

CHINA MEDIA BULLETIN

Headlines

FEATURE | On Display in July: China's Newest Censorship Methods **P2**

NEW MEDIA | Cybersecurity law implementation reinforces fears and uncertainty **P5**

NEW MEDIA | Liu Xiaobo medical parole sparks censorship, criticism **P6**

PRINT/NEW MEDIA | Censorship updates: Deadly landslide, table tennis protest, AlphaGo game **P7**

HONG KONG | Xi visit on handover anniversary prompts arrests, curbs on protests **P7**

BEYOND CHINA | Soft power in Australia, U.S. Dalai Lama warning, 'BoJack Horseman' censored **P9**

FEATURED PRISONER | Yao Guofu and Liang Xin **P10**

WHAT TO WATCH FOR **P11**

TAKE ACTION **P12**

PHOTO OF THE MONTH

Lone Warrior Xi

Russia's RT television station captured this image of a solitary Chinese president Xi Jinping facing the full Russian delegation at a summit in June. As Xi waited for the rest of his group to join him, Russian president Vladimir Putin quipped that the Chinese leader was a "lone warrior." The [footage](#) was not aired on Chinese television but quickly circulated online, drawing mocking responses from Chinese netizens. Censors then intervened, [deleting Weibo and WeChat posts](#) about the awkward moment and Putin's comment.

Credit: [Eddie Du via Twitter](#)



FEATURE

On Display in July: China's Newest Censorship Methods

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A month riddled with perilous anniversaries offers a showcase for upgraded internet controls.

July, more than most other months, is loaded with politically sensitive anniversaries that keep Chinese Communist Party (CCP) censors and security forces on their toes.

First comes the July 1 anniversary of Hong Kong's transfer from British to Chinese rule. Then there is July 5, marking the 2009 ethnic violence in the Xinjiang region that sparked an unprecedented crackdown on its mostly Muslim Uighur population. The very next day, July 6, is the Dalai Lama's birthday, and July 9 is the second anniversary of a sweeping repressive action against China's human rights lawyers. Finally there is July 20, the date in 1999 when the CCP banned the popular spiritual practice Falun Gong and began a massive—and often violent—campaign to eradicate it.

This year, the anniversaries overlap with other news stories that Beijing likely wants to quash, including an international uproar surrounding democracy activist [Liu Xiaobo](#)'s belated release on medical parole with terminal cancer, and a campaign by exiled tycoon [Guo Wengui](#) to publicize corruption allegations involving top Chinese leaders. It is not surprising in these circumstances that the CCP has [tightened information controls](#). But the party has not simply intensified its efforts in the short term. It has also gradually adapted its methods to a changing technological environment, one in which mobile phones, social media applications, and digital surveillance are critical features.

The result is a new level of intrusiveness and sophistication, as well as danger for populations that are already at risk of severe human rights violations.

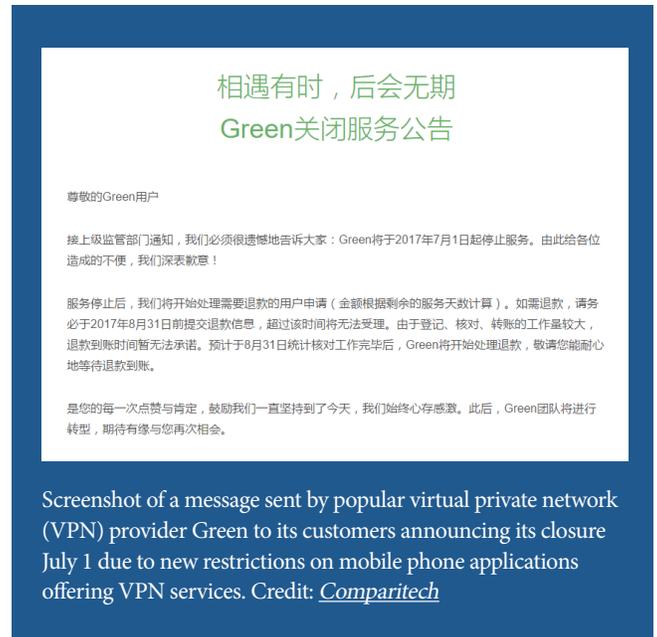
Cutting off access to circumvention tools

