

## Research Article

# Role of Lumbini Buddhist University in Nepal-China Relations

*Tara Lal Shrestha*

PhD, Lecturer, Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University, Kirtipur, Kathmandu, Nepal.

## I N F O

**Email Id:**

taralal.shrestha@cden.tu.edu.np

**Orcid Id:**

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4874-3001>

**How to cite this article:**

Shrestha TL. Role of Lumbini Buddhist University in Nepal-China Relations. *J Adv Res Eng & Edu* 2023; 8(1): 19-23.

Date of Submission: 2023-03-25

Date of Acceptance: 2023-04-28

## A B S T R A C T

Buddha is an international brand. Nepal-China relations continued from ancient times through cultural exchange related to Buddhism. Buddhist philosophy, literature, culture are attracting the international community. This paper attempts to explore how Lumbini Buddhist University could play a role to connect the international community with reference to Nepal-China relations. It explores the situation of the academic exchange programs between Nepal and China through LBU. This research- in the era when capitalism is killing our root values- also attempts to present some ways to sustain the spiritual essence related to Buddhism via LBU.

**Keywords:** Buddha Today, Buddhist Philosophy, Academic Exchange, Cordial Relation, Spiritual Essence

## Introduction

### Buddha & Lumbini: A Brand for All

Buddha is a brand for the global community and so is Lumbini, the birthplace of Gautam Buddha. Buddhism, beyond a religious sect, has attracted intellectuals from multiple domains. Lumbini has been established as one of the most important sacred symbols among pilgrimages of the Buddha circuit. This research attempts to explore the role of Lumbini Buddhist University (LBU) in Nepal-China relations. LBU is creating an academic brand, a center of Buddhist philosophy, literature, culture. Though late to utilize this brand in academia to expand Nepal's international relations, however, for the first time in the history it was proposed to establish a Buddhist University in Lumbini in the programme, the First World Buddhist Summit held in Lumbini from 30<sup>th</sup> November to 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1998 in order to impart Buddhist philosophy, literature, culture. In the words of Nirmal Man Tuladhar, "Eventually Lumbini Buddhist University was established on 29<sup>th</sup> November 2004 in one of the four holy sights of Buddhism, in Lumbini (the birthplace of Buddha).<sup>1</sup> The next three holy sites of Buddhism are Bodhagaya (the site of

enlightenment), Sarnath (where Buddha delivered the first sermon), Kushinagar (where Buddha reached parinirvana (passed away)). Nepal-China relations, as ancient documents including Swoymabhu Purana and others show, continued from ancient times and Buddhism is the key to continuing Nepal's cultural relation with China.<sup>1,2</sup> Apart from traditional religious practices, academia related to Buddhism today is one of the most valuable ways for establishing and expanding cordial relationships among the places and people. This paper, based on the grey qualitative research method, attempts to explore how LBU was established facing various hindrances and played the role to sustain harmonious Nepal-China relations. It further tries to show the role of academic exchange programs to connect Nepal to the international community, especially China. Finally, it attempts to present some way forward to keep a Buddhist spiritual essence in academia via LBU.

### Methodology

In this qualitative research, grey literature has been used for collecting information on LBU and its associations for review syntheses incorporating four different searching strategies: grey literature databases, customized search

engines, targeted website sources, consultation with contact experts, so the risk of omitting relevant sources could be minimized. At first, the websites of LBU were accessed as desk review along with applying customized Google search engines. At the same time, grey literature databases of LBU were explored in consultation with contact experts of LBU. Some of the experts outside LBU were also consulted to support the argument. Grey literature documents hardly have abstracts; so, contents and other key summaries including forewords and editorials, whatever are available were screened and used as supplementary sources. Academic authorized journals published by LBU that provide a forum for the in-depth analysis of Buddhism and individual experiences were assessed via their table of contents, executive summaries, editorials, prefaces, or whatever is available in brief. The prioritized selected research articles were studied and used insights as far as practicable. In total nine journals published by LBU, along with annual reports, from 2016 to 2022 were accessed, which have come into existence in collaboration with foreign universities and scholars across the globe. Apart from reports and MoUs of LBU, experts' views were also collected from personal interviews.

