



## INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET

### **Discriminated on return: Tibetans denied rights, opportunities when reentering Tibet**

<https://savetibet.org/discriminated-on-return-tibetans-denied-rights-opportunities-when-reentering-tibet>

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China's authorities in Tibet are withholding the "hukou" registration for as long as six years from Tibetans who have traveled abroad, leading to numerous problems in getting jobs or social services, according to recent reports.<sup>1</sup>

The hukou or household registration system is linked with social programs run by the Chinese government and is the basis for acquiring the Resident Identity Card (jūmínshēnfènzhèng, 居民身份证).

The RIC serves as the main personal identification document in China that is needed to identify oneself and to access government services. Tibetans who are not in possession of the RIC encounter serious restrictions in their daily lives.

According to sources, Tibetans returning from visits to the Indian subcontinent who had their hukou found that they have been blacklisted and deregistered from the system.

The policy is consistent with existing patterns of sanctioning Tibetans who have temporarily left Tibet, in most cases to attend teachings of the Dalai Lama in India, to attain a monastic education or to visit relatives.

The International Campaign for Tibet calls on the Chinese authorities to end its discrimination against and persecution of Tibetans who have traveled or lived abroad and return to Tibet.

### **Tougher rules since 2017**

Several Tibetans who fled into exile in India after the "reform and opening up" in the 1980s and later and have settled in Dharamsala, India have also found out that their names have been removed from the hukou system. A Tibetan who arrived in India in 2020 shared his observation that the provision of official identity documents became much tougher beginning in 2017 in northeastern Tibet.

A report in the Tibetan exile newspaper Tibet Times quoted a Tibetan from Lhasa, Tibet's capital, saying that many Tibetans who have returned from India and other places have been facing difficulties, including in travel, on account of the Chinese authorities not registering their hukou. The report further said that in August 2020, the authorities in Qinghai reviewed the hukou in all counties, canceling those of individuals who were found to have settled in other countries.

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<sup>1</sup> Tibet Times, March 6, 2013, 'Returning Tibetans facing problems for not getting registered in hukou', <https://tibettimes.net/2023/03/06/224489/>.

A similar probe and cancelation of hukou of Tibetans from Ngaba (Aba) Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan who went abroad was also reported.<sup>2</sup>

The overwhelming majority of Tibetans who return to Tibet are those who have left Tibet in the 1980s and later to avail themselves of formal school education and religious education in the institutions re-established in exile. Often, they came out individually without their family members. When they complete their school or monastic education to a certain level, they try to go back to Tibet to live with their families or in their monasteries, despite the risks involved. This plan doesn't succeed most of the time.

The Dalai Lama has lived in Dharamsala, India since Chinese troops forced him into exile in 1959. The Tibetan spiritual leader has not been allowed to return safely to Tibet since then.

The Chinese Communist Party labels the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government in exile as “separatist” and the “Dalai clique.”

### **Patterns of control after Buddhist Kalachakra initiations in India**

Irrespective of one's involvement in political activities in exile, all those who return are subjected to a vetting process that includes interrogations, political re-education classes and long-term surveillance. The apparent intention is to steer the minds of the Tibetans into becoming compliant.

For example, this policy applies to Tibetans who leave Tibet for pilgrimage to India and to attend teachings by the Dalai Lama for a few weeks or months. This has happened during the Buddhist “Kalachakra” initiations held in 2006 in Amravati, 2012 in Bodh Gaya<sup>3</sup>, 2014 in Ladakh and 2017 in Bodh Gaya.<sup>4</sup>

A group of 80 Tibetans from Driru County in Nagchu (Chinese: Naqu) prefectural-level city who left for India to attend the 2012 Kalachakra initiation in Bodh Gaya without passes were summoned home immediately. According to a Tibetan from the area, now living in exile, upon returning, they were subjected to two and a half years of detention, prohibited from picking caterpillar fungus—an important source of income in Tibet—for three years, watched over during “sensitive occasions” and restricted from traveling outside their county, even in the case of family and health emergencies. Some also developed tuberculosis in detention.

