

# CHINA MEDIA BULLETIN

## Headlines

**ANALYSIS** In Beijing's Crackdown on Foreign Firms, Signs of a Much Deeper Problem **P2**

### IN THE NEWS

- Censorship and surveillance updates: Cyberspace crackdowns, *People's Daily* recall, Uyghur phone monitoring **P5**
- Netizen outcries: Beijing fire, "chained woman" verdict, youth unemployment **P6**
- Regulatory changes: Academic database restrictions, new AI rules, counterespionage law amendment **P7**
- Hong Kong: Artistic and literary censorship, legal changes for NSL cases, "CCP speak" **P9**
- Beyond China: Pinduoduo suspended, Meta removes disinformation networks, new indictments for transnational repression, propaganda in Russia and Honduras **P10**

**FEATURED PUSHBACK** Artists and filmmakers tackle surveillance, journalism, memories of past protests **P13**

**WHAT TO WATCH FOR** **P14**

**TAKE ACTION** **P15**

## IMAGE OF THE MONTH

### Sacrosanct Teacup

In early May, this photo circulated on social media, garnering over 130,000 views on Twitter after being shared by a writer and former Chinese diplomat now living in [Australia](#). It depicts a museum display in Shanghai that includes various items used or viewed by Chinese Communist Party (CCP) head Xi Jinping. In addition to this teacup, which according to the display was "inspected" by Xi during his visit to the site of the first CCP congress, the images include a set of headphones used by Xi's guide during a museum visit and a set of utensils used by Xi when presiding over a People's Liberation Army (PLA) meeting. The displays reflect the personality cult and obsequious catering to Xi often evident in Chinese state media.

Image: [@poljunkie\\_au](#) [@dikaioslin](#), Twitter



## ANALYSIS

# In Beijing's Crackdown on Foreign Firms, Signs of a Much Deeper Problem

By Sarah Cook

Sarah Cook is a senior advisor for China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan at Freedom House.

## ***Politicized prosecutions are a growing blight on Chinese society***

In recent weeks, China's security and propaganda apparatus has turned its sights on foreign consulting and auditing companies, conducting [coordinated raids](#), [detaining employees](#), broadening an espionage law, and airing slickly produced "[special reports](#)" about its crackdown on state television.

The campaign has sent waves of alarm across the international business community, but recent prison sentences against high- and low-profile civic activists serve as a reminder that the private-sector cases are just one piece of a much larger pattern of politicized prosecutions in China.

China is home to arguably the [largest population](#) of political and religious prisoners in the world. Following substantial increases since the regime launched a campaign of mass detentions in Xinjiang in 2017, the total appears to have risen more recently since March, with courts handing down sentences in long-awaited trials and perhaps playing catch-up in the wake of restrictions associated with COVID-19.

A review of over two dozen cases that have gained public visibility in the past three months provides some sense of the scale of the problem, the sorts of behavior that are being punished, and the profound flaws in the legal system that enable such prosecutions.

## **A nationwide hunt for offenses small and large**

It is clear from the latest batch of cases that political and religious imprisonment in China is a nationwide phenomenon. The people detained or prosecuted since March for peacefully exercising their right to free expression do not come just from major cities like Beijing or Shanghai, or regions with large ethnic minority populations like Xinjiang or [Sichuan](#). Recent cases have included individuals in [Shandong](#) in the north-east, [Guangdong](#) in the south, and [Hunan](#) or [Hebei](#) in between, as well as in Hong Kong—a territory that may now hold more than [1,400 political prisoners](#), according to some sources.

Those arrested or sentenced include Han Chinese, Tibetans, Uyghurs, and an [Inner Mongolian writer](#) and historian who was taken from neighboring Mongolia within months of fleeing China. Human rights activist [Yu Wensheng](#) and his wife Xu Yan were also detained while traveling to meet with European Union diplomats.

Harsh punishments and deprivations of freedom are being meted out even for seemingly minor infractions or activities that would be not just tolerated but commended

in more democratic countries. The [sentencing](#) last month of Xu Zhiyong and Ding Jiayi, two legal and democracy activists, to 14 and 12 years in prison, respectively, was especially severe. Their crimes appear to have been meeting with fellow activists to discuss citizen rights and democratic reform, and in Xu's case, an open letter criticizing President Xi Jinping's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. Such long sentences are not necessarily an anomaly. Other recent cases include those of [Guo Feixiong](#), a free expression advocate who received an eight-year prison term in early May; a [Falun Gong practitioner](#) and citizen journalist who was also imprisoned for eight years; and a [Uyghur singer](#) who was sentenced to 11 years in prison.

