

CHINA MEDIA BULLETIN

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IMAGE OF THE MONTH

This Lockdown Cannot be Viewed

This image shows one of several signs that were [hung up](#) on Huashan Road in Shanghai by three unknown individuals on the evening of April 17, with slogans mocking the CCP's COVID-19 lockdown of the city. The banner shows a hand-painted WeChat error message that is displayed when a post has been censored, and reads, "This content cannot be viewed due to violations." Several other signs criticizing the city's draconian lockdown measures were hung before police removed them, though photos were widely shared online. The three individuals who hung the signs were reportedly [detained](#) by police for several hours and had their phones confiscated.

Credit: [Unknown](#)



ANALYSIS

China's Censors Aim to Contain Dissent during Harsh COVID-19 Lockdowns

By Sarah Cook

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

Top doctors among those silenced for urging a shift away from draconian control strategy.

As Shanghai enters its seventh week of COVID-19 lockdowns, China's censors have been hard at work trying to contain an eruption of public outrage and enforce the leadership's prohibition of any public debate or calls to reconsider its strategy.

Spikes in censorship and netizen activism occur periodically in China, particularly in moments of crisis. As in past periods of extreme regime sensitivity, there are ample examples from recent weeks of censorship "overkill," including restrictions on a WeChat account belonging to the National People's Congress, seemingly innocuous phrases like "[happy birthday](#)," a hashtag with the first line of China's national [anthem](#), and references to the Hollywood film [La La Land](#).

Nevertheless, two aspects of the current campaign stand out: the high profile of some of the users being silenced and the amount of critical content that has survived online despite furious censorship efforts.

Prominent voices silenced

The extended lockdowns in Shanghai and additional restrictions in other cities have prompted more citizens to raise objections to the human and economic costs of the government's "zero COVID-19" policy, with some calling on their leaders to consider less rigid alternatives that might still spare many lives. The prominence, diversity, and number of people who have encountered censorship for trying to engage in such a rational discussion are significant.

Medical professionals remain a key target for censors, as they have been since the inception of the pandemic. Indeed, the suppression of health experts' speech in late 2019 and early 2020 may have denied the country and the world an opportunity to control the virus. Yet the practice continues. In early April, Zhong Nanshan, the country's top respiratory disease specialist, published an [English article](#) in the National Science Review that offered suggestions on how China could reopen "in an orderly and effective manner" in the coming months. While it acknowledged the effectiveness of policies to date, the article warned that the strict "zero COVID-19" approach "cannot be pursued in the long-run." A [Chinese](#) version was quickly censored, and during the night of April 20–21, state media flooded [Baidu](#) search-engine results with items that partially quoted Zhong expressing support for the existing strategy and downplayed his remarks on the need to gradually open up.

More grassroots health workers have also been silenced. In early April, Dr. Miu Xiaohui, a retired infectious disease expert, attempted to calculate how many people

with diabetes might have died because of the lack of medicine and treatment during Shanghai's lockdown, reaching an estimated figure of 2,141. The blog post outlining his calculation and suggestions for managing the pandemic—through a stronger focus on vaccination campaigns and home isolation, for example—was deleted.

Beyond the medical profession, financial analysts have been swept up in the attempt to stifle debate. [Hao Hong](#), a Hong Kong-based market strategist, was censored after he published a series of commentaries on social media platforms that predicted a gloomy trajectory for China's economy. On April 30, his Weibo account, which had three million followers, was shuttered, and his WeChat account was suspended. Within days, he left his position at a major financial firm, citing "[personal reasons](#)." The Weibo accounts of at least [three other](#) chief economists and fund managers have recently been suspended for "violating laws and regulations." The apparent purge fits a long-standing pattern in which warnings of problems for the Chinese economy are smothered despite growing evidence of a downturn.

