Local Chinese Dissent in Action

This image is one of hundreds collected as part of Freedom House’s China Dissent Monitor project of real-world protests that have occurred throughout China since June 2022. Last month, the project launched an archive of photos and videos, drawn mostly from Chinese and global social media platforms, with some provided by civil society partners. This photo depicts a demonstration in Gansu Province in March 2023 where dozens of property buyers held banners outside a construction site demanding that the government intervene over the developers’ stalled building, an example of the broader trend of increased protest from home buyers. One banner urges protection of “our rights in a civilized manner, without resulting to violence.”

Credit: Freedom House/China Dissent Monitor, case 1553
Recent investigations and takedowns show more sophistication—and a greater willingness to intrude on domestic politics in target countries

On August 29, Meta reported that it had recently taken down thousands of accounts and Facebook pages that “were part of the largest known cross-platform covert operation in the world,” run by “geographically dispersed operators across China.” The announcement and its detailed analysis made headlines around the world, garnering attention for the type of information that is often mainly of interest to cybersecurity firms and digital policy wonks.

But such revelations are just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to Beijing’s evolving campaign to feed targeted disinformation—demonstrably false or misleading content, often through the use of fake accounts—to social media users around the world.

A review of numerous forensic investigations, think tank reports, platform transparency reports, and media coverage published since June points to a disconcerting if unsurprising trend: Beijing-linked actors are continually engaging in covert disinformation or other online influence operations. And they are experimenting with tactics that are more sophisticated, harder to detect, and potentially more effective than in previous years, while also tackling issues that cut to the heart of public debate in democracies.

This reality reaffirms the findings of Freedom House’s Beijing’s Global Media Influence report, published last year, and demonstrates that democracies must invest more resources in the detection and mitigation of the Chinese regime’s disinformation efforts.

As they develop an appropriate response, policymakers, major technology companies, civil society researchers, and ordinary users should bear in mind the following features of Beijing’s latest disinformation practices.

1. Expansion to new platforms and audiences

   The first documented, Beijing-backed global disinformation campaigns dated to 2017, and typically targeted English and Chinese speakers on large platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. But recent reports show that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime’s manipulation efforts are spreading across many more platforms, languages, and geographic audiences. The network identified in last month’s Meta takedown—a persistent revival of a previously exposed and thwarted...
network known as **Spamouflage**—notably extended beyond Facebook and Instagram. Links were found to some 50 other applications, including TikTok, Reddit, Pinterest, and Medium, as well as local online forums in Asia and Africa. Meta suggested that the pivot to smaller platforms may have been a deliberate response to larger firms’ increased monitoring, detection, and removals.

A separate report published by **Microsoft** on September 7 uncovered a range of influence efforts, from networks of fake accounts to a corps of Chinese state-linked influencers who masquerade as independent commentators. The company counted at least 230 such state media employees or affiliates across multiple platforms, with accounts that reached 103 million people using 40 different languages. The report described an expansion to new languages—like Indonesian, Croatian, and Turkish—and new platforms—including Vimeo, Tumblr, and Quora—by both human influencers and automated accounts over the past year.

### 2. More sophisticated tactics for increasing engagement and avoiding detection

While some networks, like the one exposed by Meta, have apparently struggled to gain genuine engagement from social media users, other recent initiatives have scored more success. The **Microsoft** report found an emerging use of images that were created with generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools and shared as memes by accounts mimicking US voters from across the political spectrum. Such images, despite their recognizable AI flaws, have reportedly garnered additional circulation by real users. Indeed, video and other visual media are a recurring feature of the content now being shared, according to the report. Other effective tactics include exploiting popular hashtags related to current events, as has occurred in campaigns on **Australian** political issues, or programming fake accounts to post comments in the first person.

Another tactic uses unattributed images to avoid easy detection of a link to Chinese state media. An investigation by the cybersecurity firm **Nisos** found that a network of accounts in Spanish and Portuguese, which had not been labeled as Chinese state media under Twitter’s former policy, posted screenshots of state media articles or used images and videos from the China News Service without attribution. In another case, the **Australian Strategic Policy Institute** (ASPI) found that Beijing-backed disinformation networks were replenishing their ranks after account takedowns by purchasing fake personas from transnational criminal organizations in Southeast Asia, and using them to post false or divisive content.