Many others have received shorter sentences, but they are still harsh given the actions being punished. A [Tibetan writer](#) was sentenced to four years in prison for arguing that it was important for young people to learn the Tibetan language. A [petitioner](#) from Henan appealed to higher officials over village corruption and was held for 10 days of administrative detention. A man in [Shanxi](#) was jailed for a year and a half for accessing banned global social media platforms and posting messages and videos that were reportedly shared or liked about 7,000 times but deemed harmful to the reputation of China and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). A [housewife in Hong Kong](#) is facing "sedition" charges for Twitter posts in which she criticized police and expressed support for Hong Kong independence.

### **Growing surveillance and shifting redlines**

The regime's expansive surveillance capacity, as well as the massive resources it can devote to individual cases, is evident from some of the recent verdicts. One prosecution centered on [Ruan Xiahuan](#), a technologist who had blogged anonymously for over a decade, offering instructions on how to circumvent website blocks and sharing translations of articles about the censorship apparatus. Upon learning that he had been captured and sentenced to seven years in prison, some [netizens reacted](#) with shock and dismay, noting that if someone as technically sophisticated as Ruan could be identified, then ordinary internet users are even more vulnerable.

In the case of [Xu Zhiyong](#), security agencies conducted a weeks-long manhunt across China, finally catching him after nearly two months. But the authorities do not always rely on high-tech surveillance to zero in on dissidents. [Aihua Liu](#), the mother of two US citizens and a Falun Gong practitioner, was sentenced to four years in prison in late March for possessing books and printed materials related to the banned spiritual practice and the persecution of its adherents, after a neighbor reported to police that she had been distributing leaflets.

While some dissidents are fully aware that their behavior could be punished, others may be surprised to learn that they have done something illegal. The CCP's redlines are constantly shifting, and actions that were permissible or tolerated in the past can suddenly be deemed "sensitive" and penalized, even retroactively. Similarly, activity outside of mainland China or Hong Kong can be subject to prosecution if or when the individual returns to Chinese territory, regardless of whether years have passed or previous visits have proceeded without incident.

Three recent cases illustrated these dangers: On April 21, news emerged that a [student](#) who returned home to Hong Kong from her studies in Japan to renew her identification documents was arrested and charged under the National Security Law for comments made on Facebook from Japan—two years earlier—in which she expressed support for Hong Kong independence. She was released on bail, but her passport has been confiscated, and she is unable to return to Japan to complete her studies. On April 23, [Li Yanhe](#), a Taiwan-based publisher of nonfiction books, including some that are critical of the CCP, was detained in Shanghai while visiting his ill mother.

At around the same time, it was belatedly reported that [Dong Yuyu](#), a journalist for the Chinese state-owned newspaper Guangming Daily, had been detained since February 2022 on espionage charges after meeting with a Japanese envoy. Dong, a savvy observer of China's international relations, was widely known and respected among foreign journalists and diplomats. Sensing the regime's growing sensitivity to such interactions, he had become more circumspect in his writings and careful in his meetings with foreigners, but his precautions were apparently insufficient. He was detained three months before retiring, and his family did not initially publicize his arrest, hoping the charges would be dismissed because his contacts with foreign representatives were a routine part of his job. Dong's case is now moving to trial and is perhaps the most chilling for the business community, given that the raids on consulting and auditing firms are also linked to the enhanced espionage law.

### **Societal costs**

Political prosecutions in China have long-term repercussions for those targeted and for society at large. Conditions in detention are poor; malnourishment, torture, and denial of medical treatment are widespread, and deaths in custody are documented every year. Families are separated, careers are derailed, and livelihoods are ruined. Even after release, former detainees continue to be monitored and harassed, especially around politically sensitive dates. This past month, the families of two human rights lawyers who had been jailed for their work—[Li Heping](#) and [Wang Quanzhang](#)—were evicted by landlords who had come under pressure from authorities. This was Li's seventh eviction since 2015. [Fang Bin](#), whose videos of hospitals in Wuhan in the early days of the pandemic gained global attention, was released from a three-year prison sentence, but relatives were afraid to take him in for fear of police harassment, leaving him effectively homeless.

