

CHINA MEDIA BULLETIN

Headlines

ANALYSIS The Clubhouse Affair: A Stark Reminder of China's Information Isolation **P2**

IN THE NEWS

- Censorship, security concerns accompany Clubhouse app usage in China **P5**
- Censorship updates: New rules for journalists, "self-media," entertainment industry, and internet services **P6**
- Crackdown on foreign content translators, culture website, Twitter users, publisher **P7**
- Hong Kong: More mainland information controls and legal repression tactics **P8**
- Beyond China: CGTN loses European license, WHO investigation, Xinjiang propaganda in Africa, Myanmar protests, transnational repression **P10**

FEATURED PUSHBACK Joint civil society letter to Biden administration on US-China policy **P12**

WHAT TO WATCH FOR **P13**

TAKE ACTION **P14**

IMAGE OF THE MONTH

Mourning a Martyr

This photo of the grave of COVID-19 whistleblower Dr. Li Wenliang circulated as netizens paid tribute to the doctor online, and others attempted to visit his gravesite in Wuhan in person. An [article](#) describing the physical restrictions put in place to prevent well-wishers from paying tribute to the doctor, such as covering up his name at the cemetery, banning visitors except for his family, and sending supporters to lay flowers on the martyrs' monument instead, raked up over 90,000 views on WeChat before censors deleted the post.

Credit: [China Digital Times](#)



ANALYSIS

The Clubhouse Affair: A Stark Reminder of China's Information Isolation

By Sarah Cook

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A brief opening on an audio conversation app allowed Chinese users to speak freely with the outside world.

Chinese government censorship focuses in large part on stopping people in China from accessing independent reports about events in their own country. But another major goal of the censorship apparatus is to restrict or distort information about the rest of the world, and to isolate Chinese citizens from conversations with outsiders—especially Chinese speakers in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the diaspora who are critical of the regime in Beijing.

The result is a parallel universe where the combination of robust censorship, fear-inducing surveillance, and proactive content manipulation has left tens of millions of news consumers in the world's second-largest economy with a perception of reality—in their own country and globally—that diverges significantly and even dangerously from that of their counterparts abroad. The partisan news silos in democracies like the United States may be toxic and disturbing, but consumers are free to move between and beyond them. The top-down isolation enforced by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is unique in its comprehensive scale and coercive nature.

A chink in the wall of censorship appeared briefly this month with the emergence of Clubhouse, a mobile phone application that allows people to gather in groups of up to 5,000 for interactive audio conversations. After billionaire entrepreneur Elon Musk made an appearance on the app on [January 31](#), thousands of Chinese iPhone users flocked to Clubhouse, participating in surprisingly candid, civil, and uncensored conversations about detention camps in Xinjiang, prodemocracy protests in Hong Kong, and relations with Taiwan.

The moment proved fleeting, as many anticipated. On February 8, users in China began reporting that access to the app was [blocked](#). Nevertheless, the incident offered a stark reminder of the extent to which government controls have cut the Chinese people off from their foreign peers, and of the enormous potential for open conversations and reduced animosity when those artificial barriers are removed.

Denied access to world news and opinion

As with domestic developments, breaking news on events outside China are frequently targeted for censorship and manipulation. A Freedom House [analysis of dozens of leaked censorship directives](#) from 2016, for example, found that the third most restricted topic was foreign affairs. Over the past decade, Chinese users' access to factual

information about major international news stories like the [Arab Spring](#), [US elections](#), and nuclear provocations in North Korea—as well as more obscure topics like elite corruption in [Angola](#)—has been actively restricted and distorted by Chinese state media and propaganda authorities.

The cross-border information blocks imposed by the so-called Great Firewall can also deprive Chinese citizens of international grassroots support and sympathy during moments of crisis, in part because they lack access to globally popular social media platforms. When a massive chemical explosion devastated Beirut last summer, for example, many Chinese users recalled a similar explosion in Tianjin in 2015, noting a much larger response to the Lebanese incident on the global internet. As one [netizen](#) reflected, “the ‘wall’ is two ways. It makes the inside unable to touch the outside. And it gives the outside world misunderstandings and indifference towards the inside world. Only those in power benefit.” The post was subsequently censored.

