

CHINA MEDIA BULLETIN

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IMAGE OF THE MONTH

Wen Jiabao Censored

This image from 2012 shows former premier Wen Jiabao and his mother, who passed away in December 2020. On April 17, censors deleted an [article](#) penned by Wen about his mother from WeChat and other sites, while state media refused to publish it. The emotional piece offered rare insight into the former leader’s personal thoughts, and was likely censored due to implicit criticism of Xi Jinping, with Wen writing, “China, in my vision, should be a country of justice and fairness.”

Credit: [China Digital Times](#)



ANALYSIS

The CCP Is Retooling Its Censorship System at a Brisk Pace in 2021

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Earlier this month, a [video-gaming industry site](#) revealed that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Propaganda Department had introduced a trial review and scoring system for online games produced in China, effective April 1. Under the new system, games can be prohibited if they do not sufficiently promote core socialist values, the “correct” view of history, or traditional Chinese culture.

The rules are just one of many new measures that the CCP and state agencies have ushered in since January to tighten regulatory control over political speech and online content. The changes have extended the party-state’s authority to new frontiers even in the context of China’s already robust censorship apparatus and signaled ongoing CCP nervousness about domestic dissent and alternative power centers. Most of the new actions fall into one of three categories: codes of conduct for elites, pressure on technology companies, and updates to decades-old media regulations.

Formalized rules to regulate elite speech

One set of new rules or updates announced since January enhance speech controls for three targets: [CCP cadres themselves](#), [Chinese journalists](#), and [entertainment celebrities](#). The rules were issued by the CCP’s own Central Committee, the National Press and Publication Administration, and an entertainment industry association under the Ministry of Culture, respectively. They include restrictions like prohibiting party cadres from publicly criticizing CCP decisions, refusing press card renewal to journalists found to have posted content deemed objectionable via personal social media accounts, and requiring public entertainment figures to abide by 15 rules, such as promoting “the party’s line” while not “undermining national unity” or “endangering national security.” Violators face suspension and even a permanent industry ban.

The new measures all target groups of people who were already tightly controlled or relatively compliant, indicating acute CCP concern over internal dissent and a desire to head off any potential opposition from within the country’s political, economic, or media elite.

Warning shots to technology companies

Chinese authorities have also moved in recent months to rein in some of the country’s most prominent technology firms. The most prominent target has been Alibaba. Jack Ma (the company’s cofounder and executive chairman until 2019, as well as a CCP member) had criticized China’s financial regulations in an October 2020 speech, which was widely perceived to have triggered official reprisals. Among other actions, in [mid-March](#), authorities reportedly ordered Alibaba to divest its extensive media holdings—including a 30 percent [stake](#) in the social media platform Sina Weibo—because of growing concerns among party officials that they gave the company outsized influ-

ence over public opinion. CCP leaders reportedly became concerned about tech giants' media power after Sina Weibo censored news in early 2020 about Alibaba executive Jiang Fan's affair with a prominent online influencer, which earned it a [rebuke](#) from the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC).

Chinese tech companies are also at the forefront of the CAC's latest crackdown on "self-media," meaning independently operated social media accounts that publish or comment on business or current affairs. New [CAC provisions](#) targeting "self-media" accounts went into effect on February 22. Under the new rules, "self-media" accounts are required to obtain an [Internet News Information Service Permit](#) from the host platform and are prohibited from not registering with real names, providing news information without permission, and "using emergencies to incite extreme emotions," among other restrictions. Platforms must enforce the provisions, including by imposing temporary or permanent bans on delinquent accounts. Tighter enforcement appears to have already begun. On April 12, [Radio Free Asia](#) reported that a host of WeChat accounts covering military affairs, including "self-media" accounts, had been shuttered in recent weeks.

Domestic companies are not alone in facing regulatory pressure. The CAC reportedly ordered Microsoft's professional networking platform [LinkedIn](#)—the only major U.S. social media site that is not blocked in China—to suspend new sign-ups for 30 days and undergo a self-evaluation for not censoring enough content during the politically sensitive legislative sessions in March. On March 9, [LinkedIn](#) said it would "work to ensure we remain in compliance with local law." The company has over [52 million](#) users in China and had agreed to censor content when it expanded to the country in 2014, including preventing content on [overseas accounts](#) from being viewed inside China.

