

CHINA MEDIA BULLETIN

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ANALYSIS

As US Tech Firms Bow to Beijing's Censorship, Chinese Users Risk Everything to Defy It

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Two recent incidents illustrated the starkly different ways in which US technology companies and Chinese users have responded to Beijing's obsession with suppressing any criticism of President Xi Jinping.

On April 19, the US technology giant Apple announced that it had removed the applications WhatsApp and Threads—both owned by the US-based social media firm Meta—from its app store in China on orders from the Chinese government. Authorities [reportedly](#) found that the apps featured “inflammatory” content about President Xi that violated the country's cybersecurity laws. The details of the offending content were not explained.

In a separate development that week, a netizen called in to celebrity vlogger Hu Chunfeng's live stream on Bilibili, a popular video-sharing site, and asked him, “Do you think Xi is a dictator?” The question caught Hu completely off guard, and he tried to distance himself from the caller. Hu's account was later [suspended](#), online discussions about the episode were censored, and the consequences for the caller were not publicly known. The Chinese government's strict real-name registration policy for social media and its sophisticated surveillance system suggest that the caller was very likely identified and located by the authorities, and the punishment

that awaits may be severe.

The contrast between the two cases is jarring. On the one hand, one of the world's largest companies again succumbed to Chinese Communist Party (CCP) pressure to help fortify the world's most censored online environment. (In 2023, Freedom House's Freedom on the Net report gave [China](#) the world's worst score for the ninth straight year.) On the other hand, an ordinary Chinese netizen again risked everything to express discontent with Xi's increasingly repressive rule.

Apple's removal of the Meta apps, which were already blocked in China and only accessible through the use of a virtual private network (VPN), is just the latest of many known [instances](#) of the company's willing compliance with the CCP's censorship and surveillance demands. Since 2017, Apple has [taken down](#) hundreds of VPNs from its China app store, making it much more difficult for people in the country to circumvent censorship and access prohibited information. The firm has also removed the apps of international [news outlets](#) and human rights organizations, and banned its devices sold in China from being customized with [engravings](#) that include words such as "human rights" and "democracy."

Meanwhile, even though it is one of the most dangerous things one can do in China, Chinese people, both famous and obscure, continue to criticize Xi Jinping. Real-estate tycoon [Ren Zhiqiang](#), who called Xi a "clown," has been serving an 18-year prison sentence since 2020. Poet [Zhang Guiqi](#), who urged Xi to step down, was sentenced to six years in prison in 2022. In 2023, prominent human rights activist [Xu Zhiyong](#), who called on Xi to resign because he is "just not smart enough," was given a 14-year sentence.

Then there are those whose fate after speaking out against Xi is simply unknown. In October 2022, when China was still under the CCP's draconian COVID-19 lockdown, a man whose name netizens believe to be Peng Lifang unfurled two banners on a bridge in central Beijing, calling for an end to the harsh "zero COVID" policy and for "despotic traitor" Xi to step down. Peng was quickly taken away by the police, and his whereabouts remain unknown. It is also unclear what happened to the protesters who [shouted](#) "Xi Jinping step down!" during the historic White Paper protests later that year. In 2018, Sun Wenguang, a retired professor in Shandong Province, [went missing](#) after he criticized Xi's foreign policy during an interview with the US government-funded broadcaster Voice of America. In August 2022, the outlet [reported](#) that according to insiders, Sun had died a year earlier in detention, though the journalists were unable to confirm.

Even referring to Xi on the Chinese internet is a difficult endeavor. One leaked official document from 2016 [showed](#) that at least 35,467 phrases alluding to Xi were censored. One can safely infer that the number has grown since then. In late 2022, during the COVID-19 lockdown, municipal authorities in the capital announced that "a woman in Beijing caused 2,700 people to be restricted temporarily," meaning a COVID-infected woman had travelled widely and caused those who made contact with her to

be quarantined. A user’s savvy response to the announcement—“a man in Beijing caused 1.4 billion people to be restricted long-term”—went viral online. And soon “a man in Beijing” became a [banned](#) phrase.

