self-immolations across Tibet, as well as widespread protests that broke out in Tibet in 2008. The articles, the first of which was published on the front page of Tibet Daily on Dec. 12, was distributed by the Tibet Autonomous Region Justice department subsequently, coinciding with international coverage of the passing of RATA.

In their confused and ill-informed propaganda attack, the Tibet Daily editorials described the Dalai Lama as “prime leader of separatist political groups pursuing ‘Tibet independence,’ the loyal tool of international anti-China forces, the root cause of social unrest in Tibet, the biggest obstacle for Tibetan Buddhism to establish normal order and a politician under the disguise of religion.” It stated that he “also violated the essential religious doctrine of ‘loving kindness and compassion’ by inciting religious believers to self-immolate.”

The Global Times specifically linked its critique of the Dalai Lama to the passing of RATA, as well as the upcoming anniversary of the Dalai Lama’s escape into exile in 1959, which will be marked by Tibetan communities and supporters worldwide. Comments in the article by some of the most active Chinese propaganda critics of the Dalai Lama indicated worry about the effect RATA may have on Chinese officials responsible for restricting access to Tibet. For instance, Zhu Weiqun, former United Front point person, said: "It's not surprising that we denounce the Dalai Lama, as it's a must at any time in Tibet for regional stability and unity. But it's important to raise public awareness of his moves at a moment when Western countries including the US increased pressure on China which in the Dalai Lama's view would be an opportunity for his separatism.”

China’s response coincides with news of campaign to ‘clean up’ images of Dalai Lama

News of an operation to ‘clean up’ images of the Dalai Lama in a Tibetan area of Amdo was circulated on social media by local authorities in early December, linked to a broader ongoing political campaign to enforce the display of images of Chinese President Xi Jinping and other Chinese leaders. The notice, on the official website of Dzoegen (Chinese: Zuigedoma) township in Tsoe (Chinese: Hezuo) in Gansu, showed photographs of Tibetans under the direction of work team members displaying images of Xi and other leaders. The ‘Notice of the Ministry of the Organization on Printing and Distributing the Implementation Plan of the Cooperation City on the Specialized Cleanup of the 14th Dalai Lama’s Portraits’ stated that the local authorities were seeking to implement “Xi Jinping’s new era of socialism with Chinese characteristics […] and resolutely fight against the Dalai clique, foreign hostile forces and religious extremists, according to the CPC Committee of the Communist Party of China.” The notice stated that “cleanup” work had been successfully completed in all herdsman’s homes in the area and in four Buddhist temples and among “the masses” in two monasteries. It added that the political campaign had also been completed in the residences of grassroots Party cadres—effectively acknowledging the Chinese authorities’ failure to eradicate loyalty to the religious leader in exile, even among Party members.

Campaigns directed against the Dalai Lama’s influence, Tibetan culture and Tibetan religion mean that in recent years, almost any expression of Tibetan identity not directly sanctioned by the state can

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3 Global Times, Dec. 20, 2018, [http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1132849.shtml](http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1132849.shtml)
4 Translation into English from Chinese by the International Campaign for Tibet.
5 The International Campaign for Tibet monitored this on Dec. 10, 2018, at: [https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/OTFEauXtsbK_a-ZQrZlQ?fbclid=IwAR0Zg58PmX7r74C3XnHUXx9XIu8tNY7XfCokykEVsvyQmEHZKoHkIFbEJK](https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/OTFEauXtsbK_a-ZQrZlQ?fbclid=IwAR0Zg58PmX7r74C3XnHUXx9XIu8tNY7XfCokykEVsvyQmEHZKoHkIFbEJK), but at the time of writing it had been taken offline.
be branded as ‘separatist’ and penalized by a prison sentence or worse. They have been a cause of widespread anguish among Tibetans and viewed as a contributing factor in the wave of self-immolations that has taken place across Tibet since 2009.

**Giant image of mass murderer Mao—as a Tibetan thangka**

The extreme nature of the political campaign to replace the Dalai Lama’s images with those of Chinese leaders is illustrated by recent news of an immense image of Mao Zedong, in the form of a Tibetan thangka, or traditional religious painting.

