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# Buddhism in Current China–India Diplomacy

David SCOTT

**Abstract:** Buddhism is being emphasised strongly in both Chinese and Indian public diplomacy, as they both seek to increase their soft-power attractiveness. This article finds that while Buddhism has served to draw the two countries together in their bilateral relationship, their current invocation of Buddhism as a bridge is in many ways an ahistorical reconstruction. The article also finds that Buddhism operates as a tool of diplomacy in a competitive way, as China and India both seek influence among Buddhist countries elsewhere in Asia and among international Buddhist organisations. Finally, this article finds that whereas China’s use of Buddhism is straightforwardly tactical and to a degree disingenuous, India is able to incorporate genuine spiritual elements into its use of Buddhism, albeit within a setting of Hindu reinterpretation of Buddhism. In the future, China could shift from a short-term tactical to a long-term normative use of Buddhism within international socialisation scenarios.

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**Keywords:** China, India, Buddhism, foreign policy, soft power, public diplomacy

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## Introduction

This article looks at how China and India have used Buddhism in their current diplomacy. By looking at Buddhism in the context of current Sino–Indian relations as an example of “faith diplomacy” (Seib 2013), this article furthers the wider move in research to “bring religion back into the study and praxis of international affairs” (Seiple and Hoover 2004: 3; also Fox 2001). In terms of theoretical framework, three related analytical tools that are particularly relevant for this article are those of soft power, public diplomacy, and cultural diplomacy. The method used in this study is to examine the rhetoric of politicians and diplomats from both countries as empirical examples of soft-power public/cultural diplomacy processes (Hayden 2011). This rhetoric often includes reconstructed religious histories, an appropriation of Buddhism that is essentially politicised and often ahistorical, and which is being harnessed in the diplomacy of what are two non-Buddhist states. Buddhism has been used for “image management” not only by China (Ding 2011) but also by India. Such politicised and at times ahistorical and propagandist reconstruction of Buddhism by states is exactly what critical discourse theory and its focus on “hidden agendas” (Rahimi and Riasati 2011: 107) would expect. With good reason, Phunchok Stobdan, India’s ambassador to Kyrgyzstan from 2010 to 2012, sees Buddhism as a “geopolitical tool” (Stobdan 2013) then and now for both China and India. The article finds that while Buddhism serves as a generally positive link in current China–India bilateral relations, it is also a tool for competition between them in regional and international settings.

## Ironies from History

Buddhism was indeed important in both the Indian subcontinent and China for approximately one millennium, and there was some interaction as Indian translators went to China and Chinese pilgrims travelled to India (Liu 1988; Bagchi 2011). Given this shared Buddhist setting, great stories have been generated by both countries of intimate Sino–Indian relations in the past, which are mooted as an example for present and future interstate relations.

Such a portrayal of Buddhism’s role as a bridge between India and China was first generated in the early twentieth century in the

“discursive reconstruction of Asia” (Frey and Spakowski 2016: 1) found in Pan-Asianism circles (Duara 2001). However, the caution expressed by Frey and Spakowski that Pan-Asianism “can not only be detected in processes of integration” but “can also relate to moments of rivalry, competition, or exclusion within and between political entities” (Frey and Spakowski 2016: 2) is applicable not only to the pan-Asian movements of the early twentieth century, but also to the way that Buddhism has operated in the early twenty-first century as a feature of cooperation and competition between China and India in Asia.

Within these pan-Asian circles, a Buddhist-centred history as a model for China–India relations in the modern era was exemplified by Benoy Kumar Sarkar (1916; also 1922), Liang Chi Chao (Liang 1924), and Tan Yunshan (Tan 1999; also Tsui 2010), the last having founded the Sino–Indian Friendship Society in 1933. Tan Yunshan’s teacher, Taixu, led a high-profile Buddhist goodwill mission from China to India in 1940 in an attempt to shape further China–India civilisational unity, although he was hampered by the “dearth” (Sen 2016: 311; also Sarkar 1940) of Indian Buddhist monks and monuments in India.

In the Hindutva groupings of the Mahasabha and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), Buddhism was seen as a reform wing of Hinduism and as a vehicle for wider Indian influence. This “geo-imaginary of Asia reflected what Vinayak Damodar Savarkar considered as the unifying identity marker of Asia: the Hindu-Buddhist religion” (Stolte 2016: 64). Consequently, “*Hindu-Buddhist Asia* became an often-heard trope in Mahasabha circles, and one on which the organization took action through active networking with Buddhist organizations across Asia” (Stolte 2016: 66; emphasis added). The significance of Savarkar is that it was out of the RSS that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was later formed, the party currently headed by Indian prime minister Narendra Modi, whose government is again pursuing Buddhist linkages across Asia. India is able to use Buddhism in a more obvious spiritual way, even if it is based on a reconstructed religious history, precisely because the BJP has a religious ideology and the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) does not.

Tansen Sen has been prominent in critiquing such reconstructions of history in various ways (Sen 2003, 2012a, 2012b; also Kie-

schnick and Shahar 2013). First, Buddhism came to China in the second and third centuries CE primarily through Central Asian networks. Second, the tradition that the White Horse Temple in the Eastern Han capital of Luoyang was the first Buddhist temple in China, established in 68 CE with the arrival of two Indian monks Kasyapa Matanga and Dharmaratna, is a fictitious pious invention. Third, the level of popular interaction between Chinese and Indian Buddhism after the third century was quite limited. Fourth, by the fifth century, Chinese Buddhism had developed criticisms and rejections of Indian Buddhism. Fifth, after the eighth century, Sino–Indian relations were related more to trade than to religion. Sixth, there was also a divergence in geographic focus after the eighth century: while India maintained an intimate relationship with Tibet through Tantric Buddhism, Chinese Buddhism had its own sphere of influence in East Asia through the distinctive Chinese schools of Chan and Pure Land, which spread into Vietnam, Korea, and Japan. Seventh, neither India nor China was a modern nation-state during this shared period of Buddhist presence, a fact that further qualifies the relevance of this Buddhist presence for current “interstate” relations.

