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IMAGE OF THE MONTH

Peng Shuai Watched

After Chinese tennis star Peng Shuai accused a former senior official of sexual assault on Weibo in November, she disappeared and has been believed to be under close government watch, amid tight censorship of the story on the Chinese internet and an international outcry on her behalf. This image, taken during a staged interview with Peng and the French outlet *L'Equipe* on February 7 during the Winter Olympics shows Wang Kan, the Chinese Olympic Committee chief of staff, watching Peng as she spoke to foreign journalists for the first time. The interview was conducted in Chinese with Wang translating, even though Peng speaks English.

Credit: Daily Mail UK

ANALYSIS

By Jailing Citizens for Their Speech, Beijing Distorts China's Voice

By Sarah Cook

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Those working towards a more just and free society must be heard.

It is easy for people around the world to fall under the impression that China speaks with one authoritarian voice. The content promoted by state media to foreign and domestic audiences is dominated by glowing coverage of Xi Jinping and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and the Chinese internet is fraught with xenophobic chatter and bullying by nationalistic netizens. But this impression is essentially fabricated—a result of the regime's efforts to silence the many voices and perspectives that conflict with its narrative and support universal values such as human rights, free speech, and the rule of law.

Indeed, a review of detentions and prosecutions from the past year that involve freedom of expression reveals a very different picture of the Chinese people, including their aspirations, sacrifices, diversity, and courage. It also exposes an extremely insecure regime that constantly struggles on multiple fronts to suppress even the most modest forms of grassroots dissent.

Given the country's size and the CCP's many efforts to hide the unsavory aspects of its rule, it is difficult to collect comprehensive data on political and religious imprisonment in China. This difficulty has intensified since previously published verdicts began disappearing from judicial databases last summer. Nevertheless, Freedom House's monthly *China Media Bulletin* attempts to document key cases of people in China who face legal reprisals for sharing information or expressing their views on political, social, or religious topics. The dozens of cases covered over the past year, although only a small proportion of overall political prisoners in China, offer a number of meaningful insights.

Diversity

The diversity of people being punished for speech that is disfavored by the CCP is striking. Sorted by profession, they include artists, teachers, farmers, monks, students, factory workers, journalists, and lawyers. There is also a growing contingent of entrepreneurs, billionaires, and former regime insiders such as Shen Liangqing, a former prosecutor sentenced to three years in prison in November for social media posts and other writings on abuses in the CCP disciplinary system.

Other aspects of the prisoners' identities also speak to their diversity. There are Han Chinese, Uyghurs, and Tibetans; men and women; Maoists and democracy advocates; Christians and Falun Gong believers. Some are long-standing activists who have already served politically motivated prison terms, while others find themselves on the receiving end of state repression for the first time.

Notable too is the geographic diversity of the cases. The scale of political imprisonment is larger and the punishments particularly harsh and disproportionate in remote western regions like Tibet and Xinjiang. But police stations and courts in major coastal cities like Beijing, Guangzhou, and Shanghai are the sites of persecution for activity such as archiving censored news about the pandemic, commemorating the victims of the Tiananmen Square massacre, criticizing China's leaders, or blogging about how to access uncensored information. The full list of locations also includes the heartland provinces of Guangxi, Anhui, Hunan, Henan, and Hubei, among others.

Harsh penalties for mundane communication

Despite this diversity, there are common themes in the legal provisions that are invoked to jail people for their online and offline comments. Most charges implicitly acknowledge that the defendants did not engage in any form of violence, but rather are being punished for what they said or believe. For example, authorities frequently level charges of "inciting subversion," "picking quarrels and provoking trouble," "insulting martyrs," and "using a heterodox religion to undermine implementation of the law."

The punishments meted out for these nonviolent offenses are harsh and can reach up to life imprisonment. Many of the penalized comments would be considered mundane in more open societies—a complaint about COVID-19 protocols, an observation on the prevalence of coronavirus cases in one's neighborhood, a meme mocking police, or a social media post offering an alternative perspective on a historical event.