### 3. Elaborate schemes to launder content and narratives

Among the most striking discoveries from the recent set of investigations are the various ways in which proxy entities or accounts on multiple platforms are used to “launder” content, increasing its credibility and obfuscating its origins to the point that even some people involved in its production are unaware. One example unveiled in the **Meta** investigation centered on an error-laden, 66-page “research report” claiming that the US government was hiding the origin of COVID-19. The document
was published on Zenodo.org, then promoted by fake accounts via two distinct videos on YouTube and Vimeo; an article based on those items was then posted on LiveJournal, Medium, and Tumblr, and finally, accounts on Facebook, X, Reddit, and other platforms amplified these links.

In another notable set of incidents revealed by the cybersecurity firm Mandiant in July 2023, a Chinese public relations firm known to have ties to the government piggybacked on recruitment websites for freelancers and newswire services in the United States. This enabled them to enlist unwitting Americans to create content that aligned with CCP narratives or criticized US policies. The firm published the resulting material on legitimate news website domains via the newswire services. In one case from mid-2022, the public relations firm successfully recruited a musician and actor to organize small real-world protests in Washington, DC, images of which were then circulated as part of an influence campaign to discredit that year's International Religious Freedom Summit and US lawmakers' efforts to ban the importation of products made by Uyghur forced labor.

4. Use of smears and incitement to discredit factual reporting and disrupt democratic societies

In terms of topical focus, these disinformation campaigns have apparently doubled down on a long-term strategy aimed at moving beyond simple pro-CCP messages and actually attempting to amplify discord on key political and social issues, or to damage the reputations of activists, journalists, policymakers, and democratic governments.

The network that was active on Meta platforms sought to harass or discredit journalists in the United States (such as Jiayang Fan), political commentators and dissidents (such as Chen Pokong), and occasionally elected officials (including Republican congressman Jim Banks and Democratic congresswoman Nancy Pelosi). In an incident from May that was exposed in August by the Canadian government, a network on Tencent’s WeChat platform engaged in a coordinated campaign to smear the reputation of Parliament member Michael Chong, whose father is from Hong Kong and who has been a vocal critic of the increasing repression there and in China.

The disinformation networks have also taken aim at think tanks and other nongovernmental organizations whose investigations of the CCP’s transnational repression and disinformation campaigns have been especially effective at spurring public awareness and policy responses. These include the Madrid-based Safeguard Defenders and ASPI, which have been subjected to aggressive and wide-ranging campaigns of harassment, threats, and impersonations. ASPI found that 70 percent of the top 50 Chinese-language search results for the organization’s name on YouTube had been “posted by CCP-linked inauthentic accounts.”

With respect to divisive topics, the AI-generated memes discovered by Microsoft revolved around issues like gun violence and the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States. ASPI’s research is replete with examples of China-linked fake accounts...
trying to influence public discourse on domestic social issues such as gender, sexual assault, and Indigenous people’s rights. The accounts have also tried to amplify public frustration over cost-of-living pressures and false scandals targeting Australian institutions like political parties, Parliament, and the banking system.

5. New vulnerability to exposure and pushback
CCP propagandists have good reason to put greater energy into hiding their disinformation efforts. Thanks in part to the accumulating results of investigations into the tactics now associated with China-linked campaigns, as well as a recent set of US federal indictments that clarified links between networks of fake accounts and China’s Ministry of Public Security, it is becoming easier for observers to trace and attribute specific campaigns to Beijing. Meta and Microsoft, for example, were able to make relatively definitive attributions, relying on common patterns of posting, the locations of account operators, the use of common proxy or server infrastructure, or information available on the Chinese internet regarding the government ties of public relations companies, cybersecurity firms, and fake news websites. The Canadian government found it “highly probable” that the campaign against Chong was linked to Beijing, while ASPI said the behavior it documented was similar to that of previously exposed CCP-linked covert networks.