## Results and Discussions

### LBU Brand in Academia

Nepal is a country of unique identity in the world having the sacred birthplace of the Shakyamuni Buddha and two other historical Buddhas- Kanakamuni and Krakuchchanda. "Nepal has", as N.B. Gurung et al. writes, "rich enough with the treasure of their noble teachings about Buddhism, Buddhist culture and practices of Theravada, Mahayana, Vajrayana. Lumbini Buddhist University has been established to propagate these valuable treasures as a center of higher academic teachings and research in Buddhism as well as applied subjects".<sup>4</sup> Established in the birthplace of Gautam Buddha, Lumbini Buddhist University website notes, "an autonomous and public institution of higher learning committed with the mission to educate the people of Nepal and enrich the global learning community through the application of core Buddhist values and to promote the World Peace".<sup>5</sup> Buddha and Buddhism and Lumbini are the sacred brands established in international arena.<sup>6</sup> Millions of people visit sacred Buddhist sites every year. One of them is Lumbini in Nepal, the birthplace of Buddha. LBU in this sense automatically exists as a sacred symbol of spiritual essence among the universities in Nepal today. "The concept of LBU", in the words of Hridaya Ratna Bajracharya, "was presented by the First World Buddhist Summit held in Lumbini from 30<sup>th</sup> November to 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1998 and issued a declaration proposing urgency of a Buddhist university in Lumbini".<sup>7</sup> The proposal was honored by the national and international communities. Lumbini

Development Fund (LDF) initiated steps to implement the proposal. In the leadership of Tulashi Ram Baidhya, a draft plan was formulated and submitted to LDF. A lot of intellectuals and activists including civil society 'were involved' in implementing the proposal. Nepal Government permitted to establish LBU on June 17, 2004. The Second World Buddhist Summit held from 30<sup>th</sup> November to 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2004 endorsed the Nepal Government's permission.<sup>8</sup>

As Buddha is an established brand in the world, one could believe that LBU is a brand of Buddhist philosophy, literature, culture. But for a long time, as various grey literatures show, LBU was confined within Brikutimandap, Kathmandu in two small rooms. The academic policy and strategy for developing Lumbini a hub of a Buddhist culture-friendly environment through the establishment of the international Buddhist University was noteworthy but remained hard to actualize for some time. The human resource and infrastructure development were planned to develop to meet international standards but resources were meager. According to Basanta Maharjan, other experts as well often note this reality, "LBU started the program from PhD, a top-down approach".<sup>9</sup> Likewise it also applied the similar teaching and learning pedagogy as of Tribhuvan University. TU was running the Central Department of Buddhist Studies in the Central Campus, Kirtipur. Before it, the Central Department of Culture, TU was the center to study Buddhist texts to some extent. In the beginning, it was hard to establish LBU in Lumbini in the lack of infrastructure, human resources, students. Most of the scholars were Kathmandu-centric. LBU used various strategies to enroll students for Ph.D. enrollment from various disciplines and gradually launched Masters' and Bachelors' level programs. After facing hard times in its existence, LBU has developed infrastructures in Lumbini and running different programs.

### Expanding the Brand

One of the key goals of LBU was to establish it from its inception as an international level of academia. LBU was envisioned to attract international scholars and students to Lumbini and give opportunities for exposure to native students via exchange programs. As Annual Report (14<sup>th</sup>) documents state, "Students and faculties are trained with academic exchange programs with international academic environment in the universities of the globe".<sup>10</sup> Research activities have been planned to carry out in collaboration with other universities of different countries.<sup>10</sup> The promotional policy and strategy of LBU clearly writes, "Lumbini is the origin place of Buddhist philosophy and the birthplace of Buddha. Through LBU, Buddhist philosophy and its archeological treasures are exposed to the global community with international seminars, conferences,

talks, spiritual rituals, preaching".<sup>10</sup> LBU has also adopted international relations promotional policy and strategy.<sup>10</sup> It has a separate international relations promotional program launched with an aim to extend cordial relations with universities across the globe through academic exchange programs and attract donor agencies as well. The visiting professors, MoU with other universities and institutions, researchers across the globe visit LBU and play a role to acclimatize in Lumbini. The visiting professors from various countries, like Srilanka, The Netherlands, Taiwan (though the Nepal government still did not recognize it as a independent country) Korea, India, USA have contributed to LBU PhD and Masters' level programs. The high-level delegates and leaders of various countries visit LBU time and again.<sup>11</sup>

