Imaginary University Disappears

Shortly after China’s hypercompetitive annual university entrance exam was administered nationwide in early June, a new meme emerged online, featuring a make-believe university. The trend began with a joke offering admission to the imaginary Shanhe University to students from four heavily populated provinces, where even high exam scores cannot guarantee placement. It quickly snowballed as netizens created more content, including the fake logo pictured here, as well as websites, admissions brochures, and student identification cards. By July 2, however, the hashtag #ShanheUniversity was being censored on the Sina Weibo platform.

Credit: China Digital Times
When the Chinese economy sputters, the regime’s censors shift into high gear

The Chinese government’s censorship of news and commentary related to the country’s slowing economy has made international headlines in recent weeks. This may be because financial or economic information is typically perceived as being less politically sensitive than discussions about democracy or human rights in China.

But the latest spate of economic censorship is hardly unusual. In fact, over the past decade, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has repeatedly imposed increased restrictions whenever the economy appears to be in trouble.

What stands out about the current crackdown is its focus on content addressing income inequality, youth unemployment, and poverty among the elderly. These deep-rooted problems affect large swaths of the population and could undermine key pillars of the CCP’s political legitimacy. So long as they persist, the associated censorship is likely to remain in place.

Past cycles of economic censorship

Any news that might reflect poorly on the ruling party or its top leadership is consistently at risk of censorship in China. But when the economy is doing well—or at least is on pace with official goals or outperforming other major economies, as occurred during parts of the pandemic—the regime tends to take a lighter hand.

That relative tolerance evaporates as soon as the economy enters rockier territory. For example, China’s stock market plunged multiple times in 2015. A Freedom House analysis of 75 leaked censorship directives from that year, which were published by the US-based China Digital Times, found that news related to the economy, the stock market, and pending legislation on economic policy had become the second most censored breaking-news topic, up from seventh place the year before.

Censorship related to the economy spiked again in 2018 and 2021, due to concerns about the trade war with the United States and the COVID-19 pandemic, respectively. Financial news channels and mobile applications operated by Phoenix News Media and Netease faced suspensions or demands for “rectification” of their content, while government directives reportedly told journalists and websites to closely manage news and commentary on economic matters. In August 2021, the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC), the government’s top internet regulator, launched a two-month campaign to crack down on platforms and accounts that “maliciously”
mischaracterized the economy, including those that republished foreign media reports or commentary.

**Economic woes and growing discontent**

There was a widespread expectation that the Chinese economy would bounce back after mass protests pushed the government to lift its harsh “zero COVID” lockdown policies in late 2022. But heightened international tensions, a politicized crackdown on technology firms, and a lingering real-estate crisis have dampened demand for exports, domestic consumer spending, and other drivers of economic growth. New amendments to the country's espionage law, rising xenophobia within China, and reduced trust abroad in the reliability of Chinese supply chains are also shrinking the appetites of foreign investors. The US Chamber of Commerce's annual survey, published in March, found for the first time that a majority of US businesses did not see China as one of their top three priority markets.

Meanwhile, government officials and businesses across China, especially at the local level, are facing regular protests related to wage arrears, the housing crisis, and other economic grievances. A project launched by Freedom House last summer, the China Dissent Monitor (CDM), has documented a total of 2,230 incidents of dissent between June 2022 and April 2023. Housing protests, including those linked to the collapse of real-estate companies, have been one of the main phenomena captured in the CDM database, constituting about 40 percent of all cases. Moreover, from December to February, the CDM tallied 370 labor protests, more than double the number from the previous three months.

Adding to these pressures is the record-high youth unemployment rate, which hit 20.8 percent in May and is expected to increase further over the summer as more university students graduate. The problem could be stoking official concerns about dissent from this segment of society, especially given that young people made up a high proportion of the participants in November's protests against “zero COVID.”

**Latest measures to control the narrative**

It is in this context that government regulators and social media censors launched the current crackdown, homing in on income inequality, youth unemployment, and poverty among elders as emerging sensitive topics.