Some of those taken into custody are placed in administrative detention for up to 15 days, an increasingly common punishment for speaking irreverently about police during the pandemic, according to cases tracked by the @FreeSpeechCN Twitter account based on notices from local government websites. But many others are kept in pretrial detention for years at a time; denied access to family, lawyers, and medical care; subjected to sham trials; and sentenced to years more in prison.

Prominent rights defenders and members of ethnic minorities or banned religious groups tend to receive the longest sentences, often exceeding 10 years, recently joined by several high-profile entrepreneurs. In July 2021, Sun Dawu, a pig farmer turned billionaire who ran one the largest agricultural businesses in China, received an 18-year prison sentence after he lamented the lack of political reform in China and expressed support for detained activist Xu Zhiyong. In September, a Tianjin court sentenced a family of three Falun Gong believers to prison terms of 7 to 12 years, apparently in connection with the printing and distribution of information about the banned spiritual practice. Also that month, four Tibetan monks were sentenced to up to 20 years in prison after police discovered a phone containing records of communication with fellow monks in Nepal and donations for earthquake relief. These are harsher punishments than a defendant might receive for violent crimes like sexual assault or manslaughter in some countries.

The motives and aspirations of the jailed individuals in many cases are apparent in their actions: trying to support employees who were cheated out of pensions, possessing an image of a revered spiritual leader, countering propaganda that slanders

one's faith, reporting child labor at a factory, sharing updates on COVID-19 amid heavy censorship, or exposing torture and other abuses within the legal apparatus. These are ordinary citizens trying to help others, assert their rights, and build a more just and free society.

The price they pay is greater than simply the formal penalties they receive. When Huang Xueqin, a women's rights activist and journalist, was detained, her plans to pursue a graduate degree in the United Kingdom were disrupted. Tang Mingfang, who exposed abuse at a Foxconn factory making Amazon devices, was separated from his nine-year-old son and unable to be by his father when he passed away. Veteran rights advocate Guo Feixiong was barred from seeing his dying wife. In several cases, prisoners have paid with their lives. Chinese activist Guo Hongwei died last April following surgery for a brain hemorrhage while serving a 13-year prison sentence in Jilin Province for lodging complaints about corruption and mistreatment in custody. In May, a report by the Uyghur Human Rights Project included accounts of at least 18 Uyghur religious figures, activists, or relatives who perished in detention or shortly after release since 2014.

The snowball effect and international implications

When an individual is punished for challenging injustice, others often come to their aid. Yet those offering support can face punishment themselves, at times under more serious charges. Zhang Zhan, a citizen journalist sentenced to four years in prison for reporting related to COVID-19, was detained while trying to locate another citizen journalist in Wuhan, Fang Bin, who had gained international attention for videos taken at hospitals in the first days of the pandemic. In December, Hunan Province officials involuntarily committed teacher Li Tiantian to a psychiatric facility after she expressed sympathy for another teacher who was fired for questioning official narratives on Sino-Japanese history. A lawyer who then tried to visit Li after her release—prominent attorney Xie Yang—was himself charged with "inciting subversion." This snowball effect hints at the enormous scale of resources the regime must invest in silencing dissent.

The damage caused by such repression extends beyond the jailed individuals and their communities. It also undermines any effort to build rule of law in China, reduces the government's ability to address grievances, and simultaneously papers over and exacerbates simmering public frustration with government policies.

Moreover, as with much else in China today, the scope, nature, and frequency of Beijing's prosecution of free speech cases have implications for the wider world. Several of those charged or sentenced over the past year were punished for sending information abroad about COVID-19 or otherwise communicating with exiles, providing valuable information to Chinese and global news consumers. Others are themselves foreign nationals—including Australian writer Yang Hengjun, who faces questionable espionage charges, and Belizean national Lee Henley Hu Xiang, sentenced last April to 11 years in prison for providing financial and advocacy support to Hong Kong protesters.