Updating old regulations for a new era

Government departments have also issued draft revisions of two important decades-old regulations to bring them into the modern era and further entrench CCP leadership.

The first is a [draft update](#) of the Regulations on Internet Information Service from 2000 that was released for public comment on January 8. The new proposal deals with contemporary issues like e-commerce and online fraud. But it also calls for the state to enforce "cyber sovereignty" and expands the list of prohibited online content to include "false information" and material that "incites illegal assemblies" or "endangers the physical and mental health of minors."

Another draft update to old regulations targets the explosion of privately owned online video services that compete with traditional CCP-aligned media like the state broadcaster China Central Television (CCTV). On March 16, the National Radio and Television Administration ([NRTA](#)) released the draft text of a new Radio and Television Law, replacing 24-year-old broadcasting regulations. In explaining the draft, the NRTA cited a [CCP Central Committee](#) and State Council opinion, which laid out party concerns about the rise of private digital outlets and the need to integrate traditional and emerg-

ing media to ensure continued CCP media leadership. The draft law covers video-sharing websites, internet television platforms, and online broadcasters for the first time, extending controls long applied to traditional media to platforms that have come into being since a comprehensive broadcasting law was last enacted in 1997.

Factors Driving Increased Regulation

The party-state is constantly adapting and upgrading its content-control system to smother embers of dissent and tackle new threats, but several factors appear to be driving this latest burst of activity and influencing the forms it has taken.

The first is Xi Jinping himself. The crackdown on Chinese tech companies, for example, has been led from the very top. In March, [Xi called for regulators](#) to step up enforcement and personally chaired a meeting in which officials called for the country to “accelerate the improvement of laws governing platform economies in order to fill in gaps and loopholes in a timely fashion.” Xi’s [stylistic fingerprints](#) are also evident in the effort to update old legislation for the digital age, a reflection of his modus operandi of “law-based governance”—or strengthening the party’s control through legislation.

Second is the fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the CCP eventually got a handle on the coronavirus outbreak in China, its initial official cover-up as well as the suffering inflicted by its response and the virus itself left the party sensitive to any potential criticism. The above controls on journalists and [self-media](#) emerged after many shared information—including investigative reporting—on the government’s mismanagement of the pandemic that ran counter to official narratives. Prominent party members’ expressions of doubt about Xi’s leadership during the crisis likely contributed to the new rules for CCP cadres. In 2021, the regime seems determined to enforce what [Foreign Ministry spokesperson](#) Hua Chunying referred to as the “correct collective memory” of the pandemic.

The third factor is anxiety over competition that threatens the party’s monopoly on information control. This explains the CCP’s efforts to weaken Chinese tech giants and break up their massive holdings in media and online video services. In a November 2020 speech, [Xu Lin](#)—deputy head of the CCP Central Propaganda Department and director of the State Council Information Office—warned that integrated media could “dilute the party’s leadership” and said that officials must “resolutely prevent the risk of capital manipulating public opinion.”

Looking ahead

The regime is determined to baton down public opinion ahead of the CCP’s 100th anniversary in July and the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing, especially as it faces growing international criticism over repression in Xinjiang and Hong Kong. The party is clearly concerned about critical views on its recent history and long-term legacy. On April 9, the [CAC established a hotline](#) for netizens to report users who “distort the history of the party,” “attack the party leadership,” or defame national heroes and martyrs. Those reported for speech that “[defames martyrs](#)” could face up to three years in prison under legislation that took effect on March 1.

Given this context, observers in the coming months should watch for the following:

- additional restrictions and penalties related to the discussion of history, with a likely crackdown around the July anniversary;
- reports of enforcement of the new rules and codes of conduct, including journalists losing accreditation over their social media posts, celebrities facing bans, “self-media” account suspensions, and disciplinary action against party cadres for public expressions of dissent;
- smooth adoption, with little debate, of the draft rules on radio, television, and internet services; and
- new rules and regulations for other avenues of relatively free expression, such as podcasts or voice-based apps built on the Clubhouse model.