The Great Firewall is especially egregious in its suppression of uncensored conversations between mainland Chinese residents and other Chinese speakers, many of whom live just on the other side of the barrier. The [Clubhouse conversations](#) in which mainland Chinese, Hong Kongers, Taiwanese, exiled Chinese activists, and Chinese-speaking Uighurs freely discussed the camps in Xinjiang, the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, and encounters with police were so stark and engaging precisely because the opportunity was so rare, prompting many users to stay up late into the night, listening and participating for as long as they could. The more politically sensitive dialogues rightfully received the most attention, but other Clubhouse rooms allowed people from these same communities to swap investment tips or discuss music and dating—the sorts of ordinary chats that can be equally effective at debunking stereotypes and defusing hostility.

Although there are other avenues for contact among the world’s many Chinese speakers, certain features of the Clubhouse app—moderators, real-time opportunities to respond to critiques, the impermanence of the conversations, and real voices rather than text—appeared to be particularly conducive to civility and intimate candor, which are often lacking on other social media platforms.

The opportunity provided by the Clubhouse opening was also distinct from the many more deliberate [initiatives](#) aimed at getting information into China and recirculating or archiving censored content from inside the country. While such efforts are important in their own right and have proven somewhat effective despite tightening controls, it is much easier in practice for a Chinese netizen to access uncensored news or archived censored content than it is to participate in the direct, real-time conversations and engagement that Clubhouse made possible, however briefly.

The fundamental curiosity of Chinese netizens

Only a small proportion of China’s hundreds of millions of internet users participated in conversations on Clubhouse. Joining required owning an iPhone, an inaccessible

luxury for many, receiving an invitation, and actively changing the settings in the app store to download the program. Nevertheless, as news spread, it is clear that demand for access grew rapidly, with invitations selling for [300 yuan \(\\$46 dollars\)](#) and the number of participants growing exponentially within a short span of time.

Once Chinese users gained access, the ways in which they engaged on Clubhouse demonstrated their openness to different viewpoints and curiosity about taboo topics. The episode also showed how the sharing of compelling personal experiences and credible first-hand accounts can help change perceptions and undermine deceptive CCP narratives. This appeared to be the case even for those who may have stumbled upon the conversations via the app's "explore" function without originally intending to engage in discussions on sensitive issues. Such dynamics match this author's own experiences in talking with Chinese students about politically sensitive topics, and those of many Chinese friends who have taken up activism or raised awareness of CCP abuses among their fellow citizens. As columnist Li Yuan remarked about the Clubhouse opening, "mainlanders got a chance to prove that they aren't brainwashed drones."

Previous breakthrough incidents have suggested that this apparent [yearning for freedom and uncensored speech](#) is constantly bubbling beneath the surface. The conversations on Clubhouse were happening on the one-year anniversary of the death of coronavirus whistleblower Li Wenliang, whose fate had prompted Chinese users to denounce censorship under the popular hashtag "[WeWantFreeSpeech](#)" before it was itself censored by authorities.

Hope for the future

It remains to be seen whether the brief [window](#) of openness enabled by Clubhouse will have any lasting effect. The experience may encourage more Chinese netizens to jump the Great Firewall or investigate politically sensitive topics. It could motivate the creation of more effective civil society projects and technology start-up initiatives that enable not only cross-border information flows to users in heavily censored countries, but also human connections and conversations, provided that the appropriate privacy and digital security protections are in place.

One thing is certain: the Clubhouse incident demonstrated once again that the CCP does not speak for all Chinese, and that when the Great Firewall eventually falls, there will be an outpouring of benefits not only for Chinese users and the cause of human rights, but also for the international community and the prospects for peace and security in East Asia and beyond.

