

China explores ways to purge commercialization of Buddhism

China has explored numerous means, including information disclosure and lawmaking, to tackle the increasing commercialization in places of worship across the country.

New forms of infringement of religious rights and interests have sprung up, making it more urgent to protect and promote these rights, said Jiang Jianyong, deputy head of the State Administration for Religious Affairs.

Jiang made the remarks at a meeting of the Buddhist Association of China (BAC) held in the city of Changsha in central China's Hunan Province this week, with delegates from 14 provinces and municipalities in attendance.

According to some delegates, companies and individuals in some regions are increasingly exploiting Buddhism for commercial interests under the guise of Buddhist cultural parks or theme parks, and even eliciting donations to support false applications for world heritage status.

Some religious figures have illegally accumulated wealth using Buddhism as a cover to rent out temples for commercial use.

A prominent monk in the Hunan city of Hengyang arbitrarily approved a 5-million-yuan (730,000 U.S. dollars) procurement of 18 pine trees from Japan, said Huai Hui, secretary-general of the provincial Buddhist association.

Another monk in the city of Loudi, also in Hunan, raised over 8 million yuan in the name of temple construction, which was actually for personal use, he added.

"Some ancient temples have been encompassed by so-called 'cultural parks', with non-religious buildings constructed around them for commercial use," said Sheng Hui, deputy director of the BAC.

A number of "fake Buddhists" have been carrying out illegal religious activities, extorting money and luring followers, harming the reputation of the religion.

A living-Buddha authentication database was launched last year to confirm the identity of living Buddhas. With roots traceable to the 13th century AD, the reincarnation of Buddhas is a unique inheritance system within Tibetan Buddhism. The BAC has issued certificates to living Buddhas since 2010.

"To protect religious rights and uphold dignity, Buddhist associations across China have been asked to tighten their management of personnel and strictly prohibit any commercial activities," Sheng said.