Additionally, neither India nor China is a Buddhist state today. Buddhism, though begun in India as an anti-caste, anti-Brahmin, and anti-Vedic tradition, declined and virtually vanished from India after the thirteenth century, where it had been battered by Islam, and was then reabsorbed by a resurgent Hinduism. A two-pronged response by Hinduism ultimately defeated Buddhism as an independent rival. At the institutional level, Buddhism was rejected in Hinduism as *nastika* (“heterodox”) and subject to “centuries of anti-Buddhist polemics” (Klostermaier 2010: 375). As to the individual figure of Buddha, he was accepted yet subordinated by being considered as but an avatar of Vishnu, and negated by being considered to have been sent to preach false doctrines that would mislead the demons. Buddhism arrived in China by the third century CE and would come to stand alongside Daoism and Confucianism as one of China’s three major religious traditions. However, the People’s Republic of China (PRC), proclaimed in 1949, officially remains an avowedly atheistic Marxist–Leninist state under the ruling CCP, led since 2012 by Xi Jinping. The Buddhist Association of China (BAC) was set up in 1953 as a channel for state control, but the religion was stigmatised during the 1950s and its adherents persecuted during the Cultural Revolution (Welch

1972). A gradual recovery, however, has been evident since the 1990s (Ji 2004), with the state ready to co-opt Buddhism into its quest for a “harmonious society” (和谐社会, *hexie shehui*) and thereby bolster regime survival. Indeed, a final twist in China today is that even as the state faces the challenge of absorbing a Buddhist Tibet into an officially atheist PRC, in wider Han Chinese circles there has been a “return of interest in Tibetan Buddhism to a level not seen since the Republican period” (Tuttle 2007: 223) of the 1920s and 1930s.

## Analysis Framework

Various related concepts are helpful to understanding the deployment of Buddhism by China and India. Such concepts were apparent in a speech delivered by India’s foreign secretary, Nirupama Rao. She asserted that “the projection of India’s soft power is very much a part of the processes of public diplomacy,” that “public diplomacy, we all know, is no abstract term – it is a real-world phenomenon, and it overlaps with our cultural diplomacy” that aims to “project India [...] advocating and explaining the Indian ‘brand’ as it were” (Rao 2010b). Her comments there with regard to India are equally applicable to China. What can be pursued from Rao’s speech are three related analytical tools – namely, soft power, public diplomacy, and cultural diplomacy. Soft power is the end result, public diplomacy is the government vehicle to achieve such soft power (Nye 2008; Lord 2008a), and cultural diplomacy is the aspect of the country often highlighted in such public diplomacy. Each of these three analytical tools are now looked at in terms of what they mean in general, in terms of how they can be discerned in the foreign policy of China and India; and in terms of how the Chinese and Indian deployment of Buddhism reflects such an analytical framework.

With regard to soft power, analysis of China–India relations has frequently been conducted through a hard-power prism, in which military issues have been prominent, such as their unresolved land disputes along the Himalayas, which led to war in 1962, and their ongoing geopolitical regional rivalry across Asia and the Indian Ocean (Garver 2001; Mohan 2012; Smith 2014). This is the domain for IR realism theory and the imperatives of interstate competition. In their economic relationship, a frequently deployed “Chindia” (Ramesh 2005) narrative of common complementary economic rise is entwined

ed with rising Chinese trade surpluses vis-à-vis India, energy competition (Zhao 2012), and water security issues (Christopher 2013).

Alongside such quantifiable hard-power military and economic issues is what was pinpointed and popularised by Joseph Nye in 2004 in his seminal book *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. As its subtitle suggests, soft power is a matter of foreign policy, of states seeking to “incorporate the soft dimensions into their strategies for wielding power” (Nye 2004: 1). Its role in foreign policy is important precisely because “in behavioural terms, simply put soft power is attractive power” (Nye 2004: 6), pursued in order to affect the behaviour of other states. Because soft power is all to do with creating images for others to perceive, it is indeed a “representational force” (Mattern 2005) in international politics, which in the case of China is often explicit propaganda (Edney 2012).

China’s use of soft power is a clear part of its foreign policy strategy (Callahan and Barabantseva 2001; Yu 2007; Wuthnow 2008; Li 2009; Monroe 2010; Li and Worm 2010). China’s foreign minister, Wang Yi, emphasised that “with a view to cultivating and enhancing China’s soft power, we will also try to make China’s voice heard” (Wang 2013); Xi Jinping addressed the Central Conference on Work Relating to Foreign Affairs, saying, “We should increase China’s soft power, give a good Chinese narrative” (Xi 2014b); and the Central Committee identified improving the country’s soft power as a “key concern” (*Xinhua* 2015b) from 2016 through 2020. China’s sense of its own “national cultural soft power” (国家文化软实力, *guojia wenhua ruan shili*) has been manifest in the “faith diplomacy” (Zhang 2013) strategy it has applied as it has leveraged Confucius (Paradise 2009; Hartig 2012) and Buddhism (Ranade 2011; Angelskar 2013; Dotezac 2014). The Chinese government can, and does, use the simple fact that China has more Buddhists (in actual number) than any other country in the world for its particular soft-power diplomacy, even if the state ideology is not Buddhist.

If we turn to India, Shashi Tharoor, diplomat turned government minister, has argued that,

increasingly, countries are judged by the soft-power elements they project [...] through the export of cultural products, the cultivation of foreign publics or even international propaganda. (Tharoor 2009)



Not surprisingly, he has been an advocate of India's own soft-power assets (Tharoor 2008). Such a projection is a matter of state policy, reflected in Foreign Secretary Rao's sense that "our 'soft power' gives us advantages" (Rao 2010a; also Purushothaman 2010; Malone 2011). Rao's talk of soft-power advantages was reiterated at the prime ministerial level, through Modi's use of Buddhism:

The time has come for us to realize the potential of soft power as an important strategy for external affairs and foreign relations [...]. Soft power is becoming increasingly critical in world affairs [...]. India should leverage its great traditions and culture in forging ties with countries around the world in a way that is deeper, more personal, and therefore, far more powerful [...]. Countries that have Gautam Buddha [...] as part of their own culture have a bond with India that transcends diplomatic ties. In the domain of soft power India has a lot to offer to the world. (Modi 2015b)

As the original hearth of Buddhism, India is able to thereby trump China's soft-power card of having the world's largest Buddhist population (Thussu 2013).