Prominent influencers and celebrities have attracted censorship and other pressure for echoing the sentiments of many ordinary Shanghai residents. [Wang Sicong](#), son of billionaire Wang Jianlin, had his Weibo account—with 40 million followers—shut down in late April after he posted [comments](#) questioning state-sanctioned Chinese herbal medicine treatments and declaring that he would refuse to take a mandated test. There were unverified reports that he had also been detained for "picking quarrels and provoking trouble," a criminal charge often used to punish free speech. Meanwhile, rapper Fang Lue removed a YouTube video of his song "New Slave," which was released at the end of March and gained popularity for [presciently articulating](#) the frustration and anguish of many in Shanghai.

Censors appear to have doubled down after a May 5 [meeting](#) of the Politburo Standing Committee, during which President Xi Jinping affirmed the "zero COVID-19" policy and made clear that he would tolerate no calls for reconsideration or adjustment. The readout [notes](#) from the meeting state that the party must "resolutely struggle against all distortions, doubts, and denials of our epidemic prevention policy." Soon afterward, [Tong Zhiwei](#), a law professor in Shanghai, published an online essay arguing that authorities were acting illegally when they took extreme measures such as forcing uninfected neighbors of infected individuals into collective quarantine. His verified Weibo account was then banned from posting, and a hashtag of his name was censored. On May 10, [World Health Organization](#) (WHO) director Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus remarked that China's strategy was "not sustainable" in the face of the virus's easily transmissible Omicron variant. Almost immediately, as clips and references to the comment circulated online, [censors descended](#) on his remarks, suppressing his image, name, related hashtags, and even UN-affiliated accounts on Weibo and WeChat.

Netizen pushback

During the Shanghai lockdown in particular, ordinary Chinese users have gone to extraordinary lengths to circumvent censorship, keep critical content online, and find avenues for freer expression.

Creative solutions have included piggybacking on officially sanctioned hashtags. On the evening of [April 13](#), tens of thousands of angry comments were posted to a hashtag criticizing human rights in the United States, which was artificially ranked second by the Weibo platform. Users exploited the hashtag to highlight the lack of rights protections in China and express frustration with the Chinese government. Many of the posts garnered hundreds of likes and shares, but by 4 a.m. the censors had moved in to delete them. [Podcasts](#) have also emerged as a less censored space where women in particular have shared their daily hardships during the lockdown.

Another collective outpouring of anguish came in the form of a six-minute video compilation of key incidents from the Shanghai lockdown, titled “[Voices of April](#).” The video deluged WeChat groups and was constantly reposted and forwarded even as censors tried to remove it. People made new [versions](#) of it upside down, embedded in cartoons, or with [painted still images](#) designed to evade censorship algorithms.

Various initiatives have countered censorship within the Chinese internet by keeping deleted content alive outside the Great Firewall. A compilation of 200 cases of people who died as a result of the lockdown itself rather than COVID-19—from denial of medical care, hunger, or suicide, for example—was posted to [Airtable](#), a blockchain-based database platform. Overseas bilingual websites like [China Digital Times](#) (CDT) or [What’s on Weibo](#), along with the Twitter accounts of individual [journalists](#) and researchers, have captured, archived, and translated posts like many of those cited above. CDT also published a leaked censorship [directive](#) calling for a “comprehensive clean-up of video, screenshots, and other content related to ‘Voices of April.’”

Long-term implications

The lockdowns, censorship, and citizen responses are likely to have long-term effects, regardless of how the pandemic and government health policies evolve.

It is noteworthy, for instance, that some of the most popular content has involved local officials—from medical facilities or residential committees—candidly expressing their own sympathy and sense of [helplessness](#) to complaining residents, indicating a degree of disillusionment and dissent among those asked to implement the government’s rigid and often brutal policies. There may be foot-dragging among censors themselves, as suggested by some of the gaps or delays in enforcement surrounding the US human rights hashtag or a blog [post](#) titled “Shanghainese endurance has reached the extreme point” that garnered 20 million views before being deleted.

Reflections published by observers and Shanghai residents also underscore a disappointment with Chinese state media’s [obvious lack of coverage](#), as well as a sense of solidarity and community surrounding both offline mutual-assistance efforts and online outbursts of collective anger. As one [netizen](#) commented in response to the US human rights hashtag hijacking: “So many posts to like. This is the true voice of the people. Let’s commemorate tonight.... Maybe tomorrow it’s gonna be songs and dances again, but at least we know that we are awake.”

