

CHINA MEDIA BULLETIN

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IMAGE OF THE MONTH

Shanghai Reporting 404ed

This screenshot shows a 404 error at the URL of an [investigative report](#) about Shanghai's COVID-19 outbreak by *Caixin*, a Chinese financial publication known for its hard-hitting coverage.

Censors deleted the article after it was published on April 2. The piece examined hidden deaths at Shanghai Donghai Elderly Care Hospital, the city's largest nursing home, where several staff members and residents tested positive for COVID-19. According to an interview with a Shanghai funeral director, over a dozen residents died. An April 1 [article](#) about the hospital by the state-owned English-language outlet Sixth Tone was also [deleted](#).

Credit: Freedom House



ANALYSIS

The CCP as Ukraine War Correspondent

By Sarah Cook

Sarah Cook is research director for China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan at Freedom House and director of its China Media Bulletin.

How the Party-state's toolbox artificially amplifies its version of Russia's invasion.

China's massive [information control](#) apparatus is typically focused on distorting the information that Chinese citizens are able to access about their own country, with foreign affairs relegated to a [secondary](#) level of importance. Yet over the past seven weeks, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership's apparent decision to side with Russian president Vladimir Putin in his unprovoked invasion of Ukraine has fueled a full-blown campaign to shape public opinion and internet chatter about events unfolding thousands of miles away.

Within the deep toolbox of controls available to the CCP regime, three tactics appear to be playing an outsized role in this campaign: flagship state media echoing Russian state disinformation, manipulation of social media hashtags and trending topics, and censorship of alternative viewpoints and information sources.

The effort has effectively built an isolating wall around China, leaving Chinese news consumers with an image of one of this century's most significant geopolitical events that is drastically different from the version presented to other populations around the world.

A three-pronged strategy for distorting reality

In the weeks since Putin's invasion of Ukraine, three of China's state media outlets—the CCP mouthpiece *People's Daily*, the national broadcaster China Central Television (CCTV), and the nationalistic tabloid [Global Times](#)—have been particularly active in feeding Russian state propaganda to Chinese news consumers. Rather than simply promoting Moscow's official views or statements, they have disseminated content that includes multiple outright falsehoods. For example, they have aired claims that Ukrainian soldiers surrendered their weapons, that Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy [fled Kyiv](#), and that Russian forces have struck only military targets.

Almost as notable as the lies that have been propagated are the basic facts that are missing. There is no acknowledgment that Moscow initiated the war by invading a sovereign neighbor in blatant violation of international law. No airtime is granted to [Zelenskyy's](#) charismatic daily video appearances, which have gone viral among global audiences. Also absent are the detailed accounts of atrocities in the Kyiv region that emerged after the retreat of occupying Russian troops. Multiple [CCTV news broadcasts](#)—including the prime-time program that is still watched by tens of millions of Chinese each evening—made almost no mention of the civilian deaths reported in the town of Bucha in early April, for example. Instead, they focused on topics like successful Russian military strikes and US weapons shipments to Ukraine.

The regime has aided the dissemination of pro-Kremlin propaganda by manipulating hashtags and trending topics on domestic social media platforms. There have been numerous examples of Chinese state outlets creating hashtags linked to disinformation narratives that are then aggressively amplified. In the early days of the war, CCTV created a hashtag asserting that Zelenskyy had fled Kyiv, which was reportedly [viewed 510 million](#) times. More recently, after the Russian government announced that it would host an [antifascism conference](#) in August as part of its disinformation narrative that the invasion was necessary to rid Ukraine of Nazis, CCTV posted a related story and created a hashtag on the Weibo social media platform. Within 24 hours, it had reportedly garnered 650 million views and 90 media citations.