Despite the exposure, however, there is no indication that the Chinese regime plans to rein in its manipulation. In fact, it is almost certainly gearing up for more aggressive activity around 2024 presidential elections in the United States and Taiwan. The recent assessments noted above highlight some of the strengths in current democratic responses that help safeguard the integrity of online communications and political processes, including tech firms’ transparency reports, government monitoring, and investigations by cybersecurity firms. But they also spotlight vulnerabilities, such as the inconsistency of monitoring and takedowns across platforms, particularly newer and more niche services, and the extent to which CCP-linked networks take full advantage of these gaps.

Under its new leadership, X has dismantled many of the policies and teams that had increased transparency and thwarted inauthentic behavior on Twitter. Meanwhile, Tiktok, owned by the China-based ByteDance, acknowledged removing hundreds of accounts linked to the Meta-exposed network, but only after being queried by reporters. WeChat, an app of Chinese tech giant Tencent, has yet to share information about campaigns that others have detected on their platform. In this context, it is increasingly important for the public, civil society, US policymakers, and their democratic peers to apply pressure and create incentive structures that compel all technology companies to treat the threat of disinformation—including from Beijing—with the seriousness it deserves.
IN THE NEWS
Censorship updates: CAC crackdowns, LGBT+ accounts, new mobile app rules, more censorship cases

- **CAC crackdowns target misinformation, cyberbullying:** On July 16, China’s Cyber-space Administration (CAC) announced a new crackdown on misinformation. A week earlier, on July 7, new regulations were published requiring online platforms to monitor and suspend accounts spreading false or harmful content, and tighten control over influencers and content creators as a means of preventing online violence and hate speech. More than 8,000 social media accounts (including ones not promoting violence or hate speech) have reportedly been shut down, along with other actions taken since the first quarter of 2023. In response, companies, organizations, and individuals are reportedly using content-moderation services, particularly CCP mouthpiece the People’s Daily’s new AI censorship tool “Renmin Shejiao,” to prescreen online material due to political content filtering. The Chinese government’s latest crackdown on online rumors and cyberbullying echo Xi Jinping’s earlier effort to establish a “security barrier” around the Chinese internet, as highlighted in his July 15 speech at the National Network Security and Informatization Work Conference.

- **Crackdown on LGBT+ accounts and content:** On August 22, WeChat suspended several LGBT+ accounts without explanation, including Flying Cat Brotherhood, Transtory, and Beijing Lala Salon. On August 23, security guards reportedly prevented fans from wearing rainbow outfits at a concert by Taiwanese pop star A-Mei, an advocate for the LGBT+ community. In early August, a Weibo influencer with 337,000 followers reported that Pride-themed Starbucks merchandise in a Qinhuangdao store was removed and confiscated in cities in Hebei Province after activists drew attention to the items on social media. Freedom House’s China Dissent Monitor reported in August that several Pride-related events faced repression in June 2023, including an online photography contest and a Pride Run. These incidents reflect a growing crackdown on LGBT+ groups since 2021.

- **New rules for mobile apps, Apple Chatbot removals, Baidu’s ERNIE chatbot censors:** On August 8, the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT) released new rules requiring mobile-app publishers to file business details with the government by March 2024. Publishers in certain service categories, such as news, publishing, education, film and television, and religion, must also submit an approval and commitment letter to provincial authorities. Tencent, Huawei Technologies, Xiaomi, OPPO, and Vivo app stores have begun adhering to China’s new app oversight rules, according to a September 4 Reuters report. Meanwhile, on August 15, Apple removed over 100 ChatGPT-like apps from China’s app store on August 1. Apps such as Spark and ChatGAi Plus, an AI-based chatbot and translation service, were reportedly among those removed. On August 31, Baidu released
its ERNIE Bot, which operates similarly to ChatGPT, to the public. The system is reportedly designed to restrict discussion of sensitive topics such as the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown and promote CCP talking points on issues like the status of Taiwan and Hong Kong. In cases where the system is asked about a censored topic, it will end the conversation, suggest changing the topic, or reply that it has not yet been trained to answer.

