

CHINA MEDIA BULLETIN

Headlines

ANALYSIS The Globalization of China's Media Controls: Key Trends from 2019 **P2**

IN THE NEWS

- New CCP ideological push reflected in 2019 buzzwords, internet regulations **P5**
- Investigative journalism that squeezed through tightening controls in 2019 **P7**
- Restrictions on film, photos and literature intensify **P8**
- Surveillance trends: Urban surveillance, data leaks, export restrictions, and public concerns **P9**
- Hong Kong: Mass mobile-phone seizures and doxing in 2019 spark privacy concerns **P10**

FEATURED PUSHBACK Dissent survives 2019 crackdowns **P12**

WHAT TO WATCH FOR IN 2020 **P13**

TAKE ACTION **P14**

IMAGE OF THE MONTH

Censored Oscars' Shortlist

This image is taken from [One Child Nation](#), a documentary film codirected by Nanfu Wang and Jialing Zhang that was shortlisted for an [Academy Award](#) under the Best Documentary Feature category. Chinese media reports on the shortlist mentioned only 14 of the 15 films, omitting *One Child Nation*, which offers an emotional and critical perspective on the cost for Chinese families of the decades-long one-child policy. After Amazon Prime released the film November 8, a pirated version with Chinese subtitles went [viral](#) overnight on Sina Weibo, until censors stepped in within 24 hours. Online searches for the film title or the [related hashtag](#) in China generate no results.



Credit: [One Child Nation](#)

ANALYSIS

The Globalization of China's Media Controls: Key Trends from 2019

By Sarah Cook

Sarah Cook is a Senior Research Analyst at Freedom House, director of its [China Media Bulletin](#), and author of [Beijing's Global Megaphone: The Expansion of Chinese Communist Party Media Influence since 2017](#),

published on January 16, 2020.

.....
THIS ARTICLE
WAS PUBLISHED
BY THE DIPLOMAT
ON JANUARY 21.

The Chinese Communist Party's international media influence campaign is expanding rapidly—and so is the world's response.

An official at the Chinese embassy in [Moscow](#) warns a local journalist to remove an article questioning the health of the Chinese economy from his paper's website or face being “blacklisted” in China. [Nepal's](#) state-owned news agency—which has a content-exchange agreement with Xinhua, its Chinese counterpart—launches an investigation into three reporters who circulated an item about the Dalai Lama, Tibet's exiled spiritual leader. A regional public broadcaster in [Germany](#) airs a current affairs program that was coproduced with Chinese state television, prompting criticism. And [Timor-Leste](#) welcomes two Chinese companies to manage a digital television expansion project, even as broadcasters in [Africa](#) raise concerns about such companies' outsized influence over which stations are available to viewers.

These are just a few incidents from the past year that illustrate increasingly aggressive efforts by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to project its propaganda and enforce its censorship priorities around the world. A new Freedom House report published last week—[Beijing's Global Megaphone](#)—describes the full array of CCP media influence tactics, presenting evidence of both their growing impact and the pushback they have generated, whether from governments, independent media, technology firms, or civil society.

While the report tracks the evolution of the CCP strategy and its effects since 2017, the following four trends stood out in 2019:

- 1. Foreign-facing state media mobilized against CCP enemies:** China's major state-run media outlets have a long-standing international presence, but most have recently increased their activity on international social media platforms that are blocked inside China, garnering tens of millions of followers. The content shared with foreign audiences has generally put a positive spin on China and its regime, highlighting the country's economic and technological prowess while whitewashing human rights abuses. But in 2019, as prodemocracy protests in Hong Kong and the mass detention of Muslims in Xinjiang captured international attention, more aggressive and negative content targeting perceived CCP enemies began to appear sprinkled among run-of-the-mill posts about pandas, development projects, and Chinese culture.