Dozens of detainees have been jailed for comments or information posted to global social media platforms—especially Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube—even if those companies have not turned over user data to Chinese authorities. The users are being punished at a time when Chinese officials and state media are investing significant resources to manipulate information flows on the same global platforms. Meanwhile, on Chinese platforms like Tencent's WeChat, some users appear to have faced punishment for sharing content in private group communications, reflecting how company staff turned over data to authorities, a practice documented in past cases. Tencent is both a recipient of foreign investment and a major investor in tech firms abroad, raising questions about the de facto complicity of those partners.

Foreigners visiting China may even find themselves in physical proximity to these detentions. Last week, the Falun Dafa Information Center published a map showing the short distance between detention facilities in Beijing and venues for the Winter Olympics. Many of the detention centers within miles of Olympic venues are familiar sites of abuse for religious believers, rights lawyers, petitioners, and other grassroots activists.

Breaking the silence

Unfortunately, nothing short of a significant political shift will free all of these prisoners or prevent another swath of citizens from being taken into custody for similar reasons. But international and local actors can still make a difference and save lives. Under public pressure to grant her a medical release, the authorities reportedly improved conditions for Zhang Zhan. After two years of persistent efforts to locate Fang Bin, activists concluded this month that he was being held at a Wuhan detention center. And even as Foxconn whistleblower Tang Mingfang was jailed, his actions forced the company to stop using schoolchildren as workers.

More can be done to draw attention to the plight of China's free expression activists. Foreign officials should raise relevant cases when visiting particular provinces or cities. Private-sector executives should use their leverage over supply chains to support whistleblowers, as rights groups have asked of Amazon in Tang's case. Investors in tech firms should pose questions about their potential complicity in surveillance and prosecutions.

It is critical to remember the many voices that the CCP does not want the world or the Chinese public to hear. With their courage, nonviolence, and sacrifice for their fellow citizens, they offer hope for a better future in China and beyond.

IN THE NEWS
Beijing's censorship and propaganda showcased during Winter Olympics

- **Uyghur athlete selected as Olympic torchbearer:** The Chinese government appeared to acknowledge diplomatic boycotts of the Winter Olympics and denunciations of atrocity crimes against Uyghurs by selecting a Uyghur skier to help light the Olympic cauldron during the opening ceremony on February 4. The fate of Uyghurs even with records of government support is precarious: Xinjiang police confirmed on February 11 that a Uyghur torchbearer from the 2008 Beijing Olympics is serving a 14-year prison sentence for "watching counter-revolutionary videos."

- **Chinese state media, diplomats claim US paid athletes to "sabotage" games:** A January 28 article by state-run *China Daily* and amplified by China's foreign ministry spokesperson claimed the US government paid athletes to cause trouble during the games. The false claim, issued before the games started, cited unnamed sources claiming that the US could "incite" athletes to denounce China, or to "play passively in competition and even refuse to take part." The article was part of a Chinese Communist Party (CCP) propaganda narrative to counter any criticism of the Party's "success" in hosting the Olympics.

- **US athlete's remarks becomes propaganda item; criticism of CCP ignored:** After US skier Aaron Blunck remarked at a February 13 press conference that American media coverage of China was false, Chinese state media and diplomatic social media accounts promoted the video in a propaganda campaign. Comments by British and Swedish athletes criticizing the government's human rights record were ignored.

- **Inauthentic network pushing Olympics propaganda on Twitter:** A joint February 18 investigation from ProPublica and the New York Times found a network of 3,000 inauthentic accounts that had recently been created and had promoted state media propaganda about the Olympics. Twitter suspended more than 800 accounts, which had also deployed widely used hashtags like #Beijing2022 to drown out criticism.

