

CHINA MEDIA BULLETIN

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IMAGE OF THE MONTH

An extra-sensitive extradition

News on social media about Canada's arrest of Huawei chief financial officer Meng Wanzhou on December 1 has been high on the agenda for Chinese censors. Meng faces possible extradition to the United States on charges that her company violated trade sanctions against Iran. Four of the top 20 most rapidly censored images over the past month involved an effort by Sina Weibo users to share information on the topic. One post, which included this photo and a straightforward sentence about Meng's arrest, was published on December 6 by a user with over 2 million followers. It was deleted by censors after about 1.5 hours. The heavy censorship matches an official [directive](#) leaked two days later that ordered all websites not to publish any news about the arrest other than "authoritative reports" from state media and to "strictly manage comments."

Credit: [Weiboscope](#)



ANALYSIS

The Globalization of Beijing's Media Controls: Key Trends from 2018

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A popular digital television provider in [Kenya](#) includes Chinese state channels in its most affordable package, while omitting international news outlets. [Portuguese](#) television launches a prime-time “China Hour” consisting of content produced by Chinese state media. A Taiwanese businessman is arrested in [Thailand](#) over radio broadcasts that are critical of China. And a partly Chinese-owned [South African](#) newspaper abruptly cancels a regular column after it addresses repression in Xinjiang.

These are just a few incidents from the past year that illustrate the Chinese Communist Party's growing ability to project its propaganda and censorship priorities around the world even as it continues to strengthen media and internet controls at home.

Five key trends in the party's global media campaign emerged during 2018:

1. A more aggressive approach to foreign media influence

The raw ambition of Beijing's foreign propaganda efforts was on display in 2018 as Chinese authorities expanded the scale and scope of one favored tactic—inserting Chinese state media content into foreign news outlets, referred to in official documents as “borrowing the boat to reach the sea.”

A July [Financial Times](#) analysis of Chinese state media content in diaspora Chinese outlets found a sharp uptick in the number of agreements signed in 2016–17 compared with previous years, reaching a total of over 200 publications. A five-month investigation published by the [Guardian](#) last week found examples of *China Daily's* “China Watch” advertorial supplement in publications across 30 countries. The research also indicates that the number of radio stations carrying China Radio International programming has grown from 33 stations in 14 countries in [2015](#) to 58 stations in 35 countries today.

As part of its [Belt and Road Initiative](#), Beijing hosted a journalists' forum in June that was attended by almost 100 media representatives from 47 countries. The event sponsor, the state-affiliated [All-China Journalists Association](#), was then tasked with establishing a permanent secretariat for the forum and drafting rules for a Belt and Road journalists' alliance.

According to Chen Pokong, a democracy advocate and observer of Chinese media in the United States, Chinese diplomats are also “more actively interfering” in the editorial decisions of certain American Chinese media and behaving in a “more arrogant, more aggressive” manner. The [Financial Times](#) investigation found that many businesses in the Chinese community, facing direct or indirect pressure from consular officials, are reluctant to advertise with outlets that take a more critical stance toward the Chinese government.

2. Increased influence through media ownership and infrastructure

China scholar Anne-Marie Brady once warned that Communist Party officials could shift from merely “borrowing the boat” to “buying the boat,” meaning direct acquisitions of foreign media outlets. Indeed, Chinese state entities and friendly tycoons have sought to purchase mainstream media companies outside mainland China in recent years. Chinese tech billionaire and [party member](#) Jack Ma bought Hong Kong’s *South China Morning Post* in late [2015](#), and several incidents in 2018 reinforced [concerns](#) that the purchase has reduced the paper’s independence, including Chinese officials’ unexpected appearance at an [editorial meeting](#) in August. In [South Africa](#), two companies with ties to the Chinese regime purchased a 20 percent stake in the [second-largest media group](#) in 2013, and in 2018 the group suddenly canceled commentator Azad Essa’s [weekly column](#) after he wrote about the mass detention of Muslims in Xinjiang.

