
Tibetans blocked from Kalachakra at borders and on WeChat

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JANUARY 10, 2017

RESEARCH REPORT #85

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Document Version: 1.0

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Suggested Citation

Masashi Crete-Nishihata, Jeffrey Knockel, and Lotus Ruan. "Tibetans blocked from Kalachakra at borders and on WeChat," Citizen Lab Research Report No. 85, University of Toronto, January 2017.

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to [Tibet Action Institute](#) for assistance and to Lhakpa Kyizom for permission to use photography.

About the Citizen Lab, Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy, University of Toronto

The Citizen Lab is an interdisciplinary laboratory based at the Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy, University of Toronto, focusing on research, development, and high-level strategic policy and legal engagement at the intersection of information and communication technologies, human rights, and global security.

We use a “mixed methods” approach to research that combines methods from political science, law, computer science, and area studies. Our research includes investigating digital espionage against civil society, documenting Internet filtering and other technologies and practices that impact freedom of expression online, analyzing privacy, security, and information controls of popular applications, and examining transparency and accountability mechanisms relevant to the relationship between corporations and state agencies regarding personal data and other surveillance activities.

Summary

From January 2 to 13 2017, His Holiness the Dalai Lama is holding a popular Tibetan Buddhist teaching called [Kalachakra](#) in Bodh Gaya, India, which is the site where the Buddha is believed to have gained enlightenment. Over [200,000](#) people from around the world are expected to attend this year's ritual. Increased restrictions from the government of China has barred Tibetans in Tibet from attending the teachings. This report documents blocking of Kalachakra-related keywords on WeChat revealing how restrictions around the ritual extend online.

Chinese Government Restrictions Tighten over Kalachakra

Reportedly, [nearly 7,000 Tibetans](#) inside Tibetan areas who planned to make the pilgrimage to Kalachakra are facing restrictions from the government of China that are preventing their attendance. These restrictions include the [confiscation of passports](#), [blocking passengers from boarding aircraft](#), and [ordering Tibetans](#) who had traveled to India and Nepal in November with plans to attend the event to promptly return to Tibetan areas. Tibetans who were ordered to return were reportedly threatened with reprisals against their families if they disobeyed. Chinese authorities in Tibetan areas have called Kalachakra an [“illegal” gathering](#). An official notice circulated in Dechen in Yunnan province obtained by [Radio Free Asia](#), prohibited any involvement in the event or sharing of information about Kalachakra over the Internet or social media and warned “Other related activities, such as organizing celebrations in support of the Kalachakra, are also forbidden. Anyone engaging in these acts will be in violation of Article 55 of China’s Public Security Law and will face severe consequences.” The notice explains that any violations will be met with police detention of 10 to 15 days or jail sentences of up to five years for serious infractions. Another [notice](#) circulated in December warned that anyone found to have participated in Kalachakra will have their passport and ration card confiscated upon return and if the persons are monks or nuns they will lose their right to study Tibetan Buddhism.

[Xu Zhitao](#), deputy director of the bureau of the Tibet question at the United Front Work Department of the Communist Party of China Central Committee called the ritual a “political tool” and claimed the Dalai Lama will use it to propagate ideas of “hating the Chinese government.” The Communist Party of China views the Dalai

Lama as a “[splittist](#)” who threatens its power. The [International Campaign for Tibet](#) described the tightened restrictions as the most systematic crackdown to date on a teaching in exile given by His Holiness the Dalai Lama. In response to the tightened restrictions, the Dalai Lama sent a [message](#) to Tibetans, “Distance cannot dampen the sacred ties between a Lama and a disciple. You can all pray from the far-flung areas in Tibet and I assure you that you will receive the Kalachakra empowerment”.

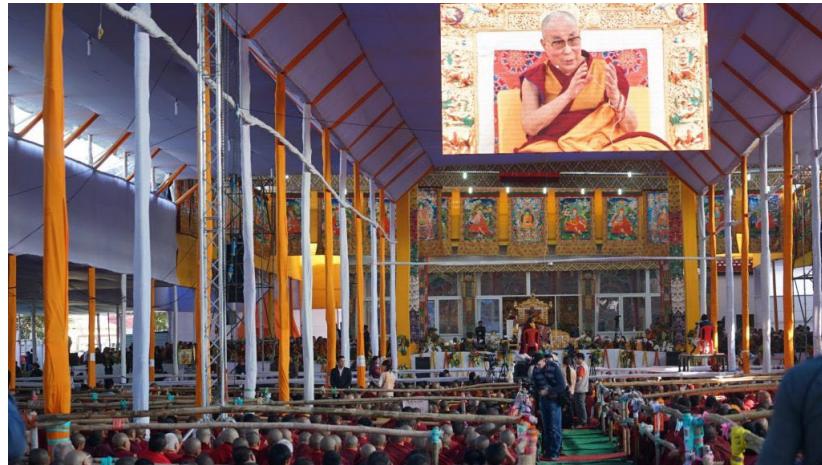


Figure 1: His Holiness the Dalai Lama conducts a Kalachakra teaching in Bodh Gaya. Photo credit: Lhakpa Kyizom

