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IMAGE OF THE MONTH

Banned Embrace

This image of Chinese runners Lin Yuwei and Wu Yanni hugging on October 1, after Lin won gold in the 100-meter hurdle race at the Asian Games in Hangzhou, was censored on Chinese social media platforms. Photos of the pair, whose numbers 6 and 4 are reminiscent of June 4, the politically sensitive anniversary date of the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre, were retroactively removed from Chinese state media websites; Weibo posts showed a gray box instead of the image. Posts about the photo, and censorship of it, went viral on global platforms like X, with one garnering over four million views.

Credit: X / @whyyoutouzhele
The Israel-Hamas conflict has triggered a fresh outpouring of hate speech that aligns with Beijing’s policy aims

A harrowing video that was recently posted on the Chinese social media platform Weibo shows a Chinese-Israeli woman, Noa Argamani, being taken away on a motorcycle by Hamas militants. Some of the callous comments that Chinese netizens posted beneath it are difficult to read.

The one with the most “likes”—1,861 as of October 20—said, “I don’t want to pay attention to her!”

The second most liked comment went further: “Israeli soldiers are all Nazis, killing monsters!” (Argamani served in the Israeli military, a requirement for most Israeli citizens.)

These comments most likely do not reflect the average Chinese person’s attitude toward Argamani’s plight, but they do offer an illustration of the atmosphere on the Chinese internet.

Since Hamas’s terrorist attack on October 7, and Israel’s ensuing bombardment of the Gaza Strip, the Chinese internet has been awash with antisemitism, including many comments that are too extreme to repeat in this article, alongside a smaller strain of anti-Palestinian content that often veers into Islamophobia.

Hateful online content is a global scourge. The Chinese information space, however, is unique in that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) tightly controls the messages circulating on social media platforms through both automated and manual tools, meaning the hate speech that remains uncensored reflects the regime’s decisions. In Freedom House’s newly released Freedom on the Net 2023 report, China was ranked as having the world’s worst environment for internet freedom—for the ninth straight year.

Amid the new round of conflict, Jin Canrong, a prominent international affairs professor with 2.7 million followers on Weibo, wrote, “Israel right now is crazed with killing, the UN can’t be of much use this time.” “Hitler truly knew the Jews” was the most liked comment in response to Jin’s post.

Chinese social media platforms, which are quick to delete content that the government deems politically sensitive, have done little to restrict antisemitic content that
clearly violates their community standards prohibiting hate speech or speech that might incite racial discrimination or violence.

Instead of condemning antisemitism, the Chinese government, through the state media, has only exploited the conflict to play up antisemitic tropes and spread disinformation. On October 10, in a program on “uncovering the Israel element of US elections in history,” the state broadcaster China Central Television (CCTV) alleged that “Jews who represent three percent of US population control 70 percent of its wealth.” Similarly, during an outbreak of fighting between Israeli forces and Palestinian militants in May 2021, China Global Television Network (CGTN), the government’s primary foreign-language news channel, aired a program in English on US-Israel relations, attributing the two countries’ close ties to the notion that “Jews dominate finance, media, and internet sectors” in the United States.

As with antisemitic content, the Chinese government and Chinese social media companies have shown little interest in addressing the spread of Islamophobic content. One netizen wrote, “Palestine has no civilians. It only has little terrorists, old terrorists, female and male terrorists, should all be wiped out.” Chinese social media platforms, used by Chinese people inside and outside of the country, have long been vectors of anti-Muslim conspiracy theories and false information.

Beijing’s condoning and dissemination of antisemitic propaganda is no surprise given that Israel is a close partner of the United States, which the CCP sees as posing an existential threat to its rule of China. The regime has consistently seized on international conflicts as opportunities to undermine Washington’s standing in the global order. Many of the recent state media reports blamed US imperialism as the root cause of the decades-old Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The CCP has historically supported the Palestinian national movement in the name of anticolonial and anti-imperialist solidarity. China was among the first states to recognize a “state of Palestine.” For its part, the Palestinian Authority, which governs a portion of the West Bank, has endorsed Beijing’s persecution of Uyghur and other Turkic Muslims in Xinjiang, which may constitute crimes against humanity, according to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.