Chinese companies have also been active in building infrastructure and content delivery systems abroad. This has been especially evident in Africa, where the Chinese television distribution firm [StarTimes](#) has become a key player in the continent’s transition from analog to digital, accruing over 10 million subscribers in 30 countries and gaining the power to determine which stations those viewers are able to access. Although privately owned, StarTimes has benefited from a [close relationship](#) with the [Chinese government](#) and occasional subsidies. It appears to have [prioritized Chinese state media](#) channels in its package offerings, at the expense of independent international news stations. In [Kenya](#), [Uganda](#), and [Nigeria](#), for example, television packages that include channels like BBC World Service cost more than basic versions with local channels and Chinese state media. In 2018, StarTimes’ efforts to expand its business to [Ghana](#) encountered opposition from the local broadcasters’ association due to concerns about its impact on viewers’ programming choices.

3. Innovation in a changing technological environment

In his speeches, Chinese president Xi Jinping has urged propaganda cadres to “use innovative outreach methods,” and they appear to be complying. For example, Chinese state media outlets have become very active on social networks that are, ironically, blocked in China itself. Facebook emerged as a particular favorite in 2018. The full array of Chinese state-run outlets have Facebook accounts, with some managing multiple pages organized by language and geographic location.

Each of the main accounts has garnered tens of millions of followers. The television network [CGTN’s](#) English account alone has 71 million followers—the largest for any news outlet on [Facebook](#)—of which 46 million have been added since May 2016. Three of the top 10 media accounts on Facebook are Chinese state outlets. [Four of the five fastest-growing media pages](#) on the platform also belong to Chinese state-run outlets: Xinhua news agency, *Global Times*, CGTN, and *People’s Daily*. This is despite the fact that the four, and *People’s Daily* in particular, are known for having relatively tedious content, raising [suspicions](#) that many of the accounts’ followers are fake. The outlets do, however, also run frequent ads on Facebook in a bid to recruit authentic fans from around the world.

Most major Chinese state media offer mobile phone applications in English, and some have taken unusual steps to expand the reach of their content. China Daily's app in Apple's application store awards users "points" for reading, liking, and sharing its articles, which can subsequently be used to purchase goods online.

4. Meddling in politics and public debate abroad

Beijing's foreign propaganda and censorship efforts have traditionally focused on promoting China's political and economic system while suppressing coverage of its domestic human rights abuses and religious persecution. But the Chinese government and its proxies are now also attempting to tilt other countries' internal debates about their relationships with China, including by suppressing criticism of Chinese activities within their borders.

This year, Chinese Australians filed [defamation suits](#) against two media companies over an investigative documentary examining the Chinese Communist Party's political influence in the country, and policymakers raised concerns that the cases could have a chilling effect on future coverage of the topic. Media groups in Kenya, [South Africa](#), and [Argentina](#) that have established a financial or otherwise cooperative relationship with Chinese state entities often feature uncritical, even fawning coverage of Chinese activities in their respective countries and regions.

In September, the print edition of the [Des Moines Register](#) included a China Watch supplement whose content was more targeted and politicized than is typical for such inserts. In July, CGTN released a two-minute [animated video](#) about the impact of bilateral trade tensions on the US soybean industry, concluding with the question, "Will voters [in the 2018 midterm elections] there turn out to support Trump and the Republicans once they get hit in the pocketbooks?" In [Taiwan](#), several examples of "[fake news](#)" stories and [doctored images](#) that originated in China and tainted the reputation of the Taiwanese government have spread widely on social media and been picked up by television news stations over the past two years. Although their precise impact on local elections last month remain unclear, the ruling party disfavored by Beijing suffered a number of [surprising losses](#).

Prominent scholars involved in public discussions about Chinese influence have also been affected. In September, officials in [Zambia](#), which depends on China for billions of dollars in loans, deported a respected Kenyan law professor who was set to give a presentation about Beijing's activities in Africa. In New Zealand, apparent efforts to silence [Anne-Marie Brady](#), a respected academic critic of Chinese influence operations in the country, have taken a particularly dangerous turn. Following suspicious burglaries at her home and office that police said were likely related to her work, Brady discovered last month that someone had [tampered with the brakes](#) on her car.