One of the escalating restrictions that may have the widest reach is a crackdown on virtual private networks (VPNs), which allow users to bypass official censorship. Several VPN applications have been [disabled](#) or removed from [online stores](#) since July 1. In a June 22 message to customers, [prominent VPN provider Green](#) said that after receiving “a notice from the higher authorities,” it planned to cease operations on July 1, causing a ripple of conversations on social media about what circumvention tools could still be used. The latest initiative builds on [increasing official efforts](#) to stop the dissemination of such tools, including some that the authorities had long tolerated.

The applications' removal will have the secondary effect of cutting off software updates for users, leaving their devices more vulnerable to hacking. And while many use VPNs to access uncensored news or blocked social media sites like Facebook and Twitter, the tools are also used for security purposes, to protect businesses and activists from pervasive state surveillance.

Inspecting the personal communications of minorities

Other recent controls have focused on ethnic and religious minorities. In Xinjiang, authorities in a district of the regional capital [Urumqi](#) issued a notice on June 27 instructing all residents and business owners to submit their “personal ID cards, cell phones, external drives, portable hard drives, notebook computers, and media storage cards” to the local police post for “registration and scanning” by August 1. One district employee told [Radio Free Asia](#) that the campaign was taking place throughout the city. The goal is ostensibly to identify and purge any “terrorist videos,” but the action violates the privacy rights of Urumqi’s three million residents and exposes them to punishment for a host of other possible offenses, including those related to peaceful religious or political expression.



In Tibet, the instant-messaging application WeChat has become increasingly popular in recent years, as it has across China. But using it to communicate about the Dalai Lama or his birthday is difficult and dangerous. A test conducted in January by the Canada-based Citizen Lab found that the Tibetan spelling for “[Dalai Lama](#)” was automatically deleted in WeChat messages. Meanwhile, at least [two Tibetans](#) are known to have been jailed for participating in a WeChat group commemorating the spiritual leader’s 80th birthday in 2015. After a new spate of self-immolation protests took place in early 2017, Tibetans in Sichuan Province report that police are [monitoring communication](#) on the platform more closely and detaining those suspected of sharing information about self-immolations with overseas contacts.

New tactics and new targets

These developments reflect a broader trend identified in a recent [Freedom House report](#) on religion in China. The study found that Chinese government tactics of religious control and persecution have been changing to incorporate new technologies and match the evolving communication habits of the public. Even in the absence of sensitive anniversaries, various modes of electronic surveillance have expanded dramatically at sites of worship and public spaces frequented by religious believers.

The CCP’s information controls also appear to be spreading to traditionally less persecuted groups, like state-sanctioned churches and non-Uighur residents of Xinjiang. Since March, authorities in [Zhejiang](#) have reportedly been implementing a campaign to install [surveillance cameras in churches and possibly Buddhist temples](#), in some cases sparking altercations with police and violence against congregants. In Urumqi, the order to turn in digital devices for [inspection](#) applies to ethnic Han and [Kazakh](#) residents as

well as Uighurs, while local Kazakhs have reported increased monitoring and some prosecutions related to expressions of their Muslim faith in recent months.

The information arms race

The Chinese government's actions are partly a response to creative initiatives by minority activists to share their stories and perspectives in a heavily restrictive information environment.

“It is a nonstop game of cat-and-mouse,” journalist Nithin Coca wrote in a June 27 [article](#) about China's high-tech war on Tibetan communication. “As the Tibet movement's digital-security abilities and training improve, the Chinese government implements more-sophisticated hacking techniques.”

Similarly, as [Falun Gong](#) practitioners devise new means of disseminating information to debunk vilifying state propaganda and expose abuses they have suffered, security forces have adapted by increasing electronic surveillance and deploying geolocation technology to find and arrest them. Local authorities in places like [Jiangsu province](#) have also upgraded anti-Falun Gong propaganda efforts, deploying LED rolling screens, cartoons, microblogs, and QQ messaging—including in schools—last month to demonize Falun Gong and other banned religious groups.

