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**Australian Tibetan Community Association**

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## Introduction

The Australian Tibetan Community Association welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Select Committee's inquiry into Foreign Interference through Social Media and the risks posed to Australia's democracy and freedom of speech.

We are a national association of ten Tibetan community associations in New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania, Western Australia, and the Australian Capital Territory. Around 3,000 Tibetans have made Australia home over the past 30 years, many of us are former political prisoners and families and have arrived under the Australian Government's humanitarian program after escaping China's colonial occupation of Tibet.

Once a cause embraced by the public and celebrities alike, Tibet today hardly gets mentioned by politicians and journalists, even though the human rights crisis has continued to deteriorate. The silencing of Tibet is not an accident; instead, it is a design of the Chinese Government's information blackout, influence operations or 'transnational repression', surveillance, and propaganda and disinformation campaigns - all playing out on social media.

Tibetan-Australians aspire to participate in the democratic life of a free society and speak up for human rights in Tibet without fear of repercussions. However, as outlined in this submission, the long arm of the Chinese Government has reached into the mobile phones and laptops of Tibetans, now Australian citizens living far beyond China's borders, infringing our freedom of expression, association, and right to protest against its unjust policies.

An Australian citizen, a member of Sydney's Tibetan community, sums up his dilemma and that of many members of the Tibetan diaspora:

"I have left Tibet, but I continue to live in fear. If I speak out for people inside Tibet, I am

afraid of the consequences for my family and the prospect of never visiting Tibet. If I do not speak out, I feel guilty about not using my democratic rights in a free country.”

We call on the Parliament to keep Australians safe and protect Australian democracy by protecting our right to express our views and fighting misinformation campaigns by foreign governments such as China on Australian soil.

## **Campaign to silence Tibetan-Australians, spread misinformation and sow disunity**

Numerous reports in Australia have documented how the Chinese social media messaging app WeChat is weaponised to silence university students from China and Chinese dissidents or to influence election campaigns. The Australian Strategic Policy Institute has undertaken important research on China’s campaign to harass Uyghurs in Australia and Xinjiang<sup>1</sup>. However, we have seen little to no coverage in Australia of the Chinese Government’s campaign to control narratives on Tibet.

WeChat became a lifeline between Tibetans in exile and their families in Tibet when the app was launched over a decade ago; however, as a company based in China, it had to disclose information to the Chinese Government as per the country’s cybersecurity law. This has meant Tibetan community members in Australia choosing between surveillance by the Chinese Government and not being able to stay in touch with families. One Tibetan said it feels like a Chinese security officer is always watching over him and listening to his conversations with his family.

Tibetan-Australians feel unsafe talking freely to their parents or relatives, much less about Tibetan politics or our exiled spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama.

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<sup>1</sup> Strange bedfellows on Xinjiang: The CCP, fringe media and US social media platforms  
<https://www.aspi.org.au/report/strange-bedfellows>

Tibetan rights groups in the United States and India, where most Tibetan refugees live, have documented numerous cases of Tibetans getting arrested or detained in connection to their WeChat messages and posts.<sup>2</sup>

Members of the Australian Tibetan community have shared our concerns about how our families are placed under enormous pressure not to discuss political subjects. Failure to comply would mean them losing jobs or old age pensions, children losing their right to education or even ending up in arrest and imprisonment for years. For us in Australia, it would mean not getting a visa and seeing Tibet ever again.

According to Freedom House, “China conducts the most sophisticated, global, and comprehensive campaign of transnational repression in the world.”<sup>3</sup> Tibetans in exile, including those in Australia, have long been targeted for this repression. It is no accident that many of us choose to keep our heads low.

The targeting of Tibetan-Australians by anonymous phone hackers is quite common. While some calls and messages are threatening, others are deceptively friendly. These messages in Mandarin, sent to our phone as SMS or WhatsApp, often have information about receiving a parcel, for instance. Many of us also receive friend requests on Facebook from accounts with unknown Tibetan or Chinese names.

### **Case study of a Tibetan-Australian man in Sydney**

*As the Dalai Lama’s Buddhist teachings are banned in Tibet, a few years ago, Tenzin<sup>4</sup> started a WeChat group dedicated to sharing audio and videos of the Dalai Lama’s speeches and teachings among friends and families in his hometown in Tibet. The group quickly grew to*

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<sup>2</sup> Three Tibetan teens arrested, and one tortured for failure to register WeChat group  
<https://www.tibetwatch.org/news/2021/3/5/three-tibetan-teens-arrested-and-one-tortured-for-failure-to-register-wechat-group>

<sup>3</sup> China: Transnational Repression Origin Country Case Study  
<https://freedomhouse.org/report/transnational-repression/china>

<sup>4</sup> Hiding real name to protect his identity

*around 500 people. Not long after that, the police arrested a member of the WeChat group.  
The man's wife called Tenzin to close the WeChat group.*

*Tenzin has now lost contact with all his friends. One of them, a successful businessman who  
regularly used live streaming on Chinese apps to promote his business, would have his  
internet connection drop out in the middle of his live audience because he was an active  
member in the group about the Dalai Lama's teachings.*

Another way to control the discourse on Tibet, or Xinjiang, is to spread information and propaganda to legitimise the Chinese Government's claims in the eyes of the international community. Twitter posts on Tibet's political status or human rights situation are instantly attacked by internet bots defending the Chinese Communist Party.

Human rights activist and critic of the Chinese Government Drew Pavlou, a vocal supporter of the human rights of Tibetans and Uyghurs, is a target of intense harassment, including death threats, on social media. All to intimidate and silence him.

ASPI's latest report on New Frontier Influencers, featuring YouTube accounts of young women from Tibet, Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia, explores how the Chinese Government's globally focused propaganda and disinformation capabilities are evolving and increasing in sophistication. "Concerningly, this emerging approach by the Chinese party-state to influence the international discourse on China, including obfuscating its record of human rights violations, is largely flying under the radar of US social media platforms and western policymakers."<sup>5</sup>

Social media is also actively used to sow disunity among the Tibetan diaspora to undermine the Free Tibet cause. The Tibetan community in Australia has seen paranoia growing in recent years, with many becoming suspicious of each other. Such divisions have deepened as China's influence operations have grown through the activities of the United Front Works Department of the Chinese Communist Party, ranging from gathering intelligence to manipulating opinions to coopting key figures in politics, academia and media.

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<sup>5</sup> Frontier Influencers: the new face of China's propaganda  
<https://www.aspi.org.au/report/frontier-influencers>

“Every crack in the wall is an ear” is an old Tibetan saying. It used to be informants physically listening to what people say and do in the Tibetan communities. Now, it’s people monitoring posts and photos shared on social media of people participating in rallies against the Chinese Government.

## Recommendations

Australia must adopt a holistic approach to counter Beijing’s social media campaigns and take urgent measures to defend our democracy.

The Australian Tibetan Community Association recommends the Australian Parliament and Government to:

- Develop and implement a public education campaign about foreign interference and the threat to Australian democracy and educate the public on misinformation and harassment and how to verify the accuracy of information online.
- Strengthen existing laws on foreign interference, espionage and national security to include interference using social media.
- Set up a dedicated task force to investigate foreign government interference using social media, including creating a reporting platform for users to report misinformation and harassment.
- Undertake extensive consultation with civil society and affected communities to develop new measures, including drafting legislation to counter foreign interference via social media.
- Hold Chinese government-controlled apps like WeChat to the same oversight as other social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook to ensure that it meets the same standards and rules.