- **Authorities release controlled Peng Shuai interview:** On February 6, Chinese authorities staged a controlled interview with Peng Shuai, the Chinese tennis star who accused a senior official of sexual assault, and a French media outlet. The journalist who took part in the interview described the meeting as "propaganda" and said it didn't prove she was safe. A senior Chinese Olympic official was present and translated Peng's comments to questions that were submitted in writing in advance.

- **Propaganda and censorship around American-Chinese skier Eileen Gu:** American-born Chinese skier Eileen Gu's flippant defense of China's Great Firewall in a February 7 Instagram post was censored on Weibo. Gu responded to a netizen comment on the social media site, which is blocked in China, by claiming that "anyone can download" virtual private networks (VPNs) because they were "literally free," even though

VPNs are illegal in China and people have been heavily fined and even imprisoned for using them. Some Weibo users mocked her comment, which was screenshotted and shared over 3,000 times on the platform before being censored. A hashtag about Gu not singing along to the PRC's national anthem was also censored on Weibo. Gu, who chose to compete for China over the United States, has been featured in Chinese propaganda, though Chinese media commentators cautioned against overhyping Gu's Olympic run, noting that she likely still holds American citizenship and "China's national honor and credibility" could be on the line.

- **Dutch reporter's removal highlights restrictions on foreign press:** The removal of a Dutch journalist by a Chinese security volunteer while live on air on February 4 underscored increased restrictions on foreign media in China, as has also been documented in recent reports by the Foreign Correspondents Club of China (FCCC) and the International Federation of Journalists. The International Olympic Committee's characterization of the removal as an "isolated" incident was disputed by journalists on the ground, although such an incident being captured on live television is rare. The FCCC report also highlighted the extreme online harassment that female journalists of East Asian descent working for Western publications have faced during the Olympics and beyond. Despite Beijing's attempt to control the narrative around the Olympics, including through paid content and messaging by influencers, a number of international outlets continued to cover human rights issues prominently.

- **Critics suppressed with Twitter hashtag manipulation:** An investigation by the *Wall Street Journal* published February 8 found that pro-China Twitter users had flooded hashtags like #genocidegames that were used by activists to organize against the CCP. Twitter took down some of the accounts, which violated its policies.

- **YouTube Olympic videos autoplay Chinese propaganda:** A WIRED investigation found that YouTube was autoplaying both pro-CCP and anti-China propaganda videos when users searched for Olympic-related keywords, with some videos gaining hundreds of thousands of views. A researcher in Canada was shown pro-Beijing influencer videos after watching Olympic highlights; recent reports found links between the Chinese government and some of the influencers. YouTube said most videos were from trusted sources and that others don't violate its policies.

- **Hong Kong, mainland authorities suppress Olympics rights activists:** Officials in the mainland and in Hong Kong suppressed activists who attempted to protest during or in the lead-up to the Beijing Olympics. In Hong Kong, police arrested 75-year old activist Koo Sze-yiu on charges of "conspiracy to commit a seditious act" for planning to protest the Olympics on February 4 with a coffin and flags that read "democracy and human rights are above the Winter Olympics," "down with the Chinese Communist Party," and "end one-party rule." Koo was denied bail. In the mainland, police arrested two prominent human rights activists ahead of the games, and put others under close surveillance or threatened them not to speak out. Others had their WeChat accounts restricted.

- **Transnational repression against Olympic whistleblower:** Chinese security agents threatened the China-based family of a whistleblower who plans to publish a book about Chinese state-sponsored doping of athletes during the Olympics in the 1980s and 1990s, according to a February 3 interview with her son. The whistleblower, Xue Yinxian, lives in Germany, where she has received asylum.