Digital habits may be changing under lockdown. Some users have reportedly [drifted](#)

[away](#) from Chinese e-commerce platforms and even WeChat, fed up with wait times and rampant censorship, and moved toward real-life neighborliness or international apps like Telegram.

As Shanghai and other parts of China emerge from health restrictions, more information may surface regarding the costs of the government's policy and its autocratic refusal to admit error, accept independent advice, or adjust to changing conditions. Even harsher censorship may still be coming, but it seems clear that this historic and tragic episode in the lives of millions of people will not be easily forgotten, even if much of the digital evidence is hastily obscured.

IN THE NEWS

State narratives: CCP's voice on 20th Party Congress, Ukraine, and UN high commissioner's visit

- Xi Jinping propaganda ahead of party congress, amidst lockdown chaos:** As China's COVID-19 outbreak rages, the CCP's propaganda departments have been busy preparing for this autumn's historic 20th Party Congress, where Xi Jinping is expected to solidify his control over the Chinese government for the decade to come. On April 27, a Central Propaganda Department [notice](#) on planned education and learning activities about the "rejuvenation of the Chinese nation," one of Xi's key policies, received prominent placing on the front page of the party's mouthpiece, People's Daily. On April 13, the CCP's Guangxi branch [released](#) a six-episode [television series](#) about Xi and the Congress, with [gushing praise](#) about how the office would "forever embrace, defend, and follow the Leader." After publishing an open letter criticizing the campaign as contributing to a cult of personality around Xi, the retired writer Tian Qizhuang has [disappeared](#). Separately, party cadres have undertaken a [campaign](#) in Tibet to ensure Xi Jinping's portrait is prominently displayed in people's homes and in religious buildings. On April 11, prominent state media outlets like the [People's Daily](#), [Xinhua](#), and [China Central Television \(CCTV\)](#) released coordinated pieces headlined "Xi Jinping's Love for the People" which featured quotes from Xi including, "I will always put the people in the highest position in my heart."
- CCP propaganda backing Russia, Chinese mediation in Ukraine:** Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine began in late February, Chinese state media outlets have [disseminated](#) propaganda and disinformation promoting the Kremlin's false claims including that Ukrainian forces committed war crimes against Ukrainian citizens. They've also touted China's and Xi's roles as responsible international actors [who have](#) "played an important role in process of restoring peace in Ukraine." Additionally, on April 30, Xinhua [published](#) a full interview with Dmytro Kuleba, the foreign minister of Ukraine. While Kuleba [criticized](#) Russia, he also expressed "gratitude to the Chinese side for taking a stance to avoid further escalation of the situation," but warned China to not use geopolitical purposes to "add fuel to the fire in Rus-

sia's war against Ukraine." A recent Carter Center China Focus [poll showed](#) that 75 percent of respondents said backing Russia is in China's national interests, and 60 percent saw China as mediating an end to the conflict. Such views are boosted by how the CCP manipulates information. Researchers have also recently [discovered](#) thousands of fake accounts spreading CCP propaganda in Chinese and English about the war in Ukraine, while [comments](#) of Chinese netizens who criticized Putin continue to be censored.

