



INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET

Inaction, or complicity? Chinese authorities turn a blind eye towards restrictions on Tibetan language

<https://savetibet.org/inaction-or-complicity-chinese-authorities-turn-a-blind-eye-towards-restrictions-on-tibetan-language>

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Tibetans inside Tibet are circulating videos objecting to the fact that Douyin, one of the most important streaming and social media platforms in China, is blocking Tibetan-language broadcasts. Chinese authorities have not responded to these objections, revealing a new aspect of the PRC's efforts to undermine the use of Tibetan and replace it with Mandarin.

Livestreaming has become the most popular online retail sales avenue in the People's Republic of China, but Tibetans are facing discrimination from platforms which, like Douyin, restrict the usage of Tibetan. The list of these platforms includes major Chinese sites such as Kuaishou, Bilibili, and Talkmate.

Restrictions on spoken Tibetan

Tibetans use Chinese platforms that provide facilities for messaging, reels posting, playing music, ecommerce and livestreaming for discussion on topics that are seen not "sensitive" to the authorities; many of the major social media and streaming sites used in other countries are blocked in China. Younger Tibetan entrepreneurs have embraced livestreaming retail sales to capture the Tibetan market, selling items such as Tibetan garments, Dzi beads, and religious artifacts. Visitors who have traveled to Tibet recently reported that online business has been very lucrative for some of these Tibetan businesspeople.

Recently, however, videos have emerged on Tibetan-language social media in which Tibetans complain about Douyin preventing them from livestreaming in Tibetan. [One such livestreamer is heard](#) saying in an undated video, which has been subsequently posted on Youtube:

"Today, I have to mention that I am forced to speak out. Today, I want to ask whether our Douyin company holds more power or is it the nation, or whether Douyin company is more powerful than the legal system? Or does Douyin company have more power or does the government? What is it? For example, my question is, to give an example, our country's very good policies give protection for a nationality's cultural preservation and promotion of a nationality's language. The state really supports these, as does the legal system, and the government, too, supports them. Therefore, why is Douyin company blocking (the livestreaming) in our language when we speak in Tibetan? I want to ask this here. It will not do [for me] not to ask this. Now, the state is saying we must promote a nationality's language, so how can our nationality's language be promoted? Where should we go, residing in our villages and speaking our language?"

The Dharamsala-based [Tibetan Centre for Human Rights & Democracy also mentions](#) the plight of Tibetan medical practitioners who are unable to use Tibetan in their online consultations. A doctor who was forced to shut down online consultation is quoted as saying:

“I may be a small-time Tibetan doctor, but my medical expertise has never been in question. I encounter numerous patients who self-medicate for headaches and other illnesses with painkillers without seeking medical advice. Many seriously ill individuals and those with health issues seek my guidance. With the prohibition on using the Tibetan language, I am forced to use Chinese, and since my patients are Tibetan, especially the elderly and illiterate youth, including farmers and nomads, they struggle to understand me when I speak in Chinese. What purpose does speaking Chinese serve if they cannot comprehend it? As a result, I have stopped my online broadcasts.”

In [2022, RFA Tibetan reported](#) that multilingual learning app Talkmate and video streaming app Bilibili removed postings in Tibetan from their platforms. TCHR also reported that [Kuaishou](#) imposed restrictions in Tibetan.

Sources inside Tibet were not able to confirm whether these videos circulating on social media outside of Tibet are recent or whether they are old postings, as the restrictions on the usage of Tibetan on online Chinese platforms have been in place for years.

Restrictions on written Tibetan

Beyond the restrictions on Tibetan-language streaming, Tibetan netizens have noticed restrictions on comments written in Tibetan as well.

In a comment in Chinese posted on the popular platform “WeChat public accounts” (公众号; “gong zhong hao”), one netizen (PiaoBoDZ) had written, “Although many comments are written in the mother tongue [meaning Tibetan], it is like throwing stone into the ocean.”

In March 2021, one Tibetan netizen [posted a message on the Chinese platform Douban stating that](#) Douyin had rejected an image as being “not suitable for the public”. The image was a picture of a Tibetan-language inscription of a popular poem by the sixth Dalai Lama, Tsangyang Gyatso (b. 1683).

Tibetans have noted that even nicknames in Tibetan are not being approved by Douyin. In [what seems to be a clarification from the platform in May 2024](#), in response to a question about why the platform rejects usernames with Tibetan characters Douyin says, “Our technical team worked day and night, and after a lot of research and practice, we finally found the central solution for processing Tibetan. The new review strategy no longer regards Tibetan as sensitive information.”

