

# CHINA MEDIA BULLETIN

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### IMAGE OF THE MONTH

## Canceled Tea Party

Chinese artist Badiuca, now living in Australia, published this cartoon on [February 11](#) after the [Guardian](#) reported that the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office was intending to meet with Erkin Tuniyaz, chairman of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, in mid-February. Tuniyaz has been [sanctioned](#) by the US government for his involvement in rights violations against Uyghurs and other ethnic minority groups in Xinjiang. Badiuca's cartoon, which circulated widely on Twitter, symbolizes the downplaying of the Uyghur rights crisis as a British official has tea with Tuniyaz.

Following the outcry over the [visit from British MPs](#) and [rights groups](#), Tuniyaz [canceled](#) the planned visit.

Image: [Badiuca, Twitter](#)



## ANALYSIS

# Beijing's Censors Could Shape the Future of AI-Generated Content

By Sarah Cook

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## ***When the Chinese regime's information controls intersect with artificial intelligence, they can distort the global information landscape***

Within months of being launched, ChatGPT—an artificial intelligence (AI) powered chatbot created by US company OpenAI—attracted [tens of millions of users](#). A version of the technology has since been integrated into a [limited preview](#) version of Microsoft Bing. Technology writers are now speculating about the impact that AI-assisted search engines will have on [competition](#) between the US tech giants Google and Microsoft. The rapid speed with which ChatGPT has been adopted represents a broader trend: while AI tools have grown in popularity in recent years, 2023 has been [declared](#) the year in which AI becomes a more visible part of daily life.

Any examination of the design, use, and effects of artificial intelligence must give ample consideration to trends in China. AI-driven tools are used widely inside the country for [politicized content](#) monitoring, [censorship](#), and public [surveillance](#). And as the world moves into a new phase of AI integration, the practices pioneered by technology firms at the behest of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) could have ramifications for internet users, policymakers, and companies well beyond China's borders.

The following dynamics related to AI and China deserve special attention in the year to come:

### **1. Censorship within AI-generated content in China**

Algorithmic tools reflect the data they are trained on. Thus, censorship on political, social, and religious topics is almost certain to affect AI-generated content in China, and there is evidence that it already has.

If a machine-learning tool is mostly drawing information from within China's so-called Great Firewall, then its outputs will reflect the omissions and biases of the country's heavily censored and propaganda-infused information landscape. One 2021 [study](#) by researchers Margaret Roberts and Eddie Yang, for example, found differences in perspective between a natural-language-processing algorithm based on the global, uncensored Chinese-language Wikipedia and an alternative that was trained on entries from Baidu's Baiku online encyclopedia. The globally trained algorithm analyzed terms like "election" and "democracy" positively, or associated them with nouns like "stability." By contrast, those trained on Baidu Baiku evaluated "surveillance" and "CCP" positively and associated terms like "democracy" with negative words like "chaos."

Other AI systems may incorporate censorship due to human intervention imposed on top of machine-generated content. When Chinese tech giant Baidu launched its [ER-NIE-ViLG](#) text-to-image generator in 2022, users like dissident artist [Badiuca](#) quickly

noticed gaps and manipulation. A [study](#) published in September by the *MIT Technology Review* explained the contours of some of this censorship: no images of Tiananmen Square, no Chinese leaders, and no terms like “revolution” or “climb walls”—a metaphor for using anticensorship tools to access blocked websites.

Baidu reports that ERNIE-ViLG was [trained](#) on a global set of content, not just China-based information. This means that the censorship and omissions observed in the text-to-image generator must have been actively induced by the program’s developers as they tried to comply with government regulations and company policies. Indeed, while the government and CCP provide extensive rules and guidelines on censorship, Chinese tech and social media companies each have their own [proprietary blacklists and approaches](#) to censorship in practice. Variation among these companies’ AI tools may become more apparent over time.

## 2. Management of chatbots in China

As users around the world experiment with ChatGPT, users in China have had only limited access to the tool. It is not yet blocked by the Great Firewall, but signing in requires a phone number from a [subset of countries](#) that does not include China. A variety of [workarounds](#) and copycats—some legitimate, others more dubious—have emerged on the Chinese internet, and many require a fee. Around February 10, however, links to these workarounds reportedly [stopped appearing](#) in search results on Tencent’s WeChat platform and Alibaba’s Taobao marketplace.