New propaganda campaign promotes Xi Jinping amid guidelines for presenters, netizen anger over COVID directives

- **Propaganda campaigns boost Xi Jinping ahead of 20th Party Congress:** New state propaganda efforts to promote Xi Jinping continue to emerge ahead of the 20th Party Congress in late 2022, at which Xi is expected to assume a historic third term as CCP general secretary. CCP news agency Xinhua's new online video-clip series, *Learning and Reviewing Xi*, is aimed at Chinese youth and has been promoted on its social media accounts and on the video-sharing platforms Douyin (China's version of TikTok), WeChat Video, and Kuaishou. Xinhua claimed the 30 short episodes, featuring clips of Xi's speeches and other footage of the CCP leader, had been viewed 550 million times by January 2022. A late January report from ChinaFile found that since 2018, the CCP had established tens of thousands "New Era Civilization Practice Centers" across the country to promote so-called Xi Jinping Thought, and that over 2,000 had been built in Xinjiang by November 2021. In another move likely related to information controls around the Party Congress, since mid-February analysts noticed that Baidu search engine's translation platform stopped translating Xi Jinping's name in Chinese into other languages, and instead shows asterisks. Some analysts believe it is part of a filtering system for "sensitive" words, which companies are likely expanding ahead of the Party Congress.

- **Tightened oversight of state media presenters:** On January 27, the CCP's Central Propaganda Department and the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television jointly released new guiding "opinions" on managing professional behavior and social activities of broadcasters and anchors, who were described as an "important force in the party's propaganda." The guidelines emphasized that media representatives' primary task was "cultivating political quality" and called upon broadcasting agencies to formulate rules that limit the social activities of their employees. It also called on announcers and hosts to purify their "social circle" and "friends circle."

- **Local-government coronavirus directives spark netizen anger:** In the lead-up to the Lunar New Year, which began on February 1, Chinese netizens took to social media to protest the framing of their return to their hometowns as "malicious." The uproar came after a video of a Henan Province county magistrate warning of severe punishments for residents "maliciously" returning to his county had gone viral. Many netizens also decried the spread of inflexible virus policies and their enforce-

ment across various regions without modifications to account for local needs. Communist Party mouthpiece *People's Daily* and other state media criticized the official for taking COVID-19 measures to the extreme, in an attempt to distance central government leaders from such measures. Netizen comments and the term "malicious" were later censored. In practice, local officials are under immense pressure from Beijing to prevent COVID-19 outbreaks, but at the same time they risk punishment if harsh policies result in visible opposition or bad publicity.

Censorship updates: Tibetan groups, elite academics, LGBT+ content, cult classic film censored; digital informant network expands

- **Government expansion of digital informants system:** In January, top officials from the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) and Central Propaganda Department called for faster establishment of an "integrated national system" for online reporting of "illegal and undesirable information." The initiative aims to further encourage the public to assist censors by reporting content online. Since its inception in 2014, the CAC has been building a nationwide system to ensure that all websites and platforms have mechanisms for the public to report content violations, and has launched a general reporting website, 12377.cn. In December 2021, the CAC announced that the total number of websites with such reporting systems had reached over 3,500. According to a recent investigation by Protocol, the CAC has substantially increased its monthly "guidance" output since 2019, especially since the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic.

- **Government orders Tibetan Buddhist online groups shut down:** New regulations jointly released by five state organs on December 21 banned the transmission of religious content online in China without a government license. The regulations, which go into effect March 1, have already started to be implemented. Authorities in Qinghai province (where a fifth of the population is Tibetan) have banned Tibetan social media groups tied to religion, according to a January 20 announcement seen by a Tibetan living in Qinghai. The new regulations call for the "Sinicization" of religion, in which the Party leads all religious communities and controls religious-based content.

- **Elite academics' WeChat accounts censored:** On February 3, days after his sixth WeChat account was shut down, Peking University law professor He Weifang hand-wrote a letter of protest to parent company Tencent. He said the shutdowns made daily activities like "transport, shopping and public health code screenings impossible," and violated his civil rights. He once had over a million followers on Weibo before leaving in 2013 amid a government crackdown on liberal-leaning intellectuals. Another Peking University professor's WeChat account was suspended for three days after he reposted He's letter, while a Tsinghua University professor had her essay criticizing rule of law trends in China removed from WeChat. On February 4,

an influential Peking University think tank removed its report posted on WeChat on the downsides for China in decreasing dependence on US technologies (known as "decoupling"). No reason was provided for the removal, though commentators noted the report was "surprisingly frank."