Kalachakra Blocked on WeChat

WeChat is the [most popular chat app](#) in China and has gained wide adoption by Tibetans around the world. Operating a chat application in China requires following [laws and regulations](#) on content control and monitoring. To comply with these regulations, [WeChat enables keyword filtering](#) for users with accounts registered to mainland China phone numbers. Censorship of keywords is not transparent and no notice is given to a user if their message is blocked. A message with a keyword that is blocked by WeChat simply does not appear. WeChat has [higher levels](#) of keyword blocking in group chats (which can reach up to 500 users) than one-to-one chat. The greater attention to group chat may be due to the semi-public sphere feature of online discussion groups. Messages can reach wider audiences in group chat and potentially be used to organize protests and other public mobilizations, which may be why it is subject to a higher level of scrutiny.

In previous [research](#) we showed that Tibet-related content targeted for censorship on WeChat. There have also been [cases](#) of Tibetans being arrested for sharing chat messages, songs, and photos on WeChat with content related to the Dalai Lama and Tibetan culture that Chinese authorities alleged carried [“anti-China” sentiments](#).

WeChat performs censorship on the server-side. When you send a message it passes through a remote server that contains rules for implementing censorship. If the message includes a keyword that has been targeted for blocking, the message will not be sent. Documenting censorship on a system with a server-side implementation such as WeChat's requires devising a sample of keywords to test, running those keywords through the app, and recording the results.

Our [previous work](#) found that censorship on WeChat is dynamic and keyword lists are updated in reaction to news events. We conducted tests to determine if keywords related to news events were blocked by collecting front page articles from international and independent news media websites (e.g., [BBC Chinese](#), [New York Times Chinese](#), [Radio Free Asia Mandarin](#), [Voice of Tibet](#), [Deutsche Welle Chinese](#)). We copy the text of the article into a chat between an account registered to a mainland China phone number and accounts registered to international phone numbers. If we found the article was censored we then reduce the text in the article down to the minimum number of keywords required to trigger censorship. From this initial set of keywords we then tested other related keywords in different languages.

The tests revealed a number of keywords related to Kalachakra blocked on WeChat in English, Chinese, Tibetan and Hindi in group chat mode when using an account registered to a Chinese phone number.

WeChat censors single keywords and combination of keywords. For keyword combinations, blocking is triggered if a set of keywords are used together in a message. If the same keywords are sent individually the message is not blocked. **Table 1** provides a breakdown of all the Kalachakra and Tibet related keywords we found blocked on WeChat in this round of testing.

Date Keyword Tested	Keyword	Translation	Language
2017-01-03	Kalachakra+Dalai Lama+Tibetan	n/a	English
2017-01-03	达赖喇嘛 + 1月3日 + 金刚灌顶法会	Dalai Lama + January 3 + Kalachakra Initiation	Simplified Chinese
2017-01-03	達賴喇嘛 + 1月3日 + 金剛灌頂法會	Dalai Lama + January 3 + Kalachakra Initiation	Traditional Chinese
2017-01-04	达赖喇嘛 + 菩提伽耶 + 金刚灌顶法会	Dalai Lama + Bodh Gaya + Kalachakra Initiation	Simplified Chinese
2017-01-04	達賴喇嘛 + 菩提伽耶 + 金剛灌頂法會	Dalai Lama + Bodh Gaya + Kalachakra Initiation	Traditional Chinese

Date Keyword Tested	Keyword	Translation	Language
2017-01-04	至高无上的领袖 + 达赖喇嘛尊者	Supreme Leader + His Holiness Dalai Lama	Simplified Chinese
2017-01-03	ស៊ិនាគេន្យ	Dalai Lama	Tibetan
2017-01-04	बोधगया	Bodh Gaya	Hindi
2017-01-03	बो	Bo. First character in बोधगया (“Bodh Gaya”)	Hindi
2017-01-03	या	Ya. Last character in बोधगया (“Bodh Gaya”)	Hindi

Table 1: Kalachakra and Tibet related keywords found blocked on WeChat.

We found the keyword combination of “Kalachakra” + “Dalai Lama” + “Tibetan” blocked. **Figure 2** shows a group chat conversation between a user with a China account and users with international accounts. If the user with the China account sends messages with the keywords individually, the message is received by the other users, but if the China account user sends a message with all three keywords used together in a sentence the message is not displayed.