Meanwhile, several local AI-based chatbot projects are underway and expected to be unveiled for public use this year. Baidu’s ERNIE-Bot, for instance, is reportedly due to [launch](#) next month. Given the company’s heavily censored search engine and the findings regarding its AI text-to-image generator, censorship and other manipulation is likely to be evident in the chatbot’s output as well. Another AI chatbot, ChatYuan, has been running as a mini-program within Tencent’s WeChat ecosystem, and its founder [acknowledged](#) to reporters that it would “filter certain keywords” with more layers of review than might be expected overseas. Some of the [ChatGPT knockoffs](#) noted above were also found to avoid topics that are considered politically sensitive in China.

Nevertheless, even a nominally censored chatbot could produce unpredictable results. Given that ERNIE-Bot is reportedly trained on global data, users should watch for any inadvertent slip-ups that run counter to the CCP’s preferences. Just as [disinformation researchers](#) have generated troubling results by asking ChatGPT for essays from the perspective of the CCP or well-known conspiracy theorists, users could attempt to turn the tables on Chinese chatbots. What responses might ERNIE-Bot offer if prompted to discuss democracy, China’s constitution, or Xi Jinping from the perspective of dissidents and rights lawyers like Liu Xiaobo or Gao Zhisheng, or Xi’s intra-CCP rivals like Bo Xilai? And if the response violates Chinese government censorship directives, what penalties might await the company and its users, who are required to [register with their real name](#)?

## 3. Influence of Chinese censorship on global AI-generated content

China is the country with the world’s largest contingent of internet users and its larg-

est population of Chinese speakers, raising important questions about how its massive and heavily censored output might influence AI-generated content on a global level, particularly in the Chinese language. Will AI tools trained on the full constellation of available Chinese-language content implicitly display a bias that favors the CCP?

Microsoft's Bing has emerged as the [first global search engine](#) to incorporate ChatGPT and conversational AI into its service. It also has some prior history of censorship from its China-based version creeping into global search functions. In December 2021, the Canadian research group [Citizen Lab](#) conducted tests on autosuggestions in Bing and found statistically significant censorship in Chinese-language searches for North American users, and even in some English results in the United States. The precise factors contributing to this phenomenon were not entirely clear, and Microsoft claimed to have addressed a misconfiguration, but Citizen Lab reported that as of May 2022, some anomalies persisted. The [researchers](#) concluded their report by warning that “the idea that Microsoft or any other company can operate an Internet platform which facilitates free speech for one demographic of users while intrusively applying political censorship to another demographic of its users may be fundamentally untenable.”

Although Microsoft's situation is unique given that it continues to operate a censored version of Bing within China, Google and other global search engines may encounter different forms of spillover from Beijing's censorship or deliberate manipulation by pro-CCP actors. Researchers last year raised concerns over Beijing's ability to amplify Chinese state-produced content in [Google News and YouTube search results](#) for terms like “Xinjiang” or conspiracy theories related to the origins of COVID-19. It remains unclear whether the added complexity of an AI chatbot will make search functionality more or less vulnerable to manipulation.

#### **4. Beijing's use of AI to produce global disinformation**

The CCP and its agents are relative [newcomers](#) in the disinformation space compared with their Russian counterparts, but since 2018, [multiple campaigns](#) involving networks of fake accounts that spread falsehoods or artificially amplify Chinese state content have been documented. Although the impact of these efforts has been rather limited to date, researchers have found [consistent evidence](#) of experimentation, adaptation, and growing sophistication. Pro-Beijing actors can be expected to actively incorporate AI technology into their global disinformation operations in the future.

Disinformation researchers at the company [NewsGuard](#) recently explored what this might look like. They asked ChatGPT to generate responses from the perspective of the Chinese government or a CCP official on topics like mass detention of Uyghurs in Xinjiang or conspiracy theories that COVID-19 originated in the United States. The results closely mimicked CCP propaganda while using an authoritative tone, but cited no sources. The researchers noted that an ordinary user asking for information on these topics would likely get a more balanced response, but the [experiment](#) demonstrated the ability of bad actors to use the technology as a “force multiplier to promote harmful false narratives around the world.”