5. Recasting foreign media markets in China's image

As Beijing has expanded its aid and investment in foreign media sectors, it has tended to [favor state-owned outlets](#) over independent, private competitors, mirroring the media landscape within China. For example, Chinese government assistance in recent years has improved the transmission capacity of Zimbabwe's state broadcaster,

the digitization of Kaduna State Media Corporation in northern Nigeria, the reach of Liberia's official radio station, and the production quality of [Laos's](#) state-run television station.

Separately, although China has long offered trainings for journalists, editors, and media officials from various parts of the world, the past two years have been characterized by a particularly large number of trainings for those focused on the online sphere. Research for Freedom House's latest [Freedom on the Net](#) report found that Chinese officials had held "trainings and seminars on new media or information management with representatives from 36 out of the 65 countries" covered in the annual survey of global internet freedom.

The impact and limits of Beijing's global media influence

As the Chinese regime pours billions of dollars a year into its foreign propaganda and censorship campaign, its actual record of achievement remains mixed.

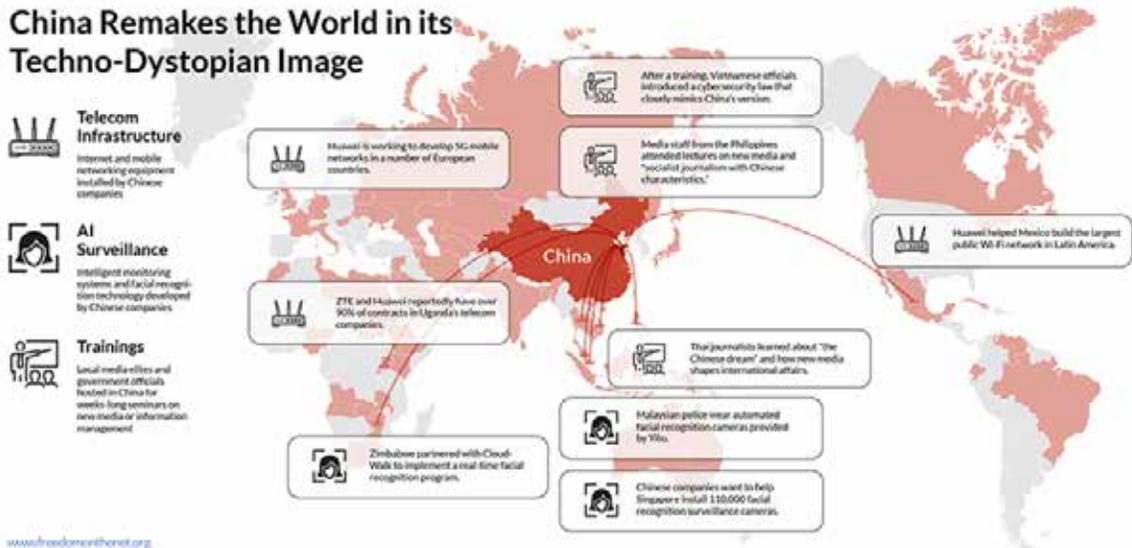
According to a recent Pew Survey, Beijing's efforts appear to be fairly effective at improving or maintaining the public image of China—and of Xi Jinping personally—in the developing world, while reducing scrutiny of the Chinese government's human rights record at home and the potential risks associated with economic and political engagement with China abroad. While a number of factors could contribute to the polling results, a rigorous 2016 [academic study](#) of six African countries found that "in many cases, the larger the Chinese media presence in a country and the more access to relevant media technology, the more favorable public opinion toward China has grown across multiple dimensions."