Regardless of how these events unfold, it seems certain that the CCP and its leaders will continue to refine and enhance what is already the world’s most sophisticated apparatus for media and internet censorship.

IN THE NEWS

State propaganda machines promote Xinjiang cotton; boycotts launched to counter allegations of forced labor

Sparked by a viral [Weibo post](#) from the Communist Youth League, a widespread campaign emerged on March 24 supporting cotton from Xinjiang and denouncing international brands like Swedish clothing company H&M that pledged not to use it over forced labor concerns. The campaign focused on [clothing brands](#) that had [announced](#) in 2020 that they would cut ties to Xinjiang factories in light of [evidence](#) that [cotton](#) from Xinjiang, which amounts to 20 percent of the world’s supply, was [picked](#) through forced labor by Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims. Forced labor in Xinjiang has been [cited](#) as evidence of crimes against humanity in Xinjiang, and several governments [issued](#) coordinated sanctions on Chinese officials over Xinjiang and forced labor two days before the Communist Youth League post. A closer look at the domestic and international media dimensions points to strong party-state backing for the campaign.

- **Domestic propaganda pushing Xinjiang cotton:** Though the campaign began online, state media propaganda organs inside the country soon began promoting it through traditional media. The CCP mouthpiece *People’s Daily* released several such articles, including one on [why](#) Xinjiang cotton is the “best in the world,” while a live [broadcast](#) on China Central Television (CCTV) advertised products made from Xinjiang cotton and denounced “international brands [that] want to make money in China while stigmatizing Xinjiang cotton.” [Government ministry](#) spokespersons also joined in, promoting the narrative that the allegations of forced labor were “malicious lies” with the purpose of discrediting China’s image or preventing China’s development. The propaganda offensive also expanded to cinemas, and a musical on Xinjiang [premiered](#) in theaters on March 28.

- Netizen support:** The campaign received widespread support on social media, with the “Support Xinjiang cotton” hashtag gaining more than 7.9 billion [views](#) on Weibo by April 21. State media boosted the social media campaign, and one of the most widely shared posts using the hashtag came from *People’s Daily*, whose post was [shared](#) over 39 million times. Participating netizens vowed to [boycott](#) the brands, with some users burning Nikes and posting [video](#) of the spectacle; several landlords [shuttered](#) H&M stores, and dozens of celebrities [severed](#) endorsement deals with H&M, Adidas, and other brands whose leadership had criticized abuses in Xinjiang. Despite this seemingly grassroots outcry, online sentiment on topics like Xinjiang cotton can be difficult to accurately gauge, as trends are [easily manipulated](#) or amplified by a [robust industry](#) of government-funded “intelligent online commenting” that can flood social media platforms with desired posts, even at the direction of small agencies.
- Censorship:** While most responses from netizens and consumers appeared to support the CCP narrative on Xinjiang cotton, Chinese censors were also at work controlling dissent. Weibo [banned](#) two accounts for posting the slogan “support Xinjiang people,” and soon after, searching for terms related to supporting Uyghurs or others in Xinjiang on most platforms [produced](#) irrelevant results. The country’s private tech companies effectively erased H&M’s online presence, pulling products from [online](#) shopping malls and the H&M name from mapping and ride-share services and food delivery apps. Huawei also [pulled](#) Nike and Adidas apps from their app store. Streaming platforms and television stations [blurred](#) the logos of clothing worn on shows.
- International propaganda and targeting of overseas researchers:** State media and diplomats promoted the campaign aggressively overseas on state-run social media accounts and in English-language media. “Xinjiang” was the [most-mentioned topic](#) by government and diplomatic Twitter accounts between March 24 and April 21, according to the [Hamilton 2.0 dashboard](#), which tracks trends on global social media platforms by government accounts from China and other authoritarian environments. CGTN also released two [propaganda documentaries](#) with English subtitles. The overseas campaign also had a more sinister element. On Weibo, more than 7 million people [viewed](#) posts attacking the lead author of a report on Uyghur forced labor, Chinese-Australian Vicky Xu Xiuzhong. She also [received](#) death threats, and her friends in China were briefly [detained](#). Other measures included retaliatory sanctions on academics [Jo Smith Finley](#) and [Adrien Zenz](#), parading [detained](#) Uyghurs on state television in attempts to [silence](#) their overseas family members, and a cyberattack on the website of the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China, an international cross-party group of legislators critical of the Chinese government.