Public diplomacy is highly "strategic" (Lord 2008b), as it is chosen and pursued through governmental policies, rhetoric, and actions that are all aimed at external public opinion (Melissen 2008; Snow and Taylor 2008; L'Etang 2009). It is very much a question of "nation-branding" (Szondi 2008). This makes public diplomacy essentially an image-related mechanism (Gilboa 2001), a "war of ideas" (Reilly 2008) through image construction. Consequently, public diplomacy is a matter of public relations (Signitzer and Coombs 2010), whereby international relations between states become international public relations crafted by states for an international audience at large and to shape a suitable image (Kunczik 1997). Even as academics have debated public diplomacy theory (Gilboa 2008), both India (Hall 2012) and China (d'Hooghe 2015) have demonstrated clear public diplomacy aspirations, and both have set up mechanisms to deliver public diplomacy.

The *Xinhua News Agency*, with its online presence *Xinhuanet*, is the official press agency for China. It is a ministry-level institution subordinate to the central government, and it is a vehicle for China's public diplomacy efforts. Its hope that "public diplomacy adds [a] soft touch for China" (*Xinhua* 2013) raises the danger that other countries become a soft touch for China – that is, that they become vulnerable to

China's influence. The declared mission of the China Public Diplomacy Association, established in 2012, is to "advance the development of China's public diplomacy, enhance mutual understanding and friendship between China and the rest of the world, project to the world a positive image of China" and "create an international environment conducive to China" (CPDA 2014).

China's setting up of the Boao Forum for Asia has become an established part of its softer diplomatic face, or Good Neighbourhood policy (睦邻友好政策, *mulin youbao zhengce*). This is part of China's ongoing reassurance diplomacy, which uses soft words to create a soft image to increase its soft power (Wang 2008; Wang 2010; Scott 2012). As one Chinese observer delicately put it, public diplomacy is a way of "managing national reputations" (Wang 2006), which in China's case reflects a problematic hard-power reputation that Beijing hopes can be improved through its soft-power deployment of Buddhism. The Chinese state-controlled media has acknowledged the advantages for China in its deployment of Buddhism. Such deployment can "increase its [China's] influence in the region" and "project a harmonious, accepting image as the country seeks to increase its influence with its religious neighbors"; although unsettling undertones can be discerned in the claim that "religion is becoming the glue that can help bond the region under the Chinese dream" (Chen 2015).

In India, a special Public Diplomacy Division was set up within the Ministry for External Affairs in 2006. Four years later, the division held an international conference in New Delhi, titled "Public Diplomacy in the Information Age," which was addressed by Foreign Secretary Rao (2010b). The Ministry of External Affairs also has its glossy magazine *In Focus*, which serves as a further vehicle for India's public-diplomacy message shaping, as exemplified by Chand's piece (2014) on Buddhism's role in India's current outreach to Myanmar. In a similar vein, India's then national security advisor Shivshankar Menon (2010) acknowledged the effect of public diplomacy in smoothing India–China bilateral relations through specific cultural links from the past such as Buddhism.

Cultural diplomacy can indeed be considered as the "the linchpin of public diplomacy" (US 2005). This involves culture being used as an instrument of diplomacy, as countries highlight or, indeed, construct features of their culture in order to project an international

image, gain influence, and shape bilateral relations (Finn 2003; Lenczowski 2008; Mark 2009). Culture can be a soft-power lever for states to use in their foreign policy.

With regard to China, during the first decade of the 2000s, “cultural diplomacy” (文化外交, *wenhua weijiao*) became increasingly treated as a third pillar of China’s diplomacy, alongside traditional political and economic levers (Palit 2013). China’s minister of culture, Sun Jiazheng, was clear on its diplomatic usefulness. He considered that “cultural diplomacy has created a good atmosphere for Chinese overall diplomacy” since it “promotes trust” and “alleviates doubts when developing relations with neighbouring countries” (Sun 2004). Like public diplomacy, China’s cultural diplomacy also focuses on soft-power goals (Lai 2012). At both the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, held in November 2012, and the Third Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, held in November 2013, the need to strengthen China’s “cultural soft power” (文化软实力, *wenhua ruan shili*) was stressed.

With regard to India, cultural diplomacy has also been pursued by India, reflecting Tharoor’s sense of it being “Indian culture that gives India its soft power” (2008: 43). A long-running vehicle for this pursuit has been the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), founded by the government in 1950 and specifically tasked with cultural diplomacy. The ICCA’s president, Lokesh Chandra, has been clear enough on “tapping into Buddhism as a key arm of our cultural diplomacy” (Kasturi 2015) that operates as an “instrument” (Kumar 2008) of India’s cultural diplomacy. In part, this aspect of India’s cultural diplomacy exists because “New Delhi aims to use Buddhism to neutralize any Chinese soft-power advantage” (Pratap 2015: 58).

In the interplay of theory and practice, Buddhism has already been explicitly linked to each of the analytical frameworks in this section. The empirical sections that follow similarly reflect the soft-power public/cultural diplomacy considerations in play for both China and India.

## The General Use of Buddhism within the Foreign Policy of China and India

India and China are in different starting positions regarding how easily each can use Buddhism in its public diplomacy. There are two historical reasons for this: First, whereas India can claim to be the birthplace of Buddhism, it has long ceased to be a Buddhist-dominated country. The 2011 census recorded 8.4 million Buddhists in India, constituting a meagre 0.7 per cent of the population. In contrast, China has long had the biggest number of Buddhist adherents, currently estimated at between 200 and 300 million; even if that number has traditionally been blurred by simultaneous adherence to Daoism and Confucianism, and even if the People's Republic of China officially follows an atheist ideology. Second, Buddhist links between China and Southeast and East Asian states had centuries of continuity that were strategically used during the twentieth century by the Republic of China (ROC) and then the People's Republic of China (PRC). In contrast, Buddhist links between India and Southeast/East Asia had been absent for several centuries due to the advance of Islam and resurgence of Hinduism in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

It is evident that the Chinese leadership is using Buddhism tactically, as the country has “shown increasing interest in tapping Buddhism as a convenient diplomatic resource” (Zhang 2012: 27). Invoking Buddhism enables China to point to itself as the biggest Buddhist country, and thereby gain further soft-power attractiveness among smaller Buddhist countries in Southeast Asia (such as Thailand and Myanmar) and in South Asia (such as Sri Lanka). The rationale for the deployment of Buddhism was outlined in the Chinese state media as intending to “project a harmonious, accepting image [and] increase its [China's] influence with its religious neighbours” through Buddhism “becoming the glue that can help bond the region under the Chinese dream” (Chen 2015).

