CHINA MEDIA BULLETIN

Headlines

IMAGE OF THE MONTH

Alaska Summit Memes

This is one of many memes that emerged on the Chinese internet in the wake of tense US-China talks in Alaska on March 18. The image is from a patriotic Chinese webcomic, *Year Hare Affair*; it depicts the 1954 Geneva Conference—during which the PRC met the US for the first time as a major power—and was reposted widely on Chinese social media platforms. Other memes (see here and here) with an even more nationalistic tone garnered millions of likes on Weibo accounts, including the *People's Daily* account, which has 128 million followers.

Credit: ChinaTalk Newsletter

ANALYSIS

Beijing Is Getting Better at Disinformation on Global Social Media

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*.

Its networks are resisting takedown efforts and gaining traction among real users.

When China-linked networks of social media bots and trolls appeared on the global disinformation scene in 2019, most analysts concluded that their impact and reach were fairly limited, particularly in terms of engagement by real users and relative to more sophisticated actors in this realm, like the Russian regime. As many China watchers anticipated, that assessment now seems to be changing.

Several in-depth investigations published over the past two months by academic researchers, think tanks, news outlets, and cybersecurity companies have shed light on the evolution of disinformation campaigns originating in China. Some offer new insights on campaigns that peaked last spring, while others analyze more recent messaging, tactics, and accounts that have emerged since October 2020.

A close reading of these investigations points to several emergent features of China-linked disinformation campaigns—meaning the purposeful dissemination of misleading content that can undermine social cohesion, including via inauthentic activity on global social media platforms.

Collectively, the studies indicate that significant human and financial resources are being devoted to the disinformation effort, the overall sophistication and impact have increased, and linkages between official accounts and fake accounts are more evident, rendering plausible deniability by the Chinese government more difficult.

Disinformation is only one tool—and perhaps not the most important one—in Beijing's sizable collection of instruments for global media influence, but Chinese authorities and their proxies are clearly working to increase its potency, and the process warrants close observation.

Persistence and adaptation

One key takeaway from the recent reports is the persistence of the networks of inauthentic accounts that are being used to channel official messaging to global audiences. A February 21 report by the cybersecurity firm Graphika was its fourth focused on a network of accounts it has termed Spamouflage. Despite repeated takedowns by Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube following reports from Graphika or independent detection by the social media platforms themselves (sometimes just hours after the questionable accounts posted content), the networks and specific fake personas have continued to revive themselves.

Another study by the Crime and Security Research Institute at Cardiff University remarked on the structural complexity of a network of fake Twitter accounts linked to China that the authors had detected. It consisted of a series of almost autonomous "cells" with minimal links between them, which appeared to enhance the network's resilience. The report notes that the behavior patterns are unusual and appear to have been designed to avoid detection by Twitter's algorithms.

Researchers found additional signs of adaptation. Notably, Graphika detected experimentation with persona accounts, which look and behave like real people, even as the Spamouflage network continued to deploy hundreds of more obviously fake accounts.

In some instances, the persona accounts were new creations, while in others they appeared to have been real accounts that were stolen or purchased from the previous owners. Even as certain persona accounts were taken down, they revived themselves and evolved over time in an effort to improve engagement with local audiences in different parts of the world. One such Twitter account identified by Graphika was found to be posting primarily in Spanish in its third incarnation. This modus operandi involving persona accounts had previously been associated more with the Kremlin's disinformation playbook than with Beijing's.

Persistence is also evident in the longevity of certain messaging. One long-standing disinformation campaign emanating from both official Chinese government outlets and inauthentic accounts has been the promotion of a conspiracy theory that COVID-19 is a bioweapon developed in the United States and brought to China by the US military in October 2019. PBS's *Frontline* documented 24 digital stories mentioning the unfounded theory that were posted by the Chinese Communist Party–aligned *Global Times*, with the earliest posted in March 2020 and the most recent in early February this year. This was just one example of anti-US narratives disseminated by state media and inauthentic accounts that continued beyond the Trump administration and into the Biden presidency.