For example, during the summer, the English-language Facebook page of China Global Television Network (CGTN)—the international arm of the Chinese state broadcaster—published several videos for its more than 70 million followers that

likened [Hong Kong protesters](#) to terrorists or repeated proven fabrications about them. In December, a series of disturbing “documentaries” about the supposed terrorist threat posed by Xinjiang’s Muslim population were posted on CGTN’s English, Spanish, and French Facebook pages. Within hours, one of the [videos](#) had garnered over 25,000 views, a relatively high number for CGTN content.

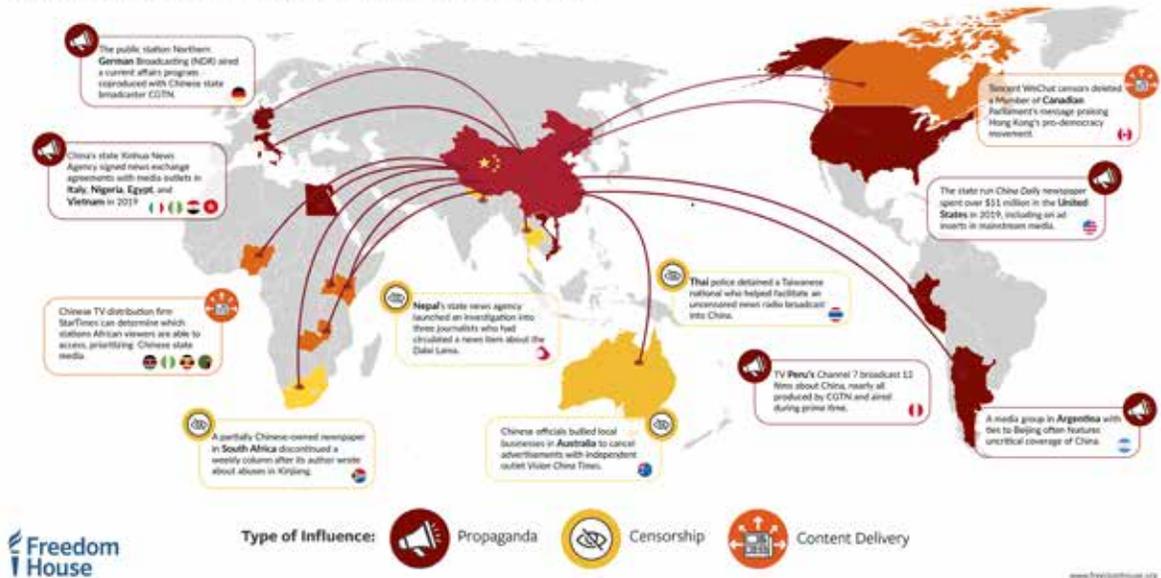
2. **Disinformation campaigns conducted on global social media platforms:** Russian-style disinformation campaigns on international social media platforms, which feature coordinated networks of accounts posing as ordinary users, have gained prominence over the past year as a relatively new tactic for promoting CCP narratives abroad, although the phenomenon apparently began as early as mid-2017. Previously, most evidence of this type of covert propaganda was observed on domestic platforms, according to the [Oxford Internet Institute](#). But in 2019, the institute reported, the Chinese government displayed “new-found interest in aggressively using Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube.” All three companies announced mass removals of accounts that they said were mobilized as part of Chinese state-directed disinformation campaigns.

Detailed analysis of the data from these takedowns showed that although Chinese authorities’ overseas use of online disinformation has been relatively crude to date, they are learning fast. In [Taiwan](#), where Chinese social media operations are already more sophisticated than those deployed globally, observers note that the disinformation is becoming harder to detect. Moreover, despite Twitter’s actions to remove China-linked networks, state-affiliated trolls are still apparently active on the platform in large numbers, as indicated by the intimidation campaign triggered by Houston Rockets general manager [Daryl Morey](#)’s tweet in support of Hong Kong protesters in October. Meanwhile, there have been multiple suspected efforts by pro-Beijing trolls to manipulate the ranking of content on popular sources of information outside China, including Google’s [search engine](#), [Reddit](#), and [YouTube](#).

