

CHINA MEDIA BULLETIN

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IMAGE OF THE MONTH

White Paper Protests

This image from the Facebook [account](#) 公民日报 Citizens Daily [references](#) the blank pieces of A4 paper that protesters held up across mainland China to protest the government's "zero-COVID" policies, and the censorship that prevents Chinese residents from expressing themselves freely on and offline. The protests also included netizens inside and outside China who shared images on social media. In-person solidarity demonstrations also took place around the world. Accounts like 公民日报 Citizens Daily, which also has tens of thousands of followers on [Instagram](#), helped share creative posters, news, and tips for protesters.

Image: [公民日报 Citizens Daily](#)



ANALYSIS

Chinese Protesters and the Global Internet Need One Another

By [Kian Vesteinsson](#) and [Angeli Datt](#)

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Safeguarding a free and open internet will help support China's brave protesters

In late November 2022, the Chinese internet was overwhelmed by expressions of rage, grief, and disbelief. The catalyst was a [fire](#) in Urumqi, capital of the western region of Xinjiang, that killed at least 10 people in an apartment block after harsh COVID-19 rules apparently restricted the movement of both victims and rescuers. Xinjiang residents, including ethnic Uyghurs, took to the streets to protest.

Many internet users circumvented China's official censorship system, known as the Great Firewall, to share information on banned platforms like Twitter and Instagram. People across the country joined in a decentralized movement with overlapping aims, including mourning for the Urumqi victims, removal of rigid restrictions associated with the regime's "zero COVID" policy, and in protest of strict political controls. The result was one of the most open challenges to Chinese Communist Party (CCP) rule in decades.

These events were shocking in part because the space to discuss politically sensitive topics on Chinese platforms is small and shrinking—an outcome of the regime's multiyear strategy to deepen control over domestic internet companies. As the CCP authorities work to close loopholes and prevent any recurrence of the recent outburst, the international community should do everything possible to ensure that the global internet remains a space where Chinese people can raise their voices in dissent.

A stand against online censors

Public anger in the aftermath of the Urumqi fire erupted suddenly and spread far and wide on social media, despite the Chinese government's profoundly oppressive [controls on the internet](#). Users who share restricted information or criticism of the authorities are typically censored, harassed, and intimidated into silence. But Chinese platforms [initially struggled](#) to cope with the huge volume of videos and messages related to the blaze, much like with the [public reaction](#) to the death of Dr. Li Wenliang in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Chinese users also employed creative means to evade censorship as the movement spread. For instance, people on the Weibo microblogging platform expressed solidarity through hashtags like "A4" and "[white paper exercise](#)"—both references to the blank sheets of paper that protesters held up to show the wide reach of government constraints on free speech.

Even as they grappled with censors on Chinese platforms, people inside the country

[turned to virtual private networks](#) (VPNs)—tools that can circumvent the Great Firewall and are heavily regulated in China—to view and share uncensored content about the protests. High-profile [Twitter accounts](#) run by Chinese people living abroad acted as staging grounds for dissemination of videos and photos to the wider internet. On Instagram, pages that were previously dedicated to [posting memes](#) became important repositories for crowdsourced information about the movement.

Eventually, however, the internet censors caught up. Weibo and other platforms began blocking users' cleverly coded hashtags. And the Cyber Administration of China (CAC), the country's internet regulator, ordered social media companies to hire more censors, focus on quashing discussion of the zero-COVID protests, and scrub any [references to VPNs](#) from content posted by users.

Tightening the screws on China's internet companies

While the recent outbreak of dissent may have caught officials by surprise, the CCP has worked tirelessly to bolster its censorship system against long-term challenges. Recently, the CAC and other regulators have increasingly reined in Chinese technology companies, whose immense wealth and influence came to be viewed as a potential threat to the CCP's concentration of power. Leveraging financial and antimonopoly scrutiny, the authorities imposed large [fines](#) or [pulled applications](#) from online stores to punish companies for any perceived failure to toe the government line. This clamp-down will make online mobilization like that of zero-COVID protests more difficult than ever.