The examples outlined above are only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to political and [religious imprisonment](#) under CCP rule. The total number of such detainees is estimated to be in the millions. Companies like those targeted in recent raids have often been perceived as separate and more protected from abuse than such victims. But the underlying problem the business community now faces is comparable: a system in which the law is arbitrary, redlines shift without warning, and there is no recourse from judges beholden to the CCP. Foreign executives, investors, and indeed anyone with exposure to China's legal regime would do well to learn from the cases of targeted activists and religious believers because even if their activities are different, the regime increasingly sees the potential threat that they pose to its interests as the same.

## IN THE NEWS

# Censorship and surveillance updates: Cyberspace crackdowns, People's Daily recall, Uyghur phone monitoring

- CAC crackdowns:** China's internet watchdog, the [Cyberspace Administration of China](#) (CAC), announced the beginning of a two-month nationwide "clean-up" campaign on [March 28](#) to tighten content controls and crack down on "serious online chaos," "fake news," and rumors. The campaign particularly focuses on "self-media," a category that includes independent writers, bloggers, and social media celebrities. The new campaign followed a spate of removals, fines, and other actions already undertaken in the first quarter of 2023. Over 4,200 sites and 55 apps were reportedly [shut down](#), and the regulator summoned the people in charge of over 2,200 websites to bring their content in line with government content standards. Among the platforms fined or which had management summoned were Microsoft's Bing, Baidu, Sina Weibo, DouYu, and Douban. Since March, the CAC has [banned](#) videos and posts that portray the challenges faced by poor, elderly, or disabled people, as part of an effort to control material deemed to damage the image of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) or to disrupt economic and social development. One piece of content that was [removed](#) from the Chinese internet is a [video](#) made by Hu Chenfeng, titled "Randomly Finding an Elderly Person Shopping, I Will Pay for It." In the video, Hu interviews an elderly woman living on a meager monthly income of \$15 then goes grocery shopping with her and insists on paying for the total amount of goods, \$18. The clip was removed from two China-based video platforms but survives on YouTube; Hu's online accounts were reportedly [suspended](#).
- People's Daily recall:** On March 30, millions of copies of the *People's Daily*, the CCP's mouthpiece, were [recalled](#) due to an omission of Xi Jinping's name in one sentence. The full sentence should have read, "The central government with comrade Xi Jinping at the core assesses the situation," but instead read "with comrade at the core" in the middle. Such [errors](#) in reporting on state officials' names or positions are regarded as serious political incidents and may result in punishment. The latest case has reportedly [provoked](#) fear among media workers and officials at People's Daily, and speculation as to whether Tuo Zhen, the paper's president and a veteran of the party's propaganda apparatus, might be removed. Netizen [mocked](#) the incident, joking that "Xi Jinping is gone" or that the paper "killed" Xi. Others reported that the edition with the error was being sold for hundreds of yuan per copy.
- Integrated Shanghai surveillance system:** On May 2, the surveillance-focused outlet [IPVM](#) reported that the Chinese authorities have intensified their campaign to monitor foreign journalists and Uyghurs through a specialized big-data alert system, according to documents they had discovered. The system is part of the Shanghai police's digital transformation, and uses 26 modules to sift through police data and send notifications for various incidents. These include [detecting](#) foreign journalists booking travel to Xinjiang and identifying Uyghurs arriving in Shanghai,



in addition to those aimed at tracking sex workers, illegal immigrants, and drug traffickers. The system connects to the police's cloud platform, which is run on a customized Alibaba cloud, enabling access to 34 categories of information including biographic information on foreigners, visa details, customs, hotel check-ins, civil aviation, and railway booking data.

- **Interrogation of Uyghurs over religious content on mobile phones:** On May 4, [Human Rights Watch](#) (HRW) reported that police in Xinjiang had used automated mass-surveillance systems to search 1.2 million phones nearly 11 million times in Urumqi from 2017 to 2018. The searches [flagged](#) Uyghur and other Turkic Muslim residents for interrogation based on a master list of 50,000 multimedia files labeled as “violent and terrorist.” However, a sample of 1,000 files examined by HRW found that 57 percent included materials with no apparent connection to violence compared to only 13 percent that did (28 percent could not be identified). Among the nonviolent content potentially triggering interrogation was a well-known documentary about the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests and crackdown, as well as Islamic religious content, such as Quranic verses and wedding songs.

