

**Refugee Review Tribunal
AUSTRALIA**

RRT RESEARCH RESPONSE

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This response was prepared by the Country Research Section of the Refugee Review Tribunal (RRT) after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the RRT within time constraints. This response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum.

Questions

- 1. If the Lian Shen version of Buddhism differs from Buddhism legally practised in the PRC, how significant would it be for a person who practises this Buddhism to practise allowable forms of Buddhism in China instead?**
- 2. Please provide information on whether this version or form of practising Buddhism is banned in China, and whether its members are or would be adversely treated in China.**

RESPONSE

- 1. If the Lian Shen version of Buddhism differs from Buddhism legally practised in the PRC, how significant would it be for a person who practises this Buddhism to practise allowable forms of Buddhism in China instead?**

While no definitive information has been located, it appears that there is no prohibition or exclusiveness among the different sects of Buddhism. They are compatible with each other as long as they maintain the core teachings of Buddha.

Lu Sheng-yen, one of many Buddha claimants is a founder of the True Buddha School and called “Living Buddha Lian Shen” by his followers. It is a new Tantric (or Vajrayana) Buddhist sect with influence from Sutrayana and Taoism. It is based on the ideals of Taoism, Sutrayana and Tantric (or Vajrayana) Buddhism (‘List of Buddha claimants’ 2006, *Wikipedia*, 28 September http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Buddha_claimants – Accessed 9 October 2006– Attachment 1; ‘True Buddha School’ 2006, *Wikipedia*, 30 September http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/True_Buddha_School – Accessed 10 October 2006 – Attachment 2; and ‘Sheng-yen Lu’ 2006, *Wikipedia*, 28 August http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sheng-yen_Lu – Accessed 10 October 2006 – Attachment 3). It is also called the Immortal Real Buddha Sect in English (‘Classified: secret document – Ministry of Public Security [2000] No.39- Notice On Various Issues Regarding Identifying and Banning of Cultic Organizations’ 2000, PRC Ministry of Public Security, 30 April http://www.monitorchina.org/document_details.php?id=78 – Accessed 10 October 2006 – Attachment 4)

Referring to the different sects of Buddhism practiced by the population in China, US Department of State comments that:

The Government estimated that there are more than 100 million Buddhists, making Buddhism the organized religion with the largest body of followers. However, it was difficult to estimate accurately the number of Buddhists because they did not have congregational memberships and often did not participate in public ceremonies. The Government reported that there were 16,000 Buddhist temples and monasteries and more than 200,000 nuns and monks. Most believers, including most ethnic Han Buddhists, practiced Mahayana Buddhism. Most Tibetans and ethnic Mongolians practiced Tibetan Buddhism, a Mahayana adaptation. Some ethnic minorities in southwest Yunnan Province practiced Theravada Buddhism, the dominant tradition in neighboring Southeast Asia (US Department of State 2006, *International Religious Freedom Report: China*, 15 September – Attachment 5).

As to the different schools/sects/lineage groups of Buddhism, *Oxford Concise Dictionary of World Religions* states that:

There are two major lineage groups [in Buddhism]: Theravada and Mahayana. Vajrayana is sometimes counted as a third grouping and sometimes as a subset of Mahayana. Theravada is most simply viewed as a single major lineage (Bowker, John 2000, *Oxford Concise Dictionary of World Religions*, entry for ‘Buddhist schools’ at pp 104-5 – Attachment 6).

Similarly, *Wikipedia* comments that:

Vajrayana

Also known as Tantric Buddhism, Mantrayana, Tantrayana, Esoteric Buddhism, Diamond Vehicle, True Words Sect, or 金剛乘 Jin gang sheng in Chinese.

Vajrayāna Buddhism is often viewed as the third major ‘vehicle’ (Yana) of Buddhism, alongside the Theravada and Mahayana. The Vajrayana is an extension of Mahayana Buddhism consisting not of philosophical differences, but rather the adoption of additional techniques (upaya, or ‘skilful means’).

Vajrayana literally means “the vajra vehicle”.

