



## INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET

### **Setting up astroturf “Tibetan Associations” in the West is China’s latest ploy to mislead the world on Tibet**

<http://www.savetibet.org/setting-up-astroturf-tibetan-associations-in-the-west-is-chinas-latest-plot-to-mislead-the-world-on-tibet/>

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In April 2018, when Sweden charged a Tibetan residing in that country with espionage for the Chinese government, the international community became aware of a new Chinese propaganda tactic meant to influence foreign countries from within and disrupt Tibetan communities in exile.

At that time, a Tibetan from Amdo living in Europe told ICT: “No Tibetan living in Europe or America will be surprised to hear about this sad situation. Everywhere that Tibetans are settled – Brussels, Britain, Zurich or New York—it is known that the Chinese authorities are working behind the scenes, making threats, spreading suspicion, and damaging the lives of families back in Tibet related to those in exile.”

One year later, the so-called “Tibetan Association of Canada” was established in Toronto. The nature of its inaugural event, featuring the obvious involvement of pro-Chinese Communist Party organizations and a small number of Tibetans, made it clear this association is a Chinese government front group. The Tibetans present, who formed a minority of the audience at the gala despite the sizeable Tibetan community in Toronto, were all individuals publicly known to be involved with China’s United Front Work Department (UFWD), as well as Chinese consulates in New York and Canada.

In a more telling sign, the Chinese national anthem was played at the event, and the head of this new entity praised the Chinese government for its “support and help” in changing Tibet and bringing “economic development and religious rights.” A Chinese Communist-inspired song that refers to Tibetans and Chinese as “members of one family” was sung, making the political agenda of the organization clear.

The Confederation of Toronto Chinese Canadian Organizations (CTCCO), which was involved with this event, is publicly known in Canada to be an entity that works closely with the Chinese government.

A report in a Chinese-language news website about the event claimed that Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Federal Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Minister Ahmed Hussen “sent a special congratulatory letter for the establishment of the Canada Tibetan Compatriots Association.” Copies of the messages were also shared on social media. However, the Canadian Prime Minister’s office has denied providing such a message.

Amreet Kaur, a spokesman for Prime Minister Trudeau told The Globe and Mail, “A letter of greeting was not sent by the Prime Minister to the Tibetan Association of Canada. Our office is looking into this matter further.”

Arif Virani, a Canadian member of Parliament and chair of its Parliamentary Friends of Tibet, tweeted: “Alarmed to learn that the ‘letter of support’ from Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to the newly created ‘Tibetan Association of Canada’ is a forgery. This matter has been reported to officials who are looking into this further.”

Six legitimate Tibetan Canadian organizations in Ontario, Quebec, Alberta and British Columbia released a joint letter on April 23, 2019 saying this China-supported association does not represent Tibetan Canadians.

“We are appalled that a fake letter of support from the Prime Minister of Canada is being used to mislead Canadians,” the joint letter said. “As well, it is misleading senior Canadian officials into thinking that this new group actually represents Tibetans in Canada.”

The Canada Tibet Committee said in a statement that the aim in setting up such an association “seems to be to divide the Tibetan community in Canada.”

Tsering Shakya, associate professor in contemporary Tibetan studies in the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, told the media he feels the Chinese action is meant to confront the increasing Tibetan Canadian voice.

“Articulate, social-media savvy younger Tibetan Canadians are participating in politics and getting high positions in society, so I think the Chinese government thinks, ‘Oh my God, we need an alternative voice on Tibet in Canada,’” Shakya said.

The “Tibetan Association of Canada” was registered on April 12, 2019, with its address being listed as 7181 Yonge Street Unit 110, Markham ON L3T 0C7. The address seems to be that of a vacant commercial unit.