One recent case that gained international attention was the announcement by the Sina Weibo social media platform that it had blocked the accounts of Wu Xiaobo—a prominent financial commentator with nearly five million followers—and two other unnamed individuals on June 26. Sina deleted Wu's recent posts and claimed he had "disseminated negative and harmful information" that undermined government policy, citing assertions about the unemployment rate and the securities market, specifically. Wu's accounts on various platforms had been temporarily suspended last year, alongside those of other economic experts, after they criticized “zero COVID” policies.
Less high-profile cases have also emerged, affecting sources of information that would typically have the blessing of the CCP. For example, a series of nine infographics were published by Sohu News on Sina Weibo in early June, highlighting social issues such as poverty, youth unemployment, and disabilities. While they mostly drew on Chinese government statistics, the images were censored, and as of June 15 they had all been replaced with blank gray boxes. Earlier this month, multiple social media platforms—including Zhihu, Weibo, and Yixi—removed references to a video talk and news article about research by Qiu Fengxian, a scholar at Anhui Normal University. Qiu found that 60 percent of the provincial migrant workers she surveyed—many of whom had been working in Chinese cities for over 30 years—had no pension and were unable to retire, lest they be forced to live on just 100 to 200 yuan ($14 to $28) per month. The recent items were censored despite state broadcaster China Central Television (CCTV) covering publication of her book with similar findings as recently as May 25.

Since March, the CAC has banned videos and posts that portray the challenges faced by poor, elderly, or disabled people. One piece of removed content was a video made by journalist Hu Chenfeng, who interviewed an elderly woman living on a meager monthly income of $15, then went grocery shopping with her and insisted on paying for her goods, which totaled $18. The clip was taken down from two China-based video platforms, and Hu's online accounts were reportedly suspended. In March and April, censors removed essays and social media posts that were part of a massive backlash against comments in which the CCP’s Youth League and the state broadcaster China Central Television suggested that young, educated people were simply not trying hard enough to find work.

**A remedy that feeds the disease**

While past spikes in economic censorship have often come in response to temporary setbacks like stock-market plunges, the latest round targets structural weaknesses that policymakers have long struggled to address. Consequently, tighter regime control over discussion of economic data—even when the information comes from government sources—may become the norm rather than the exception in China.

Such restrictions carry their own risks, not only for businesses, investors, journalists, and ordinary news consumers, but also for the CCP and its aims. Tight censorship of economic news breeds distrust, fueling suspicions that the situation is worse than it appears. These in turn can become a self-fulfilling prophecy, as consumers prepare for the worst and wary investors take their business elsewhere. Instead of continuing to insist that all is well, the CCP should allow a full airing of reliable data, however dire. Only then can the private sector and individual citizens make rational, informed decisions about how to improve their and the country's fortunes.
IN THE NEWS
State narratives and propaganda: Blinken in Beijing, Patriotic Education Law, new Marxist journalism app

• **Chinese state, netizen coverage of Blinken visit:** On June 18-19, US secretary of state Antony Blinken visited Beijing and met with President Xi Jinping, Central Foreign Affairs Office director Wang Yi, and Foreign Minister Qin Gang. Chinese state reporting on the exchanges showed a clear division of labor among the Chinese officials. The meeting between Blinken and Qin was described in a business-like tone, while Wang strongly criticized the United States. Xi was depicted as a benevolent statesman leading discussions, with stories accompanied by images of him shaking hands and smiling at Blinken, or sitting at the head of a table with US officials looking toward him as he spoke. A press release by Xinhua News on June 21 quoted a speech by Xi in which he called for a stable bilateral relationship, and stated that “the Chinese seek harmony with all nations” and that “great power competition does not conform to the trend of our times.” Online discussions in China erupted after Blinken’s arrival, with nationalist Chinese netizens and state media accusing some Western media of bias over photos of Blinken’s descent from a jet in which the sky behind him appeared dark—implying air pollution, they said, even though the sky was actually clear. State-run Global Times criticized Western media’s “underworld filter” on China in their coverage of Blinken’s visit, as did the Paper and CGTN.

