

CHINA MEDIA BULLETIN

Headlines

ANALYSIS Five Predictions for Beijing's Assault on Internet Freedom in 2021 **P2**

IN THE NEWS

- Censorship updates: Journalist accreditation, film cancellation, live-streaming controls, tech-sector regulation **P5**
- Surveillance updates: Tech firm complicity, coronavirus QR code, facial recognition in real estate **P6**
- Harsh punishments for outspoken entrepreneurs, Twitter users, Wuhan citizen journalist **P7**
- Hong Kong: Attacks on Media Worsen with Journalist Arrests, Banned Protest **P8**
- Beyond China: Beijing's media influence sparks censorship, debate, and response measures at WHO, Vatican, Australia, United Kingdom, India, and Taiwan **P10**

FEATURED PUSHBACK Concerns over Facial Recognition Gain Traction **P12**

WHAT TO WATCH FOR **P13**

TAKE ACTION **P14**

IMAGE OF THE MONTH

Persistent #MeToo Censorship

This [poster](#) of bunnies holding rice with the #MeToo hashtag—referencing a [homonym](#) (“mi tu”) devised to circumvent censorship of the hashtag—circulated on Chinese microblogging platform Sina Weibo as users expressed support for Zhou Xiaoxuan, a 27-year-old woman who has accused prominent Chinese Central Television (CCTV) host Zhu Jun of sexual assault. While expressions of support for Zhou circulated widely on December 2, the day of a court hearing in the case, Chinese netizens complained of silence on the case by official media and the censorship of related posts and hashtag pages related on Sina Weibo and Douban social media platforms.

Credit: [WhatsonWeibo](#)



ANALYSIS

Five Predictions for Beijing's Assault on Internet Freedom in 2021

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](#).

THIS ARTICLE
WAS PUBLISHED
IN THE DIPLOMAT ON
DECEMBER 10, 2020.

The events of the past year point to several censorship patterns that will likely gain prominence in the months to come.

China has long been home to the world's most sophisticated system of internet controls. Indeed, in Freedom House's [Freedom on the Net](#) 2020 report, published in October, it was ranked the lowest among the 65 countries assessed for the sixth year in a row.

But even by China's own standards, censorship and surveillance were pushed to unprecedented extremes this year as the government tightened its grip on the activities of hundreds of millions of internet users. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) also extended its repression and disinformation into Hong Kong and around the world in ways that dramatically increase the stakes for foreign governments, technology firms, and ordinary citizens.

This raises the question: what is 2021 likely to bring in the country that is defining the contours of 21st century digital authoritarianism?

In light of both the *Freedom on the Net* findings and more recent events, these are five trends to watch for in the coming year:

1. Spiking censorship and surveillance surrounding COVID-19 vaccines and outbreaks:

At the center of the official cover-up that enabled COVID-19 to spread globally in early 2020 were the regime's restrictions on internet freedom, particularly police interrogations of and forced retractions by medical professionals who shared early reports on social media of a SARS-like illness in the city of Wuhan. Other repressive measures followed, including restrictions on the use of virtual private networks, the removal of massive amounts of [online content](#), the deletion of [social media accounts](#) and mobile phone applications, and the arrest of [hundreds of internet users](#) for their online speech. A number of these practices have [receded](#) in certain locales as infection rates drop, but the prosecutions of some detainees—like citizen [journalist Zhang Zhan](#)—continue to make their way through the court system. With the government now testing and distributing [COVID-19 vaccines](#) within China and to several developing countries, the political pressure to declare success is enormous. Given this reality and past censorship surrounding [tainted vaccines](#), there are likely to be targeted deletions of and reprisals for any discussion of problems with the vaccination drive in 2021. And if new outbreaks occur in certain parts of the country, tightened censorship and surveillance are sure to follow.