The threat is not just hypothetical. A report published this month by the cybersecurity firm [Graphika](#) uncovered actual employment of AI-generated avatars in a disinformation campaign linked to the Chinese regime. The firm stated that this was the first known instance of such use of the technology by a state actor. The campaign featured video clips from the fictitious outlet Wolf News, with male and female anchors presenting reports in line with CCP propaganda narratives on gun violence in the United States and US-China relations. The videos were circulated by a network of fake accounts tied to China, known as Spamouflage, which Graphika has tracked for years and exposed as a persistent source of pro-CCP disinformation. The firm said its researchers initially thought the anchors were paid actors, but then traced them to a British website offering commercial AI-generated avatars, typically for use in advertisements.

The videos did not receive many views and included significant English-language errors. But as Graphika notes, combining the use of video avatars with a better script generated by natural-language systems like ChatGPT could yield more convincing and effective content.

### **A critical need for transparency**

A defining feature of China's censorship system is its opacity. Much of what is known about the day-to-day functioning of the apparatus has come from leaks of censorship directives, testimony from former employees, anonymous comments to the media from current staff, and the sorts of outside research and investigations referenced above. Particularly, while many international tech firms are deficient on transparency, their Chinese counterparts are generally even less open regarding the functionality and content-moderation systems of their products and services, including their AI-generative applications. For example, Baidu's ERNIE-ViLG text-to-image generator [does not publish](#) an explanation of its moderation policies, unlike the international alternatives DALL-E and Stable Diffusion.

Given the clear potential for abuse, any pressure applied to Chinese technology firms for greater transparency would benefit users. International competitors should integrate strong human rights principles into developing and implementing new AI-generated tools and set a high global standard for transparency and public accountability. Meanwhile, independent investigations and rigorous testing to detect and understand pro-CCP content manipulation will remain critical to informing users and creating better safeguards for free expression and access to diverse information.

It is perhaps a sign of the times that these constructive endeavors will also likely be assisted by AI technology.

## IN THE NEWS

### Censorship updates: COVID-19 deaths, Alibaba “golden shares,” Apple pulls social media app

- Undercounting COVID-19 deaths:** COVID-19 spread rapidly across China after Chinese Communist Party (CCP) authorities abandoned “zero-COVID” restrictions in December, with some experts and local officials estimating that [65 to 90 percent of the population](#) had been infected by early February. Reports of large-scale deaths, especially among the elderly, and overwhelmed crematoriums quickly began spreading in international news reports, on social media, and in Chinese residents’ conversations with overseas relatives. Yet the officially declared death toll remained [unconvincingly low](#), at just [83,150](#) as of February 9. Medical experts and epidemiologists say this is a vast underestimation, and the World Health Organization (WHO) has expressed similar concerns about undercounting. Academic studies using four different methods that were cited by the [New York Times](#) all reached estimates of between 1 million and 1.5 million deaths. While a narrow official definition of what counts as a COVID-19 death contributes to the undercount, active censorship and obfuscation has also played a role. At least [nine cities](#) reportedly stopped publishing quarterly crematorium data. On January 17, [Reuters](#) reported that doctors at multiple hospitals had been told to avoid listing COVID-19 on death certificates. Online, the [Cyberspace Administration of China](#) (CAC) announced a month-long “2023 Spring Festival Online Clean-up” beginning January 17. A provision of the notice called for a crackdown on online “rumors” related to the pandemic, including “personal experiences with the virus during the Spring Festival period.” The US-based [China Digital Times](#) reported that a WeChat essay about paper horses used for mourning rituals in rural Shandong Province being in short supply was deleted. Discovering the true number of COVID-19 deaths in China may be impossible in light of censorship efforts. Such uncertainty works to the CCP leadership’s advantage, given the extent to which state media dwelled on COVID-19 mortality in the United States and other democracies as a sign of poor governance and decline.
- Chinese government buys “golden shares” in Alibaba, other tech firms:** In early January, a Chinese government entity purchased stakes in two subsidiaries of [Alibaba](#), the Chinese e-commerce giant. One of the subsidiaries oversees its streaming video unit, Youku, and web browser, UCWeb. As part of the deal, a new board member, Zhou Mo, whose name matches that of an official at the CAC, was appointed. The purchase is part of a [larger trend](#) since 2015 of Chinese party-state entities acquiring “golden shares” in major tech firms, especially those with social media platforms like microblogging site [Sina Weibo](#) or short-video sharing app [Kuaishou](#). Although typically amounting to only a 1 percent stake, the shares come with disproportionate influence, usually appointment of a board member and veto power over key decisions, such as who oversees censorship and content moderation. This has been the case at a ByteDance subsidiary in Beijing, per company documents and bylaws obtained by the [Financial Times](#). The government is also reportedly