A vicious circle

The result of the escalating controls is that there are even fewer avenues for persecuted groups and individuals to defend themselves, offer alternatives to the party line, or expose violence committed by officials. Meanwhile, other Chinese interested in knowing more about these and other censored topics find it increasingly difficult—and risky—to obtain information.

There is also a cost to the CCP. Such aggressive “stability maintenance” methods ultimately increase tensions with key populations, intensify resentment of the party's heavy-handed rule, and inspire antigovernment activism and even violence, including among otherwise apolitical citizens.

From that perspective, while the CCP's efforts may successfully silence some critics this year, party leaders may face an even more daunting challenge next July.

NEW MEDIA

Cybersecurity law implementation reinforces fears and uncertainty

Last month, two Chinese government agencies began enforcing new laws and regulations that will further restrict expression online. The Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) on June 1 started [implementing](#) parts of the [Cybersecurity Law](#) that came into effect on that date, while rolling out new rules to limit the dissemination of news via the internet. Later in the month, the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film, and Television (SAPPRFT), China's primary media regulator, imposed restrictions on several major websites.

CAC's regulatory actions in the first month of the new law were expansive and aggressive, reinforcing some of the worst fears of its critics. Already, two of the three potential scenarios outlined in the [last issue of the China Media Bulletin](#) have come to fruition: the shuttering of numerous apolitical social media accounts, and pressure on private internet companies to more closely toe the party line. (No new reports of large-scale arrests of users have emerged so far.)

On June 1, public social media accounts were banned from republishing news [without a permit](#). On June 7, under apparent CAC pressure, Chinese technology firms shuttered an estimated 80 Sina Weibo and WeChat accounts that [relayed celebrity gossip or other entertainment news](#), some with millions of followers. The move represented an expansion of censorship to a news sector long viewed as relatively free.

On June 22, SAPPRFT ordered three major websites, including Sina Weibo, to [stop streaming](#) audio and video with political and social content deemed to be in violation of state regulations. It is unclear whether CAC and SAPPRFT were coordinating their actions—or competing, as [one analysis suggested](#).

The sudden reprimands left online companies [uncertain](#), immediately hurt Sina's stock price, and led to [a lawsuit](#) against the Nasdaq-listed Sina Weibo by investors in the United States. Mostly, however, China's top internet companies quickly capitulated to the demands, "closing down hundreds of mobile [video platforms](#), firing thousands of journalists, and promising to promote state media opinions," according to the [Financial Times](#).

Foreign firms are still attempting to understand exactly how the new law will affect them—in terms of both their interface with users and the infrastructural changes they may be forced to implement. An executive with the Finnish technology firm Nokia told the [New York Times](#) that foreign companies are experiencing "a lot of confusion" about the specifics of the new rules, including a requirement that they store data collected in China within its borders.

Nevertheless, international pushback by business groups and individual companies may have at least delayed the inevitable: CAC announced that it will require compliance with the rules on cross-border data flows only by [the end of next year](#).

NEW MEDIA

Liu Xiaobo medical parole sparks censorship, criticism

China's only Nobel Peace Prize laureate, democracy advocate Liu Xiaobo, was granted [medical parole](#) from his 11-year prison term [on June 26](#) after he was diagnosed with terminal liver cancer. Liu was sentenced in 2009 for “inciting subversion of state power.” He won the Nobel Prize the following year. One of his lawyers said he had already been diagnosed in May, indicating that the authorities deliberately withheld the information.

The news of Liu's illness and release immediately sparked a flurry of activity among observers and supporters outside China: [Media](#) outlets published [articles](#), human rights groups [issued statements](#), and [foreign governments](#) urged China to allow Liu to seek treatment abroad, offering to host him and his wife, who has been under house arrest since 2010.

