

CHINA MEDIA BULLETIN

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IMAGE OF THE MONTH

Drawing Dissent

This cartoon—depicting a peaceful Hong Kong protester surrounded by police riot shields—was one of several that exiled Chinese artist Badiuca has produced about this month's mass demonstrations against a bill to allow extraditions of criminal suspects to mainland China. The images circulated widely on social media platforms like Twitter and among Hong Kong news outlets. The outspoken artist, who until recently had sought to keep his identity hidden for security purposes, had disappeared from public view for nearly a year after canceling an event in Hong Kong due to police harassment of his family on the mainland. In early June, he [broke his silence](#) with this series of cartoons and ahead of a documentary about him airing in [Australia](#), in which he made his first public appearance [without a disguise](#).

Credit: [Hong Kong Free Press/Badiuca](#)



ANALYSIS

China's Summer Censorship: From Bad to Worse

By Sarah Cook
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June has been a terrible month for internet freedom in China. July may be even worse.

Every year in June, China's censors go into overdrive to prevent citizens from discussing, commemorating, or learning about the prodemocracy protests that took place across the country in 1989 and the brutal military action that brought them to an end.

But this year, the combination of the 30th anniversary of those events, an escalating trade war with the United States, massive antigovernment protests in Hong Kong, and the availability of a more technologically advanced information-control system has driven the Chinese Communist Party's censorship efforts to unprecedented extremes. With even more sensitive anniversaries approaching in July, the escalation is likely to continue.

New upgrades to existing censorship

Not surprisingly, the national internet filtering system known as the Great Firewall expanded its reach this month. Within the first week of June, the websites of 12 major international news outlets from five different countries were blocked, including CNN, the *Washington Post*, the *Guardian*, the [Intercept](#), the *Toronto Star*, *The Age* in [Australia](#), and New Zealand's [Newsroom](#). These joined others like the *New York Times*, Reuters, and the *Wall Street Journal*, which have long been inaccessible within China.

Meanwhile, the country's most popular social media applications—Sina Weibo and Tencent's WeChat—deployed novel technologies and penalties to prevent information about the June 4 anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre from circulating. Censors at top Chinese tech companies told Reuters that the artificial intelligence used to detect and delete banned content had reached “[unprecedented levels of accuracy](#).” Those caught communicating about the events of 1989 risked being [shut out](#) of their WeChat accounts; to log back in, they would have to acknowledge that they had “spread malicious rumors” and provide a face print, as BBC journalist Stephen McDonnell experienced first-hand. Manya Koetse notes that on Weibo there was [more airtight censorship](#) this year surrounding the word “Tiananmen” itself, and not only in combination with dates or terms that would link it to 1989. In another first, [Apple reportedly removed](#) several Chinese-language podcasts from its online store in China, affecting one of the few Apple services in the country that had until then avoided censorship.

Expansion to apolitical spaces

Even somewhat dated entertainment content has not escaped the censors' attention. In the most prominent example, major Chinese streaming platforms have removed music by rock star [Li Zhi](#) since April, and the musician's Weibo account, WeChat public account, and Douban musician page have been deleted. Although Li's recent music has been apolitical or even progovernment, a few older pieces alluded to the 1989 protests.

In the run-up to the June anniversary, [regulators](#) ordered the deletion of any audio or video content related to these songs.

A more unexpected move has been the full or partial suspension of live-streaming, dating, and [celebrity gossip](#) services due to “system upgrades” or “maintenance,” all commencing in May and scheduled to end in June. At least nine such cases were documented, including [Momo](#) (a hook-up and live streaming app with 113 million users), video-sharing site [Bilibili](#) (100 million users), China’s largest dating app [Tantan](#) (90 million users), LGBT social media app [Blued](#) (27 million users), and Dingtalk, a business communication app. In most instances the service was not entirely shuttered, with suspensions focusing instead on features that enable real-time communication and might be difficult for censors to keep up with—such as “bullet chat” commentary that runs along a video. YY, a popular live-streaming platform, [announced this type of restriction](#) in late May, shortly after adding over 300 new keywords related to June 4 and Hong Kong to its blacklist.

