

CHINA'S TRANSNATIONAL REPRESSION AGAINST TIBETANS IN THE DIASPORA

Congressional testimony submitted by Tenzin Dorjee on March 28, 2023

Thank you Chair Smith, Co-chair Merkley, and distinguished members of the Commission. It is an honor to testify today on China's transnational repression against Tibetans in the diaspora.

Oppression produces exile. All oppressed nations have a blessing called diaspora, where stateless exiles are able to enjoy freedom of expression, religion, assembly, and association that they are denied back home. Once upon a time, Tibetans in the diaspora enjoyed these freedoms too.

But in the last decade, many of these freedoms have succumbed to the long arm of the Chinese government. From Nepal and India to Sweden and Switzerland, and now in Canada and the United States, formal and informal agents of the Chinese government are using some of the oldest tactics of manipulation and some of the newest technologies of repression to bully, threaten, harass, and intimidate Tibetans into silence.

To fully grasp why and how China's apparatus of transnational repression targets Tibetans, we must understand its origins. China has historically viewed the Tibetan diaspora as a leading threat to its global reputation. In the nineties, the international Tibet movement was quite successful at exposing China's human rights violations and generating bad PR for the regime. This was undermining Beijing's foreign policy objectives.

It was during this period that the Chinese government launched a new campaign to clean up its global image. But instead of improving its human rights record at home, Beijing decided to go after the Tibet movement abroad.

China proceeded to develop a sophisticated set of tools, tactics, and strategies to silence not only Tibetans but all pro-Tibet voices. This multi-year project to dislodge Tibet from the global agenda and erase it from public consciousness targets students, activists, artists, academics, former political prisoners, and elite institutions. Some of my friends and colleagues in Canada and the United States have gone through traumatizing experiences as a result of being targeted either directly by Beijing or by online mobs of Chinese nationalists, who are often acting at the behest of the Chinese consulates.

One strategy that Beijing employs with devastating effectiveness is the relationship mapping that links individuals in the diaspora to their families in Tibet. This mapping of family connections allows Chinese authorities to use the fate of relatives back home as a pawn to blackmail exile Tibetans into silence.

Two years ago, I interviewed a Tibetan American in New York who had visited Tibet to see her aging parents. She told me how toward the end of her trip, her minders from the United Front explicitly told her that her political behavior going forward would determine not only her future chances of getting a visa, but also the safety and well-being of her family members in Tibet.

Her parents are basically the hostage, and her silence in exile is the ransom — a ransom she must pay everyday by refraining from actions, online or offline, that may be perceived as critical of China. Agents of the United Front or the Chinese consulate unfailingly communicate this message to every Tibetan American who visits Tibet or applies for a visa.

Most of the time, though, Tibetan Americans are denied a visa simply because of their racial identity. Tibetan Americans applying for a China visa are generally put through a tortuous process of ethnic discrimination, individual humiliation, and eventual rejection — but not before their data is harvested by the consulate. They are made to provide the names, locations, occupations, and other biographical details of their relatives in Tibet. Each piece of information surrendered to the consulate is a data point that Beijing uses to map the Tibetan diaspora.

This transnational family mapping is designed to manufacture a sense of guilt in the conscience of the exile, making her feel that her political participation will endanger her family in Tibet. The ultimate goal of this “coercion by proxy” is the political deactivation of the exile.

Another common Chinese strategy is the weaponization of funding to depoliticize institutions and demobilize communities. This mechanism is visible in the case of Baimadajie, the self-identified Tibetan NYPD officer who was spying for the Chinese government. Exploiting the power of his NYPD uniform, he was trying to manipulate the leaders of the New York Tibetan community.

He was saying to them: *“You guys are paying a monthly mortgage of nearly 50,000 dollars for your community center. I have some very wealthy Chinese friends who can help subsidize your mortgage. But you should stop flying the Tibetan flag at your events, and you should ban any discussion of political issues at this venue.”*

By dangling the promise of funding before the community leaders, Baimadajie was trying to depoliticize and co-opt one of the most important Tibetan-owned spaces in the diaspora.

Beyond targeting Tibetan communities, Beijing has used its control over access and funding to shape political discourse on university campuses, cultural institutions, academic forums, and even influence the research agenda of budding scholars and aspiring Sinologists. Beijing's apologists happily exploit the openness of our democratic systems to defend the world's largest dictatorship.

Nevertheless, I believe there are ways to fight this. The US, and the West in general, has conceded so much ground to China in the last three decades and moved the equilibrium so far in Beijing's favor. It is time to reset the diplomatic baseline and go back to first principles of historical truth and legal rights. It is time to liberate ourselves from the delusion that sweeping human rights under the rug and throwing Tibetans and Uyghurs to the wolves would somehow make China more likely to cooperate on issues of common interest and geopolitical importance.

The best way to counter China's transnational repression is to proactively support the Tibetan, Uyghur, and Hong Kong people's transnational, decolonial advocacy for human rights and self-determination, and strengthen the Chinese people's longstanding struggle for democracy and freedom.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1: I request Congress and the Administration to set up a hotline — if possible, even an office dedicated to this issue — where people can report incidents of transnational repression by Beijing, and make relevant information and resources available in Tibetan, Uyghur and other languages so that affected communities will find it easy to report incidents, seek protection, and pursue justice. These measures would not only help protect vulnerable communities but also deter CCP agents from engaging in some of their more blatant forms of harassment and intimidation.

2: I request Congress to look into the role and responsibility of universities in the United States to protect the freedom of students who are targeted or at risk of being targeted by Beijing's apparatus of transnational repression. So far, public as well as private universities have done a drastically inadequate job of protecting their Chinese, Uyghur,

Hong Kong or Tibetan students from harassment, intimidation or espionage activities instigated by the Chinese consulates or other PRC agencies.

3: I request Congress to start mentally and discursively linking the issues of Tibet, Hong Kong, and Xinjiang as part of an overarching colonial problem that has persisted into the 21st century. The CCP lacks the legitimacy — historical or democratic — to rule these peoples and we should not let that foundational fact get lost in the complex discussions of the regime's current crimes against humanity. If Congress can lead with bold language to describe the colonial relationship that is at the root of China's genocidal policies and crimes against humanity in Tibet, Xinjiang and Hong Kong and consistently deny Beijing the legitimacy to rule these peoples, others including the Administration will follow suit when the Overton window for emancipation widens.