- **Grindr leaves, broader censorship on LGBT+ content:** On January 6, the Beijing Municipal Radio and Television Bureau announced a ban on the popular "dangai" genre, which features fictional romance stories between men, in films and television series to "create a clean and healthy cyberspace." Although the rules only apply to content produced in Beijing, two of China's three leading broadcast platforms are based in the city. On January 27, the LGBT+ dating app Grindr pulled itself from various app markets in China, including Apple's, citing concerns over China's new data regulations. On February 11, Chinese audiences noticed that LGBT+ references were removed from a re-released version of the popular American sitcom Friends, and Weibo also censored hashtags referencing the situation. Since 2021, China has been intensifying its crackdown on both fandom culture and LGBT+ communities, citing a need to prevent "toxic idol worship" and preserve family and social structures and population growth, respectively. It is likely that officials also fear its potential for social activism and political organization outside of state control.

- ***Fight Club* ending changed, then reversed:** In late January, Chinese audiences noticed that the original ending to the 1999 film *Fight Club* was replaced with a message that authorities had saved the day. After pushback from Chinese and international audiences alike, it was reported on February 6 that streaming giant Tencent had reinstated the original ending though some other elements, like nudity, remained absent.

HONG KONG

Sedition conviction, attacks on academic freedom, unemployed journalists, website blocked, and musicians blacklisted

- **"Sedition" sentence, first since 1967, over protest posters:** On January 31, a Hong Kong judge sentenced Kim Chiang Chung-sang to eight months in prison for displaying and possessing digital and physical posters with protest slogans like "police are Hong Kong's largest criminal organization," or that called Chief Executive Carrie Lam "wicked." The ruling prompted the first jail sentence handed down under the colonial-era law since 1967. With several journalists and activists awaiting trial on sedition charges, there will likely be more such convictions.

- **Crackdown on free speech at universities:** Free speech and academic freedom in Hong Kong continue to deteriorate, as demonstrated by several episodes at local universities over the past month. On January 28, the entire editorial board of the Hong Kong Baptist University's student publication *Jumbo* resigned in protest of interference from the university in their reporting. The university acted after receiv-

ing an external complaint that the publication may violate the National Security Law (NSL). The next day, Hong Kong University (HKU) covered up a tribute to the victims of the Tiananmen Massacre painted on a bridge near a student dormitory, one of the last remaining public tributes in Hong Kong to the victims. On February 1, a US-based human rights law professor announced he had been denied a visa by Hong Kong authorities to teach at HKU, likely due to his current employment at Human Rights Watch (HRW), an NGO sanctioned by Chinese authorities in 2020.

- **State media attacks academics and research grant council:** Starting February 7, state-owned outlet *Ta Kung Pao* released a series of smear articles on Hong Kong academics and research institutions, possibly foreshadowing a new crackdown. Following the first article, which accused political scientist Brian Fong of being a "proindependence element," the Education University of Hong Kong confirmed on February 13 that he no longer worked there. The next day, the paper accused HKU Faculty of Law dean Fu Hualing of running "anti-China" projects. The paper's series also targeted the government's advisory University Grants Committee, claiming it used public funds to "subsidize" academic research projects that violated the NSL. A recent piece by Nikkei Asia examined confidential documents that exposed the close relationship between Beijing and *Ta Kung Pao*, which a senior Liaison Office official praised as a "golden microphone for the central government."

