

The Foreign Correspondents' Club of China

Tibet remains the most intriguing and tightly controlled region in China today. While foreign media outlets were granted some limited access to the Tibet Autonomous Region in 2015, China still rejected roughly three-quarters of the reporters who sought permission to visit last year, according to a new survey by the Foreign Correspondents Club of China.

The survey revealed deep frustration that China only allows foreign journalists to visit Tibet on government-approved trips; employs an opaque process for selecting those who can join these trips; and restricts freedom of movement while there.

While Chinese authorities apparently believe that restricted access will prevent "negative" reporting about issues in the region, the survey results suggest the opposite may be true. Journalists said a lack of access to Tibet increases their reliance on exile sources and overseas academics, who may have particular agendas and lack up-to-date information.

By contrast, the few journalists granted permission to visit to Tibet in 2015 said it improved their knowledge of the region and Chinese government administration there.

The FCCC also surveyed journalists on their perspectives about diplomats and foreign government officials who have been allowed to visit Tibet. A vast majority of those responding said these foreign diplomats and officials are not doing enough to press for greater media access to the region.

SUMMARY

The survey -- based on 142 responses from foreign journalists based in China, including 35 from non-FCCC members -- revealed the following:

The government may be slightly more open to arranging group trips for China-based foreign correspondents. Journalists from more than a dozen foreign media organizations were allowed to join three group reporting trips to the region in 2015. Among the media organizations that visited Tibet in 2015 were ABC Spanish Daily Newspaper, Bloomberg, Russian TV, Kazakhstan TV, Le Figaro, Der Spiegel, ANSA, Mainichi Shimbun, Yonhap, Singapore's Lianhe Zaobao, the Financial Times and Reuters. (Links to some of their reports can be found at the end of this report.)

Large numbers of journalists are still shut out. Nearly three-quarters of those seeking to report in Tibet (49) had their applications rejected. Only one respondent to the survey reported receiving approval for an individual reporting trip to the region.

Many journalists aren't applying because they believe they won't get permission or will be subjected to unacceptable reporting restrictions.

Only 36% of journalists said they or their organization had applied to conduct a reporting trip to Tibet in 2015.

Of the 64% who did not apply, lack of interest in Tibet was not the reason; rather, half of those journalists

said they didn't apply because they believed permission would not be granted.

Another 40% said they didn't seek permission for a trip because they believed the restrictions imposed by authorities would make substantive reporting impossible.

Only 9% said they weren't interested in Tibetan affairs.

Journalists say the procedures for seeking permission to visit Tibet are opaque and difficult. Of those who applied to conduct trips, 30 (or 79%) said that the process was not straightforward and that details about costs and the itinerary were insufficient.

"It was a totally opaque process, with very little short term notice," wrote one responder.

"Not straightforward at all," wrote another. "Very (little) information about the itinerary and costs, and the selection of journalists who finally went to Tibet was arbitrary."

Several of the journalists allowed to visit Tibet in 2015 found the trip worthwhile, despite reporting restrictions:

"Not perfect but it was good to get this trip," said one reporter. "We got some very good material, especially our photographer."

"In general, I found the trip useful in the sense that it gave me a glimpse of Tibet, the government's policies and point of view. There was no chance to do independent reporting per se or freedom to travel to regions or areas that were not included in the trip, nor could I extend the trip on my own. But it was better than nothing. I asked all questions that I wanted to officials, who candidly responded with their own discourse to my questions about more sensitive issues that you don't usually see explained in state media or press conferences in Beijing. Yes, it was heavy on propaganda, but I was able to get a picture of how the government sees Tibet and how it envisions its future."

"Reporters of the five Indian media organizations with registered offices in China ... were invited to travel to Tibet when the first batch of Indian pilgrims for the Kailash yatra arrived in Yadong on a newly opened route. In Yadong and Lhasa, there was reasonably free access."

