

TESTIMONY OF TENZIN DORJEE, TIBET ACTION INSTITUTE, BEFORE THE
CONGRESSIONAL EXECUTIVE COMMISSION ON CHINA

September 30, 2020

Thank you Chairman McGovern, Co-chair Mr. Rubio, and members of the Commission for allowing me to testify on behalf of the Tibetan people. Over the course of seven decades, the Chinese government has waged an unrelenting campaign of violence and coercion aimed at eradicating the Tibetan people's faith, identity, and way of life.

As China becomes a global power, the threat it poses to freedom and human rights goes far beyond Tibet. Beijing's surveillance and influence operations are undermining the liberty and security of those living in America.

China uses a sophisticated set of tools, tactics, and strategies to conduct what I'd call *repression without borders*. One strategy is the weaponization of access — access to markets, to family, to funding. By carefully controlling access, China buys the silence of American individuals and corporations, even Hollywood and the NBA.

Of special relevance to Tibetans is China's "visa as bait" strategy. The Chinese government weaponizes access to family in order to coerce exile Tibetans into silence and political impotence. They do this through a visa policy that is blatantly racist against Tibetans.

Let's say you are a Tibetan American applying for a visa at the Chinese Consulate. There's a main window where everyone checks in, but you can't use that window because you're Tibetan. You're taken to a separate area where a liaison officer interviews you. You have to write a personal statement in which you narrate your life history, name all the groups you've ever joined, and state whether you've ever participated in a protest. Each piece of information is a data point that the Consulate might use against you later.

Most importantly, you have to provide the names and IDs of your relatives in Tibet. So the Chinese government knows who you are, and who your relatives are. Now the fate of your relatives is somehow your responsibility. They're the hostage; you're the target.

Then the Consulate makes you wait... sometimes for up to a year. Eventually, the liaison officer calls you in for a longer interview. He'll ask you again: "Have you ever participated in pro-Tibet activities?" When you say no, he shows you a photo — it's a photo of you attending a teaching by His Holiness the Dalai Lama. That settles it. Beijing has your data, and you have no visa.

In one disturbing case, the liaison officer knew things he had no business knowing. He knew that the Tibetan visa applicant had a dog, he knew what breed the dog was, he even knew the dog's name. His message was clear: "we are watching you".

This insidious campaign to control exile Tibetans, in order to divide the community and kill the movement, is bolstered by the rise of WeChat. While ordinary apps are platforms for expression and communication, WeChat is the ultimate platform of censorship and state surveillance. It facilitates the transnational repression that Beijing employs to silence overseas dissidents and activists.

The same regime that threatens the lives of Tibetans, Uyghurs and Hong Kong citizens on the other side of the world, is threatening the rights of American citizens here. I urge Congress to ensure that Chinese Consulates abolish their racist visa policies and stop the surveillance and intimidation of American citizens.

Since 2009, over 166 Tibetans have self-immolated to protest Chinese rule. Today, Tibetans in Tibet are using the tiny amount of space they have to wage small but important campaigns to defend their language or to protect the environment. My colleagues have documented 71 such incidents between 2015 and 2019.

Tibetans fight for human rights, the freedom to use their language, the freedom to worship freely. These rights are tied together by a deeper yearning for political freedom. Beijing wants to depoliticize the Tibet issue. I urge you to re-politicize it.

Tibetan freedom is a truly bipartisan cause that brings Democrats and Republicans together. I humbly ask you now to lend your moral and political authority to initiate a multilateral and coordinated effort to support Tibet's right to self-determination. One concrete action Congress can take is to recognize Tibet's historical status as an independent nation and its current status as an occupied territory. That itself will change facts on the ground. Language has the power of action, and Congress has the power to set precedents.

After all these years, the Chinese government has lost the battle for the hearts and minds of the Tibetan people. And its insecurity is making it increasingly bellicose. But the Tibetan people continue to resist with courage and patience. They know that freedom struggles take time; they also know that freedom often comes when it's least expected. Tibetans have never given up on their struggle for freedom. Neither should we.

Thank you.