Even as they keep their algorithms and trending topics aligned with the government's priorities, staff at Chinese social media platforms have been busy deleting content that departs from the official line. Among other targets, they have removed posts and [open letters](#) by prominent individuals within China who directly questioned the government's support for Moscow, criticized Putin, voiced support for Ukraine, or decried nationalist netizens' disregard for China's own historical suffering at the hands of foreign invaders. In at [least two cases](#), celebrities who called Putin "crazy," urged followers to pray for peace, or posted photos of antiwar protests in Russia had their Weibo accounts suspended or restricted. The two individuals, former talk-show host Jin Xing and actress Ke Lan, consequently lost their ability to reach 13.6 million and 2.9 million followers, respectively. Some militantly pro-Moscow posts have also been taken down, but the [predominant narrative](#) on the censored and distorted Chinese internet is pro-Kremlin, anti-US, and anti-NATO.

Censors have similarly moved to suppress first-hand reportage by Chinese residents of Ukraine, including complaints related to the government's [delayed assistance](#) with their evacuation from the war zone. Wang Jixian, a technology worker posting videos from the city of Odesa, found that his social media accounts across multiple platforms, including WeChat, had been shut down. In [an emotional video](#) posted to YouTube, Wang angrily lamented the fact that he no longer had a way to communicate directly with his parents, asking friends to alert them that he was still alive. [Individual netizen posts](#) and [videos](#) on Jinri Toutiao, a widely used content aggregator owned by ByteDance, have been deleted for depicting Russian antiwar protests.

These information-control tactics closely match a leaked set of official media [directives](#) from March 3. One directive specifically indicates that foreign news reports cannot be republished, and that social media platforms must "strictly control" commentary that challenges official statements, involves "incitement of Sino-Russian antagonism," references historical invasions of China, or involves "public antiwar declarations." This and [another directive](#) both enforce a state media monopoly on war-related hashtags and trending topics, noting for instance that "without exception, existing hashtags started by individuals, self-published media, and commercial platforms must not be included in trending topics, and new hashtags are strictly prohibited."

Voices of dissent and resistance

While the space for alternative perspectives on the war in Ukraine is clearly under

heavy pressure, some examples of both vocal and quiet resistance have emerged.

Among traditional media, a small number of outlets have referred fairly explicitly to Moscow's responsibility for the invasion. [Xinmin Weekly](#), a commercial publication in Shanghai, published a March 7 human interest story about a Chinese student's escape from Ukraine that described how Russian forces had suddenly "launched a war" against Ukraine. *Caixin*, a financial publication that is widely recognized for its investigative journalism, ran a cover-story analysis that framed the war as a full-scale Russian invasion and published [photo galleries](#) showing destroyed buildings.

On [February 26](#), five Chinese historians published an open letter condemning the war and directly challenging the Chinese government's position. They declared that "as a country that was once also ravaged by war ... we sympathize with the suffering of the Ukrainian people." The authors also bluntly rejected efforts to justify the invasion: "Regardless of Russia's myriad reasons and all kinds of excuses, the use of force to invade a sovereign country is trampling on the norms of international relations based on the UN Charter." In early March, the Carter Center's US-China Perceptions Monitor published a commentary in [English](#) and [Chinese](#) by Hu Wei, a scholar at several state-affiliated institutions in China. The piece analyzed the long-term implications of the war for China and the world, warning that "China cannot be tied to Putin" and should "choose the mainstream position in the world." Both commentaries were [censored](#) in China, and the website of the US-China Perceptions Monitor was subsequently [blocked](#), but not before its original Chinese post received [over 185,000 views](#).

More subtle expressions of skepticism about the official line and support for Ukraine have also appeared. Journalist [Xifan Yang](#) discovered that four out of the top five broach pins on e-commerce site Taobao had a Ukrainian flag theme. Users' comments on the items included statements like "Long live the people of Ukraine!" Researcher [Ling Li](#) collected multiple examples of Chinese netizen commentary that departed from the official narrative, including comments like "one can be indifferent to wars but should at the very least not advocate wars, or worse, praise invaders," which received over 6,900 likes. Even a video by Hollywood star and former California governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, aimed at countering the Kremlin's propaganda among Russian audiences, was spotted [circulating](#) on WeChat with subtitles in Chinese.