Increased efficacy in reaching real users

The tactical shifts to date appear to have paid off. Graphika found that the persona accounts were especially effective at facilitating "genuine engagement" and emerged as a "main driver of impact" in the Spamouflage network, which as a whole appeared to broaden its reach and achieve greater success in prompting shares from real social media influencers in multiple countries. The Spanish-speaking account noted above generated posts that were shared by top Venezuelan government accounts, including that of the country's foreign minister, as well as others with large followings in Latin America.

Further examples noted in the report include posts that were shared by politicians or technology executives in Pakistan, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere, including some with millions of followers. Two reports found that Russian and Iranian social media assets assisted in promoting the COVID-19 conspiracy theory and related China-linked

posts, including in regions like the Middle East, where China's media footprint is not as robust. With regard to the US, the Cardiff University study found that a subsequently debunked video of someone allegedly burning ballots in Virginia, which was ultimately shared in early November by Eric Trump and garnered over a million views, had reached the user whose post Trump retweeted via two accounts in a China-linked disinformation network.

The reports cite several instances of journalists or local traditional media outlets in different countries—not just individual influencers on social media—unknowingly sharing disinformation on their own accounts, news websites, or television broadcasts. This enhances the credibility of the content and delivers it to a much wider audience. Reflecting the global nature of the phenomenon, the examples found included a Panamanian news channel with over 800,000 Twitter followers, a Greek defense publication, an Indian news website, an Argentinian journalist and former CNN anchor with 500,000 Twitter followers, newspapers in Finland and New Zealand, and a television station in Texas.

Coordination and official linkages

Conclusively attributing inauthentic networks of social media accounts to Chinese party-state actors is exceedingly difficult, even when they are clearly promoting Beijing's preferred narratives or specific state-produced content. Nevertheless, signs of coordination and patterns of behavior indicating official backing are emerging with increasing frequency. Graphika found that fake accounts in the network it investigated had been amplified by Chinese diplomats on Twitter hundreds of times. Meanwhile, the timing and content of the material shared by the fake accounts tracked very closely with the activity of Chinese diplomats or state media outlets, even on globally obscure topics like President Xi Jinping's visit to Shanghai in November to celebrate the anniversary of China's "reform and opening up." The researchers acknowledge that the Chinese diplomats may have shared content from the network without knowing that these were fake accounts and assuming instead that they were genuine "patriotic" netizens.

Still, several features of the campaigns led separate researchers to conclude that they very likely enjoyed some Chinese state backing. First, the sheer volume, speed, and sophistication of the activity is noteworthy. Graphika found that between February 2020 and January 2021, the fake Twitter accounts of the network under study had posted over 1,400 unique videos. Many of these were reacting to breaking news events within 36 hours of their occurrence, suggesting significant resources and a degree of professionalism that would be difficult for ordinary users to achieve. Second, the Cardiff University research team mapped the timing of the posts from the Twitter network they analyzed and found that its activity closely matched working hours in China, even dipping during a fall holiday that is not widely celebrated elsewhere. Lastly, ordinary citizens who circumvent censorship to access and engage on Twitter have increasingly faced legal reprisals in China over the past two years, suggesting that those behind these networks likely had some tacit official approval if not active support.

Harmful content

The content promoted by the fake accounts ranges along a spectrum from relatively benign to highly problematic. Some posts sought to amplify praise for China by high-lighting a parade in Hubei Province for COVID-19 medics, while others highlighted failures or accidents affecting the United States, including lightning strikes or downed drones in Syria. Another group of posts aimed to attack and discredit perceived enemies of Beijing, like the prodemocracy movement in Hong Kong, exiled billionaire Guo Wengui, or more recently the British Broadcasting Corporation.

Perhaps the most troubling content is that which could have serious public health and political implications, especially if it builds on other material already circulating in a target country's information ecosystem. Indeed, analysts found that posts often sought to exploit preexisting narratives and content from domestic social media or fringe websites in order to enhance engagement and local resonance. Examples included false information about Taiwan's response to the pandemic, videos questioning the safety of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, and the conspiracy theory that COVID-19 had been developed at a US military facility. Others focused on the US elections, and while they did not appear to promote a particular presidential candidate (instead criticizing both), they did amplify a questionable claim of election fraud, calls for violence, and other social discord in the US both before and after the January 6 riot at the Capitol.

