



INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET

NYPD arrest reveals hidden dimensions of China's efforts against Tibetans abroad

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The arrest this week of a New York City police officer accused of spying for China exposed how the Chinese government not only harasses Tibetans abroad but also use visas to visit their homeland as leverage to control them.

In a Sept. 21, 2020 press release, the Department of Justice announced charges against Officer Baimadajie Angwang, a US citizen reported to be of Tibetan origin, for acting as an illegal agent of the People's Republic of China.

Angwang, who's also a US Army reservist, is accused of reporting to a Chinese government handler in the PRC consulate in New York as he surveilled the Tibetan community in the area and attempted to cultivate additional spies within it.

Long reach of Beijing

The detailed complaint against Angwang establishes the importance China attaches to infiltrating Tibetan communities around the world.

The pattern includes an incident in 2018 in Sweden in which a Tibetan man, Dorjee Gyantsan, was paid to provide personal information about fellow Tibetans. Gyantsan was found guilty by a Swedish court and sentenced to 22 months in prison.

Chinese authorities have also been found using similar tactics against Uyghurs in recent years, characterized by Ellen Halliday of The Atlantic as "a systematic effort by China to silence Uighurs overseas with brazen tactics of surveillance, blackmail, and intimidation."

Weaponizing access

In advocating for the Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act, the International Campaign for Tibet has cited concerns among Tibetan Americans that Chinese authorities discriminate against them on the basis of their ethnicity when they apply for visas. In a survey of hundreds of Tibetan Americans, ICT found that the vast majority of those who applied for a visa to visit the PRC were denied.

The Justice Department charges directly confirm the existence of that practice. Angwang's handler, identified only as "PRC Official-2," states that Angwang's Tibetan ethnicity prevents him from receiving a long-term visa and suggests that he change his ethnicity in Chinese documentation in order to receive one.

Angwang, for his part, argues that long-term visas could be used to make Tibetans more "enthusiastic," a reference to his efforts to recruit others to serve the PRC.

This indicates the weaponization of China's restrictions on access to Tibet, with exceptions to China's discriminatory policies granted to those who agree to monitor and undermine Tibetan communities in free countries.

The bipartisan Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act became law in 2018 after Congress unanimously approved it. As part of the act's implementation, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced this summer that the Chinese officials responsible for keeping US citizens out of Tibet are banned from entering the United States.

Anti-Dalai Lama efforts

The charges also refer to the Dorje Shugden controversy in Tibetan Buddhism, with Angwang recommending that the Chinese consulate extend a "helping hand" to Shugden groups so they will "feel the warmth of the motherland."

Links between the controversial Dorje Shugden groups and the PRC have been documented before, including in a landmark 2015 Reuters report that revealed that Shugden groups received clandestine support from the Chinese government for a campaign to undermine support for the Dalai Lama.

For a report that year, ICT obtained official Chinese documents calling Shugden "an important front in our struggle with the Dalai Clique" and actively promoting Shugden groups inside the PRC even as Shugden critics were imprisoned.

The Justice Department charges reveal that even after the Reuters story contributed to a reduction of anti-Dalai Lama activism by Shugden groups abroad, PRC officials and intelligence assets remain interested in the potential use of those groups.

Is Baimadajie Angwang of Tibetan origin?

As news of Angwang's arrest spread within the Tibetan American community in New York, people who have interacted with him have begun to speak about him.

The Justice Department affidavit says he is of Tibetan ethnicity. He has told some people that he is from Gyalrong¹, an area in northeastern Tibet, now in Sichuan province. The Tibetan Community of New York & New Jersey held a media briefing on Sept. 22 in which it said he was not a member of the community and that they did not know whether he was indeed a Tibetan.

The Tibetan community leaders said that he had approached them saying he was a Tibetan and wanted to help them with connections to law enforcement. However, after confronting him when they came to know of his ties with the Chinese consulate in New York, the community stopped all contacts with him.

People who knew him have told Voice of America's Tibetan service that he did not speak the Tibetan language and that his attitude appeared to be not that of an average Tibetan. [See our translation of VOA Tibetan's interviews with four people below.]

ICT quote

¹ Gyalrong is the term for the place in in the southern part of Ngaba [Aba] Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture in present-day Sichuan. The Gyalrong people are also found in Rongdak Dzong [Danba] in neighboring Kardze [Ganzi] Prefecture.

International Campaign for Tibet Vice President Bhuchung K. Tsering said:

“This latest development is just another indication of the Chinese government’s continued attempt to reach beyond its borders to stifle critical discussion of its repressive policies. For years, the US Congress has been looking into this aspect of the Chinese government’s strategy. The charges against the NYPD officer warrant that both the Trump Administration and Congress hold China accountable. There is perhaps no greater symbol of China’s double standards against the United States than its refusal to allow American citizens—especially Americans of Tibetan descent—into Tibet even as it spies on and intimidates Tibetans living here within US borders.”

VOA Tibetan interview with four Tibetans who interacted with Baimadajie Angwang

Following is a basic translation in English prepared by ICT from the Voice of America Tibetan report of Sept. 23 about Baimadajie Angwang. VOA based it on interviews with Tibetans in New York and New Jersey who have interacted with him, including people with whom he stayed for the first two years of his arrival in New York. VOA said it was withholding the names of the people interviewed at their requests.