3. **Politicized censorship evident on Chinese-owned platforms expanding abroad:** As Chinese social media firms and their flagship applications slowly gain worldwide popularity, they are creating new avenues for the CCP to influence news distribution outside China. One notable example is WeChat, an app that combines instant messaging, group chats, business services, and electronic payments. It is owned by Tencent and boasts a billion active users within China. However, an estimated [100 to 200 million people](#) outside the country, particularly in Asia, also use the service. Among WeChat’s global users are millions of members of the Chinese diaspora in countries like Canada, Australia, and the United States. Increasingly, WeChat is being used by politicians in these democracies to communicate with their ethnic Chinese constituents.

Amid tightening internet censorship within China, reports have emerged of WeChat staff deleting politically sensitive information posted by foreign users or [shutting down their accounts](#). In April 2019, researchers found evidence that [WeChat was systematically monitoring](#) conversations of users outside China and

Beijing's Global Megaphone: Selected Cases of Chinese Media Influence Abroad



flagging politically sensitive content for some form of scrutiny, even when transmission of the messages is not hindered. Separately, the Chinese company [ByteDance](#)'s short-video app [TikTok](#) became one of [the most downloaded applications](#) worldwide in 2019, especially among teenage users in the [United States](#). As with WeChat, there were reports that TikTok had censored material considered sensitive by the Chinese government or [downplayed political content](#) more broadly.

- 4. Growing pushback as audiences awaken to Beijing's influence on free expression:** As exposure to Beijing's media influence expanded, wide swaths of the international community and ordinary members of the public became more aware of the CCP's ability to affect what people outside China are able to say, read, and watch. A watershed moment came in the fall, when within a space of weeks, cases of CCP-induced self-censorship and pressure touched on [pop-culture icons](#) like the National Basketball Association, the satirical television show *South Park*, and the video-game company Blizzard. Many ordinary people were outraged to see corporate entities bending over backwards to avoid offending Beijing and even policing expression by others, including sports fans and gaming tournament participants.

This growing awareness has prompted democratic governments to scrutinize Beijing's media engagement and investment practices. In [February 2019](#), CGTN registered in the United States under the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) following an effort to improve enforcement and increase transparency surrounding authoritarian regimes' influence activities. In November, the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (CFIUS) initiated a national security review of ByteDance's \$1 billion acquisition of Muciscal.ly in 2017, a key precursor to the development and spread of [TikTok](#). In Australia, a new set of [foreign influence transparency laws](#) that include FARA-like registration requirements came into

effect in March. Also during the year, the United Kingdom’s media regulator increased to eight the number of [investigations](#) it is conducting into whether CGTN violated broadcasting rules by recording and airing forced confessions and through its biased coverage of protests in Hong Kong.

In other parts of the world, information from independent media and social media influencers about the persecution of Muslim minorities in Xinjiang and the potentially negative effects of Chinese investment may be undermining Beijing’s reputation and encouraging further pushback. China’s [public approval ratings](#) declined by between 7 and 17 percentage points from 2018 to 2019 in influential developing countries with notable Muslim populations, including Indonesia, Kenya, and Tunisia. And over the past month, after Turkish soccer star [Mesut Özil](#) highlighted the plight of Uighurs in Xinjiang and the silence of Muslim-majority countries in a viral social media post, officials and citizens in countries such as [Kuwait](#), [Jordan](#), and [Malaysia](#) have taken action to show their support with statements, Chinese embassy protests, and a ban on repatriating asylum seekers.

There are no indications that CCP leader Xi Jinping and his allies plan to slow their global media influence activities in 2020. In fact, they are likely to view the new pushback as a sign that they should redouble their efforts. That makes it all the more important for governments, journalists, technology firms, and civil society to take steps that will increase transparency and protect media freedom. Such measures will have the added benefit of strengthening democratic institutions against other domestic and international threats, which only seem to multiply from one year to the next.