At present the networks are still reaching a relatively small audience and represent only one part of a much larger toolbox deployed by Beijing or its proxies to influence global information flows. Nevertheless, the underlying conclusions of these studies are worrisome: the number of people affected is growing, the accounts are breaking out of their own echo chambers to reach millions of global social media users on vital issues of public health and political participation, and the campaigns are clearly part of an organized, well-funded, and persistent effort almost certainly driven by some part of the Chinese party-state apparatus.

Whoever in the party-state apparatus is driving this effort is becoming more adept, and if there is one thing that the Chinese Communist Party has proven itself capable of time and again, it is innovation in the service of its own political survival.

IN THE NEWS
Censorship updates: Alibaba rebuked, Signal blocked, new broadcasting law, EU denied media market access

- **Alibaba ordered to divest media assets:** Chinese government regulators ordered the online commerce company Alibaba to divest its media holdings over concerns that its large market share could allow the company enormous influence over public opinion. Alibaba owns the Hong Kong–based *South China Morning Post*, and has stakes in Yicai Media Group, the microblogging platform Weibo, the video platform Bilibili, and others. Authorities became concerned after Weibo censored news in

early 2020 about an Alibaba executive's affair with a prominent online influencer—apparently alarming Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leaders who consider censorship the prerogative of the state. The directive marked the further escalation of CCP leader and state president Xi Jinping's attempts to rein in the relative autonomy of the country's privately owned technology giants, which have [focused](#) on Alibaba and its chief executive, Jack Ma.

- **LinkedIn China rebuked for not censoring enough:** The Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) reportedly [ordered](#) Microsoft's LinkedIn—the only US social media site accessible in China—to suspend new sign-ups for 30 days and undergo a self-evaluation for not censoring enough content during the annual legislative meetings in March. The company issued a [statement](#) on March 9 that it was "work[ing] to ensure we remain in compliance with local law." LinkedIn has over 40 million users in China and has been [criticized](#) for blocking them from viewing the profiles of overseas Chinese activists and other CCP critics.

- **Three apps blocked:** On March 16, Signal, an end-to-end encrypted messaging application, was [no longer accessible](#) inside China without a Virtual Private Network (VPN). The same day, internet companies [pulled](#) Alibaba's web browser, UC Browser, from Chinese Android app stores following a [call](#) by Xi Jinping on March 15 for regulators to "step up" regulation of the country's growing technology companies. On March 2, Apple's China App store [removed](#) the [viral](#) face animator app Avatarify, which produced "deep-fakes" in which a person's face is altered or replaced. Some users [speculated](#) that it was removed over privacy concerns, though others suggested the real reason was that it was due to the many spoofs of CCP politicians that had appeared on the app.

- **New draft updates to Radio and Television Law:** On March 16, the National Radio and Television Administration [released](#) for public comment a draft text containing major revisions to the 24-year-old Radio and Television Law. The [draft](#) covers for the first time video-sharing websites, internet television platforms, and online broadcasters. It specifies nine types of content to be banned from broadcasting, including that which "endangers national security," "slanders excellent traditional Chinese culture," or "is not beneficial for youths to establish the correct worldview," and additionally specifies seven types of content the government will support. Alongside state media, some of the most popular broadcasters in China [include](#) privately owned online video services, such as Baidu's iQiyi.

- **EU-China investment deal enshrines unequal media market access:** The European Union-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI), [agreed](#) upon December 30, 2020, but only [published in full](#) on March 12, showed that the EU failed to negotiate any significant media market access in China. Foreign radio and television broadcasting and film production and releases in China [continue](#) to be subject to production controls, quotas, and broadcast-time limitations unless approved by the government. By contrast, the agreement still permits significant opportunities

for Chinese investment in European media. The deal, which must be ratified by the European Parliament, [may not pass](#) in light of Chinese sanctions on Members of the European Parliament and a parliamentary subcommittee.

- **Foreign journalists restricted, commentary on press freedom blocked:** The annual report of the Foreign Correspondents' Club of China [found](#) that Chinese authorities expelled 18 foreign correspondents in 2020, the most expulsions since the aftermath of the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre. On March 9, China's Foreign Ministry [summoned](#) the British ambassador to China over a [WeChat article](#) she wrote defending press freedom, and censors blocked her article from being shared. Censors also [deleted](#) within 24 hours a February 18 [post](#) by Caixin Media deputy editor Gao Yu in which he lamented the drowning out of independent reporting by nationalistic voices and offered a dark view on the state of affairs in China, after it sparked discussion online.