A window on leaders' views, a barrier against the world

Given the opacity of the Chinese leadership, it is difficult to determine the exact motivations driving the regime's support for Putin's war. It could be part of an effort to tilt the international balance of power, to weaken the United States, to set the stage for a future CCP takeover of Taiwan, or simply to save Xi Jinping from embarrassment over the very public partnership with Putin that he trumpeted in early February, before the invasion. What is clear is that the domestic media narrative is much more reflective of CCP leaders' views than the superficially more neutral and mild public comments of Chinese diplomats. Once Xi and his cohort decided that it was strategically beneficial to the CCP, if not to China, to throw their weight behind Putin, the party's information control apparatus was jolted into action.

As the war in Ukraine continues, much is at stake for the cause of freedom, peace, and international order. But regardless of the outcome on the battlefield, the conflict has already resulted in a reinforced CCP propaganda structure and a wider [information gap](#) between many in China and the rest of the world.

IN THE NEWS

China's worst COVID-19 outbreak to date marked by propaganda, netizen outcry, censorship, and disinformation

- State media minimize outbreak while boosting government's strict measures:** On March 28, as COVID-19 cases hit record highs in Shanghai, authorities began ordering the city's districts into [lockdown](#). By April 5, the entire city of 26 million was under lockdown rules. An [estimated](#) 45 cities across China with populations totaling 373 million people—including [Shenzhen](#) and [Guangzhou](#), as well as all of Jilin Province—have faced full or partial lockdowns since March 14 in response to the highly transmissible Omicron variant. Since the current outbreak began, major state media outlets like the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) mouthpiece *People's Daily* or state television broadcaster China Central Television (CCTV) have [minimized coverage](#) of the virus relative to other stories. On [occasions](#) when the outbreak is mentioned on the first page of *People's Daily*, the aim is to [defend](#) China's "dynamic zero-COVID" policy as necessary for the [prevention](#) of "enormous loss of life" and to laud CCP leader Xi Jinping's control over the pandemic. However, experts and netizens have questioned the government's methodology for [recording cases](#), as the practice of counting mild cases as "asymptomatic" resulted in 97 percent of all cases in Shanghai on April 7 being labeled as asymptomatic. In other countries, the rate is closer to 50 percent. Despite the surge in cases and [apologies](#) from some local leaders, Xi [said](#) at an April 8 [awards ceremony](#), "If there was a gold medal for pandemic response, then China deserves one."
- Netizen outcry and censorship over lack of supplies, child separation policy:** Residents of areas under lockdown, especially in Shanghai, turned to social media to protest a [lack of food](#) and the authorities' [handling](#) of the crisis. In response, tech platforms censored related videos, posts, and articles, and some authorities [told](#) residents not to post "pandemic-related messages online." The social media platform Weibo began [censoring](#) the search term "buying vegetables in Shanghai" as complaints over food shortages grew. There was a national outcry after Shanghai implemented a policy to [remove](#) COVID-19-positive children from their uninfected parents, with [videos](#) and related hashtags garnering tens of millions of views. In a video posted on Weibo on April 5, residents protested and sang songs from their balconies, only to have [drones appear](#) and scold them. On April 6, netizens expressed [outrage](#) over a video of a pandemic worker beating a pet dog to death on the street after its owner was taken away to quarantine. An undated video from a housing compound in Shanghai's Minhang District showed residents [protesting](#)

outside against COVID-19 measures, saying “we want to eat” and “we want freedom”; the social media platform WeChat censored the clip, claiming it violated the terms and conditions of usage. On rare occasions when journalists deviated from state guidance to report more independently on the outbreak, their work was censored. *Caixin*, a widely respected business publication with a reputation for investigative journalism, released a [long investigative report](#) on April 2 about hidden deaths at Shanghai’s largest nursing home; the article was later deleted by censors.