## Netizen outcries: Beijing fire, “chained woman” verdict, youth unemployment

- **Anger over Beijing hospital fire media blackout, censorship:** On April 15, a devastating [fire](#) broke out at Changfeng Hospital in Beijing, resulting in the tragic loss of 29 lives. The official cause was a spark from hospital renovation that ignited flammable paint, but details were not released until eight hours later, leading to public outrage and criticism of the government and state media for their silence. Videos of the fire were posted on social media but quickly deleted. A Weibo hashtag, #BeijingHospitalFire (#Beijingyiyuanhuozai), was also [censored](#). Chinese netizens expressed [anger](#) over the intentional manipulation and censorship of trending topics concerning the fire, with one netizen [summarizing](#) the situation: “First they block information, second they delete all traces, third they extinguish the fire and rescue people, fourth they remove hot topics.” In another example, a [Beijing editor](#) commented on WeChat, “The most terrifying thing is not the death of 29 people, but eight hours of silence.”
- **“Chained woman” verdict:** The case of a woman who had been found [enslaved in Xuzhou](#) in January 2022 continues to draw public attention in China. On April 7, the Xuzhou Intermediate People’s Court in Jiangsu Province [sentenced](#) six people to imprisonment for trafficking and abuse. Many netizens criticized the verdict as overly lenient, especially the punishment handed down to Dong Zhimin, the man who purchased the woman from a trafficker and fathered eight children with her; he was sentenced to nine years, despite additional details emerging during the court proceedings about the torture and sexual abuse he inflicted on her. A comment on Weibo that read “Only nine years?” gained over 10,000 likes before being

[removed](#) within an hour. Following the verdict, a video by feminist activists [called for](#) the release of netizen Wuyi, who was detained while traveling to try to support the woman, as well as for a retrial of the case. The original video, in which the woman was seen chained in a freezing hut, was circulated on Weibo before being censored. Others who have tried to speak out about the case or obtain information have also faced [reprisals](#), including prominent director Wang Shengqiang, whose Weibo account was shuttered, and human rights lawyer Lu Tingge, who was pressured by Jiangsu authorities to withdraw a request-for-information application related to the case.

- **Backlash against CCP Youth League post regarding graduate unemployment:** A recent trend on the Chinese internet is being referred to as “Kong Yiji literature,” with the phrase going viral across multiple platforms. This online writing genre compares jobless graduates to the poor intellectual “[Kong Yiji](#)” in a classical 1918 short story by famous author Lu Xun, reflecting widespread discontent among Chinese youth with the current state of high unemployment rates. In mid-March, a post on social media by the CCP’s Youth League and state broadcaster China Central Television (CCTV) tried to respond to the phenomenon, stating that young, educated people could not find work because they were not trying hard enough. This triggered a strong [backlash](#), with 280 million reads on Weibo. In response, the authorities quickly censored any criticism, including a popular satirical [song](#) titled “Sunny Side Kong Yiji” which garnered over 3 million views on Bilibili. The song’s lyrics included lines like “I wash my face every day, but my pocket is cleaner than my face,” and “I went to college to help rejuvenate China, not to deliver meals.” In April, censors [removed](#) an essay suggesting that “Instead of Making Kong Yiji Take Off His Scholar’s Gown, How About Stripping the Emperor of His New Clothes?”, pointing the blame for the unemployment crisis at Xi Jinping.

## Regulatory changes: Academic database restrictions, new AI rules, counterespionage law amendment

- **Academic database restricted for foreigners:** On April 1, China’s largest online academic database, China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), [restricted](#) access to some databases for foreign subscribers. The suspension was made in accordance with new measures on transfer of data to those outside China that went into effect on September 1, 2022. The organization operating CNKI [notified](#) affected institutions on March 17. Access to databases with statistical yearbooks, dissertations, and census data are among those being restricted, though a key database of Chinese academic journals will remain accessible. The suspension is the most recent action in a trend of [growing restrictions](#) for foreign researchers wishing to access information on the Chinese internet, thereby [hindering](#) foreign scholars’ ability to research Chinese topics and document rights abuses and surveillance. Separately, a WeChat blog run by a practicing lawyer in Heilongjiang Province reported on March 19 that the Supreme People’s Court (SPC) has [reduced](#) the number of cases available

on its China Judgments Online (CJO) web portal, which is a leading database for judicial decisions from courts across the country. The blog revealed that only 31 new judgments were published online in 2023, compared to 554,534 in 2019. Since 2021, observers have noted a drop in publicly released verdicts on the database and the [disappearance of previously available judgments](#).