Surveillance updates: Crackdowns on voice-changing software, data collection by private actors, Tibetan religious institutions, new vaccine passport

- **Chinese regulator restricts voice-changing software:** On March 18, the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) [announced](#) that it had initiated talks with 11 social media platforms including Xiaomi, Kuaishou, ByteDance, Tencent, and Alibaba to find ways to counteract the use of voice-changing software in order to "safeguard national security." Voice-changing software has been [used](#) by activists on audio apps like Clubhouse to throw off potential government monitoring and elude voice-recognition software. The platforms were instructed to report back with security assessments and improved risk-prevention and control measures for voice-based social media software, as well as deepfake technologies.

- **New regulations restrict private collection of nonessential personal data:** On May 1, new regulations on what constitutes "necessary personal information" that mobile internet applications can require consumers to provide will come into force, with the [full text](#) released by the CAC on March 22. The regulations legally define what is "necessary personal information" for 39 different types of mobile apps, and prohibit apps from denying users basic access to their services if they decline to share such information. Currently, many app providers in China [require](#) users to share nonessential information with them—such as a ride-sharing app that requests access to photo albums. However, the regulations do not contain an enforcement mechanism.

- **Chinese state media calls out used of facial-recognition systems by private companies:** State broadcaster China Central Television (CCTV)'s annual 315 Evening Gala on World Consumer Rights Day, March 15, exposed the use of facial-recognition technologies by private companies in China. The program reported that at least 20 busi-

nesses, including Western companies BMW, Max Mara, and Kohler, used facial-recognition cameras in stores to collect customers' biometric data. CCTV's program ignored such surveillance by government or public entities, prompting Weibo users to point out the ubiquitous mandatory facial-recognition requirements to enter some residential areas or access healthcare. The Personal Information Protection Law, which will likely be passed this year, will further tighten what personal data private companies can collect, store, and use.

- **China's new vaccine passport raises surveillance and privacy concerns:** A new vaccine passport launched on WeChat on March 8 will track the health, testing, and vaccination records of Chinese citizens entering and exiting China. The use of a vaccine passport on WeChat is concerning in light of the app's links to the government's censorship and surveillance apparatus; moreover, previous analysis of another pandemic-related app, the Alipay Health Code introduced by Ant Financial, revealed that it was surreptitiously sending location data to the police. So far, the WeChat passport is not mandatory and a paper version is expected to become available. China is in the process of negotiating acceptance of the passport; no other country has yet agreed to recognize it. Chinese companies have consistently ranked in the bottom half of the Rating Digital Rights evaluation of major tech companies, and in the recently released 2020 index that covered 14 digital platforms, Tencent, owner of WeChat, ranked 13th, while Alibaba, affiliated with Ant Financial, and Baidu tied at 10th.

- **Surveillance in Tibetan nunneries and monasteries:** A March 10 report from the International Campaign For Tibet reveals patterns of increased control over Tibetan religious institutions through human and electronic surveillance, backed by a near-tripling of the United Front Work Department's budget in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) from 2016 to 2020. Private companies are reported to support increasing high-tech surveillance and mass data collection in the region, including a cloud storage center in Lhasa scheduled to be completed in 2026, which could be used by authorities for "real-time monitoring."

Citizens detained for online speech about COVID-19, "insulting martyrs," or having a Uyghur journalist relative abroad

- **Online commentators detained for "insulting martyrs" in border clash comments:** Chinese police detained at least seven people between February 20 and 23, and vowed to pursue two people based overseas, for online comments that followed the release of the names of Chinese military personnel killed during a June 2020 border clash between China and India. Police detained former journalist Qiu Ziming on February 20 on charges of "picking quarrels and provoking trouble," a charge often used in politically motivated free expression cases. Qui had posted comments to his 2.5 million Weibo followers questioning the officially reported death toll from

the clash and suggesting it may be higher. Police accused him of "defaming martyrs," which became a criminal offence on March 1, 2021, subject to a maximum three-year prison sentence. State media aired a video confession from Qiu, which are often filmed in coercive or deceptive circumstances. Chongqing police said they were "pursuing online" an overseas 19-year-old for his Weibo comments on the border clash; officers briefly detained, interrogated, and tortured his parents.