The CCP has also demonstrated a commitment to ensuring that its censorship regime can keep pace with technological advances. For example, regulations introduced in [2021](#) and [2022](#) targeted the automated systems that distribute content or advertising to social media users. They require Chinese platforms to develop content-recommendation systems that exclude "illegal and undesirable" material, adhere to "mainstream values," and promote "positive energy" and "socialist core" principles. Now, the algorithmic systems that sometimes exposed users to critical content they might not discover on their own will be designed to prevent precisely that.

Other regulations aim to undermine anonymity and chill speech. To comply with a [2021](#) regulation, Chinese social media platforms now [display](#) the cities or provinces of China-based users under their posts, and users based outside China are tagged with their country. In a [post](#) explaining this change, Weibo claimed that some users had pretended to be locals while engaged in discussions about controversial topics.

New [regulations](#) that took force last month may constrain online discussions even further by restricting people's comments on the posts of others. Platforms must now enforce [real-name registration](#) for users with commenting privileges and roll out new content-moderation controls on comment threads. Noncompliance can ultimately result in closure of the platform. Comment threads have previously offered a rare space for Chinese people to [exchange views](#) or criticism, but that opportunity may be dwindling.

Protecting Chinese dissent on the global internet

To support the Chinese protesters who have bravely raised their voices to share their views, democratic governments and international technology companies should take steps to safeguard access to a free and open global internet.

First, governments around the world should expand support for the development of tools that can be used to circumvent censorship systems like the Great Firewall, particularly those that are user-friendly and designed for high-risk environments. Related programs should enable civil society organizations to distribute these tools to the people who need them.

Second, democracies should counter the CCP's campaign to erode the global internet at the international level, which Freedom House's [Freedom on the Net 2022](#) report described in detail. Chinese diplomats and state-aligned companies have sought to promote their model of digital authoritarian control to other governments. They have lobbied to enshrine this model within the multilateral institutions that set technical and other standards for the internet, like the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) when it was led by China's Houlin Zhao.

At a minimum, democratic governments should [develop common approaches](#) to checking digital-authoritarian influence at multilateral bodies. The [Freedom Online Coalition](#), which brings like-minded governments together to protect human rights online, can drive diplomatic coordination against the Chinese government's efforts to fragment the global internet. The ITU, now under the leadership of Secretary General Doreen Bogdan-Martin of the United States, can also resist such policies. Of particular concern are those that would undermine how networks around the world connect to each other to form the global internet, such as would be the case if Huawei's [New IP proposal](#) and its copycats were adopted.

Third, international technology companies should be [prepared to defend](#) Chinese people's right to express themselves and seek and receive reliable information, particularly when protests are unfolding. During the zero-COVID protests, networks of automated Chinese-language "bot" accounts on Twitter [swamped](#) protest-related hashtags with pornography and advertisements for escort services. Though these tactics mirrored previous state-backed disinformation campaigns, [no clear evidence](#) of a government link has emerged so far. Twitter was delayed in responding to the deluge, reportedly because the company's recent mass layoffs [undermined](#) its ability to combat content manipulation more broadly.

It is critical for tech companies that serve a global audience to maintain adequate capacity to address threats to platform integrity, including by fully staffing teams dedicated to trust and safety, human rights, and regional needs. Companies should further invest in the internal infrastructure required for such teams to coordinate and respond to CCP manipulation efforts. Companies should also innovate to ensure that users in closed countries can access their products safely and securely, such as by embedding end-to-end encryption and deploying [proxy servers](#).

The zero-COVID protests demonstrated to millions of Chinese people the power of their collective voice, online and off. In December, under pressure from the public, the government relaxed many of its draconian pandemic restrictions—despite their close association with President Xi Jinping. Collective expressions of dissent are not unusual in China, as Freedom House’s [China Dissent Monitor](#) has found, but they rarely take the form of direct challenges to the central government, and rarer still are major concessions from top CCP leaders.