2. Punishments for outspoken political and economic elites: A wide array of internet users in China, ranging from supporters of Hong Kong's democracy movement to

members of ethnic and religious minorities, routinely face arbitrary detention, torture, and draconian prison terms for their online activity. The past year stood out, however, for the number of harsh sentences and other reprisals that were meted out to members of China's political and economic elite—including CCP members—for expressions of dissent. For example, within months of publishing an online critique of party leader Xi Jinping's response to the pandemic, real-estate tycoon [Ren Zhiqiang](#) was stripped of his CCP membership and sentenced to 18 years in prison in September. A few weeks later, a party committee in Fujian Province purged the deputy party secretary of Xiangshan County, [Ye Fuxing](#), and began [criminal procedures](#) against him for spreading material online that “vilified and slandered party and national leaders,” including Xi. In November, two entrepreneurs were targeted: [Sun Dawu](#) in Hubei was detained after speaking out in support of lawyer and democracy advocate Xu Zhiyong and [philanthropist Li Huaqing](#) in Chongqing was sentenced to 20 years in prison after sharing articles in a [private WeChat group](#) concerning atrocities committed by the People's Liberation Army. These cases were remarkable not just because such individuals were airing critiques of CCP rule and in some cases, supporting visions for a more democratic China, but also because of the speed and harshness with which they were punished. As the CCP prepares to celebrate the 100th anniversary of its founding in 1921, further reflections on the poor quality of its current governance are likely to bubble up from within the party, and fresh crackdowns will indubitably ensue.

3. **Amplification of nationalist voices:** Intensifying information controls in China have suppressed online expressions of support for human rights, justice, and fundamental freedoms, but they also encouraged and promoted aggressive nationalistic voices throughout 2020. The result was an even deeper distortion of public online debate, and heightened self-censorship among users hoping to avoid intimidation and verbal abuse by [nationalistic netizens](#). In April, for example, there was an eruption of nationalist vitriol aimed at Wuhan author Fang Fang over the publication in English of online diaries documenting the city's coronavirus lockdown. Should the Chinese government continue to pursue an aggressive foreign policy in the new year, groups of nationalist netizens could be marshalled to reinforce official rhetoric and participate in trolling attacks on both foreign and domestic “enemies.”
4. **A tighter leash on tech giants:** Major Chinese technology companies faced especially intense pressure from agencies like the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) to aid state surveillance and police user content during 2020. The CAC launched multiple “rectification” campaigns involving tighter scrutiny of content and large-scale deletions of posts and accounts. It forced [Sina Weibo](#) to impose a one-week suspension of its trending topics feature in June, and paused NetEase's comment functions for a week in October, [fining](#) the company an unspecified amount because censors found that commenters had posted “[inappropriate](#)” content. The effort to tighten control over big tech firms appeared to gain steam toward the end of the year. On October 26, the CAC [ordered](#) the country's most prevalent mobile internet browsers to undergo a “self-examination,” during which they had to remove rumors, sensational headlines, and other material deemed to violate “socialist

values.” On November 2, the government abruptly [suspended](#) the highly anticipated initial public stock offering of Jack Ma’s Ant Group. Observers speculate it was due to Ma—himself a CCP member—having criticized excessive government regulation. Later in the month, the National Radio and Television Administration issued [new regulations](#) covering the country’s massive live-streaming sector, requiring companies to take stronger measures to proactively promote “positive” content in line with “socialist core values” and shutter accounts that fail to comply [with real-name registration](#) and requirements that they provide advance notice of appearances by celebrities or foreigners. These regulatory actions tend to undermine the efforts of Chinese tech giants to convince foreign markets that they have some independence from the CCP. It remains to be seen how the government and tech entrepreneurs will cope with this tension in 2021, but observers should watch for new examples of the firms proactively doing the bidding of the CCP and Chinese security forces.

5. **More big-data surveillance and its use for political persecution:** Government monitoring of internet and mobile communications in China is already pervasive and technologically advanced. Nevertheless, the party-state’s surveillance reach expanded further during 2020, whether through [health code apps](#) that purported to track COVID-19 exposure, improved facial-recognition systems meant to identify individuals [wearing masks](#), or a massive police-led [DNA collection](#) scheme. As of July, China was home to [18 of the 20 most monitored cities in the world](#). Moreover, government agencies and security services are increasingly moving in the direction of more [data integration](#) across platforms, sources, and locations. The year brought additional evidence that monitoring equipment supposedly designed to prevent crime and terrorism was being used to identify, track, detain, or even prosecute rights activists and religious believers, including [Uighur Muslims](#), [Christians](#), and [Falun Gong practitioners](#). Chinese technology firms have begun to specialize in the types of programs that facilitate such politicized and persecutory uses of surveillance. These developments reinforce concerns that broader big-data advancements—like social credit initiatives or a nationwide [digital currency](#)—will be used to further marginalize rights activists, CCP critics, and minority communities. The new year will reveal the next steps in this progression and could include revelations on the potential complicity by foreign companies that operate in or [export equipment](#) to China.