Online hate speech—whether it is antisemitism, Islamophobia, or some other form of bigotry—is a growing threat to human rights and democracy around the world. In many countries, civil society has played a critical role in tracking and countering such material. Organizations like Freedom House have worked closely with local activists, lawmakers, and technology companies to create policies that reduce the spread of hateful and inciting content in countries where such remedial efforts are permitted.

But in China, the CCP has nearly eliminated the space for independent domestic civil society groups, and it has blocked or even criminalized interactions with foreign non-governmental organizations. As a result, there are few in a position to challenge hate
online, particularly when incendiary speech is fomented by the government itself.

In a recent essay, the well-known Chinese writer Yashalong expressed concern about the possibility that such online hate could lead to offline violence: “A breath out always follows after a breath in. Blood in word very likely becomes blood in deed.”

**IN THE NEWS**

**Censorship updates: Asian games, mobile app stores, foreign access to Chinese internet, Freedom on the Net findings**

- **Censorship of accidental Tiananmen Massacre references, other content at the Asian Games:** On September 11, a video titled “A Literary Exploration of Hangzhou” featuring two Song Dynasty poems with political undertones, including an indirect reference to the June 4, 1989, Tiananmen Massacre and criticism of corrupt politicians in Hangzhou, was released by the People’s Daily ahead of the Hangzhou Asian Games opening ceremony. It was later removed and censored on Weibo. On WeChat, Chinese censors deleted a photo of athletes hugging in such a way that their race bibs formed the number 89, which can be interpreted as a reference to the year of the massacre. That action followed the viral spread of a similar photo at the games that was censored because athletes’ race bibs formed the number 64 (see Image of the Month)—which can be interpreted as a reference to June 4. As of September 29, more than 10,000 social media accounts and around 74,000 games-related pieces of information, including those with political speech allowed in most countries, had been censored since the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) on August 28 called for a two-month “clean-up” for the games. The campaign aimed to tighten content controls and crack down on various violations such as impersonating official accounts, spreading rumors, and sharing information about “specific” regions, presumably areas like Xinjiang and Tibet where the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is committing gross rights violations against ethnic and religious minority populations.

- **New blocks on foreign access to Chinese government websites, users:** The Chinese Supreme People’s Court (SPC) website reportedly restricted access for foreign users on September 20, preventing them from researching Chinese legal cases and seeking judicial clarity. In November 2022, foreign users were also blocked from accessing the Chinese version of the SPC site and China Judgments Online (CJO) database. The English-language version of the SPC site is still accessible, but contains only limited content. These restrictions reflect the increasing regulation by the CCP of information on the Chinese internet for foreigners; an important academic database, for example, was also restricted in April. Separately, Skype callers outside China faced access issues in May due to what its parent company, Microsoft, said was “local telecom operators” blocking calls into the country. Users
continue to report difficulties making calls to China via Skype as of late August.

- **Mobile app stores enforce new checks on apps amid tighter government rules**: On September 29, Apple announced that app developers who wish to publish on its App store in China must provide an Internet Content Provider (ICP) filing number issued by the Chinese government. The move effectively closes a loophole that allowed Chinese iPhone users to download apps blocked in China and access content using a VPN, like Facebook, YouTube, and WhatsApp. The move followed measures released by Chinese authorities on August 8 for mobile-app publishers to submit business details to the government. In enforcing the ICP policy, Apple joins 26 other app stores operated by Chinese and foreign companies, including Tencent, Huawei, and Samsung, which were included in a September 27 list of those that had already filed business details with regulators.

- **Chinese government worse offender of internet freedom, ninth year in a row**: According to Freedom House’s 2023 Freedom on the Net report, published on October 4, China remains “the worst abuser of internet freedom” for the 9th consecutive year. The country’s Internet Freedom score dropped from 10 to 9 (out of 100), with the decrease reflecting the state monopoly in telecommunications and increased obstacles for private companies entering the market. Crackdowns and long prison sentences for rights activists, journalists, and members of minority groups exercising their right to free expression; stricter censorship; and new requirements for social media operators were observed during the coverage period from mid-2022 to 2023.