By protecting the freedom and accessibility of the global internet, the international community will be providing Chinese people and others who live behind authoritarian firewalls with the means to build solidarity and movements that challenge the very mechanisms that deny them fundamental freedoms.

IN THE NEWS

2022 Year in Review: Propaganda priorities, coercive influence overseas, Hong Kong crackdown

- Propaganda campaigns on Olympics, Ukraine, COVID, Party Congress:** Chinese government narratives in 2022 included positive messaging on the CCP’s governance system, and items that lashed out at critics. The year started with a propaganda push for the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, celebrating the event and the CCP’s success in hosting it amid a global pandemic. Authorities seized the opportunity to [parade](#) tennis star Peng Shuai before an international spotlight, sitting her down for a heavily controlled interview; in 2023, the tennis star remains [out of contact](#) and her name [scrubbed](#) from the Chinese internet. Following the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian military, Chinese state media [began amplifying](#) Russian government disinformation. Propaganda [narratives](#) on COVID-19 ranged from [claims](#) in April during the [disastrous](#) Shanghai lockdown that Xi Jinping’s stringent zero-COVID strategy was necessary to prevent an “enormous loss of life,” to, after restrictions were abruptly dropped following mass protests, minimizing the true death [toll](#) and lack of preparations as hospitals and crematoriums were overrun. Also in 2022, propaganda organs worked to [boost](#) Xi ahead of the 20th Party Congress in October, during which he was [anointed](#) to a historic third term. The People’s Daily also [called](#) former CCP general secretary Jiang Zemin an “outstanding leader” after he passed away in November, ignoring his [own track record](#) of expanding restrictions on internet freedom and overseeing human rights abuses.
- Expanded CCP overseas activities:** The CCP’s coercive and covert overseas tactics intensified throughout the year. There were [instances](#) of transnational repression from [new actors like](#) the Hong Kong authorities; the United States responded with several Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) [indictments](#) against perpetrators. Early in the year, a [cyberattack](#) by state-linked hackers was uncovered in the networks of News Corporation newspapers in the United States and United Kingdom. Other coercive tactics in the year [included](#) disinformation targeting the US midterm

elections, and misogynistic online attacks on female journalists. Freedom House released a comprehensive study of the CCP's overseas media influence, [Beijing's Global Media Influence: Authoritarian Expansion and the Power of Democratic Resilience](#), in September 2022. The study mapped out CCP influence efforts in 30 countries around the world and the resilience and response from democracies. Researchers found that the CCP's global influence efforts have expanded, with the intensity of such efforts designated as High or Very High in 16 of the 30 countries under review.

- **More political prisoners and censorship in Hong Kong:** In January 2022, a Hong Kong court [sentenced](#) a resident to a prison for “sedition” after he put up posters criticizing local authorities. It was the first sedition conviction in the territory since 1967. The year saw several more convictions for sedition, including a [radio DJ](#) for chanting “Liberate Hong Kong, Revolution of Our Times;” an [elderly resident](#) who tried to protest during the Beijing Olympics; a [journalist](#) who talked about politics on his online radio show; and a [two spectators](#) who clapped at prodemocracy protesters’ trial. Online speech was increasingly criminalized; convictions were issued in cases involving Facebook posts [calling](#) to commemorate the Tiananmen Massacre, and [calls for people](#) to cast a blank ballot during the December 2021 Legislative Council elections. Hong Kong’s independent media continued to suffer, with the trial of [Stand News](#) opening and the guilty pleas of several [Apple Daily](#) execs. Beijing’s intent to continue with repressive tactics in Hong Kong was made clear with the [selection](#) in May of hardliner John Lee as the territory’s new chief executive.

