

CHINA MEDIA BULLETIN

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IMAGE OF THE MONTH

A Doctor's Death

This illustration, based on a now-iconic photo of Chinese doctor and whistleblower Li Wenliang, circulated widely on Chinese social media following Li's death in Wuhan on February 7, 2020. Li had been reprimanded by police in early January for "spreading rumors," after trying to warn colleagues on WeChat of cases of the SARS-like disease eventually acknowledged as Covid-19. He passed away after contracting the illness himself. His death sparked a rare, unified, and widespread uproar of grief and anger on Chinese social media platforms. Alongside tributes to Li's courage and sacrifice, the hashtag "[WeWantFreeSpeech](#)" garnered over two million views within five hours on Sina Weibo before being censored.

Credit: [Kuang Biao](#)



ANALYSIS

In a public health crisis, Beijing sees a political threat

By Sarah Cook

Sarah Cook is a senior research analyst for China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan at Freedom House, as well as director of its [China Media Bulletin](#).

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Suppression of dissent remains a top priority, and the stakes are higher than ever.

Over the past month, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has marshalled the country's public security apparatus to track down and detain known activists and ordinary citizens who have shared information about the coronavirus outbreak, provided on-the-ground updates from the epicenter, or reflected upon the epidemic's implications for China's governance model.

But parts of the regime have also gone on the offensive against its political enemies more broadly, raising new questions about where party leaders' priorities lie during a public health crisis and how far they will go to maintain their hold on power.

Muzzling sources of independent information

The disappearance of three Chinese citizen journalists who had been live-streaming updates from Wuhan has drawn international attention. The three men—[businessman Fang Bin](#), [lawyer Chen Qiushi](#), and former [journalist Li Zehua](#)—had separately recorded and disseminated video reports from inside the locked-down city, its hospitals, and its quarantine centers. Over the past month, [all three have vanished into some form of custody](#), detained by police or possibly quarantined despite their reported good health.

While these cases are widely known, in part due to the men's international contacts and the potency of their videos, there are many more like them. Media reports, updates from human rights groups, and posts on local government websites from the past month indicate that similar measures are being taken by authorities far from Wuhan. In Shandong Province, prodemocracy activist [Ren Ziyuan](#) was sent to 15 days of administrative detention for criticizing the [government's management](#) of the epidemic online. [Tan Zuoren](#), an online activist and former political prisoner in Sichuan Province, received multiple visits by police and had his account on the WeChat social media platform frozen. In Nanjing, former professor [Guo Quan](#) was arrested for “inciting subversion of state power” after publishing articles online with information related to the outbreak.

Chinese Human Rights Defenders has documented [over 450 cases](#) of ordinary netizens who were detained for supposedly spreading “rumors.” Local government websites in Shandong, Jiangxi, Jilin, and Tianjin reported that security forces had arrested adherents of the banned Falun Gong spiritual practice who were handing out leaflets or posting banners with information related to the health crisis. In [Tibetan areas](#), people have reportedly been subject to administrative detention for reporting suspected cases on WeChat or simply offering prayers. Yet officials have carried on with activities meant to reinforce political controls over Tibetan monasteries and households—for example gathering people to pledge loyalty to the national flag and sending party cad-

res to travel among villages—even when such actions run counter to recommended health safeguards.

Some intimidation efforts appear to be reaching beyond China’s borders, with journalists reporting cases of Chinese WeChat users in the [United States](#), Canada, France, Australia, and elsewhere being threatened or having their social media accounts [silenced](#) when they try to relay international news to relatives inside China.



Li Zehua, a former journalist live-streaming from Wuhan, shortly before his detention by police. *Credit: Li Zehua/YouTube*

From what is known about the above examples, the individuals detained or threatened were not maliciously spreading disinformation that would cause public panic, but rather were sharing information they perceived as helpful to fellow citizens in the midst of a sudden, disorienting, and dangerous crisis that has been exacerbated by state censorship. And they often did so despite an awareness of the reprisals they might personally face as a result.