Moreover, promoting China's version of Buddhism and the symbolic authority of government-selected figures – such as Gyaincain Norbu, China's appointed Panchen Lama – helps to counterbalance the influence of the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan cause outside China. It was in this vein that the Panchen Lama's appointment in 2010 as vice president of the Buddhist Association of China (BAC)

came complete with his internal and external pledges that he would “uphold the leadership of the Communist Party of China [...], safeguard national unification, play a role in building a ‘harmonious society,’ and expand Buddhist exchanges” (*Xinhua* 2010).

The current Chinese leader Xi Jinping has some personal links with Buddhism. His father, Xi Zhongxun, for years wore a watch presented to him by the Dalai Lama; his mother, Qi Xin, was buried with full Tibetan Buddhist rites, and his wife, Peng Liyuan, is a personal practitioner of Tibetan Buddhism. Xi Jinping made some positive remarks in 2014 about Buddhism’s contribution to Chinese society, although that may have been spurred more by regime survival considerations and a need to placate the domestic Buddhist community. Xi Jinping has also made deliberate use of Buddhism in delineating his public vision of China’s place in the modern world. At UNESCO headquarters, Xi unfolded the following story:

Buddhism originated in ancient India. After it was introduced into China, the religion went through an extended period of integrated development with the indigenous Confucianism and Taoism and finally became [...] Buddhism with Chinese characteristics [...]. The Chinese people have enriched Buddhism in the light of Chinese culture and developed some special Buddhist thoughts. Moreover, they also helped Buddhism spread from China to Japan, Korea, Southeast Asia and beyond. (Xi 2014a)

Xi’s panorama was a Buddhist past embedded in China’s own Sino-centric, Middle Kingdom world – with India thereby somewhat superseded. His qualifying phrase “with Chinese characteristics” (有中国特色, *you Zhongguo tese*) has also been applied by the Chinese government to concepts like “democracy” and “international relations” for equally political motives.

Meanwhile, in its public diplomacy, India has the advantage of the historical founder Gautama/Shakyamuni. He may have been born in Nepal, around Lumbini, but he has been adopted as a “son of India” (*bharata ka beta*). It was in India at Bodh Gaya that he obtained enlightenment, thereby gaining the title of the Buddha, the “Enlightened One.” It was in India at Sarnath that the Buddha gave his first sermon, it was in India that he continued to teach the Dharma, and it was in India that he set up a continuing community: the Sangha. Finally, it was in India at Kushinagara that he died. These sites have been linked together in the “Buddhist Circuit” by the Indian govern-

ment, organised domestically by the Ministry for Tourism but also used externally in Indian diplomacy. Their wider importance has been noted by government figures, who have acknowledged that

it is very useful to have focus on the Buddhist Circuit as well because that is one of the more important linkages that we have with Southeast Asian countries. (Akbaruddin 2014)

Previous ministers for external affairs, such as Pranab Mukherjee, have been ready to claim the Buddha's mantle for India:

We can rightfully be proud that India is the *janm-bhoomi* ["land of birth"] and *karma-bhoomi* ["place of work"] of this great son of ours. It is also a matter of pride for all Indians that it is we who nurtured and developed the Buddha's teachings and spiritual traditions at Nalanda, Vikramsila and other Buddhist centres after his *parinirvana*. (Mukherjee 2008)

In addition, Mukherjee invoked Buddhist missionaries from India, going on to say that "his [the Buddha's] message of peace and tolerance was carried abroad by Indians" (Mukherjee 2008). The geographic range was broad, including

Mahinda, the son of Emperor Ashoka, [carrying the message] to Sri Lanka, [...] Padmasambhava to Tibet, [...] Kashyapa Matanga and Bodhidharma to China, and [...] countless others to the vast swathe of our world from Central Asia to the islands of Japan. (Mukherjee 2008)

On the diplomatic benefits of invoking Buddhism, Mukherjee had already argued that "the renewed interest in Asia's Buddhist heritage will rekindle ancient links between East and South Asia and will help us come closer together" (Mukherjee 2007).

Narendra Modi has taken a particularly strong lead in invoking the Buddha and Buddhism, a lead that represents "an amalgamation of cultural and faith-based diplomacy" (Chauhan 2015: 2). Previously, as chief minister of Gujarat, Modi took a personal interest in the rediscovery of ancient Buddhist sites. He also made a point of visiting Buddhist events. At the Buddhist Heritage Seminar organised in Gujarat in January 2010, he celebrated the modern "relevance" of Buddhism and, irritatingly for China, went on to praise the "authority" (Modi 2010) of the Dalai Lama. Currently, as prime minister, Modi has made highly positive comments about the figure of the Buddha, tweeting, "On Buddha Purnima, we bow to the venerable Lord Bud-

dha, whose teachings have guided the entire humanity for centuries” (Modi 2014a). He continued to make a point of attending important Buddhist-related events, being chief guest at the International Buddha Poonnima Diwas celebrations (Vesak) in May 2015, organised by the International Buddhist Confederation.

Modi has publicly embraced the Buddha as a reformer whose message has been reabsorbed back into Hinduism. Of course, this devalues the independent development of Buddhism as a religious tradition, but it enables Modi to use the Buddha to portray Hinduism in a better light and to shape a more Indian focus for Buddhism. Modi played a particularly prominent role at the Global Hindu-Buddhist Initiative on Conflict Avoidance and Environment Consciousness held in New Delhi in September 2015. He welcomed the delegates with domestic but also external nuances:

You are visiting a nation that is extremely proud of its Buddhist heritage [... which] draw pilgrims from ASEAN nations, as also from China, Korea, Japan, Mongolia, and Russia [...]. My government is doing everything possible to give an impetus to this Buddhist heritage across India, and India is taking the lead in boosting the Buddhist heritage across Asia. (Modi 2015e)

On the third day, Modi joined the delegates for a trip to Bodh Gaya, leading a formal meditation session underneath the sacred Bodi tree where the Buddha was supposed to have achieved enlightenment. Modi cited Vivekananda’s earlier incorporation (Long 2005) of the Buddha into Hinduism and went on to assert,

