



CHINA MEDIA BULLETIN

*A weekly update of press freedom and censorship news
related to the People's Republic of China*

Issue No. 59: May 31, 2012

Top Headlines

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BROADCAST / PRINT MEDIA NEWS



Censors allow greater discussion of Great Leap Forward

The Chinese authorities in recent weeks have quietly eased bans on media discussion of certain taboo subjects, most notably the Great Leap Forward, a Chinese Communist Party (CCP) collectivization campaign that caused an estimated 45 million deaths from famine between 1958 and 1962. Analysts suggested that the airing of such topics could be linked to efforts by some CCP leaders to promote liberal reforms and discredit the more statist policies and harsh political repression associated with Bo Xilai, who was purged from the Politburo in April, and others from the faction of former president Jiang Zemin (see CMB Nos. [52](#), [58](#)). The publicly owned but relatively liberal Guangzhou-based magazine *Southern People Weekly* made “The Great Famine” the cover headline of its May 21 issue, surprising many observers with an 18-page report featuring photographs of the victims. On April 29, Lin Zhibo, an editor at the Communist Party newspaper *People's Daily*, attempted to promote the conventional party line on the disaster with a microblog posting that accused “some people” of fabricating lies about the famine in order to “bash Chairman Mao.” The resulting netizen outrage forced him to write an apology the next day, confessing his lack

of knowledge of the period. Meanwhile, a film project on the famine has been permitted to hold public screenings in Beijing's 798 Arts District. The project's producer, Wu Wenguang, has dispatched researchers to villages across China, recording 600 testimonies from survivors to date. However, Wu was careful to exclude the word "famine" and the phrase "Great Leap Forward" from the title of his project, and insists that it is an arts project, not a political campaign.

- *Globe and Mail* 5/28/2012: [Is China finally confronting its dark history?](#)
 - *Atlantic* 5/29/2012: [After 50 years of silence, China slowly confronts the 'Great Leap Forward'](#)
 - BBC 5/24/2012: [Documenting China's lost history of famine](#)
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State media downplay North Korea kidnap incident

After 28 Chinese fishermen held for almost two weeks by North Koreans were released and returned home on May 21, China's state media began to report on the incident while maintaining a careful balancing act to avoid a rupture with Beijing's closest ally in the region. State-run Xinhua news agency had played down the story by posting a one-sentence announcement of the fishermen's release on May 20. In a lengthy account of the incident published on May 22, the Communist Party-owned *Global Times* described how the fishermen were beaten and robbed, but it was ambiguous on whether their captors—uniformed men in an armed vessel—were acting as criminals or in an official capacity. The party mouthpiece *People's Daily* did not address the incident on May 22, but ran a front-page article on multilateral economic development efforts in the Tumen River area that include North Korea. Meanwhile, on the Chinese microblogging platform Sina Weibo, many netizens criticized North Korea as "ungrateful" for Chinese assistance and protection. At a time of increased nationalism on other fronts (see below, CMB No. [58](#)), some also rebuked Beijing for failing to denounce North Korea over the kidnappings. A Shenzhen-based commentator wrote that the government "criticizes Japan, America, the Philippines, and Vietnam every day, but dares not utter a word against North Korea."

- NBC News 5/21/2012: [Chinese fishermen held by North Korea released but questions linger](#)
 - *Wall Street Journal* 5/22/2012: [Something fishy: China offers glimpse of North Korea incident](#)
 - China Media Project 5/23/2012: [Posts about protesting outside North Korean Embassy deleted](#)
 - BBC 5/22/2012: [Netizens angered by North Korean detention of fishermen](#)
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State TV host's xenophobic remarks draw backlash