However, there are limits to Beijing's influence. Independent news outlets around the world regularly generate coverage that the Chinese Communist Party would find objectionable, as with reporting this year on the mass detention of Muslims in Xinjiang. The relatively equal playing field of the internet has enabled alternatives to pro-Beijing news outlets—from the *New York Times*, to *Hong Kong Free Press* to New Tang Dynasty TV—to make important gains in disseminating their content within China and abroad. Meanwhile, many journalists and readers from countries with a free press remain skeptical of state-controlled content, the precise reason why Chinese state media use various tactics to obfuscate the origin of the information they deliver to global audiences.

In the policy sphere, the past year has been a watershed for increased awareness of China's foreign influence operations and the potential risks of allowing such activities to go unchecked. Both governments and civil society actors have mobilized to more critically examine Beijing's media engagement and investment practices. This trend has come amid broader skepticism—and even rejection—of some Chinese infrastructure aid in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative.

Many governments, including democracies, engage in vigorous public diplomacy campaigns, but the Chinese Communist Party's methods are frequently covert, coercive, and harmful to democratic institutions. Moreover, many of the same tactics used to

interfere with news coverage and political debate are being applied to sectors like education, the arts, and the entertainment industry. It is therefore imperative that in 2019 open societies enhance efforts to protect themselves by developing policies and legislation to increase transparency, punish improper activities by Chinese officials on their soil, and insulate independent media from direct or indirect Chinese pressure.



Credit: Freedom on the Net 2018. ([High-res download](#))

IN THE NEWS

Coverage of Trump-Xi meeting highlights state control over Sino-US trade messaging

- State media spin Trump-Xi meeting:** Chinese media coverage of the agreement reached at a December 1 meeting between US president Donald Trump and Chinese president Xi Jinping, which took place after the Group of 20 summit in Argentina, has shed light on the Chinese leadership's [propaganda strategy](#) amid an ongoing US-China trade war. While some reports on both sides of the Pacific lauded the meeting as highly successful, Chinese coverage failed to mention certain items that were apparently agreed upon—including the fact that a US pledge not to increase tariffs was dependent on a more comprehensive agreement being reached within 90 days—even as it stressed other details that were not mentioned in official White House statements. Reporting from the [Financial Times](#) concluded that Xi had actually agreed to [far more](#) concessions than his US counterpart, a fact that Beijing was eager to conceal. A leaked censorship [directive](#) translated by [China Digital Times](#) ordered all domestic media to defer to official Xinhua news agency coverage of the Xi-Trump meeting. Separately, a WeChat post on the agreement by the US embassy in Beijing was [partially censored](#).

- **2018 trend:** Prior to the Trump-Xi meeting, Chinese censors had already shifted their focus to controlling business and economics coverage amid the trade war, as a November 13 [report](#) from the Financial Times explains. Throughout 2018, authorities have actively intervened in news coverage to suppress negative reporting on China's economic situation, a pattern that [Freedom House](#) has noted during previous bouts of economic uncertainty. Several censorship directives leaked earlier in the year, also translated by *China Digital Times*, illustrate the phenomenon: A [directive](#) issued in June detailed US trade-related coverage guidelines at some length; an October [directive](#) specifically ordered certain articles on US relations to be widely shared; and a November [directive](#) forbade foreign media citations in coverage of the US midterm elections, in which the ongoing trade dispute was a prominent subject of debate.