Official inaction over abuse of Tibetan language rights

Tibetan netizens, even while objecting to the online platforms, are differentiating between the action of Douyin and other online platforms and the policies of the Chinese government, expressing hope that the authorities will intercede on their behalf because of their “good policies.” This rhetorical position may be necessary to protect them from being seen as critical of the Chinese government.

The [regulation governing livestreaming is the one issued by the Chinese State Administration of Radio and Television on June 8, 2022](#), in which Article 12 of this [Code of Conduct for Online Presenters](#) says, “Online presenters shall use the nation’s common spoken and written language in accordance with standardized writing methods and meanings.”

However, Chinese officials have said that online presenters can use any language they want. At a [press conference in Beijing on achievements and measures on ethnic unity and progress in the new era on August 29, 2022](#), Zhao Yong, then deputy director of the National Ethnic Affairs Commission, defended the Chinese policy of promoting Mandarin maintaining that it does not impact the promotion of non-Chinese languages. In response to a question on China “promoting the use of Mandarin in ethnic minority areas such as Xinjiang and Tibet” might be “detrimental to the development of ethnic minority languages and cultures,” Zhao said, “while popularizing Mandarin in accordance with the law, the Chinese government fully respects and protects the freedom of ethnic minorities to use their own languages, creating conditions for them to learn and use their own languages.”

He further said, “And as for how to protect the languages and cultures of ethnic minorities, I think supporting their use is the best method of protection” adding, “In short, there is absolutely no obstacle for ethnic minorities in learning and using their own languages in their work and lives.”

If this indeed is the official policy, then there is no implementation when it comes to the Tibetans. The authorities have been turning a deaf ear to the appeals being made by the Tibetan online presenters.

Livestreaming platforms fulfilling CCP’s political agenda

One reason for the Chinese government not protecting the rights of the Tibetans to use their own language on such online platforms is because these restrictions fulfill the Chinese government’s political agenda of undermining the study of Tibetan while making Mandarin the dominating language even among Tibetans.

Indicating the anguish that Tibetans feel about the erosion of the Tibetan language and the mainstreaming of Chinese, several 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?”

The case of Tibetan language rights advocate Tashi Wangchuk having to undergo five years of imprisonment and even [now continuing to face denial of his freedom](#), even after formal release is another example of denial of language rights. He is among a younger generation in Tibet who have prioritized protection of the Tibetan language.

Wangchuk [was arrested in early 2016](#), two months after he was featured in a New York Times video and article in 2015 criticizing Chinese cultural and educational policies on Tibetans. He stood trial in January 2018, and was subsequently given a five-year sentence. In the [New York Times video](#) posted in November 2015, Wangchuk complained that Chinese “government authorities actively block the teaching and studying of the Tibetan language.” He stressed the importance of Tibetans having access to education in the Tibetan language and his intention to file a lawsuit against the authorities for not enabling this. He further amplifies the thinking of the Tibetan self-immolators [telling the New York Times](#), “They didn’t just set themselves on fire because of some family issues or something. I

believe they also saw culture disappearing and other cultural problems. But we don't have ways to solve these problems. I want to try to use the People's Republic of China's laws to solve the problem.”

In its 2024 report, [Freedom in the World](#), [Freedom House reported](#), “The online censorship and monitoring systems in place across China are applied more stringently in Tibet, while censorship of Tibet-related keywords on apps like WeChat has become more sophisticated. The use of Tibetan language is banned on a range of social media apps, particularly ones that use streaming and live communication services.”

Douyin is China's domestic version of the controversial TikTok, and both are owned by the ByteDance. In April 2024 [Congress passed a legislation banning TikTok in the United States](#) if ByteDance doesn't sell its stake by January of 2025. Earlier, in 2022, Senate had passed a bill that prohibits certain individuals from downloading or using TikTok on any device issued by the United States or a government corporation. TikTok is suspected of being a tool in the Chinese Communist Party's long arm of authoritarianism. TikTok reportedly “instructs its moderators to censor videos that mention Tiananmen Square, Tibetan independence,” according to a [2019 report in The Guardian](#) quoting leaked documents detailing the site's moderation guidelines. In one instance of TikTok being used to harass Tibetans in diaspora, a [young Tibetan American student received a series of derogatory](#) comments within hours of posting a video of herself in Tibetan clothes on TikTok. The posts ranged from standardized CCP propaganda to slurs, and more.



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