- **State media boost COVID-19 conspiracy theory via manipulated Weibo hashtag:** On March 23, several state media outlets boosted a [debunked](#) conspiracy theory that the coronavirus was created by US pharmaceutical company Moderna. The Weibo hashtag “Research Confirms: The Novel Coronavirus Was Made by an American Company,” which grew from 220 million [views](#) on March 24 to 1.86 billion [views](#) as of April 11, after being listed at the [most trending topic](#) on Weibo. The story [began](#) spreading after a blog post on the topic was republished by state media outlets *Global Times* and *China Daily*, according to What’s on Weibo. Other state-owned outlets, including *Wei Wen Po* in Hong Kong, began [boosting](#) the hashtag.

Censorship updates: Plane crash reporting restricted, journalist intimidation, Douban crackdown, religious content banned

- **Reporters blocked and terms censored following deadly plane crash:** Several reporters encountered [obstruction](#) while trying to report on the crash of a China Eastern Airlines passenger aircraft on March 21, which killed all 132 people on board. One reporter, Du Qiang, [described](#) driving 35 miles on a motorbike in an unsuccessful effort to reach the site in an [article](#) that was later deleted by WeChat. Du’s article decried the public’s naïve attitude of “wait[ing] for the announcement” from the government rather than pressing for media investigations. Netizens who [questioned](#) the government’s reporting on the crash on social media faced censorship alongside those spreading rumors or conspiracy theories. The Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) [said](#) it removed 279,000 posts and deactivated 2,713 accounts in connection with the crash.
- **Journalists at foreign media face police intimidation and state media vitriol:** On March 8, Spanish newspaper *ABC*’s correspondent in Beijing, Jaime Santirso, [reported](#) that three police officers came to his home on the eve of China’s annual legislative meetings and told him to “to do balanced coverage, with not only bad news but good news.” On the same day, Emily Feng, US National Public Radio’s correspondent in Beijing, [reported](#) that she has been receiving death threats and threats of sexual and physical violence online over her reporting since state media had called her a “race traitor” and a “spy.” Chinese state media has recently [escalated](#) attacks on journalists of Chinese ethnicity working for foreign media, almost all of them women, [describing](#) some with violent language such as having “shot their

compatriots and motherland in the back.” On March 15, China’s state-run news agency Xinhua claimed that Western media hire ethnic Chinese journalists to tell “anti-China” stories in the belief that such stories “will enjoy more credibility if told by journalists with Asian faces.”

- **Pressure on Douban, where users found space for expression:** On March 15, the CAC escalated its [crackdown](#) on social media site Douban by [declaring](#) that it was in a state of “serious online chaos,” adding that it had sent a “work supervision team” from the State Internet Information Office to help “rectify” the problem. Last year, the CAC [fined](#) Douban nearly \$1.5 million and ordered the removal of its app from app stores for allowing “illegal” information on its platform. The close supervision of Douban is likely in response to the relatively free discussions on the platform, as authorities further tighten free expression online ahead of the 20th Party Congress later in 2022.
- **Enactment of law banning religious content online:** Following the March 1 enactment of new [regulations](#) banning the transmission of religious content online without a government license, authorities [launched](#) a training program for censors on how to identify and delete religious content. According to Radio Free Asia, several social media platforms with live streaming functions have [banned](#) the use of the Tibetan language on their apps to comply with the regulations.
- **Microsoft Bing’s functionality restricted in China:** Chinese regulators [forced](#) Microsoft’s search engine, Bing, to stop autocomplete functionality for seven days in March. Bing is one of the few remaining foreign tech services operating in China. On February 28, Yahoo [ended](#) its email service for mainland Chinese users.

Australian journalist tried, subversion indictments, detentions for opposing Ukraine war

- **Australian journalist Cheng Lei tried on state secrets charge:** On March 31, Australian journalist Cheng Lei went on trial behind closed doors on charges of “illegally supplying state secrets overseas.” Australia’s ambassador to China was [denied](#) entry to the courtroom, and the one-day trial ended with the verdict being deferred. Cheng, an Australian citizen who worked as an anchor for Chinese state broadcaster China Global Television Network (CGTN), has been [detained](#) since August 2020. The reasons for her arrest are unknown, but the Chinese government has [regularly](#) accused journalists of leaking “state secrets” through their reporting. Another journalist, Haze Fan of Bloomberg, a Chinese citizen, has been [detained](#) since December 2020.
- **Three activists indicted and face trial for “inciting subversion”:** Chinese authorities have indicted three activists and sent their cases to court for trial. On February 28, feminist activist Li Qiaochu, the partner of detained legal scholar Xu Zhiyong, was