Authorities cut netizen publishing power, increase access to user data

- **'Self-media' face crackdown, WeChat issues rules on running multiple accounts:** On November 12, the Cyberspace Administration of China announced that nearly 9,800 social media accounts had been shuttered since late October because they had "spread politically harmful information, maliciously falsifying [Chinese Communist] party history, slandering heroes and defaming the nation's image." The purge particularly targeted "self-media" accounts on Tencent's WeChat and Sina Weibo. The term "[self-media](#)" refers to independently operated social media accounts that produce news and analysis. In a tightening media environment, such accounts have emerged as an avenue for sharing alternative information on social and political issues that is not derived from state media, although some have raised concerns by circulating misinformation. Separately, on November 16, Tencent reduced the maximum number of official WeChat accounts that a single company or organization can operate from [five to two](#).
- **Police increase harassment of Twitter users, force deletions:** With domestic social media platforms closely monitored and censored, savvy activists and critics have come to rely on the US-based microblogging service Twitter to freely express opinions and share information. Although Twitter is formally blocked in China, such users reach it via circumvention tools. In a new trend that emerged toward the end of the year, security forces have begun to pressure Twitter users to delete tweets or quit the platform. The first high-profile case that came to light involved the account of Wu Gan, who is serving an eight-year prison sentence for his online activism. On November 11, China Change's [Yaxue Cao](#) said she had noticed a message from Wu's account indicating that he had used the "@Tweet_Delete" function to automatically delete over 30,000 of his old tweets. In a subsequent article, [Cao](#) relayed posts from dozens of Chinese Twitter users—many of them journalists, dissidents, and intellectuals—describing how they were summoned by police over comments on Twitter, forced to write a statement of repentance, obliged to delete their Twitter feeds, and subjected to administrative detention or even criminal charges. All of the posts

in question were dated since September 2018.

- **Regulation targets online mobilization:** On November 15, the Cyberspace Administration of China released a [new regulation](#) requiring all internet companies providing services “of a public opinion nature” to conduct voluntary security evaluations that could be used to neutralize any social mobilization. The regulation did not name the companies that would be affected, but its vague description suggested that a broad range of firms, foreign and domestic, could be covered by the rules. The regulation requires companies to keep [detailed records](#) of user information, including real names, internet protocol (IP) addresses, and activity logs. The regulation clearly identifies social media activity as a “security risk” for the government, and the policy comes after important social movements, including [#MeToo](#) and an ongoing wave of [labor advocacy](#), have gained traction on social media platforms.
- **2018 trend:** The year has been characterized by steadily increasing surveillance and social media censorship, and an expansion of the role of artificial intelligence (AI) in both efforts. Following the February announcement of [constitutional changes](#) allowing Xi Jinping to seek a third term as president, there were [mass deletions](#) of content, and a raft of relevant [search terms](#) were deemed sensitive. In April, the humor app [Neihan Duanzi](#), which had been used by millions of people, was shut down. A study published in [March](#) showed that WeChat was [using AI](#) to identify and delete images. AI-powered surveillance tools able to recognize people by the [way they walk](#) were deployed by police in several cities. The government’s access to user data also increased in several ways, with the implementation of data localization rules by foreign firms such as [Apple](#) and [Evernote](#), new rules on public security departments’ access to data-center information, and signs that electric cars could be sending [location data](#) to authorities.

Tech firms face backlash for aligning with Beijing

The CCP has become increasingly adept at enticing technology firms to aid in the development, implementation, and justification of internet controls, including specialized versions of products for the Chinese market that meet the CCP’s demands. However, several examples of the costs associated with such complicity have emerged in recent months.

- **Internal resistance to ‘Dragonfly’ grows at Google:** [Revelations](#) in August of a long-running plan by Google to launch a censored search engine in China prompted US lawmakers to mount an [inquiry](#), and many Google employees began to publicly [protest](#). In late November, a group of workers published an [open letter](#) calling for the project to be aborted, and staff pledged money to support fellow employees in the event of a [strike](#) over the issue. A December 4 [editorial](#) from the Washington Post and fresh [admonishments](#) from international rights organizations have increased the pressure on the Silicon Valley tech giant. Indeed, at a December 11 [Congressional hearing](#) Google CEO Sundar Pichai remarked that the company had

“no plans” to launch a search app in China “right now,” although he left open the possibility that it could be released in the future. Recent news reports indicate that Google ignored its own procedures regarding privacy and security reviews in an effort to move the project forward and keep employee knowledge to a minimum. Some project employees reportedly had their [jobs threatened](#) if they broke confidentiality rules.