• **Proposed Patriotic Education Law:** A new Patriotic Education Law was proposed to the National People’s Congress Standing Committee on June 26 and is open to public comment until July 27. The draft law includes provisions calling for adherence to the CCP’s leadership of the country and outlining duties for patriotic education departments at all levels of the state bureaucracy—including in Hong Kong and Macau—and even targeting overseas Chinese. It also codifies ideological controls and curriculum throughout the educational system, and calls on media outlets to “innovate methods for publicity and reporting” on “patriotic” themes, and on internet content providers to “vividly carry out patriotic education activities.” On June 29, the Global Times in English denounced opposition to the new law as “malicious.” Internet users noted that comments on state-media news articles related to the draft legislation have been disabled.

• **New app, annual “social responsibility” reports highlight CCP control over Chinese media, role of Xi:** On June 30, the All-China Journalists Association (ACJA), a CCP-led organization, released a new propaganda app called “Journalist’s Home ‘University Hall.’” The app trains journalists through over 220 courses covering the Marxist view of journalism, party press controls, and Xi Jinping leadership concepts, among others. It tracks progress, assists with reviews and press card renewals, and emphasizes the Communist Party’s control of the media and the
political role of “news workers.” On July 4, China's media social-responsibility reporting system, implemented by the Central Propaganda Department and the ACJA in 2013, marked its 10th anniversary. The system requires media outlets to do self-assessments and submit social responsibility reports. More than 500 media outlets submitted reports in the last cycle. The reports, archived online by the ACJA, the regulatory body for journalists, offer insight into how political priorities are enforced in China’s official media. A June 23 analysis by the China Media Project further illustrated the central focus of CCP-backed media on Xi Jinping. It found that an average of 12 unique books attributed to Xi had been published per year during his first decade in power. All of the titles were given prominent treatment in the CCP mouthpiece People’s Daily, making him the most published Chinese leader in decades. In contrast, Hu Jintao published only 1.5 books per year, and Jiang Zemin only 1.4 titles per year.

Censorship updates: Health news site censored, AI “whitelist” published, Meta’s Threads downloaded despite ban

• Health news outlet censored: On July 3, multiple social media platforms—including WeChat, Weibo, and Zhihu—abruptly suspended the accounts of Health Insight, a digital outlet launched in 2019 focused on health and science, with no explanation given. The suspension came amid efforts to rewrite the history of the government’s strict “zero-COVID-19” policy that was abruptly abandoned in late 2022, and as part of a broader Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) campaign that began in March to “strictly regulate the chaos of self-publishing media.” The news outlet had received national recognition for its coverage of COVID-19, which included reporting on the death of Li Wenliang, a doctor who tried to warn colleagues about the virus in 2019 but was punished and later contracted and died from the disease. The outlet's reports had previously been censored for criticizing the zero-COVID policy and broader health care system. Other science-focused outlets have faced censorship in China, including Paper-Clip, a popular explainer video platform shut down in 2021; and DXY, whose Weibo and WeChat accounts were blocked in 2022. Unrelated to health reporting, Media Camp, a WeChat public account founded by investigative journalists, also had its accounts suspended on July 3. Media Camp had published articles on the challenges faced by Chinese journalists, including recent coverage of a journalist who was attacked by police while investigating a fatal accident in Guizhou Province—an incident that sparked rare public debate about hostility toward journalists in China.

• CAC publishes approved AI deepfake “whitelist”: On June 20, the CAC released an initial “whitelist” of 41 authorized deep-synthesis (or, “deepfake”) technology suppliers. The list includes company algorithms, names, products, and filing numbers, and applications like Baidu’s Ernie AI (artificial intelligence) chatbot
and Alibaba’s Tongyi Qianwen AI chatbot, among others. The announcement follows the release of draft regulations for generative-AI services by the CAC in April, and will come into effect on August 15, 2023. These regulations require generative-AI content to align with “China’s core socialist values” and not include content deemed undesirable by the CCP.

- **Meta’s Threads gaining downloads despite block:** On July 5, Meta debuted its Twitter-like messaging app Threads, a new platform that allows users to post and engage with text-based content. As of July 6, the app ranked fifth among free social media apps in China’s Apple store, behind Chinese social media giants Xiaohongshu, WeChat, QQ, and Weibo, despite requiring a VPN for access. Since July 4, the domain www.threads.net has been inaccessible in China, according to Greatfire, an online censorship monitoring organization. The large number of downloads points to the persistent and relatively widespread use of VPNs, at least at key moments, despite the regime’s crackdown on circumvention tools.