It is claimed that LBU founding actors internalizing the teachings of Buddha have tried to inculcate world peace and prosperity in harmony through its pedagogy and research in the domains of Buddhist philosophy, literature, culture. They have tried to promote the academic culture towards spiritual and psychological essence with human virtues in the era when obsession with material development looks instilled in human DNA. A further claim is that LBU consists of three faculties among which the Faculty of Buddhist Studies has been prominent from the beginning:

Being one of the fast-growing multi-facet academic disciplines, it has attracted and attached the global communities touching every aspect of human and non-human ecological lives. Beyond traditional monastic education systems and centers, this course has been introduced in universities within and outside the country. It suits to expand in the universities across the globe, which are taught not only at the central campus of LBU but also in its six affiliated educational institutions in Nepal and in SIBA, Sri Lanka. It aims to impart knowledge of Buddhist education based on Pali, Sanskrit, Tibetan, Chinese from Lumbini with physical as well as online classes. Anyone from around the globe can join LBU for learning or researching Buddhist philosophy, literature, education, culture, applied subjects and gain peace and harmony with intellectual achievement.<sup>12</sup>

The Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences of LBU also offers learners across the globe an opportunity in the field of international relations and peace, law, rural development, travel and tourism at the central campus, Lumbini and other parts of the country. The Buddhist Jurisprudence in Law program is the most unique feature of its curricula along with the Master of Arts in Archeology and Buddhist Sites and Museology and Buddhist Archives. This faculty uniquely integrates various knowledge and Buddhist values (love, compassion, renunciation, peace) in its curricula so that learners and researchers could develop sensitivity to ethical, aesthetic, politico-cultural issues in the current context.

School of Development Studies and Applied Sciences of LBU aims to practically connect and contextualize the teaching of Buddha with the contemporary issues and development needs by offering three master level programs in Agroforestry, Development Studies, Environment Studies.<sup>13</sup> Its vision is creating a virtuous society having sustainable livelihood through environmentally friendly, economically vibrant, ethically governed systems through sustainable development and environmental management skilled manpower production based on the Buddhist philosophy as elaborated in the four noble truths pertinent to the suffering (existence, causes, ending, remedies) and the noble eight-folded path of righteousness of view, thought, speech, conduct, livelihood, effort, mindfulness & concentration.

### **Role of LBU in Nepal-China Relation**

Various grey literatures related to LBU show Nepal-China relation via academic exchanges is growing along with regular visits and exchanges of academic programs and collaborations between the two countries. Since its inception, scholars and dignitaries across the globe are visiting LBU. China is one of the leading countries to support LBU in terms of academic exchanges and collaboration. The memorandum of visits of LBU shows frequent visits and engagement of scholars and dignitaries from China.

The first journal 'Lumbini Prabha' was published in May 2016 on the auspicious occasion of Buddha Purnima. Since then, academic collaboration between Nepal and China persists without obstruction. For instance, the International Journal of Diversity in Asian Natural Philosophy (vol. 1 December 2018) published by LBU in collaboration with Beijing Normal University, Beijing, China includes 17 research articles in which one of the editors was a professor from China in the editorial board. Moreover, 11 articles out of 17 were contributed by the foreign authors, especially from China. LUB played a vital role in organizing International Seminar on Diversity of Asian Natural Philosophy in collaboration with Beijing Normal University at LBU from 15th-19th November, 2018. LBU published a seminar volume on the occasion of the 14<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Day of LBU. According to Manik Ratna Shakya, the Asian continent is a fertile land for the flourishing of a wide range of philosophical systems, the papers presented in the seminar cover ancient theories, modern adaptation, diverse disciplines of Asian philosophy and bring together scholars from home and abroad to share their knowledge, experiences, expertise in the field of Buddhism, Hinduism, Yoga, Jainism, Confucianism, Taoism and many other practices that exist in the Asian region.<sup>14</sup> Altogether 9 volumes of journals of LBU have been published by the year 2022 and the contribution and collaboration from Chinese scholars and institutions were found noteworthy. Some significant support from the individual level was also remarkable.