Surveillance updates: Amid data leaks and police-sponsored app, Chinese users raise new privacy concerns

- **Leak of Shanghai police watchlists:** News outlets [reported](#) in March that a Shanghai Public Security Bureau (PSB) database accessed by hackers in late 2020 contained watch lists of 25,000 persons of interest, including Uyghurs; people with histories of drug use or mental illness; petitioners who filed claims against government officials; and foreigners, including executives with access to sensitive technologies. Experts believe the records—contained in a file of more than 1.1 million items that were mostly collected since 2017, and which was code named “uyghur terrorist”—fed into a national surveillance camera data program called Skynet. The files also contain materials detailing the monitoring and questioning of thousands of Uyghurs, including children as young as five. Similar [“key individual”](#) databases exist in other cities and provinces across China. The Intercept [reviewed](#) a similar leak of police data from Ürümqi in January.
- **Forced downloads of antifraud app spark privacy concerns:** A new app developed by the Ministry of Public Security designed to warn users of scam calls, texts, and apps came under withering criticism from users who say it violated their privacy. Several netizens [complained](#) that they were forced to download the app in order to enter their residence buildings, or before receiving vaccinations. Though the app claims not to collect user data, its registration processes [requires](#) submitting one’s name, national ID number, biometric facial data, address, and phone number, and [seeks](#) 29 access permissions including to cameras and microphones. Since launching in mid-March, the app has been downloaded [over](#) 8.7 million times, and has accumulated more than 9,000 mostly negative reviews.
- **Backlash over revised Shanghai regulations on visitor registration:** On March 31, headlines appeared [claiming](#) that Shanghai would require mandatory online registration for anyone who stays in the city for over 24 hours starting April 1, prompting netizen [backlash](#) over the loss of privacy and increased surveillance. The Shanghai government then issued a notice stating that the regulations were [misinterpreted](#) and that registration was voluntary, not compulsory.
- **Chinese tech companies helped draft standards for ethnicity tracking by facial-recognition systems:** A March 30 [report](#) from video surveillance firm IPVM revealed that police security surveillance practices at national, provincial, and local levels in which people are categorized by personal attributes including skin color and ethnicity were drafted in conjunction with China’s top video-security companies. Participating firms include ones that have been [blacklisted](#) by the US government, like Dahua and Hikvision, for complicity in human rights violations. While some standards revealed are from previous years, others will come into force in the future, including one in May 2021 that aims to catalogue skin color into five different categories. The list contains companies with varying levels of state ownership, with available information showing a range from [under](#) 15 percent to [above](#) 40 percent.

Harsh penalties in free expression cases or for members of ethnic and religious minority groups