Persistent Pushback

Despite the tight constraints and the risk of criminal penalties, bright spots in the struggle for internet freedom in China remain and made an appearance in 2020. In the early weeks of the coronavirus outbreak, investigative journalists, video bloggers, and their sources worked to trace the origins of the pandemic, identify those responsible for the initial cover-up, and [report from within the quarantined city](#) of Wuhan. Even after the reporting was censored, internet users devised [creative methods](#) to preserve it—including replacing Chinese characters with emojis, translating into Korean, or using Ethereum blockchain transactions. Netizens openly criticized the authorities’ cover-up efforts and their stifling of open discussion of the government response to

the crisis, while citizen journalists posted unvarnished videos of events on the ground. In early February, as news of the death of whistleblowing doctor Li Wenliang spread, the hashtag “I want free speech” began to trend on Weibo, garnering millions of views in the hours before it was censored.

These activities served as a reminder of the deep desire for credible, independent information and the competency of Chinese journalists and citizens to provide it when given the chance. While such defiance of information controls will be especially difficult in 2021, as the CCP tries to avoid any embarrassments during its centennial year, new examples of effective grassroots resistance may still break through. Given the dangers involved, they deserve the outside world’s attention.

IN THE NEWS

Censorship updates: Journalist accreditation, film cancellation, live-streaming controls, tech-sector regulation

In addition to examples of outright censorship, over the past month, government regulators in China have been especially active imposing preferred ideological standards and restrictions on film festivals, journalists, live-streamers, and the country’s largest tech firms.

- **Prominent film director butts heads with censors:** In November, Chinese authorities [pulled](#) the latest film by director Zhang Yimou from the country’s Golden Rooster Film Festival for unspecified “technical reasons;” it had been slated as the festival’s opening film. The movie, *One Second*, is set during the Cultural Revolution—a decade of political upheaval from 1966 to 1976 that remains politically sensitive—leading to speculation that the acclaimed director had violated the country’s strict but opaque [censorship regulations](#). This was not the first time Chinese authorities had apparently prevented the film’s screening: in February 2019, Zhang [withdrew](#) *One Second* from competition at the Berlin Film Festival, also for “technical reasons.”
- **Ideological exam for Chinese journalists:** Radio Free Asia reports that from the end of 2019 to November 2020, the Chinese government accredited more than 200,000 Chinese journalists through a “[Xi Thought](#)” exam. The test—now a requirement for all Chinese reporters working in the country—is administered through the “[Study Strong Country](#)” propaganda app, which provides users with the speeches of President Xi Jinping and Xi’s views on socialism and propaganda. Party officials have already been required to use the app, which was released in 2019, to earn “[study points](#)” by reading articles and taking quizzes on party policies, and its use for journalist accreditation was a long-standing goal of party leaders. It may also serve a surveillance function: an October 2019 [report](#) by the Open Technology Fund found that authorities can use a backdoor in the app to gain access to a user’s phone.

- **New live-streaming controls:** On November 23, the National Radio and Television Administration issued [new regulations](#) for the country's massive live-streaming sector. Under the new rules, online platforms should take active measures to [promote](#) accounts that embody core socialist values, while live-streamers must register with their [real name](#) and report in advance any appearances by foreigners or celebrities. Authorities also announced a month-long December clean-up campaign targeting the sector and its 560 million users, under which accounts and companies failing to meet the new requirements risk being shuttered. The new regulations expand upon [rules](#) released in November 2016 that require live-streaming hosts of news programming to obtain a license and service providers to screen and censor user comments.
- **Reining in tech giants:** On November 2, the Chinese government [suspended](#) without warning the highly anticipated initial public offering (IPO) of Jack Ma's Ant Group. Observers speculated that the move against one of the world's largest financial technology companies was retaliation for comments Ma made on October 24 during a summit in Shanghai: despite the presence of both China's vice president Wang Qishan and the governor of the Bank of China, Yi Gang, Ma [criticized](#) regulators for trying to "regulate the future with yesterday's means." The Chinese government's sudden cancellation of Ant Group's IPO, which had been estimated to reach [\\$34.4 billion](#), is part of a larger effort to [rein in](#) the country's sprawling tech sector. On November 10, the State Administration for Market Regulation issued new [draft regulations](#) targeting [monopolistic](#) activities by Chinese e-commerce giants like Alibaba, JD.com, and Taobao.