### Arrests and detentions: Couple jailed over circumvention software, banned book expulsions, feminist activist condition worsens, German Chinese man interrogated

- **Falun Gong couple jailed over circumvention software:** On June 12, He Binggang and his fiancée, Zhang Yibo, were sentenced to six and five years, respectively, for their alleged involvement in creating and maintaining the oGate circumvention software. The couple, who were followers of the banned Falun Gong spiritual practice, had served two prior sentences related to their faith and have been detained since 2021. He is currently paralyzed, reportedly due to conditions of his long-term detention; Zhang’s health is also deteriorating. The couple’s conviction is the latest in a series of cases in which people were jailed for assisting users in circumventing the so-called Great Firewall. It may also reflect heightened CCP sensitivity ahead of the July 20 anniversary of the regime’s 1999 launch of the campaign to wipe out Falun Gong.

- **Hunan activist sentenced for marking Cultural Revolution death:** On June 25, Xie Wenfei, a rights activist also known as Xie Fengxia, was reportedly sentenced to four and a half years in prison after posting a short poem on Twitter mourning the death of Lin Zhao, a Peking University student killed during the Cultural Revolution. On April 29, 2020, Xie had been arrested on charges of “picking quarrels and provoking trouble,” an allegation often levied by authorities to punish activism. Prior to his latest arrest, Xie had been warned twice by the police not to post “nonsense” online.

- **Officials expelled from CCP for possessing banned books:** On June 25, Zhang Guilin,
a former state assets supervisor in Beijing, was **expelled** from the CCP for “serious violations of discipline and law,” including possession of banned political books and journals. In early June, Xu Shiping, the former editor in chief of a Shanghai newspaper, was also expelled from the CCP for “hiding and reading prohibited books.” Other individuals who have been expelled from the party and removed from their posts since March 2020 for bringing banned books into the country include former Changsha deputy mayor Chen Zehui, former Huainan deputy mayor Li Zhong, and former Chongqing state security police officer Li Bin.

- **Feminist activist Li Qiaochu’s trial delayed, lawyers denied access:** The trial of feminist activist Li Qiaochu for “inciting subversion of state power,” originally scheduled for June 20 at Linyi Development Zone People’s Court in Shandong Province, has been **delayed**. According to Radio Free Asia, Li’s legal representative was barred entry to the court and had requests for evidence retrieval denied. Li has been detained since 2021 after launching an **online campaign** to release her partner Xu Zhiyong, a prominent human rights lawyer who is currently **serving** a 14-year sentence for participating in a private gathering with other activists in Xiamen in December 2019. Her mental and physical health are reportedly declining, and multiple applications for medical parole filed by her mother have been **denied**.

- **Police force German Chinese traveler to provide information on protesters:** On July 8, Radio Free Asia reported that a young German Chinese man (pseudonym Alex) traveling in China had been **pressured** by Chinese police to provide information about Chinese dissidents in Germany. Alex was interrogated for hours at a Chinese airport and shown photographs said to depict his participation in protests in Germany against the Chinese government. He was forced to confess and to provide names of other protesters, although he gave fake ones; he was released only after providing a fingerprint and an apology letter. Several parliamentarians urged the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to issue a travel warning over the incident. Separately, on June 2, the Chinese Consulate General in Frankfurt launched an “Overseas Citizen Registration” feature on its Chinese Consulate app. The feature, which requires Chinese citizens in the consular district to **register** personal information, prompts users to grant it access to the phone’s camera, microphone, and location, and the privacy policy states that in situations related to national security users’ personal information can be collected without their consent. Users can also register on behalf of others, which potentially encourages overseas Chinese to report on one another. This new feature may come in response to Germany’s **demand** in May to close illegal overseas police stations operated by the CCP.
HONG KONG
Activists arrested for helping exiles, press freedom hits new low, Japanese journalist denied entry, Citizen Radio closes