in discussions for a similar purchase from Tencent, which runs the ubiquitous WeChat app and popular QQ email service. Some [experts](#) note that the push to expand golden shares may be an attempt to increase control and enforcement, especially over content, while avoiding the heavy-handed fines and regulatory decisions that have rocked the industry in recent years.

- **Apple removes Damus social media app:** Two days after becoming available to users in China and globally, [Apple removed](#) the new Damus social media application from its app store in China at the demand of the CAC government regulator. Damus [tweeted](#) a copy of the notice on February 2 with the comment “That was fast.” The new app is a decentralized platform that allows users to create accounts without entering a name, phone number, or other form of identity—a rare degree of anonymity in China, where real-name registration is required for most online activities. Users communicate with each other via a network of encrypted “relays” rather than a centralized server, rendering wholesale blocking of the platform difficult. The app quickly drew Chinese users seeking an uncensored platform, [jumping](#) from 54th in downloads to 21st within a day before being removed. Despite the removal from the App store, users in China who had previously downloaded the app report that it [continues to function](#).

## State media vs. netizen narratives: Spy balloon, Li Wenliang memorials, student’s death

- **Censors, propagandists guide commentary on alleged spy balloon:** On February 4, the United States [shot down](#) an alleged Chinese spy balloon after tracking its progress over the North American continent for several days. In response to the balloon’s presence, the US government canceled a high-level diplomatic trip to Beijing, passed a unanimous resolution condemning China’s surveillance of the United States, and quickly sanctioned several Chinese aerospace companies. While the incident—and follow-on coverage of other unidentified aircraft—caused widespread discussion globally, online [discussion](#) of the incident in China was both light-hearted and relatively minimal. Humorous hashtags and social media posts comparing the issue to a recent box office hit or Lunar New Year celebrations quickly went [viral](#) on the Chinese internet. More [somber discussions](#) of the incident’s implications for already-tense bilateral relations between China and the United States also appeared, some of which were censored. Netizens observed that “spy balloon” search results were quickly [restricted](#) to allow only government-approved results. The Chinese foreign ministry first expressed rare “regret” for the incident, but then [criticized](#) US overreaction to what Beijing has insisted was a “civilian unmanned airship.” Following the foreign ministry’s lead, state media have sought to [highlight](#) the “hysterical” response in the United States as [evidence](#) that it cannot be a responsible global actor. Curiously, official spokespersons and state media have also [accused](#) the United States of conducting surveillance over Chinese territory, in an apparent effort to [justify](#) and counter accusations that they continue to deny.

- **Netizens maintain Li Wenliang online memorial:** Amid an uncertain public health situation after the Chinese state’s abrupt lifting of zero-COVID restrictions late last year, netizens have maintained a digital “wailing wall” under the final Weibo post of Dr. Li Wenliang. Dr. Li was silenced by authorities after warning his colleagues about the emergence of the novel coronavirus in late December 2019. After his death from COVID-19 on February 6, 2020, the post became a virtual memorial for critics of the government’s pandemic policies and for free speech advocates. Commenters visiting the post this year on the anniversary of his death [discussed](#) the recent wave of infections and deaths in China and their hopes for the end of pandemic restrictions. They assured Dr. Li that he would not be forgotten. In cities around the world, including Boston, Sydney, Berlin, Tokyo, Stuttgart, and Washington DC, groups gathered to commemorate Dr. Li and show their support for freedom of expression in China. In New York City, a [plaque](#) on a bench in Central Park became a gathering place for those wishing to remember Dr. Li.
- **Student’s death sparks public discussion of youth mental health crisis, skepticism of state narratives:** The body of 15-year-old Hu Xinyu, a boarding school student in Jiangxi Province, was [discovered](#) on January 28, in the vicinity of his school more than 100 days after he was reported missing. Police ruled his death a suicide, but details released by officials have not stemmed speculation about the case, with inconsistencies fueling concerns Hu had been murdered. Hashtags related to the story have received billions of views. The incident highlights growing concern about China’s youth mental health crisis, as well as widespread mistrust of authorities. Netizens [panned](#) a stiffly choreographed press conference on the investigation into Hu’s death in which officials only called on journalists from state-controlled media outlets. Hu’s story also [sparked](#) online discussion about an apparent spike in missing-persons cases. The CCP mouthpiece *People’s Daily* called for an end to public speculation about Hu’s death and Weibo announced that it had “cleaned up more than 3,500 pieces of illegal content” relating to the case, including bans or deletions for dozens of accounts.