Vajrayana exists today in the form of two major sub-schools:

- Tibetan Buddhism, found in Tibet, Bhutan, northern India, Nepal, southwestern and northern China, Mongolia and, various constituent republics of Russia that are adjacent to the area, such as: Amur Oblast, Buryatia, Chita Oblast, Tuva Republic, and Khabarovsk Krai. There is also Kalmykia, another constituent republic of Russia that is the only Buddhist region in Europe, located in the north Caucasus. While Vajrayana Buddhism is a part of Tibetan Buddhism (in that it forms a core part of every major Tibetan Buddhist school), it is not identical with it; Tibetan Buddhism also includes other vehicles; in fact, many sects of Tibetan Buddhism teach mainly ordinary Mahayana teachings to beginners and laypeople and keep Vajrayana teachings for initiates. Vajrayana in Tibetan Buddhism, properly speaking, refers to tantra, Dzogchen (mahasandhi), and Chagchen (mahamudra).
- Shingon Buddhism, found in Japan, includes many esoteric practices which are similar to those used in Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism (‘Vajrayana’ 2006, *Wikipedia*, 2 October <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vajrayana> – Accessed 10 October 2006 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vajrayana> – Attachment 7)

A University of Wyoming website gives the following description on Vajrayana:

Since a “vajra” is a diamond, this term means “The Diamond Way.” It refers to the third form of Buddhism (after [Theravada](#) and [Mahayana](#)), which is practiced largely in Tibet. It is also known as [Tantric](#) Buddhism. The main claim of Vajrayana is that it enables a person to reach [nirvana](#) in a single lifetime. It is able to do this by using all of a person’s powers (including those of the body) to achieve that goal (‘Buddhism Glossary’ 1997, University of Wyoming website <http://uwacadweb.uwyo.edu/religionet/er/buddhism/BGLOSSRY.HTM> – Accessed 9 October 2006 – Attachment 8).

As to the compatibility of the different sects of Buddhism, Dalai Lama notes that:

It is very important to understand that the core teachings of the Theravada tradition embodied in the Pali scriptures are the foundation of the Buddha’s teachings. Beginning with these teachings, one can then draw on the insights contained in the detailed explanations of the Sanskrit Mahayana tradition. Finally, integrating techniques and perspectives from the Vajrayana texts can further enhance one’s understanding. But without a foundation in the core teachings embodied in the Pali tradition, simply proclaiming oneself a follower of the Mahayana is meaningless.

If one has this kind of deeper understanding of various scriptures and their interpretation, one is spared from harboring mis-taken notions of conflicts between the “Greater” versus the “Lesser” Vehicle (Hinayana). Sometimes there is a regrettable tendency on the part of certain followers of the Mahayana to disparage the teachings of the Theravada, claiming that they are the teachings of the Lesser Vehicle, and thereby not suited to one’s own personal practice. Similarly, on the part of followers of the Pali tradition, there is sometimes a tendency to reject the validity of the Mahayana teachings, claiming they are not actually the Buddha’s teachings.

As we move into our examination of the Heart Sutra, what is important is to understand deeply how these traditions complement each other and to see how, at the individual level, each of us can integrate all these core teachings into our personal practice (‘A View on Buddhism: The Three Vehicles’ 2005, Buddhism.kalachakranet website, 29 October <http://buddhism.kalachakranet.org/vehicles.html> – Accessed 9 October 2006 – Attachment 9).

In response to “Can True Buddha believers worship in mainstream Buddhist temples?”, another practicing Buddhist comments that to a Buddhist the surroundings are not very important. Buddhism is a rather ‘private’ religion; daily meditations may take place anywhere. Tolerance and acceptance is an essence of Buddhism, therefore he sees no reason why a member of one Buddhist sect could not attend a temple of other Buddhist schools. He stressed, however, that he is not an expert in this field and his knowledge is that of an amateur and is based on personal experience (Jang, Jason 1994, Comments on True Buddha School, as contained in RRT Country Research 1994, *Research Response 94Y0703*, 3 July – Attachment 10).

Given the above, it appears that there is no prohibition or exclusiveness among the different sects of Buddhism. They are compatible each other as long as they maintain the core teachings of Buddha. The Tantric (or Vajrayana) Buddhism to which the Lian Shen belongs is practiced in a part of China. Being a new sect blended with elements of other religion, it may face a different treatment from the traditional Buddhists in China. But it is not due to the Buddhist teachings or their interpretations but to a societal human reaction. It seems that changing from practicing one sect of Buddhism to another, say, from the Lian Shen to one of the prevailing forms of Buddhism in China would not pose any significant problem in the religious doctrine. Attempts have been made to locate any report/information either supporting or refuting the statement but to no avail.

2. Please provide information on whether this version or form of practising Buddhism is banned in China, and whether its members are or would be adversely treated in China.