Surveillance updates: Tech firm complicity, coronavirus QR code, facial recognition in real estate

- **New revelations implicate Chinese, US tech firms in Xinjiang surveillance:** A November 4 [report](#) by IPVM, a group that studies video surveillance, revealed that the Chinese surveillance company Dahua has developed software code to enable the ethnic profiling of Uighurs. The code, first uncovered by engineer [Serge Bazanski](#), enables surveillance cameras to [recognize](#) people according to physical features programmers deem to be associated with the minority ethnic group. Dahua's involvement in repression in Xinjiang is well known, and had prompted [sanctions](#) by the US government in October 2019. However, US tech companies also appear to have indirectly facilitated Chinese state surveillance. According to a November 22 [report](#) by the *New York Times*, the Urumqi Cloud Computing Center in Xinjiang is using chips manufactured by Intel and Nvidia to process government surveillance footage taken from across Xinjiang. Both companies said they were unaware of this use of their products by Chinese authorities.
- **Xi Jinping proposes global QR code for managing pandemic:** In a speech to a gathering of [G20 leaders](#) on November 21, CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping proposed

using QR codes as a means of facilitating international coordination and standardization surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic to support the “smooth functioning” of the global economy. According to the official [Xinhua](#) news agency, Xi said people could be given QR codes that serve as “a global mechanism on the mutual recognition of health certificates based on nucleic acid test results.” He also expressed hope that more countries would join the mechanism. Even as experts anticipate the emergence of some form of international “digital health passport” alongside COVID-19 vaccinations to facilitate global travel, Xi’s proposal was greeted with skepticism and privacy concerns. Depending on which application is used and who has access to the data associated with any QR code, the privacy and security implications could be profound. Within China, a [New York Times](#) investigation found that a widely used Alipay Health Code app automatically shared data with the police.

- **Surveillance concerns emerge in real estate, home-sharing industries:** The *Wall Street Journal* reported on November 20 that a leading American executive for Airbnb resigned in late 2019 over concerns the company was [sharing user data](#) with Chinese authorities. The report also reveals that, in the paperwork for Airbnb’s December IPO, the company stated that compliance with data requests from the Chinese government could result in damage to its brand. Meanwhile, in China, real estate companies are using facial-recognition technology to [collect data](#) on potential clients, raising [privacy concerns](#). The companies are believed to be using cameras with facial-recognition capabilities to resolve disputes over commission fees between brokers by monitoring which agencies prospective buyers visit, and when.

Harsh punishments for outspoken entrepreneurs, Twitter users, Wuhan citizen journalist

In recent weeks, prosecutors have filed criminal charges against outspoken entrepreneurs and social media users who criticized the party or expressed support for human rights and other activists, with some cases resulting in heavy prison sentences.

- **Entrepreneur jailed for 20 years over private WeChat messages:** On November 20, a court in Chongqing [sentenced](#) entrepreneur and anticorruption activist Li Huai-qing to a draconian 20-year prison sentence for purportedly “inciting subversion of state power,” as well as fraud, extortion, and false imprisonment, related to his participation in a private WeChat group. While Li’s messages frequently contained criticism of authorities, [prosecutors claim](#) that between October 2017 and his arrest in January 2018, the noted philanthropist had shared voice messages in which he called for “moral resistance” and “violent revolution.” Li’s sentencing, along with that of eight of his employees, comes amid a larger government crackdown on prominent entrepreneurs. On November 11, police in Hebei Province detained the head of Dawu Agricultural and Animal Husbandry Group, [Sun Dawu](#), along with his family and 20 executives for “picking quarrels and provoking trouble.” Sun’s arrest

is suspected to have come in retaliation for his [public support](#) in May 2020 of the detained legal activist Xu Zhiyong.