• **Activists arrested for supporting wanted exile activists:** On July 5 and 6, Hong Kong’s national security police arrested five activists, aged 26 to 28. Police claimed that the young men—most of whom were previously involved with the political party Demosisto, which disbanded in 2020—had posted messages with “seditious intent” on social media platforms. They additionally alleged that they had been raising money from sympathetic businesses and their customers (including via an app called Punish Mee) and using the funds to support exile activists who face charges under the National Security Law (NSL), including Britain-based Nathan Law. The arrests came two days after Hong Kong police issued arrest warrants and a bounty of $HK 1 million (US$127,700) for the arrest of Law and seven other rights activists now living in exile. Together, the group is accused of “foreign collusion” and incitement to secession for their advocacy on behalf of freedoms in Hong Kong and sanctions against officials responsible for abuses. On July 8, Voice of America reported that the Punish Mee app had gone dark, likely due to the arrests and to shield those who had contributed funds or sponsored activities via the app from prosecution. Separately, local media reported that the parents and brother of Nathan Law had been questioned by police on July 11 regarding recent contact with him, but were subsequently released.

• **Press freedom hits new low in journalist, foreign correspondent surveys:** On July 7, the Hong Kong Journalists Association (HKJA) released the findings of an annual survey conducted since 2013 of journalists and members of the public on the state of press freedom in the territory. Both groups said that press freedom had declined in 2022, bringing the overall rating to a new low, although at a slower pace of decline than the previous year. Key factors listed by HKJA respondents were hesitation to criticize the central government, and pressure exerted by supervisors on journalists or other forms of self-censorship. The findings align with similar results from a separate survey of foreign correspondents published on July 5. Of those respondents, 83 percent said the environment for journalists had worsened over the past 18 months and 88 percent said they “found sources in Hong Kong had become less willing to be quoted or to discuss sensitive subjects,” a trend described as “a telling indication of fear levels in the community.” Several respondents reported experiencing digital or physical surveillance and 65 percent admitted to practicing self-censorship.

• **Japanese journalist denied entry:** Freelance Japanese journalist Yoshiaki Ogawa, author of the book Chronicles of Hong Kong’s Protests, was denied entry to the territory on June 29 and forced to return to Tokyo the following day. Police offered no explanation. In December, a photographer from Japan was denied entry, and
in early June, a Japanese street performer was similarly barred. Ogawa is the first reporter from the country to be denied entry, however.

- **Man arrested for Hong Kong independence remark online**: Police arrested 63-year-old Danny Kong, founder of a martial arts school, on June 26 over allegedly “seditious messages” posted on Facebook between December 2022 and June 2023 that advocated for Hong Kong and Taiwan independence, and, according to prosecutors, were intended to incite hatred against the government. Kong’s case is the latest in which authorities have invoked a colonial-era sedition law to prosecute people for social media posts. The law had been unused for half a century, until local authorities revived it in 2020.

- **Public broadcaster deletes content, prodemocracy radio closes**: The public broadcaster Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK)—which has been brought under tighter government control since 2020—has reportedly removed thousands of episodes of old shows now apparently considered politically sensitive. Radio Free Asia reported that as of June 21, an archive on the station’s Podcast One website had deleted all 30 years’ worth of episodes of the popular satirical news show Headliner, as well as select episodes of other shows that addressed topics like the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre or police violence. It also deleted work by the political cartoonist Zunzi, whose contract was recently canceled by the Ming Pao newspaper. Separately, the Cantonese prodemocracy online Citizens’ Radio station aired its final show on June 30 and will be closing down, soon after authorities froze its bank account. The station was launched in 2005 and was known for talk shows that were often critical of the government. Its owner said the station lacked resources to pay rent, and that “even if we invite guests to the program, they cannot speak freely, because the red line is everywhere.”
BEYOND CHINA

Hackers target governments worldwide, pushback on Hollywood favors to Beijing, propaganda push on human rights, TikTok faces more bans