A recent rise in xenophobic sentiment began to encounter some resistance after May 16, when Yang Rui, an anchorman at the state broadcaster China Central Television (CCTV), unleashed a tirade

against “foreign trash” on his microblog. State media had focused reporting on misbehaving foreigners in China after a video showing the apparent aftermath of a British man’s attack on a Chinese woman was posted online on May 9 (see CMB No. [58](#)). In another video posted on May 14, a Russian cellist with the Beijing Symphony Orchestra was caught cursing at a female train passenger when she complained about him placing his bare feet on a seat. A third video showing “suspected Koreans” assaulting Chinese women at a fast-food restaurant in Chengdu also provoked outrage. However, the public seemed to turn on Yang when he denounced foreigners as spies, liars, criminals, and greedy opportunists, and praised the government for its recent expulsion of foreign journalist Melissa Chan (see CMB No. [57](#)). His posting was soon filled with user comments that called him an “idiot” and worse, or told him to join the Central Propaganda Department. Many also raised suspicions that the recent surge of similar xenophobic stories was part of a government-backed effort. One user asked, “Is there an invisible hand manipulating public opinion?” A May 23 article in the Communist Party–owned *Global Times* newspaper sought to reassure foreigners and calm the controversy, calling Yang’s remarks insensitive but not a fireable offense. It said the posting should be understood as part of the “diversity of opinions” available on Chinese microblogs. But the article notably ignored the domestic backlash against Yang, attributing calls for his firing to “a minority of foreigners in China and some Western media.”

- *Washington Post* 5/25/2012: [In China, foreigner-bashing brings backlash](#)
- *South China Morning Post* 5/25/2012: [CCTV host’s jibes defended by state media](#)
- *Global Times* 5/23/2012: [Yang Rui was insensitive, but shouldn't be sacked](#)



‘Time’ copies seized, Bo Xilai sex rumors squelched

The Chinese authorities confiscated some copies of the May 14 issue of the U.S. magazine *Time*, which bore the cover title “The People’s Republic of Scandal” over an ominous image of purged Chongqing Communist Party leader Bo Xilai. *Time*’s May 23 description of the incident said such seizures seemed to be occurring more regularly in recent months, as part of an apparent campaign to control or intimidate foreign media in China (see above, CMB No. [57](#)). It noted that the magazine’s previous issue on Bo was barred from distribution at hotels and other select purveyors, and that an article on the case of blind, self-taught lawyer Chen Guangcheng was manually ripped from each May 21 magazine before delivery to subscribers in China (see below). Meanwhile, censors continue to restrict discussion of the Bo case in domestic Chinese media, including on the internet. Comments on recent rumors that Bo and other powerful men paid large sums to carry on a sexual relationship with popular Chinese actress Zhang Ziyi—and that Zhang was now barred from leaving China—have been deleted from the microblogging platform Sina Weibo. The claims were apparently aired first on the U.S.-based Chinese news site Boxun (see CMB No. [55](#)). Zhang has denied the allegations, on Weibo and elsewhere, and demanded apologies from outlets that disseminated them.

- *Time* 5/23/2012: [Missing in action: On the train of confiscated copies of Time in China](#)
- China Media Project 5/29/2012: [Posts on actress Zhang Ziyi removed from Weibo](#)

- *South China Morning Post* 5/31/2012: [Zhang mulls libel action over paid-sex allegation](#)
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NEW MEDIA / TECHNOLOGY NEWS



Microblog service unveils point-based self-censorship system

On May 28, the popular Chinese microblogging platform Sina Weibo introduced a point-based system of user contracts to govern content (see CMB No. [58](#)). Each of the service's 300 million users was awarded a starting credit of 80 points, which can be deducted for "inappropriate" online comments or reposts. The system, called Weibo Credit, encourages users to report one another for violations like dissemination of "untrue information," as well as invasion of privacy, plagiarism, use of fake identities, defamation, and harassment. The "untrue information" violation carries the heftiest penalty—a 10-point deduction—while the others cost users up to five points. Users who suffer multiple deductions will be forced to have a "low credit" badge on their accounts, which could ultimately be closed if the score reaches zero. Points are restored over time if the user avoids violations, and users can gain additional credits by submitting personal information such as their identification number and mobile-telephone number, which had already been required as part of a government-imposed but poorly enforced real-name registration system. Sina, a private company, has long been compelled to implement official censorship directives, which commonly target politically sensitive information, regardless of its veracity. The new system could effectively shift some of the burden to users by fostering self-censorship. In an indication of the staffing requirements associated with censorship obligations, a Sina job notice posted on May 21 sought prospective "monitoring editors" who would be responsible for maintaining "information safety" on the site.