IN THE NEWS

New CCP ideological push reflected in 2019 buzzwords, internet controls

The year 2019 saw the Chinese government increase its control over domestic media and online space. Authorities also made a more concerted effort to promote Chinese Communist Party (CCP) chief Xi Jinping’s persona and ideological priorities. This was noticeably reflected in online discourse in China, and the trend appears set to continue in 2020, particularly as new content-management regulations take effect in March.

- **Analysis of People’s Daily political discourse:** [A recent report on political discourse in Chinese state media](#) highlights the increasingly Marxist and authoritarian ideological turn of Xi Jinping’s rule. Produced by the China Media Project, an independent research initiative affiliated with the University of Hong Kong, the analysis examined the frequency of the use of key terms in the People’s Daily, the CCP’s official mouthpiece, over the course of 2019. Many of the most widely used terms reflected Xi’s growing power or ideological influence: “with comrade Xi Jinping as the core,” “Xi Jinping Thought on socialism with Chinese characteristics for the New Era,” and “Belt and Road Initiative,” were identified as “blazing” or “red-hot” in terms of their frequency, according to the project’s “discourse heat scale.” By contrast, Qian Gang,

a long-time Chinese journalist and media scholar and the report's author, noted that “in 2019, the most important change we saw in the political discourse of the Chinese Communist Party was the complete abandonment of the phrase ‘political system reform,’” which was once regularly present in Chinese state media, albeit with more restrictive connotations than the phrase’s use internationally. Other liberal phrases that were ranked “cold,” reflecting their limited use, were “judicial fairness,” “governing the nation in accordance with the constitution,” and “intra-party democracy.”

- Internet buzzwords lists:** [A list of 2019’s most popular internet buzzwords](#) released by a Chinese government-backed research institution has been met with online derision. Published by the Chinese National Language Monitoring and Research Center, the list contained phrases drawn from major domestic media outlets. Yet many netizens pointed out that the phrases—including “the first year of the 5G era,” and “stop the violence and end the chaos,” the latter a reference to the ongoing protests in Hong Kong—were unknown, or conformed to government-approved narratives. However, another list [published by the literary magazine Yaowen Jiaozhi](#) suggest that the Chinese government’s efforts to channel public sentiment in a more nationalistic direction may be bearing fruit, though presumably the magazine itself is subject to greater censorship controls than a decade ago, affecting its list selection. In 2009, the annual list included phrases referring to government abuses and social ills. While the 2019 list contained the phrase “996”—referring to protests by software engineers against Chinese tech firms’ culture of working from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. six days a week—terms suggesting frustration with the state were absent. Instead, the list included a slogan referring to a pop-culture meme; “mutual learning among civilizations,” a pet phrase of Xi Jinping; and “blockchain,” a technology Xi has promoted. Separately, the phrase “the five-star red flag has 1.4 billion protectors” went viral for a time in August, after protesters in Hong Kong removed a Chinese flag on display and flung it into the sea.
- New internet content regulations:** On December 20, the Cyberspace Administration of China published the “[Provisions on the Governance of the Online Information Content Ecosystem](#).” In addition to identifying content the Chinese government wishes to discourage (such as sexual content, or material that counters the regime’s religious or other policies), the rules also lay out specific categories of material that are to be promoted and prioritized, like Xi Jinping Thought and positive depictions of Chinese culture. Yet it is the range of nonstate groups expected to assist the government in managing online content that has raised fresh concerns. According to the regulations, the “governance of the online information content ecosystem” is the responsibility not only of the government and technology firms, [but of society and individuals as well](#). Furthermore, these regulations are [based on the country’s National Security Law](#), which defines national security in notoriously expansive terms. The provisions also point to the role new technologies may play in censorship, with both [human operators and algorithms](#) being tasked with identifying and deleting illegal content. The rules are scheduled to take effect in March 2020, and are likely to further discourage online information sharing.