A MoU shows LBU had made an agreement on books donation with Harbin Publication House that recognizes that Buddhism originated from Lumbini and entered China during Han Dynasty.<sup>15</sup> It is well known that the Buddhist literature and Monastic practices learned by great ancestors originated in this Holy Land of Lumbini and near about regions. Historically Fa Xian visited the land of the Buddha during the early 5<sup>th</sup> century and Xuan Zang in the 7<sup>th</sup> century to acquire Buddhist scriptures and literature from the land of the Buddha, since that time, Buddhism has spread in China. Now China has the largest number of Buddhist followers. China has preserved much of Buddhist literature and Monastic practices. With this recognition, Harbin donated books to LBU as gratitude to Buddha and the people of this land for academic discourses on Buddhist literature, traditions, Monastic practices worth about three million Nepali rupees on January 21, 2021.<sup>16</sup> The Chairman of Harbin Publication House Luo Yongxi when visiting LBU found a lack of some valuable books on Chinese Buddhism and donated the related books on the Jain Chhan Buddhism series and also added some more books in English worth six hundred thousand Nepali rupees. Kumar Khadaka said, "These books are only in LBU library in Nepal".<sup>16</sup> LBU records show, Yongxi later joined LBU in a Master's program and completed his study on Buddhist Studies.

LBU has given special focus to Nepal-China relations via semi-academic courses as well. One of the examples is that LBU has been also running Chinese language courses of three credit hours, 48 contact hours to develop advanced skills in standard Mandarin Chinese language. This course focuses on consolidating linguistic knowledge and development of speaking, listening, reading, writing skills. This course has been designed to practically help in exchange programs and knowledge sharing between Nepal and China among professors and students. Professionals also could get benefit from Chinese language courses. Chinese scholars and students as well as professionals are also learning the Nepali language informally. The cultural exchanges between Nepal and China persist since time immemorial. Naresh Shakya has published Newah Inner Art of Licchavi Dynasty in Chinese Cave Paintings of Dunhuang, the province of Gansu in the Inner Mongolian region of China. In his words, the cave monasteries developed in this area were due to the richness of the silk route and many travelers paid homage to these Buddhist cave monasteries on their trade missions and Newar artists contributed their artistic skills in these Buddhist caves.<sup>17</sup> Young scholars are engaged in Buddhist philosophy, literature, culture. Rajan and Bimala are engaged in 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup>-century cultural exchange history between Nepal and China.

Monika Kandel, the topper of the central campus, has planned to go to China for academic exchange. Ramila Gautam doing Master's in China and doing research on

Chinese language teaching and learning based in LBU. She is working in South Asia TV as well. There are some other students who have been playing the role to develop cordial relationships between Nepal and China through academic exchange programs, research, language learning teaching activities. After someone takes a degree from LBU, they can get an equivalent. International students can get visas but the visa fee is high. The visa has to be renewed each year, annually.

LBU and Shanghai University of Political Science and Law, China have agreed to cooperate with regard to international academic programs based on the principle of reciprocity including exchange of researchers, scholars, students, academic resources and materials between the two universities. The MoU has been signed agreeing for faculty exchange; students exchange between universities in the short or long term and degree and non-degree programs, credit transfer.<sup>18</sup> The joint research in the field of mutual academic interests is going on by organizing joint academic conferences, workshops/ seminars. MoUs show LBU is developing teaching resources and curriculum materials and courses sharing academic credit mutual recognition.<sup>11</sup> Similar agreements with other renowned Chinese universities (Beijing University, Quechan University, Chinas University) have been signed and effective .<sup>11</sup>

Finally, some translation projects as a part of academic exchanges and knowledge sharing about Buddhist philosophy, literature, culture were going on within LBU. Great Than Era's Western Countries Visits was being translated from Chinese into Nepali. Wang Chang's travelogue as well was translated. "Nepali scholars are" as Kumar Khadaka writes, "working on Chinese history, society, culture related to Buddhism".<sup>16</sup> Chinese scholars are more engaged in Nepali Buddhist philosophy, literature, culture. There are instances, as Basant Maharjan claims, that Buddhism of the Himalayas in Nepal from Tibet still exists that does not exist now in Tibet.<sup>6</sup> Long ago Nepal, especially the Kathmandu Valley, was a center of Buddhist scholars and practitioners. The Buddhist scholars of Kathmandu and across the world have high solidarity with LBU.