IN THE NEWS

Censorship, security concerns accompany Clubhouse app usage in China

- A rare window of openness:** Although it debuted globally in April 2020, Clubhouse—an invite-only iPhone audio chat app—became popular in China in early February 2021 after Elon Musk publicly joined the platform, and “Clubhouse Invite Code” [trended](#) on Weibo on February 1. While a relatively small proportion of Chinese users own iPhones and a change to location settings was required to access Clubhouse, it was available without the need to use a virtual private network (VPN). It quickly became a bridge of access for the netizens able to install it, as Chinese censors had no presence on the app. Many people—including typically apolitical netizens—freely joined discussions on [censored or sensitive topics](#) like the treatment of Uighurs, Taiwanese independence, gender equity, Tiananmen, and COVID-19 whistleblower Dr. Li Wenliang. As mainland Han users mingled candidly with Uighurs, Tibetans, Hong Kongers, and the Chinese diaspora in an uncensored space, mainlanders and outsiders alike [reported](#) changing their views of other groups.
- App block and its aftermath:** This open window closed on February 8, when Chinese users began reporting trouble accessing the app. After the block, authorities [censored](#) the term “Clubhouse” on Sina Weibo. Participants and observers alike saw the block as inevitable as soon as details of the app’s conversations became more widely known. Meanwhile, other Chinese netizens mourned the loss of a space for open dialogue and debate, [lamenting](#) that they were only allowed a few days of freedom. Clones of [mainland versions](#) of Clubhouse are [already](#) emerging. Some mainland netizens reportedly used VPNs to continue joining Clubhouse conversations, including a large group [dedicated](#) to mocking Global Times editor-in-chief Hu Xijin.
- Security concerns:** Clubhouse’s reliance on technology from the Shanghai-based startup Agora may allow the Chinese government to identify and prosecute users. The Stanford Internet Observatory (SIO) [discovered](#) that Agora handles unencrypted metadata on Clubhouse users, including user profiles and room IDs, which is transmitted to servers they believe are hosted in China. These factors mean the CCP could discover which Chinese user profiles have joined conversations on sensitive topics. Additionally, if Agora stores user audio records, Beijing could compel the company to release records of sensitive conversations under its national cybersecurity law. (Alternatively, Chinese authorities may be able to spy on Agora’s transmissions and record audio itself.) Agora [claims](#) not to store user audio or metadata except for billing and quality-check purposes, but this assertion could not be independently verified. [Security](#) and [privacy](#) concerns have also been raised outside China as the app’s popularity skyrocketed. Clubhouse [responded](#) to SIO to say they will roll out changes, though it remains to be seen what kind.

Censorship updates: New rules for journalists, “self-media,” entertainment industry, and internet services

Over the past two months, various government and quasigovernment bodies have issued new rules or draft regulations governing free expression.

- **Chinese journalists’ social media accounts scrutinized:** New rules [issued](#) by the National Press and Publication Administration (NPPA) on January 12 require Chinese journalists to have their social media posts reviewed as a part of the annual verification process for renewal or issuing of press cards. The rules, which were immediately [implemented](#) for the review period ending in mid-March, cover material dating back to December 2019. Journalists who opened social media accounts without authorization or posted content deemed objectionable may be denied a press card.
- **Further crackdown on “self-media”:** On January 22, the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) released [new provisions](#) targeting “self-media” accounts. Such independently operated accounts, which publish or comment on news and current affairs, will be required to obtain a “Internet News Information Service Permit” and are prohibited from commenting on a list of restricted topics after the provisions go into effect on February 22. Those who violate the provisions can face a temporary or permanent ban from social media sites. Social media platforms will manage the accreditation process and are required to establish credit-rating systems for content producers. Companies like WeChat, Baidu, and Sohu have [messed](#) their users and cautioned them not to comment on news unless they receive accreditation. This is the first time the provisions [have been updated](#) since 2017, with CAC citing a need to further combat “false information” following the COVID-19 pandemic.
- **Celebrity behavior rules formalized:** The China Association of Performing Arts, an entertainment industry association under the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, [released](#) new guidelines on February 5 outlining circumstances under which celebrities may be sanctioned for their speech or behavior. China’s public entertainment figures will be required to promote “the party’s line” while not “undermining national unity” or “endangering national security.” The 15 rules, which go into effect on March 1, are intended to [formalize](#) unwritten but longstanding standards of behavior; performers who violate the order face suspensions and even a permanent industry ban.
- **Draft update of key internet service regulation:** CAC [released](#) on January 8 a draft update of the Regulations on Internet Information Service for public comment. The original regulations date back to 2000, and the updated draft adds several provisions on [modern online issues](#) like e-commerce and online fraud; new rules would also expand the list of prohibited online content to cover “false information,” information that “incites illegal assemblies,” or which “endangers the physical and mental health of minors.” The draft enshrines the CCP’s [support](#) for “cyber sovereignty,”