- Activist dies in prison:** Chinese activist Guo Hongwei [died](#) on April 9 following surgery for a brain hemorrhage while serving a 13-year prison sentence. A Jilin court had convicted Guo in 2016 of “extorting the government” and “picking quarrels and provoking trouble,” a crime commonly invoked against rights activists. Police seized Guo, who had previously served a 5-year sentence in connection with his activism, months after he publicly supported the 2014 Hong Kong “Umbrella Movement” protests. Guo’s family [voiced doubts](#) about his death, suggesting it may have been caused by inadequate medical care prior to surgery, and called for an autopsy. While his father, Guo Yinqui, said there were no visible marks on his body, they had [raised allegations](#) several times previously that Guo was tortured in custody.
- Death sentence for Uyghur textbooks:** A Xinjiang court [announced](#) on April 6 that former Xinjiang Education Department head and senior party official Sattar Sawut had been sentenced to death with a two-year reprieve on charges of “separatism” and “taking bribes.” Authorities claimed he had published Uyghur-language textbooks that “incited ethnic separatism, violent terrorism, and religious extremism” during the 13 years they were in use, and that individuals convicted of violent attacks had been influenced by them. The deputy education bureau head and two publishing house employees [received](#) life sentences in connection with the book, which shows [little](#) evidence of violent content.
- Long sentence for foreign citizen:** On April 2, Guangzhou Intermediate Court [convicted](#) Belizean-national Lee Henley Hu Xiang of “financing criminal activities that endanger national security,” and sentenced him to 11 years in prison. Lee [reportedly](#) provided 5.1 million renminbi (\$780,000) to support Hong Kong protesters in 2019 and had spoken at a closed-door briefing about a foreign country’s sanctions bill, believed to be the US’s Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act. National security police detained him in November 2019. On April 14, the state-run CCTV-13 channel [broadcast](#) Lee’s confession; such confessions are [often](#) filmed in coercive or deceptive circumstances.
- Tibetan monk imprisoned for online activities:** On March 26, local police in Sichuan [informed](#) the family of Rinchen Tsultrim, a Tibetan monk, that he had been sentenced to 4.5-years in prison for “inciting separatism” over his online remarks about Tibet and for speaking with Tibetans in exile. Police initially [detained](#) him in August 2019 after warning him twice the previous year about his WeChat posts, and had held him incommunicado for over a year.
- Falun Gong practitioners jailed over leaflets:** Two Falun Gong practitioners—Wang Jianmin in Shandong and Bo Fanglu in Anhui—received prison [sentences](#) of nine and four years, respectively, in a new crackdown on the group following adherents’ [promotion](#) of a meditation chant as a health and spirituality technique during the

COVID-19 pandemic. Both had been convicted of possession of Falun Gong leaflets; Wang was sentenced March 26 and Bo on February 23.

- **Arrests for online labor activism and YouTube video about torture:** Beijing police [formally arrested](#) delivery worker Chen Guojiang on April 2 on charges of “picking quarrels and provoking trouble” for his labor-unionizing efforts. Guo had [recorded](#) videos and set up WeChat groups to organize delivery drivers, who work with [few protections](#). WeChat [censored](#) his family’s appeal for donations to help with legal fees, though they still managed to raise 120,000 renminbi (\$18,500). In another case, Shaanxi police [charged](#) human rights lawyer Chang Weiping on April 7 with “subversion of state power,” which carries a potential life sentence. Chang had [released](#) a YouTube video detailing torture he reported suffering when detained in January 2020 just before his arrest last October.

HONG KONG

Media outlets, journalists, and public broadcaster face new attacks on press freedom

As Beijing enacted [sweeping changes](#) to Hong Kong’s electoral system, and local courts [convicted](#) stalwarts of the territory’s prodemocracy movement for participating in the 2019 protests, several changes that further erode press freedom and freedom of expression flew under the radar.

- **Journalists threatened with arrest, warrantless searches:** On April 16, Hong Kong’s police commissioner and senior ministers threatened local media over their coverage of the first-ever National Security Education Day on April 15, an event promoting the new National Security Law (NSL). The commissioner [said](#) that police could investigate or arrest individuals for “fake news” as it “is directly linked to national security.” In another blow, on April 2 *Apple Daily* [reported](#) that the Justice Department ruled that searches of journalistic material in national security investigations could be conducted without court approval, as existing legislative oversight rules did not extend to the Beijing-imposed NSL. The Hong Kong Journalists Association (HKJA) protested both [moves](#).
- **RTHK rejects press awards as fears of self-censorship grows:** Numerous changes at Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK) in the past month reflect the government’s [tightening grip](#) over the once-respected public broadcaster. On March 31, local media [reported](#) that RTHK tried to withdraw from consideration for awards being granted by the Society of Publishers in Asia Awards (SOPA) and the Human Rights Press Awards; neither body approved the request, as the judging process had already begun. On April 21, RTHK [rejected](#) a separate press award granted to one of its programs for coverage of the 2019 Yuen Long mob attacks. Separately, on April 7 the broadcaster [said](#) its journalists could be held financially liable for “improperly incurred expenditure;” that warning came as RTHK’s government-appointed

chief [continued](#) to [axe](#) programs, and staff were reportedly warned about financial consequences for producing shows that never go on the air. On April 13, media reported that prominent journalist Yvonne Tong had [quit](#) after months of online harassment from pro-Beijing supporters; the news came days after RTHK [ended the contract](#) of a veteran current affairs columnist.