## **Detentions: Chinese police target pandemic protesters, Xinjiang detainee database published, bookseller’s wife barred from traveling abroad**

- **Dozens detained in aftermath of anti “zero-COVID” protests:** In late [November](#), vigils and protests occurred in cities across China as residents memorialized people in Urumqi, Xinjiang, whose deaths in an apartment fire were due in large part to draconian COVID-19 restrictions on movement. The demonstrators demanded an end to the zero-COVID policies, and some called for greater freedom of speech and even political change. In the weeks and months since, dozens of people—especially those in their 20s—have been detained. One compilation published by [Chinese Human Rights Defenders](#) and updated on February 2 listed nearly 50 people who had been detained from Beijing, Shanghai, Nanjing, Sichuan, Wuhan, Guangzhou,

and elsewhere. The actual number of those detained is likely higher. A number of the protesters face charges of “[picking quarrels and provoking trouble](#),” often used in China to punish peaceful expression and which can carry a sentence of up to 10 years in prison. Many of the protesters were inexperienced and apparently believed their participation was relatively innocent, and as a result many of those detained had [not taken precautions](#) to hide their identity or presence. For instance, they carried cell phones and shared photos on heavily monitored apps like WeChat, rendering it easier for Chinese security forces to trace them.

- **Database of Xinjiang detainees published:** On February 9, a team of [scholars](#) and rights advocates launched a new search tool of people detained in Xinjiang. The [Xinjiang Police Files](#) is based on a [trove](#) of leaked government documents that included the names and often photos of over 700,000 people in Xinjiang, many in some form of detention. The site aims to enable members of the Uyghur diaspora and others to search for loved ones by Chinese name or national ID. Alongside the launch of the database, CNN published a [feature](#) highlighting the stories of Uyghurs in exile who had discovered the fate of siblings, parents, nieces, and nephews via the database. Many described feeling heartbroken when it became clear that their relatives had been punished because of their own writing or activism abroad, or merely for communicating or sending money to them.
- **Former bookseller’s wife barred from leaving China:** On January 31, the [Associated Press](#) reported on the case of Xie Fang, the wife of former bookstore manager Yu Miao, who has been barred from leaving China since August 2022. Her husband, who lives in Florida with the couple’s three children, decided to go public about the case in mid-January, posting on social media a [letter](#) the wife had written to authorities. Xie, who was prevented at the airport from leaving the country, said that police admitted that she was “innocent” but refused to allow her to leave unless her husband returned to China. Yu had worked at the [iconic Jifeng Bookstore](#) in Shanghai until 2018, when it had been forced to close after authorities said it sold work by too many “sensitive scholars,” and hosted too many “sensitive talks.”
- **Rights lawyer released from custody:** In a [message](#) dated January 14, contacts of prominent lawyer Tang Jitian posted a notice that he had been released after 398 days of incommunicado detention, relaying a message from Tang that he was in his hometown of Dunhua, in Jilin Province. Tang had worked as a [rights lawyer](#) since 2007, taking on cases involving HIV/AIDS patients, peasants’ property rights, and Falun Gong practitioners. Tang was detained in December 2021 en route to a scheduled meeting with European diplomats.