[indicted](#) in Beijing on charges of “inciting subversion of state power” [for](#) setting up a blog and publishing Xu’s writings. On March 27, prosecutors in Guangzhou [indicted](#) journalist Huang Xueqin and labor activist Wang Jianbing on “inciting subversion” charges. The reasons for their detention are [unknown](#), but both were detained shortly before Huang [prepared](#) to fly to the United Kingdom (UK) to start a master’s degree program at Sussex University on a British government scholarship.

- Detention, harassment of Chinese activists for opposing invasion of Ukraine:** Chinese police have detained or harassed residents for online and offline protests against the Russian invasion of Ukraine. On March 3, Shaoyang City police administratively [detained](#) Peng Peiyu for “disrupting public order” after he published an online article titled “A Citizen’s Call to Launch an Anti-War Demonstration” and prepared to demonstrate outside Russia’s embassy in Beijing. He was [released](#) on March 18. Tianjin police [harassed](#) Zhang Jianzhong on March 14 over his online comments about the war and the [Xuzhou](#) “chained woman” case. The Ukrainian consulate in Shanghai [reportedly sent](#) a letter in February asking police to stop questioning Ukrainians in China over their comments about the war on Chinese social media.
- Three Tibetans self-immolate around March anniversary:** Three Tibetans self-immolated during a 34-day period between February and March to protest Chinese government controls, which also restricted the flow of information about their cases. The [recent increase](#) in instances of this desperate form of protest, which had not been recorded since November 2019, may be related to the March 10 anniversary of the 1959 Tibetan uprising against CCP rule. On February 25, 25-year-old Tibetan singer Tsewang Norbu [self-immolated](#) in Lhasa, and his family was only informed of his death on March 2. Family members have not been allowed to see his remains. On March 27, an 81-year-old man known as Taphun [died](#) in Sichuan Province after his self-immolation protest, and another Tibetan known only as Tsering [self-immolated](#) on March 30 in Qinghai Province, though his fate is unknown.
- Heavy prison sentences for Uyghur woman and journalist:** Details about two heavy prison sentences against Uyghur defendants have recently emerged. Meryem Emet is [serving](#) a 20-year prison sentence for being married to a Turkish man and reportedly speaking to Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, then Turkey’s prime minister, when the leader visited Urumqi in 2012, according to her husband. She was initially detained in 2017. Retired journalist Qurban Mamut is [serving](#) a 10-year sentence for “political crimes,” having been detained in 2017 following a visit to his son in the United States.

HONG KONG

Prosecutions and intimidation of journalists and DJ under national security and sedition laws, including over health reporting

On May 8, a handful of Beijing loyalists are expected to [select](#) hard-liner John Lee as the new chief executive of Hong Kong. Lee, a former police officer and security secretary, is running unopposed after incumbent Carrie Lam [announced](#) on April 4 that she would not seek a second term. Lee was a key official behind the crackdown on the 2019 prodemocracy protests, which to date has [resulted](#) in 1,158 prison sentences, the longest of which was 12 years, while nearly 1,000 protesters are awaiting trial. In late March 2022, two UK Supreme Court justices who sit on Hong Kong's Court of Final Appeal [resigned](#) over the deterioration of the rule of law in the territory.