## Conclusions and Findings

Buddha is an international brand. LBU has a lot of potential despite the fact that there are hindrances due to unstable Nepali politics. China being a huge economically prosperous neighboring country is an opportunity for Nepal to the promotion of Buddhist philosophy, literature, culture. At the same time, LBU is a unique university established to preserve and extend Buddhist spiritual essence. Unlike other universities, LBU is not just academia to provide information and skills to compete in the capitalist markets. It is the university to offer spiritual essence, information, practice, realization about Buddhist philosophy, literature,

culture. Mechanical growth alone does not work in LBU. The everyday habits and lifestyles of the faculties, staffs, students matter a lot. While exchanging programs and collaborating with China and other countries, the essence of Buddhist spiritual essence has to be taken into consideration. Incorporating more market-oriented papers and emphasizing more mechanical teaching-learning practices may kill the essence of deep ecological cum spiritual essence of Buddhism. The dominance of mechanical human resources unattached to Buddhist spiritual essence in their practical lifestyle may mock the core values of the university. The extra-curricular activities also have to reflect the essence of Buddhist spiritual essence. To actualize the brand value of Buddha, the actors and stakeholders of LBU have to internalize the spiritual essence of Buddhist philosophy, literature, culture in their practical life, at least for their ethical strength. And so rather than branding the Buddha, saving established Buddhist spiritual essence in practice today is enough.

## References

1. Tuladhar, Nirmal Man. Master Plan for Centre for International Affairs (CIA) of Lumbini Buddhist University (LBU). *Lumbini Prabha*. 2016;1: pp. 19-23.
2. Bajracharya RM. Samkshipta Swayambhu Purana. Kathmandu, Nepal. 2004.
3. Shakyas HR, Shree Swayambhu Maha Chaitya. Swayambhu Bikash Mandal, 1978.
4. Gurung, NB. Editorial, *Lumbini Prabha*. 2022 May 16;7.
5. Homepage. Lumbini Buddhist University. [Online]. Available: <https://lbu.edu.np/>.
6. Faculty of Buddhist Studies. Lumbini Buddhist University. [Online]. Available: <https://lbu.edu.np/faculty-of-buddhist-studies/>.
7. Bajracharya RM. Hridaya Ratna. Message from the VC. *Lumbini Prabha*. 2022 May; 7.
8. Annual Report 14<sup>th</sup>. Lumbini Buddhist University. 2022 June 24. [Online]. Available: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/10fmxXFlzv9gYRU407lhxNueghxsJPgXE/view>.
9. Maharjan, Basant. Personal Interview. Kirtipur, Kathmandu. April 15, 2023.
10. Annual Report 14<sup>th</sup>. Lumbini Buddhist University. 2022 June 24: pp. 15-20. [Online]. Available : <https://drive.google.com/file/d/10fmxXFlzv9gYRU407lhxNueghxsJPgXE/view>.
11. Khadaka, Kumar. Personal Interview. March 15, 2023 Lumbini Buddhist University. Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. [Online]. Available: <https://lbu.edu.np/about-fhss/>
12. Lumbini Buddhist University. School of Development Studies. [Online]. Available: <https://lbu.edu.np/school-of-development-studies/>
13. Shakyas. Manik Ratna. Preface. LBU in collaboration with Beijing Normal University. *International Journal of Diversity in Asian Natural Philosophy*. 2008 Dec;1.
14. Agreement on Books Donation between Harbin Publication House and Lumbini Buddhist University, LBU, January 21, 2021.
15. Kumar Khandak. An Analysis on Contribution of People's Daily to Promote Lumbini in China. *Lumbini Prabha*. 2022 May 16;7.
16. Shakyas Naresh. Newah Buddhist Art of Influence in Mongolia. *Lumbini Prabha*. 2022 May 16;7: pp. 129-144.
17. MoU. LBU and Shanghai University of Political Science and Law, China on Cooperation and Academic Exchange, signed in December 2, 2022.