Ironically, because references to Xi are so heavily censored, the simplest and vaguest terms—such as “you,” “he,” “that man,” and “you-know-who”—have all come to be understood by netizens as allusions to Xi. After former premier Li Keqiang passed away in late 2023, the pop song “Too Bad It Wasn’t You” was circulated widely on social media before being scrubbed by censors. In August 2023, a netizen told a joke on the social media platform Weibo: A genie with a magic lamp asks what they want most in life, to which the netizen responds, “Could you make [redacted] happen?” The genie then quickly covers its mouth and whispers, “Can you say this?” While no name or even an activity was specifically mentioned, comments to the post showed that all had understood the wish to be for Xi’s death.

Despite enormous risks, Chinese people are still criticizing and mocking their unelected leader in any way they can. Instead of aiding the regime’s efforts to stamp out these stubborn embers of free expression and dissent, international companies like Apple should follow the example of courageous Chinese netizens and push back against the CCP’s censorious demands.

IN THE NEWS

Censorship

- **Censors curb public tributes to ex-premier:** Censors continue to limit online discussion of former premier Li Keqiang during the Qingming Festival in April, a holiday traditionally marked by remembrance. Li’s death in late 2023 had sparked widespread public mourning on social media; he was widely perceived as affable and pragmatic but was ultimately sidelined by President Xi Jinping. Many hashtags, phrases, and search results related to Li were blocked on Weibo, including the [hashtag](#) “Chinese flock to Li’s old residence en masse to offer flowers”, which before it was censored had amassed 8.47 million views.
- **Apple removes apps from its China app store:** On April 19, following orders from the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC), Apple withdrew social media applications WhatsApp and Threads from its Chinese app store. The company said it had been told to do so due over national security concerns. The applications were said to have violated China’s cybersecurity laws due to “problematic” references to Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leader Xi Jinping, according to a [Wall Street Journal](#) report.

- **Public health concerns stifled:** In early April, an article voicing consumer concerns about possible hazardous mercury levels in Ren Dan, a nonprescription drug produced by Chinese medicine company Tong Ren Tang, was [removed](#) from several online platforms including WeChat. In a blog post appearing on the online portal Zhihu, the author explained that the article was censored even after they had altered the title and content to evade censorship. Follow-up discussions on Weibo were also reportedly [censored](#) after the mercury claim attracted public attention.
- **Nationwide censorship campaigns launched:** On April 23, the Office of Central Cybersecurity Affairs Commission announced the launch of a special clean-up [campaign](#) targeting “self-media,” referring to accounts that are self-run. The same day, Weibo started a three-month [campaign](#) on content concerning sports. Comments deemed as berating the athletes or hyping up rumors against them are among the targets. Censors suspended or closed 203 accounts, and deleted 1581 posts. The campaign began three days after the New York Times issued a report that [uncovered](#) positive drug tests among Chinese top swimmers before the Tokyo Olympic Game in 2021.

Arrests and detentions

- **Human rights activist sentenced:** On March 29, rights activist Xu Qin was [sentenced](#) to four years’ imprisonment for “inciting subversion of state power” in connection with her support for human rights organizations like China Human Rights Observer and China Rose. Her trial had been postponed 12 times since her arrest in November 2021. Xu’s health has suffered due to the lengthy wait and ill treatment in a detention facility.
- **Prodemocracy activist sentenced:** On April 3, activist Xu Guang, detained since July 2022, was convicted of “picking quarrels and provoking trouble” and [sentenced](#) to four years in prison for his social media posts promoting democracy and criticizing the Chinese government. He has reportedly been tortured in custody.
- **Son of jailed activists surveilled, arrested:** Yu Zhenyang, the son of prominent human rights lawyer Yu Wensheng and his activist wife Xu Yan, was reportedly [arrested](#) for “assaulting an officer” in early March. Yu has been under constant state surveillance since his parents’ arrests for “inciting subversion of state power” in May 2023. His situation is part of a broader state policy of collective punishment, which includes punitive measures against children of dissidents such as house arrest, forced foster care, and educational obstruction, as highlighted in an April [report](#) by rights group Chinese Human Rights Defenders (CHRD).
- **Netizens detained for online comments on police, local corruption:** Police in Yunnan Province [detained](#) a man for “berating the police,” after he posted online a video depicting a traffic officer issuing him a fine, along with comments implying that the officer’s actions were akin to “robbery.” Separately, authorities detained a netizen in Guangdong Province for five days, accusing him of “spreading false information” for sharing a video online with the caption, “The local corruption