• **China-based hackers target government agencies:** On June 15, the cybersecurity firm Mandiant reported that an actor believed with high confidence to be linked to the Chinese government had used vulnerabilities in Barracuda, an email security gateway software, to engage in a global espionage campaign spanning multiple countries and sectors starting in October 2022. The hackers gained access to various systems by sending emails with malicious files attached. Of the organizations targeted, 55 percent were based in the Americas, 22 percent in the Asia-Pacific region, and 24 percent in Europe, the Middle East and Africa. They included foreign ministries in southeast Asia, as well as foreign trade offices and academic entities in Taiwan and Hong Kong. Later, on July 11, Microsoft revealed that it had detected and contained an intrusion that targeted email accounts of individuals at approximately 25 organizations, including US government agencies and institutions. Media reports found that these included the State Department, Commerce Department (including the commerce secretary herself), and the House of Representatives. Microsoft attributed the hack to a China-based actor referred to as Storm-0558, who was known to target government agencies in western Europe and to focus on espionage, data theft, and credential access. It remains unclear what information the hackers acquired.

• **Pushback on Beijing’s influence in Hollywood, Barbie controversy:** On June 30, Politico reported that the US Department of Defense (DoD) had updated rules on collaborating with filmmakers, in part in response to controversies involving the CCP. The new regulations prohibit staff and relevant agencies from providing assistance with filming, and from permitting filming at military facilities, if directors plan to or are likely comply with CCP censorship demands. The new rules respond to provisions in the 2023 defense funding bill and follow a scandal involving the Taiwanese flag pictured on Tom Cruise’s jacket in the blockbuster Top Gun: Maverick. The rules also require film production companies to notify their DoD liaison in writing of any censorship demands from Beijing. Separately, two weeks before the July 21 theatrical debut of the new Barbie film based on the popular doll, authorities in Vietnam announced that the film would be banned in the country because a hand-drawn map included what would appear to be China’s controversial “nine-dash line” in the South China Sea, a designation that Vietnam contests. The move spurred global attention and prompted similar evaluation of the movie in the Philippines. On July 12, that country’s movie-review board concluded that the line on the map portrays “the route of the make-believe journey of Barbie from Barbie Land to the ‘real world,’” rather than the “nine-dash line,” and that film screenings could go forward.
• **Human rights forum feeds global propaganda, activist’s UN testimony interrupted:**
On June 14, the Chinese government hosted a Forum on Global Human Rights Governance, reportedly attended by over 300 participants from nearly 100 countries. Among the keynote speakers was the chief of the CCP’s propaganda department, Li Shulei, and the president of the official Xinhua news agency, Fu Hua. State media reports quoted scholars and officials from the United States, Zambia, Uganda, and Argentina as affirming Beijing’s narratives on human rights and the need for “mutual respect” rather than critical assessments. To amplify the event’s messages globally, officials and outlets from Eritrea, Sierra Leone, Rwanda, and Tanzania posted on social media or published stories in their home countries. Beijing hosted the forum shortly before the opening of a UN Human Rights Council session, at which China’s record was expected to come under scrutiny. On June 30, a Chinese diplomat at the council interrupted and attempted to end the testimony of the son of Jimmy Lai, a democracy advocate and former media owner now jailed on politically motivated charges in Hong Kong. The council president ultimately affirmed the witness’s right to continue.

• **Targeted TikTok bans spread, prompting legal challenges:** TikTok, a video-sharing platform owned by the China-based firm ByteDance, was initially banned from US government devices under a February directive, but follow-on regulations that came into effect on July 3 also require federal contractors to comply with the restriction. Airlines like Delta and Southwest notified employees of the ban, which extends to personal devices if they are used to conduct official business. Meanwhile, Mississippi enacted a ban of the application on state-owned devices and Wi-Fi networks starting July 1, joining 43 other US states that have applied some kind of restriction; Montana has adopted a law that would ban the platform entirely in the state as of January 1, 2024. These bans have been challenged in the courts on the grounds that they violate the constitutional freedom of speech. One case filed by digital media scholars at public universities in Texas argues that a ban affecting university devices hinders their research and instruction. Two lawsuits were filed against the law in Montana: one by TikTok and another by local content creators whose legal fees are being covered by the company. The US Congress is weighing two bills that could enable a nationwide ban or impose new data security requirements on TikTok. In a letter to US lawmakers dated June 23, the company confirmed that some US user data are accessible from China, explaining that only a limited category of users—content creators who signed commercial contracts with the company—are affected. French lawmakers on July 6 called for the extension of a recent ban from government devices to staff at strategic companies in sectors like energy, transportation, and water, following a months-long investigation prompted by national security concerns.
FEATURED PUSHBACK
University graduate memes go viral amid high youth unemployment