- Activists prosecuted for Twitter posts:** On November 10, a Beijing court [sentenced](#) activist Zhang Baocheng to three-and-a-half years in prison for “picking quarrels and provoking trouble” and “promoting terrorism.” Prosecutors accused Zhang, whom police had [arrested](#) on May 28, of using Twitter to defame the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and of [retweeting](#) an ISIS propaganda video—although the platform is blocked in China and is inaccessible to most domestic users. Prosecutors also focused on a video Zhang possessed of Pu Wenqing, mother of the jailed founder of the 64 Tianwang Human Rights Center [Huang Qi](#). A Beijing court had previously [sentenced](#) Zhang and three other members of the New Citizens Movement, a loosely organized network of human rights and transparency advocates, to two and a half years in jail in 2014 for peacefully protesting against official corruption. Zhang was not the only activist targeted in November for online activities: on November 20, the [trial](#) of Zhou Weilin, whose work focuses on the rights of workers and disabled people, began in Anhui Province. Prosecutors have [accused](#) Zhou of “picking quarrels and provoking trouble” due to comments he made on Twitter and articles on human rights he produced for the Rights Defense Network website.
- Wuhan citizen journalist facing prison:** Authorities in Shanghai have formally [charged](#) a citizen journalist with “picking quarrels and stirring up trouble” in relation to her reporting on the coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan. Prosecutors [claim](#) Zhang Zhan accepted interview requests from overseas media like Radio Free Asia and *The Epoch Times* and used WeChat, Twitter, and YouTube to spread false information. Following her [detention](#) on May 14, Zhang Zhan lost access to her lawyer and conducted [hunger strikes](#). Zhang Zhan is one of several Chinese citizen journalists authorities have detained for reporting on the COVID-19 outbreak.
- Tibetan monk held incommunicado over social media posts:** Tibetan exile groups confirmed in early December that since August 2019, authorities in Sichuan have held a Tibetan monk in [detention](#) for criticizing the Chinese government on WeChat. On March 23, authorities in Nagba County formally [charged](#) Rinchen Tsultrim, who has been held incommunicado in prison, with inciting subversion. Rinchen, who authorities had previously detained in 2018, was known among Tibetan exiles for his efforts to preserve and promote the Tibetan language.

HONG KONG

Attacks on media worsen with journalist arrests, banned protest

Journalists—especially investigative reporters—and other independent media in Hong Kong faced new restrictions and threats in past weeks. Several incidents highlight the precarious situation for free media in the territory.

- On November 3, police [arrested](#) a student journalist from Hong Kong Baptist University for obstructing police and resisting arrest during a May 8 protest, during which police allegedly beat him. Nelson Tang’s arrest follows the Hong Kong police’s [announcement](#) in September that it would only recognize journalists from government-accredited and “internationally recognized and renowned” foreign media outlets.
- On November 3, police also [arrested](#) a journalist for allegedly making false declarations on a data-access form. [Bao Choy](#), a freelance producer with public broadcaster Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK), had cited “traffic and transport-related matters” when she sought access to vehicle registration information for people suspected of participating in the July 2019 Yuen Long mob attack on prodemocracy protesters emerging from a subway station. Authorities later [banned](#) a march in support of Bao Choy, leading the Hong Kong Journalists Association to express “[extreme disappointment](#).” Separately, on November 4, police [arrested](#) a journalist with the online outlet Ben Yu Entertainment for obstructing police; the arrest was reportedly related to her refusal of a police order to stop filming arrests during a protest in May.
- In late November, RTHK management accessed staff computers and work e-mails, raising concerns about the public broadcaster’s editorial independence. The move was related to an investigation into [Nabela Qoser](#), a reporter with a reputation for grilling top government officials, aimed at determining whether her conduct at public events was inappropriate. She was placed on probation while the inquiry takes place.
- On December 1, iCable TV [laid off](#) 40 workers from its award-winning investigative news program *News Lancet*. The program was known for its coverage of politically [sensitive stories](#), including a 2019 special on the June 4, 1989, Tiananmen massacre that was ultimately shelved. Numerous other journalists [resigned](#) in protest at the sudden decision. Responding to the pushback, iCable TV’s management apologized on [December 3](#) for how the dismissal was handled and pledged no further layoffs over the next two years. Some journalists connected the mass layoffs to a recent investigative special by *News Lancet* about the manipulation of public opinion.
- On December 3, a court [denied bail](#) to *Apple Daily* founder and government critic Jimmy Lai, who faces specious fraud charges related to the lease on the building housing the newspaper’s offices. Lai’s trial is likely not to occur until April 2021, leaving the 73-year-old in police custody until then.