calling for the state to take measures to “monitor, prevent, and address illegal and criminal activities using domestic or foreign internet resources to harm the security or order of the nation’s cyberspace.” It further codifies the Great Firewall, which blocks user access to banned websites. The period for public comment closed on February 7. While the regulations have not yet been enacted, in effect they codify into law much of what is already in practice.

Crackdown on foreign content translators, culture website, Twitter users, publisher

Chinese police continued to target users, website administrators, journalists, and individuals for speech perceived as critical or threatening toward the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

- Police arrest operators of site sharing uncensored foreign media:** Shanghai police [announced](#) on February 3 that they had arrested 14 employees of the subtitle translation group Renren Yingshi on charges of copyright infringement. Renren Yingshi had been one of the largest providers of Chinese-language subtitles for uncensored foreign films and television programs, which are strictly controlled in China. A [hashtag](#) related to the events was viewed more than 990 million times on Sina Weibo, reflecting the extent to which the app is known and the appetite among Chinese users for foreign content. The arrests of the Renren Yingshi administrators followed [previous crackdowns](#) on crowdsourced subtitling groups.
- Chinese Twitter users face detention, imprisonment:** On February 8, the Rights Defenders Network [reported](#) that Dong Yaoqiong, a woman known for [live-streaming](#) herself splashing ink on a portrait of Xi Jinping in 2018, had been detained in a psychiatric hospital for the third time. The latest detention came after she had used Twitter to [share a video](#) and information about authorities’ close surveillance of her activities. Another activist, Ou Biaofeng, in December was [detained](#) and placed under “residential surveillance” in an undisclosed location for “inciting subversion of state power,” after he shared Dong’s video to his [50,000 Twitter](#) followers. A recent *Wall Street Journal* [investigation](#) found that over the past three years, 58 Chinese users had been sentenced to prison for between six months and four years over posts on Twitter, Facebook, or YouTube—a significant increase relative to previous years.
- Website crackdown leads to 14-year sentence:** A Guangdong court [sentenced](#) 24 young members of an online community on December 30, 2020, for posting memes and leaking personal information about celebrities and Xi Jinping’s family. Niu Tengyu, 21, received the heaviest sentence of 14 years for “picking quarrels and provoking quarrels,” a charge often used in politically motivated free expression cases, as well as for “infringing on citizens’ personal information,” and “illegal business operation.” Police had rounded up users and administrators of the websites,

zhina.wiki, zhina.red, esu.wiki, between July and October 2019. Niu alleged he had been tortured and forced to sign a confession. The parents of 10 of the 24 defendants released an [open letter](#) on February 8 calling on authorities to release their children.

- **Two Tibetan activists die from abuse in custody, one released:** Tenzin Nyima, 19, [died](#) in December in Sichuan Province as a result of torture after being detained in 2019 for distributing leaflets and shouting slogans calling for Tibetan independence. Tibetan Kunchok Jinpa, 51, [died](#) on February 6 in a Lhasa hospital while serving a 21-year prison sentence for “leaking state secrets” after being detained in 2013 for providing information to overseas websites about protests in Tibet. On January 28, Tibetan activist Tashi Wangchuk was [released](#) from prison following a five-year sentence for “inciting separatism” over interviews he gave to foreign media about Tibetan language rights.
- **Penalties, charges for Chinese publisher, television anchor, rights activists:** On February 9, prominent Beijing publisher Geng Xiaonan [received](#) a three-year sentence for “illegal business activity” in apparent retaliation for her [outspoken support](#) of CCP critics. A few days earlier, on February 5, Chinese police [formally arrested](#) Australian citizen and former state-run China Global Television News (CGTN) anchor Cheng Lei for “illegally supplying state secrets overseas;” Cheng has been detained in China since August 2020. On February 6, Shandong police [detained](#) activist Li Qiaochu, the girlfriend of detained [legal scholar](#) Xu Zhiyong, for “inciting subversion.” In January, authorities had [upgraded](#) the charges against Xu to “subversion of state power,” which carries a potential life sentence. Former journalist Zhang Jialong was [released on](#) February 12 at the end of a 1.5 year sentence [handed down](#) for comments on Twitter; he was first arrested in 2019.