- **More countries grow wary of Huawei, ZTE equipment:** Chinese telecommunications firms with close ties to the Chinese state and CCP are facing increasing resistance to their international expansion. In early December, Japanese media reported [government plans](#) to revise procurement rules in order to restrict purchases from Huawei and ZTE over fears about intelligence leaks and cyberattacks. This followed [moves](#) by Australia and New Zealand to block Huawei from providing 5G mobile technology due to national security concerns. In the United Kingdom, BT Group [announced](#) on December 5 that it would be removing Huawei equipment from the core of its existing 3G and 4G infrastructure in addition to barring it from a planned 5G network. In Canada, a top intelligence official warned of state-sponsored Chinese espionage efforts via Huawei equipment, and Huawei chief financial officer Meng Wanzhou was [arrested](#) on December 1 at the request of US authorities as part of a case accusing the company of violating trade sanctions against Iran. Meanwhile, a [Reuters](#) investigation published on November 14 outlines ZTE’s role in helping Venezuela’s state-run telecom Cantv to implement a “fatherland card” program. The project links citizens’ national identity cards to activities like voting and obtaining public services. The revelation could increase civil society and political opposition to future ZTE expansion elsewhere.
- **Censorship demands frustrate video game fans:** After an international [backlash](#), the French video game developer Ubisoft [reversed](#) course on planned “aesthetic changes” that would have removed gore, sexual content, and gambling themes from a Chinese version of the hit special forces game Rainbow Six Siege. Last month, the game distribution platform Steam announced the launch of a China-specific version, a practice that many Chinese gamers [oppose](#) for fear that it could lead to the restriction of content in some of their favorite games and blocking of the global version of Steam, which to date has been accessible in China. Meanwhile, in another sector of the video game industry, a cartoon bear who is [often targeted](#) by Chinese censors due to netizens’ long-running comparison of the loveable icon to President Xi was censored in local coverage of a forthcoming game. A Chinese website posted images from the soon-to-be-released game Kingdom Hearts 3 that showed [Winnie the Pooh](#) obscured by a white blob.
- **2018 trend:** These incidents signaled a growing awareness that Beijing’s influence on private companies is affecting security and information environments well beyond China’s borders. In another notable example, Chinese firms faced [increased international pressure](#) over their links to extreme surveillance practices and religious persecution in the region of Xinjiang. The arrest in Canada of Huawei’s CFO emerged in the context of a broader “[China Initiative](#)” at the US Department of Justice, announced on November 1 by then attorney general Jeff Sessions. Among

other elements, the initiative seeks to better enforce existing laws related to Chinese influence and economic espionage, evident in the requested registration as foreign agents of more Chinese state media outlets and several [new indictments](#) of individuals suspected of spying to obtain US technology. The backlash against Chinese tech giants has not stopped the CCP from trying to [strengthen its hold](#) on the industry: China again hosted its annual World Internet Conference last month, though the increased international pressure may have contributed to a [lower turnout](#) by prominent foreign tech executives compared with previous years.