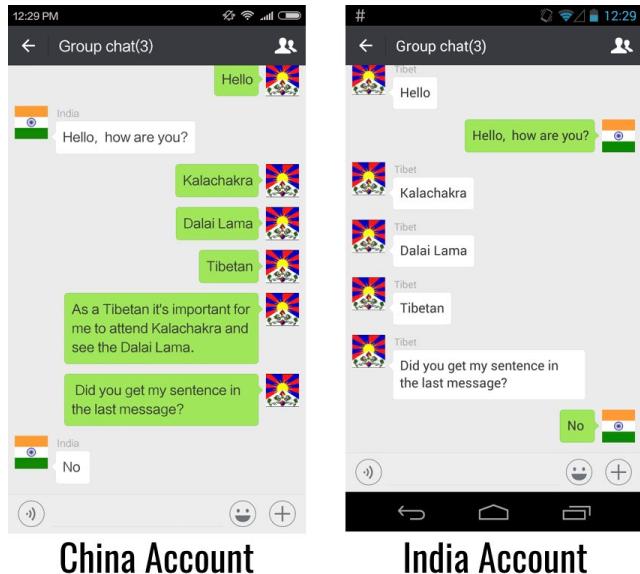


Figure 2: A user with a China account attempts to send a message with the keyword combination “Kalachakra” + “Dalai Lama” + “Tibetan” in a group chat to users with International accounts and is blocked. If the keywords are sent individually they are received.

We found other keyword combinations in Chinese including 达赖喇嘛 (Dalai Lama) + 1月3日 (January 3) + 金刚灌顶法会 (Kalachakra Initiation). Figure 3 shows the keywords can be sent individually, but are blocked if all the keywords are present

in one message as in our example: “时轮金刚灌顶法会在1月3日举行，达赖喇嘛将进行讲学” (On January 3, the Kalachakra Initiation will start. The Dalai Lama will do a teaching).

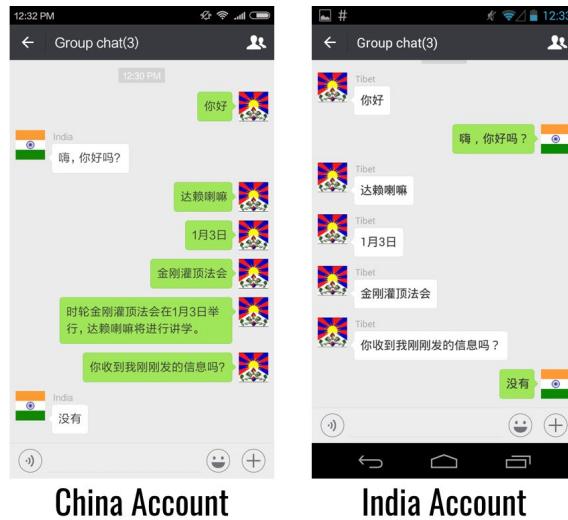


Figure 3: A user with a China account attempts to send a message with the keyword combination “达赖喇嘛 + 1月3日 + 金刚灌顶法会” in a group chat to users with International accounts and is blocked. If the keywords are sent individually they are received.

In the Tibetan language we found reference to the Dalai Lama blocked (e.g., ཀུན་ུན་པ་ “Dalai Lama”), but Kalachakra in Tibetan (ཀླାଚ୍ଚକ୍ର ད୍ୱାକ୍ଷର) was not blocked. Figure 4 shows a conversation between a user with a China account and users with International accounts. Messages that contain the keyword ཀུන་ུන་པ་ are not sent.

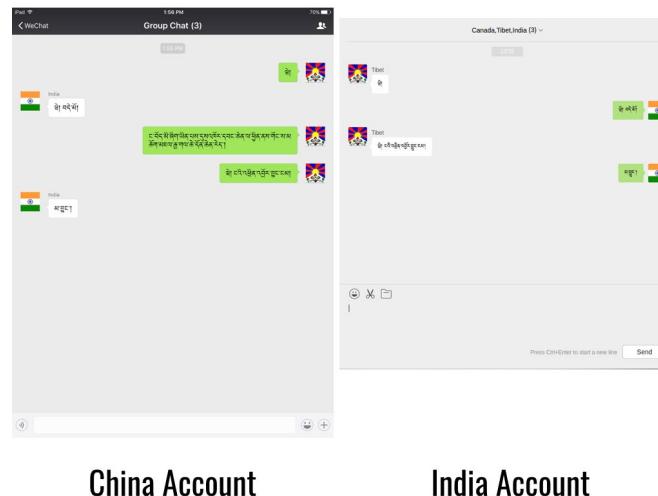


Figure 4: A user with a China account attempts to send a message with the keyword “藏区”
“西藏” in a group chat to users with International accounts and is blocked.

We also found the keyword Bodh Gaya (the site of Kalachakra) in Hindi blocked (बोधगया). If the first and last characters of the keyword ("बो" and "या") are used

individually the message is also blocked even though the characters alone are not meaningful.

Conclusion

Chinese social media platforms routinely and systematically censor Tibet-related content. Previous work has documented the extent of this censorship on [microblogs](#), [video sharing sites](#), [live streaming apps](#), and [chat apps](#) (including [WeChat](#)). The blocking of Kalachakra related keywords demonstrates that censorship on WeChat is dynamic and keyword lists are updated in response to current events. Tibetans with WeChat accounts registered to mainland China phone numbers who try to communicate about Kalachakra may find themselves blocked, showing that the restrictions to the Tibetan community offline are mirrored online.