A “classified secret document” prepared by the Ministry of Public Security [2000] No.39 entitled ‘Notice on Various Issues Regarding Identifying and Banning of Cultic Organizations’ lists the Immortal Real Buddha Sect founded by a Chinese American Lu Sheng-yan as a cult. The document refers to the earlier instruction condemning it as a cult. It states that on December 15th 1995 the Immortal Real Buddha Sect was identified as a cult in the “Announcement Regarding Cult Organizations and Their Activity (gong zheng [1995] No.691) “ issued by the Ministry of Public Security to Organization Department of the CPC Central Committee, Propaganda Department of the CPC Central Committee and Department of the CPC Central Committee, Supreme Court and Supreme Procuratorate (‘Classified: secret document – Ministry of Public Security [2000] No.39- Notice On Various Issues Regarding Identifying and Banning of Cultic Organizations’ 2000, PRC Ministry of Public Security, 30 April http://www.monitorchina.org/document_details.php?id=78 – Accessed 10 October 2006 – Attachment 4)

The secret document defines the sect as follows:

This Sect was founded by a Chinese American Lu Sheng-yan in 1979, with the headquarter set in Leicang Buddhist Temple (also called “Hall of The Immortal Real Residence”), Seattle, U.S. In 1988 this Sect has begun its infiltration in China, which has been active over 13 provinces and cities.

Lu Sheng-yan advertised himself as “Buddha incarnate”, “Master Buddha”, claiming, “I really have achieved success through having practiced the Buddhist doctrines on a solid basis, starting step by step from practicing basic doctrines. I even have studied all other religions, ranging from Christianity, Taoism, Xian Gate of Buddhism, Mi Sect of Buddhism, and other less influential religions.”

Lu Sheng-yan is extremely hostile to socialist system. He delivered many speeches in public in 1989, attacking Chinese Communist Party and the government. He also organized a so-called “Buddhist Meeting for the Release Souls from Purgatory for Those Fellow Chinese who died on the June 4th (1989)”, which was broadcasted on air to the whole world. The organization set up branch offices in Shanghai, Guangzhou and Kunming, and assigned supervisors to smuggle into China a large quantities of books and propaganda material, recruit members and expand organizations (‘Classified: secret document – Ministry of Public Security [2000] No.39- Notice On Various Issues Regarding Identifying and Banning of Cultic Organizations’ 2000, PRC Ministry of Public Security, 30 April http://www.monitorchina.org/document_details.php?id=78 – Accessed 10 October 2006 – Attachment 4).

The 2006 US Department of State *International Religious Freedom Report: China* comments that:

The Government has banned all groups that it has determined to be “cults,” including the “Shouters” (founded in the United States in 1962), Eastern Lightning, the Society of Disciples (Mentu Hui), the Full Scope Church, the Spirit Sect, the New Testament Church, the Guan Yin (also known as Guanyin Famin, or the Way of the Goddess of Mercy), the Three Grades of Servants (also known as San Ba Pu Ren), the Association of Disciples, the Lord God Sect, the Established King Church, the Unification Church, the Family of Love, the South China Church, the Falun Gong, and the Zhong Gong movements. (Zhong Gong is a qigong exercise discipline with some mystical tenets.)

After the revised criminal law came into effect in 1997, offenses related to membership in unapproved cults and religious groups were classified as crimes of disturbing the social order. A ban on cults, including the Falun Gong spiritual movement, was enacted in 1999. Under Article 300 of the criminal law, “cult” members who “disrupt public order” or distribute publications may be sentenced to three to seven years in prison, while “cult” leaders and recruiters may be sentenced to seven years or more in prison. Under the new Public Security Administrative Punishment Law, which took effect March 1, 2006, Falun Gong adherents could face five to fifteen days of administrative detention and fines of up to \$125 (1,000 RMB) for using superstitious cults or qigong activities to disrupt public order or harm public health. Public security officials said the law would be used against Falun Gong (US Department of State 2006, *International Religious Freedom Report: China*, 15 September – Attachment 5)

Although it is not included in the list of the banned cults prepared by the US Department of State, it is probable that the sect is on the list of the PRC Ministry of Public Security. However, it has not yet attracted the attention of the PRC government to act on it. It is understandable in the light that the government has shown increasing tolerance for Buddhist sects in the recent years and the sect’s profile as assessed by the PRC authorities is not yet high enough to warrant intervention. The True Buddha School Net website lists its branches throughout the world but not in China (only in Hong Kong) (‘World Wide Chapters’ 2006, True Buddha School website <http://www.tbsn.org/chinese2/chapterindex.php> – Accessed 11 October 2006 – Attachment 11).

In an attempt to obtain a clearer picture of the sect in China, Country Research rang and spoke with Mr Keith Lee of the Perth Branch of the True Buddha School (mobile phone number 0400-883-688) on 13 October 2006. On the condition that he does not represent the sect officially, he spoke that there are practitioners of the sect in such large cities like Shanghai and Fuzhou in China but they keep low key because of the political sensitivity (Lee, Keith 2006, Comments on the practitioners of the True Buddha School in China, 13 October – Attachment 12).