- *Wall Street Journal* 5/29/2012: [Censorship 3.0? Sina Weibo's new 'user credit' points system](#)
 - *New York Times* 5/28/2012: [Crackdown on Chinese bloggers who fight the censors with puns](#)
 - Sina Weibo (in Chinese): [Weibo credit rules](#)
 - *Wall Street Journal* 5/21/2012: [Is this what a Chinese internet censor job ad looks like?](#)
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Chinese mobile users tallied at over one billion

China's Ministry of Industry and Information Technology announced on May 23 that the country gained 43 million new mobile-telephone users in the first quarter of 2012, bringing the total to about one billion. Many of the devices sold in this market are smartphones, and about two-thirds of them use the Android operating system produced by U.S.-based Google. However, the company's online store for smartphone applications is not available in China because it does not comply with state

ensorship rules. The state-owned telecommunications giant China Mobile has taken advantage of Google's absence, selling applications for Android users through what has become the world's largest carrier-operated app store. Like other online app stores in China, it blocks access to proscribed foreign websites, including the social-networking site Facebook, the microblogging service Twitter, and the Google-owned video platform YouTube.

- **Tech in Asia 5/23/2012:** [China Now has over a billion mobile phone users](#)
- **Ministry of Industry and Information Technology 5/23/2012 (in Chinese):** [April 2012 telecommunications indicator report](#)
- **Bloomberg 5/24/2012:** [Google leaves app void that China Mobile fills](#)

TIBET



Comedian sentenced for 'weapons possession'

According to Tibetan exile parliament member Andrug Tseten, the Chinese authorities in Sichuan Province sentenced popular Tibetan comedian Athar to three years in prison on April 29, after he was convicted on dubious charges of weapons possession. Athar, who is known for his promotion of Tibetan identity, is an influential figure in Sichuan's Ganzi Prefecture. He was detained in early February as he prepared to release a video criticizing the Chinese government's policies in Tibet (see CMB No. [49](#)). Andrug Tseten told Radio Free Asia that although the comedian flatly denied the charges, he was severely beaten until he signed a confession. The Chinese government has arrested scores of Tibetan intellectuals and cultural figures in recent years (see CMB Nos. [55](#), [56](#)).

- **Radio Free Asia 5/21/2012:** [Tibetan comedian sentenced](#)

HONG KONG



Mainlanders seek banned books, park censors visitor comments

Two recent developments have underscored the fact that although Hong Kong remains a beacon of media freedom for mainland Chinese, it is also under pressure to avoid topics deemed sensitive by the central government. According to a new survey by the Hong Kong Newspaper Hawker Association, a local alliance of newsstand owners, about 30 percent of the books sold in popular tourist areas are purchased by mainland Chinese visitors. Books and magazines on topics that are banned in China, including the case of purged Chongqing Communist Party chief Bo Xilai and the June 4, 1989, Tiananmen Square massacre, have been bestsellers at newsstands in Yau Ma Tei, Tsim Sha Tsui, Mong Kok, and Causeway Bay. The association said some tourists had purchased up to 70 books at a time, or placed group orders and asked vendors to send them to their hotels. Meanwhile, in an alleged instance of self-censorship, Hong Kong newspaper *Ming Pao* reported that managers of the city's Ocean Park amusement area had banned park visitors from leaving certain messages on its

public electronic bulletin board. There were apparently 25 banned words and phrases, including “Vindicate June 4,” “Down with Communist Party,” and “Falun Gong.” The park administration lifted the ban after the media report. However, it refused to apologize and claimed that there was no interference from the government.