I would personally call India “Buddhist India” as it has imbibed all the values and virtues of the teachings of Buddha by their [i.e. Hindu] religious scholars incorporating them in their literature. (Modi 2015f)

In effect, Modi made the Buddha into a national asset by incorporating his life into a Hindu context: “Buddha is the crown jewel of the Indian nation [...]. So, Hinduism after the Buddha’s advent became Buddhist Hinduism or Hindu Buddhism” (Modi 2015e). Furthermore, the holy sites of the Buddha’s ministry were deployed as an international asset:

I recognise how Buddhists all over the world revere Bodh Gaya as a place of pilgrimage. We in India would like to develop Bodh Gaya so that it can become the spiritual capital and civilisational

bond between India and the Buddhist world. The government of India would like to provide all possible support that its Buddhist cousin nations need for the satisfaction of their spiritual needs from this holiest of holy places for them. (Modi 2015e)

By contrast, because of the nature of the Chinese political system and its underpinning ideology, Xi Jinping is unable to make such overtly “spiritual” use of Buddhism towards Chinese “political” ends.

Alongside this official domestic embrace and further use of Buddhism within India, there has been a noticeable external invocation of the Buddha and of Buddhism within Indian diplomacy under Modi (Mohan 2014, 2015). Government officials stated that the Modi government was “keen on drawing up a Buddhist connect as part of its Look East, Act East policy,” with BJP officials claiming that “Mr. Modi is well aware of the connections that Buddhism has in the entire region, and who better to string it together than India, the home of the Buddha” (Haidar 2015).

India’s soft-power bridge of Buddhism was invoked at length during Modi’s visits to Mongolia, Sri Lanka, Vietnam and Japan, whereas Xi Jinping’s visits to those countries had no similar Buddhist invocations. This is not to suggest that Buddhism is the most important feature in India’s relationship with those countries. Rather, the geocultural invocation of Buddhism facilitates the geopolitical advantages of drawing Sri Lanka and Myanmar out of China’s orbit and strengthening security cooperation with Mongolia, Vietnam and, above all, Japan, who have similar concerns about a rising China. Soft-power linkages thereby feed into the hard power–balancing behaviour that IR realism theory would expect.

## Buddhism as a Tool for Cooperation between China and India

Many a speech by politicians and diplomats from China and India has stressed the historical cultural linkages between the two countries, through their having been neighbouring Buddhist countries for many centuries in the past. Such a view of history was evident when Wang Xuefeng, the Chinese consul at Kolkata, suggested to an Indian audience that

Buddhist culture has always had very special importance in the cultural exchange of the two countries [...]. Historically, Buddhist



culture has marked a magnificent chapter in the friendly exchange of China and India. (Wang 2014)

This reconstructed history is used as a model for the current relationship by Chinese officials. In such an irenic vein, the director of the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA) in 2007, Ye Xiaowen, argued that “Buddhism played an important role in the process of the communication between the two countries” and that “such a role is continuing to function, and will function well in the future” (*Hindustan Times* 2007). India’s previous minister of external affairs, Somanahalli Krishna, also stressed this bridge, saying, “Buddhism is a strong cultural bond between us” (Krishna 2012). He felt that the criss-cross of travellers and Buddhist pilgrims were “powerful symbols of connectivity between our societies [...], a powerful symbol of our shared history” and an illustration of “the power of culture to bring about perceptual changes” (Krishna 2010).

The most famous of the Chinese pilgrims travelling to India was Xuan Zang, who stayed in India for 14 years in approximately the 630s, and who diplomats such as Le Yucheng consider “a household name in China and India” (Le 2014). The Chinese ambassador to India, Sun Yuxi, told a hard-nosed audience at the National Defence College of India that the “journey of Xuan Zang to India paves the way for the communications of soul and exchanges of emotion between the two great civilizations” (Sun 2006).

Consequently, in 2005, the Chinese and Indian governments pledged to work together on constructing a Xuanzang Memorial Hall at Nalanda. Chinese funding for the project was forthcoming. Chinese foreign minister Li Zhaoxing attended the opening of the memorial hall in February 2007, as did the Indian minister for tourism, Ambika Soni. Li’s audience included Ye Xiaowen and more than 100 Chinese Buddhist monks vetted by the Chinese government.

Further use of Xuan Zang as a bridge in China–India diplomacy has come with Narendra’s Modi’s advent to power, and his interaction with the Chinese leadership headed by Xi Jinping. This use of Xuan Zang was noticeable in Xi’s trip to India in September 2014, where he was taken to Modi’s home state of Gujarat. Modi’s stated reasons for taking Xi to Gujarat were partly political, partly economic, but also partly related to Buddhism:

The monk Xuan Zang, who came to India from China in 600 AD, went to Gujarat and stayed in the village where I come from.

Through the medium of Buddhism, India and China – especially China and Gujarat – have developed very close relations. From this perspective also, his coming to Gujarat reminds us of a relationship that is of special historic and cultural significance. (Modi 2014b)

It was no surprise that the subsequent Joint Communiqué (India–China 2014) included promises that China would help India to promote its tourism products and the routes related to the travels of Xuan Zang to India. Xi reciprocated during Modi’s trip to China in May 2015, when he took Modi to the White Goose Temple in Xi’an, which commemorates Xuan’s return from India. Xuan Zang went on to take charge of the White Horse Temple in Luoyang, where he remained until his death, a temple which has been the venue for further Buddhist-related cooperation between China and India.

The White Horse Temple in the Eastern Han capital of Luoyang is traditionally, though probably erroneously, held to be the first Buddhist temple in China, established in 68 CE with the arrival of two Indian monks, Kasyapa Matanga and Dharmaratna. Dharmaraksha, the Kushan translator, resided at the White Horse Temple from 289 to 290. In the fifth century, Bodhidharma, the famous founder of the Ch’an (Zen) school of Buddhism supposedly arrived at the temple from India. As noted already, on his return from India Xuan Zang remained as abbot at the White Horse Temple until his death.