These cases may presage deepening controls to come. At a November 23 press conference, Hong Kong Journalists Association chair [Chris Yeung](#) warned that the Hong Kong government is likely to use the National Security Law to enact harsher restrictions on the media. However, recent violations were accompanied by some pushback. On November 19, the city’s High Court found the police practice of hiding identification numbers from the public to be a [violation](#) of the Hong Kong Bill of Rights. Separately,

on December 3, [Apple Daily](#) employees posted an open letter to readers, pledging that “we will never give up on embracing freedom and democracy,” despite the escalating legal harassment of owner Jimmy Lai. And a rare [joint op-ed](#) written by American, Canadian, British, and Australian diplomatic representatives in Hong Kong published on November 22 in the *South China Morning Post* called Bao Choy’s arrest “a worrying development” and stated that press freedom in the city “is under attack.”

BEYOND CHINA

Beijing’s media influence sparks censorship, debate, and response measures at WHO, Vatican, Australia, United Kingdom, India, and Taiwan

- WHO Facebook page censors comments critical of China:** The World Health Organization’s Facebook page reportedly [blocked](#) “Taiwan” from appearing in the comment sections of the live-stream of the World Health Assembly held between November 9 and 12. Other blocked terms [included](#) “Wuhan virus” and “Winnie the Pooh,” an often-censored meme in China used to represent Chinese Communist Party chief Xi Jinping. The WHO justified the move as an appropriate response to “an onslaught of cyberattacks by online activists,” referring to Taiwanese users who posted Facebook comments questioning why Taiwan was excluded from the health summit despite its remarkable success in containing COVID-19.
- China-based hackers target Vatican:** A November 23 report by [Proofpoint](#) noted evidence that Chinese hackers have targeted Vatican e-mail accounts using spoofed email headers and malware. Observers believe these attacks, like [previous](#) ones in 2019, are intended to [collect intelligence](#) related to ongoing negotiations between Beijing and the Holy See concerning diplomatic relations between the two states and the appointment of Catholic bishops in China.
- Australia-China tensions spread to social media:** China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs has refused to apologize after Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian [shared](#) a fake image of an Australian soldier holding a knife to the throat of an Afghan child. The image, produced by a Chinese artist, was designed in relation to an Australian Defense Force [inquiry](#) into the murder of Afghan civilians by Australian special forces between 2009 and 2013. In response to the tweet, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison [said](#) “[t]he Chinese government should be totally ashamed.” While Zhao’s problematic post survives on Twitter, censors on the Chinese social media app WeChat [deleted](#) a subsequent post by Morrison that explained the Australian government’s inquiry into the killings, claiming it had used “misleading words” to “distort historical events and deceive the public.” The diplomatic spat comes amid deteriorating relations between Canberra and Beijing over a range of issues, [including](#) the detention of an Australian journalist by Chinese authorities; the departure of Australia’s last remaining media correspondents in China, who were rushed out of the country after they and their families were

intimidated by officials; and a flurry of trade limitations Chinese authorities threatened or implemented after Australian officials criticized repression in Hong Kong and called for an investigation of the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic.