Government cracks down on student labor activism, academic freedom on campus

- Student activists detained:** A crackdown on student activism in support of labor rights has led to the disappearance of many students and alumni of elite Chinese universities, many of whom are still missing and presumably in detention. A first [round of detentions](#) occurred in late July, when dozens of student activists and workers were arrested in an early morning raid while [advocating](#) the formation of an independent labor union for Jasic factory workers in Shenzhen. A second [round of detentions](#) came in November, when more than 10 activists, including Peking University (PKU) alumni, were detained in apparently coordinated raids across several cities. A number of these students and graduates are [self-avowed Marxists](#) who draw inspiration from Mao Zedong. Some were [violently detained](#) on university campuses, and onlookers were similarly subjected to violence. Supporters have been using social media to spread word of the students' mistreatment and draw attention to the cases of those still missing. Posts that have circulated widely, and been translated by *China Digital Times*, include an essay by now detained Marxist activist and PKU graduate Yue Xin on [her support](#) for the Jasic workers, [two profiles](#) of fellow PKU graduate and women's rights activist Sun Min, and a [bystander's account](#) of being beaten on the PKU campus during the November raids. Accounts of similar violence against student activists at [Renmin University](#) have been circulating on, and disappearing from, Chinese social media platforms.
- Cornell-Renmin University collaboration canceled:** In October, [Cornell University's](#) School of Industrial and Labor Relations ended a six-year-old joint program with Renmin University in Beijing due to concerns about restrictions on academic freedom and the recent reprisals against Chinese students who advocated on behalf of low-income workers. In a November 13 article in [Foreign Policy](#), professor Eli Friedman, who oversaw the Cornell program, relayed firsthand experiences of deteriorating conditions for academic freedom in China over the past five years, linking the changes to the broader trend of growing Chinese Communist Party (CCP) repression against civil society. Friedman urged other foreign universities to reassess their engagement with Chinese counterparts given this worsening reality and its practical impact on the quality of academic research and exchanges.
- 2018 trend:** The crackdown on student activists in 2018 emerged after an [intensifi-](#)

[cation](#) last year in the CCP's drive to reinforce ideological orthodoxy among students and faculty in Chinese universities. As the campaign continued in 2018, the space for academic discussion shrank, even on previously less sensitive topics like labor rights or economics. Efforts to police day-to-day classroom discourse have increased, with students encouraged to [report](#) on teachers' politically incorrect remarks, and the same trend has been [reported](#) in secondary schools. Several professors faced [reprisals](#) during the year for expressing views deemed critical of the CCP or its policies in class, online, or in interviews with overseas media. Foreign staff working for joint ventures with international universities have also been [pressured for comments](#) deemed ideologically unacceptable, and some foreign scholars have commented on the palpably reduced room for rigorous academic discussion when interacting with their Chinese colleagues.

HONG KONG

Curbs on free expression affect art and literature events, book retailers

- Ma Jian literary talk cancellation reversed after outcry:** As part of this year's Hong Kong International Literary Festival, exiled Chinese novelist Ma Jian was invited to participate in two talks at the Tai Kwun Center for Heritage and Arts, a venue managed by a nonprofit with ties to the Hong Kong government. The writer, whose [most recent book](#), *China Dream*, lampoons Xi Jinping-era propaganda, was then [disinvited](#) just days before the scheduled appearances, [heightening long-running concerns](#) about the future of free expression and increased self-censorship in the semiautonomous region. A potential replacement venue for the talks also [declined to host](#) the exiled writer, but amid a growing international outcry, the Tai Kwun Center reversed its decision, and Ma Jian was allowed to speak on November 10. Still, Ma wrote on [Twitter](#) that publishers in Hong Kong had declined to publish his book, the first time this had happened to him, though his writings have been banned in mainland China.
- Badiucao event canceled over 'safety concerns':** On November 2, an art show for Australia-based Chinese political cartoonist Badiucao was abruptly canceled. The show, part of the Hong Kong Free Press's "Free Expression Week," was quashed due to [safety concerns](#) following threats against the dissident artist by Chinese authorities, though he had planned to participate virtually rather than in person. The event was seen as a [test of the limits](#) on speech in a city where concern is already high about the erosion of free expression under pressure from Beijing.
- One of Hong Kong's last outlets for banned books closes:** People's Bookstore, a small shop in Causeway Bay and one of the last stores in the city selling publications that are banned by the CCP, [closed](#) in October. The decision is believed to have followed pressure from the government. It is only the latest development in the slow demise of a previously booming trade in politically sensitive books since the [extralegal detention](#) of five Hong Kong booksellers and publishers by mainland authorities in 2015.

- **2018 trend:** Over the past decade, the relative freedom enjoyed by residents of Hong Kong—particularly regarding expression—has been in [steady decline](#) as Beijing exerts greater influence. In 2018, international media outlets and [nongovernmental organizations](#) began [moving to Taiwan](#) as Hong Kong became a less welcoming hub for the broader region, a trend that was underscored in October when Hong Kong officials refused to [renew the visa](#) of Financial Times correspondent Victor Mallet. While visa rejections for foreign journalists are now common on the mainland, Mallet's marked a [first](#) for Hong Kong.