Investigative journalism that squeezed through tightening controls in 2019

As China prepares to enter the Year of the Rat, the space for independent journalists continues to shrink. In December, [the Committee to Protect Journalists \(CPJ\) announced](#) that China was the world's leading jailer of journalists, with at least 48 imprisoned. [While only a handful of those were arrested in 2019](#), figures indicating more arrests and long-term detentions reflect growing state intolerance of press freedom under Xi Jinping. According to researchers at Guangzhou's Sun Yat-sen University, between 2011 and 2017, the number of investigative journalists in China [declined by 58 percent, to 175](#). And over the last few years, many of China's most renowned investigative journalists, including [Zhang Wenxin](#), [Liu Wanyong](#) and [Ji Xuguang](#), have quit, been barred from writing, or fled the country.

Yet limited critical journalism has managed to survive. In their annual rundown on the best investigative journalism of 2019, the Global Investigative Journalism Network (GIJN) [highlighted the work of numerous Chinese reporters](#) who tackled sensitive issues in spite of state censorship. The list included articles on the following topics:

- **Chemical plant explosion:** Two months after a March 21 chemical plant explosion in Xiangshui, Jiangsu, that left 78 people dead, reporters from Caixin examined how an unchecked, unsupervised drive for economic development had led to the disaster.
- **The Pangolin Reports:** As part of the Global Environmental Reporting Collective, ten journalists from China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan worked with dozens of their global peers to produce a report on the illegal trade in the endangered pangolin.
- **Plague in Inner Mongolia:** In November, reporters from Beijing News examined cases of pneumonic plague in Inner Mongolia, an autonomous region in Northern China, believed to have been caused by a rat infestation.
- **Official corruption:** Following the investigation of numerous local officials in Inner Mongolia for corruption, Caixin published a detailed examination of their networks of influence and patronage.
- **A murder at a schoolyard:** Following the arrest of a contractor in Huaihua, Hunan, for the 2003 killing of the supervisor of a school building project, reporters from Caixin explored who had protected the murderer and why the case had remained unsolved for 16 years.

The Beijing-based Caixin, which reported three of the five articles GIJN drew attention to, is one of the only remaining financial news outlets in China with a robust investigative team.

Other investigative pieces came from newsrooms outside mainland China. Hong Kong-based Initium Media worked with the New York Times to report on [the Chinese roots of the global fentanyl trade](#). And in some of the year's biggest China-related stories, the [New York Times](#) and [the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists](#) both published internal Chinese government documents detailing authorities' detention and repression of ethnic-minority Muslims in Xinjiang.

Restrictions on film, photos, and literature intensify

Tightening political controls in 2019 affected not only traditional and online media but also artistic, literary, and entertainment content in China. The following are a few recent examples:

- **State media scrub mention of Chinese documentary:** Government censors have deleted mentions of [a Chinese documentary about the country's former one-child policy](#) after the film was shortlisted for the Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature in November 2019. Directed by Nanfu Wang and Jialing Zhang, One Child Nation remains officially unavailable in China, though [pirated, subtitled copies have circulated online](#).
- **Beijing art exhibit canceled:** In late November, Beijing's UCCA Center for Contemporary Art [announced the cancellation of an exhibition](#) by Chinese-American artist Hung Liu. The decision to call off an exhibit by an artist known for her work on history, memory, and gender was seen as another indication of increasing artistic censorship under Xi Jinping. It may also reflect greater targeting and scrutiny of American content producers amid a US–China trade war. On December 27, the [New York Times](#) reported that the publication of many Chinese translations of books by American authors had been halted during 2019.
- **Book burning follows library censorship directive:** In early December, a local library in Zhenyuan County, Gansu Province, [came under popular and government criticism](#) for publicly burning “illegal books, religious publications, and especially books and articles with biases.” While state media said those involved will be investigated, the local library appeared to be acting in response to [state instructions](#) calling for politically sensitive material to be removed from library shelves nationwide and destroyed.
- **Independent Chinese film festival suspended:** In early January, organizers of the China Independent Film Festival announced they would [halt operations indefinitely](#) because the event had become “impossible” to put on in the face of increasing state controls. Since its opening in 2003, the Nanjing-based festival had faced intermittent harassment from authorities due to its screenings of films on sensitive topics like political history and homosexuality.
- **Websites of two leading stock photo agencies “rectified”:** Two of China's largest stock photo agencies [were suspended on December 10](#) for working with foreign entities without a proper security assessment, and for failing to hold information service licenses. Visual China Group and IC Photo subsequently announce on their respective websites simply that they are undergoing a process of “[self-inspection and rectification](#).” The unexpected suspensions led to a scramble by news outlets and websites across the country seeking photos for their content.