## HONG KONG

# Trial of democracy activists, sedition updates, broadcasters to promote security law, foreign tech censorship

- Democracy advocates tried in Hong Kong's largest national security case:** On February 6, the [trial](#) began of 47 prodemocracy lawmakers, activists, and academics arrested in January 2021. The “Hong Kong 47” face subversion charges for organizing or participating in unofficial primary elections held in July 2020. Only 16 defendants are contesting the charges. Most of the defendants have been denied bail and remain in jail, including prominent student activist Joshua Wong and veteran journalist [Claudia Mo](#). Such lengthy pretrial detentions were previously unusual for Hong Kong, but a higher threshold for bail and reduced transparency for national security cases are some of the developments that have raised [warnings](#) from international legal experts. Court watchers expressed [suspicions](#) that [paid queuers linked](#) to progovernment groups are lining up at the courthouse beginning the night before proceedings, in order to prevent the general public from observing the case.
- Sedition charges and case updates:** Hong Kongers continue to face prosecution under a colonial-era sedition law that has seen [expanded](#) use since 2020. Police [arrested](#) six people at a Lunar New Year shopping fair organized by two prodemocracy groups and accused them of producing and publishing a “seditious” book about the 2019 protests. Sedition charges have been applied in at least 63 cases as of December 2022, according to [data](#) from ChinaFile. Prosecutors have [questioned](#) Chung Pui-kuen, the former editor of the now-shuttered *Stand News*, for more than 30 days in an ongoing sedition trial that began in October 2022. The defense has [called](#) the prosecution’s questioning “endless” and criticized other elements of the trial as violating due process, including the prosecution’s last-minute submission of four boxes of new evidence in early February.
- Increased obstacles for foreign journalists:** Immigration authorities questioned the Japanese photographer Michiko Kiseki about a past photo exhibit covering the 2019 prodemocracy protest movement, and ultimately [denied](#) her entry to Hong Kong on December 30. The Hong Kong Journalist’s Association (HKJA) [described](#) Kiseki’s case as “alarming,” and noted that she is the fourth foreign journalist to have been denied entry into the city since 2018.
- New media regulations promote National Security Law, delist Next Digital:** New [licensing](#) requirements announced by the government on February 14 [mandate](#) that Hong Kong’s three public television stations and two radio broadcasters air at least 30 minutes of weekly programming to promote the 2020 National Security Law and “national education.” The rules represent ongoing efforts to indoctrinate citizens—especially younger generations—through [patriotic education](#) campaigns and follow a rapid [dismantling](#) of Hong Kong’s independent public media in early 2021. Sepa-

rately, on January 12, authorities [delisted](#) the media company Next Digital, ostensibly [due](#) to its failure to follow guidance set by the Hong Kong Stock Exchange. Next Digital's shares were [suspended](#) after police raided the company's headquarters in June 2021. Financial experts have argued that the move was politically motivated; international lawyers for the company's former owner, [Jimmy Lai](#), who is a British citizen, had [met](#) with the UK foreign ministry just days before to discuss ongoing legal cases. Lai is awaiting trial for alleged violations of the National Security Law while simultaneously serving sentences for fraud and protest-related convictions.

- **Foreign firms proactively increase self-censorship:** On December 30, Hong Kong-based users noticed that the “safe browsing” feature on the Apple-owned web browser Safari had temporarily [blocked](#) the website GitLab, which has been [censored](#) in China. This was evidently the result of Apple's quiet expansion to Hong Kong Safari users of a website blacklist operated by the Chinese company Tencent. The “safe browsing” feature, meant to protect users from sites that could be engaged in malicious behavior like phishing could also flag websites that the Chinese government disapproves of, sparked [privacy concerns](#) when it was implemented in China in 2019; analysts said the feature could transmit user data to Tencent, which is governed by Chinese data security laws. The incident was the latest example of foreign companies applying compliance with Beijing's censorship regime to Hong Kong. In early February, Disney [removed](#) an episode of the Simpsons that referenced “forced labor camps” in China from its Hong Kong streaming services. The company had previously removed another Simpsons episode referencing the Tiananmen Massacre from Disney+ Hong Kong in [November 2021](#).