FEATURED PUSHBACK

Circumvention tools in the wake of a VPN crackdown

The Chinese Communist Party has long played a game of cat and mouse with Chinese citizens who use various technologies to jump the so-called Great Firewall and access uncensored information on the global internet. This contest escalated in 2017 with a new crackdown on unregistered virtual private networks (VPNs), including pressure on Apple to remove hundreds of such applications from its online store, curbs on VPN access for hotel guests, and the imprisonment of several people for purveying unregistered VPNs. Nevertheless, the campaign has not entirely succeeded in quashing netizen efforts to circumvent internet censorship.



A number of free tools—for both desktops and mobile phones—continue to [function](#), including FreeBrowser, Ultrasurf, Psiphon, Freetag (Dynaweb), and Lantern, as well as paid VPN services like ViperVPN and Shadowsocks. Data from four of these services, which are far from complete, indicate that at least 20-30 million people in China jumped the Great Firewall in 2018, depending on how many used multiple tools, with the actual total likely numbering much higher. The size of the population served by each tool varies, ranging from 500,000 to over 9 million, as does the connection speed a given tool is able to provide. Usage of several still-functioning tools increased in 2018 as other options disappeared, indicating that interest in uncensored information persists despite the new restrictions. In some cases, increased usage appeared to coincide with politically significant but heavily censored events like the arrest of Huawei's CFO in Canada or Taiwan's local elections.

Although Apple has removed many VPN applications from its store, apps for Android and other operating systems continue to function. Developers say the crackdown is more likely to have affected less tech-savvy users. But it may have created security concerns even for users outside China, as a large proportion of easily accessible VPNs are provided by China-based companies, which may come under greater pressure from the authorities to provide access to user data. A [study](#) published in November of

the top free VPNs emerging in searches on Google Play and Apple iTunes stores in the United States and the United Kingdom found that 17 of the top 30 had formal links to China, and that many had problematic privacy policies.

Looking ahead to 2019, as the Chinese government increases its access to user data within China and intensifies censorship of China-based social media platforms, the demand for tools to sidestep such interference may grow. Developers and their funders should prepare for these trends and work to ensure that users have access to secure and affordable circumvention technology.

WHAT TO WATCH FOR

- **More reprisals linked to upgraded surveillance:** As the Chinese authorities gain access to a wider array of data on the behavior and communications of citizens—whether via cloud services, social media, or video cameras with facial recognition technology—watch for evidence that such information is being used to identify and punish citizens who may hold dissenting views. Among other potential developments, watch in 2019 for the first case of a Chinese user jailed over content saved in an iCloud account as well as continued expansion of social credit systems.
- **Changes in or expansion of Xinjiang repression:** Watch for whether the global response to the mass detention and “reeducation” of Muslim minorities in Xinjiang, including potential sanctions against key officials and companies, results in policy changes by the Chinese government. Also watch for new examples of repressive tactics or technologies that were first applied in Xinjiang being extended to other parts of China, as began occurring in 2018 with police equipment such as mobile device scanners.
- **Global responses to Beijing’s growing media influence:** During 2018, governments, civil society actors, journalists, and citizens in countries around the world became more attuned to the ways in which the CCP’s far-reaching propaganda, censorship, and surveillance programs can affect their domestic politics, democratic development, and national sovereignty. In 2019, watch for how this awareness translates into new initiatives to ensure transparency, protect democratic institutions, and insulate media freedom from covert, coercive, or otherwise improper encroachments by the CCP and Chinese state media.

TAKE ACTION

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- **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 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 in China, see: *Freedom in the World 2018*, *Freedom of the Press 2017*, *Freedom on the Net 2018*, and *The Battle for China's Spirit: Religious Revival, Repression, and Resistance under Xi Jinping*



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