Chinese state media announced that a huge thangka 49.1 meters long—approximately the length of a football field—of Mao Zedong has been created by a Tibetan thangka artist and the Hua Rui Thangka Art Institute in Pari (Chinese: Tianshu), Tibetan Autonomous County in Gansu, costing more than 4 million yuan. “Using bold imagination, unique thinking and novel ideas, Mao Zedong’s brilliant life and great achievements from 1893 to 1949 [the founding of the People’s Republic of China] were expressed in the artistic language and techniques of thangka painting, which enabled the ancient artistic expression of the thangka form to be integrated [with the image of Mao],” Chinese official media reported on Dec. 10.6

The thangka of Mao is an assertion of “red culture” to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic of China on Oct. 1, 1949, a major anniversary for the Chinese Communist Party. Its creation in Tibetan thangka form is symbolic of China’s efforts to underline its dominance over Tibet and to change the face of Tibetan Buddhism. While seeking to erase the image of the Dalai Lama, Chinese authorities are asserting the supremacy of a leader whose record has been challenged in the Chinese capital of Beijing. Such an image would have no place in a 21st-century Chinese city and is all the more shocking in its implications as a result. Mao presided over the invasion of Tibet in 1949-50 and crushed resistance against Chinese rule, leading to the Dalai Lama’s escape to safety in India in March 1959.

**Efforts to obliterate Dalai Lama images linked to important anniversaries this year**

The creation of the Mao thangka and the campaign to “clean up” images are part of a so-far largely failed effort to obliterate the influence of the Dalai Lama and to appropriate and “Sinicize” authentic Tibetan Buddhist culture and are now being revived in the buildup to this year’s important anniversaries.

The International Campaign for Tibet has monitored a direct correlation between the self-immolations that have swept across Tibet, including in recent weeks, and the intensified campaign against the Dalai Lama together with the aggressive expansion of legal measures tightening state control over Tibetan religion and culture.

This has been particularly evident following the imposition of increasingly restrictive measures in the eastern Tibetan areas of Amdo and Kham, where most of the self-immolations have occurred. It used to be more common to see images of the Dalai Lama in these areas than in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR). In recent years, “clean up” efforts seeking to eradicate these images have been enforced in different areas outside the TAR, linked to the political drive to enforce “stability,” meaning compliance to Party policies. These measures include the following, monitored from state media:

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6 49.1 meters of huge Thangka "World's Great Man- Mao Zedong"  
http://www.tibet.cn/cn/index/syjc/201812/t20181210_6450221.html
• A Party committee in Gansu Province gathered to study instructions to punish those “violating Party discipline” by displaying images of the Dalai Lama, issued by Kyegudo (Yushu) authorities in Qinghai.7

• An initiative to confiscate Dalai Lama pictures displayed in Tibetans’ cars and trucks in Nyarong (Chinese: Xinlong) in Kardze (Chinese: Ganzi) in Sichuan in 2015.8 A state media article stated that the purpose of the campaign was to check “illegally displayed” portraits of the Dalai Lama in “large and small vehicles” in the area, and to “actively eliminate rumors” that they can be displayed. Since the operation began, “10 images of the 14th Dalai Lama, 15 photos, three VCDs, 10 chest emblems and five pendants” were collected.

• A propaganda initiative against the “scourge” of the Dalai Lama was carried out by the Public Security Bureau and other departments in 2014 in Chamdo (Chinese: Changdu), TAR, including the order to remove any images of the Tibetan religious leader.9

• The Ganzi (Tibetan: Kardze) People’s Daily published an article on Nov. 5, 2014, entitled “Vigorously implementing Ten Actions to create good rule of law in Kardze.” The 8th action mentioned was to seize “suspicious photos and portraits” of the Dalai Lama. The article stated that the pictures were “seriously disturbing the religious masses.”10

• In 2013, discussions on a slightly less hostile approach toward the Dalai Lama among some monks and officials were shut down in the Tibetan area of Tsolho, Qinghai, amid a backdrop of tightening repression. The news of the discussions indicated that some religious figures and scholars had drawn attention to the counterproductive nature of the oppressive measures, but that these moderate voices had been silenced.11 At the same time, official notices were issued in at least two areas emphasizing the Chinese government’s hardline policies against the Dalai Lama and warning Tibetans that pictures of the Dalai Lama are not allowed in monasteries.

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7 The Ganzhou District Wetland Bureau learns to convey the decision of the Communist Party members to hang the 14th Dalai Lama’s portrait violation’, January 19, 2018, http://www.shidi.org/sf_107C764D62F7426AB5E82EDF0CD30CD1_151_F0A24895379.html