Lashing out at political enemies

Even as resources are stretched thin responding to the public health crisis, the CCP continues to prioritize crushing perceived threats to its political legitimacy. This tendency is evident from a recent flurry of actions meant to punish long-standing targets over political offenses that have nothing to do with the coronavirus.

On February 25, for example, a mainland court imposed a 10-year prison sentence on [Gui Minhaj](#), a Hong Kong-based publisher of scandalous books about CCP leaders who had been abducted in 2015 from Thailand. Chinese authorities also apparently coerced him into [renouncing his Swedish citizenship](#), which would strip him of a host of legal protections and set a dangerous precedent for any foreigner detained in China, though Sweden has not recognized the supposed change in nationality.

Another instance was the February 28 arrest in Hong Kong of media tycoon [Jimmy Lai](#) for participating in a protest more than six months ago and making insulting comments to a journalist in 2017. Given that Lai has been in Beijing’s crosshairs for many years, the timing of the legally dubious arrests seems linked to a crisis of political legitimacy created by the viral outbreak. Two other veteran democracy advocates were arrested the same day. At the very least, the authorities may be using the extraordinary circumstances of the epidemic to take aggressive steps that they might otherwise be reluctant to attempt.

Back in China, the judicial system continue to push forward with the politicized [prosecution](#) of other activists—like Guangxi Province rights lawyer [Qin Yongpei](#) and anti-discrimination advocate [Cheng Yuan](#). Police [harassed](#) Cheng’s wife on March 3 after she

posted a [video](#) calling for the release of her husband and two of his colleagues. In late February, [Yang Xubin](#) was sentenced in Guangdong Province to nine months in prison for expressing support for Hong Kong protesters.

In a more prominent case, rights [lawyer Xu Zhiyong](#), who was detained in Guangdong Province on February 15, had been on the run from authorities since December, when he attended a dinner meeting of activists. But the nationwide effort to track him down may have been accelerated by his recent comments and updates on Twitter and blogging platforms, including a scathing [letter](#) calling for President [Xi Jinping to step down](#) over the government's mishandling of the coronavirus. Interestingly, when police came to the home of the friend Xu was staying with, they reportedly claimed to be [checking residents' temperatures](#). The visit ended with Xu and [his hosts](#) being taken into detention on political grounds.

Doing harm to all concerned

Even without any intentional escalation, the harms caused by the regime's repressive practices are magnified by the epidemic. For instance, Li Wenzu, the wife of jailed rights lawyer Wang Quanzhang, cannot take her son to visit his father in Shandong. She reports that police have denied them the option of [communicating by video](#). Meanwhile, outbreaks of the virus have been recorded in several [prisons](#) in Hubei, Shandong, and Zhejiang provinces, including facilities known to have housed religious and political prisoners. As numerous observers have noted, the possible spread of the pathogen through detention camps in Xinjiang could be catastrophic for hundreds of thousands of Uighurs.

Moreover, like the people of Wuhan and elsewhere who have suffered from the outbreak, the victims of the CCP's politicized repression during this time will feel its effects for many years to come, whether due to long prison sentences, lost livelihoods, or actual health problems linked to their mistreatment in custody.

Ironically, the repressive actions will not be without cost for the CCP itself. The high degree of censorship and at times preposterous propaganda over the past month and a half have weakened public trust in the regime and incentivized people to jump the Great Firewall or otherwise [circumvent censorship](#). Gui Minhai's mistreatment has galvanized condemnation not only from Sweden but also from the [European Union](#) and the [United States](#). And days after Jimmy Lai's arrest, Hong Kong saw its first round of [protests](#) since the epidemic began, as public anger overrode people's fears of contagion.

Still, the Chinese authorities are likely to continue prioritizing political repression in the coming months. The coronavirus outbreak—arguably more than any other development in the past decade—has shaken the foundations of CCP legitimacy, threatening the post-Tiananmen social contract in which citizens accept the loss of political rights and civil liberties in exchange for a sense of safety and growing prosperity. This renders the message of people like Xu Zhiyong more appealing to a larger contingent of Chinese citizens, and therefore more dangerous to Xi Jinping.