- Attacks on media, journalist, street booths with ties to Falun Gong:** On April 12, four masked men [attacked](#) a printing warehouse of the Chinese-language *Epoch Times* newspaper and [destroyed](#) equipment with sledgehammers. This is the second attack on the newspaper since 2019 and the fifth in 15 years. Police [claimed](#) the attack related to a dispute over a debt; the paper denied this. [Journalist associations](#) denounced the attack, which reportedly forced *Epoch Times* to halt printing for several days. In March, a Hong Kong-based *Epoch Times* journalist reportedly [received threats](#) from mainland police, who detained and questioned her family members. The journalist and the paper's founders are practitioners of the Falun Gong spiritual movement, which is violently persecuted in China but remains legal in Hong Kong; the paper's coverage often addresses human rights abuses in China and is fiercely critical of the CCP. On April 2 and 3, unidentified individuals bearing knives [attacked](#) and [destroyed](#) several booths in different areas in the territory, where Falun Gong practitioners were handing out leaflets and raising awareness about persecution in China.
- Journalists' access to government data restricted, penalized:** On March 29, Hong Kong authorities announced amendments to [restrict](#) access to information about directors of companies on the Hong Kong's Companies' Registry. On April 14 [proposed changes](#) to procedures for accessing electoral roll information were released as a part of the Improving Electoral System Bill 2021, which will implement Beijing's imposed changes on the electoral system. The government claimed the moves were meant to protect privacy, but the HKJA [denounced them](#) as a threat to press freedom. The measures come as a court [convicted](#) journalist Bao Choy on April 22 and fined her HK\$6,000 (US\$770) for accessing a government database to investigate the 2019 Yuen Long attack. Police also [confirmed](#) that a state media reporter had been arrested in February on the same charge as Bao for accessing a government database.
- Three-year sentence for Telegram administrator:** On April 20, a Hong Kong court [sentenced](#) Hui Pui-yee, the administrator of a Telegram channel with approximately 60,000 subscribers that was used during the 2019 protests, to three years in prison for "conspiracy to commit a seditious act" and "conspiracy to incite others to commit arson." Prosecutors [claimed](#) she had spread hate speech and encouraged people to attack the government or police, referring to her [descriptions](#) of police officers as "dogs," "chickens," or "corrupt cops."

BEYOND CHINA

“Wolf Warrior” diplomacy, tech footprint in Asia, CGTN woes, self-censorship in Australia

Aggressive Chinese overseas diplomacy known as “wolf warrior” diplomacy have been on display this spring, prompting pushback from other governments.

- **Turkey:** In arguably its largest public rebuke of the CCP in [over a decade](#), the Turkish government [summoned](#) the Chinese ambassador on April 6 after the Chinese embassy condemned two Turkish politicians for commemorating on Twitter a 1990 clash between Uyghurs and the Chinese government. After the spat, the water supply was [reportedly](#) cut to the Chinese embassy. Turkey is home to one of the world’s largest communities of Uyghur exiles and refugees, who have recently been facing threats of [extradition](#).
- **Sweden:** The Chinese embassy in Sweden [sparred](#) with Swedish politicians after its diplomats were accused of sending threatening emails to Swedish journalist Jojje Olsson over articles critical of the Chinese government. In response to publication of the emails, the last of which was sent April 9, Swedish political leaders called for the deportation of the Chinese ambassador.
- **Czech Republic:** A Jamestown Foundation report released on April 12 [details](#) a CCP disinformation campaign against Czech Senate Speaker Jaroslav Kubera. The authors note the sophisticated involvement of pro-Beijing websites and of [systems](#) linked to the United Front Work Department that sent emails to Czech media falsely accusing the speaker of accepting money from the Taiwanese government.
- Meanwhile, journalist Matt Debutts [revealed](#) that 19 of 158 known **Chinese government Twitter accounts** he investigated up through April 6 were still not flagged as state-affiliated. Twitter [began](#) flagging such accounts last August, leading to a [decrease](#) in user engagement with these and state media accounts.