- **Media crackdown leaves hundreds of journalists out of work:** According to a Bloomberg News estimate, 1,115 media professionals have lost their jobs in the past year amid the national security crackdown, or approximately 20 percent of the total number of Hong Kong's Chinese-language media workers. Some have left the profession to open restaurants, drive taxis, or freelance. Others have been forced to take on temporary or gig jobs to survive, such as delivering food, collecting trash, waiting tables, cleaning air-conditioners, or moving furniture.

- **British NGO Hong Kong Watch website blocked:** On February 14, the NGO Hong Kong Watch announced it had received reports that its website was blocked inside Hong Kong, likely on orders of the police. This is the seventh website known to be blocked since the NSL went into effect.

- **RTHK blacklists Canto-pop singers from radio:** The government-owned Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK) started circulating a blacklist in early January of ten Canto-pop singers and groups whose music it could not play on the radio. The blacklist includes vocal prodemocracy musicians like Denise Ho—but also includes artists whose songs have no political content but who have somehow angered Chinese authorities. Additionally, on February 15 national security police arrested singer-activist Tommy Yuen Man-on for publishing "seditious" content on social media, and for singing the protest anthem "Glory to Hong Kong" during a 2021 concert.

BEYOND CHINA
Cyberattacks, YouTube removals, TikTok censorship, and other incidents in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East

- **Cyberattack on US, UK media linked to China:** On February 4, the international media giant News Corp informed employees that the previous month a cyberattack linked to China had been discovered, and that journalists' emails and other documents had been accessible to the hackers since at least February 2020. The company publishes the *Wall Street Journal*, Dow Jones, and the *New York Post* in the United States and the *Times* and *Sunday Times* in the United Kingdom. The hackers used keyword searches related to Taiwan and Uyghurs, as well as defense and military related issues, which the cyber security company that investigated the hack described as "likely meant to gather intelligence to benefit China's interests."

- **YouTube removes independent Chinese-language channels after mass reporting:** Since mid-January, YouTube has temporarily and permanently removed several independent Chinese-language news and counterculture channels. On January 13, YouTube took down the channels of ipkmedia.com, a site founded by Chinese dissidents based in Washington DC, and the California-based China Digital Times. Both channels were eventually reinstated after they removed several videos on copyright grounds. Then on February 11, two channels from the counterculture group "Ruters," a play on the Reuters news agency, were taken down. The accounts, called "Little Anti- Flag" and "Little Pond" often mocked Xi Jinping and Chinese leaders, and had nearly 100,000 followers; one video had garnered over a million views. Some observers speculated the takedowns were related to coordinated reporting on copyright claims by nationalistic netizens on overseas platforms ahead of the 20th Party Congress.

- **TikTok censorship in US, Germany:** On January 28, the *Los Angeles Times* reported on the three-month suspension of the TikTok account of American comedian Jiaoying Summer in late 2021, after she made a joke about China's one-child policy that went viral; the company claimed it was "a violation of community guidelines." In Germany, a February 11 report said automatic subtitles on videos have replaced terms like "reeducation camp," "labor camp," and "internment camp" with asterisks, which the company claimed was a mistake. TikTok, which is owned by Chinese company ByteDance, has been accused of censorship before.

- **New reports on CCP influence in Indonesian, Israeli, Polish media:** Several reports from January and February examined Beijing's media influence around the world. In Indonesia, a January 20 report looked at an expanding physical presence of Chinese state media, including new outlets publishing in Bahasa Indonesian and targeting younger audiences, as well as journalist trips to China, cooperation with local media, and censorship. On February 10, local media in Israel reported on efforts by Chinese officials in the country to get Chinese students to report back on local media coverage of the Winter Olympics. A February 15 paper examined Rus-

sian and Chinese state media narratives in Poland, finding similar goals to promote authoritarian governance models and praise China's handling of the pandemic. China Radio International Poland was found to use Russian media sources when promoting the Chinese government disinformation narrative that COVID-19 began at the US military base Fort Detrick.