• **Prosecutions continue for COVID-19 comments online:** On March 18, retired professor Chen Zhaozhi went on trial in Beijing on charges of "picking quarrels and provoking trouble" for posting online that the "Wuhan pneumonia is not a Chinese virus, but Chinese Communist Party virus." Prosecutors recommended a two-and-a-half year sentence, but the trial ended without a verdict being pronounced. Separately, Hubei netizen Zhang Wenfang had received a six-month sentence for "picking quarrels and provoking trouble" on September 8, 2020, over a poem she posted on Weibo on April 4, 2020, about the pandemic in Wuhan, which authorities claimed spread rumors and contained false information. Her case came to wider attention after authorities posted the verdict online and the anonymous Twitter account @SpeechFreedomCN, which compiles information about individuals arrested for speech crimes using official documents, reposted it on February 22. The account has collected over 1,900 cases stretching back to 2013, and has tracked 643 cases specifically related to COVID-19 speech.

• **Uyghur American journalist's family detained in Xinjiang:** Xinjiang authorities detained two brothers of Radio Free Asia Uyghur editor Eset Sulaiman, the broadcaster confirmed in a March 3 report, and have seized five of his cousins since 2018. Their detention is believed to be part of an intimidation campaign to prevent Eset from continuing his reporting, one form of transnational repression documented in Freedom House's recent special report on the topic, "Out of Sight, Not Out of Reach." RFA said over 50 family members of its Uyghur staff have been detained in Xinjiang.

HONG KONG AND MACAU
Assault on democratic principles, free expression intensifies

Over the past month, Beijing set in motion a legislative process to impose sweeping electoral changes on Hong Kong, including a "patriot" test for candidates in all elections. Hong Kong authorities also pressed charges against 47 people involved in a democratic primary in 2020, and two major civil society groups disbanded or lost affiliates after facing government pressure. Meanwhile, censorship increased in both Hong Kong and Macau:

• **Opposition activists charged with "subversion," silenced on social media:** On February 28, authorities charged 47 members opposition activists with "conspiracy to commit subversion" over a 2020 primary election, in the largest application of

the National Security Law since it came into effect. The individuals were initially arrested in a crackdown on January 6. At least 10 individuals deleted their Facebook accounts and others promised not to post on social media as a condition for bail, though only 4 of the 47 were actually granted bail following a marathon hearing. Hundreds of Hong Kongers gathering outside the courthouse to voice dissent, defying restrictions on protests.

• **New RTHK director starts censoring programs:** The new government-appointed chief of the public broadcaster Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK) began canceling programs soon after informing staff on March 4 he would review all content before it went on air. On March 16, Patrick Li confirmed that he had refused to allow three programs from two shows to air on "impartiality" grounds, including a panel discussion on the Beijing-imposed electoral changes that included the former Legislative Council president. The head of public and current affairs section at RTHK quit on March 1, the day Li took control, and at least two other journalists resigned in February rather than sign a mandatory pledge of allegiance to the Hong Kong government. Hong Kong's 2021 budget, introduced on February 24, cut RTHK's funding by 4.6 percent.

• **Self-censorship of arts:** Organizers canceled several cultural events in recent weeks due to apparent concern about prosecution under the National Security Law. On February 26, Hong Kong Baptist University canceled a World Press Photo exhibition, which planned to feature images of the 2019 Hong Kong protests. On March 15, the Hong Kong Film Critics Society canceled the screening of a documentary about 2019 clashes between demonstrators and police at Hong Kong Polytechnic University, after a local Chinese state-owned newspaper argued that the event amounted to a violation of the National Security Law. On March 23, the new M+ museum confirmed that it would not show at its inaugural exhibit a work by artist and CCP critic Ai Weiwei, as was reportedly planned. The Hong Kong Arts Development Council on March 17 said applicants could lose grants if they were found to have advocated for Hong Kong's independence, while Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam vowed on the same day to be on "full alert" for artwork in government-funded spaces that "undermine national security."

