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IMAGE OF THE MONTH
Drowning in PRC flags

This image, taken from a November 14 video, shows pro-Beijing protesters with Chinese national flags swarming a sole Uyghur woman, who is holding a flag representing an independent Uyghur homeland, at San Francisco’s international airport, as Chinese president Xi Jinping lands. The incident was one of many documented cases of harassment and violence by pro-Beijing greeters, many of whom were apparently paid by Chinese diplomats, against anti-Xi protesters throughout the week. The video, which garnered over 130,000 views, is jarring since the woman is a survivor of a detention camp in Xinjiang.

Credit: @SFTHQ/X

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A year after the massive demonstrations against draconian lockdown rules, participants have an abiding new sense of strength and responsibility.

In late November 2022, the Chinese internet was overwhelmed by expressions of grief and rage, despite the government’s best efforts to maintain its strict censorship of online dissent. The outpouring was triggered by a fire in Urumqi, capital of the western region of Xinjiang, that killed at least 10 people after harsh COVID-19 rules reportedly restricted the movement of victims and rescuers.

In the subsequent days, tens of thousands of people, many of them young, took to the streets across China to protest the government’s inhumane health measures and denounce the authoritarian rule of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The White Paper protests, named for the blank sheets of paper that participants held up to mock official censorship, also drew widespread support from the Chinese diaspora, as thousands staged rallies in major cities from Paris to Sydney.

A year has passed since the demonstrations—the largest in China since the 1989 Tiananmen Square democracy movement—caught the world by surprise. Stringent censorship and surveillance, however, have made public commemorations inside the country nearly impossible. Words and names associated with the protests continue to be banned online, protest sites are cordoned off by police, and those who participated in 2022 still face police harassment.

Yet, as with the original protests, remembrance activities have spread internationally. At a rally I attended in Washington, DC, a Chinese man, wearing a mask to protect his identity, called himself “a survivor” of the CCP’s zero-COVID policy and said it was his “privilege and duty” to speak up for the people who have been censored inside the country. During a commemoration rally in London, activist Ma Youwei told Radio Free Asia: “It’s very common to feel powerless as a Chinese person living in China. I wanted to get rid of that feeling. How? You do it through action.”

For many people in China, the biggest takeaway from the protests was that far more of their compatriots are deeply dissatisfied with the regime than they previously realized. Freedom House research shows that at least 72 protests were held across 17 provinces and regions during the last week of November 2022 alone. “I could not have possibly imagined that so many people would come today,” a protester in Shanghai said on the popular Chinese-language podcast Bumingbai.
Similar sentiments were shared among Chinese protesters in the diaspora. A student who organized an on-campus protest in the United States told me: “I thought only the people I already knew would turn up. Then I saw like 300 people!” A computer programmer who attended a protest in front of the Chinese consulate in New York said: “I spotted my colleague in the crowd. All these years I have worked with him, I had no idea he loathes the CCP just as I do!”

The knowledge that “I am not alone” has been tremendously empowering. People have since felt emboldened to approach classmates and coworkers to talk about Chinese politics, to organize events offline, and to share information and thoughts online. Anonymous social media accounts born out of the protests continue to gain followings, serving as focal points for news and debate. In the past year, I have attended many private gatherings with activists, students, and professionals of mainland Chinese origin, where we discussed ideas about human rights and democracy. Another notable feature of the White Paper protests was the large share of female participants. Many of them gained organizing experience through their participation in China’s women’s rights movement, which continues to thrive despite unrelenting government repression. Unlike the older generation of prodemocracy activists, the young people who are at the forefront of activism today care not only about the CCP’s authoritarian rule, but also about China’s patriarchal society and deep-rooted discrimination against LGBT+ groups. They care not just about the human rights of Han Chinese people, but also about those of Uyghurs and Tibetans.