Technology footprint

- **Indonesia:** Tencent [opened](#) its first data center in Indonesia on April 12, and has revealed plans to expand aggressively in Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. Foreign-based Chinese servers are concerning as they could [potentially](#) copy data to China-based servers that could be accessed by the government, or where content stored on them could be manipulated or censored. In January 2021, China’s Cyberspace Administration [signed](#) an memorandum of understanding (MOU) to cooperate on cybersecurity capacity and technology with Indonesia, its first with a foreign cyber agency.
- **Vietnam:** According to an April 5 report from antivirus firm Kaspersky, a previously undocumented group of Chinese-speaking hackers [conducted](#) a campaign from

June 2020 to January 2021 to gather “political intelligence” from government agencies in Vietnam.

Pushback against Chinese-language and state media

- **Estonia:** After Estonian paper *Ohtuleht* published a paid piece on April 15 by the Chinese embassy denying allegations of repression of Uyghurs, two of Estonia’s other major newspapers, *Postimees* and *Eesti Päevaleht*, [announced](#) that they would refuse to publish advertorials by the Chinese embassy. In response to the backlash, *Ohtuleht* editor in chief promised organizational changes to avoid similar “mistakes” in the future.
- **Philippines:** After intense popular backlash, ABS-CBN News Channel decided on April 15 to [end](#) its partnership with a Chinese-Filipino media company that was to host the Philippines’ first local news program in Mandarin, the first edition of which aired only three days prior. The company, Horizon of the Sun Communications, Inc., promotes the Chinese government’s Belt and Road initiative and is [known](#) for having produced a widely criticized music video written by the Chinese ambassador to Manila last April, which promoted China’s claims on the South China Sea.
- **CGTN broadcasts:** On April 5, human rights NGO Safeguard Defenders [filed](#) two complaints regarding China Global Television Network (CGTN) with both the French regulator—whose [approval](#) of the station’s license put it back on the air across all Council of Europe countries—and the US regulator Federal Communications Commission (FCC). Safeguard Defenders also coordinated an [open letter](#) from 13 survivors of forced confessions to satellite operators around the world, including in Australia and Canada, [urging](#) them to not carry Chinese state-affiliated channels. Telia Norway immediately [suspended](#) the broadcasts of CGTN and CCTV-4 after receiving the letter. On [April 22](#), the FCC adopted a new rule requiring clear disclosures for broadcast programming paid for by foreign governments, such as China’s.