According to a Tibetan from Driru, who now lives in exile in Dharamsala, some members of the group of 80 who stayed back for the Kalachakra tried to return in the following years of 2013-2014 and were not allowed. Some Tibetans from Driru were returned from the Nepal-India border, while some nuns who made it as far as Shigatse, which is around 700 km from Driru County, were also returned. They have been living in Dharamshala for over a decade now.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> New York Times, April 7, 2012, ‘China said to detain returning Tibetan pilgrims’, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/08/world/asia/china-said-to-detain-returning-tibetan-pilgrims.html>.

<sup>4</sup> International Campaign for Tibet, January 9, 2017, ‘Tibetan pilgrims compelled to return from Dalai Lama teaching in Bodh Gaya, India; China calls the teaching ‘illegal’’, <https://savetibet.org/tibetan-pilgrims-compelled-to-return-from-dalai-lama-teaching-in-bodh-gaya-india-china-calls-the-teaching-illegal/>.

Three-hundred and fifty Tibetans, mostly from the Tibetan regions of Amdo and Kham, were detained in Toelung in Lhasa after returning from the Kalachakra in January 2012 in Bodh Gaya. They were punished with two months of political “re-education.”<sup>5</sup>

Jigme Topgyal, 55, who returned in March 2013, was held for the mandatory “re-education session” in Toelung and later sentenced to two years of hard labor for bringing back “forbidden” materials. This includes 15 DVDs of the Dalai Lama’s Kalachakra teachings along with photos of the Dalai Lama himself. His family learned that he was severely beaten in the first 15 days of detention.

In December 2016, days before the start of the Kalachakra initiation in Bodh Gaya, Tibetans from Tibet were seen leaving the Buddhist pilgrimage site with heavy hearts as they were issued an ultimatum to return in a week or risk the jobs of family members in Tibet. A group of 40 left together and were seen off by their acquaintances from Dharamshala and South India who traveled with the group till Nepal.<sup>6</sup>

## **Discrimination and unequal treatment**

For those who make it back after a pilgrimage or years in exile, finding one’s footing can be a long and difficult process under the pervasive shadow of state surveillance. It has become more difficult over the years as a surveillance superstructure is cast over Tibet and the state’s sensitivity over security imperatives defines its approach to Tibet.<sup>7</sup>

The withholding of identity cards is a form of vetting that drastically reduces what these Tibetans can do on a daily basis.

While the authorities apparently take efforts to simplify the process in Chinese provinces, such as recently reported by state media People’s Daily on March 14, 2023 from the northeastern province of Jilin, such efforts are not extended to the Tibetans who have returned to Tibet and apply for a RIC. They are required to remain in one place, report regularly to the local police office and maintain a “clean” record before they will be considered for the card.

The Tibet Times report quotes a returned Tibetan who approached the authorities to be reinstated in the hukou system and was told to wait for six years before he could try. This presents a host of difficulties to the Tibetans in the intervening period.

## **Denied job opportunities**

Affected Tibetans are facing difficulties on the job market. They are subjected to extra scrutiny, and their lack of proficiency in the Chinese language, which is a prerequisite for most government jobs, adds to the difficulty.

A Western researcher who visited Tibet on and off from 1999 to 2019 stated that she personally met a Tibetan man named Phuntsok in 2015 who had returned after completing his education in exile. He had managed to appear for a government job exam and cleared it successfully. The researcher found out later that Phuntsok had been assigned a job as a gatekeeper at the Tibetan monastic

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<sup>5</sup> RFA, January 17, 2013, ‘Hard Labor for Kalachakra Returnee’ <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/tibet/returnee-01172013143623.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Tibet Times, December 27, 2016, ‘Many pilgrims from Tibet are returning to Tibet’, <https://tibettimes.net/2016/12/27/153828/>.

<sup>7</sup> International Campaign for Tibet, November 17, 2016, ‘Inside Tibet: Tightened controls before Kalachakra; new Chinese Interpol President’, <https://savetibet.org/ict-inside-tibet-news-and-analysis-of-emerging-developments-in-tibet-2/>.



## Education

According to a monk from Sera Jey Monastery, school admission is a challenge for children of parents returning to Tibet. In the case of pregnant women without the RIC, their newborns are denied birth certificates, as only those born in government hospitals or recognized private hospitals are issued birth certificates.