Many young people recognize that they might be the oppressed in one context and the oppressor in another, and that the struggle for a truly democratic China—one that protects not just the political freedom of dominant, privileged groups, but also the dignity and rights of the marginalized and dispossessed—could take generations. This level of awareness regarding the complexity of authoritarian repression is unprecedented.

I’ve also increasingly seen young Chinese activists get involved in the human rights causes of other countries. In the United States, they have gone to pro-Palestinian rallies, George Floyd protests, and demonstrations supporting women and freedom in Iran. In recent weeks, the Instagram account of the anonymous activist group Citizen Daily CN has posted messages urging people to pay attention to the situation in Gaza. A growing number of young people view themselves as part of a global struggle for freedom and human rights, and believe that solidarity with other oppressed people around the world is a moral imperative. This level of international perspective is equally unprecedented.

As Washington and Beijing engage more and more overtly in geopolitical competition, we should not lose sight of the passionate longing for freedom that people in China are trying to express. We should support their aspirations at every opportunity.
IN THE NEWS
Censorship updates: Mourning Li Keqiang, Ming Dynasty book, generative AI training

• **Mourning Li Keqiang:** Following the unexpected death of former Chinese premier Li Keqiang on October 27, offline and online spaces in China saw an outpouring of grief and expressions of mourning for the technocrat, who was widely perceived as affable and pragmatic but was also sidelined by President Xi Jinping, who has taken a more ideological approach to governance. However, officials inspected the offerings of people gathered at Li's former residence in Anhui Province who brought flowers and cards, while online posts, videos, and comments lauding Li’s leadership qualities and expressing shock at his death were swiftly removed. Media outlets were further instructed to avoid “overly effusive comments.” Posts and accounts that referenced the song “A Pity It Wasn’t You” by Malaysian singer Fish Leong, which was widely interpreted as an oblique critique of Xi, were deleted or suspended. The hashtag “The one who should die hasn’t” also faced censorship. Universities warned students against posting about Li's death on social media, and censorship followed any speculation about its cause on platforms like WeChat. Besides the sensitivity of implicit swipes at Xi, the tight controls were likely motivated by past events when commemorations of popular but sidelined leaders transformed into political protests, as occurred most notably in 1989.

• **Ming Dynasty book recalled:** The book The Chongzhen Emperor: Diligent Ruler of a Failed Dynasty was removed from shelves on October 16 due to a “printing problem,” according to its publisher, Dook Media Group, in a recall notice shared online. The book, with an updated cover and title from a 2016 edition, hints at how the emperor's insufficient skills and overzealous endeavors might have led to the dynasty’s downfall. Netizens began drawing parallels with Xi, potentially resulting in the book’s removal and deletion of such comments. The book is now unavailable online, with searches for the author, Chen Wutong, and the hashtag #Chongzhen on Weibo yielding results restricted to posts by a limited number of verified users. The recall is part of a broader trend in recent years in which historical or scholarly articles critical of past dynasties have been censored due to perceived or actual undertones of criticism toward Xi.

• **Generative AI regulation and censorship:** On October 11, the National Information Security Standardization Technical Committee (known as TC260) released draft measures on basic security requirements for generative artificial intelligence (AI) services. The draft, open for commentary through October 25, requires companies offering services powered by generative AI to conduct security evaluations for each dataset used in training public-facing AI models. Any dataset containing “more than 5 percent of illegal and harmful information,” including content aimed at “overthrowing the socialist system,” “damaging the country’s image,” and “undermining national unity and social stability,” would be barred from
being used for training. In a recent incident highlighting the unpredictability of generative AI for China’s censors, Reuters reported on October 24 that an AI study tablet from Chinese firm iFlyTek produced an essay that criticized Mao Zedong as “narrow-minded” and “intolerant.”

