

## **China excels in making fakes, but religion is not its cup of tea<sup>1</sup>**

A couple of years ago, a Chinese site mentioned Château Lafitte, one of the most famous vintage Bordeaux wine. The site gave this surprising information: "Château Lafitte Rothschild, a wine estate in France, produces 15,000 to 25,000 cases of wine annually, or about 200,000 bottles. China's annual quota of Lafitte wine imported from France is only 50,000 bottles. However, the annual sale of Lafitte in China exceeds 3 million bottles, meaning 80 to 90 % of Lafitte sold in China is fake."

The Chinese are well-known for their prowess in retro-engineering; it is obvious that if Chinese engineers are able to duplicate a Russian fighter plane's engine, there should be no problem to 'produce' a *Côte de Bordeaux* as only the label has to be copied. The fake bottle will serve its purpose: showing-off for the Chinese *nouveaux riches*.

Around the same time, *PCWorld* had reported that Chinese authorities had found a number of fake Apple Stores (22 just in the city of Kunming, Yunnan). The Rothschild family, owners of famous vintage since the 19th century, can find consolation in the fact that no Chateau Lafitte stores need to be opened in China for the fake red wine to continue to flow abundantly in the Middle Kingdom.

This story came back to mind while I was reading in *The South China Morning Post*, an article entitled, "Ancient Buddhist temple in China bogged down by fake monks and debt."

The Honk Kong papers writes: "A provincial city's ambitious plans for turning an ancient Buddhist temple near Xian into the world capital of Buddhism and

---

<sup>1</sup> Published in ***Niti Central*** on May 13, 2013 (URL not available)

listing it on a stock exchange have stagnated, leaving the temple surrounded by fake monks and sham Buddha statues.”

It quotes the outspoken Guangzhou-based *Southern Weekly* which says the project around the 1,700-year-old Famen Temple in Shaanxi province ‘went horribly wrong’.

The temple is famed for having the relic of the Buddha’s finger bone. *The Southern Weekly’s* story does not tell us if, like the Chateau Lafitte labels, the relic is fake; it is however surprising that the Great Son of India’s finger would have found its way to the Middle Kingdom (although in 1955, Zhou Enlai lent a ‘tooth’ of the Buddha to Rangoon, making the Burmese people greatly feel obliged by this noble gesture).

Communist China has always seen Buddhism as a good business opportunity. According to the *Southern Weekly*, at the Famen temple, “fake monks from Hubei province roam a nearby scenic park that opened in 2009 and that tourists and pilgrims mistake as part of the temple. The impostors get commission for collecting donations to the Shaanxi Famen Charitable Foundation.”

The foundation is apparently a front name for the industrial group which operates the park, Shaanxi Famen Temple Scenic Park Cultural Group.

But business is tough these days, even in China! The company does not collect enough ‘donations’ to make profits. Last year, the public-listed enterprise lost some 50 million US dollars, that’s a lot for a spiritual undertaking.

*The South China Morning Post* adds: “When the park opened in 2009, it quickly became apparent that the massive project was not the goldmine it had promised to be for the government, and investors disappeared. In

search for new capital, its operators set up an organisation, which could collect donations from Buddhist believers and bankroll the company.”

The abbot and monks refused to be used by the company; eventually they sent their resignation, which was refused. The Weekly quotes Zeng Qin, the head of Xian’s Buddhist Association, who said that he had ‘involuntarily’ been selected as head of the foundation. With his colleagues, he had been forced to sign a contract with the enterprise, but the Buddhist monks have now put their foot down and refused to extend their contract. They consider that the project had brought ill-fame to the temple. The monks also refused to take over the project, knowing too well about the debts.

The latest information about the ‘Chinese Buddhist venture’ must be rather worrying for the Lumbini project which is in the process of being taken over by some wealthy and well-connected Chinese businessmen.

Two years back, *The Economist* mentioned “a bizarre project in Nepal, at Buddha’s birthplace: a Chinese development proposal causes disbelief”.

The weekly magazine pointed out that after stepping down as Prime Minister in 2009, Prachanda, the Nepali Maoist leader regularly met representatives of the ‘Asia Pacific Exchange and Co-operation Foundation’, particularly its head, one Xiao Wunan based in Hong Kong with a doubtful past and many links in the Party.

The Chinese media had reported earlier that the Hong-Kong-based foundation had signed an agreement with UNIDO, the UN’s industrial-development organisation, to invest \$3 billion in Lumbini, the birthplace of the Buddha. It wanted to set up a ‘Mecca for Buddhists’ with train links, an international airport, hotels and a Buddhist university.

Many in Delhi were nervous, as Lumbini is located a few kilometers from the Indian border and India can certainly not remain silent if huge infrastructure development is planned by China at her doorstep.

What about the 'famous' Nalanda University of Amartya Sen? The only foreign donor seems to be the Chinese government which pledged 1 million US dollars for the project. Is it not disturbing? The Chinese may be keen to 'invest' in spiritual ventures, but does it make the projects, like the wine or the Buddha's relics genuine?

Chinese are good at many things (infrastructure, along their expansive 'borders' for example), but running Buddhist institutions is not their forte; it is understandable for people who do not believe in religion.

Let us hope that Famen temple's failure will, for some time, cool the Chinese investors' fervour; the longer it does, the better for Nepal and India.