- **Censored items include cremation stats, accident reports, TEDx event, economics paper, history book, Qin Gang material:** In July, a report on Zhejiang’s cremation statistics, published briefly on July 13, suggested a higher COVID-19 death toll than the official count. It was quickly removed from the provincial government website where it was posted, and related social media posts were censored. Following the collapse of a gymnasium roof in Heilongjiang province on July 23, social media posts about government officials who were intimidating grieving parents, as well as posts honoring the victims, were also quickly censored. In August, a TEDx event planned for August 13 in Guangzhou that included talks by artists, researchers, campus antibullying advocates, and entrepreneurs, was canceled by the police due to concerns about its links to a foreign organization. On August 14, China banned the rock band Slap (Erguang Yuedui) and related content across Chinese websites and apps in connection with their socially conscious lyrics, including a recent song on the pandemic and the “chained woman” scandal, sparking online discussion. Weibo censored a paper written by Hong Kong businessman and writer Lew Mon-hung, published in a Singapore newspaper and titled “The Economy Is The Problem, Its Root Is Politics,” which gained popularity online for blaming Xi Jinping and the ruling party for China’s current economic problems. A Chinese association aligned with the state has banned a book about the early history of the Mongols, citing “historical nihilism” and its failure to conform to the narratives and policies promoted by the communist regime. Separately, after he was abruptly removed from his position on July 25, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs removed hundreds of press releases about Qin Gang from its website and removed comments sections on the site. Weibo has reportedly filtered out searches for “Qin Gang” and censored a related hashtag.
State narratives and netizen pushback:
Anti-espionage campaign, Beijing-area floods, Fukushima water release

- **Nationwide counterespionage campaign**: On the heels of tightened new rules for foreign firms and the expansion of China’s counterespionage law in July, the Chinese government is calling on citizens to assist authorities with antispying work. The Ministry of State Security, the main agency overseeing foreign intelligence and counterintelligence, wrote in its first post on a newly established WeChat account that it was important for citizens to “proactively defend” against spies to strengthen national security and the leadership of the Communist Party. As part of this effort, Chinese state media, including Xinhua and CCTV, published fake stories about China’s national security agency supposedly uncovering an espionage effort by the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), with an accompanying reminder for people to be careful when traveling overseas. Various forms of counterespionage propaganda have emerged, including information flooding Weibo, WeChat, Douyin, and Xiaohongshu, of videos, images, and animations coupled with messages warning that “spies may be present around you.” Some images urge students to monitor family members, leading to criticism from teachers and parents who view the effort as brainwashing.

- **Anger over Hebei flood news blackout, censorship**: In late July, a typhoon hit Beijing and the surrounding Hebei Province, causing severe flooding. Authorities’ decision to divert floodwaters to several so-called flood-storage areas on August 1 reportedly worsened the situation in certain areas, leading to public outrage. Chinese netizens expressed anger over comments by a provincial official implying that surrounding areas in Hebei should be used as a “moat” to ease pressure on Beijing and protect the capital. Residents’ criticized other aspects of the government’s response, especially the absence of local officials on the scene during the crisis. Video and posts of residents and Zhuozhou Public Security Bureau sending out a plea for help on Weibo were quickly deleted. Discussion of the topic and a related Weibo hashtag, which had more than 80 million views as of August 3, were also censored.

- **Disinformation sparks debate over Fukushima water release**: Following the release of treated wastewater from the destroyed Fukushima nuclear plant in Japan on August 24, Chinese state media launched a condemnation campaign on social media to spread disinformation about the discharged water’s safety, painting Japan as an irresponsible international actor. Online anti-Japanese sentiment has spiked among nationalist netizens, with intense reactions such as “the world will remember what the Japanese government did.” A post by the Weibo account Yuyuan Tantian, which is believed to be associated with state media CCTV, included a graphic titled “Japan allocates 70 billion yen for PR to release nuclear-contaminated water.” A hashtag associated with the graphic also became
ranked second on Weibo’s “hot search” list and garnered 667 million views, as of August 24. Other online content discussing the Fukushima wastewater release, including an article that criticized illogical arguments by anti-Japanese netizens, was quickly censored.