IN THE NEWS

An ever-changing coronavirus propaganda narrative

Chinese state media coverage of the 2019 novel coronavirus outbreak has gone through several phases since the first cases of the SARS-like illness emerged in Wuhan in late December.

- January: People’s Daily too busy for an epidemic:** Analysis from the China Media Project shows that [from January 1 to January 20](#), the Communist Party’s flagship *People’s Daily* newspaper ignored the emergence of a novel coronavirus in Wuhan, instead giving priority [to coverage of speeches and other activities by CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping](#). It was not until January 21 that the virus was finally acknowledged on the paper’s front page. While other domestic Chinese media covered the unfolding crisis in the following days, it did not reappear on the front page of the *People’s Daily* until January 26, when the paper ran an article about a meeting of the [Standing Committee](#) at which members had discussed prevention and control of the illness.
- Late January to early February:** Xi disappears from public for 12 days: On January 27, Premier Li Keqiang became [the first senior party leader to visit Wuhan](#). However, Xi Jinping remained uncharacteristically out of the public eye during late January and early February, sparking speculation about his own health, or factional CCP infighting. Xi [reemerged on February 10](#), wearing a face mask and visiting doctors at a Beijing hospital.
- Early February to early March:** Heroic profiles of sacrifice, and creating a “positive environment”: As public concern about the virus grew, state propaganda outlets began to [promote stories of individual sacrifices made by frontline medical workers](#). Even the death of the Wuhan doctor Li Wenliang, who was punished by local authorities when he first attempted to share news of the virus in late 2019, [was framed by state media as a tragic story of individual heroism](#)—though coverage omitted his role as a whistleblower silenced by local officials. [State authorities also encouraged media outlets to highlight positive stories](#), such as [citizens leaving anonymous cash donations at government offices](#) in order to assist in the fight against the virus.
- Late February:** Winning on an ongoing war: State media eventually began using coverage of the fight against the virus to bolster the credentials of the Communist Party and of Xi Jinping personally. Chinese state media announced on [February 26](#) the release of a book, *A Battle against Epidemic: China Combatting Covid-19 in 2020*, which aims to present the party as having responded to the disease with skill and speed. But with the virus continuing to spread, many online [derided the book](#) as ill-timed.
- Late February into early March:** Emerging narrative blaming the United States: Since the end of February, conspiracy theories about the origins of Covid-19 [have begun](#)

[to circulate online in China](#), many suggesting that the virus originated in the United States. Some have speculated without evidence that deaths in the United States caused by vaping were instead due to the coronavirus. Such narratives were further bolstered on February 27 when top Chinese epidemiologist Zhong Nanshan stated that the virus may not have originated in China. This [anti-American narrative](#)—subtly stoked by other official statements, state media reports, and the convenient absence of censorship for posts shifting the blame to the United States—have resonated among many in China, and to some degree have been successful in refocusing anger and frustration away from the party.

Cracks in the narrative: Some state media coverage has [seen pushback by citizens](#)—including youth—who find certain propaganda distasteful. One state-run newspaper published a video of women healthcare workers having their heads shaved before returning to treat patients; intended to portray them as “beautiful warriors” against the epidemic, the video [was widely derided as humiliating and sexist](#). Likewise, a video by the state broadcaster China Central Television Channel (CCTV) showing a nine-months-pregnant nurse treating patients at a hospital in Wuhan [drew criticism for using the woman as a “propaganda tool.”](#)

Coronavirus censorship: Evolution, tactics, and intensification

The early days of the Covid-19 outbreak were marked by tight censorship, especially by local authorities in Wuhan. But, since January 19, public concern about the virus has produced a flurry of investigative reporting into the unfolding crisis. For a few weeks, censors seemed to permit relatively open discussion of the virus, [including on “self-media” platforms like WeChat](#), while professional journalists took advantage of the government’s slow response to publish reports on the early days of the outbreak and life under the dramatic lockdown of numerous cities in China. The state-owned magazine *Sanlian Life* even published an article on the potential impact of the coronavirus on China’s economy, although it was later [ordered deleted](#).