- *Want Daily* 5/22/2012: [Banned books are bestsellers among mainland visitors to HK](#)
- *Ming Pao* 5/22/2012 (in Chinese): [Mainland tourists sweep political books, Bo Xilai best selling](#)
- *Ming Pao* 5/22/2012 (in Chinese): [Ocean Park electronic message board censors ‘June Fourth’ and other sensitive words and phrases](#)

BEYOND CHINA



China issues retort to U.S. human rights report

In response to the China section of the *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2011* issued by the U.S. State Department on May 24, China’s State Council Information Office (SCIO), as in previous years, issued its own report the next day, entitled *Human Rights Record of the United States in 2011*. In its report, the SCIO reiterated its argument that the United States has “turned a blind eye to its own woeful human rights situation and remained silent about it” (see CMB No. [19](#)). Saying the report offered a “small yet illustrative enough fraction” of the country’s “dismal record,” the Chinese government asserted that Washington had imposed “fairly strict” curbs on press and internet freedom, and that its promotion of internet freedom abroad was “just an excuse for the United States to impose diplomatic pressure and seek hegemony.” However, most of the sources used in the SCIO report were American media outlets, including the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and the Cable News Network (CNN), effectively contradicting the claim that the United States practices censorship or ignores its own shortcomings. Both the SCIO report and a related May 28 article in the Communist Party mouthpiece *People’s Daily*, which defended China’s record, seemed to acknowledge the basic validity of human rights principles like free expression and transparency, complicating the government’s strident objections to outside scrutiny and domestic criticism. According to *China Digital Times*, in an apparent effort to prevent netizens from viewing the State Department report, the search term “human rights” in both Chinese and English was blocked on the Chinese microblogging platform Sina Weibo as of May 26.

- *Xinhua* 5/25/2012: [China issues report on human rights in the U.S.](#)
- *Xinhua* 5/25/2012: [Full text of human rights record of the United States in 2011](#)
- *People’s Daily* 5/28/2012 (in Chinese): [China’s progress in human rights undeniable](#)
- *China Digital Times* 5/26/2012: [Sensitive words: Foreigners and cannibals \(correction and update\)](#)



In United States, Chen Guangcheng embraces open media

Blind, self-taught lawyer and activist Chen Guangcheng reached New York on May 19, having escaped from extralegal house arrest in China in late April and won passage to the United States under a deal negotiated between Beijing and Washington (see CMB No. [57](#)). Since his arrival, Chen has been speaking to the media about issues connected to his story in a frank way that would have been impossible in China. In an op-ed article published by the *New York Times* on May 29, he urged the Chinese government to confront the issue of lawlessness in the country, noting that the decisions in most significant legal cases, including his own, are dictated by Communist Party officials instead of independent judges. In his first in-depth television interview on May 24, he told Cable News Network (CNN) host Anderson Cooper that his suffering during the lengthy illegal detention was “beyond imagination,” and that, given its blatant illegality, the term “house arrest” should not be used to describe it. And on May 31, he spoke at a forum sponsored by the Council on Foreign Relations in New York, along with New York University law professor Jerome Cohen, who had arranged for Chen to attend the university’s law school on a special fellowship program. Despite his traumatic experience, Chen said he was optimistic about China’s future, explaining that new technology was making it increasingly difficult to suppress information. “China’s society has gotten to the era where if you don’t want something known, you’d better not do it,” he said.

- CNN 5/24/2012: [Chinese activist Chen gives first in-depth TV interview since escape](#)
- *New York Times* 5/29/2012: [How China flouts its laws](#)
- *New York Times* 5/31/2012: [Chinese rights activist expresses optimism](#)



EU mulls penalties for China over telecom subsidies

According to the *Financial Times*, the European Union announced at a closed-door meeting on May 24 that it planned to launch a trade case accusing Beijing of providing illegal state subsidies to Chinese telecommunications equipment manufacturers, particularly Huawei and ZTE. The EU’s executive arm, the European Commission, said it had “very solid evidence” that the two companies had been able to sell products in EU countries below cost. The case, which could result in punitive tariffs, would be the first opened against any country by the commission of its own accord, rather than in response to a formal complaint. EU trade commissioner Karel De Gucht has argued that such cases are necessary because many European companies conduct business in China and fear retaliation if they were to file a complaint. In response to the *Financial Times* report, both Huawei and ZTE denied in a public statement on May 29 that they had received illegal subsidies or practiced “dumping” of underpriced goods in overseas markets. According to a confidential European Commission report issued in early 2011, the two companies benefited from government support that included massive credit lines from Chinese state-owned banks. The companies have also been accused of assisting authoritarian regimes with domestic surveillance and potentially facilitating cyberespionage by Beijing (see CMB No. [52](#)).