Consequently, such children cannot be admitted to schools.

## Off-limits hometown

According to an exile Tibetan who came from Driru County after 2008, it has almost become impossible for anyone from the county to return to their hometowns. Driru has been rocked by mass arrests and a violent crackdown after the local Tibetans came together to resist state-sponsored mining of sacred mountains and landscapes. The authorities' imposition of "patriotic re-education" further fuelled protest, leading to large-scale detention and sentencing of many protestors for long prison-terms.<sup>9</sup>

Another Tibetan from Driru who returned to Tibet around 2015 could do so only after assuring the authorities that he will be staying in Dechen Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, in Yunnan, the province his Tibetan wife is from. It has been more than seven years, and he has not been allowed to go to his hometown, a Tibetan source in exile with connections to the area told the International Campaign for Tibet.

## Severing ties with those in exile

In December 2022, the Tibet Times reported that 36-year-old Guru Kyab from Chikdril (Jigzhi) County, Golok (Guoluo), who returned to Tibet in 2016, was released in November after serving one year in prison on charges of having been in touch with Tibetans in exile.<sup>10</sup>

A friend of Guru Kyab from the same county who has been in exile since 2006 and has witnessed other friends return to Tibet said it is clear that severing ties with people in exile was the first thing to be internalised.

## Encouraging Tibetans to return and reinstated official channel for applicants

The opportunity for propaganda mileage presented by the return of Tibetans is not lost on the Chinese government, which in the past had tried to lure Tibetans to return by issuing permits from its embassy in Nepal and India.

China first started issuing travel documents to Tibetan refugees liberally in the 1980s and then more strictly in the 1990s. In February 2002, two types of permits—a temporary, one year pass and a

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<sup>9</sup> International Campaign for Tibet, November 20, 2014, 'Harsh new 'rectification' drive in Driru: nuns expelled and warning of destruction of monasteries and 'mani walls'', <https://savetibet.org/harsh-new-rectification-drive-in-driru-nuns-expelled-and-warning-of-destruction-of-monasteries-and-mani-walls/>.

<sup>10</sup> Tibet Times, December 30, 2022, 'A Tibetan released after more than a year in detention', <https://tibettimes.net/2022/12/30/223511/>.

relocation permit for those returning permanently—were issued, accompanied by the instruction that those returning to Tibet must “act in a manner that supports the motherland.”<sup>11</sup>

In 2011, the Chinese embassy in New Delhi started issuing travel documents for two years in Tibet and opened reception centers in major Tibetan cities. Many did return to Tibet in 2011.<sup>12</sup>

Since 2016, Tibetan returnees from different parts of Tibet have been gathered and taken on fully paid tours to Chinese cities, including Nanjing, Xi’an and Beijing, during which the Tibetans were apprised of development taking place in China. These Tibetans were also given pre-tour sessions on Chinese politics, law and history, and were commended for returning to Tibet. The apparent objective was to further encourage Tibetans to return to Tibet.

In November 2018, a so-called Tibet Autonomous Region overseas Chinese affairs office was set up in Lhasa.

In 2019, CCP officials in Dzoige (Ruo'ergai) County in Ngaba Prefecture assured the family and relatives of Tibetan returnees and Tibetans in India and other countries that although their names were automatically blacklisted for leaving the country, those who had not violated Chinese political laws would be removed from the blacklist.<sup>13</sup>

As of March 2023, the Chinese embassy in Delhi is reportedly processing travel documents applications from those Tibetans wishing to return to or visit Tibet. A source in exile noted that there are about 500 active applicants at the Delhi embassy.



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<sup>11</sup> International Campaign for Tibet, June 13, 2002, ‘China urges Tibetan exiles to return but keeps shifting rules’, <https://savetibet.org/china-urges-tibetan-exiles-to-return-but-keeps-shifting-rules/>.

<sup>12</sup> Tibet Times, December 19, 2018, ‘Returned Tibetans are being taken on China tour’, <https://tibettimes.net/2018/12/19/174309/>.

<sup>13</sup> Tibet Times, February 5, 2020, ‘Returned Tibetans’ names can be deleted from the blacklist’ <https://tibettimes.net/2020/02/05/202357/>