## BEYOND CHINA

# Ethiopian Twitter campaign, Taiwanese data leaks, global spread of China-based apps, surveillance-export concerns

- Pro-CCP Twitter campaign accompanies diplomatic trip across Africa:** In a move that appeared meant to highlight the importance the CCP places on Sino-African relations, new Chinese foreign minister Qin Gang visited Ethiopia, Gabon, Angola, Benin, and Egypt in his first [overseas trip](#). Media watchers observed an unusual [Twitter campaign](#) apparently orchestrated by the website Ethiopian Truth Media that began soon after Qin landed in the country on January 10. The website had previously organized Ethiopian progovernment social media campaigns, but the January campaign was the first time it [focused](#) on relations with China. Tweets linked to the campaign used distinctive hashtags and tagged official Chinese government accounts as well as media outlets and other entities often critical of the Chinese government like China Digital Times, China Media Project, the *Financial Times*, and the US Congressional-Executive Commission on China. The Chinese embassy amplified positive local coverage of Qin’s visit, but did not appear to play a role in the highly scripted Twitter campaign, although [Ethiopia’s ambassador to Sudan](#) did appear to.
- China-based apps Bondee and Kwai spark concerns overseas:** While TikTok’s rapid capture of international audiences has been widely covered, less attention has been paid to other China-based social media apps that are also expanding abroad. A metaverse app called Bondee was the top-downloaded app in the Philippines, Thailand, Malaysia, and Taiwan after its launch on January 17. It has been accused of [mishandling](#) payment data and [linked](#) to a domestic Chinese app that was accused of violating users’ privacy rights. Short-video app Kuaishou and its international version Kwai have targeted markets in Latin America and Southeast Asia for growth, with its users in Brazil alone reaching 45 million in 2021. Researchers have raised concerns that the app has [privileged](#) violent and extremist content in Brazil. Journalists flagged Kwai as a source of [misinformation](#) in the lead-up to Brazilian presidential elections last September, and the platform [spread](#) conspiracy theories and violent content that may have contributed to postelection riots in Brasilia. In 2022, the state-owned Beijing Radio and Television Station took a 1 percent “golden shares” [stake](#) in Kuaishou.
- Taiwanese health-data scandal exposes security risks:** Recent mass data [leaks](#) have exposed Taiwanese citizens’ data, raising the risk that potentially sensitive information could end up in the hands of the Chinese government. In January, prosecutors launched a probe into the National Health Insurance Administration (NHIA) after two employees and a retired chief secretary were accused of collecting and leaking the personal data of officials at 11 national security and military agencies, with the data potentially spanning 13 years. [Media reports](#) and [lawmakers](#) alleged

that the NHIA workers sold the data to Chinese authorities, who have long sought to obtain sensitive information on Taiwanese citizens and leaders. Other public and private data leaks have spurred [calls](#) from legislators for the government to implement better oversight mechanisms for data protection.

- **Chinese disinformation campaign targeting Australian politics:** Researchers at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) have identified a [coordinated social media campaign](#) spreading disinformation about Australian politics or amplifying sexual assault and misconduct allegations in Australia's Parliament House in an apparent attempt to sow distrust in the political system. The network, which is believed to have about 30 active accounts, has been associated with the persistent China-based disinformation actor [Spamouflage](#) that has been active since 2019 and previously spread disinformation on the [Hong Kong protests](#), the [coronavirus pandemic](#), and began posting English-language content targeting the [United States](#) in the spring of 2020. The ASPI researchers believe Spamouflage began targeting the Australia political system in late 2022.
- **New research on surveillance exports:** New research shows that Chinese firms have been integral to the proliferation of surveillance technologies—especially those using artificial intelligence (AI) enabled facial recognition—abroad, from [Zimbabwe](#) to [Suriname](#). In Africa, the researcher Bulelani Jili published a study in January finding that Chinese-made [public security platforms](#)—along with training and law enforcement cooperation programs designed to enable their use—have been implemented absent sufficient legal safeguards or oversight, often benefiting authoritarian actors and rendering citizens vulnerable to the misuse of these technologies. Some governments including the [United States](#) and [Australia](#), have begun investigating the national security risks associated with Chinese-made surveillance technologies. A January working paper by scholars from [the Brookings Institute](#) finds that China is more likely than other countries to export facial-recognition AI and that autocracies and weak democracies are more likely to import them. They argue that international regulations for [AI development and trade](#) need to take this reality into account.