HONG KONG

More mainland information controls and legal repression tactics

From website blocking to SIM card registration to bail denial, more signs of the Chinese Communist Party’s political, legal, and media controls have appeared in Hong Kong over the past month.

- **Another website blocked:** Hong Kong internet service providers blocked access to the Taiwan Transitional Justice Commission website starting on February 12, [according](#) to internet users and [reporters](#) who said they could only access the site through a Virtual Private Network (VPN). The latest block comes a month after authorities [ordered](#) a block on the activist website [HKChronicles](#), a platform that had been used by activists to dox police officers (among them, those involved in attacking protesters) and expose pro-Beijing businesses.

- Public broadcaster independence in doubt following government shake-up, BBC ban:** Hong Kong's government [appointed](#) a bureaucrat with no broadcasting experience to head the public broadcaster Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK) on February 19, just ahead of the [publication](#) of a government report that said RTHK lacked "clear editorial accountability." The RTHK staff union [decried](#) the move, saying RTHK has lost its editorial independence. The shakeup comes days after RTHK [followed](#) Chinese regulators' [move](#) to ban the British Broadcasting Corporation's (BBC) World Service on February 12. The now-resigned RTHK head said he had [ordered](#) the move in line with Beijing's ban, which was made in retaliation for the revocation of Chinese state broadcaster CGTN's license by Britain's media regulator. While the BBC was previously accessible to only a small number of viewers in China, in Hong Kong, BBC World Service broadcasts were widely available on RTHK daily from 11pm to 7am, and in a weekly Cantonese-language radio show.
- Top court ruling creates precedent against presumption of bail in national security cases:** Hong Kong's Court of Final Appeal [issued](#) a landmark ruling on February 9 denying bail to media tycoon Jimmy Lai in connection with his arrest in 2020 for "colluding with foreign forces" under the National Security Law, including on the basis of his Twitter posts. The judgement comes after the Hong Kong government appealed the High Court decision to grant Lai bail in December, and Chief Executive Carrie Lam had [appointed](#) three judges to the court to hear national security cases. The Court [ruled](#) that new, more narrow conditions in the National Security Law governing when bail may be granted superseded the existing Hong Kong bail rules. The ruling marks a significant shift in Hong Kong's legal system that brings it closer to the mainland system, where bail is regularly denied.
- Radio host arrested for "sedition;" denied bail:** Hong Kong national security officers [arrested](#) D100 Radio host Edmund Wan Yiu-sing on February 7 on four counts of committing an act with seditious intent under the colonial-era Crimes Ordinance over comments critical of the Chinese and Hong Kong governments that he made on four of his shows last year. On February 10, a chief magistrate [rejected](#) his application for bail after prosecutors argued that the National Security Law's new bail standards applied because his case "involved behavior endangering national security," citing the Court of Final Appeal's ruling in the Jimmy Lai case. Wan faces a sentence of up to two years and fine of HK\$5,000 (US\$650) if convicted. He was also arrested separately last year under the National Security Law on suspicion of aiding [secession](#), among other charges.
- No jury for first National Security Law trial:** In early February, Secretary of Justice Theresa Cheung [invoked](#) Article 46 of the National Security Law to deny Tong Ying-kit, the first person to face trial under the law, the right to a trial by jury, [according](#) media sources. Tong is charged with "terrorism" and "inciting secession" for driving his motorbike into a crowd of police officers while waving a flag with the slogan "Liberate Hong Kong; revolution of our times." Tong faces a maximum sentence of life in prison. Article 46 outlines instances where national security trials may go forward without a jury, a departure from Hong Kong's long-standing common law legal system.