Source A:

In 2005 I went to receive Baimadajie Angwang at LaGuardia airport as Sherap Kelsang, who said he was his uncle, asked me whether I could host him at my place. I agreed to rent a room in my place as my housemate had just moved to New Jersey then. We stayed together for two years.

When asked about his homeland, sometimes he said he was from Tsakho [another term for Gyalrong], or that he was from Gyalrong.

He said he came from a rich family, his father held a high position, and that he will be going to school in New York and the expenses will be borne by his parents. He seemed to have plenty of money. Whenever, he spoke to his parents, he would do so in Chinese. When speaking with his grandmother, he would use Gyalrong or some language that was not comprehensible.

I suggested one day that if he desired to stay back in the United States, it is better that he start his asylum process at the earliest as it would take a long time. He, however, replied then that he intended to return to his homeland, saying, “I will be able to get my father’s position easily”.

Although he said he was going to school, my suspicion was that he spent his time in Chinatown in New York city. One day, he told me that someone from Chinatown called Maya and her husband called Norbu were assisting in the preparation of documents for those seeking political asylum. I then thought he had surreptitiously started his process for asylum. He had not mentioned about this to me at all.

He spoke Chinese and a bit of English. However, he did not know Tibetan at all, whether central Tibetan, Kham or Amdo dialects. Although he said he knew Gyalrong language, it appeared that he knew only some words. His way of thinking, talking and mental disposition all appeared to be like that of a Chinese and so during the time we were housemates, we did not have a meeting of minds. He would stay in his room and I would be in mine.

After he moved from my place our contacts stopped; we did not even have a phone call thereafter. Occasionally, I would hear from others that he had joined the United States army and had been deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan. The other day, when I heard about his arrest, I was astounded.

Source B:

When I would visit Source A's place occasionally, I would meet Baimadajie Angwang. At that he was a young and stout man. Sometimes he said his homeland was Tsakho, at some other time, he said his homeland was Trochu [a county in Gyalrong region, Chinese: Heishui]. He did not know Tibetan and Amdo languages. At one time, he took out a thick wad of 100 dollar bills and placed them on the table, showing them off to me saying his family back home was rich. I thought then that this was a person who was fond of money. The other day, when I heard that he was arrested I thought he may have been bought off by the Chinese.

His Chinese is fluent like that of Chinese people. His way of thinking and approach were totally that of a Chinese. I thought then that although he said he was from Tsakho, he must be a Chinese youth brought up in Chengdu. It seems he had told certain people that his parents were from the Tibet Autonomous Region.

My assumption is that when he initially came to the United States from his homeland, he may not have had an assignment from the Chinese government. However, during his successive trips from the United States to his homeland, the Chinese intelligence, the United Front, and the National Security agency, may have used both coercion and incentives and turned him into Chinese government spy. It seems he had contact with the United Front section in the Chinese consulate in New York. May be he did not have any links with the Chinese government intelligence agency or national security agency. His wife, a Chinese, seem to be in contact with the leaders of the Dholgyal [the controversial Buddhist group also known as Shugden] group. It could be that the Chinese wife was someone who had an assignment from the Chinese government.

Source C:

After moving to New Jersey, occasionally I would go to meet my previous housemate in New York city. During those times, I met Baimadajie Angwang. I did not get any impression that he was a Tibetan. He did not understand any Tibetan language. My old housemates said that sometimes when this person returned home he would bring with him wads of American dollars, and the housemate wondered as to the source of that much money.

Source D:

Around two-three months back, I went to a Tibetan restaurant in New York city to attend a child's birthday party. At that time Baimadajie Angwang was also at the party. As people were talking to one another a girl asked him whether his homeland was in Amdo. He responded in Chinese, "No, I am a Khampa. My homeland is Kham." I thought then that he was among those people from Gyalrong who considered themselves Khampas. I had seen him 10 years earlier in the home of Source A. At that time he was constantly talking about how the Tibetans in exile had a poor livelihood, were economically poor, and that there were no capable individuals in the Tibetan exile society. He mentioned about how there was development in Tibet and economic progress and that there were many rich people in Tibet. Now meeting him after around 11 years later, his approach had not changed. I directly told him that his way of talking had not changed for the better even after many years. He responded in Chinese in front of the people gathered for the birthday party, "Your utterances crossed the limit". It seemed he would not truthfully say where his homeland really was and whether he was a Tibetan in reality.



International Campaign for Tibet (ICT) | 1825 Jefferson Place NW | Washington, DC 20036 | United States of America
Phone: (202) 785-1515 | Fax: (202) 785-4343 | info@savetibet.org

ICT Europe
Funenpark 1D | 1018 AK
Amsterdam, The Netherlands
Phone: +31 (0)20 3308265
Fax: +31 (0)20 3308266

icteurope@savetibet.nl
ICT Deutschland e.V.
Schönhauser Allee 163 | 10435
Berlin, Germany

Phone: +49 (0)30 27879086
Fax: +49 (0)30 27879087
info@savetibet.de

ICT Brussels
11, rue de la lumière | 1060

Brussels, Belgium
Phone: +32 (0)2 609 44 10

Fax: +32 (0)2 609 44 32
info@save-tibet.eu