By early February, tighter censorship began to be enforced following [a meeting of the Politburo on February 3](#) to discuss the epidemic. On February 5, [the Cyberspace Administration of China \(CAC\) issued a notice](#) concerning media coverage of the virus. In the announcement, public WeChat accounts were accused of having [“illegally carried out reporting activities,”](#) while the CAC placed internet companies like Sina Weibo and Tencent under “special supervision.” Tightened censorship following a period of relative openness when a sudden crisis emerges is a pattern that has occurred before, including following the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, and after a fatal 2011 high-speed rail crash.

Of particular concern to government censors has been coverage of Li Wenliang, the Wuhan doctor who along with seven of his colleagues had been disciplined by local authorities for trying to share information about the coronavirus as early as the end

of December. An article in *Beijing Youth Daily* about Li falling ill after treating an infected patient [was ordered deleted by government censors](#) on January 28. Following the doctor's death on February 7, an outpouring of public mourning and anger led to the government issuing [censorship instructions to all media](#) ordering them not to "sensationalize" the topic. Meanwhile, shortly after the hashtag "WeWantFreeSpeech" began trending on the Sina Weibo microblogging platform after Li's death, it was swiftly [censored](#).

Three additional dimensions of the escalation in state censorship are especially notable:

- **WeChat account shutdowns:** Since early February, [censors have cracked down on personal WeChat accounts](#), not only deleting messages but also suspending accounts, in an attempt to limit criticism of the Chinese government's handling of the epidemic. The closures have affected large numbers of ordinary users, including those sharing seemingly innocuous or state-approved content, leaving them with more limited avenues for communicating with family and friends, obtaining news updates, or using electronic payment services as a result. When users complained about censorship [using the hashtag "WeChat Blocked Account,"](#) posts using this hashtag were also deleted.
- **Live-streaming platforms and WeChat delete critical, factual, and neutral information:** [According to a March 3 report from the Canada-based research group Citizen Lab](#), live-streaming platform YY began censoring words related to the coronavirus on December 31, while WeChat began censoring coronavirus-related content in early February. Crucially, some of the censored content was neither criticism of the state nor "rumors," but simply neutral references to state policies or media coverage of the epidemic.
- **Hundreds detained amid new rules criminalizing rumors:** On February 10, [the Chinese government issued new guidelines stipulating criminal charges](#) against people who use social media to spread rumors about the virus, criticize the state's response to the crisis, or otherwise impede the fight against Covid-19. Such measures are having a pernicious effect [on China's already constrained media environment](#). According to Chinese Human Rights Defenders, [452 netizens have been punished](#) for "spreading rumors" as of March 2.

Even before the outbreak, [new internet censorship rules](#) targeting "negative content," "sensationalist headlines," and "excessive celebrity gossip" were scheduled to come into effect March 1. How these new regulations will be used to further tighten control over the media landscape—including over information about the coronavirus—remains to be seen.

Coronavirus outbreak triggers new surveillance initiatives

New high-tech monitoring systems have emerged as the Chinese authorities and the country's citizens have sought to contain the spread of the novel coronavirus. These include widespread deployment of [thermal scanners](#) to identify those with a fever, opportunities for citizens to obtain a [record of their recent travels](#) from state-run mobile phone companies, and [electronic door seals](#) that alert authorities if people under quarantine leave their homes. Three larger trends are particularly notable, in part because of their long-term implications:

- Quarantine and contact-tracking apps:** China is making use of new mobile apps as part of the fight against Covid-19. [The “Close Contact Detector” app](#), created by the State Council, the National Health Commission, and China Electronics Technology Group Corporation, uses information from public authorities and mobile data to alert users if they have been in the vicinity of people suspected to be infected. There are concerns that the app—[which requires the phone number and national ID number of users](#)—shares private medical information, and could be used by the Chinese government to collect additional personal data on users. Other tech companies have developed similar apps in partnership with local governments. [Alipay has worked with authorities in Hangzhou](#) to create a feature for its mobile-payment system that assesses individuals' supposed health; people scan a QR code at entrances to markets and apartment buildings, with a satisfactory result required for entry. The feature is now reportedly used in 200 cities across China. Alipay has announced plans for further expansion of such efforts, including for a new program that will draw from individuals' travel history and basic health information to produce recommendations about quarantine measures. [Tencent has added a similar feature to WeChat](#) accounts based in Shenzhen.
- Expanding real-name registration on transportation and public venues:** Commuters in Shanghai are being encouraged [to use WeChat, Alipay, or the map app Autovani to scan a QR code after boarding subway cars](#). The system, similar to programs implemented in other cities across China, is intended to help authorities track the spread of the coronavirus and is currently voluntary. In other cities, [local authorities have worked with tech companies Meituan Dianping and Dida Chuxing](#) to implement mandatory real-name registration systems for all riders using QR scanners to board public transportation. In Beijing, movie theaters that have closed due to the virus can only reopen if they record [the name, address, and national ID numbers of all patrons](#).
- Facial recognition upgrades:** Chinese citizens are being encouraged to wear face masks to prevent the spread of Covid-19, with one consequence being renewed attention to enhancements in facial-recognition technology. Chinese tech company SenseTime announced in late February that its cameras were able to recognize faces [based solely on the limited parts of the face that a mask-wearer leaves visible](#).

Surveillance cameras equipped with facial-recognition software are already being used [to identify people suspected of breaking quarantine](#).

The use of surveillance technologies in response to the virus has raised new concerns over citizen data privacy and protection, as well as the long-term uses of collected data. While local governments claim that personal data collected as part of the fight against Covid-19 will be destroyed after the epidemic ends, [critics are skeptical](#). A March 1 report by the *New York Times* suggests that Alipay’s “health code” QR-scanning feature [shares the user’s personal information and location with the police](#). Moreover, Chinese internet users have increasingly expressed fears that their personal information could be [stolen or sold to third parties without their knowledge](#).

HONG KONG

Reprisals against journalists, lawmakers, others continue

Even as fears of a large coronavirus outbreak grow in Hong Kong—where 98 cases have been reported as of March 1, and where the government is taking measures to limit travel from China—Hong Kong authorities and Chinese state media continue their efforts to thwart and discredit journalists covering the embattled prodemocracy movement, and others involved. Here are several notable events since late January:

- **American journalist barred entry:** On February 5, US reporter Michael Yon was [prevented from entering Hong Kong](#). Yon, who previously covered the territory’s antigovernment protests as an independent journalist, believes he was barred from the city due to his public support for the protest movement.
- **Teachers and students arrested for Lennon Wall posts:** On February 24, [police arrested one teacher and 14 students](#) in Kwai Chung for hanging posters on a Lennon Wall at a pedestrian overpass. Police claimed that the teacher had led the students, who are reported to be in their mid-teens, “to break the law.”
- **Jimmy Lai and others arrested amid state media smears:** On February 28, [local media tycoon Jimmy Lai](#), founder of the local tabloid *Apple Daily* and [a prominent supporter of the prodemocracy movement](#), was arrested for “illegal assembly.” He was taken into custody along with the vice chairman of the Labour Party, Lee Cheuk-yan, and former Democratic Party chairman Yeung Sum, due to their participation in an August 31 protest march that was banned by police. Lai is also accused of [verbally abusing](#) a journalist from a pro-Beijing publication in 2017. The three men could face [up to five years in prison](#) if convicted. Some 7,100 demonstrators have been arrested and 1,120 were prosecuted [between June 9 of last year and January 24](#); [human rights groups have criticized these prosecutions](#) as politically motivated. They moreover underline a pattern of selective justice in Hong Kong, given the relative impunity for well-documented police brutality and violence by gangs against

journalists, including reporters for *Apple Daily*, as well as prodemocracy protesters. Chinese state media praised Lai's arrest, denouncing him as a "[traitor](#)," a "[Hong Kong riot mastermind](#)," and "[a political tool for foreign forces](#)."