**Surveillance updates: State secrets law, social media real names, citizen surveillance perceptions**

- **State secrets law to be revised:** On October 20, a draft revision of the Law on Guarding State Secrets was submitted to the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress, updating it for the first time since 2010 and broadening its already wide-reaching provisions. The draft proposes restrictions on international travel for those with access to confidential information and increases the power of the National Administration of State Secret Protection to conduct investigations of potential violations. It further suggests state-funded public education, media campaigns, and mandatory audits of technology products related to state secrets. The proposal’s vague definitions and the past use of state-secrets charges to jail journalists and business executives have raised concerns among legal experts and the foreign business community, who fear it will heighten the risks associated with operating in China. The public comment period will end on November 23.

- **Social media influencers required to display real names:** On October 31, popular Chinese social media platforms, including the WeChat messaging service, Douyin, Xiaohongshu, and Bilibili, announced that influencers with more than 500,000 followers must display the user’s real name publicly, removing the option of using an alias (individuals have long had to use their real names to create accounts in the first place). Those who refuse risk revenue caps and limits on new followers. Earlier in the month Weibo advised influencers with over one million followers to comply with similar guidelines by the end of October, and those with over 500,000 followers to do so by the end of the year. The regulations are aimed at accounts that cover topics such as domestic and international news, politics, social issues, finance, education, health care, legal matters, and entertainment. The move aligns with increased regulation by the Cyber Administration of China on anonymous accounts and online rumors. The measure has raised privacy concerns and fears among users and netizens about potential doxing and harassment that could increase already widespread self-censorship on China’s heavily regulated internet.

- **Chinese citizens’ perceptions of surveillance:** On October 12, the Australian Strategic Policy Institute published a report on state surveillance. The study included an online survey of 4,038 mainland Chinese citizens conducted from early October to early November. The survey revealed a range of views on state surveillance,
reflecting differing levels of trust and comfort. While privacy was valued, opinions on surveillance differed, with many favoring a more consensual approach instead of being forcibly subject to surveillance. Over 65 percent of respondents favor voluntary DNA sample collection, and generally prefer cameras over more intrusive biometric data collection. The survey found that public opinion often aligned with Chinese state narratives linking surveillance to personal safety, indicating propaganda efforts on the issue have been relatively effective.

Arrests: Harsh punishments for rights lawyer, Japanese businessman, Tibetan-language advocate, Falun Gong activist, Uyghur filmmaker

- Rights lawyer sentenced to six-and-a-half years, another released on bail: Renowned Chinese human rights lawyer Li Yuhan, recipient of the 2020 Franco-German Human Rights Prize, was handed a six-and-a-half-year prison sentence on October 25 for “picking quarrels and provoking trouble,” a charge often used to punish activists. Her arrest in 2017 was seen as retaliation for her defense of Wang Yu, the first lawyer detained in the CCP’s 2015 crackdown on rights attorneys. Li has been in custody since, despite her health declining, but was only sentenced now. In another update, Chinese human rights lawyer Lu Siwei, who was arrested in Laos and repatriated to China in September, was bailed on October 28.

- Japanese businessman formally arrested on espionage charges, impacting business community: Japanese businessman Nishiyama Hiroshi, an employee of Astellas Pharma and former senior manager of the China-Japan Chamber of Commerce, was formally arrested on espionage charges on October 19. Initially detained in March, his arrest has reportedly increased caution among members of the Japanese business community, prompting a growing number to leave China. Since 2015, at least 16 Japanese citizens have been detained by Chinese authorities on suspicion of espionage, including Nishiyama.

- Tibetan-language advocate detained, beaten for WeChat video: Tashi Wangchuk, a Tibetan entrepreneur and well-known language advocate, was detained for three days and faced physical mistreatment after posting a video of authorities denying his business license. His carwash business was abruptly shut down, as reported by Radio Free Asia on October 29. Wangchuk, who was featured in a 2015 New York Times article advocating for the use of Tibetan language in government and education, was sentenced to five years’ imprisonment for “inciting separatism” after those remarks. Wangchuk had been released in January 2021 but remains deprived of his political rights and under close government surveillance.