- **Chatbot, artificial intelligence rules:** On April 11, the [Cyberspace Administration of China \(CAC\)](#), unveiled draft measures to govern generative artificial intelligence (AI) service provision in China. The draft, which was open for public comment until May 10, would require providers like Alibaba (which [announced](#) its launch of a new large language model, Tongyi Qianwen, on the same day as the CAC draft announcement) and Baidu (which launched its Ernie bot, a Chinese language alternative to ChatGPT, on March 16) to be responsible for ensuring that their training datasets are “truthful, accurate, and objective” per Chinese government standards. Providers must undergo a “security assessment,” impose real-name registration on users, and update their technology within three months to prevent inappropriate content from being generated again. Any content created by generative AI must be in line with “China’s core socialist values” and must not “incite subversion of state power” or include other content deemed undesirable to the CCP. On May 5, a man surnamed Hong from Gansu province was [arrested](#) for using ChatGPT to generate and spread a fake news story about a fatal train crash. Police arrested Hong under a [new law](#) regulating deepfake technology, which came into effect on January 10, 2023. This is the first known criminal case in China related to the use of chatbots.
- **Counterespionage law amended:** On April 26, the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress (NPCSC) passed a revision to its [Counter-Espionage Law](#)—which will take effect on July 1, 2023—broadening the already wide-reaching provisions and updating it for the first time since 2014. The revised law [expands](#) the definition of spying to include cyberattacks against state organs or critical information infrastructure, but also more vaguely defined contact, assistance, or information transfer to individuals or entities deemed to harm China’s national security, which can include rights groups, international media, or foreign governments. The revision [increases](#) security risks for foreign firms operating in China. Since March 2023, [crackdowns](#) on foreign companies like Bain & Company and Mintz Group have increased.



## HONG KONG

### Artistic and literary censorship, legal changes for NSL cases, “CCP speak”

- Cartoonist dismissed, library censorship exposed:** On May 11, the Hong Kong newspaper *Ming Pao* announced that it would be [ending a 40-year partnership](#) with prominent satirical cartoonist Wong Kai-Kwan, better known by the pen name Zunzi, effective May 14. The newspaper did not offer an explanation, but several of Wong’s cartoons have been [criticized by government officials](#) in recent months. The day after the announcement, local media found that books and illustrations by Wong had [disappeared from Hong Kong public library](#) listings. The revelation prompted Hong Kong journalists to check the database for other politically sensitive topics, such as the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre, and they [discovered dozens of book titles](#) and documentaries missing. *Ming Pao* reported that over 40 percent of video materials and books on “political themes” had been removed from public libraries since 2020. In another example of artistic censorship, in late March, the horror film “Winnie the Pooh: Blood and Honey” had its scheduled [screenings canceled](#) at the last minute, likely because the bear is often used satirically to represent Xi Jinping. According to the US-based [Hong Kong Democracy Council](#), this was the 20th case of film censorship in Hong Kong since November 2020. Also removed last month was a [digital art installation](#) by US-based artist [Patrick Amadon](#), which included a hidden reference to 47 Hong Kong democracy advocates facing prosecution, and had been on display at a department store.
- Legal changes for National Security Law cases:** In late April, the Hong Kong Department of Justice proposed an amendment to the [Criminal Procedure Ordinance](#) that would allow prosecutors to appeal an acquittal by High Court judges in cases involving the National Security Law (NSL). The proposal is under review, but could affect the trial of media owner Jimmy Lai, whose case is pending at the High Court. In another rule change affecting Lai’s case, the Hong Kong legislature on May 10 [unanimously passed](#) a bill that allows the city’s chief executive to decide whether overseas lawyers can represent clients charged under the NSL. This is the latest phase in an ongoing attempt by Hong Kong government officials to bar Lai from having a foreign lawyer represent him.
- Hong Kong government bars media from event featuring Chinese official:** Officials [barred several government-registered news outlets](#) from covering an April 15 event associated with National Security Education Day, which was officiated by China’s top representative to Hong Kong Xia Baolong. Among the outlets barred were the digital Hong Kong Free Press (HKFP), known for coverage critical of the Hong Kong and Chinese government, and a wire service (which the HKFP report on the incident did not name). Officials then evaded questions when asked to explain the action. On May 2, HKFP reported that a government [ombudsman](#) had replied to its complaint and promised to conduct an inquiry into the incident. The April 15 ban was the second time such an incident occurred at an event involving a top Chinese