• **Censorship in Macau:** The websites hkchronicles.com, which Hong Kong police blocked in January, and hkmap.live, which remains accessible in Hong Kong, are both now blocked in Macau, according to an investigation by the *Apple Daily* newspaper. The blocks may have been ordered under Macau's 2019 Cybersecurity Law. On March 10, Portuguese-language reporters at Macau's largest radio and television broadcaster, Teledifusão de Macau (TDM), received a nine-point list of editorial directions, including that TDM not oppose government policies and that it is an "information dissemination body" of the Chinese and Macau governments.

BEYOND CHINA
Global reach of antipoverty propaganda, Uyghur hacking, and regulatory responses to CGTN and Chinese surveillance

- **China's antipoverty propaganda push abroad.** On March 17, the Communist Party mouthpiece the *People's Daily* touted its [successful efforts](#) in placing propaganda pieces about Xi Jinping's antipoverty campaign in newspapers around the globe between March 5-11, during Chinese annual legislative meetings. The paper claimed it had placed over 750 articles in 12 languages in nearly 200 media outlets in over 40 countries. These included features in Brazil's *[O Globo](#)*, the United Arab Emirates' *[Khaleej Times](#)*, Mexico's *[Milenio](#)*, Indonesia's *Media Indonesia*, and Canada's *The Hill Times*. The *People's Daily* claimed it also "cooperated" with 15 papers to publish 25 thematic special editions; not all of the content was labelled as paid advertising or a press release. Chinese diplomats in the [Maldives](#), [Pakistan](#), and [Tanzania](#) also promoted the campaign on Twitter.

- **Chinese hackers use Facebook to target Uyghurs abroad:** On March 24, Facebook [announced](#) that it had taken action against hacker groups that used the platform to target Uyghurs abroad with malware links to enable surveillance. The targets, mainly based in Turkey, Kazakhstan, the United States, Syria, Australia, and Canada, were sent look-alike domains for popular Uyghur and Turkish news sites and lured to click on them by fake human rights advocacy accounts. Parts of this campaign closely resemble activity associated with Evil Eye, a [previously identified](#) threat actor that also targeted Uyghurs. A recent Freedom House [report](#) identified hacking and phishing as among the tactics deployed by the Chinese regime against Chinese exiles and diaspora communities.

- **China responds to Xinjiang sanctions.** Following [coordinated sanctions](#) from the European Union (EU), United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom on March 22 against Chinese individuals and entities for their involvement in human rights violations in Xinjiang, China hit back with reciprocal sanctions against the EU and UK on [March 22](#), and [March 25](#) respectively, as well as a state media [smear campaign](#) targeting the EU. One EU entity targeted was the Berlin-based Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICS), the largest China-focused think tank in Europe; the body was not known to be particularly hawkish or human-rights oriented, although it had published reports on problematic CCP influence in Europe. Emboldened by the sanctions, China's Communist Youth League [initiated](#) a viral online campaign criticizing Swedish clothing company H&M for a months-old [statement](#) that it would stop sourcing cotton from Xinjiang over concerns about forced labor. The "Support Xinjiang cotton" [hashtag](#) had over 5.4 billion views on March 26.

- **State-run China Global Television News (CGTN) back in Europe, fined in UK, under review in Australia.** After [losing its UK license](#) for being controlled by the Chinese Communist Party, CGTN received approval in France on March 4, allowing the

channel to resume broadcasting across Council of Europe countries, including the United Kingdom. This approval, however, was met with what industry watchers describe as an "unusually stern" announcement regarding the rules that will govern CGTN due to the fact that it had already committed "serious breaches" of principles under French broadcasting legislation, such as "respect for human dignity as well as honesty, independence, and pluralism of information." Industry watchers also note that while UK residents can tune into CGTN, major UK carriers are unlikely to carry it due to British media regulator Ofcom's February ruling. Separately, on March 8, Ofcom fined the entity holding CGTN's license £225,000 ($310,000) for airing forced confessions and biased coverage on protests in Hong Kong. Australian broadcaster SBS suspended CGTN on March 5 while it undertakes a review of the service over human rights concerns.