**Arrests and detentions: Legal amendments could limit speech, consumer rights and anticorruption activists sentenced, Uyghurs with Turkish ties arrested**

- **Proposed administrative punishment changes could further limit speech:** Proposed revisions to China’s Public Security Administrative Punishments Law were submitted to the National People’s Congress Standing Committee in late August. The draft includes new provisions that prohibit clothing, symbols, and the production, advocacy, or publication of remarks that “undermine the spirit” or “harm the feelings” of the country. The proposals and their vague definitions provoked concern among legal experts and netizens, who called in online posts for their removal. The changes are open to public comment until September 30.

- **Activists sentenced for online criticism, supporting jailed rights lawyer:** On July 20, former lawyer and prominent consumer rights advocate Hao Jinsong was sentenced to nine years in prison for “picking quarrels and provoking trouble,” one of the longest sentences under that commonly used charge against Communist Party critics that has been handed down in recent years. Hao was detained in January 2020 for making comments on sensitive international issues and criticizing Chinese authorities online, and was reportedly tortured in custody. In another case, rights activist Song Ze (also know as Song Guangqiang), previously arrested in 2014 for his activism, was detained on August 15 on the charge of “picking quarrels and provoking trouble” after he posted online support for jailed rights lawyer Xu Zhiyong, who is serving a 14-year prison term.

- **Anticorruption activists in Guizhou and Shandong punished:** On August 31, Yang Shaozheng, an outspoken former Guizhou University economics professor, was sentenced to four and a half years in prison on charge of “subversion of state power” after a closed-door trial on July 29. Yang was detained in May 2021 for calculating in an online article the high annual personnel costs of the Chinese government and CCP, reaching an estimate of 20 trillion yuan ($2.75 trillion total). Before his arrest, Yang had been repeatedly warned by the police not to post sensitive comments online and was expelled from Guizhou University for his actions; Yang is reportedly appealing the conviction. Separately, on September 1, new information surfaced that Chen Xueyuan, an activist from Shandong who is known as the “rural anticorruption hero” by netizens and has 47,000 followers on
Douyin (Chinese Tiktok), was facing charges of “picking quarrels and provoking trouble.” He had been consistently posting short videos to document and expose local corruption issues before his detention in January 2023.

- **Arrests of Uyghurs who traveled to Turkey, detention over Quran recitation:** On August 15, Voice of America (VOA) reported that a Norway-based Uyghur rights group found that Chinese authorities had recently arrested a number of Uyghurs who had traveled from China to Turkey and back in the early 2010s, when such travel was widely permitted by the Chinese government. The group counted at least 10 such cases, including Nureli Haji, a Uyghur pop singer and member of the Philharmonic Orchestra of Xinjiang Art Theater, detained in early 2023. Many of those arrested had studied abroad in Turkey. Separately, on July 14, ethnic Kazakh Kusman Rehim was reportedly detained after performing Quranic recitations, including at a Muslim wedding, and after he was found to possess a Quran at home.

- **Health declines for jailed writer, Chinese citizen journalist:** Chinese Australian writer and democracy activist Yang Hengjun's health is deteriorating and he fears he could die in prison, according to a message relayed to supporters. Yang, who was arrested for espionage during a visit to China to see family in August 2019, has been awaiting a verdict since his trial in May 2021 was repeatedly delayed. Separately, Zhang Zhan, a Chinese citizen journalist who received a four-year prison sentence in December 2020 for early reporting on the COVID-19 pandemic in Wuhan, was admitted to the hospital after months of protesting her imprisonment with hunger strikes, as reported by Radio Free Asia (RFA) on September 1. Finally, publisher Geng Xiaonan and retired professor Chen Zhaozhi were released after serving three and three-and-a-half-year sentences, respectively, for advocating for Chinese intellectuals and sharing information about COVID-19.
HONG KONG
Police target exile dissidents’ relatives, minimum NSL sentences upheld, court rejects protest anthem injunction, critical newspaper column disappears