official. Last July, at least 10 outlets from Hong Kong, Japan, the United States, Taiwan, and various European countries were excluded from covering the inauguration of chief executive John Lee.

- **Local officials using more “CCP speak”:** An analysis published on April 6 by the [China Media Project](#) documents a spike in the use by Hong Kong officials of buzzwords similar to propagandistic rhetoric Chinese officials typically use. The researchers found that over the past eight months, since John Lee became chief executive, “the political terminologies of the Chinese Communist Party have increasingly penetrated the language spoken by authorities.” Phrases whose usage has risen include “telling Hong Kong’s story well” (a spin-off of Xi Jinping’s instructions to Chinese state media and propaganda officials to “tell China’s story well”), “profound changes unseen in a century” (which could also be used ironically by critics given the declining freedom in Hong Kong), and, strangely for a financial center like Hong Kong, “targeting poverty alleviation.”
- **New study surveys journalists in exile:** On April 10, the recently founded Association of Overseas Hong Kong Media Professionals, with support from the International Federation of Journalists, published a [report](#) based on over 100 interviews with journalists who had left Hong Kong and are now based in the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, Taiwan, or the United States. The findings reflect the high degree of experience many of the journalists have—over one third had at least 21 years of experience in the industry—as well as the challenges they and the Hong Kong media industry face. While 80 percent said they did not regret the decision to leave Hong Kong, over half reported no longer working in the media industry and many said they did not feel comfortable working in a non-Chinese speaking environment. Nevertheless, the study also identified eight media platforms recently established by Hong Kong journalists in exile and 11 YouTube channels. A recent addition to this list was [Photon Media](#), launched in [Taiwan last month](#).

## BEYOND CHINA

### **Pinduoduo suspended, Meta removes disinformation networks, new indictments for transnational repression, propaganda in Russia and Honduras**

- **Google suspends Pinduoduo app amid malware revelations:** On March 21, Google announced that the Chinese e-commerce app [Pinduoduo](#) was being suspended from its Google Play store due to security concerns, after it was found to contain malware. On April 3, CNN published an [investigation](#) based on conversations with cybersecurity experts and former Pinduoduo employees, which found that the app was able to bypass users’ security settings to monitor activities on other apps, read private message, access photos, and change settings. Experts said such activity was highly unusual and noted that the app could continue to run in the background

after being uninstalled. The findings have implications for the apps many users inside China as well as those internationally.