**Surveillance updates: Anti-espionage campaign, data export rollback, keyboard app vulnerability, forced “antifraud” app installation**

- **Anti-espionage campaign enhances public monitoring**: Since August, the Chinese government has intensified a nationwide anti-espionage campaign. Red banners and posters with a hotline number for reporting suspected espionage have appeared in public places, and a reward of up to 500,000 renminbi ($68,500) was being offered for reporting suspicious individuals or espionage activities. Additionally, recruitment notices from some Chinese firms indicate that they will not consider applicants who have returned from certain countries, a shift from the past when foreign degrees or affiliations would improve career prospects. A survey by the American Chamber of Commerce in Shanghai from May 31 to June 30 and a position paper by the European Union (EU) Chamber of Commerce in China found a decrease in optimism and profitability rates among US and European businesses compared to past years, partly due to anti-espionage and data-security laws.

- **CAC draft rules roll back data export regulations**: The CAC released new draft reg-
ulations on September 28 to standardize and facilitate cross-border data flows, with the draft open for public comment until October 15. The move appears to be an effort to streamline existing guidelines on data transfers and export of personal information that implied extensive review by the CAC was needed for even minor transactions. The rules have caused problems for domestic and foreign companies, as well as the regulator itself due to vague definitions, potential political backlash, and resulting bureaucratic gridlock. The draft proposes exemptions for cases where data-export security assessments and certification are not required, such as when the data is used for transactions like cross-border purchases, travel reservations, or visas and when personal information is provided overseas and not collected domestically. Data that relevant departments have not deemed “important” or publicly announced as such does not require data-export security assessments.

- Tencent repairs widespread keyboard vulnerability after Citizen Lab report: An August 9 report by Citizen Lab, a research group affiliated with the University of Toronto and specializing in technology and security, uncovered vulnerabilities in the encryption system of the popular Chinese keyboard app Sogou Input Method. The report highlights vulnerabilities in the app that could expose users’ sensitive data to eavesdroppers. Prior to releasing the report, Citizen Lab informed Tencent about the vulnerabilities in a letter sent on May 31. The firm eventually acknowledged the report and released updated versions of the app in late July to address the weaknesses. The research group urged all users of the Sogou Input Method—which consists of over 400 million monthly active users in China and globally—to immediately update to the most recent version of the app.

- Police drive for mobile “antifraud software” raises surveillance concerns: According to reports from Radio Free Asia (RFA), local Chinese police are intensifying efforts to enforce the installation on mobile phones of an antifraud software developed by the Ministry of Public Security. Instances of police checking and registering phones at train stations and intercepting pedestrians in Heilongjiang Province and Inner Mongolia, as well as at a university in Jiangxi Province, have been reported, with those who refuse to download the software facing movement restrictions. The forced installation and data access the app requires has raised fears that although labeled as “antifraud,” the government-created app actually facilitates surveillance or serves to stop incoming calls from overseas.
Arrests: Life sentence for Uyghur scholar, secret trials and leaked indictments for journalists, Australian reporter freed, Tibetan jailed for Dalai Lama photo

- **Uyghur scholar sentenced to life**: On September 21, the Dui Hua Foundation reported that Rahile Dawut, a prominent Uyghur academic who disappeared in 2017, had been sentenced to life imprisonment for the crime of “splittism,” a charge often used by the Chinese government to punish those trying to preserve Uyghur culture. Dawut, whose daughter lives in the United States, had published books and papers on Uyghur folklore, and had been a visiting scholar at several American universities. She is one of hundreds of intellectuals imprisoned since 2016 in the CCP’s campaign of suppression, in which over one million Turkic Muslims have been detained. News of her sentencing also coincided with the ninth anniversary of Uyghur scholar Ilham Tohti being sentenced to life in prison for criticizing the regime’s policies on ethnic minorities.