Analysis for 2019: The above examples reflect expanded efforts during the year to tight-

en restrictions on cultural content producers in China, even as the country continues to grow as an important international entertainment market. In 2020, China is expected to surpass the United States to become the world's largest movie-theater market, with [box-office revenue estimated to reach \\$12.28 billion](#). Domestically, however, increasing government censorship continues to hurt Chinese filmmakers, and a decrease in the number of television dramas approved by Chinese censors has left [many television actors unemployed](#). As state restrictions tighten, theatrical troupes and performance artists whose work addresses sensitive topics have [taken to organizing pop-up performances](#) to avoid attracting the ire of government authorities.

Occasionally, cultural censorship attempts apparently at the behest of the Chinese government have extended overseas. On December 29, Norway Today reported that a delegation of Chinese skiers training for the 2022 Winter Olympics in the Norwegian town of Meråker requested that controversial Chinese books, including one about the banned Falun Gong spiritual group, [be removed from a local library](#), a demand the library rejected.

Surveillance trends: Urban surveillance, data leaks, export restrictions, and public concerns

CCP efforts to build up surveillance capabilities continued throughout 2019, with worrying consequences. However, online and offline efforts to counter the mass collection of personal data have accelerated, in tandem.

- Large-scale domestic surveillance capabilities expand further:** China is building one of the world's largest integrated domestic surveillance systems, [according to a December 17 piece in the New York Times](#). Using technology supplied by numerous Chinese tech firms, the Chinese government can now collect data from surveillance cameras, mobile phones, and other sources, sometimes without citizens' knowledge. The combination of these records with data in existing government files dramatically expands government capabilities for identification and close tracking of millions of individuals. Moreover, security protection for data collected is surprisingly weak, as made evident by [a March 2019 leak of 364 million social media profiles](#) from a police-run database—just one of a number of large-scale leaks of Chinese citizens' personal information over the past year. In some instances, residents have taken low-tech steps to weaken the effectiveness of surveillance, such as by propping doors open in order to circumvent door-locking mechanisms that rely on facial recognition technology. Separately, a [professor](#) in Zhejiang Province launched a legal case against a zoo that required facial scans upon entry. However, continued revelations of the scope of Chinese government surveillance efforts suggest that authorities will keep developing surveillance capacities.
- Leak from school surveillance system highlights weak data security:** Victor Gevers, a researcher at the nonprofit GDI Foundation, discovered an unsecured database belonging to a middle school in Sichuan that [held the records of 1.3 million student, teachers, and staff](#). The database included high-resolution photos used to train fa-

cial-recognition systems, alongside other information about students, such as grades and GPS location. The finding highlighted the breadth of information being collected and the insecurity of how it is being stored. Indeed, [research](#) from [Comparitech](#) published on December 4 found that China had the worst record among 50 countries examined with regard to the protection of biometric data collected from citizens.