- **Meta removes China-linked disinformation networks, Twitter removes state-media labels:** In its [“Adversarial Threat Report”](#) for the first quarter of 2023, published on May 3, Meta reported on new China-origin influence operation attempts it had thwarted. According to the company, the recent takedowns bring to six the number of China-linked manipulation campaigns removed since 2017, with three of them reported in the past seven months. The report also identifies a further evolution in tactics, threat actors, and geographic targeting, even as the networks were removed before gaining a wide audience. The report cites experimentation with tactics new to China-based operations but used by other actors in the past, including “creating a front media company in the West, hiring freelance writers around the world, offering to recruit protesters, and co-opting an NGO in Africa.” Content from the posts did not only relate to China but also to stirring up [divisions](#) in Europe and the [United States](#). Separately, Twitter in late April abruptly changed its policy regarding labeling of state-media accounts, removing prior labels attached to [Chinese state outlets](#). This followed revelations in late March that the [platform](#) had already changed its treatment of the accounts, amplifying their content and recommending them to users.
- **New details emerge of Beijing’s transnational repression and suppression of critical speech:** Since March, the CCP’s campaign to monitor and intimidate Chinese nationals abroad and other members of exile or diaspora communities has received renewed international attention and legal action. At the center of the debate have been ongoing revelations related to unregistered [“overseas police stations”](#) in different countries, whose representatives reportedly surveil local communities and work to suppress critical speech. On April 17, authorities in New York arrested two men linked to one such station. The [indictment](#) against them and another charging over 40 people in China outlined the men’s ties to the PRC’s Public Security Bureau (PSB), as well as efforts to monitor dissidents’ activities, organize counterprotests in 2015 against [Falun Gong practitioners](#) demonstrating during a visit by Xi Jinping; the documents also revealed instructions to publish articles in local newspapers smearing CCP-chosen targets. The charges against the [group of agents in China](#) tied them to a censorship incident that occurred on Zoom related to a discussion of the Tiananmen Square massacre, and “troll farms” of fake accounts used to attack dissidents and disseminate disinformation on topics like Xinjiang, Hong Kong, Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and COVID-19. On May 9, authorities in [Boston, Massachusetts](#) arrested another man on charges of working as a PRC foreign agent without registering as such. That indictment listed activities such as relaying names and photos of Chinese and Hong Kong activists, organizing a counterprotest against [Hong Kong democracy advocates](#), and providing the names of potential recruits to PSB officials. Activities like these have been documented by media investigations and rights groups outside the United States, as well. The overseas police station phenomenon was first exposed in a September 2022 report by Europe-based [Safeguard Defenders](#), and on April 11, the [Financial Times](#) published a lengthy re-

port, drawing from a scholarly survey, on the experience of Uyghurs in Turkey and elsewhere who were targeted for monitoring and recruitment attempts, and whose family members in China had faced CCP intimidation.

- **Responses to transnational repression:** Policymakers have begun to take more notice of transnational repression, organizing hearings on the topic and introducing [legislation](#). On May 10, the US Commission on International Religious Freedom hosted one such [hearing](#), which although global in focus, included testimony from Chinese rights lawyer [Teng Biao](#) and [Julie Millsap](#) from the Uyghur Human Rights Project, as well as a written submission from the [Falun Dafa Information Center](#). Their accounts provide further details of the impact of Beijing’s transnational repression on academia and university students in the United States, the Uyghur diaspora, Millsap’s in-laws in China, and physical assaults on Falun Gong practitioners in the United States and Australia.
- **Beijing’s media cooperation and propaganda in Russia, Honduras:** Chinese-state-produced programming airing on mainstream outlets and new cooperation agreements remain a feature of CCP diplomacy. Xi Jinping’s March visit to Russia was accompanied by the [launch](#) on Russia 24, a major state-owned local channel, of the second season of a program titled [Xi Jinping’s Favorite Classical Quotes](#). The program offers an example of relatively dull propaganda that state media disseminate in some countries in collaboration with local outlets. [Analysis](#) by Elena Soboleva published on May 2 of Chinese media engagement with the Russian market found that Chinese state outlets’ outreach on Russian social media platforms was arguably more successful and the content more engaging. For example, Xinhua’s account on Russia’s VK platform had 1.1 million followers, ironically more than Russia’s own state news agency. Meanwhile, in Honduras, two days after the country broke diplomatic relations with Taiwan and switched to China, the state-run China Media Group (CMG) was already celebrating the inauguration of a new national bureau in the country, as outlined in a report by the [China Media Project](#). The head of CMG’s Latin America division told Honduras’ cultural minister that now the new bureau could “collaborate with the country’s leading media organizations.” Already on March 26, within hours of the announced change in diplomatic ties, a two-part program in Spanish on the establishment of relations was shown on Canal 8, a Honduran state-owned channel. Such cooperation with local media has been a central and effective tactic by Chinese state news outlets to reach local audiences in countries around the world, a key finding for Freedom House’s 2022 [Beijing’s Global Media Influence report](#).

## FEATURED PUSHBACK

### Artists and filmmakers tackle surveillance, journalism, memories of past protests

Several artistic exhibits and films opening this spring highlight how artists, filmmakers, and other content creators in mainland China, Hong Kong, and the diaspora continue to explore sensitive topics and social issues, despite heavy censorship and legal reprisals.