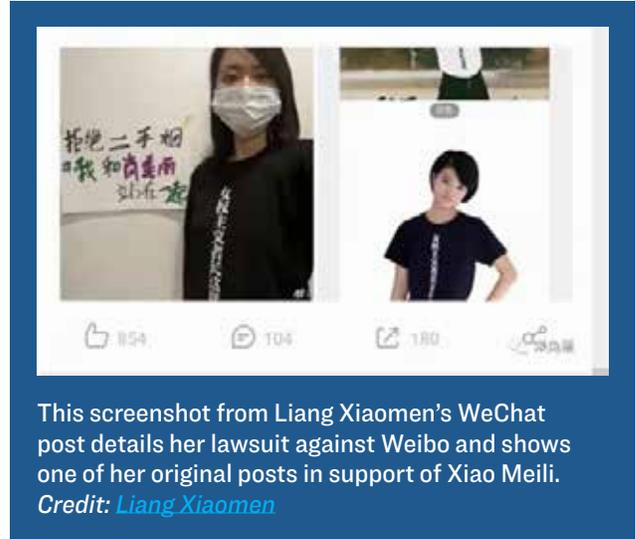
Self-censorship

- **Australia:** In late March, an art gallery in Canberra [removed](#) art pieces depicting Chinese leaders Mao Zedong and Xi Jinping as Batman and Winnie-the-Pooh, respectively, after receiving hundreds of seemingly coordinated complaints that the works were racist. Following similar allegations of racism, on April 4, the University of Sydney student-run newspaper *Honi Soit* [removed](#) an investigative article linking two university academics to Chinese government programs. The incidents occurred amid debate in the [United States, Australia](#), and elsewhere, about being mindful of criticizing the CCP without conflating repressive Chinese authorities with ordinary Chinese people. Meanwhile, Chinese state media has exploited the debate and [pushed](#) or amplified a narrative overseas that critics of the CCP and its repression in Xinjiang are “accomplices of crimes against Asian Americans” in an attempt to silence criticism of its human rights abuses as racist.

FEATURED PUSHBACK

Women’s rights activists’ fight against online bullying and censorship gains support

Women and women’s rights activists have faced escalating bullying and censorship by tech companies for writing about feminism and women’s rights issues. Recently, women spoke out in [solidarity](#) with feminist Xiao Meili after her post on the Sina Weibo microblogging platform led to a stream of nationalistic and misogynistic trolling, ultimately resulting in Weibo deleting her account in late March. The user who began the smear campaign against her, a prominent nationalist, had [previously](#) been profiled by the Communist Youth League and a local government vowed to work with him. Weibo [reportedly](#) deleted around 20 other women’s accounts after they were doxed and attacked for defending Xiao; the company did not appear to take any action against the accounts harassing the women.



One of the women targeted, New York-based Liang Xiaomen, [sued](#) Sina Weibo on April 13 under China’s new Civil Code for deleting her account without providing any explanation or evidence of wrongdoing. Weibo [responded](#) and claimed her account had been deleted because she posted “illegal and harmful information” and that the reports against her were for “promoting hatred” and “sex discrimination” for supporting Xiao Meili.

As the Weibo trolling campaign continued, social media site Douban [deleted](#) over 10 feminist groups on its platform on April 12. The groups were tied to the 6b4t women’s empowerment movement that began in South Korea, and refers to women who choose to be single, refrain from sex, or decline to have children, among other things. Douban stated it had removed the groups because they had “extreme and ideological content.” A backlash immediately [began](#) online, with other women’s rights supporters [speaking out](#) in defense of the groups. The [hashtag](#) “women let’s unite” had over 62 million views by April 22.

WHAT TO WATCH FOR

- **100th anniversary of CCP's founding:** Starting in late March, the CCP [launched](#) a mass propaganda campaign ahead of its 100th anniversary on July 1, with guidance and directives for media, [education](#) for officials, [screenings](#) of propaganda films, and a [hotline](#) for netizens to report other users for online criticism of the party. As the anniversary approaches, look for intensifying censorship and a crackdown on dissidents and activists, including house arrests, forced travel, and detentions. Also watch for Chinese embassies and diplomats increasingly [posting](#) positive content about the CCP's history and [downplaying](#) abuses that have taken place under the party's rule.
- **Future of Apple Daily and independent media in Hong Kong:** On April 16, state-owned newspaper *Ta Kung Pao* [called](#) for *Apple Daily* to be banned under the National Security Law; the same day *Apple Daily* owner Jimmy Lai was [sentenced](#) to 14 months in prison for "unauthorized assembly." Watch for regulatory scrutiny or fines on independent media, [sales](#) of media assets, and increased prosecution of media owners and journalists on national security or other charges for their journalistic work.
- **New initiatives examining China's global influence:** Several new projects have launched recently that examine aspects of China's international engagement and local impact, including: the [People's Map of Global China](#) from the Made in China Journal; [China Local/Global](#) from the Carnegie Endowment; [The Wire China](#), founded by a former *New York Times* China correspondent, and the [Afro-Sino Centre for International Relations](#), in Ghana. Watch for new reporting from these and other sources on the effects of the CCP's overseas influence as increasing attention is paid to the party-state's actions beyond China.

TAKE ACTION

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- **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 2021*, *Freedom on the Net 2020*, *Beijing's Global Megaphone*, and *The Battle for China's Spirit: Religious Revival, Repression, and Resistance under Xi Jinping*



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