Major incidents related to free expression over the past two months in Hong Kong include:

- Media founder denied bail in security law case, research shows law often used against free speech:** On April 6, a Hong Kong judge [denied](#) bail for the cofounder of a now-disbanded media outlet on the basis that he had “shown himself to be persistent in promoting and spreading subversive ideologies” in his journalism. The defendant, Frankie Fung, is one of 47 people arrested under the National Security Law (NSL) for planning a prodemocracy primary election in 2020. Another defendant, Winnie Yu Wai-ming, was [sent back](#) to jail on March 8 after police accused her of violating her bail by making comments online that “endangered national security.” [ChinaFile](#) has documented 183 total arrests under the NSL since it came into effect in 2020, of which a third are speech-related offenses. The researchers also found that the NSL's stringent bail conditions amount to “de facto long-term detention without trial.”
- DJ convicted of sedition:** The March 2 [conviction](#) of prodemocracy DJ Tam Tak-chi under the colonial-era sedition law marks the first full trial and conviction under the law since the territory's 1997 handover from Britain. (While there have been other convictions during that time, in those cases the individual pled guilty.) The court found Tam guilty on seven counts of “uttering seditious words” for chanting “Liberate Hong Kong, Revolution of Our Times,” “Down with the Communist Party,” and other slogans. On April 11, police [arrested](#) former Stand News journalist Allan Au for “conspiracy to publish seditious materials.” Au joins dozens of other [journalists](#) and [activists](#) arrested under the law, including two people detained on April 6 for [clapping](#) during a court hearing. The law, written in 1938, is one method used by Hong Kong authorities to target journalists and commentators for writings that were not illegal at the time of publication but are now prohibited under the NSL.
- Hong Kong health department forces Meta takedowns:** Hong Kong's Department of Health successfully requested that Meta take down 389 posts and 37 pages or accounts on Facebook and Instagram in the first half 2021. Meta refused to explain to local media why the content or accounts were removed. In July 2020, Facebook had

said it would [stop](#) complying with Hong Kong government requests for user data in response to the NSL, and it did refuse to provide user data in response to 152 government requests involving 177 users or accounts during the same period.

- **Use of NSL to intimidate remaining journalists:** A journalist's question at a March 16 government press conference about COVID-19 measures [resulted](#) in pro-Beijing groups calling for her to be fired for "hate speech" and investigated under the NSL. As a result, the outlet, Now News, apologized. The Hong Kong Journalists Association, which is [considering](#) disbanding over police pressure, was one of the only organizations to [express](#) concern over the attack on the journalist for doing her job. The journalist had asked about complaint procedures against mainland medical staff who were brought to Hong Kong through emergency measures during the latest COVID-19 wave.

BEYOND CHINA

Extraterritorial Hong Kong threats, transnational repression in US, Australia election, influence campaign muddles TikTok debate

- **Chinese media boosts presence overseas:** In a March 25 [interview](#), Xinhua's chief correspondent in Spain highlighted the agency's efforts to bolster its presence in local media, with the goal of having Spanish journalists more frequently "consult" Chinese state media. There is also very high visibility for Chinese state media in Kenya, Peru, and the Philippines, according to a March 29 [report](#) from the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ). State media again made a global propaganda push during China's annual legislative meetings in March. The CCP mouthpiece *People's Daily* [boasted](#) of placing 770 articles in 13 languages, in more than 200 outlets in 60 countries. A recent webinar in [Indonesia](#) on human rights violations in China, and a parliamentary hearing in [Kenya](#) on potential corruption accompanying local, Chinese state-backed infrastructure projects, suggest that more countries are beginning to respond to increasing CCP influence efforts.
- **Growing threats of NSL enforcement outside Hong Kong:** Two overseas activists have recently received threats of prosecution under Hong Kong's NSL. On March 10, the UK-based organization Hong Kong Watch [received](#) a formal email from Hong Kong police warning that if it did not take down its website, its director would face a possible HK\$100,000 (US\$12,700) fine or a three-year prison sentence on suspicion of violating the NSL. On March 29, a staff member of the Europe-based Safeguard Defenders, a nongovernmental organization (NGO) that focuses on human rights in Asia, [received](#) an email purportedly from Hong Kong police threatening extraterritorial enforcement of the NSL and possible extradition. While the email came from a Gmail account and did not appear to be from the police, it referred in detail to sections of the NSL and additionally contained a warning to the recipient to stay out of Hong Kong and mainland China.

