

U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing Technological Surveillance of Religion in China

Lobsang Gyatso Sither
Digital Security Program Director, Tibet Action Institute

I would like to thank the commission for giving me the opportunity to testify on behalf of Tibetans inside Tibet whose voices are censored and surveilled. I am honored to be able to share examples of religious persecution inside Tibet and how technology is used by the government of China to restrict religious freedom.

On July 6, the world celebrated the birthday of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and good wishes for him were posted on social media all over the globe. Yet, around the same time, two Tibetan artists—lyricist Khadro Tsetan and singer Tsego—were arrested in Tibet for a musical tribute dedicated to His Holiness the Dalai Lama that they also shared on social media.¹ They were convicted on charges of “subversion” and “leaking state secrets,” sentenced to 7 and 3 years respectively. Meanwhile, Tibetan prayer flags were also being removed in a campaign which according to a report from various Tibetan media started in Golog (Chinese: Guoluo) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Qinghai Province and Tengchen (Dingqing) County in Chamdo in the Tibet Autonomous Region under the guise of a “cleanup drive and behavioral reform.”²

His Holiness the Dalai Lama is the spiritual leader of the Tibetan people, yet for decades the government of China has banned his photo and teachings inside Tibet. Furthermore, while Chinese officials regularly insist that there is religious freedom in Tibet, even the mention of His Holiness the Dalai Lama—both online and offline—is completely restricted and is considered a crime against the state. This is similar to saying, “You can be Catholic as long as you don’t acknowledge the existence of the Pope.” In fact, numerous Tibetans have been arrested or detained for sharing photos of the Dalai Lama online, specifically through a Chinese app called WeChat, a tool used by Tibetans predominantly to communicate with each other, either between Tibetans inside Tibet or between Tibetans inside and outside Tibet.

During the 2017 Kalachakra by His Holiness, one of the most important Buddhist teachings held in India, Tibetans from inside Tibet were restricted and intimidated from attending. At the direction of the Chinese government, authorities in Tibet confiscated passports, blocked passengers from boarding airplanes, and ordered Tibetans who were already in India for the Kalachakra to return to Tibet or face severe consequences, including imprisonment and removal from work. At the same time, research conducted by the Citizen Lab at the University of Toronto showed that WeChat was censoring a number of keywords related to the Kalachakra, including even the word “Bodhgaya” (the location of the teaching in Hindi).³

¹ <https://savetibet.org/two-tibetans-imprisoned-for-a-song-praising-the-dalai-lama/>

² <https://savetibet.org/tibetan-prayer-flags-forced-down-by-chinese-authorities/>

³ <https://citizenlab.ca/2017/01/tibetans-blocked-from-kalachakra-at-borders-and-on-wechat/>

In 2016, Tibet Action Institute conducted research on Youku (a Chinese video sharing platform similar to YouTube).⁴ Our findings showed that every video we uploaded with content that included His Holiness the Dalai Lama was censored almost instantly. But beyond this, videos containing content related to Tibetan language and culture were also restricted completely. In order to test censorship of Tibetan language further, we also conducted side by side tests of benign videos with titles and descriptions in Tibetan, Chinese, and English, with the results showing that the ones in Tibetan were more heavily censored.

Since the research was done before real-name registration fully took effect for Chinese platforms, we were able to explore Youku censorship in this way.⁵ However, since 2016, accounts must now be connected to a name and phone number registered in China or Tibet, making it almost impossible to create any online account without providing government issued documents. This requirement is not restricted to Youku as all Chinese platforms have similar or more draconians systems in place to censor and surveill users, including Tibetans. With immediate and often severe repercussions for posting information considered sensitive to the Chinese government, it is now even more difficult to share content such as the teachings of His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

In addition, online censorship has been intensifying since the passing of the Chinese Cybersecurity Law in 2017, implementing severe intermediary and data localization regulations that target the actions of foreign companies operating in China. As a result, we are now witnessing a proactive attempt by Chinese authorities to change global norms around freedom of expression and access to information. This includes demands placed on foreign-based companies or institutions (including in the U.S.) that want to operate in areas controlled by the government of China, resulting in restrictions on religious freedom and basic human rights under the guise of local law compliance.

A very concerning example of this are the ongoing actions of Apple. At the order of Chinese authorities, and at times even proactively, Apple has removed or refused to publish thousands of apps from China's version of the App Store, with little to no transparency. This includes virtual private networks (VPNs) and news apps like the New York Times.⁶ Since Apple's closed ecosystem forces users to rely on the App Store for app installation, these removals have a huge impact, helping keep iOS users in China, Tibet, East Turkestan, and possibly soon Hong Kong locked behind China's Great Firewall.