- Prominent Falun Gong practitioner sentenced for distributing flyers, health declining: Beijing Falun Gong practitioner Pang You was sentenced to a 15-month
prison term in July for distributing materials about Falun Gong and the rights violations facing adherents. Previously jailed in 2000 and 2009, Pang has been detained since 2022. In 2015, he was released from a prior detention due to a successful campaign on his behalf, which included a petition signed by dozens of Beijing residents. As of November 1, Pang was receiving medical attention at the Beijing Police Hospital due to health concerns. He was one of 100 Falun Gong practitioners sentenced to prison since July, according to the Falun Dafa Information Center.

• **Uyghur filmmaker put on trial, reports torture:** Uyghur filmmaker Ikram Nurmehmet, who was arrested in May, was tried on October 27 in Xinjiang for “terrorist” activities and involvement in an “East Turkestan separatist” group, charges that his lawyer said may yield a sentence of over eight years. Nurmehmet reportedly endured torture and was coerced into a false confession during his detention, which he retracted during the trial. Known for Uyghur-centric films including *Elephant in the Car*, which tells the story of a Han Chinese woman sharing a taxi with two Uyghurs, Nurmehmet studied filmmaking in Turkey for six years. This may have contributed to his detention; in August, the Norway-based Uyghur Hjelp warned that Uyghurs with Turkish ties were increasingly facing arrest in China.

**HONG KONG**

**Media restricted at financial summit, erhu player jailed, academic restrictions increase, YouTube rejects takedown requests**

• **Media access restricted at financial summit:** From November 6 to 8, the Hong Kong Monetary Authority, the territory’s de facto central bank, hosted its second international financial leaders’ summit, attracting executives from major global banks despite Hong Kong’s economic woes and political crackdown. On November 14, the Hong Kong Journalists Association raised concerns that journalists’ ability to access attendees was extremely limited. The prominent journalists’ union reported that journalists were relegated to a separate floor and permitted to watch speeches via live stream but not to interview attendees directly, in what it called a “serious blow to press freedom.”

• **Jail terms for erhu playing, social media posts made in Japan:** On October 24, an elderly erhu player named Li Jiexin was sentenced to 30 days in prison after performing the protest anthem “Glory to Hong Kong” in public; Li was convicted of performing and raising money without a permit, but the judge acknowledged his actions amounted to “soft resistance,” reinforcing the political tinge of the case. Separately, on November 3, a judge sentenced 23-year-old Yuen Ching-ting to two months in prison over social media posts made when she was studying in Japan.
that were critical of the CCP and supportive of Hong Kong protesters. She was charged under the colonial-era “sedition law” for posts made between 2018 and early 2023.

- **Restrictions on academic freedom evident in scholar ban, British lawyer’s talk canceled:** On October 24, Canadian Chinese scholar Rowena He was informed by the Hong Kong Immigration Department that her visa renewal to work at City University of Hong Kong (CUHK) had been denied. CUHK, where He taught since 2019, subsequently informed her that her position had been terminated. He, who has been on a fellowship in the United States, is a political science professor and specializes in the 1989 Tiananmen Square protest, massacre, and aftermath. Her case has been viewed as the latest example of increasing restrictions on academic freedom, especially in the social sciences. Those restrictions, along with the worsening political environment, has driven hundreds of scholars to leave Hong Kong, prompting a record high turnover rate in 2022. More recently, a talk scheduled for November 17 at Hong Kong University by a British barrister who had been barred from representing jailed media tycoon Jimmy Lai was canceled due to “unforeseen circumstances.”