Positive developments: Amidst continuing restrictions on press and political freedoms in Hong Kong, there have been some pieces of good news. On February 21, [prosecutors withdrew rioting charges against two men](#) who participated in protests last August 24, the first known cases of such charges being dropped. And on February 24, *Hong Kong Free Press*, an independent English-language digital news outlet, was [shortlisted for the Index on Censorship's Freedom of Expression Awards](#).

BEYOND CHINA

Tighter state media regulation, Chinese diplomats on Twitter, artistic censorship, and expanding Chinese social media apps

- Chinese social media apps top global downloads for January:** Chinese smartphone apps continue to gain followers worldwide, with TikTok emerging as [the most downloaded app for both Apple and Android systems](#) in January, according to data published by Sensortower. Helo and [Vigo](#) Video, two other entertainment apps owned by the same Beijing-based parent company, ByteDance, and popular in countries like [India](#), were also among the top ten overall for Apple store downloads. Several apps owned by Tencent, including WeChat, also performed well. The high number of smartphone users within China also ensured that [Chinese-language news apps like Toutiao and Tencent News](#) were among the world's most downloaded news apps that month.
- US designates Chinese state media as "foreign missions," caps work permits:** On February 18, the US State Department named [five Chinese state media organizations for- eign missions](#). Under the new rules, the five media outlets—Xinhua News Agency, China Radio International, China Global Television Network, and the distributors of *China Daily* and *The People's Daily*—will be required [to provide the US government with a list of their employees, and seek permission if they wish to purchase prop- erty](#). On March 2, the State Department further announced [caps on the maximum number of Chinese citizens](#) permitted to work for these agencies in the United States. The move came in apparent reprisal for China's abrupt expulsion of three *Wall Street Journal* reporters in February.
- US Census Bureau ads in Chinese-language outlets draw criticism:** In order to reach Chinese-speaking audiences in the United States, the [US Census Bureau](#) was reportedly planning to [publicize the 2020 Census through ads purchased on Chinese state-owned CCTV4](#), among other Chinese-language outlets, some known for their strong pro-Beijing stance. After the plan emerged in the media, however, the Census Bureau clarified that CCTV4 had been [added to a list of potential community](#)

[media outlets in error](#), and that ad space in the outlet had not been purchased. Also excluded from the ad list were outlets known for criticism of the Chinese government, such as the *Epoch Times* and the San Francisco Bay area radio station Sound of Hope, [the latter of which had been included in a list of Census advertisers in 2010](#). Media groups with links to the Chinese government that were [contracted to run census ads](#) include Sinovision, ChinaPress, Phoenix TV, and Sky Link TV; analysts noted that the prevalence of contracts with state-friendly media reflected the Chinese government's long-standing efforts to coopt US-based, Chinese-language outlets.

- Chinese diplomats take to Twitter:** Since late 2019, [Chinese diplomats have been taking to Twitter](#) in ever-greater numbers to promote the Chinese government's views before international audiences, even as the platform remains blocked in China. [Currently there are 68 Chinese diplomats who use Twitter](#), including Ambassador to the United States Cui Tiankai, and Ambassador to the United Kingdom Liu Xiaoming. Responses to these social media activities have been mixed. Some diplomats' use of undiplomatic language has backfired: for example, China's consul general to Kolkata, India, Zha Liyou, was criticized by users after telling a critic that they would be "[eradicated just like \[a\] virus](#)." Others, like Ambassador to South Africa Lin Songtian, have seen [their criticism of the US government](#) gain traction. Beyond Twitter, Chinese diplomats are becoming increasingly bellicose. [In a February 2020 interview with the *Economist*](#), China's ambassador to Sweden warned that "for our enemies, we have shotguns."
- Beijing's foreign influence over the arts:** Over the past month, photographers, cartoonists, and dancers that Beijing is hostile to have faced censorship and smears due to direct Chinese government action or self-censorship by event organizers—though some efforts have been thwarted after public exposure. On February 19, the *Hong Kong Free Press* reported that the Sony World Photography Awards [removed from its website](#) photographs of the Hong Kong protest movement by nominees Ko Chung-ming, David Butlow, and Adam Ferguson, citing their "sensitive nature." After public pushback, [Butlow and Ferguson's photographs were fully restored](#), though Ko's were only partially returned to the website. On February 7, an art exhibit hosted by a pro-Hong Kong democracy movement organization in New South Wales, Australia, was initially [forced to exclude work from noted dissident Chinese artist Baidiucao](#) at the request of the gallery owner, [a decision that was later reversed](#). In Perth, Australia, a freedom of information request revealed that in March 2019, a publicly funded theatre center was [forced to apologize to the Chinese consulate](#) after hosting a Taiwanese dance performance. And in the United States, public health officials [have sought to refute false rumours](#) that attendees at Shen Yun dance performances were at risk of contracting the coronavirus from the ethnic Chinese dancers, noting that, among other things, the troupe is banned in China because many of its performers practicing Falun Gong. The Falun Dafa Information Center reported on February 26 that the rumors were being deliberately spread in the United States and South Korea by [individuals linked to the Chinese state](#).