On the dilemma faced by the PRC authorities in selecting a group of sects from another for crackdown, Xu Mei states, relying, in part, on the above Ministry of Public Security document that:

The vast revival of religion since the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) has spawned a bewildering variety of sects, cults and new religions. Maoist ideology has failed to satisfy Chinese spiritual aspirations. The void has filled with a plethora of religious sects, which the government has growing difficulty in categorizing.

If some 70 percent of the population are peasants, then over 800 million people are living in semi-literacy and poverty, prone to superstition, witchcraft and magic.

The five religions tolerated by the authorities -- Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Catholicism and Protestantism -- are like icebergs floating in a murky ocean that conceals depths of folk-religion, bizarre cults and outright fanaticism. Witches and shamans beat the spirits out of possessed or mentally ill patients. People die because of exorcisms and false promises of faith healing...

In April 2000 the Ministry of Public Security defined a cult as any organization which:

- Sets up an illegal organization in the false name of religion.
- Deifies its leaders.

- Fabricates and spreads superstition and heterodox beliefs to excite doubts and deceive the people and recruits and controls its members by these means.
- Systematically disturbs social order and injures the lives and property of citizens.

This is a catch-all list of regulations that can be used to ban virtually any religious organization (Mei, Xu 2002, 'China's Anti-Cult Campaign in Context : Difficulties Abound in Sorting Out a Confusing Situation', *Worthy News*, 29 October – Attachment 13).

Similarly the US Department of State comments on the difficulties faced by the authorities in dealing with small religious sects as follows:

Some local authorities continued a selective crackdown on unregistered religious groups, and the Central Government did not oppose this crackdown. Police closed unregistered mosques and temples, as well as some Catholic churches and Protestant "house churches," many with significant memberships, properties, financial resources, and networks. Several unregistered church leaders reported continuing pressure from local authorities. Despite these efforts at control, official sources, religious professionals, and members of both officially sanctioned and unregistered places of worship all reported that the number of religious adherents in the country continued to grow...

Official tolerance for Buddhism and Taoism has been greater than that for Christianity, and these religions often face fewer restrictions. However, as these non-Western religions have grown rapidly in recent years, there were signs of greater government concern and new restrictions, especially on groups that blend tenets from a number of religious beliefs. The Government also sought to regulate closely the financial affairs of Buddhist and Taoist temples (US Department of State 2006, *International Religious Freedom Report: China*, 15 September – Attachment 5).

While no report has been located so far that the members of the True Buddha sect were detained, arrested, harmed or harassed in China, it is difficult to predict whether they would be subjected to harsh treatment by the authorities. As indicated above, it may depend on factors such as the sect's profile, the prevailing political climate and how the authorities assess them.

List of Sources Consulted

Internet Sources:

International News & Politics

BBC News (World Edition) website <http://news.bbc.co.uk/>

Search Engines

AlltheWeb search engine <http://www.alltheweb.com/>

Google search engine <http://www.google.com.au/>

Wikipedia Free Encyclopedia <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki>

Copernic Agent Personal search engine www.copernic.com

Databases:

COPERNIC AGENT PERSONAL

FACTIVA (news database)

BACIS (DIMA Country Information database)

REFINFO (IRBDC (Canada) Country Information database)

ISYS (RRT Country Research database, including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, US Department of State Reports)

RRT Library Catalogue

List of Attachment

1. 'List of Buddha claimants' 2006, *Wikipedia*, 28 September http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Buddha_claimants – Accessed 9 October 2006.
2. 'True Buddha School' 2006, *Wikipedia*, 30 September http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/True_Buddha_School – Accessed 10 October 2006.
3. 'Sheng-yen Lu' 2006, *Wikipedia*, 28 August http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sheng-yen_Lu – Accessed 10 October 2006.
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7. 'Vajrayana' 2006, *Wikipedia*, 2 October <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vajrayana> – Accessed 10 October 2006.
8. 'Buddhism Glossary' 1997, University of Wyoming website <http://uwacadweb.uwyo.edu/religionet/er/buddhism/BGLOSSRY.HTM> – Accessed 9 October 2006.
9. 'A View on Buddhism: The Three Vehicles' 2005, Buddhism.kalackranet website, 29 October <http://buddhism.kalachakranet.org/vehicles.html> – Accessed 9 October 2006.
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12. Lee, Keith 2006, Comments on the practitioners of the True Buddha School in China, 13 October.
13. Mei, Xu 2002, 'China's Anti-Cult Campaign in Context : Difficulties Abound in Sorting Out a Confusing Situation', *Worthy News*, 29 October. (CISNET China CX69409)