- **Google refused takedown request of Jimmy Lai documentary:** A Google transparency report published last month revealed that in April 2023, Hong Kong police had requested that its video-sharing platform, YouTube, take down a documentary about Jimmy Lai. The film, The Hong Konger, was produced by the US-based Acton Institute and has amassed over 2.8 million views since April. The police reportedly requested the removal of five videos related to the film, claiming they amounted to “seditious content,” but the company refused. The transparency report shows a steady increase in Hong Kong removal requests; 6 were filed in the second half of 2020, while 72 were filed in the first half of 2023. Unlike in mainland China, YouTube is not blocked in Hong Kong.
BEYOND CHINA

Belt and Road Forum, Canada disinformation, Thailand censorship, pressure on the arts, UK scholarships

• Belt and Road Forum welcomes journalists but keeps out foreign correspondents: The Chinese government hosted its third Belt and Road Forum in Beijing on October 17 and 18, marking a decade since the launch of President Xi’s signature Belt and Road Initiative. State media reported that individuals from over 130 countries took part. The event also included a “Media Cooperation Forum,” featuring a speech by Li Shulei, head of the CCP’s propaganda department. The event was hosted by the People’s Daily, a CCP mouthpiece, and official sources reported that “representatives from more than 110 media organizations of over 70 countries” were in attendance. Emerging from the forum were various new cooperative projects, including the Second Silk Road Global News Awards, a Middle East Media Alliance, and a China-Africa Media Action Initiative. Effectively barred from the summit, however, were foreign journalists based in China. An October 23 statement by the Foreign Correspondents’ Club of China complained of impossible bureaucratic hurdles and opaque registration procedures that prevented many journalists from gaining access to the summit.

• Disinformation campaign targets Canadian politicians: On October 23, the Canadian government reported that its Rapid Response Mechanism had detected a wide-ranging campaign of disinformation targeting members of Parliament (MPs) and political leaders—including Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and opposition leader Pierre Poilievre—using networks of inauthentic accounts and deepfake imagery. The campaign largely involved English- and French-language posts on Facebook and X purportedly authored by a Canadian CCP critic; that critic supposedly accused targets of ethical and criminal violations. At least 47 MPs were targeted. The campaign appeared aimed at harming the reputations of the MPs in question as well as that of the CCP critic in a two-fold attempt to silence criticism of the regime and sow distrust. Separately, on October 30, Ottawa announced it was banning use of Tencent’s WeChat application on government-issued mobile devices, along with software linked to Russia, citing an “unacceptable level of risk to privacy and security.”

• Thai public broadcaster blocks video after Chinese embassy complaint: Thailand’s public broadcaster published an interview on November 3 with Taiwanese foreign minister Joseph Wu, airing it on the evening news and uploading it to the station’s YouTube channel. On November 11, the Chinese embassy in Bangkok published a complaint on its Facebook page claiming the interview “hurt the Chinese people’s feelings” and urged the station to “earnestly correct the mistakes.” The Chinese state- owned Global Times reposted the call on X. The following day, the video of the interview had been removed from public view on YouTube. A similar
incident occurred in 2021, when an interview with Wu was deleted after the Chinese embassy in Kuwait complained.

• **Previously blocked Genghis Khan exhibit opens in France, performing arts group faces CCP pressure in South Korea**: An exhibition dedicated to the Mongol emperor Genghis Khan opened last month in Nantes, three years after a history museum in the French city postponed the exhibit over Beijing's attempts to impose censorship and dictate the use of words like “empire”; the new exhibit was reorganized with the aid of the democratic government of Mongolia. Separately, the New York–based Shen Yun Performing Arts classical dance troupe has reportedly encountered CCP interference in South Korea, as pressure on local theaters and government officials is making it increasingly difficult to book venues despite successful ticket sales for past performances. Beijing’s efforts and use of economic-coercion tactics are not new, having resulted in at least one last-minute cancellation in South Korea in 2016. Shen Yun’s performances offer alternative narratives to CCP depictions of Chinese history and modern China, including pieces portraying religious persecution. Over 90 incidents where the troupe was harassed or obstructed by Chinese officials in dozens of countries have been documented since 2007.