Censorship updates: Deadly COVID-19 wave, new social media regulations

- **Censors’ disjointed response to the end of “zero COVID”:** In early December, the Chinese government abruptly [ended](#) major elements of its zero-COVID policy after a historic wave of national protests and a surge in reported cases. Days after the policy shift, as cases were rising in Beijing, Weibo [censored](#) search results for the topic “pandemic in Beijing,” hindering real-time discussions about the virus’s severe impact on the city. The National Health Commission, meanwhile, changed its criteria for reporting COVID-19 deaths, leading to undercounting that has [concerned](#) international health experts. It also [stopped](#) publishing daily case figures on December 24. Unverified internal reports [leaked](#) to foreign journalists contained estimates that almost 250 million people in China contracted COVID-19 in the first 20 days of December. Censors meanwhile [struggled](#) to control messaging on the pandemic. A propaganda directive [ordered](#) state media to portray the policy shift as a well-organized decision backed by science, while deprioritizing negative news. On January 5, China’s foreign ministry [claimed](#) that “China’s COVID situation is under control.” Articles and commentaries on Sina News, WeChat, and the Netease news platforms discussing case numbers and deaths were quickly [deleted](#) after being published. A party-run news outlet in Qingdao [censored](#) an interview with a senior

health official who said the city was seeing half a million new cases of COVID-19 per day. While an English-language feature [article](#) by the investigative outlet Caixin discussing “COVID chaos” at hospitals remained available as of the time of writing, another article about the public’s [questioning](#) of virus casualty numbers published by the state-backed, English-language news site Sixth Tone was taken down. Netizens criticized a [disconnect](#) between some media outlets’ year-end retrospectives featuring positive or feel-good stories, and reality; many pointed out Weibo’s [removal](#) of a viral [video](#) produced by Netease that highlighted the difficulties ordinary people had faced during 2022 lockdowns and under zero-COVID policies.

- **Censorship regulations for emerging technologies:** On December 15, an [updated version](#) of the 2017 regulations on internet comments went into effect. The update clarifies the responsibilities of internet service providers (ISPs) and operators, mandating that platform operators set up dedicated content moderation teams. (Many have already done so.) It also stipulates specific punishments for violations for platforms, such as warnings, fines, or suspension of commenting service or the entire platform. The regulations are part of an ongoing effort by the government to control emerging online spaces for public engagement, such as [live streams](#), while increasingly [conflating](#) “negative” content—which is not against the law—with illegal content. In related news, Chinese internet regulators released [new rules](#) on November 25 targeting deep-synthesis (or, “deepfake”) technology that went into effect on January 10. Among other requirements, they order deep-synthesis technology providers and users to explicitly label and make traceable any doctored content. While primarily aimed at addressing fake news and possible criminal abuses of the technology, the rules also require that deep-synthesis technology providers abide by local laws, including national security requirements, and maintain the “correct political direction and correct public opinion orientation.” Analysts [say](#) that even as the new laws represent leading-edge efforts to address content moderation issues arising from new technologies, they also tighten online censorship.

Arrests and sentencing: Prison for Uyghur singer, poet and wife sentenced, zero-COVID protesters detained

- **11-year sentence for Uyghur singer:** On December 2, Rights Defense Network (RDN) [reported](#) that singer Ablajan Ayup had been sentenced to 11-years in prison on an unknown charge; analysts suspect his imprisonment came in retaliation for a 2017 [interview](#) he gave to the British Broadcasting Corp. (BBC) in which the popular singer, who also goes by “AJ,” expressed hope that his music could build a bridge between Han Chinese and Uyghur people. Hotan Prefecture authorities initially detained him in 2018 and held him in a reeducation camp. Uyghur human rights advocates abroad [denounced](#) the sentence as an attempt to “destroy Uyghur cultural expression.”
- **Poet Wang Zang and wife Wang Liqin sentenced:** In December, information [emerged](#)

that poet Wang Zang and his wife Wang Liqin had been sentenced on November 11 to four years and two-and-a-half years in prison, respectively. They both vowed to appeal their conviction of “inciting subversion of state power,” which came in retaliation for Wang Zang’s public comments, media interviews, poetry, and performance art. Wang Liqin appears to have been convicted solely for being married to her husband and supporting his free expression. They had been initially detained in May and June 2020, and the trial only started in December 2021; one of their lawyers was disbarred during the trial process.