NOVEMBER GROUP TRIP

According to the survey results, the bulk of the foreign journalists who visited Tibet in 2015 did so on a five-day November group trip organized by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA). Notification for the trip was provided on the ministry's website in October, with a short deadline for applying. MOFA originally scheduled the trip for October, then delayed it, later rescheduling it with little notice to those who had applied. Selection criteria were not revealed and some journalists said after applying they were unable to confirm the status of their application with officials because the phones at the appointed office went unanswered.

Those selected visited Tibet from Nov. 16-20. Participants stayed at Lhasa Hotel and visited Potala Palace, Jokhang Temple, Sera Monastery, schools and an academy, a beer factory and Namtso Lake, where they visited a village and talked with the village leader.

"Very pleasant and relaxed, though managed," said one respondent.

A majority of the journalists who visited Tibet in 2015 and responded to the survey said sources appeared reluctant to speak freely. Only one said they had satisfactory freedom of movement.

Cost of the November trip per person was about \$2,000, including airfare, meals, hotel and land transport. Roughly half of those attending said the price of attending was fair. Some complained about cost of airfare (booked through a MOFA-specified agent) and unexpected charges for hotel, meal and land transport were presented at the end of the trip.

GENERAL VIEWPOINTS

Foreign journalists are highly skeptical about their ability to report accurately and fairly in Tibet, even when MOFA allows them to go on an individual or group trip. Of the 121 respondents, more than 90% percent answered "no" when asked if they could report in Tibet in accordance with China's general reporting principles allowing freedom to travel and speak to sources who agree to be interviewed. Said one journalist:

"I feel it is possible to report the issues around Tibet. However, without independent access to Tibet it is not possible to speak to people living there, gather their first-hand testimony, and document conditions for ourselves. This prevents us from being able to report comprehensively or indeed accurately about Tibet, and means the region is effectively closed to independent, impartial journalism. A three-day, extremely limited and heavily controlled official trip is absolutely unacceptable, and should in no way be interpreted as meaning that journalists are now able to travel to Tibet."

Foreign journalists, based on the survey, listed restrictions on access to Tibet, restriction of movement once in Tibet and sources' fear of speaking freely as the three leading reasons they cannot do accurate and comprehensive reporting on Tibet.

Journalists indicated that the lack of access to Tibet forced them to rely on Tibetan exile sources and other experts outside of the region in an attempt to provide balance in their reports. Said one reporter:

"I feel that the government restrictions on Tibet reporting lead to one-dimensional reporting. Nearly every story becomes Chinese gov't vs. Tibetan human rights and religious freedom. More access would lead to a lot more nuance, I believe."

Added another:

"It's complicated. We can try to balance the reporting that we can occasionally do in government trips with voices that express different point of views - there are many scholars, dissidents and Tibetan organizations abroad. But in general terms, I also think there is a disconnect between these overseas actors in the Tibetan puzzle (each of them with their agenda, of course) and the situation on the ground, which is something that we cannot access independently. A difficult dilemmas that you face as a journalist in Tibet, and in China in general, is... even if you find the chance to get rid of your minders and get out in the street to try to talk to people, I'm going to have limited time to try to find a voice that tells me (freely?) about what the government is doing good or bad. In a way, that person is locked in Tibet, facing reprisals for being quoted

in an article in Western media, or by being seen talking to a foreign reporter. And the only reason why I'm sticking the microphone in front of that random person who was just passing by in front of me that morning, is because I have the need to fulfill this illusion of balance by having somebody tell me something different to what the government has told me. I don't think it's fair to do that... so given the lack of time and opportunity to talk freely with people, I decided to go with the option of finding the other side of the story in overseas groups and scholars."

DIPLOMATIC ACCESS

In 2015, China allowed some foreign diplomats and foreign government officials to visit Tibet, including U.S. Ambassador Max Baucus and U.S. Rep. Nancy Pelosi, the House minority leader. However, few, if any, of those delegations appear to have been accompanied by members of their national press.