A bilateral project concerning the White Horse Temple was agreed upon at the highest level during Wen Jiabao’s visit to India in 2005. The Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) set out that the Indian government would assist with the funding in addition to providing the architectural design and construction material. In the Indian Parliament, government officials explained the project in glowing terms, whereby

it is expected that the Temple, once completed, will become an enduring symbol of the centuries-old cultural exchanges between India and China, of which Buddhism is an important and integral part. (Ahamed 2005)

Five years later, the edifice was finished, complete with Sanchi Stupa and Sarnath Buddha replica statuary provided by India. The Indian president, Pratibha Patil, was the official guest of honour at its inauguration ceremony. Patil, of course, was diplomatic in the extreme.

Her remarks there began with the site’s supposed past “symbolizing an intermingling of Indian and Chinese cultures,” in which

as the resting place of two great cultural ambassadors from India, the monk-scholars Kasyapa Matanga and Dharmaratna, it is a reminder of how our civilizations enriched each other. (Patil 2010)

She finished with the present and future, whereby

in realizing this monument of India–China friendship, I hope that this shrine will further enhance people-to-people contact between India and China by encouraging greater exchange in the current age and in times to come. (Patil 2010)

## Buddhism as a Tool for Competition between China and India

Almost 40 years ago, Krishna Gupta noted that to both India and China “the Buddhist connection has become a useful psychological device to project their own corresponding images of parity and ascendancy in history” (Gupta 1979: 39). Their respective competitive deployment of Buddhism as a foreign policy device is even more evident in 2016.

Divides over Tibetan Buddhism are particularly deep in the ongoing disputed frontier between China and India. Competition has also been noticeable in Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar, where both China and India have deliberately invoked Buddhism in various ways in their foreign policy relations and diplomatic interactions with those countries. In addition, further east, India currently invokes Buddhism as a cultural-civilisational link in its strategic partnerships with Vietnam, Mongolia, South Korea, and Japan in part to soft balance against China. China, by contrast, focuses more on economic enticements with those last four Buddhist countries. Finally, competition has also been noticeable between China and India with regard to international Buddhist organisations.

Tibet is an immediate issue where religion and geopolitics divide India and China (Norbu 1997). The history of the Tibetan issue is complicated. Prior to Chinese military forces bringing Tibet (back?) under Chinese sway in 1950, Tibet’s traditional position was as a theocracy, in which the Dalai Lama, as leader of the Gelugpa School, also held political power. The second leader in the Gelugpa hierarchy was

the Panchen Lama. Other schools had their own leaders – for example, the Kagyu School with their Karmapa. Tibet became a highly divisive issue for India and China when the 14th Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, fled in 1959 over the Himalayas into Indian sanctuary. In Chinese eyes this was bad enough, but the decision to set up the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) as a government in exile on Indian soil at Dharamsala was even more damaging. The Dalai Lama may have formally renounced political leadership in 2011, but he remains an ongoing symbol for the Tibetan cause, safely ensconced in India.

Tawang, the leading Tibetan Buddhist centre in Arunachal Pradesh, has become a further point of friction between China and India. The visit by Pranab Mukherjee (the minister for external affairs at the time) to Tawang on the occasion of the 8th Buddha Mahotsava attested to this Indian co-optation of Tibetan Buddhism. Mukherjee told his audience that

Tawang finds a special place in the spiritual and cultural history of Buddhism [...]. We are very proud of your efforts to develop the state and your patriotic spirit. (Mukherjee 2008)

He tied together religion and politics by saying that “Buddhism is an important and integral part of life and tradition in Arunachal Pradesh” and that “the Chinese side is fully aware that Arunachal Pradesh is an integral part of India” (Mukherjee 2008). Tawang’s place as the birthplace of the 6th Dalai Lama, Tsangyang Gyatso, gives it further importance within the world of Tibetan Buddhism. Moreover, Indian government permission for the Dalai Lama to visit Tawang in 2009 contributed to further dissonance between the two countries. The Dalai Lama’s visit, with “India’s encouragement” (Sun 2009), was denounced in China. Meanwhile, the Indian government called the Dalai Lama an “honoured guest” who was free to visit any part of India, including Tawang.

India’s role as a sanctuary for Tibetan Buddhist leaders fleeing from Chinese-controlled Tibet was reiterated in 2000, when Ogyen Drodul Trinley Dorje, the 17th Karmapa, fled across the Himalayas to take sanctuary in Dharamsala alongside the Dalai Lama. The pictures of the two exiled Tibetan leaders meeting on Indian soil increased Chinese suspicions: “China is firmly opposed to any separatist activities that might emerge in the wake of the Karmapa Buddha’s leaving Tibet for India” (*People’s Daily* 2000). China has instead unsuccessfully tried to build up the credibility of its own Panchen

Lama figure, Gyaincain Norbu Banquin Erdeni, in part by allowing his appearance at its approved World Buddhist Forums held in China.

Nepal traditionally has followed a pro-India policy in the Himalayas. However, following the collapse of the Hindu monarchy in 2008, Chinese officials have been ready to play the Buddha card in this new post-Hindu setting in Nepal:

The traditional friendship between us has a long history. Early in the Jin and Tang Dynasties, Chinese Master Monks Fa Xian and Xuan Zang have made pilgrimages to Lumbini [...]. And nowadays, Chinese and Nepalese people are still talking about the white pagoda in Miaoying Temple in Beijing which was built by Nepalese architect Aniko as the symbol of the friendship between us. (Yang 2012)

Lumbini has been a focus for Chinese penetration, at the expense of India. A Beijing-backed organisation founded and chaired by Xiao Wunan, the Asia Pacific Exchange and Cooperation Foundation (APECF), signed a framework agreement with the Nepalese government for the Lumbini Buddhist Special Cultural Zone in May 2011. This APECF initiative included plans to build temples, an airport, a highway, hotels, convention centres, and a Buddhist university in Lumbini. The APECF's links with the Chinese government attracted comment, the more so given Xiao's admission that the "APECF is part of the grander strategy of increasing China's soft power" (Sala 2013). Reservations on the part of the Nepalese government left that particular APECF project stillborn within a matter of months. However, in late 2013 the Buddhist Association of China, whose vice president is the Beijing-selected 11th Panchen Lama, announced it had plans for the development of Lumbini. The BAC's presence represents more direct involvement by China in matters regarding Lumbini.