- **Activist imprisoned over press pieces:** On December 30, a Hunan court [sentenced](#) activist Ou Biaofeng to three-and-a-half years in prison for “inciting subversion of state power.” Ou, who was detained in December 2020, was also [fined](#) 70,000 renminbi (\$10,300) for writing pieces that appeared in *Apple Daily*, *Ming Pao*, and editing articles by the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Human Rights Campaign in China; authorities said the pay he earned from the articles was “illegal income.” Ou had also [publicly supported](#) other persecuted human rights defenders, including on his Twitter account, which led to police scrutiny.
- **Detention, disappearances of zero-COVID protesters:** Police have detained or disappeared several participants in mass protests against the government’s zero-COVID policy that took place across China beginning on November 24. According to one [NGO](#), at least 17 protesters disappeared after being detained by police at protest sites or their homes— predominately in Shanghai but also in Shenzhen, Chengdu, and other cities. In Guangzhou, police [detained](#) a 25-year-old protester for at least nine days and cited the pandemic as justification for not moving her to a detention center, with the result that she was unable to meet with a lawyer and her family was unable to contact her. Reportedly, most protesters were held for 24 hours or less, but some faced several days’ detention. At least two activists were [held on](#) suspicion of “picking quarrels and provoking trouble,” a charge commonly used in free expression cases. Protesters included Han Chinese students, [Tibetans](#), Uyghurs, and other members of minority groups, demonstrating the depth of anger towards the government. Police deployed China’s extensive surveillance apparatus against protesters, including by [using](#) cell phone data to track protesters and monitoring social media chats and then contacting individuals who were in the vicinity of protests or had posted messages in support of the protests in order to threaten them.

HONG KONG

Beijing overrules HK court, tighter crowdfunding controls, censorship dilemma for US tech

- Beijing overrules Hong Kong court on overseas lawyer:** On December 30, China’s National People’s Congress (NPC) [issued](#) an interpretation of Hong Kong’s National Security Law (NSL) that said courts must get approval from the chief executive or an oversight committee before an overseas lawyer may work on a case involving national security. The territory’s leader, John Lee, had requested the interpretation after the government lost a case at the Court of Final Appeal, which [ruled](#) that *Apple Daily* founder and government critic Jimmy Lai could be represented by a British lawyer in his NSL case. The NPC’s decision allowing Beijing to overrule local courts significantly erodes rule of law in Hong Kong. Previous such interventions were limited, with only five decisions between 1997 and 2016 before the imposition of the NSL in 2020.
- Crowdfunding regulations:** Hong Kong’s Financial Services and the Treasury Bureau [announced](#) plans to create a Crowdfunding Affairs Office to regulate the practice. During the 2019–20 protest movement, residents launched crowdfunding efforts in support of arrested protesters, themselves, or [humanitarian](#) efforts; authorities later [arrested activists](#) on money laundering charges for such activities. Individuals or entities will have to apply to the office to crowdfund, with applications vetted on a range of criteria including potential harm to “national security.”
- Heavy app censorship, VPN bans:** A December [report](#) found that Apple’s app store in Hong Kong had the third-highest rate of unavailable apps in the world, after only Russia and China, which may be due to direct censorship or self-censorship. According to an [investigation](#) by the group AppleCensorship, 53 virtual private network (VPNs) have been made unavailable in Hong Kong since the imposition of the NSL.
- Google refuses protest anthem censorship request:** The tech company [said](#) on December 15 that it does not manipulate its algorithm to rank pages in response to the government’s efforts to censor the protest anthem “Glory to Hong Kong.” Hong Kong officials, backed by the Chinese Foreign Ministry, denounced Google’s stance. Google’s refusal to stand down comes as the government [deliberates](#) on a potential Cybersecurity Law that may mean tighter controls on foreign companies in the future. The song has been [accidentally](#) played at several international sporting events recently.
- Guidelines for teachers on NSL:** The Education Bureau in December [released](#) “Guidelines on Teachers’ Professional Conduct,” which will require teachers to have a “correct” understanding of national security. Teachers have been a target of government control since numerous students took part in prodemocracy protests in 2019, some with sympathetic support from their instructors. Educators are banned from teaching “biased” material, encouraging speech that “violates social order,” and are required to report to school administrators possible illegal activities.

