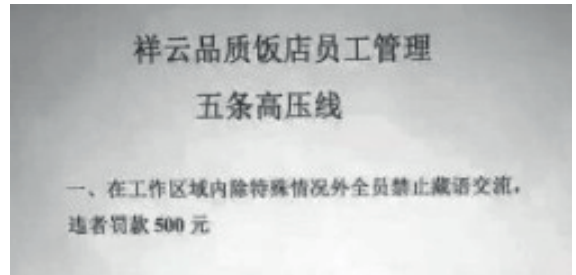


HOTEL WORKERS IN TIBET WIN DECISIVE LANGUAGE VICTORY

SUMMARY

In January 2016, Chinese-owned Hotel Shangyuan in Rebkong County, Tibet issued a policy that banned employees from speaking Tibetan while on the job “except for in special circumstances.” The policy threatened a 500 yuan fine and firing for noncompliance. This was a clear violation of labor laws created by China’s National People’s Congress (NPC) that protected workers by banning discrimination based on ethnic group, race, sex, or religious belief.



Copy of Order issued by the hotel management

After the policy was posted at the hotel, pictures of it went viral on social media as local Tibetans took to the internet to challenge the rule’s intrusion on their rights, at times citing legal arguments. Several news outlets and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) reported on the issue. Netizens from China’s Han ethnic majority also showed their support, as one comment said, “Tibetans should have the right to speak their own language, and this right should be protected.”



Closure notice by “Rebkong County Industry and Commerce Management Bureau.

The public outcry had a major effect and the local government temporarily closed the hotel to investigate. Hotel management quickly admitted its mistake and removed the ban, issuing an apology. A few days later, Rebkong County government officials also publicly reiterated the laws giving Tibetan language equal and sometimes greater prominence than Mandarin Chinese for Tibetan areas. This was an unmitigated victory—especially given the harsh political context—proving that using public, online pressure to highlight existing language laws

can lead to meaningful victories when confronted with language discrimination in Tibet.

ISSUE

A newly opened, Chinese-owned hotel in Rebkong County, Tibet banned employees from speaking Tibetan. This was in direct violation of language laws protecting workers from discrimination based on ethnicity.

WHO

Employees of the hotel and Tibetans/other netizens who saw the issue posted online

WHERE

Rebkong County, Malho Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Qinghai Province, Tibet

GOALS

We can assume the goal was to overturn the hotel policy banning Tibetan language usage

STRATEGY

By posting on social media, the strategy seemed to be to raise awareness of the issue and use public, online pressure to challenge the policy

PLANNED OR SPONTANEOUS?

While it is not known if the initial posting of the policy to WeChat was a coordinated effort by employees, the campaign soon spread spontaneously and rapidly with many individuals (local Tibetans and allies) taking to the internet to express their outrage.

ISSUE FRAMING

The issue was framed in terms of the right of minorities to speak their own language in Tibetan areas, as secured by anti-discrimination language laws and the Chinese Constitution

LEADERS, PARTICIPANTS, ALLIES INCLUDING ELITES

Leaders & Participants

- Tibetan employees at the Shangyun hotel
- Other local Tibetans

Allies:

- Han Chinese netizens opposed to language discrimination
- International media outlets and NGOs spreading the story

TARGET

- Hotel management
- Government officials from Malho Prefecture

OPPONENTS

- Hotel management



A poster in China calls for study of the Tibetan language.

- Government officials from Malho Prefecture

TACTICS

People posted their complaints online, especially on WeChat and Weibo. These actions were dispersed across the internet with low to medium risk depending on anonymity. If not anonymous, however, employees risked their jobs and pushback from officials.

RESPONSE BY OPPONENTS

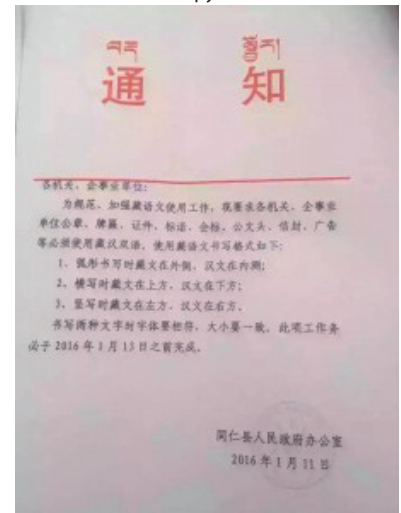
Government officials:

The Rebkong County People's Government office in Malho Prefecture responded quickly, ordering the hotel closed for investigation. Within a week, officials issued a formal notice emphasizing the importance of using Tibetan in all government business, a move that seemed directly linked to the online pressure.

Hotel management:

In an unusual step, the hotel issued a formal statement that acknowledged the policy had violated national language regulations. The statement apologized for offending Tibetans and promised "a full, deep, thorough, and meticulous rectification," assuring that these "circumstances will never happen again in the future."

Copy of the new directive



MEDIA & MESSAGING

As public outrage circulated online, there were multiple news reports on the issue from Radio Free Asia, Voice of Asia, and several NGOs. It is unclear if local Tibetans reached out to the media or if reports had influence on the actions of government and hotel officials.

OUTCOMES

Two direct outcomes of the public outcry were:

- 1) The cancellation of the hotel's policy banning employees from speaking Tibetan at work
- 2) A Rebkong County government notice reiterating existing language laws on official Tibetan language usage.

The reaction of authorities showed great possibility for the power of internet mobilization coupled with an emphasis on existing language laws. Such clear and meaningful victories are very significant in helping create space for communities to protect their language—and therefore culture—in the face of pressure to assimilate.

Copy of Apology from Hotel Shangyun