• **Police question, detain relatives and friends of exile dissidents:** In early July, Hong Kong police issued arrest warrants and a [bounty](#) of HK$1 million (US$127,700) for the arrest of eight rights activists and former legislators now living in exile. Within days, police began questioning and detaining their family members and acquaintances living in Hong Kong, and such actions continued throughout the summer. On July 18, police questioned relatives of [Christopher Mung](#), an exiled labor activist, and two days later, the family of [Dennis Kwok](#), an attorney and former lawmaker. On August 8, police questioned the parents of [Anna Kwok](#), head of a Washington DC-based advocacy group. In addition to the eight main targets, police also visited family of Glacier Kwong, a civic activist now in Germany. Relatives’ homes were also raided. A Hong Kong police spokesperson told [media](#) that “other law enforcement actions, including arrests, cannot be ruled out.” Most of those targeted were questioned by police and then released. However, in the most serious action thus far, in late August, Nathan Law’s sister-in-law was formally detained by police after a raid on her apartment. The targeting of exiled activists’ family members appears to be part of a larger operation to cut off those who fled abroad from contacts remaining in Hong Kong. On August 10, police arrested 10 people on charges of endangering national security via their aid to the [now-defunct 612 Humanitarian Fund](#) that sought to help protesters during the 2019 prodemocracy demonstrations, including by receiving donations from overseas and providing financial aid to those who fled abroad. Last year, the fund’s former trustees were arrested and have faced fines.

• **Sedition conviction for Facebook posts, minimum NSL sentences upheld:** On July 27, [Danny Kong](#), a 63-year-old martial arts coach, was sentenced to three years in prison under a colonial-era sedition law for posts on Facebook criticizing the Communist Party and making factual comments like that the party “is very coercive.” Kong pleaded guilty the day before to posting various statements and images on Facebook. The DC-based [Hong Kong Democracy Council](#) pointed out, “Most Hong Kongers would agree with these views,” highlighting the likely intention of using his case as an example to intimidate others into silence. Separately, on August 22, a panel of judges [rejected the appeal](#) of jailed university student Liu Sai-yu, who pleaded guilty to posting “secessionist” messages in a Telegram channel and requested a sentence reduction, per usual practice in Hong Kong’s common law system. The judges unanimously dismissed the appeal, affirming that “serious offenses” under the National Security Law (NSL) must carry a minimum punishment of five years and setting a precedent for other ongoing prosecutions under the law. In two other cases related to foreigners’ ability to enter...
Hong Kong, Matthew Connor, a photography professor from the Massachusetts Institute of Art and Design who had documented prodemocracy protests in the territory, was refused entry to Hong Kong on August 16 for the second time since 2019. The incident occurred five days after Danish artist Jens Galschiøt, who designed the famous Pillar of Shame statue commemorating the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown, wrote to Hong Kong authorities attempting to confirm reports in pro-Beijing media that an arrest warrant had been issued against him.

- **Judge rejects injunction on protest anthem, government appeals:** In an example of judicial pushback—which has become increasingly rare in politically sensitive cases—on July 28, Hong Kong’s high court rejected an injunction request by the government to ban the protest song “Glory to Hong Kong,” claiming it would create a chilling effect and undermine free expression. The government had attempted to ban distribution of the song online after it had been played accidentally at several sporting events as Hong Kong’s national anthem, instead of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) anthem. Many Hong Kongers celebrated the unexpected ruling online. Others feared the victory would be short-lived, as on August 23 the court granted a government request to appeal the judgment, with a hearing date set for September 13.