BEYOND CHINA

TikTok spying, YouTube influencers' CCP links, China-Russia propaganda cooperation

- Growing international responses to Tik Tok, amid spying revelations:** In late December, ByteDance [confirmed](#) that it had monitored several then-Buzzfeed journalists' locations through TikTok, after earlier denials. The journalists targeted had published a [series of allegations](#) regarding user privacy and content moderation [concerns](#) on TikTok. The company's response to these and other controversies [failed](#) to convince US policymakers of its independence from Beijing. As three-year negotiations between TikTok and the US Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (CFIUS) continue, Congress [banned](#) the app on federal devices in late December. By January 10, [more than 20](#) US states had announced their own such bans. Legislators around the world have stepped up efforts to address TikTok's apparent national security risks. The Australian Senate [relaunched](#) a Select Committee on Foreign Interference through Social Media on November 24, [stating](#) that it would focus on applications based in authoritarian countries, including TikTok and WeChat. In mid-December, Taiwan's Mainland Affairs Council called for a [probe](#) of ByteDance Taiwan. The island's National Security Bureau earlier alleged that Beijing uses TikTok for "[cognitive warfare](#)."
- Amnesty International Canada hacked:** On December 5, the Canadian branch of Amnesty International [announced](#) that it had been the target of a cyberattack it believed was sponsored by the Chinese state. The attack [reportedly](#) attempted to obtain information on the organization's work related to China and Hong Kong, including on several prominent Chinese activists. It was the [latest](#) in a series of apparently state-linked cyberattack on organizations working on human rights abuses in China.
- Transnational repression case updates:** On December 14, police [arrested](#) a Chinese national and charged him with stalking. The student, enrolled at the Berklee College of Music in Boston, allegedly threatened and harassed an individual who had posted a flyer in support of democracy in China in late October. A former Florida corrections officer arrested last year over his role in an alleged stalking and intimidation campaign targeting Chinese dissidents across the US [pleaded guilty](#) to two charges. Governments around the world have become increasingly concerned with authoritarian regimes' extraterritorial targeting of dissidents and critics. On December 7, the US House of Representatives [introduced](#) the Stop Transnational Repression Act. Policymakers and researchers in the United Kingdom have also suggested [measures](#) to bolster democratic resilience.
- New research on influencers' role in CCP propaganda:** An analysis by Nikkei Asia shows that [nationalist netizens](#) have gained traction on Chinese social media over the last decade, bolstered by state support and censorship of more moderate voices. As ultrapatriots' messaging grows more dominant and more extreme, it could

even influence government policies. The Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) [uncovered that](#) a number of influencers on YouTube—which is blocked in China—with popular channels on topics like Uyghur culture are closely aligned with the CCP’s propaganda apparatus. They work with international influencer-management agencies to circumvent domestic internet blocks and monetize content abroad. As a result of this [ecosystem](#), party-friendly vloggers can push positive content that can drown out criticisms of CCP rights abuses while benefiting from loopholes in US social media platforms’ revenue models.

- **Leaked China-Russia propaganda cooperation details:** A December [leak](#) of a July 2021 bilateral propaganda cooperation agreement provides rare evidence of expanding media cooperation between Chinese and Russian propagandists. The document includes an agreement for Russian media to run interviews with Chinese leaders. Chinese state media [echoed](#) Russian disinformation after the Ukraine invasion in early 2022, as the two countries increasingly share a common cause in “ideological pushback” against the United States and its allies in Ukraine and Europe.