The FCCC queried foreign journalists on whether members of their government had visited Tibet in 2015. Of the 25 respondents who said they were aware that a representative of their government had visited Tibet, only 16% said they were satisfied that these officials had provided sufficient information about their trip to the press both before and after the trip. Said one respondent:

"In two cases I know of, the trips by U.S. government officials (diplomats and senior legislators) were kept secret until after the fact."

CONCLUSION

Although China may be "opening up" -- ever so slightly -- in allowing more China-based foreign reporters to visit Tibet in groups, the region remains effectively closed to outside media coverage. These restrictions prevent the world from learning the real story of Tibet, and prevent China from telling its story. They also fuel suspicion about government treatment of Tibetans in the TAR, and prevent journalists from confirming that investment and poverty alleviation efforts have improved the lives of people there, as China claims. This media blackout is being abetted by visiting foreign diplomats who, apparently in exchange for access to Tibet, agree to Chinese conditions that foreign media not be notified about trips, or invited to join.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For the Chinese government:

China should lift restrictions on foreign media visiting Tibet, in line with China's general reporting principles allowing freedom to travel and speak to sources who agree to be interviewed.

Short of that, China should at least take intermediary steps of:

- Arranging more trips
- Granting more independent trips
- Making the application process more transparent
- Allowing reporters to request specific itineraries on group trips
- Informing reporters of the cost of trips before they happen

-Ending intimidation of Tibetan sources

For foreign governments:

The FCCC notes with concern and disappointment the apparent inability or unwillingness of foreign government delegations to arrange journalists' access to Tibet to chronicle these visits. The FCCC urges:

All foreign government representatives visiting Tibet to travel with reporters from their home country or other nations, and to make such media coverage a routine part of such visits.

Foreign government delegations to raise the issue of media access to Tibet with their Chinese counterparts that reciprocates the access Chinese journalists enjoy abroad. It is inconceivable, for instance, to imagine Chinese journalists in the United States being forbidden to visit Florida except on highly managed trips arranged by the State Department.

SELECTED REPORTS PRODUCED BY JOURNALISTS WHO VISITED TIBET IN 2015

<http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-12-17/tibet-s-potemkin-economy>
http://www.abc.es/internacional/abci-espera-proximo-dalai-lama-201512130313_noticia.html
http://www.abc.es/internacional/abci-abc-tibet-monjes-bajo-sospecha-201512140257_noticia.html
www.abc.es/sociedad/abci-himalaya-derrite-201512060337_noticia.html
http://www.abc.es/internacional/abci-abc-tibet-y-thangkas-lujo-milenario-para-ricos-chinos-201512150535_noticia.html
<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-tibet-surveillance-idUSKBN0TJ13420151130>
<http://www.reuters.com/video/2015/11/25/tibets-melting-glaciers-show-climate-crisis?videoId=366449983>
<http://www.lefigaro.fr/international/2015/12/16/01003-20151216ARTFIG00255-tibet-la-longue-marche-vers-la-modernite.php>
<http://tibet.net/2015/10/china-micromanages-tibet-floods-it-with-money-to-woo-locals/>
<http://tibet.net/2015/12/china-deploys-mass-surveillance-to-secure-streets-around-ancient-tibetan-temple-read-more-at-reutershttpwww-reuters-comarticle20151130us-china-tibet-surveillance-iduskbn0tj13420151130uyobdxly/>
<http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/kailash-mansarovar-yatra-indian-pilgrims-tibet-kailash-route-nathu-la-pass/1/446153.html>

*About the survey:

The survey was sent to 177 FCCC 2015 correspondent members and 351 non-members in January 2016, of whom 142 replied. Figures indicate absolute number of responses, unless otherwise indicated. When percentages are used, they reflect all respondents to that specific question. Not all respondents answered every question. Please note that non-members were not surveyed in the previous year. Data may be used if credit is given to the Foreign Correspondents' Club of China (FCCC).

The Foreign Correspondents Club of China is a Beijing-based professional association comprising more than 160 correspondents from 33 countries and regions. Contact: fccadmin@gmail.com.

Website: www.fccchina.org.