- US charges five over transnational repression campaign with electoral implications:** On March 16, the US Department of Justice (DOJ) [charged](#) five individuals with involvement in a transnational repression scheme orchestrated by China’s Ministry of State Security to silence US residents who are critical of the CCP. The victims included a New York [congressional candidate](#), a US Olympic [figure skater](#) and her father, a [dissident artist](#), and activists from Hong Kong, Tibetan, Uyghur, and dissident Chinese communities in New York City. The defendants had conducted surveillance on the victims, or had engaged in harassment or stalking. The DOJ [charged](#) another Chinese national on March 30 in a separate case for acting on behalf of the Chinese government as a part of “Operation Fox Hunt,” an effort to coerce “fugitives” to return to China to face charges. In March, during China’s annual legislative meetings, nationalist legislators [proposed a bill](#) to try “traitors” in absentia and to force their extradition to China. The bill named Miles Yu, a Chinese-born American foreign policy adviser, as a potential target. The cases are part of a larger trend. A 2021 report by [Freedom House](#) found that the Chinese government conducts the most sophisticated, global, and comprehensive campaign of transnational repression in the world.
- CCP influence emerges as a partisan smear in Australia:** Australia’s federal elections, set for May 21, have been [marred](#) by [ugly](#) political campaigning, with the ruling Liberal Party [attempting to portray](#), without evidence, candidates from the main opposition Labor Party as being “backed” by the CCP. The prime minister even [described](#) a Labor candidate as “a Manchurian candidate” on the floor of the House of Representatives before withdrawing his remark. The rhetoric follows a [February speech](#) by the head of Australia’s national security agency, who said it had disrupted a “foreign interference plot” in relation to May’s elections involving a “wealthy individual who maintained direct and deep connections with a foreign government”; media later reported that the affair appeared to involve large donations from an Australian Chinese [businessman](#), who denied interfering with the democratic election process, to Labor candidates in New South Wales. The atmosphere of political suspicion surrounding links to China comes as one out of three Chinese Australians report being treated differently or less favorably because of their Chinese heritage in 2021, according to a [new report](#) from the Lowy Institute. Separately, the government released new [guidelines](#) to help universities counter CCP attacks on academic freedom, such as intimidation campaigns against students of Chinese descent who support democracy movements.
- Meta paid political operatives for damaging reports about TikTok, investigation finds:** The *Washington Post* [reported](#) on March 30 that Meta—the US social networking giant and parent company of Facebook and Instagram, among others—paid one of the largest Republican Party consulting firms to mount a campaign that portrayed the short-video platform TikTok as a danger to American children. The campaign, which was conducted by Targeted Victory and sought to damage TikTok, a leading rival of Meta, involved placing op-eds and stories in local media. The exposé muddles the US political debate about TikTok, whose operations in the country have already been the subject of [executive orders](#) by two presidents. The app, owned by Chinese company ByteDance, which has a history of complying with CCP censor-

ship in China, has been [found](#) periodically to [remove](#) or [downplay](#) overseas content that is politically sensitive to the CCP, although the company has [subsequently](#) reversed course when censorship cases are raised by the media.

FEATURED PUSHBACK

Chinese people challenge propaganda on war in Ukraine

Although Chinese state media and pro-CCP netizens have flooded Chinese social media platforms with comments supporting the Russian regime’s invasion of Ukraine over the past several weeks, some in China oppose the unprovoked aggression and have tried to express their antiwar stance, despite the risk of punishment. Several bloggers, journalists, ordinary users, and even celebrities wrote [essays](#), [articles](#), [poetry](#), and other [posts](#) to voice opposition to the war and Beijing’s alignment with Moscow, but many of their comments had to be quickly saved before Chinese censors deleted them.



This photograph, shared on Weibo, reportedly shows a lone protester in Chongqing expressing opposition to the Russian regime’s invasion of Ukraine.