Apple executives frequently insist freedom of expression and privacy are fundamental human rights, most recently calling for a "more just world for everyone."⁷ When removing apps from the App Store, they say they are simply complying with local laws and regulations, however this

⁴ <https://tibetaction.net/erasing-tibet-censorship-on-chinese-video-sharing-site-youku/>

⁵

<https://techcrunch.com/2017/08/27/china-doubles-down-on-real-name-registration-laws-forbidding-anonymous-online-posts/>

⁶ <https://techcrunch.com/2017/07/29/apple-removes-vpn-apps-from-the-app-store-in-china/>

⁷ <https://www.apple.com/speaking-up-on-racism/>

reasoning doesn't work if the local laws violate freedom of expression and, in this case, freedom of religion. In effect, Apple is enabling the Chinese authorities to actively curb people's ability to freely practice their religion, access information, and express themselves, and, in doing so, is violating fundamental human rights.

We at Tibet Action Institute in collaboration with GreatFire (a research group that monitors and challenges internet censorship in China) conducted research on Tibetan apps censored in the Chinese App Store.⁸ Based on our research, we found 29 Tibetan Apps which were not available in the Chinese App store. We don't know how many of them were removed or not even allowed to be published since Apple is not transparent with such information. In addition, our research showed that the majority of the censored apps were related to Buddhism, and that any app with "Dalai Lama" in the title is likely to be censored.

Another concern is iFlyTek, a Chinese artificial intelligence company which specializes in voice-to-text transcription and has been collecting data from Tibetan users for years. The company created a Tibetan app named "བུ་དྲ་བཀའ་ལྟོས། - Dhungkar" which allows Tibetans of various regional dialects to convert speech to text. In a 2019 report, the company states that about 60% of its profits come from "projects involving government subsidies," raising serious concerns about how the company's data collection is being used in Tibet and elsewhere.⁹ For example, we are starting to receive reports that voice conversations on WeChat are being censored. In addition, in 2018, the Massachusetts Institute of Computer Science and Artificial Intelligence Laboratory signed a five year research collaboration agreement with iFlyTek, bringing some of the best minds from the U.S. together with a Chinese company that is likely directly involved in censorship and surveillance.¹⁰

We are now also beginning to see Chinese companies exporting censorship into the global community. Tiktok (owned by the Chinese company ByteDance) was recently banned in India for security reasons. Also, in leaked documents, we have seen that the platform considers words like "Dalai Lama," "Tibet," "Hong Kong," "Tiananmen Square," etc. as sensitive to China, censoring and moderating such content.¹¹ This is a further step in the erosion of global norms on freedom of expression as this censorship is not simply happening inside Tibet or China, but reaching into the U.S. and around the world, with no regard to stated freedom of expression laws and norms of the areas where they are operating.¹²

In closing, there must be repercussions on the international stage for the harmful actions of Chinese companies that are operating globally. For example, iFlyTek and many others must face consequences for their unethical and dangerous ethnic profiling of Tibetans, Uyghurs, and

⁸ <https://blog.tibcert.org/apple-app-censorship/>

⁹ <https://www.wired.com/story/iflytek-china-ai-giant-voice-chatting-surveillance/>

¹⁰ news.mit.edu/2018/csail-launches-five-year-collaboration-with-iflytek-0615

¹¹

<https://tfipost.com/2020/05/no-tibet-no-dalai-lama-no-tiananmen-square-as-jihadi-posts-blow-up-tiktok-follows-ccps-orders-to-censor-anti-china-posts/>

¹² <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2019/sep/25/revealed-how-tiktok-censors-videos-that-do-not-please-beijing>

other marginalized peoples. This holds true as well for companies like WeChat and TikTok that are expanding their censorship and surveillance beyond China's borders, helping Beijing erode global human rights standards.

I believe now is also the time that US-based companies like Apple and others operating in or collaborating with China must be held accountable for their actions that enable human rights violations, including for Tibetans. To address this, I feel the U.S. government and this commission can and should bring together various stakeholders such as government officials, corporations, and people from affected communities to draw up a code of conduct required for U.S. companies and institutions operating in China; a code that reflects the principles of fundamental human rights, including religious freedom and freedom of expression. By joining together, stakeholders will be able to more effectively create and implement such requirements for corporations, and ultimately create leverage that can pressure the Chinese government to comply with such a code of conduct.

Thank you for your time.