- **State media quiet on upcoming visit by UN human rights chief:** Chinese state media has kept relatively quiet about the upcoming visit to China in May by UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet, perhaps planning to wait until its conclusion before using sections of footage or transcripts for propaganda soundbites. Bachelet's trip will be the first visit to China by the UN's highest human rights official since 2005, despite repeated UN requests; it will also be the first visit since repression and rights violations increased sharply under Xi. No major state media outlets have run detailed reports about the upcoming trip, which will include a visit to Xinjiang, or about Bachelet's [advance team](#) of staff who are currently in China; a spokesperson briefly mentioned that the government welcomed the mission at a May 5 foreign ministry [press conference](#). Meanwhile, the government has taken measures to suppress critical voices. Authorities rereleased a [directive](#) to Uyghurs in Xinjiang to not "disclose state secrets" during the visit. On April 20, the CCP also [ratified](#) two international forced labor treaties in an apparent attempt to blunt criticism of its oppression of Uyghurs. Freedom House and over 60 NGOs [released](#) an open letter to Bachelet on April 19 outlining minimum steps her office must take for her visit to be credible, including releasing a report her office prepared on serious human rights violations in Xinjiang in 2021, ensuring minimum standards for independent, unfettered access, and that state officials will not be present at meetings with civil society groups. Bachelet has yet to make such commitments.

Surveillance updates: Chinese social media displays user locations, AI surveillance software, US sanctions, monitoring concerns in Hong Kong

- **Social media platforms reveal user locations:** Beginning April 28 most major Chinese social media platforms [began](#) to display users' locations on their posts, based on their IP address, with no option to turn the feature off. The move [appears](#) to be in line with a provision in 2021 [draft regulations](#) from the Cyberspace Administration of China. All major social media companies like Sina Weibo, Tencent's WeChat, ByteDance's Douyin (China's version of TikTok), Baidu's online forum Tieba, and others proactively began enacting the measure in a coordinated fashion. The platforms [said](#) the move was meant to prevent netizens from "spreading rumors," including by pretending to be in a different location from where they are. Netizens [criticized](#) the changes, which also showed that some pro-CCP nationalist bloggers appear to be either outside of China or using a Virtual Private Network (VPN). One student filed a lawsuit against Weibo over the disclosure.

- **“One person, one file” surveillance technology bought up Chinese authorities:** An April 8 Reuters investigation of Chinese government procurement documents [revealed](#) that dozens of Chinese local authorities had purchased “one person, one file” surveillance software. The technology uses artificial intelligence to more accurately link data held in government databases or social media platforms with individuals identified on surveillance cameras. Several of the authorities, which included police departments and CCP offices, specified they wanted technology to identify Tibetan or Uyghur faces to find “persons involved in terrorism.”
- **Report says United States plans severe sanctions on Hikvision:** In what would be the first-ever comprehensive US human rights sanctions of a Chinese tech company, the US government is reportedly [considering](#) using provisions of the Global Magnitsky Act to impose sanctions on Chinese technology company Hikvision for its role in [facilitating](#) the Chinese government’s atrocities against the Uyghur minority, according to a May 4 report from the *Financial Times*. Hikvision is one of China’s largest video surveillance camera equipment companies, with an [estimated](#) 4 million of its cameras operating in 197 countries. While Hikvision has [already](#) been sanctioned by different US entities, if put on the Specially Designated Nationals (SDN) List then the US government [would](#) be forced to freeze all its US-linked assets and, because jurisdiction extends to large parts of the US dollar-dominated international financial system, could impose criminal penalties for anyone who sends the company money or property. That would effectively shut the company down.
- **Hidden facial-detection feature built into Hong Kong virus app:** A May 3 [report](#) from the Hong Kong-based investigative journalism site FactWire revealed that the territory’s LeaveHomeSafe Android app contains a hidden facial-detection feature, raising privacy concerns among Hong Kongers already fearful of the government. In response to a request for comment, the government told FactWire the feature had never been used and asked the contractor to remove it from the app, which is [required](#) to enter most premises in Hong Kong. The day after releasing the report, FactWire said it was [hit](#) by a cyberattack and that hackers had gained access to its subscribers’ data.
- **Over 1 million Hong Kong SIM cards now linked to users’ personal information:** A month after a Hong Kong law requiring real-name registration for SIM cards took effect, [1.4 million SIM cards](#) are now linked to their owners’ real names and other personal information. People who bought SIM cards before the rule was enacted have until February 2023 to register them or they will be deactivated. The system is likely to contribute to increased surveillance of Hong Kongers and prosecutions for online speech.