- **Government reports, critical newspaper column, Cantonese advocacy group disappear:** Previously available information and community groups continue to disappear as Hong Kong authorities tighten their grip on the territory. On July 28, online news outlet InMedia reported that Hong Kong’s Department of Justice had deleted from its website all annual reports prior to 2020. The move was interpreted as an effort to protect the identities of prosecutors who have prosecuted civic activists and prodemocracy protesters under the NSL and other laws, as some advocates have called for international sanctions to be imposed on them. Reports after 2020 remain available but with almost no photos. Separately, on August 14, the pro-Beijing newspaper Oriental Daily announced that it would discontinue its column “Kung Fu Tea,” which had often been critical of local Hong Kong government and officials. Two weeks later, Gongjyuhok, an advocacy group promoting use of the Cantonese language, announced that it would be shutting down after national security police conducted a warrantless search of the former founder’s home over the group’s publication of a dystopian short story, part of a 2020 writing competition.
BEYOND CHINA
BRICS media push, pro-Beijing voices in the US, surveillance tech in Serbia, party training in Tanzania

• BRICS summit propaganda spotlights Xi: In late August, Xi Jinping made a rare trip abroad to South Africa to attend the BRICS summit. The group, composed of the governments of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, announced that it would add six new members starting in January 2024. Surrounding the summit, China Digital Times tracked an “intensely Chinese-centered media coordination campaign aimed at criticizing the West and elevating Xi Jinping’s ‘core’ leadership.” The effort included the sixth BRICS Media Forum, held on August 18-20, which gathered around 200 participants from 100 outlets, think tanks, and organizations from 30 countries. The forum’s Chinese chairman noted its goal of promoting greater cooperation among BRICS media but also used the occasion to unveil two reports by a think tank affiliated with state agency Xinhua news, including one on “Xi Jinping economic thought.” A Xinhua reporter also interviewed attendees, and compiled the resulting video into a montage titled, “Global South against Western Media Monopoly.” The regime’s strategy of syndicating articles through partnerships with local media was also evident, as an article by Xi himself appeared in various South African outlets, which was then reported upon by Chinese state media.

• Far-left activists’ ties to CCP propaganda apparatus draws attention: On August 5, the New York Times published an in-depth investigation on a network of non-profits, think tanks, and media entities tied to—and in many cases funded by—American socialist activist and tech entrepreneur Neville Roy Singham. The story outlines various initiatives these organizations have undertaken that promote progressive causes, but at the same time disseminate Beijing-backed content and talking points. Examples cited range from the United States to Brazil to India. Also spotlighted is Singham’s wife since 2017, Jodie Evans, founder of the Code Pink peace group, who has gone from being critical of the Chinese government’s suppression of women rights defenders to promoting CCP poverty-alleviation campaigns and defending the mass incarceration of Uyghurs. Singham currently resides in Shanghai, sharing office space with Chinese company Maku Group, whose goal is to “tell China’s story well” on the world stage, an objective often cited by Chinese officials and state media. As recently as last month, Singham attended a CCP propaganda forum. In addition to the Times investigation, the China Media Project published a detailed analysis of Code Pink and its promotion of problematic pro-Beijing narratives. A 2022 New Lines investigation first drew critical attention to Singham and his network.

• Dahua cameras join Huawei’s in Serbian surveillance networks: On July 30, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) published the results of a months-long investigation that found that facial-recognition cameras produced by the Chinese firm
Dahua are being installed throughout the Serbian countryside as part of public surveillance programs. The investigation found that at least 10 local governments had awarded contracts to Macchina Security, a Serbian company with few available public records, which has been importing Chinese-made surveillance cameras. Dahua was placed on a US sanctions list in 2019 for alleged complicity in human rights abuses against Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities in China. Authorities in the capital, Belgrade, have already installed Huawei cameras as part of a “Safe City” contract.

- **CCP-sponsored school in Tanzania trains officials in one-party governance:** In Tanzania, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is operating its first overseas training school for foreign officials. Promoted as a way to support economic development in Africa, in practice, the center offers lessons and trainings of a more political nature, taught by Chinese instructors affiliated with party schools in China. Topics include party-building, internal party discipline, Xi Jinping Thought, and structuring a political system so that the ruling party sits above the government and courts. African staff also give short lectures on topics like nationalism. The **Mwalimu Julius Nyerere Leadership School**, which opened last year, is a rare example of the regime acting explicitly to export its model of governance. It is a joint initiative between the CCP and the six ruling parties of Angola and Zimbabwe (both ranked Not Free by Freedom House’s *Freedom in the World* survey), Tanzania and Mozambique (both ranked Partly Free), and Namibia and South Africa (both ranked Free), reflecting participation of leaders in democratic states too. Students from opposition parties are not eligible to attend. In 2022, the center hosted a conference of 120 participants from the six countries plus China, and in June of this year, another, with 170 attendees. Interviews by Axios and the Danish newspaper Politiken found that at least some graduates leave the school with a greater desire for stronger one-party state models in their own country.
FEATURED PUSHBACK
London diaspora mobilizes to counter pro-CCP graffiti