- **Hong Kong authorities propose real-name registration for SIM cards:** The Commerce and Economic Development Bureau [announced](#) on January 29 it was launching a one-month public consultation on requiring real-name registration for prepaid SIM cards due to the cards being “exploited by criminals in undertaking illegal activities.” Real-name registration of SIM cards has been a [common feature](#) in mainland China and one method of surveillance over users’ telecommunication activities. While many countries around the world also require some form of registration, activists and protesters in Hong Kong commonly use prepaid SIM cards due to privacy concerns.

BEYOND CHINA

CGTN loses European license, WHO investigation, Xinjiang propaganda in Africa, Myanmar protests, transnational repression

- **Chinese media in Australia:** A British regulator revokes Chinese state broadcaster’s license, with continent-wide implications: An investigation by Britain’s Office of Communications (Ofcom) [concluded](#) on February 4 that the license holder for state-run CGTN violated British law by operating without editorial responsibility over its outputs. British law also states that license holders cannot be controlled by political bodies, but that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) [effectively oversees the station](#), especially since March 2018 structural reforms. Prior to the decision, Ofcom had given CGTN several months to address concerns or transfer the license, but the station’s responses were deemed insufficient. For their part, some CGTN journalists continued to assert their editorial independence, despite official outlets, party members, and Xi Jinping frequently [proclaiming](#) that Chinese state media must “serve the party.” Due to a [Council of Europe agreement](#), the license revocation resulted in the station being taken off the air in other European countries. In retaliation, within days, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) was [banned in China](#) and its programming removed from Hong Kong’s public broadcaster.
- **WHO delegation criticized for echoing Chinese state propaganda:** The World Health Organization (WHO) ended its long-awaited investigation on COVID-19’s origins in China on February 9. At a [widely reported press conference](#) in Wuhan, the WHO delegation said it was “extremely unlikely” that the virus’s spread had originated from a lab accident in Wuhan, and recommended against further pursuit of that theory. The investigators additionally said claims that the virus could have arrived in China through frozen fish imports from other countries—a theory CCP figures have voiced in an apparent attempt to deflect Chinese responsibility for the virus’s initial spread, but for which scientists have found [little evidence](#)—was a possibility for further research. Global health experts and others [criticized](#) the WHO for appearing to endorse both perspectives without independent evidence, noting that investigators seemed to rely on [assertions by Chinese scientists](#), despite the [restrictions](#) the Chinese government has placed on domestic scientists and the

risk of severe reprisals should they contradict official narratives. One WHO investigator stated that the team had included the frozen fish theory in its conclusion “[to respect, a bit](#),” Chinese scientists’ findings. After departing China, [some delegation members](#) relayed concerns over limits on data provided to the investigators and acknowledged that “politics was always in the room,” while another [said](#) that relying on secondary data is to be expected in most countries, not just China.