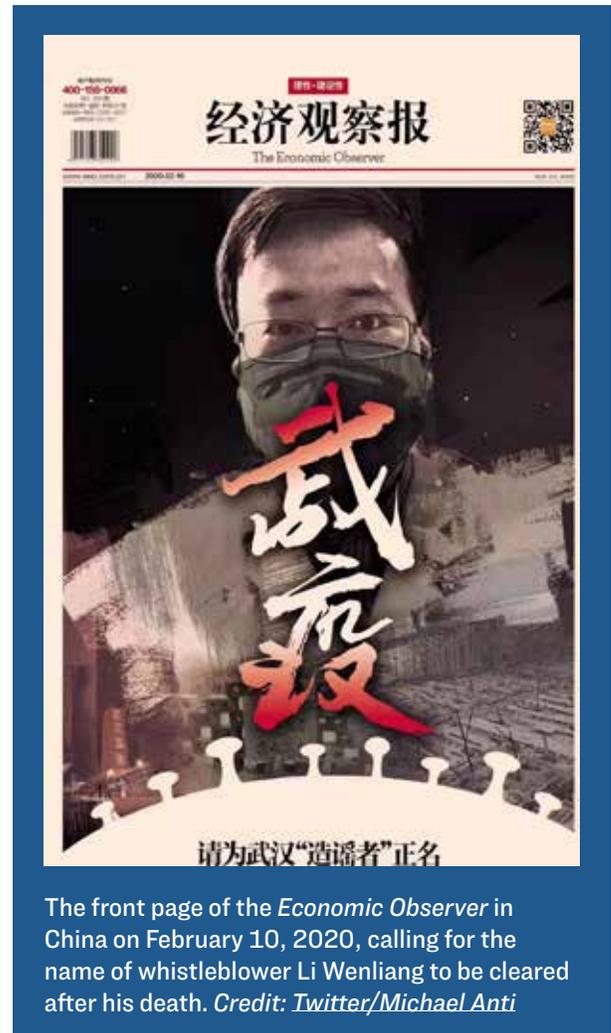
FEATURED PUSHBACK

Chinese journalists cover coronavirus

Even as Chinese state media outlets have pushed forward the Chinese leadership’s propaganda narratives and agenda regarding the coronavirus, a wide array of Chinese-language news outlets inside and outside the country have provided courageous and valuable coverage of the outbreak and initial cover-up. Several commercialized and financial news publications in China—despite some degree of state ownership—have tried to outpace censors or have directly defied them. Outlets like [Caixin](#) and the [Economic Observer](#) have conducted investigations into the early days of the outbreak and official cover-up, published accounts from patients and medical workers on the front lines, and scrutinized official infection tallies. Activists have gone to great lengths to preserve such reports from inside China before they can be deleted. Among other initiatives, [one repository on GitHub](#) includes an impressive collection of thousands of articles from dozens of news sources.