FEATURED PUSHBACK

China's youth stand up to the Party

Discontent with the CCP's zero-COVID policies simmered for months in 2022. Chinese people faced deeply invasive authoritarian control over their everyday lives for the past three years, which also [wrecked](#) the economy and [crushed](#) the futures of many young people. Lockdowns guided by rigid zero-COVID policies led to people starving in a wealthy metropolis like [Shanghai](#), or dying from medical [complications](#), [incompetence](#), or [depression](#). The appointment of the Shanghai party chief [Li Qiang](#), who oversaw the city's strict and prolonged lockdown, to the second-highest position of power in the country in October further fueled a deep undercurrent of anger.



Two Fudan University professors stand between students and a row of police on Urumqi Road in Shanghai on November 26.

Credit: [@RealBeiMing](#)

The lone Bridge Man protester in Beijing gave [words](#) to people's frustration: "We need food, not COVID tests. We want freedom, not lockdowns. We want dignity, not lies... Don't be slaves, be citizens." These words have since been found around the world, [scrawled](#) on bathroom stalls in China, [posted](#) on university notice boards across multiple continents, and even [pinned](#) to the Legislative Council (LegCo) in Hong Kong.

Protests within China grew following the Urumqi [fire](#) on November 24, which killed 10 Uyghurs whose deaths were perceived as the result of disproportionate lockdown measures. Chinese students and young people have been at the forefront of these protests; Initium Media [tracked](#) 106 protests at Chinese universities from November 24–27. In Nanjing Communications University, one of the first college campuses to protest, students spontaneously [held up](#) blank pieces of paper, a gesture that spread and came to define the protest movement. Students sang the Chinese national anthem, in a show of patriotism for the country, not the Party, that declares "Arise! Ye who refuse to be slaves!"

The youth-dominated movement also saw greater [awareness](#) from previously apolitical people of the truth of the CCP's persecution of Uyghurs and Hong Kongers, and growing realization that those mechanisms of control can be also used against middle-class Han Chinese. Many [experts](#) and [protesters](#) compared this movement and generation to the student-led protests in 1989.

WHAT TO WATCH FOR

- **Changes at China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs:** On December 30, Qin Gang was [appointed](#) foreign minister—a state position—after a stint as China's ambassador to the United States. His predecessor, Wang Yi, [remains](#) the country's top diplomat after he was appointed to the CCP's Politburo to lead foreign policy. Meanwhile, foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian, known for his combative “wolf warrior” approach to diplomacy, was [demoted](#) from spokesperson to a low-profile department. Watch for how Qin approaches diplomatic relations, though it is unlikely for the Chinese government to drop its assertive diplomatic style, as the “wolf warrior” policy is closely associated with Xi Jinping and practiced by Qin Gang.
- **Foreign businesses' accounts subject to nationalistic scrutiny:** Weibo's CEO [announced](#) on January 4 that the official Weibo account of Sony China had been banned from posting new content, reportedly in delayed punishment for an October post that nationalistic netizens interpreted as an obscure reference to a Chinese soldier who died in the Korean War. (The post depicted a dog in a pile of leaves, accompanied by a Mao Zedong quote which nationalists claimed was an insult to Qiu Shaoyun, a Chinese soldier who burned to death in the war.) Watch for further restrictions on foreign companies preventing them from engaging online with Chinese people, as ultranationalist netizens put pressure on companies and government bodies.
- **Erasure of past Hong Kong media reports:** On January 4, independent Chinese-language digital outlet Citizen News [deleted](#) its online content, including its website, Twitter posts, and Facebook and Instagram accounts, exactly a year after it announced it was shutting down. Watch for the continued erasure of Hong Kong outlets' old news content, as press groups and individuals continue to respond to the threat of sedition and NSL prosecutions in light of the cases against Stand News and *Apple Daily*.

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 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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