- **United Kingdom launches website to educate companies on China investment risks:** In November, the government of the United Kingdom launched a [website](#) laying out the risks faced by tech firms investing in China. Noting the Chinese government's programs of state surveillance and repression of ethnic minorities, the [site](#) warns companies that their products "could be used to violate human rights." Later, on November 24, the UK government introduced a [new law](#) under which telecom firms could be fined for violating a ban on using Huawei equipment.
- **India bans more Chinese apps:** On November 24, India's Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology [banned](#) 43 Chinese apps, claiming the software posed a risk to national security. Banned apps [included](#) AliExpress, MangoTV, and Taobao Live. The Indian government has [banned more than 175](#) Chinese apps including ByteDance's popular TikTok video-sharing app since June, when military clashes between the two countries took place along their disputed Himalayan border.
- **Taiwan regulator repeals license for pro-China television station:** On November 18, [citing](#) regulatory violations, bias against the ruling Democratic Progressive Party, and the dissemination of misinformation, Taiwan's National Communications Commission unanimously [rejected](#) the application of CtiTV for a renewal of its broadcast license; as a result, the pro-unification channel will be removed from airwaves beginning December 12. CtiTV is owned by [Tsai Eng-meng](#), chairman of the Want Want China Times Media Group, who is known for his business investments in China, pro-Beijing views, and support for Taiwan's opposition Kuomintang party. The channel had already been fined or given warnings over violations of broadcasting before the license revocation decision. On December 7, a [Taipei court](#) refused the station's request for an injunction, meaning that from December 12 it will no longer be aired on local cable channels, but can still be streamed online. The Association of Taiwan Journalists (an affiliate of the International Federation of Journalists) [expressed](#) regret and urged a more comprehensive explanation of the non-renewal, while simultaneously calling for professionalism and ethical standards on the part of media outlets.

FEATURED PUSHBACK

Concerns over facial recognition gain traction

Even as surveillance expands throughout China, a growing number of Chinese citizens are voicing concerns over the privacy implications surrounding facial recognition technologies in particular: a December 2019 [survey](#) conducted by a Chinese think tank found that 80 percent of respondents had expressed such concerns.



Over the past month, awareness-raising efforts by privacy advocates have gained broader recognition and scored some legal victories. On November 20, a court in Hangzhou ordered a local wildlife park to delete facial-recognition data it had collected from a university professor [without his consent](#), and pay him modest compensation. Guo Bing of Zhejiang University of Science and Technology had sued the Hangzhou Safari Park in [November 2019](#) for infringing on his personal privacy by requiring visitors to scan their faces in order to gain entrance. Both the case and the ruling were the first of their kind in China. Amid growing public concern about data privacy, in late October, Hangzhou's municipal government introduced a [draft law](#) banning the use of facial-recognition technology in [residential areas](#).

Meanwhile, Chinese performance artist Deng Yufeng has [organized a tour](#) of a circuitous 0.7-mile path in Beijing, guiding volunteers, including families with children, for two hours as they crouched, ducked, and used props to avoid being detected by the 89 security cameras identified along the carefully mapped route. Over the past month, the initiative gained attention in [domestic](#) and [international media](#) after Deng conducted a tour on October 24, which took months of [research and preparation](#).

WHAT TO WATCH FOR

- **Crackdown amid winter holidays:** The Chinese Communist Party has [a long track record](#) of timing politicized arrests and prosecutions of prominent activists within China to occur around Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's Eve—a holiday period when many Americans and other international observers take time off work and may be slower to respond to heightened repression. This holiday season watch for trials and sentences in cases involving high-profile activists—like citizen journalist Zhang Zhan or lawyer Xu Zhiyong—as well as internal CCP critics.
- **Judicial independence, due process in Hong Kong media freedom cases:** As additional controversial cases involving journalists and media personalities like *Apple Daily* owner Jimmy Lai and RTHK reporter Bao Choy wind their way through the Hong Kong court system, watch for whether and when judges are able to maintain their previously high degree of independence and guarantee due process or if questionable justice will be meted out in seemingly politicized prosecutions.
- **Harassment and attacks on Chinese activists in the United States:** In recent months, several prominent Chinese human rights advocates have encountered [growing harassment and intimidation](#), as well as targeting of their family members, by ardent followers of exile billionaire Guo Wengui. Among those targeted in online smear campaigns and harassment live-streamed outside their homes have been Bob Fu, a pastor and advocate for religious freedom in China living in Texas; [Teng Biao](#), a prominent human rights lawyer and legal scholar in New Jersey; and Wu Jianmin, a veteran democracy advocate in California. The activists have also received death threats, and have called police for protection. Watch for whether these attacks continue or expand, and for any evidence of Guo instigating the intimidation at the behest of the party-state's security apparatus in China.

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 related to China, see: *Freedom in the World 2020*, *Freedom on the Net 2020*, *Beijing's Global Megaphone*, and *The Battle for China's Spirit: Religious Revival, Repression, and Resistance under Xi Jinping*



Freedom House is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that supports democratic change, monitors freedom, and advocates for democracy and human rights.

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