Credit: Jeff Wang

Five scholars from prestigious universities used WeChat to [post](#) a now-deleted [open letter](#) denouncing the invasion. They signed their names on the document, despite the possible repercussions for their careers and security. Other netizens demonstrated resistance to the war with [thumbs-up emojis on antiwar posts by others](#). Offline, one man stood alone on a street in Hangzhou with a [sign](#) that read “Stop War” and “Please don’t support the war” before being briefly detained. Supporters gave him hugs or told him to keep it up. Another lone protester was [reportedly](#) seen in Chongqing holding a sign that said “I Stand with Ukraine” in English.

Others tried to share information with Chinese users about the situation on the ground. Wang Jixian, a Chinese engineer living in Ukraine, [posted](#) videos on [WeChat](#)—and then on [YouTube](#) after his WeChat account was blocked and his family in China was harassed—to share uncensored news in Mandarin about what was happening in the country. A small community of Ukrainians living in China have [translated](#) Ukrainian news into Chinese on YouTube and WeChat channels, despite their limited reach and the likelihood of censorship. A Chinese person living in Russia posted about [antiwar protests](#) in St. Petersburg. A new online community called the “Great Translation Movement” pushed back against virulent pro-Putin or prowar comments by exposing them to the world; the content was [translated](#) into languages including English, Spanish, Japanese, and Korean. The group’s Twitter [account](#) has already grown to 120,000 followers after being created in March, though it was [banned](#) from Reddit for revealing personal information.

WHAT TO WATCH FOR

- **Proposed or enacted legislation to tighten information controls:** Several recent pieces of legislation or regulatory actions—including new [regulations](#) on algorithms introduced March 1, proposed [regulations](#) on push notifications, and a [proposed](#) law to ban “fake news”—reflect the regime’s efforts to refine and tighten its information controls in order to “manage” public opinion and remove “harmful” information. Watch for the enactment or implementation of these measures, and the further removal of information that deviates from the official line, as the CCP gears up for its 20th Party Congress later this year.
- **Further crackdowns under new Hong Kong chief executive:** Former police officer and security official John Lee is expected to be [selected](#) as the new chief executive of Hong Kong on May 8, after Carrie Lam [announced](#) that she will not seek a second term. Beijing’s evident support for Lee, who is running unopposed, indicates that the central government is not finished with its campaign to crush dissent in the territory. Watch for further national security crackdowns on independent media, activists, civil society groups, and protesters.
- **State media and pro-CCP netizens shaping availability of content on platforms globally:** Videos on YouTube that are critical of the CCP have been hit by malicious reporting and hacking meant to remove them from view; affected content has included the [trailer](#) of the Hong Kong protest documentary *Revolution of Our Times* and Malaysian singer Namewee’s entire [channel](#) of collected music videos. At the same time, state broadcaster CGTN has bought Meta advertisements to promote the Kremlin’s propaganda about its invasion of Ukraine. Watch for further attempts by Chinese state media to disseminate propaganda on global platforms even as pro-CCP actors use cyberattacks or malicious reporting to censor critical content.

TAKE ACTION

- **Subscribe to the *China Media Bulletin*:** Have the bulletin's updates and insights delivered directly to your inbox each month, free of charge. Visit [here](#) or e-mail cmb@freedomhouse.org.
- **Share the *China Media Bulletin*:** Help friends and colleagues better understand China's changing media and censorship landscape.
- **Access uncensored content:** Find an overview comparing popular circumvention tools and information on how to access them via GreatFire.org, [here](#) or [here](#). Learn more about how to reach uncensored content and enhance digital security [here](#).
- **Support a prisoner:** Learn how to take action to help journalists and free expression activists, including those featured in passed issues of the *China Media Bulletin*, [here](#).
- **Visit the *China Media Bulletin Resources* section:** Learn more about how policy-makers, media outlets, educators and donors can help advance free expression in China and beyond via a [new resource section](#) on the Freedom House website.

For more information

- For archives, go to: www.freedomhouse.org/China-media
- For additional information on human rights and free expression related to China, see: *Freedom in the World 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 is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that supports democratic change, monitors freedom, and advocates for democracy and human rights.

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