Since the youth unemployment rate hit a record high of 20.8 percent in May, a new strain of unconventional graduation photos has emerged on the Chinese internet, with students expressing dismay in the face of dim employment prospects and official efforts to downplay their plight. Rather than showing joyful smiles and hat throwing, the pictures feature graduates in poses of dejection—draped over railings or benches, or lying face down on the ground. They are also depicted throwing their certificates, or even themselves, into the trash. The images have garnered attention outside China as well. One set shared by Radii China on Twitter on June 12 clocked up 185,000 views and triggered articles in outlets like Britain’s Guardian newspaper.

The photos are often accompanied by hashtags such as “zombie-style” or “lying flat,” a reference to the popular—and occasionally censored—idea that individuals should seek to get by with minimal effort as a form of passive defiance of social expectations. One student who posted “lying flat” graduation photos told the Washington Post that she had sent her résumé to about 300 e-commerce companies and received only two offers, which she rejected because the pay was unreasonably low. Another graduate said she posted the offbeat photos to spur a bit of optimism: “I thought it was very refreshing ... really fun and exciting compared with the usual graduation photos. You can choose to spend your day happily or unhappily. I choose to be happy.”

A recent graduate lies on the ground with her graduation cap covering her face in a photo that garnered 185,000 views on social media.

Credit: @RADII_Media, Twitter
WHAT TO WATCH FOR

** Increased censorship around 19th Party Congress: ** In late 2017, the Communist Party will hold its **Termination of big-tech crackdown:** On July 7, the Alibaba conglomerate’s Ant Group affiliate, which runs a popular mobile payment platform, was fined 7.12 billion yuan ($985 million) by the People’s Bank of China for violating various regulations, including those related to corporate governance, financial consumer protection, and money laundering. The penalty ended a long-standing investigation, coincided with the return of Alibaba founder Jack Ma to China after months overseas, and was viewed with some hope as the conclusion of a crackdown on major technology companies that started in 2020. Watch for whether China’s regulators indeed ease their pressure on leading Chinese tech firms, and whether any such leniency extends to content regulation or management of user data.

** Avenues for reporting national security violations to Hong Kong government:** On July 6, the government department that oversees Hong Kong’s public library system issued a notice that it was launching new ways for members of the public to report potentially problematic content in library collections. The types of objectionable content listed on a form for this purpose include not only violence or pornography but also items that “endanger national security.” The new policy comes after a spate of removals of politically sensitive content from Hong Kong libraries in May. Watch for whether it spurs further censorship, and whether similar mechanisms are enacted for other venues or sectors of society.

** Accountability for US corporate complicity in Chinese government surveillance:** On July 7, an appeals court in California issued a decision allowing a long-standing lawsuit against the communications technology firm Cisco to proceed. A three-judge panel found that the company could be held accountable under US law for the extent to which its design and installation of surveillance technology in China amounted to “aiding and abetting” Chinese government human rights violations and torture, especially against adherents of the persecuted Falun Gong spiritual practice, who are represented as plaintiffs in the lawsuit. The Electronic Frontier Foundation, which submitted an amicus brief in the case, hailed the decision as a “tremendous victory for victims” of repression enabled by digital surveillance. Watch for the next phases of and final decision in the case, as well as future lawsuits related to US corporations’ involvement in the construction of Beijing’s robust surveillance apparatus and its deployment against rights activists or members of minority groups.
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 policymakers, media outlets, educators and donors can help advance free expression in China and beyond via a [new resource section](#) on the Freedom House website.

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For more information

- For archives, go to: www.freedomhouse.org/China-media