The companies’ statements explained that their efforts were initiated at the behest of “[the relevant government authority](#),” an apparent reference to the powerful Cyber Administration of China (CAC). They had little choice but to comply with the agency’s demands. The financial news service Refinitiv, which distributes Reuters content via Eikon terminals, was reportedly warned by CAC officials that it could lose its news dissemination license if it refused to omit articles related to the Tiananmen anniversary. In a sign of the regime’s broader anxiety about the economy and associated topics, on June 10 the CAC reportedly ordered the suspension of the website and mobile app of [Wallstreet.cn](#), a financial news aggregator that had garnered an estimated 180 million global users.

In fact, the jump in censorship over the past month is perhaps most remarkable for the sheer scale of the media types and user bases affected. Hundreds of millions of people have experienced a sudden decline in their ability to access or share information, even if in some cases they remain unaware of the reasons behind the restriction.

Temporary or permanent?

Given that the upgraded censorship seems to have been triggered largely by the Tiananmen anniversary, one might assume that most of the new measures are temporary. But the evidence suggests that such an assumption would be a mistake.

Freedom House’s tests of the 12 foreign news sites that were blocked in early June—conducted on [GreatFire.org’s](#) URL analyzer—show that apart from CNN, all remained blocked as of June 18. Other innovations deployed over the past month, such as social media filtering aided by artificial intelligence, can be expected to expand rather than contract in the coming years. Any information about problematic WeChat users that was collected during this sensitive period will be retained for future reference.

And if China’s censors were busy in June, the month of July will be no picnic either. July 1 marks the anniversary of Hong Kong’s transfer from British to Chinese rule, which could easily prompt another round of mass protests. Then there is July 5, the 10th

anniversary of ethnic violence in the Xinjiang region that led to a harsh and ongoing crackdown on its large Muslim population. The very next day, July 6, is the Dalai Lama's birthday, and July 13 is the second anniversary of the death of democracy advocate and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Liu Xiaobo. Finally there is July 20, the 20th anniversary of the Communist Party's ban on the Falun Gong spiritual practice and the beginning of a massive and often violent campaign to eradicate it.

Unlike the more historically focused June 4 anniversary, some of July's sensitive dates are closely tied to current events, including the most egregious human rights abuses and most important examples of dissent taking place in China today. Over the last week alone, news emerged that a prominent [Uighur writer](#) had died due to detention in a Xinjiang "reeducation" camp, an [independent inquiry in London](#) concluded that prisoners of conscience in China—including Falun Gong and potentially [Uighur](#) detainees—have been killed so that their organs can be used in transplant operations, and the Hong Kong [government suspended](#) its controversial extradition bill after mass protests.

Most people in China may be completely unaware of these developments, even though they are making international headlines and could have real repercussions for the country. Despite this information isolation, however, hope is not lost. Numerous accounts published this month by young Chinese explain how they learned the truth about the events of 1989 and highlight some of the cracks in the regime's censorship system. Data from at least two circumvention tools show an increase in users from China in June compared with the previous month, around both the June 4 anniversary and the large protests in Hong Kong.

People in China clearly want to know what the government is not telling them. As the coming month propels Beijing's information control efforts to even greater extremes, international actors should be prepared to support ordinary individuals' quest for access to uncensored news.

IN THE NEWS

US and Chinese companies feel the chill of a 'Tech Cold War'

The US administration's proposed ban on the sale of American hardware and software to the Chinese telecommunications giant Huawei due to national security concerns, announced on [May 16](#), is already taking a toll on the company. Overseas sales of Huawei smartphones have [dropped](#) by 40 percent since the US Department of Commerce said last month that it intended to place the firm on a list of companies considered a threat to US national interests. Huawei has [warned](#) that the ban may cost it \$30 billion in revenue, despite the potential that it could in some cases receive special permission from the US government to buy American components and technology. US suppliers are also facing massive financial losses. US chipmaker [Broadcom](#), which made \$900 million in direct sales to Huawei in 2018, has reportedly already felt the impact of the ban.