## FEATURED PUSHBACK

### Viral tweets shed light on plight of political prisoners

China is home to arguably the largest population of political and religious prisoners in the world. Amid its heavily censored information landscape, keeping track of their conditions remains a challenge for family, friends, and rights groups. Although blocked in China, Twitter remains a vital avenue enabling information about these prisoners to reach international and domestic audiences. Over the past month, this dynamic was on display in several cases where posts on Twitter in Chinese or English about prisoners in China went viral, garnering hundreds of thousands of views and in some cases, global media coverage.



Pang Xun (L) died in a Chinese prison in December after being jailed for practicing Falun Gong. Kewser Wayit pictured with his sister Kamile (R), who was detained in Xinjiang in December.

Credit: [@dbezuqun](#), [@kewserwayit](#), Twitter

Perhaps the most prominent example was the case of [Cao Zhixin](#), a young woman in Beijing detained for participating in an anti-zero COVID vigil and protest in late November. Cao recorded a poignant video prior to her arrest, in which she explained that young Chinese people “pay attention to the society we live in” and that when fellow citizens are killed, as in the Urumqi fire, “we have the right to express our legitimate emotions.” A contact published the video on [YouTube](#) and [Twitter](#) after it had been censored on WeChat. At the time of writing, one tweet of the video had garnered 312,000 views, while clips were aired on [CNN](#), and coverage of her case appeared in outlets like [NPR](#), the [Telegraph](#), and the [Wall Street Journal](#).

A lesser-known example was that of [Pang Xun](#), a 30-year-old former host at Sichuan’s provincial radio station. Pang was reportedly jailed in 2020 for five years for practicing the [Falun Gong](#) spiritual discipline, which is heavily persecuted in China. On February 11, a friend outside China posted to [Twitter](#) a heartbreaking update that Pang had been killed in custody in December 2022, which included a graphic video of his bruised corpse presumably obtained from his family. [@dbezuqun](#) stated, “[Pang Xun] was a very sunny and handsome young man. He was the purest and kindest person I knew. Although I don’t practice Falun Gong, this is by no means a reason for the CCP to kill him!” The tweet has since received over 500,000 views, sympathetic replies, and coverage by [Chinese diaspora](#) media and the US-funded [Radio Free Asia](#).

Another example is that of [Kewser Wayit](#), an ethnic Uyghur whose 19-year-old sister Kamile—a university student from Hebei—was detained while visiting family in Xinjiang over winter break. She was arrested apparently due to a [WeChat post](#) supporting the “White Paper” anti-zero COVID protests. Her brother, who lives outside China, has tweeted about her case, garnering [178,000 views](#) in just one tweet about her. She also appeared in a [thread](#) by a Chinese journalist which itself accumulated 120,000 views.

Twitter has recently come under scrutiny, especially since its purchase by billionaire Elon Musk, for [accidentally muzzling Chinese activists](#). The above examples point to the urgent need to resolve these problems and their real-world implications for innocent people languishing in China’s prisons.

## WHAT TO WATCH FOR

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- **“Two Sessions” legislative meetings opening March 5:** The annual “[two sessions](#)” of China’s National People’s Congress and the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference will open on March 5, where Xi Jinping will formally be appointed to state president for a third term after assuming his leadership of the CCP in October. Watch for [tightened security](#) in Beijing, heightened internet controls, and any legislative proposals or personnel appointments that might impact free expression.
- **Outcome of “Hong Kong 47” trial:** The trial of the 16 defendants among the “Hong Kong 47” who have plead not guilty is expected [to last 90 days](#), with at least four codefendants testifying against their colleagues and verdicts expected for those who pled guilty, including prominent activists like academic Benny Tai and Joshua Wong. Besides the final punishments meted out, watch for any due process violations during the trial, and the broader impact on the remaining prodemocracy community in Hong Kong.
- **Increased “China model” narratives in foreign propaganda:** In a speech to top CCP cadres at a [study session](#) February 7, [Xi Jinping hailed](#) China’s “modernization model” as a new paradigm for “a better social system” for developing countries and as “different from the West.” Watch in the coming months for whether this narrative becomes more prominent in the regime’s foreign-facing propaganda efforts.

# TAKE ACTION

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## For more information

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- For archives, go to: [www.freedomhouse.org/China-media](http://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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