- **Independent journalist and labor activist indicted for studying nonviolent activism**: On September 22, independent journalist and #MeToo activist Huang Xueqin and labor activist Wang Jianbing underwent a closed-door trial in Guangzhou, Guangdong Province, for “inciting subversion of state power,” a charge often used to punish dissent. Huang and Wang have been detained since September 2021, denied access to lawyers, and subject to extensive interrogation and solitary confinement. The day after the trial, the rights website Weiquanwang published a leaked copy of the indictment against the pair, dated August 11, 2022. It outlines as their “crimes” actions such as publishing online articles critical of the Chinese government and recruiting others to do the same. It also references Huang’s participating in online courses on “nonviolent” civic movements, Wang’s participation in similar such courses when studying in the United Kingdom in 2020, and using digital software to plan gatherings where Chinese citizens discussed challenges faced by activists due to increasing CCP persecution.

- **Chinese journalist verdict delayed, Australian reporter released**: The verdict in the case of Yuyu Dong, a veteran Chinese journalist and editor accused of espionage, has been delayed for three additional months, according to a September 27 statement by the National Press Club. Dong has been in detention since February 2022. His trial was conducted in secret in late July and the verdict had already been delayed once due to insufficient evidence. Separately, journalist Cheng Lei, an Australian citizen who was arrested in Beijing in August 2020, was released and returned home to Melbourne on October 11. Cheng, who had worked for the state-run China Global Television Network (CGTN), was held in China for over three years on national security charges. After years of secrecy, Chinese officials declared upon her release that she had been sentenced to two years and 11 months and had served out her term.
Tibetan jailed for Dalai Lama photo: Radio Free Asia reported on September 27 that Tsultrim, a Tibetan language advocate, was sentenced to two years in prison in April 2023 for possessing a photo of the exiled Tibetan spiritual leader the Dalai Lama on his mobile phone. He had previously been detained for two months and tortured in 2022 for sharing a picture of the Dalai Lama on social media and saving it on his phone. Tsultrim is currently imprisoned in Sichuan without visitation rights.

HONG KONG
Police arrest solitary protesters, mainland Chinese student convicted of “sedition,” government demands personal details of locals working for foreign consulates

National Day, Mid-autumn Festival protesters arrested: On October 1, China’s National Day and the anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic of China, police surrounded and detained activist Yung Wai-Yip in a commercial district. Yung had stood silently holding white flowers and wearing a black t-shirt with the phrase “Hong Kong—add oil,” symbols of mourning in Chinese culture, and a phrase used for encouragement, respectively. He was reportedly arrested for disrupting order in a public place. On October 9, local media reported that police had arrested elderly activist Chan Ki-Kau, who became known as “Grandpa Chan” for his support of young protesters during 2019 prodemocracy demonstrations. Chan had climbed to the top of the iconic Lion Rock in Hong Kong during the Mid-autumn Festival in late September and displayed two banners with lines by classical Chinese poet Lu Xun that used terms like “defiance” and “serving the children,” a likely reference to the many young political prisoners in the territory. Chan was detained for violating park regulations and could face up to three years imprisonment; he was released on bail and must report back next month. Besides such prosecutions for actions that years ago would have been considered protected speech in Hong Kong, a heavy police presence, increased surveillance, and preemptive visits to known activists have served to head off larger protests, even on less sensitive issues like women’s and workers’ rights.

“Sedition” convictions for Mainland Chinese student, man who imported banned children’s books: On September 12, a Hong Kong court sentenced Zeng Yuxuan—a doctoral student from mainland China—to six months in prison under the city’s colonial-era sedition laws. She was reportedly punished for possessing posters of the “Pillar of Shame,” a sculpture commemorating the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre; for commemorating the death of a Hong Kong protester in 2021; and for maintaining contact with US-based activist Zhou Fengsuo. Zeng is the first mainland Chinese person convicted of sedition in Hong Kong. She pleaded guilty in the apparent hope of reducing the sentence, but was reportedly defiant in
her court appearance, wearing a sweatshirt with an image of Winnie the Pooh, a meme derogatory of Xi Jinping. On October 12, local media reported that she had been released and returned to mainland China, but it remains unclear if she will serve her prison sentence there. In another case, Kurt Leung was sentenced on October 6 to four months in prison for importing “seditious publications.” Leung had received a delivery of 18 copies of an illustrated children's book that had been deemed to “incite hatred” of the Chinese and Hong Kong government in a 2022 trial.