Meanwhile, journalists and outlets based in Hong Kong, Taiwan, or among the Chinese diaspora have tried to identify credible alternative sources of information about the actual scale of infections and deaths, including by interviewing workers at funeral parlors in Wuhan and publishing leaked data from provincial health offices. Publicly funded outlets like Radio Free Asia and Deutsche Welle, as well as Chinese-language versions of international media like the *New York Times* and *Financial Times*, have offered additional quality coverage to Chinese-language speakers.

Taken together, these efforts have provided Chinese news consumers who know where to look with a more comprehensive understanding of the outbreak, despite extensive official censorship. Alongside public outcries and videos from citizen journalists, they also appear to have yielded some adjustments to government actions—be it central authorities [dispatching discipline inspectors to Wuhan](#) to investigate the wrongful punishment of doctors who tried to issue early warnings, or changes to case [reporting guidelines](#) to provide a more accurate sense for the scale of infections.



The front page of the *Economic Observer* in China on February 10, 2020, calling for the name of whistleblower Li Wenliang to be cleared after his death. Credit: [Twitter/Michael Anti](#)

WHAT TO WATCH FOR

- **Investigations of coronavirus data accuracy:** Since February 20, Chinese health officials have been reporting a [consistent decline](#) in the pace of new cases of the coronavirus emerging in China, particularly outside of Hubei Province, the outbreak's epicenter, even as new infections and deaths in other countries multiply. Amid a propaganda narrative that has already declared the virus contained, and calls from Xi Jinping to restart the economy, watch for evidence of greater-than-reported infection rates or deliberate data manipulation by local, provincial, and central officials. Such evidence recently emerged in documents leaked from [Shandong Province](#).
- **Long-lasting, tighter CCP grip on society, communications:** As censorship and surveillance have intensified amid the Chinese government's efforts to contain the coronavirus outbreak, watch for which [measures and technologies](#) remain in place long after the outbreak ends, whether personal data collected during this period is deployed for other social-control purposes, and whether journalists or media outlets that challenged censorship are punished retroactively.
- **Foreign regulation of Chinese state media:** Following the US government's designation of key Chinese state media outlets as "foreign missions" and the placing of caps on the number of personnel permitted to work in the country, watch for practical implications for Chinese state media operating in the United States. Also watch for any reciprocal measures taken by China, including new expulsions of American journalists. Elsewhere, the rights group Safeguard Defenders submitted a complaint to the United Kingdom's media regulator OFCOM on [February 25](#), outlining evidence that China Global Television Network (CGTN) is violating UK broadcasting law by being owned or controlled by a political body, the Chinese Communist Party. If the allegation is confirmed, it could result in the station's broadcasting license being revoked. Watch for whether OFCOM launches such an investigation and its resulting conclusions.

TAKE ACTION

- **Subscribe to the *China Media Bulletin*:** Have the bulletin's updates and insights delivered directly to your inbox each month, free of charge. Visit [here](#) or e-mail cmb@freedomhouse.org.
- **Share the *China Media Bulletin*:** Help friends and colleagues better understand China's changing media and censorship landscape.
- **Access uncensored content:** Find an overview comparing popular circumvention tools and information on how to access them via GreatFire.org, [here](#) or [here](#). Learn more about how to reach uncensored content and enhance digital security [here](#).
- **Support a prisoner:** Learn how to take action to help journalists and free expression activists, including those featured in passed issues of the *China Media Bulletin*, [here](#).
- **Visit the *China Media Bulletin Resources* section:** Learn more about how policy-makers, media outlets, educators and donors can help advance free expression in China and beyond via a [new resource section](#) on the Freedom House website.

For more information

- For archives, go to: www.freedomhouse.org/China-media
- For additional information on human rights and free expression in China, see: *Freedom in the World 2018*, *Freedom of the Press 2017*, *Freedom on the Net 2018*, and *The Battle for China's Spirit: Religious Revival, Repression, and Resistance under Xi Jinping*



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1850 M Street NW, 11th Floor
Washington, DC 20036

111 John Street, Floor 8
New York, NY 10005

www.freedomhouse.org
facebook.com/FreedomHouseDC
[@freedomHouseDC](https://twitter.com/freedomHouseDC)

202.296.5101 | info@freedomhouse.org