- **Chinese government funding for human rights at Dutch university:** In late January, Dutch media reported on Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (VU) hosting a Cross Cultural Human Rights Center (CCHRC) that was fully funded by a Chinese university to "develop a global vision on human rights." Several academics affiliated with the center had defended the Chinese government's human rights record on Chinese state media. Following exposure of the partnership, VU returned the money and the website of the center was taken down and replaced with a statement that said not all publications from the center had adhered to its vision.

FEATURED PUSHBACK
Netizens, journalists work to help Xuzhou woman held captive

A screenshot from the account of one of the women detained for trying to visit the Xuzhou woman, writing slogans of support on her car.

Credit: @小梦姐姐小券券 *Weibo*

In recent weeks, netizens have rallied around the case of a woman found with a chain around her neck in a hut in a rural county in Jiangsu Province, exposing her mistreatment and pushing for accountability. A vlogger first posted a video on January 26 on Douyin, showing a woman in Feng County, Xuzhou City, chained in a freezing hut. The video of the woman, her husband, and eight children was recorded as part of a series by the vlogger, in which he interviewed poor families with the goal of spurring charitable donations. Two days after being posted, the video went viral with an estimated 1.92 billion views across platforms. Local officials issued a statement claiming the woman was not a victim of human trafficking, as some suspected, and had a mental illness with "violent" tendencies, but netizens refused to accept the explanation.

While state media and a National People's Congress delegate became involved and elevated attention on the case, it was netizens' anger and pursuit of justice that forced local officials into releasing more information. Chinese users refused to allow the story to disappear despite censorship of hashtags on Weibo, Douyin shutting down the vlogger's account and taking down the original video, WeChat deleting an article expressing outrage, and Baidu and other Chinese platforms removing content related to the case. Netizens reposted the video on other platforms, repurposed unrelated hashtags or headlines, and thanked foreign media for covering the issue when domestic media could not.

As a result of netizen pressure, county and city officials released four statements on the case between January 28 and February 10. The last statement identified the woman, said she was from Yunnan Province, that she had been brought to Jiangsu for treatment for a mental illness; and that she was indeed a victim of human trafficking; it added that authorities had arrested three people including her husband. She was reportedly moved to a psychiatric facility. However, two women who tried to visit her there were detained on February 11 in Xuzhou on suspicion of "picking quarrels and provoking trouble," a charge commonly used against activists. They were later released. As of February 18, doubts remain over official claims; a former investigative reporter from Yunnan attempted to track down the detained woman's family, and subsequently published a detailed report that questioned whether authorities had genuinely confirmed her identity.

WHAT TO WATCH FOR

- **Government "golden shares" linked to information infrastructure:** The Chinese government has increasingly taken "golden shares" in private companies involved in information infrastructure or that hold strategic data on citizens, that give the government or state-backed companies a say on their boards. Watch for further state involvement in private tech companies to ensure government control over data, and to expand surveillance and digital media infrastructure.

- **Hong Kong journalists at risk with planned Article 23 national security legislation:** Hong Kong's security chief announced plans to introduce legislation in the second half of 2022 to enact the long-shelved Article 23 of the Basic Law, dealing with state secrets and espionage. As state secrets charges are commonly used in the mainland against journalists and activists, watch for the wording of the legislation, as well as its enactment to further restrict media and potentially to lead to additional jailing of journalists and internet users. The Hong Kong government explored passing similar legislation in 2003 but shelved the proposal after a mass protest.

- **Role of WeChat in political campaigns outside China:** Political outrage erupted in Australia after it emerged that Prime Minister Scott Morrison's public WeChat account with 76,000 followers had been transferred to a Chinese company; several political leaders called it "interference" in Australia's democracy and vowed to boycott the company. Following evidence of state-linked disinformation on WeChat during Canada's federal elections in September 2021, watch for increased discussion on the use of WeChat to reach Chinese-speaking constituencies during political campaigns in democracies; Australia's federal elections take place later this year.

TAKE ACTION

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- **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 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*

Freedom House

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