- **New US surveillance export restrictions:** New US regulations that came into effect on January 6, 2020, restrict [the overseas sale of American geospatial imagery software](#) possessing military and surveillance capabilities. The move comes in response to fears that advanced US technology could be used to strengthen China’s artificial intelligence industry, although the reach of the rules is global. The regulations are a first step in implementing a [2018 law](#) that tasked the US Commerce Department with improving oversight of the export of sensitive technologies to China and other perceived US adversaries, and are relatively narrow compared to what some in the industry had feared.

Analysis for 2019: These events reflect increasing state intrusion into personal and public spaces, as well as limited data protections for what is collected—but also growing pushback against domestic spying in China. Internationally, the country’s intention to become a global surveillance technology leader is clear: [every submission to the UN’s International Telecommunication Union](#) concerning surveillance technology made over the last three years was from China. Yet international observers are not the only ones concerned about China’s domestic spying apparatus. According to the results of a survey conducted by Beijing-based Nandu Personal Information Protection Research Center in October and November 2019, [nearly three-quarters of Chinese respondents](#) expressed a preference for traditional ways of verifying their identity over the use of facial-recognition software. And as government surveillance increases, netizens have also taken to [sharing tips on how to avoid state monitors both on and offline](#).

HONG KONG

Mass mobile-phone seizures and doxing in 2019 spark privacy concerns

With the Hong Kong protest movement showing no signs of abating, concerns are growing about police-led data-collection programs targeting demonstrators. During a Legislative Council meeting on January 8, 2020, Hong Kong secretary for security John Lee revealed that between June and November 2019, Hong Kong [police had seized 3,721 mobile phones](#) from individuals suspected of participating in antigovernment protests. In response, opposition lawmaker [Charles Mok](#), who represents the information technology sector, expressed concern about the large percentage of detained protesters targeted in this way, as well as possibility that police could be breaking into phones to collect data from them, or even installing spyware on confiscated devices before returning them. Government representatives have not clarified whether police have used spyware to unlock the phones of protesters.

Even before Secretary Lee's comments, concerns about police data collection were already being raised. [In a Twitter thread posted on December 19](#), democracy activist Joshua Wong wrote that following his arrest on August 30, police had accessed text messages on his phone, even though he had never provided his phone's password nor had he been issued a warrant. Wong said he discovered the break-in when some of the messages were submitted by prosecutors as evidence in court. Police disputed Wong's account, claiming that [they had obtained a warrant from a magistrate](#).

These revelations raise serious questions about the Hong Kong government's commitment to data privacy. Existing protections under the Personal Data (Privacy) Ordinance are vague and provide police with broad exemptions to access personal data for the purpose of ["the prevention or detection of crime."](#) Additionally, worries about government surveillance extend beyond police confiscation of cell phones. Protesters have taken to wearing face masks out of fear that cameras may be equipped with facial-recognition software that could identify them to Hong Kong and mainland Chinese authorities.

It is not only the local government that has laid siege to the privacy rights of Hong Kong residents. [Both pro- and antigovernment netizens](#) have attacked their political opponents through doxing—the practice of researching personal information about an opponent and publishing it online as a retaliatory action. Doxing targets have included [police officers, journalists, protesters, government employees, and people across the political spectrum](#). Personal details, including photos, home addresses, phone numbers and information on family members, have been released on websites, social media, and [the encrypted messaging app Telegram](#). Since last June, the Office of the Privacy Commissioner for Personal Data has received [more than 4,700 complaints about doxing](#).

In October, [an injunction was granted by the city's High Court](#) against the nonconsensual sharing of personal information of police and their families. Yet local laws and institutions thus far seem unable to effectively control the use of this tactic. In December, Privacy Commissioner for Personal Data Stephen Wong Kai-yi [acknowledged doxing as a problem](#), and said his office was working with online platforms to remove "intimidating messages."

FEATURED PUSHBACK

Dissent survives 2019 crackdowns

New and ongoing crackdowns against labor activists, human rights lawyers, and religious and ethnic minorities further inhibited government criticism, information sharing, and grassroots activism in 2019. At the close of the year—as Chinese authorities likely suspected many international observers were distracted by the Christmas holiday—security agents engaged in a [detention and interrogation spree](#) against activists, including a group who attended a private dinner in early December at which they debated the prospects of a [democratic transition in China](#).