Compounding these losses are US tech companies' decisions to sever ties with Huawei out of fear of violating the proposed restrictions. On June 7, [Reuters reported](#) that Facebook will no longer allow its mobile application to be preinstalled on Huawei phones, while Google will stop providing Huawei with Android operating software in August.

China, however, looks set to respond in kind. The Ministry of Commerce [announced](#) in late May that it was compiling its own "Unreliable Entities List." It is not yet clear which companies will be designated, but a ministry spokesperson's reference to companies that "block or cut supplies to Chinese firms for noncommercial reasons" suggested that US tech companies would be among the first targets. On June 8, the [New York Times](#) reported that Chinese officials had already summoned representatives from Microsoft, Dell, and South Korea's Samsung to warn them against cooperating with the US ban.

Not all countries have been convinced by US assertions that Huawei poses a national security threat, for example by using its role in building fifth-generation (5G) mobile infrastructure to facilitate espionage on behalf of the Chinese state. [Chile and Brazil](#) have indicated that they would not exclude Huawei from plans to introduce 5G technology in their respective territories, and [Russia's largest telecom provider](#) signed a deal with Huawei on June 5 to build that country's 5G network.

Chinese state media, censors respond to protests in Hong Kong

Over the past month, Hong Kong has been gripped by mass protests in opposition to draft legal amendments that would enable the extradition of accused criminals to mainland China. The assemblies have featured episodes of violence, including police assaults against protesters on June 12, but also massive and peaceful marches, such as a demonstration on June 16 that brought an estimated [two million](#) of Hong Kong's seven million people into the streets. Mainland Chinese media have avoided extensive coverage of the protests, with the flagship [evening news program](#) of China Central Television (CCTV) on June 17 making no mention of the historic turnout for the previous day's demonstration.

But Chinese state media and Hong Kong government supporters have not been entirely silent about the public dissent. Disinformation regarding the protests has spread online, much of it [promoted by Chinese state media](#). Among the false reports were a June 10 China Daily article claiming that 800,000 people had taken part in an online signature campaign to voice their support for the extradition bill and a June 17 assertion that parents in Hong Kong had marched against "US meddling." Some of this content has spread outside China via Chinese-language media. In one example that emerged in New Zealand, the [Chinese New Zealand Herald](#) came under criticism for reprinting distorted information from the People's Daily, a Communist Party mouthpiece, leading it to retract the article.

Chinese state media also attempted to dismiss opposition to the bill as the result of “some Hong Kong residents being hoodwinked by the opposition camp and its foreign allies,” as a [June 9 editorial](#) in the China Daily put it. The same editorial warned that the protests could undermine the “credibility and reputation” of the city. A June 13 Global Times commentary struck an even more belligerent note, denouncing expression of support for the protesters from US lawmakers like Nancy Pelosi as “[a stark provocation](#).” A Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman tried to justify police brutality against protesters by claiming on [June 13](#) that the demonstration in question was “not a peaceful rally, but a blatant, organized riot.”

Meanwhile, Chinese censors have been busy trying to stop mainland news consumers and netizens from learning about the political crisis and demonstrations in Hong Kong. [China Digital Times](#) published a leaked June 16 government directive instructing websites to “find and delete video content related to Hong Kong antiextradition protests.” Censors at Tencent and other Chinese social media companies have worked to comply with such orders, for example by removing a song from the musical *Les Misérables* from a popular Chinese music-streaming platform. The [Economist](#) reported that the song “Do You Hear the People Sing?”—adopted as one of the anthems of the protest movement—was no longer available on QQ Music. However, the Christian pop song “Sing Hallelujah to the Lord,” another unofficial anthem, was still available. Censors for Sina’s Weibo microblogging platform have also worked to [remove discussion](#) of the Hong Kong protests. Posts or comments voicing support for the movement have been deleted from Weibo.