- **Privacy and security concerns lead to regulatory restrictions from India, UK, and Japan's Line.** In an atmosphere of heightened concern over Chinese meddling in India's critical infrastructure, India announced on March 10 new rules mandating that equipment can only be procured from a government-curated list of "trusted sources." The rules, which come into effect in June 2021, will likely ban Chinese vendors like Huawei and ZTE from playing a role in India's expansion of its 4G services, and building the new 5G network. Similarly, according to a March 18 *Financial Times* report, UK intelligence agencies reportedly urged regulation against municipal procurement of Chinese "safe city" technologies, following a *Reuters* investigation which revealed that at least half of London's boroughs have bought and deployed Chinese-made surveillance systems. On March 23, due to data-misuse concerns, Japan's messaging app Line stopped Chinese affiliates and contractors from accessing Japanese users' personal information. This follows Japanese media reports that four employees of Line's Chinese affiliate had access to Japanese user information, including names and phone numbers, and Line IDs.

FEATURED PUSHBACK
Taiwan's #freedompineapple campaign goes viral in response to Chinese ban

A social media campaign dubbed #freedompineapple went viral after Chinese authorities on February 26 announced a ban on the import of Taiwanese pineapples starting in March. After the announcement, Taiwan's minister of foreign affairs issued a call for people to stand with Taiwan by buying Taiwanese pineapples, coining the hashtag that echoed last year's #freedomwine campaign that emerged in response to China's similarly politicized tariffs on Australian wine. While Taiwan only exports about 10 per-

cent of its pineapple crop, the vast majority of exports have traditionally gone to China. Taiwanese president Tsai Ing-wen joined the campaign in a tweet that received over 3,000 shares, calling for people to purchase pineapples and denouncing the ban as not based on "health or fair trade," as China had claimed.

Taiwanese consumers quickly responded to the campaign and within four days domestic orders of pineapples overtook amounts sold to China, with netizens sharing recipes online using the hashtag. Japanese companies reportedly ordered a record number of pineapples in response to the Chinese ban; Canadian and US diplomats in Taiwan also took part in the campaign, posting photographs of themselves enjoying pineapple to social media alongside the hashtag, or others like #pineapplesolidarity. Accounts stating they were from India, Canada, the Czech Republic, and elsewhere also shared the hashtag.

In November 2020, the Chinese government had introduced up to 200 percent tariffs on Australian wine shortly after the Australian government called for an independent investigation into the origins of COVID-19. Chinese authorities cited additional grievances, including "unfriendly or antagonistic reports" by independent Australian media that they alleged the Australian government was responsible for. In response to the tariffs, a social media campaign encouraging consumers around the world to buy Australian wine in solidarity spread globally.

WHAT TO WATCH FOR

- **US-China tensions post-Alaska:** On March 18, [high-level talks](#) between the Chinese and US governments took place for the first time under the Biden Administration. The strong—and not always diplomatic—exchanges between the two sides gained particular attention on Chinese social media platforms. One comment by Chinese official Yang Jiechi went [viral](#) through a *People's Daily* meme and was branded onto merchandise. Watch for sustained Chinese state and social media attention on US-China relations, including further nationalist rhetoric.

- **Academy Award censorship:** The Oscars, which will [take place](#) on April 25, include the first Asian woman to be nominated for best director: Chloé Zhao, for her film *Nomadland*. Previous remarks by Zhao, who was born in China and now lives in the United States, that were critical of China [sparked](#) nationalist outrage after she was initially lauded by state media as the "pride of China." Watch for down-played or nationalistic media coverage of the Oscars after the CCP propaganda department [issued a directive](#) ordering local media not to broadcast the ceremony in real time due to Zhao's nomination, as well as the nomination of a film about the Hong Kong protests for best short documentary, and whether Zhao's big-budget Marvel film *Eternals* secures a release in China.

- **Forced sale of Hong Kong's *South China Morning Post* (SCMP):** Following an order from Chinese regulators to Alibaba to divest its media assets, the tech giant will be [forced to sell](#) SCMP during a period when Hong Kong's freedoms are being dismantled under the Beijing-imposed National Security Law. Watch for details on the new owner, their potential links to the Chinese party-state, and whether any editorial shifts that reduce critical coverage or enhance pro-Beijing content emerge.

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 policymakers, 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*