



INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET

Tibetan language rights advocate Tashi Wangchuk sentenced to five years in prison

<https://www.savetibet.org/tibetan-language-rights-advocate-tashi-wangchuk-sentenced-to-five-years-in-prison/>

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Tibetan language rights advocate Tashi Wangchuk was sentenced to five years in prison today, accused of 'separatism' after appearing in a New York Times video speaking of the importance of protecting Tibetans' 'mother tongue'.

The verdict, handed down by a court in Yushu, Qinghai, today (May 22) signals China's harsh and extreme approach to Tibetan culture and the criminalization of moderate, peaceful efforts within Chinese law to protect the use of Tibetan language.

Matteo Mecacci, President of the International Campaign for Tibet, said: "This could not be a clearer and more absurd indication of the extremist position of the current Chinese leadership, in which Tashi Wangchuk was condemned ultimately for seeking to speak his own language, and expressing his concern about a future when Tibetan children might not be able to do so. In this case, minority rights outlined in China's Constitution were on trial, and the outcome reflects the emptiness of China's claims to protect Tibetan language and culture."

Tashi Wangchuk, 33, was arrested in early 2016, two months after he was featured in a New York Times video and article about Tibetan language education. He stood trial in January, and no verdict was returned until this morning, when his lawyer Liang Xiaojun announced the five-year sentence in a microblog. In a separate Tweet today, Liang Xiaojun asserted Tashi Wangchuk's innocence "in the spirit of the law", and stated that he would not be speaking to foreign journalists about it.

In the first known instance of an international news story being used in a criminal prosecution against a Tibetan, the New York Times video was used in court as evidence – despite Tashi Wangchuk's clear disavowals of separatism, and his stated intention to use the Chinese law to protect the Tibetan language.¹ Tashi Wangchuk and his lawyer pleaded not guilty. In China, prison terms begin on the date of detention, meaning that he will be due for release in early 2021.

Governments and Parliamentarians across the world have called for his immediate release, and in February, six UN human rights experts condemned the "criminalization of linguistic and cultural rights advocacy", and called for Tashi Wangchuk to be freed from prison.²

¹ See 'How China Used a Times Documentary as Evidence Against Its Subject', by Jonah M Kessel, January 10, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/10/insider/tashi-wangchuk-documentary-china.html>.

² International Campaign for Tibet report, February 21, 2018, 'ICT Welcomes UN experts call for immediate release of Tibetan language advocate Tashi Wangchuk' <https://www.savetibet.org/ict-welcomes-un-experts-call-for-immediate-release-of-tibetan-language-advocate-tashi-wangchuk/>

In the video, Tashi Wangchuk, who ran a shop in Yushu, spoke about his anxiety over the survival of Tibetan culture, linked to the erosion of the language. China's Constitution specifies the right of 'ethnic minorities' to speak their own language. Tashi Wangchuk and his lawyer denied charges of 'separatism', with his lawyer stating to the Associated Press that: "The prosecutors are ideologically too strong." (Associated Press, January 4, 2018).

Tashi Wangchuk is among a younger generation in Tibet who have prioritized protection of the Tibetan language, the bedrock of cultural and religious identity, framing their concerns in the context of Chinese law and official regulations. In the New York Times documentary, Tashi Wangchuk says: "I want to try to use the People's Republic of China's laws to solve the problem."

The verdict signals the dangers for Tibetans now in doing so. The criminalization of individuals and groups associated with protecting their language represents an escalated attack by the Chinese authorities on Tibetan cultural identity.

A police circular issued in February (2018) in the Tibet Autonomous Region described those involved in "protecting the 'mother tongue'" as "underworld forces" who were responsible for "instilling the masses with reactionary ideology." The circular, published by the Public Security Bureau, stated that the public should report on those individuals, and detailed in total 22 illegal activities the bureau wants the public to report, with a specific emphasis on the Dalai Lama in at least three of the points, and a warning about the "foreign hostile forces" loyal to him.³

This follows measures adopted in some other areas, such as Rebkong in Qinghai, where "protecting the mother tongue" was described by officials as an "illegal activity" – along with praying and lighting butter-lamps.⁴

Indicating the anguish that Tibetans feel about the erosion of the Tibetan language and the mainstreaming of Chinese, a number of self-immolators have, in their last words or statements, referred to the importance of protecting their language. As he lay dying following his self immolation in 2012, monk Ngawang Norphel said: "Every nationality needs freedom, language and tradition. Without language, what would be our nationality? [Should we then] call ourselves Chinese or Tibetan?"⁵

The use of the New York Times video as "evidence" reflects the Chinese leadership's increasingly histrionic approach to the international media, and its intensified efforts to control the narrative on Tibet, both inside and outside. In a summary of the case at Yushu People's Intermediate Court, Qinghai, the authorities stated that New York Times video had conveyed a "negative image" of the Chinese authorities to the world.⁶ Following the 19th Party Congress in October (2017), the CCP's

³ International Campaign for Tibet report, 'Chinese police circular urges public to report on loyalty to 'evil forces' of Dalai Lama', February 13, 2018, <https://www.savetibet.org/chinese-police-circular-urges-public-to-report-on-loyalty-to-evil-forces-of-dalai-lama/>

⁴ International Campaign for Tibet, 'Praying and lighting butter-lamps for Dalai Lama 'illegal': new regulations in Rebkong', April 14, 2015, <https://www.savetibet.org/praying-and-lighting-butter-lamps-for-dalai-lama-illegal-new-regulations-in-rebkong/>

⁵ Video posted on Youtube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6jW13KfVt8Y>

⁶ International Campaign for Tibet report, 'Trial of Tibetan language advocate today ends without known verdict', January 4, 2018, <https://www.savetibet.org/trial-of-tibetan-language-advocate-today-ends-without-known-verdict/>

language on “telling the Tibet story” has hardened, and a statement in the Chinese state media earlier this year reflected the new ideological position, saying that “propaganda thought and culture work are at a new historical starting point”.⁷

The verdict today on Tashi Wangchuk is also likely to be intended as a strong warning to other Tibetans who may think about speaking to journalists, even about an issue that is well within the parameters of the Constitution and Chinese law.

Matteo Mecacci said: “Prosecutors claim that the short and balanced video featuring Tashi Wangchuk’s conscientious efforts conveyed a ‘negative image’. But it is clear to all that it is the criminalisation of Tibetan language protection that conveys the negative image of China on the world stage.”

⁷ International Campaign for Tibet, May 9, 2018, ‘Access denied: China’s enforced isolation of Tibet and the case for reciprocity’, <https://www.savetibet.org/access-denied-chinas-enforced-isolation-of-tibet-and-the-case-for-reciprocity/>