Tiananmen anniversary: Surveillance, harassment, and recollections of learning the truth

In addition to censorship of the news media and other communication tools, the Chinese government intensified its direct repression of key critics ahead of the 30th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre. [Radio Free Asia](#) reported that police had placed members of the Tiananmen Mothers—relatives of people killed in 1989—under greater technical and physical surveillance, primarily to prevent them from speaking to foreign journalists. Ding Zilin, one of the more outspoken mothers, and prominent activist Hu Jia were taken on an enforced “vacation” outside Beijing. [Chinese Human Rights Defenders](#) reports that at least 37 activists and artists were taken into custody, forced to travel, or placed under house arrest in connection with the sensitive anniversary. Among them was Sichuan-based independent filmmaker Deng Chuanbin, who was [detained](#) by police after tweeting a photograph of a bottle of liquor with a label that commemorated the massacre. Former student leader Feng Congde, who now lives abroad, was [denied entry to Hong Kong](#) on June 2.

Separately, many writers who grew up in China after 1989 used overseas media to reflect on the moment they first learned about an event that has been wiped from their country’s history books. In one compilation of such accounts published by [ChinaFile](#), writers described coming home to see family members secretly watching a banned

documentary about the massacre, stumbling upon a Wikipedia entry after using circumvention tools to reach the uncensored internet, learning that a favorite teacher was denied promotion because of some past involvement in the “Tiananmen disturbance,” or encountering online censorship of an innocuous word in late May and being told it was related to the upcoming anniversary of liusi (6/4). In most cases, the writers subsequently found opportunities to learn more about what had happened, for example after leaving China to study abroad, by asking their parents, or through persistent digging for banned content online.

In a testimony to the power of film, many of those recounting these experiences emphasized watching video footage or documentaries about the 1989 events, including real-life images of students protesting and going on hunger strike, followed by tanks driving into Beijing and bloodied civilians. As one anonymous contributor wrote about watching the 2006 film *Summer Palace*, “I was born in 1990. This was the first time I had seen protesters with Chinese faces. The movie left me speechless.”

HONG KONG

Journalist assaults, cyberattacks, surveillance fears accompany protests

As millions of Hong Kong residents faced off with their government in recent weeks over proposed legal amendments that would enable the extradition of criminal suspects to mainland China, a number of restrictions or fears related to free speech and privacy rights emerged:

- **Police attack journalists covering protests:** The [Hong Kong Journalists Association](#) (HKJA) protested police harassment of journalists covering demonstrations on June 10 and subsequent dates. According to the HKJA, police officers verbally and physically assaulted reporters, with some suffering burns from pepper spray, and prevented them from safely covering the events even when they presented their press cards. There were at least [27 cases](#) of reported violence or harassment against members of the media covering protests during June, as outlined in a detailed HKJA complaint to police.
- **Surveillance fears:** Protesters in Hong Kong are [reportedly](#) using the encrypted messaging application Telegram, disabling the location tracking on their phones, and deleting chat records to avoid potential government surveillance and future punishment for participating in protests. Despite these efforts, on June 11 police arrested the administrator of a Telegram chat group on charges of “conspiring to commit a public nuisance,” [according to Global Voices](#). Police searched Ivan Ip’s apartment and downloaded chat records from his phone pertaining to a group of over 20,000 members. According to the [New York Times](#), in the wake of Ip’s arrest, many protesters began using pay-as-you-go SIM cards or foreign numbers to avoid being found by police on the basis of their phone numbers.

- **Cyberattack on Telegram:** The Chinese government is suspected of launching a massive distributed denial of service (DDoS) attack on Telegram during the height of the recent protests. On June 12, a large number of “garbage requests” overwhelmed Telegram’s servers and temporarily disabled the app, [reports Engadget](#). Telegram chief executive Pavel Durov confirmed [on his personal Twitter account](#) that most of the internet protocol addresses linked to the attack were in China. Such tactics are not new. Durov said that [past](#) attacks of similar sizes had coincided with protests in Hong Kong.