- *Financial Times* 5/25/2012: [Beijing faces Brussels action on telecoms aid](#)
 - Reuters 5/29/2012: [China's Huawei and ZTE deny getting illegal subsidy](#)
 - *Wall Street Journal* 4/18/2011: [Huawei discloses directors](#)
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U.S. softens visa directive on Confucius Institute teachers

On May 24, the U.S. government moved to amend a May 17 announcement on the visa status of instructors at more than 80 Confucius Institutes in the United States, after Chinese state media reacted angrily to the possibility that they would have to leave the country to obtain new visas. Confucius Institutes are Chinese government-sponsored facilities that offer language training and other educational programs, and were once described by Communist Party propaganda chief Li Changchun as an “important part of China’s overseas propaganda setup.” The May 17 directive had said that many instructors were improperly teaching students from kindergarten through high school while holding visas for university-level work, and would have to leave by June 30. However, as Chinese state media warned that the incident could “harm Sino-U.S. friendship,” a U.S. State Department spokeswoman gave assurances on May 24 that the teachers in question would not have to leave the country, saying the original directive had been “sloppy and not complete.” The news stirred discussion among Chinese netizens on the overseas education program, with some saying the funds involved would be better spent at home. Critical microblog posts were deleted by censors, including one by popular Chinese artist and writer Chen Zufang, who wrote, “A big thanks to America for tearing away the mask of the Confucius Institutes.”

- Associated Press 5/25/2012: [US clampdown on visas for Confucius Institute teachers draws indignation in China](#)
 - *Epoch Times* 5/27/2012: [US decision on Confucius Institutes prompts backlash in China](#)
 - *China Daily* 5/24/2012: [China says U.S. directive on Confucius Institutes ‘may harm friendship’](#)
 - U.S. Department of State 5/24/2012: [Daily press briefing](#)
 - China Media Project 5/25/2012: [Criticism of Confucius Institute spending deleted from Weibo](#)
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‘Men in Black 3’ censored, China tycoon buys U.S. theater chain

Several scenes from the current Hollywood blockbuster *Men in Black 3* were removed by the Chinese government before the film’s release in China. The authorities cut a total of 13 minutes from the sci-fi comedy for various reasons. The Guangzhou-based *Southern Daily* newspaper speculated that one scene, in which the U.S. secret agent played by Will Smith erases the memories of a group of Chinese bystanders, was deleted to avoid possible comparisons to the Chinese government’s use of internet censorship “to maintain social stability.” Two other scenes, in which aliens disguise themselves as Chinese restaurant workers, were also considered offensive. Robert Cain, a partner at

the China-U.S. coproduction company Pacific Bridge Pictures, said a film could only avoid raising the objections of censors in China if it included a flattering image of Chinese people. To illustrate the long list of taboos, he recounted an incident in which the authorities requested that a character's name be changed because it was a pet name used by former Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping for his granddaughter. Such negotiations have taken on new importance as the U.S. and Chinese film industries step up their integration (CMB No. [57](#)). On May 20, Chinese theater owner Wanda Group announced its takeover of North America's second-largest movie theater chain, AMC Entertainment, which will create the world's largest cinema operator. Several analysts speculated that the acquisition by Wanda chairman Wang Jianlin, a former Chinese army officer and the country's sixth-richest man, was part of Beijing's broader overseas media push. However, AMC chief executive Gerry Lopez said his management team would retain control over the choice of movies screened by the chain in North America.

- *Telegraph* 5/30/2012: [Chinese villains censored from Men in Black 3](#)
- *Los Angeles Times* 5/24/2012: [AMC chief calls new Chinese owner 'great news' for its theaters](#)
- *New York Times* 5/24/2012: [Chinese power player places risky bet on moviegoing](#)
- *Financial Times* 5/25/2012: [Wanda's AMC deal shows Chinese firepower](#)

For additional information on human rights and free expression in China, see:

[*Freedom on the Net 2011*](#)

[*Freedom of the Press 2011*](#)

[*Freedom of the World 2012*](#)

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