• **British think tank questions legality of Chinese state-funded scholarships**: On November 15, the UK-China Transparency initiative published a translation and analysis of rules governing the state-financed China Scholarship Council fund, which supports at least 650 Chinese graduate students at British universities each year. The report notes the increased politicization of rules governing the scholarship and admissions criteria, which now include explicit support for the CCP leadership and a review of an applicant’s “political ideology.” Recipients are also required to submit periodic reports to local Chinese diplomats and to provide names of guarantors in China who may be at risk of reprisal should a scholar violate provisions of their contract. The think tank argues that these and other requirements may be in violation of British laws and ethical standards involving discrimination and free speech protections.
FEATURED PUSHBACK
“Halloween of Discontent”

Shanghai’s youth embraced Halloween this year, taking to the streets in a variety of costumes. Some used the occasion to subtly express dissatisfaction with previously strict COVID-19 policies, censorship, and growing economic difficulties. Their distinctive fashion choices served as a silent, but potent, channel to convey their discontent, gently testing the boundaries of authority.

Some individuals appeared as “Big Whites,” a nod to COVID-19 enforcers. Wearing white hazmat suits, which symbolized the much-criticized Zero-COVID policy, they jokingly threatened “patients” with large swabs. Blank sheets of paper became costumes for some, a reference to the “White Paper” protesters in 2022 who called for an to the Zero-COVID policy. A figure clad in white and sporting a surveillance camera as a head was also spotted, representing the Chinese state’s broad digital surveillance scheme.

One person dressed as the renowned Chinese writer Lu Xun—known for his political and social critiques—began reciting a piece championing free speech only to be stopped by a police officer. One recent college graduate, disguised as a zombie clutching résumé copies, uploaded a video on the Douyin video-sharing service; the graduate’s video included the caption “Cosplaying my life—daily interviews without job offers,” a common experience as young people face record-high unemployment.

One local observer remarked, “Young people are under too much stress from competition and need an outlet.” Another added, “Each costume is a form of response to real life.” “What can't be said in words is expressed with the costumes.”
WHAT TO WATCH FOR

**Aftermath of Biden-Xi summit, APEC protests:** In the run-up to and during the November 15 meeting between US president Joe Biden and Xi, Chinese state outlets appeared to soften their tone regarding the United States, choosing to emphasize the prospects of bilateral cooperation while portraying Xi as a skilled statesman. Watch to see whether such narratives last in the summit's aftermath and whether they feature in CCP propaganda targeting foreign non-Western audiences, where anti-US rhetoric has grown in recent years. Also, watch to see whether US law enforcement agencies investigate incidents of pro-Beijing protesters harassing anti-Xi demonstrators in San Francisco.

**Stand News sedition verdict in Hong Kong:** On November 15, a district court judge delayed the verdict in a sedition case involving the Stand News media outlet, pending a ruling from a higher court. That case's ultimate conclusion may depend on whether Hong Kong courts follow a judgment of the UK Privy Council, a panel of judges whose decisions typically guide common-law jurisdictions, in a Trinidad and Tobago case that found sedition offenses "must include an intention to incite violence and disorder." Watch for the decision of the territory's Court of Appeal, its impact on the Stand News verdict, and other “sedition” charges involving nonviolent speech.

**China-linked disinformation campaigns targeting foreign politicians:** What began as a tactic used against Taiwan, especially electoral candidates from the Democratic Progressive Party, in 2018 has been spreading, with campaigns documented in Australia and now Canada. Networks of inauthentic accounts linked to China, and presumably Chinese security forces, conduct targeted campaigns that attempt to smear politicians’ reputations and undermine trust in officials from across the political spectrum. With important elections scheduled in 2024 in Taiwan, the United States, and India, among other democracies, watch for additional campaigns and takedowns.
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](https://www.freedomhouse.org/China-media) or [here](https://www.freedomhouse.org/China-media). Learn more about how to reach uncensored content and enhance digital security [here](https://www.freedomhouse.org/China-media).

- **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](https://www.freedomhouse.org/China-media).

- **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](https://www.freedomhouse.org/China-media) 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*