BEYOND CHINA

Support for Hong Kong, Twitter suspensions, Uighur refugees, Huawei spying in Serbia

- **Foreign leaders speak out on Hong Kong bill, protests:** [Officials from democratic governments around the world](#) have expressed deep concern about Hong Kong’s extradition bill and support for the protesters opposing it. Those speaking out include cabinet ministers and lawmakers from the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Germany, Taiwan, Japan, and Australia. If passed, the bill would expose Hong Kong residents as well as expatriates and visitors to detention and trial in China’s notoriously flawed judicial system. In one of the strongest steps taken thus far, a bipartisan group of US lawmakers reintroduced the [Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act](#) on June 13. The draft law would, among other actions, require the US government to annually reassess the territory’s autonomy from Beijing and its related special trading status. It would also enable personal sanctions against officials who are found to be “complicit in suppressing basic freedoms in Hong Kong, including ... rendition of individuals ... to mainland China.”
- **Under Chinese pressure, Australian councilor withdraws motion commemorating June 4:** A city councilor for [Melbourne](#) withdrew at the last minute a motion to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre, apparently in response to pressure from the Chinese consulate. [Councilor Jackie Watts](#) later expressed regret for her decision to bow to “political influence” and told the media that remaining silent about the anniversary “was contrary to the very democracy that we hold dear.”
- **Twitter suspends Chinese dissidents’ accounts ahead of Tiananmen anniversary:** Twitter suspended the accounts of at [least 100 Chinese political commentators](#), and by some estimates [thousands](#), days before the 30th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre. Rights lawyers, activists, and college students in China as well as intellectuals based abroad were affected. Responding to what has been dubbed the #TwitterMassacre, many observers, including US senator [Marco Rubio](#), accused the company of acting as a censor for the Chinese government or responding to suspected fake complaints about the accounts. Twitter soon

apologized and claimed that the suspensions were the unintentional result of a periodic “[routine action](#)” to crack down on spam, not a reaction to Chinese government requests. Many of the accounts were soon functioning again, but users and activists remain unsatisfied with Twitter’s explanation and are urging more transparency. [Writing in Forbes](#), Kalev Leetaru argued that the social media company’s reluctance to allow external monitoring of its enforcement actions raised “grave questions about Twitter’s commitment to freedom of speech.”

- **Foreign help in Uighur crackdown criticized:** The Belgian government has come under fire for an incident in late May in which it allowed Chinese police to detain a [Uighur family seeking assistance](#) at the country’s Beijing embassy. [Wureyetiguli Abula](#) was seeking visas for herself and her four children, aged 5 to 17, in order to join her husband in Brussels, where he had been granted asylum. After a disagreement over the travel documents, consular officials permitted police to enter the embassy and remove the family, who have since been placed under house arrest in Xinjiang. Writing in [Foreign Policy](#), acquaintances of the family referred to a 2018 case in Germany in which a bureaucratic error led to the deportation of a 22-year-old Uighur man, who has not been heard from since. After that incident, Germany and Sweden ordered a halt to any deportations of Uighurs to China. Separately, the [United Nations counterterrorism chief](#), Russian diplomat Vladimir Voronkov, has been criticized for making a trip to Xinjiang in mid-June and failing to mention the mass detention of Uighurs in “reeducation” camps. US deputy secretary of state [John Sullivan](#) condemned the visit as an endorsement of the Chinese government’s efforts to depict “its repressive campaign against Uighurs and other Muslims as legitimate counterterrorism efforts when it is not.”
- **Chinese facial-recognition technology deployed in Serbia, Tajikistan:** The Serbian government has announced that it will be installing hundreds of Huawei-made cameras equipped with facial-recognition technology across the capital, Belgrade, [reports Foreign Policy](#). The article cites a now-deleted Huawei study in which “the company boasted that it had already deployed its Safe City system in 230 cities around the world, for more than 90 national or regional governments.” Indeed, according to a June 17 report by Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty ([RFE/RL](#)), similar technology is being installed in cities across Tajikistan as part of a Safe City program funded in large part by a loan from China. The move, which has raised concerns within the human rights community, recalls the use by [Ecuadorian](#) authorities of Chinese-made technology in that country’s expanding system of domestic surveillance. Serbia is rated Partly Free and Tajikistan is rated Not Free in Freedom House’s 2019 Freedom in the World report. The export of such technologies is just one example of the way China’s technological and media reach could strengthen autocrats and challenge democratic governance and press freedom worldwide—a theme explored in a [new report, Freedom and the Media](#), published by Freedom House in early June.