Former journalist, tech worker, EU employee, and Uyghur scholar detained or jailed for social media posts and academic writings

- Former journalist imprisoned for “insulting” martyrs on Weibo:** A Hainan court [sentenced](#) influential former journalist Luo Changping to seven months in prison for a 2021 Weibo post about Chinese soldiers depicted in the nationalistic film *The Battle at Lake Changjin*, which was commissioned by the CCP’s propaganda department as a part of the CCP centennial celebrations and went on to become China’s highest-grossing film of all time. Luo’s October 7 [post](#) that the soldiers were “stupid” for freezing to death was [viewed](#) 22,397 times before he deleted it. He was charged under a law [introduced](#) in 2021 that prohibits defamation of “heroes and martyrs.”
- Tech worker accused of using internet to endanger national security:** State media [announced](#) on May 3 that a male technology worker had been put under criminal compulsory measures on April 25 on suspicion of “inciting secession” and “inciting subversion of state power” after being “brainwashed” by anti-China forces. The announcement about the man, surnamed Ma, briefly caused panic on the stock market after people thought the announcement [referred](#) to Jack Ma, cofounder and former executive chairman of Alibaba Group. Some now [suspect](#) the announcement might refer to a hacker activist known for his blog, [Program-Think](#), who [disappeared](#) last May and is also [surnamed](#) Ma. State media claimed he used his “professional expertise” to engage in “traitor behavior” by creating an “antipropaganda program” to endanger national security.
- Uyghur academic imprisoned for 13 years:** Xinjiang Normal University philology lecturer Ababekri Abdureshid was [reportedly](#) sentenced to 13 years in prison for his academic writings and foreign connections. He had previously spent a year in Germany as a visiting scholar, and traveled to Turkey once. The harsh sentence is the latest example of the extreme measures the Chinese government is taking against ethnic Uyghurs with any kind of overseas connections.
- European Union employee detained in Sichuan:** French media recently [revealed](#) that Chinese national An Dong, a tech worker at the EU’s mission in Beijing, has been [detained](#) since September 2021 for “picking quarrels and provoking trouble,” a charge commonly used to prosecute free expression. An had reportedly shared political views and support for democratic principles on WeChat.
- Shanghai citizen reporter briefly detained for posting about COVID-19 lockdown:** Shanghai police briefly [detained](#) Ji Xiaolong, a citizen journalist with previous arrests for democratic activism, and his wife on April 30 for documenting dissent against the city’s harsh COVID-19 lockdown. His wife was released after a few hours, but police [held](#) Ji until May 2 on restrictive bail conditions after confiscating his ID card, passport, and mobile phone. In addition to documenting Shanghai residents’ anger and dissent towards the city’s strict COVID-19 lockdown, Ji had

started a citizen petition calling on local and national authorities to ease lockdown measures and provide greater aid to citizens. He had just been released from prison on February 9, after serving a three-and-a-half-year sentence for a 2018 protest campaign calling for Xi's removal.

- **Police intimidate relatives of Chinese expat over Ukraine comments:** Chinese citizen Gao Ronghui [shut down](#) his Twitter account in the Netherlands after police in Fujian province visited his parents and grandparents and threatened them in connection with his posts in support of Ukraine. The officer reportedly told him, “just because you’re in a foreign country, doesn’t mean that China doesn’t know what you’re doing.” A 2021 Freedom House report found China to be the world’s worst perpetrator of [transnational repression](#).

HONG KONG

Rights award canceled, convictions for Facebook post, ‘deradicalization’ programs