Talk of infrastructure links to bring "Buddhist tourism" trails from China into Nepal through an extension of the Qinghai–Lhasa railway line down to Lumbini has been a source of concern for India. A significant counterproposal was made by Narendra Modi in his official trip to Nepal in August 2014: "assistance for development of Janakpur, Baraha Chhetra, and Lumbini, including linking Lumbini with the Buddhist Circuit of India" (India–Nepal 2014).

Sri Lanka represents another location of the China–India rivalry. During the 1980s and 1990s, India seemed to give its support to the minority Tamil Hindu community rather than to the majority Sinhalese Buddhist government. By contrast, Chinese military assistance to the central government enabled the Sinhalese leadership to crush the Tamil Tiger insurgency in 2009. This gravitation of Sri Lanka towards China was compounded during the ten-year presidency of Mahinda Rajapaksa from 2005 to 2015, during which time Sri Lanka accepted Chinese infrastructure projects at Hambantota and Colombo, gave firm support to China’s Maritime Silk Road initiative (which India had grave reservations about), and granted docking facilities to Chinese submarines at Colombo in 2014.

Competition was renewed between China and India with the surprise victory in the Sri Lankan presidential race of Maithripala Sirisena in January 2015. India has invoked Buddhism in order to recover diplomatic ground and influence in Sri Lanka. When Sirisena visited India in February 2015, Modi stressed old ties in the shape of the

link forged 2,300 years ago, by Prince Mahindra, known as Arahata Mahinda in Sri Lanka, and his sister Sanghamitra. They went to Sri Lanka as apostles of Buddhism. (Modi 2015a)

In turn, Modi stressed Buddhist links in his address to the Sri Lankan Parliament, promising, “We will bring our shared Buddhist heritage closer to you” (Modi 2015d). In a simple but telling gesture, Modi offered alms to Buddhist monks at the Mahabodhi Society in Colombo, an overtly religious act that that would be impossible for Xi to do.

Myanmar is another Theravada Buddhist country in which China and India have sought influence. In November 2011 China sent a holy Buddhist relic – a supposed tooth of the Buddha – to Myanmar, where it was publicly displayed for 48 days. This was the fourth time since the 1950s that the tooth had been sent to Myanmar, previous deployments being in 1955, 1994, and 1996. Along with the tooth came a high-level Chinese government official delegation led by SARA director Wang Zuonan and the president of the BAC, Master Chuanyin. Top Burmese officials, including the president at the time, Thein Sein, awaited the holy relic’s arrival to pay homage to it when it arrived in the capital, Naypyidaw.

Two months after the exhibition of the Buddha’s tooth, China and Myanmar signed an MoU on establishing friendly relations be-

tween Beijing's Lingguang Temple, where the Buddha's tooth is kept, and the Shwedagon Pagoda of Myanmar. The deputy director of SARA at the time, Zhang Lebin, tied the agreement into wider aims to "[deepen] Buddhist culture exchange" so that it will "play a greater role in enhancing the two countries' bilateral ties" (*Xinhua* 2012). It is no coincidence that Thein Sein made four trips to the Lingguang Temple. His latest trip in 2014 was greeted with comments from his Chinese host that "Lingguang Temple and Myanmar have forged a profound friendship between the people of the two countries and a friendship of believers in Buddhism of the two countries" (Hou 2014). It is worth noticing that Sein's visit included a trip organised especially for him by his Chinese hosts to the White Horse Temple in Luoyang.

India has also invoked Buddhism in its diplomacy towards Myanmar (Chand 2014). The five-day goodwill visit to India by Senior General Than Shwe in July 2010 resulted in an MoU on Indian assistance in restoring the Ananda Temple in Bagan, a renowned Buddhist shrine in central Myanmar. The 2012 visit to Myanmar by the Indian PM at the time, Manmohan Singh, included various Buddhist-related matters highlighted in the India–Myanmar Joint Statement. The statement outlined that the two countries "welcomed the preparations that have been made towards organizing the International Conference on Buddhist Heritage in Myanmar," noted that "the Myanmar side thanked India for its decision to gift a 16-foot sandstone replica of the Sarnath Buddha later in the year that will be installed in the precincts of the Shwedagon Pagoda," and went on to state that Myanmar "conveyed its appreciation to India for the facilities and courtesies being extended to Myanmar pilgrims visiting India" (India–Myanmar 2012). The International Conference on Buddhist Heritage in Myanmar was duly opened in December 2012 by India's minister for external affairs, Salman Khurshid. He remarked on Buddhist pilgrimage linkages between the two countries in which "India, as the birthplace of Buddhism, has its fair share" (Khurshid 2012). China, of course, is at a disadvantage vis-à-vis India, in having secondary rather than primary Buddhist sites on its soil.

Buddhist organisations present a final venue for China–India rivalries. China's vehicle for influence has been the World Buddhist Forum (WBF) – which it hosted in 2006, 2009, 2012, and 2015 at Hangzhou, Wuxi, Hong Kong, and again Wuxi, respectively – where

China can operate as a “patron of global Buddhism” (Pond 2012). The theme of the first WBF meeting was “A harmonious world begins in the mind,” while at the second the official theme was “A harmonious world, a synergy of condition.” Such terminology deliberately pointed to China’s flagship policies of seeking a “harmonious society” (和谐社会, *hexie shehui*) inside China and a “harmonious world” (和谐世界, *hexie shijie*) outside China. Hence, the official linkage that

China has been striving to build a harmonious society and advocating the construction of a harmonious world. Advocating the Buddhist spirit of harmony, peace and benevolence will undoubtedly push forward harmony in China and the world. (*Xinhua* 2006)

Not surprisingly, the Dalai Lama has not been invited, and instead the WBF settings have served as a public platform for Gyaincain Norbu, China’s Panchen Lama figure. China is also trying to build up the wider profile of Chinese Buddhism through the WBF Forum: “China realized that Chinese Buddhism had far less influence than Theravada Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhism in the world” (Zhang 2013: 79).

Similar nuances were evident when China hosted the 27th General Conference of the World Fellowship of Buddhists (WFB) in 2014. Chaunyin, at the time the president of the government-approved Buddhist Association of China which hosted the event, commented that “the conference is a milestone for Chinese Buddhism. It will allow China to play a greater role in the Buddhist world” (Seneviratne 2014). China was also able to gain support from other delegates. Medagama Dhammananda, a vice president of the WFB, was delighted with the conference and took China’s side against the Dalai Lama, who he agreed had contributed to creating a bad image of China in the eyes of the world. “We are very happy about China giving leadership to the Buddhist world,” he said (Seneviratne 2014).