FEATURED PUSHBACK

Songs, wordplay aid Hong Kong protesters and Chinese netizens

Mass outbreaks of song and Cantonese wordplay have been a recurring feature of the protest movement against Hong Kong's extradition bill, which would enable criminal suspects to be sent to mainland China. Perhaps the most prominent example has been the Christian hymn "[Sing Hallelujah to the Lord](#)," which became an anthem for the movement even though most Hong Kongers are not Christians. The hymn first gained prominence when a group of Christian students



Credit: [Mary Hui](#)

sang religious songs to provide legal cover for the protests, relying on the fact that religious gatherings can be held in Hong Kong without a permit. The song caught on and can often be heard at protest sites, with some participants noting that it helps reduce tensions with the police, conveying an air of calm and sending the message that the protest is intended to be peaceful.

Various types of [satirical wordplay in Cantonese](#), the dialect of Chinese spoken by most Hong Kongers, have also appeared, serving as a way to assert a sense of identity distinct from that of mainland China. Several internet memes have played off of insults hurled by police at protesters and journalists that were caught on camera and went viral. Similarly, protesters have been seen carrying dolls of the Pokémon character Pikachu, a mocking reference to the Cantonese name of Hong Kong's secretary of security (Lee Ka-chiu), one of the fiercest proponents of the extradition bill and a key target of protester ire.

Across the border in mainland China, aggressive censorship has prevented photos and discussion of the Hong Kong protests and related police violence from circulating widely, although there has reportedly been a spike in the number of users searching for information about Hong Kong. (Searches on Tencent's WeChat for "Hong Kong" reportedly reached 32 million on June 12, up from 12 million the week before, for example.) Chinese netizens have also turned to songs and coded references to express their opinions. Specifically, two songs about Hong Kong from the 1980s and 1990s—"[Pearl of the Orient](#)" and "[Queen's Road East](#)"—have been used as code to refer to the city. Users posted lyrics from the songs alongside expressions of support for protesters, like "Jiayou!" ("Add oil!"), a common Chinese term of encouragement that has also been heard at the protest sites.

WHAT TO WATCH FOR

- **Increased censorship and surveillance in July:** As another month of sensitive religious and political anniversaries begins, watch for new instances of censorship innovation or intensified restrictions, especially those targeting key populations like Uighurs, Tibetans, and Falun Gong practitioners, or known democracy advocates and friends of Liu Xiaobo.
- **Hong Kong protest fallout:** With demonstrations continuing in Hong Kong, and [new evidence](#) confirming police brutality during past protests, watch for whether the controversial extradition bill is fully withdrawn, Carrie Lam resigns as chief executive, police are held accountable for assaults on journalists, and protest leaders or participants face repercussions, including prosecutions based on digital surveillance.
- **'Safe City' projects aiding repression globally:** With Chinese facial-recognition technology and video surveillance equipment spreading to dozens of countries around the world, including deeply autocratic states like Tajikistan and backsliding democracies like Serbia, watch for new information on whether and how the recipient security forces may be using the new tools for political repression in addition to crime control.

TAKE ACTION

- **Subscribe to the *China Media Bulletin*:** Have the bulletin's updates and insights delivered directly to your inbox each month, free of charge. Visit [here](#) or e-mail cmb@freedomhouse.org.
- **Share the *China Media Bulletin*:** Help friends and colleagues better understand China's changing media and censorship landscape.
- **Access uncensored content:** Find an overview comparing popular circumvention tools and information on how to access them via GreatFire.org, [here](#) 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*



Freedom House is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that supports democratic change, monitors freedom, and advocates for democracy and human rights.

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