Photo of a message written by a foreigner held in a Chinese prison that was found in Britain inside a Christmas card.

But amid these and other restrictions, initiatives by Chinese citizens to protect basic freedom, share news, and access vital information persist. Throughout 2019, the [China Media Bulletin](#) has highlighted in this section risky endeavors like journalists reporting assertively at high-profile political gatherings, software engineers protesting on the unblocked GitHub site, smuggled videos of camps in Xinjiang and Falun Gong practitioner deaths in custody reaching the outside world, Uighurs using video-sharing apps to break through censorship, and Chinese netizens deploying wordplay to express support for Hong Kong protesters. Other examples that emerged during the year include:

- Chinese lawyer [Chen Qiushi](#) traveling to Hong Kong in August, where he provided live video broadcasts and social media updates on peaceful protests before being called back home by public security agents;
- A rapidly organized international campaign stalling the deportation from Qatar to China of [Uighur Ablikim Yusuf](#), ending in his safe arrival in the United States;
- A new [Facebook page](#) launched in November to enable Chinese users in Hong Kong and elsewhere to anonymously express their support for Hong Kong protesters garnering 12,000 followers and numerous submission within two months; and
- A prisoner in China successfully sneaking a call for help into a [Christmas card](#) that was discovered by a 6-year-old British girl, prompting Tesco to suspend ties with its supplier.

Meanwhile, in the face of tightening censorship and despite a growing crackdown on virtual private networks (VPNs) used to reach blocked websites, millions of Chinese people each month continue to jump the so-called Great Firewall using these tools. Indeed, marketing firms like [GlobalWebIndex](#) and [Hootsuite](#) reported estimates that 31 to 35 percent of Chinese web users utilized a VPN in 2019. If accurate across China's 800 million internet users, that would amount to some 250 million people.

WHAT TO WATCH FOR IN 2020

- **New uses of technology for social control:** As government and private entities at both the national and local levels continue to deploy new technologies—especially 5G and artificial-intelligence driven capabilities like facial recognition—watch for emerging ways in which these are used to advance political and social control. [A recent ad](#) for China Telecom’s 5G networks shows elderly neighborhood CCP volunteers using a facial recognition-enabled mobile phone application to identify bicycle thieves and call the police. The mobile phone provider told media that there were no plans to develop such a product, but the scenario nevertheless appears realistic. Also watch for local or national developments related to social-credit-rating systems.
- **Intensified influence efforts in Taiwan and Hong Kong:** The prodemocracy camp in Hong Kong, and Tsai Ing-wen and the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) in Taiwan, saw electoral victories in November’s district elections, and [January 11 polls](#), respectively in spite of Chinese efforts to manipulate the information space. In 2020, watch for more sophisticated and aggressive attempts at electoral manipulation, particularly ahead of Hong Kong’s legislative elections. Also watch for the expansion of Chinese engineered electoral-manipulation tactics previously detected in Taiwan and Hong Kong—particularly in terms of social media disinformation—to other countries.
- **Impact and evolution of global pushback:** Watch for the impact, outcome, and implementation of steps taken by governments in 2019 to constrain problematic and antidemocratic dimensions of CCP foreign media and technological influence. These include sanctions imposed on Chinese tech firms by the US government, investigations of Chinese state media by British regulators, and foreign-influence laws adopted in Australia. Also watch for similar initiatives by other countries to push back against Chinese global media influence.

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.

1850 M Street NW, 11th Floor
Washington, DC 20036

111 John Street, Floor 8
New York, NY 10005

www.freedomhouse.org
facebook.com/FreedomHouseDC
[@freedomHouseDC](https://twitter.com/freedomHouseDC)

202.296.5101 | info@freedomhouse.org