- **Wave of Chinese propaganda denying Xinjiang human rights abuses hits Africa:** In early February, Chinese state media and diplomats across Africa launched a “full-scale campaign in print, broadcast, and social media” to rebut reports of atrocities in Xinjiang, according to [Eric Olander](#) of the China Africa Project. Chinese diplomats and missions in countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Botswana, South Africa, and Rwanda [filled](#) their Twitter feeds with statements implying the allegations of atrocities are a “Western” anti-China plot, outright denials of human rights violations, and positive portrayals of Xinjiang’s socioeconomic development. The push emerged after the US government declared that genocide is occurring in Xinjiang, and the BBC aired a report about the systematic rape of Uighur women in so-called reeducation camps.
- **Chinese regime engaging in world’s largest campaign of transnational repression:** A new Freedom House [report](#) catalogued 214 cases of direct, physical attacks originating in China against its exiles and diaspora around the world since 2014. China was found to conduct the world’s most sophisticated and widespread campaign of what is known as “transnational repression” in at least 36 host countries, including democracies. The targets of CCP transnational repression are broad, including journalists, political dissidents, ethnic and religious minorities (Uighurs, Tibetans, Falun Gong practitioners, and Inner Mongolians), former officials wanted for alleged corruption, and Hong Kong activists. China was the only one of 31 regimes engaging in such behavior to deploy the full set of tactics studied, including detentions, renditions, physical assaults, and intimidation via proxy entities, as well as sophisticated hacking and phishing attacks.
- **Myanmar citizenry pushes back against suspected Chinese interference in coup.** Thousands [gathered](#) daily for a week in front of the Chinese embassy in Yangon, Myanmar’s largest city, to protest China’s failure to condemn Myanmar military’s coup at the United Nations Security Council. People in Myanmar are increasingly levying allegations, mostly online, that China is covertly supporting a crackdown on the antimilitary movement. Suspicions of Chinese support for building internet firewalls in Myanmar went viral when five flights carrying unknown cargo, suspected of holding telecommunications equipment, were [reported](#) flying from Kunming to Yangon. Later, images of unintelligible Chinese text messages sent to Myanmar SIM cards [spread](#) on social media, fueling more concerns of Chinese telecommunications interference.



FEATURED PUSHBACK

Joint civil society letter to Biden administration on US-China policy

As Joe Biden settles in as the 46th president of the United States of America, Freedom House joined 23 other organizations and individuals in [writing](#) to his administration on February 17 calling for human rights—including freedom of expression and privacy rights—to be made a priority in US-China relations. The joint letter asserted that a fundamental shift is required to address the scale of human rights violations committed by the Chinese Communist Party, and that tools employed by past administrations “are no longer relevant or sufficiently robust.”

Specific proposals in the letter that relate to media and internet freedom include: investing in independent Chinese-language news platforms and technology to combat Chinese government censorship and cyber surveillance; giving independent Chinese media and influential independent commentators priority access to senior US officials; working to set rights-respecting standards in the technology sector; escalating actions against technology companies found to be contributing to China’s mass surveillance, including targeted sanctions; and choosing words carefully to avoid restating key Chinese government propaganda points.

While the Biden administration is still reviewing its China policy, initial movements indicate human rights will be on the table. Biden [raised](#) Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and Taiwan with Xi Jinping during their first call. Secretary of State Antony Blinken [affirmed](#) that the CCP’s treatment of Uighurs amounts to genocide, and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan has [spoken out](#) about the crackdown on Hong Kong.

WHAT TO WATCH FOR

- **Varying boycotts of 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing:** Over 180 human rights groups have [called](#) for a full boycott of the 2022 Winter Olympic Games in Beijing, set to open less than a year from now on February 4, 2022, over the CCP's gross and systematic human rights violations; the International Olympic Committee (IOC) swiftly denounced the initiative. Watch for governments boycotting the games [diplomatically](#) by declining to send senior officials to attend; whether corporate sponsors pull out despite facing potential economic retaliation by Chinese authorities; or media organizations broadcasting the games also increasing their coverage of human rights abuses in China.
- **Increased regulatory controls on social media alongside “clean-up” drive:** After the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) announced new rules for “self-media” accounts in late January, on February 4 it released a [cheery announcement](#) for a “Clean and Bright Network Environment” special action in which it would review material on search engines, social media platforms, live broadcasting, browsers, and other online spaces to “clean up illegal and unhealthy information.” Watch for CAC leading the charge in removing a vast quantity of information—including on political, social, and religious topics—that it deems to be “unhealthy” or “false” to send a signal to the tech companies responsible for the accreditation process of self-media that the level of enforcement will be significant under the new rules.
- **New Hong Kong laws restricting free speech:** On February 4, Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam [vowed](#) to introduce news laws on doxxing, fake news, and hate speech in Hong Kong. [The Hong Kong Journalist Association](#) expressed concerns about some of the proposals, including that the doxxing laws could be used to restrict legitimate reporting on individuals. Watch for the introduction of legislation on doxxing this year and whether there are exemptions for journalists, and provisions are written narrowly and specifically enough to protect freedom of expression.

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.

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