On August 4, a wall in London’s Brick Lane known for street art was whitewashed and then covered with propaganda slogans promoting Chinese Communist Party (CCP) ideology. The slogans, painted by young Chinese artists, included 24 characters promoting 12 “core socialist values” common in CCP propaganda; although they include terms like “democracy,” “freedom,” “rule of law,” and “equality,” they are interpreted through a pro-Beijing lens. It’s unclear whether the intent was to promote the CCP or be sarcastic, but the move to establish a CCP slogan wall in London and destroy the existing art there shocked observers.

Strong responses from local artists and British-based dissidents critical of the CCP and repression under Xi Jinping’s rule soon followed. In a video interview with France 24, one woman who grew up in China said, “It is quite traumatizing when seeing it….it is traumatizing for me and my friends because in primary school and middle school you have to remember those phrases…it is almost like a brainwashing code.” The graffiti gained international attention and went viral on social media. Over the coming days, local members of the Chinese and Hong Kong diaspora then began scrawling ironic or opposing comments above the original slogans, such as “some are more equal than others” and “no freedom in China.”

Both the pro-CCP and critical writing was removed by the Tower Hamlets Council, reportedly due to its policy against “unwanted and illegal graffiti,” a move criticized by some artists as silencing an important conversation. New graffiti critical of Xi Jinping and the CCP appeared there on August 13, including messages denouncing the government’s actions in Hong Kong, Xinjiang, Tibet, and recalling the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre. Graffiti posters opposing Xi Jinping also appeared on nearby street poles.

Within China, photos of the slogans criticizing Xi and the CCP were quickly blocked on Weibo, and some netizens reported that their accounts were banned on WeChat after sharing them.
WHAT TO WATCH FOR

**Censorship related to missing defense minister:** Following the abrupt and mysterious removal of foreign minister Qin Gang from his position in late July, in mid-September, it became evident that Chinese defense minister Li Shangfu had likely been similarly dismissed after disappearing from public view for two weeks. Li, appointed by Xi Jinping only six months ago, is believed to be under investigation for corruption related to the Chinese military. Given the scale of censorship surrounding Qin (see above), watch for similar purges of past references to Li on official websites, bans on discussing his fate on social media, and restrictions on speculating about who might replace him.

**Prosecution of exiled dissidents’ family members in Hong Kong:** Given the number of relatives and friends of exiled Hong Kong activists and former lawmakers who have been interrogated and in some cases, detained, over the past two months, watch for whether any of these individuals are prosecuted under the NSL or other legislation, what they are charged with, and the extent to which judges make an attempt to resist government efforts to use such blatantly politicized collective punishment.

**New cases of transnational repression, international responses:** The past three months have seen a regular drumbeat of new incidents or investigations of CCP-driven transnational repression—the regime’s pursuit of exiled critics and members of diaspora communities. These include detention and deportation of Chinese lawyer Lu Siwei from Laos, efforts to recruit Uyghurs in Japan and Turkey to spy on others in their community, the shuttering of independent Chinese-language newspapers in New Zealand, and a cyberattack against a US-based Falun Gong research website. These incidents highlight once again the breadth of tactics deployed by the regime and its proxies to harass, intimidate, silence, monitor, and in extreme cases, repatriate targets from a wide range of communities and causes. The attention of officials and media outlets in democracies to these activities has been increasing as well, evident from a recent hearing of the bipartisan US Congressional-Executive Commission on China and a ProPublica investigation that found links between overseas Chinese police stations and organized crime in Italy and Spain. Watch for which policies are implemented in democracies to better protect victims of transnational repression, as well as the limited impact of international pressure in authoritarian contexts like Laos.
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