here is known as the number one in the country.”

Hong Kong

- **Civic Party disbands under government pressure:** On March 27, the Hong Kong Civic Party, a prodemocracy group established in 2006 and once the city’s second-largest political party, was [disbanded](#). The move followed a series of retaliatory actions by the Hong Kong government since the 2019 “anti-amendment” movement—the mass protests against a proposed bill that would have allowed extradition of criminal suspects to mainland China. Prominent party members had participated in the movement, and in 2020, the party participated in an unofficial primary during which prodemocracy parties had selected candidates to run for seats on the Legislative Council (LegCo). In 2021, numerous members were arrested in connection with the primary, and three remain in detention.
- **RSF staffer detained, deported en route to monitor Jimmy Lai’s trial:** Reporters Without Borders (RSF) [reported](#) that its advocacy officer in the Taipei office, Aleksandra Bielakowska, was detained for six hours at the Hong Kong airport on April 10. Following several searches and interrogations, Bielakowska was denied entry without a clear explanation. She was scheduled to join an RSF colleague to observe a hearing of the trial of Jimmy Lai, the businessman who owned the now-shuttered Apple Daily newspaper, and who is now facing a potential lifetime sentence after being charged under the National Security Law (NSL).

Beyond China

- **Biden signs bill that could ban TikTok:** On April 24, US President Joe Biden [signed](#) a bill that compels TikTok’s Chinese parent, ByteDance, to sell the app within 270 days. Failure to do so would lead to TikTok being banned from US app stores and from “internet hosting services” that support it. TikTok leaders called the law “unconstitutional” and vowed to challenge it in court.
- **Sweden deports Chinese journalist deemed national security threat:** Swedish newspaper Göteborgs-Posten and the public broadcaster SVT [reported](#) on April 8 that the Swedish government had deported Chinese journalist Chen Xuefei Axelsson on April 4, on grounds that she was a national security threat. Axelsson was editor of Green Post, an online platform primarily featuring content from Chinese state media and United Front-linked groups in Sweden. She was arrested in October 2023 for reportedly being involved in spreading CCP propaganda, organizing art exhibitions meant to obscure the CCP’s ongoing repression in Xinjiang,

and establishing ties between Chinese officials and Swedish politicians, which were deemed as posing a threat to Swedish national security. These activities were reportedly funded by the Chinese embassy.

- **United States and United Kingdom sanction China-linked hackers:** On March 25, the US and the UK governments announced [sanctions](#) and criminal charges against Chinese entities and individuals, including Xiaorui Zhike Technology Company and two affiliated individuals, for malicious cyber operations. The hacking operation, which is associated with the Chinese Ministry of State Security, aimed to spy on and intimidate high-level political figures and gather trade secrets. Officials say it has targeted US officials, corporations, activists, and the UK's election watchdog since 2010.
- **State media launched AI propaganda targeting United States:** The Chinese state broadcaster, CGTN, has [launched](#) an AI-animated series titled “A Fractured America” on its English-language channel. Since its premiere on March 17, the series has rolled out three short episodes predominantly via social media platforms such as X, Facebook, and YouTube. The series depicts mass riots and civil unrest amid US political, economic, and societal challenges to convey the message of “decline of the American dream.”

TAKE ACTION

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

For more information

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