- **Chinese Foreign Ministry demands Hong Kong consulates hand over local staff data:** On September 20, the BBC reported that China's Foreign Ministry had written to foreign consulates in Hong Kong to request that personal details of locally hired staff, including their home addresses, be submitted by October 18. This is believed to be the first time such a request has been made in Hong Kong and is the latest sign of tightening surveillance, especially for those communicating with foreigners, as well as of efforts to bring governance in Hong Kong into alignment with more intrusive policies in mainland China.

- **Chinese security forces urged Hong Kong radio host to become pro-Beijing YouTuber:** On October 2, RFA reported that Chinese state security police had approached former Hong Kong radio host Edmund Wan toward the end of a 32-month-long jail term, encouraging him to set up a YouTube channel upon his release to “tell good stories about China.” Wan, who had been convicted of “sedition” and “money laundering” related to crowd-funding and comments made in online radio broadcasts from August to October 2020, refused and exposed the attempt after relocating to Canada. The attempt aligns with a larger pattern of CCP-linked actors attempting to create or recruit social media influencers to broadcast pro-Beijing messages or outright disinformation.
BEYOND CHINA
Kenya state media expansion, Tiananmen musical, pressure on UN sideline events, surveillance exports study

- **Chinese state media expand presence in Kenya:** Chinese state news outlets (such as Xinhua and CGTN), Chinese diplomats, and local journalists working for Chinese state outlets have increased their presence in Kenyan media over the past few months, according to a detailed analysis published on October 6 by *China Digital Times*. Sources like Chinese state-run China Daily came to dominate articles that mention “China” in August and September in the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC) and Capital FM, for example. The surge in such content and other initiatives—like a Chinese-embassy sponsored photography contest—may have been triggered by rising bilateral tensions and public criticism of China amid concerns over public debt and a hacking scandal.

- **Fear of reprisals hangs over Tiananmen musical:** The production “Tiananmen: A New Musical” premiered October 4 in Arizona. It portrays the events of the Tiananmen Square student protests and subsequent deadly crackdown by the Chinese military by following two fictional participants. With a cast and crew composed of Asian Americans, the reach of Chinese government intimidation and fear of reprisals had already been felt before it opened. In an abrupt about-face, one of the leads announced on Instagram in August that he was withdrawing, while on a concert tour in China. The musical director and another actor also withdrew over concerns that their family members in China could be punished; others reportedly consulted with relatives to ensure no one might be endangered.

- **Chinese government pressures UN missions to avoid events on Uyghurs, Hong Kong press freedom:** On September 11, China’s mission to the United Nations in New York issued a letter to fellow missions urging governments to boycott an event held on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly about atrocities faced by Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims in China. The speakers included a US diplomat, former UN high commissioner for human rights Zeid Ra’ad al-Hussein, and experts from the Atlantic Council and Human Rights Watch (HRW). Two weeks later, China’s mission to the UN in Geneva issued a similar letter urging countries “not to participate in any way” in an event about press freedom in Hong Kong scheduled for September 27 on the sidelines of the UN Human Rights Council. It included among the speakers the son of jailed media tycoon Jimmy Lai. In both cases, the events proceeded as planned, with the Geneva one garnering sponsorship from the governments of over 20 countries.