- **Foreign press club cancels human rights award:** On April 25, the Foreign Correspondents Club of Hong Kong (FCCHK) [suspended](#) its long-standing Human Rights Press Awards, reportedly because Stand News had [won](#) several awards and the club feared police prosecution under the National Security Law (NSL) as a result. Stand News had [shut down](#) in December after a police raid and the arrest of several of its staff. The announcement, which came days before the ceremony was to be held on May 3—World Press Freedom Day—[prompted](#) several resignations from the club. The FCCHK board also reportedly [refused](#) to issue a statement about the [arrest](#) of former Stand News columnist Allan Au on April 11. An April 28 [open letter](#) to the FCCHK board questioning the decision received dozens of signatures, including from several previous award winners, who face risk from Hong Kong authorities for speaking out.
- **Sentence for sharing Facebook post, updates on free speech cases:** Two Hong Kongers were [sentenced](#) to two months in prison, suspended for 18 months, after they shared a Facebook post from former lawmaker Ted Hui calling for people to cast blank ballots in last December’s Legislative Council election. “Inciting others to cast invalid votes” was made a crime last year when the CCP [gutted](#) Hong Kong’s electoral laws. Meanwhile, the “conspiring to publish seditious material” [trial](#) of two senior Stand News editors, Chung Pui-kuen and Patrick Lam, has been postponed until June 23. The NSL requires such trials to be held in a “fair and timely” manner, but many have dragged on. The case of the 47 prodemocracy activists charged under the NSL for having a primary election has still not come to [trial](#), though many have been held without bail since police raids on January 6, 2021.
- **“Deradicalization” programs as more people flee into exile:** Hong Kong’s Security Bureau [revealed](#) that 250 protesters had taken part in “deradicalization” programs while in prison to “reestablish correct values” through lessons on Chinese history,

the Basic Law, and the NSL. While authorities claimed the program was voluntary, a former inmate [told](#) reporters that it was akin to enforced “brainwashing.” The tactics are similar to those used against Uyghurs in mainland China. During the 2019 protests, approximately 10,000 people were arrested and 2,000 have faced criminal charges. Meanwhile, as Hong Kong authorities tighten control over its residents, several dissenters have fled out of fear of the shifting political redlines. On April 24, Chung Kim-wah of the Hong Kong Public Opinion Research Institute [fled](#) into exile in the United Kingdom. He had been [visited](#) by national security police in April, and the institute had been criticized by CCP mouthpiece *People’s Daily* in December. Two days later, political cartoonist Ah To [announced](#) he had left the territory, also out of fear.

BEYOND CHINA

Sanctions prompt social media ban, pro-Russian propaganda, new research on CCP influence

- Enforcement of US sanctions on social media platforms:** Hong Kong’s incoming chief executive John Lee’s YouTube channel was [removed](#) by Google on April 20. The company cited US [sanctions](#) as the reason for removing the channel, where he had posted campaign material for his unopposed run to become the territory’s new leader. Lee, who was sanctioned in August 2020 for undermining Hong Kong’s autonomy, is expected to take up the post on July 1. Platforms have some discretion in enforcing US sanctions, so long as there is no exchange of funds. Meta said it will not remove his [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#) channels, but will prevent him from using payment services.
- Ukrainian agency compares Ukraine to Taiwan as Chinese state media spreads pro-Russian propaganda in Europe:** Ukraine’s official Center for Countering Disinformation [published](#) an [article](#) on April 28 analyzing the risk of military conflict in Taiwan and comparing the geopolitical similarities of Taiwan and Ukraine under the hashtag #StopInfoTerror. The report was released amid China’s continuing efforts to [disseminate](#) pro-Russian propaganda through diplomats and state media accounts on Twitter. A new [report](#) from China Observers in Central and Eastern Europe found that Chinese messaging was most intense in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Poland, and Romania, with China Radio International being a notable source of translated anti-NATO messages.
- New reports on CCP influence overseas:** Several new research reports examine CCP influence in countries around the world. Taiwan-based DoubleThink Lab [released](#) the pilot version of the [China Index 2021](#) on April 25. The index examines CCP influence in 36 countries in nine areas: media, foreign policy, academia, domestic politics, economy, technology, society, military, and law enforcement. Cambodia, Singapore, and Thailand were ranked the most exposed. A March 31 [report](#) from the Center for European Policy Analysis looked at Chinese and Russian disinformation and propaganda about COVID-19, and includes several examples of effective