Within mainland China, the film [The Best is Yet to Come](#) was released in March and took in 52.3 million yuan (\$7.4 million) during its first week. The film is loosely based on the real-life story of Han Fudong, an investigative journalist with the Guangzhou-based *Southern Metropolis Daily*, which was once known for its hard-hitting reporting. Set in 2003, a period of greater press freedom than today's China, it follows Han's exposure of discrimination faced by carriers of Hepatitis B, who numbered 120 million in China at the time. That the film aired at box offices in China surprised some observers, a reflection of the difficulty of knowing where Beijing's "red lines" lie.

Another film, which premiered March 21 at a Copenhagen film festival, is [Total Trust](#). This documentary shows how the CCP regime's surveillance apparatus affects the daily lives of two families—one of a journalist, and the other of a jailed human rights lawyer. The film's director, [Zhang Jialing](#), has been unable to return to China since the release of a previous film about the one-child policy and directed the new film remotely, working with the families from afar and observing strict security protocols.

Meanwhile, in Hong Kong, an exhibit by [mainland artist Wang Tuo](#) opened in late March, featuring subjects that test the local authorities' red lines. Paintings depict underground poets and writers in China, a reference to the White Paper protest movement, and a video that includes an imagined discussion between an artist and government censor. And as controls in Hong Kong tighten, five Hong Kongers living in [Canada](#) collaborated on an exhibit opening this month that seeks to document and commemorate the mass prodemocracy protests that occurred in 2019.

While these examples highlight artistic expression that has managed to reach audiences, another recent incident highlights the ever-present CCP restrictions. On May 4, [performance artist Li Wei](#) exhibited a work in Shenzhen, Guangdong Province that involved a display in Chinese and English of the famous slogan from Shanghai's COVID-19 lockdown last spring, "We're the last generation, thanks!". Within two days, the exhibition hall was forced to close for "maintenance" and Li's Weibo account appeared to have been shuttered.



A photo of artist Li Wei's work "Manifesto" on display in Guangdong Province, prior to being shut down.

Credit: [China Digital Times](#)



## WHAT TO WATCH FOR

---

- **Tiananmen Massacre anniversary arrests, censorship:** With the approach of June 4, the 34th anniversary of a brutal military crackdown on 1989 prodemocracy protests in China, watch for arrests of activists or internet users who try to commemorate the occasion in mainland China and in Hong Kong. Watch also for censorship of seemingly inadvertent references to the event, as occurred [last year](#) when a prominent social media influencer displayed a cake shaped like a tank in a June 3 broadcast.
- **Hong Kong police technology and surveillance upgrade:** Hong Kong's security minister told legislators on [April 4](#) that as the police seek to upgrade their communications and data-storing systems, they may look to mainland Chinese suppliers out of “national security concerns” and to avoid future disruptions due to foreign sanctions. The planned upgrades are estimated to cost HK\$5.78 billion (US\$738 million). Watch for further details on police surveillance or data-processing technology purchased by Hong Kong authorities from Chinese counterparts, and their [human rights implications](#).
- **TikTok's future:** The popular global app TikTok, owned by China-based company ByteDance, continued to face restrictions due to surveillance and content moderation concerns, while new incidents and research added to worries over its ties to the Chinese party-state. Since late March, at least four countries—[Australia](#), [France](#), the [Netherlands](#), and [Austria](#)—joined other [democracies](#) in banning the app on government devices. A submission to the [Australian parliament](#) in late March reported that content analysis found “higher proportions of pro-CCP content and political misinformation on TikTok than on some other social media platforms,” while the account of a US-based institute that produced a documentary about jailed Hong Kong [media mogul Jimmy Lai](#) was temporarily suspended until journalists inquired with the company about the ban. On May 17, the US state of [Montana](#) adopted legislation that would impose a blanket ban on the app come January 2024, but it was quickly [challenged](#) in court by local content creators. Watch for further investigations regarding TikTok content moderation, prospects of a forced sale, and the outcome of legal challenges to the Montana law.

## TAKE ACTION

---

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

### For more information

---

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



Freedom House is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that supports democratic change, monitors freedom, and advocates for democracy and human rights.

1850 M Street NW, 11th Floor  
Washington, DC 20036

111 John Street, Floor 8  
New York, NY 10005

[www.freedomhouse.org](http://www.freedomhouse.org)  
[facebook.com/FreedomHouseDC](https://facebook.com/FreedomHouseDC)  
[@freedomHouseDC](https://twitter.com/freedomHouseDC)

202.296.5101 | [info@freedomhouse.org](mailto:info@freedomhouse.org)