- **New research clarifies political implications of China’s export of surveillance technology:** A working paper published in September by the Cambridge, Massachusetts–based National Bureau of Economic Research offers insights on patterns surrounding the export of artificial intelligence (AI) powered surveillance systems.
from China. Using information from trade databases and regime-type indices, the authors found three key dynamics: 1. China has a comparative advantage in facial-recognition AI technology and is more likely to export it compared to other countries; 2. Autocracies and weak democracies are more likely to import AI surveillance tools from China than from the United States or other democracies; and 3. Such imports are more likely to happen during years of domestic political unrest, suggesting that “as part of autocracies and weak democracies’ concerted efforts to consolidate political control, they turn specifically to China’s facial-recognition AI technology which was developed there to achieve similar goals.”

**FEATURED PUSHBACK**

Worldwide “Day of Mourning” Protests

On October 1, China celebrated its National Day, marking the 74th year since the rise of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to power and the founding of the People’s Republic of China. The occasion was met with global protests referred to by activists as a “Day of Mourning.” Demonstrations took place in major cities worldwide, with at least 22 anti-CCP protests unfolding. Protesters from various groups, including Hong Kongers, Uyghurs, Tibetans, Mongolians, and Chinese democracy activists, raised their collective voices to draw attention to the CCP’s history of oppression and advocate for greater freedom and human rights in China.

In London, demonstrators were observed holding signs that read, “We resist the Chinese Communist Party,” and “Tibetans demand freedom,” while in Birmingham, speakers called “for a better world without Chinese [Communist Party] tyranny.” Chinese democracy activists in San Francisco protested against the dictatorship of the CCP outside the Chinese consulate, calling it an “illegitimate regime.” Other protesters chanted slogans for greater freedom in Inner Mongolia, Hong Kong, and Tibet. In Washington, DC, protesters donned shirts bearing the message “Stop Uyghur Genocide,” drawing attention to Beijing’s ongoing mass internment and reeducation of its Muslim-majority population in Xinjiang. Hong Kongers worldwide, including those in Toronto, displayed a “Free Hong Kong” banner. Protests also took place in Tokyo and Taipei.
WHAT TO WATCH FOR

**Tightened security, censorship surrounding anniversary of Sitong Bridge protest:** October 13 marked the one-year anniversary of a daring protest on Beijing's Sitong Bridge, when a man unfurled banners calling for an end to the government’s draconian “zero-COVID” policy and called for greater freedom. Images of the protest spread within China and internationally and are viewed by many observers as a catalyst to nationwide protests that erupted against the zero-COVID measures, ultimately resulting in an abrupt and rare policy reversal in December. Watch for tightened security in Beijing, increased censorship of relevant terms, and discreet commemorations of the protest over the coming month.

**Backlash against Chinese state response to Israel-Hamas war:** Following a deadly rampage by Hamas militants who infiltrated Israel from Gaza on October 7, the Chinese government’s initial refusal to condemn the attack as terrorism has drawn criticism in Israel and internationally. Chinese state media outlets and nationalist netizens have also posted blatantly antisemitic content. The Chinese embassy in Israel eventually referred to the militants as “terrorists” when speaking about a woman of Chinese and Israeli heritage who was among those kidnapped into Gaza. Watch for how news of the war is reported by Chinese state media and on social media, as well as how scholars, policymakers, and companies in Israel and elsewhere alter their engagement with China, if at all, as a result.

**Increased harassment of Hong Kong Journalists Association:** Ronson Chan, the chair of the widely respected Hong Kong Journalists Association (HKJA) was sentenced on September 25 to five days in jail. Chan had been arrested last year while reporting and charged with “obstructing police” after he failed to hand over his identity card. Chan pleaded not guilty, said he had asked police to show a warrant but they refused. The HKJA is one of the few independent trade unions and civil society groups still operating in Hong Kong, and periodically criticizes local police and government officials. Watch for whether authorities intensify harassment of the HKJA and its representatives, as well as whether other journalists are jailed for failing to show ID cards.
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](mailto:cmb@freedomhouse.org) or e-mail 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](http://greatfire.org) or [here](http://greatfire.org). Learn more about how to reach uncensored content and enhance digital security [here](http://greatfire.org).

- **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](http://freedomhouse.org).

- **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](http://freedomhouse.org) on the Freedom House website.

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**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*