India’s Buddhist vehicle has been the International Buddhist Confederation (IBC) based in New Delhi. At its inaugural meeting in December 2011, delegates heard statements by Banagala Uptatissa, head of the Mahabodhi Society of Sri Lanka, who said, “The whole world looks to India because of Buddhism. If someone from India takes initiative, India can take leadership of the Buddhist world” (Saxena 2011). The IBC’s inaugural meeting, at which there were no delegates from China, due to the Dalai Lama’s presence, was a source of friction between China and India. The Special Representatives



talks on the Sino–Indian boundary dispute slated for the end of November were called off after the Chinese objected to the Dalai Lama’s presence at the IBC, where he gave the valedictory address. The IBC meeting of 2013 again showed these competitive undertones between China and India. In a further insult to China, the Indian authorities denied a visa to Xiao Wunan, the head of the APECF, which had been involved in trying to set up the Lumbini Buddhist Special Cultural Zone as a joint China–Nepal activity.

The IBC went on to organise the International Buddha Purnima Diwas celebrations in May 2015, with Modi as its chief honoured guest. In September 2015 the IBC co-organised a conference called the Global Hindu-Buddhist Initiative on Conflict Avoidance and Environment Consciousness, which was addressed by both the Indian minister for external affairs, Sushma Swaraj, and Narendra Modi. As noted earlier, Modi joined the delegates on their subsequent visit to Bodh Gaya. Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Japan all sent delegates to the Hindu–Buddhist conference, but China did not. Undertones of Indian–Japanese political alignment were manifested in both the attendance of Minoru Kiuchi, Japan’s minister for foreign affairs, and the special video message sent by Shinzo Abe, the Japanese prime minister.

## Conclusions

China’s and India’s use of Buddhism evinces some elements of bilateral cooperation but also some greater elements of regional competition between the two states. Such competitive Buddhist features feed into the larger battle across the Indo-Pacific for relative influence between China and India. In effect, the historical geocultural setting of Chinese-shaped Buddhism versus Indian-shaped Buddhism mirrors the current geopolitics of regional competition between these adjacent states. As to where the potential for future developments may lie, a continued mix of cooperation and (greater) competition around Buddhism seems likely, a microcosm of China–India relations as a whole.

This article finds that India, despite its position of disadvantage in having a Buddhist community comprising less than 1 per cent of its population, has been able to deploy Buddhism with regard to third countries more successfully than has China. Part of the reason for

this lesser degree of Chinese success in its soft-power use of Buddhism has been China's hard-power, military-related actions and drive to reassert tight political control in Tibet, its increasingly assertive actions in the South China Sea, and the general reassertion of CCP orthodoxy, first under Hu Jintao and now under Xi Jinping.

Nevertheless, the article does not argue that Buddhism is the main driving force in the China–India relationship. It accepts that traditional hard-power territorial and military issues – the stamping ground of IR realism imperatives – together with economic issues such as trade and energy security are more immediate primary determinant forces in China–India relations.

The exception to this secondary role played by Buddhism in China–India relations is the issue of Tibet. Buddhism affects the moral legitimacy and continuing insecurity of China's political control over Tibet. This question of control over Tibet remains a domestic and foreign policy issue in which Buddhism spills across the Sino–Indian border. It was in this vein that Xi Jinping's meeting with China's Panchen Lama in June 2015 came complete with a heavy official line and implicit criticism of the Dalai Lama, in which “President Xi expects the Panchen Lama to be a patriot” (*Xinhua* 2015a) supporting integration with the PRC rather than any separatism. The Panchen Lama's support of Chinese policies on Tibet is precisely why he is lauded (*Xinhua* 2016) by the official media. The “securitisation of Tibetan Buddhism” (Topgyal 2012) in China involves issues of political control over Tibet. China's attempts to control Tibetan Buddhism are also related to Chinese claims to Arunachal Pradesh, particularly with reference there to Tawang. Consequently, Tibetan Buddhism has become an important political issue not just in domestic Chinese affairs, but also in China's relations with India. China remains hypersensitive over “foreign interference in Tibetan Buddhism affairs” (*Global Times* 2010), which represents an “insecurity dilemma” (Topgyal 2011) caused by worries over any weakening of its security grip over Tibetan Buddhism. This takes us back to the pragmatic and instrumental but ultimately cynical adoption of Buddhism by the Chinese state in its foreign policy. As the *Global Times* bluntly explained in May 2015, Buddhist figures recognised in China and deployed in their diplomacy must “be willing to pledge their support to the leadership of the Communist Party of China” (Huang 2015). A radically different projection of the role of Buddhism was apparent in

Ambassador Stobdan's paper *Buddhism and Asia's Connectivity*, which was presented at the Raisina Dialogue held in March 2016. Stobdan concluded his paper by arguing that "India needs to start thinking about seeking a greater transformation in China from authoritarianism to embracing the culture of Buddhism" (Stobdan 2016: 79), but this cuts across the increasingly authoritarian leadership control being exerted in China by Xi Jinping.

Peter Martin (2014) argues that the tactical rather than normative use of Buddhism by China means that Buddhism's role as a genuine bridge between China and India leaves something to be desired. However, China's invocation of Buddhism may indeed be a pragmatic way for an authoritarian, non-Buddhist leadership to shape its image now, but what of the future? Here, the tactical use of Buddhism in China's public diplomacy feeds into a wider, related debate on China's "international socialisation." State socialisation theory concerns "the process by which states internalize norms originating elsewhere in the international system" (Alderson 2001: 147), an argument heavily influenced by constructivist arguments from Nicholas Onuf and Alexander Wendt. Such a process may beckon for China. Superficial adoption of particular norms by governments for short-term tactical reasons, if maintained through a "logic of habit" (Hopf 2010), may lead to norms being internalised at a deeper, more genuine level. This possibility has already been raised with the Chinese leadership's espousal of Confucian-derived "harmony" tenets, but it can also be raised vis-à-vis China's continuing deployment of Buddhism within its public diplomacy. Such a process would improve China–India relations.

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