In February 2019, another entity made news in the Tibetan community in New York when a float under the name of a hitherto unknown “Tibetan Association of North America” participated in the Chinese New Year parade in New York’s Chinatown. Some of the people seen in New York were also involved in the Canadian event. A subsequent statement by several legitimate Tibetan associations in the United States on March 20, 2019 rejected the claim of this association to represent them.

The Chinese front group in New York registered as a nonprofit on March 26, 2019, and its registered address (37-25 64th Street, Apt 2D, Woodside, New York, 11377) appears to be a residential address.

The Chinese Communist Party’s United Front Work Department is likely the organization behind these activities. A 2018 Hoover Institute report said that the main tasks and objectives of the United Front outside China are laid out in Article 31 of the CCP Guidelines on United Front Work, issued in 2015. The UFWD seeks to manipulate the diaspora community and encourage them to “contribute to the modernization and reunification of the motherland, advance the cause of opposing (Taiwanese) independence and promoting reunification, inherit and propagate China’s outstanding culture, and promote the friendship between the Chinese people and the peoples of the other countries in the world.” Interestingly, even though the issue of Tibet has nothing to do with “reunification,” the person who is identified as heading the Chinese-supported association said in his remarks that “the purpose and aim of our organization is to persist in reunification and oppose separation.”

China's UFWD has assigned Tibetan-speaking officials in the Chinese Embassy and consulates of other countries, including in Canada, whose sole task is to infiltrate the Tibetan community and create dissension.

In their statement in March 2019, the legitimate Tibetan associations in the United State said followers of a fringe group within Tibetan Buddhism were being used by the Chinese government. "Shugden followers such as Dechen Tulku frequently visit China without any issues as they have connections with the New York Chinese consulate," the statement says. Dechen Tulku is a leader of this group and participated in both the New York parade and the Toronto event.

Shugden followers have been attacking the Dalai Lama and siding with the Chinese government ever since the Dalai Lama described Shugden as having harmful aspects and urged Tibetan Buddhists who participate in his teachings to cease Shugden-related practice. In the past, Shugden groups have organized protests during the Dalai Lama's visits to different countries. In December 2015, Reuters reported on the Shugden group following an investigation in which it found that the Shugden group "has the backing of the Communist Party." Reuters said, "The group has emerged as an instrument in Beijing's long campaign to undermine support for the Dalai Lama" and that its members "attend government functions in China, and have contact with Chinese diplomats at Beijing's embassies and consulates."

### **China's long-term strategy on Tibet**

China has made great efforts to spread confusion about Tibet in the international community. In 2000, China outlined its "Tibet-related external propaganda and Tibetology work in the new era" which said, "In the struggle for public opinion on the issue of Tibet, our adversary is an organized international anti-China force. To counter this united force, we have to build an effective organization and network. The external propaganda struggle for public opinion should be treated as an important work, requiring relentless attention. We should launch a coordinated assault on different fronts."

The strategy said, "We should nurture several groups of hard-working people, who, as well as understanding our government policies and strategies, have good knowledge of Tibetology and foreign languages, and have expertise in external propaganda work. This is the need of our external propaganda." The setting up of these so-called Tibetan associations is very much part of this long-term strategy.

In the United States, China's attempt to influence operations within the country has gained much attention, and currently there is a bicameral and bipartisan legislation (S.480 and H.R.1811) in the Congress known as "Countering the Chinese Government and Communist Party's Political Influence Operations Act."

The bill says:

*"The Government of China and the Communist Party of China employ an array of government entities, friendship and exchange organizations, private entities and businesspeople, and government-funded foundations, think tanks, educational and other projects to carry out political influence operations, which is often referred to as united front work."*

*"These political influence operations violate national sovereignty, and as such, are fundamentally different from traditional efforts by states to shape international policy debates and improve their public image through public diplomacy and strategic communications campaigns."*

The legislation aims to ensure that “United States citizens, particularly Chinese Americans and members of the Chinese, Uyghur, and Tibetan diaspora who are who are often the victims and primary targets of malign political influence operations, are protected.”