responses from governments and digital platforms. These included exposing disinformation, sharing credible and authoritative health information, partnering with civil society to provide credible and reliable information, COVID-19 disinformation task forces, regulatory measures, addressing the vulnerabilities in media environment, and taking down inauthentic posts. On April 12, the Council on Foreign Relations released a [report](#) on CCP influence in Latin America, with a particular focus on economic and military ties. An Atlantic Council [paper](#) released April 20 looked at CCP strategies for exploiting friendly foreign media to spread propaganda, a practice known among CCP figures as “borrowing the boat to reach the sea,” with the report focusing particularly on the Global South. The authors examined Chinese official policy and government documents in Chinese and Chinese state media in local languages, as well as local partners in three case studies of South Africa, Venezuela, and Iran.

- **Ugandan state-owned newspaper correction over Taiwan amid broader CCP media influence in Africa:** The Ugandan state-owned newspaper *New Vision* [issued](#) a correction on April 26 for referring to Tsai-Ing Wen as the president of Taiwan. In the correction, outlet reaffirmed that “Uganda recognizes the one China policy.” An April 6 [report](#) from the International Republican Institute looked at CCP influence in the information spaces of Nigeria, Ghana, and Ethiopia. The author argued that “growing economic entanglement with China almost inevitably carries the risk of corresponding impacts on free discourse.”

FEATURED PUSHBACK

Netizens voices cry out against COVID-19 lockdown cruelty, censorship

As the people of Shanghai and other cities in China were subjected to strict COVID-19 protocols that included being sealed in their homes, left without food, taken away to quarantine facilities, separated from parents or children, and watching their pets be killed in front of them, most could only briefly express their frustrations online before censors arrived.

However, many in Shanghai shared a six-minute video titled “[Voices of April](#)” that brought together clips of many of the realities of the lockdown. The video [itself](#) was apolitical and somber, but after attracting the attention of millions of viewers it effectively became a collective expression of dissent against the government, and thus a political act. As the video went [viral](#) on WeChat and Weibo, racking up at least 5



million views on WeChat, Chinese tech companies [began](#) to censor it upon [instruction](#) from the authorities. That didn't stop netizens from finding [creative ways](#) to [share](#) it anyway, including by reposting copies, saving it on blockchain, creating QR codes embedded in posters, or minting it as a nonfungible token (NFT).

Netizens also expressed dissent over the government's pandemic response by hijacking a top-trending [hashtag](#) on Weibo originally started by Chinese state media, stating that the "United States is the biggest country of human rights deficit." Users deployed the hashtag in creative ways making it apparent that the same criticism was directed not at the US, but instead at the Chinese government. They also [used](#) the hashtag "Call me by your name" in at least 12 different variations, in a similar campaign meant to mock the CCP for blaming the country's problems on the United States.

WHAT TO WATCH FOR

- Increased restrictions on exchanges between Chinese scholars and foreign academics:** In March, several Chinese scholars [withdrew](#) from presenting at virtual sessions during an annual international conference [organized](#) by the Association for Asian Studies after another Chinese presenter was visited by police at their home and interrogated for having an "incorrect" title to the paper. Watch for further intimidation and harassment of Chinese scholars for continuing apolitical exchanges with international researchers, to the detriment of academic freedom.
- Hong Kong authorities targeting crowdfunding, other alternative financing:** As Hong Kong police [arrested five](#) former trustees of a crowdfunding fund for protesters on May 10-11, legislators are also looking at ways to [regulate](#) crowdfunding to prohibit residents from donating money to activities that are purportedly "endangering national security" or to crowdfunding platforms for activists in exile. Watch for the rubber-stamp approval of such legislation by the Beijing-controlled Legislative Council, and possible further arrests.
- Foreign studios try to navigate China censorship:** American film studios have taken different approaches to Chinese government censorship demands recently. Sony [refused](#) to cut a scene showing the Statue of Liberty from the new Spider-Man film, which was thus blocked from opening in China. Warner Brothers [censored](#) an LGBT+ storyline from the new Harry Potter film, meanwhile. Watch as film studios navigate Chinese authorities' censorship demands.

TAKE ACTION

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- **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*



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