On June 29, 154 other Nobel laureates—many of them in the medical profession—signed a [joint letter](#) asking for Liu to be allowed to leave China. In Hong Kong, prodemocracy activists [incorporated calls](#) for Liu's freedom into demonstrations marking the 20th anniversary of the territory's handover from Britain to China.

Inside China, information about Liu and his receipt of the Nobel Peace Prize has long been heavily censored. The impact of these efforts was reflected in reports that Chinese tourists asked the Hong Kong protesters [who Liu was](#). The news blackout on the mainland was reinforced on June 28 when, [according to China Digital Times](#), a censorship directive ordered all websites not to “report, comment, or repost on Liu Xiaobo's medical parole or related matters.” Nevertheless, the activist community rallied on his behalf, with over 500 Chinese intellectuals [signing a petition](#) calling for his release.

The Chinese government reacted to the domestic and international pressure in a variety of ways. Government [spokespeople claimed](#) that Liu was now too ill to travel, and limited his and family members' ability to speak to outsiders, though they did allow his wife, Liu Xia, to leave house arrest in Beijing to visit him and invited [foreign medical experts](#) to help treat him. On June 28, the U.S.-based dissident news website Boxun posted a three-minute [YouTube video](#) showing Liu Xiaobo's treatment in prison. Boxun noted that the video was “probably deliberately leaked by official sources,” in an apparent attempt to dispel criticism that Liu had been denied proper medical attention. The nationalistic state-owned newspaper Global Times published [two articles disparaging](#) Liu (only in English). Meanwhile, at least one signatory of the Chinese activists' petition—a [poet from Guangzhou](#)—was reportedly taken away by police, and the phone line of another [was blocked](#).

As of July 6, Liu's condition appeared to be deteriorating, with Reuters reporting that a family member said [his time was limited](#). While Liu is the most prominent dissident to be released from prison on the verge of death, his treatment fits a larger pattern in which prison authorities attempt to avoid responsibility for having a political prisoner die in custody. The death of activist [Cao Shunli in 2010](#) was similar, as are numerous reported incidents involving Tibetans and Falun Gong practitioners.

PRINT/NEW MEDIA

Censorship updates: Landslide coverage, table tennis protest, AlphaGo game

- **Landslide complaints:** On June 26, censors [ordered the deletion](#) of an article by commercial news outlet *Caixin* about residents seeking accountability after a devastating landslide in Xinmo village, Sichuan Province. At least 10 people were killed in the disaster, with over 90 missing. The villagers blamed the government for eight years of inaction as the danger grew. A few days later, [Reuters](#) reported that half a dozen Chinese journalists covering the landslide had been recalled on the evening of June 25, after their editors said they had received orders from the Chinese Communist Party's Propaganda Department to cease coverage.
- **Table tennis protest:** After top table tennis players boycotted their matches at a major tournament in Chengdu on June 23 to protest their coach's forcible promotion, they [expressed their frustration](#) on Sina Weibo. Those posts were later deleted, and the players issued an apology, saying that "benefit to the motherland comes before all else." The same day, a directive was reportedly issued to "all websites" not to report on the incident.
- **Man vs. computer Go match:** Live streaming of a game of Go—the ancient Chinese board game involving strategic placement of black and white stones on a grid—was [strictly forbidden by Chinese censors](#) in late May. The match in question was between Chinese Go prodigy Ke Jie and Google's artificial intelligence program AlphaGo, which proved that it has become stronger than any human player of the complex game. There were multiple ironies in the episode, including that the match took place in the Chinese city of Wuzhen, host to the country's annual cyberspace regulation conference, and that China has been attempting to build its own artificial intelligence industry. Some speculated that the censorship was part of a longer-term effort to reduce U.S.-based [Google's](#) profile in China. A number of [streaming sites](#) showed boards replicating the two players' moves, but without live shots of the event.

HONG KONG

Xi visit on handover anniversary prompts arrests, curbs on protests

Chinese leader Xi Jinping made a rare visit to Hong Kong to mark the 20th anniversary of the former British colony's handover to the People's Republic of China on July 1. Ahead of Xi's arrival on June 29, protests were organized by prodemocracy and localist groups to call for fully democratic elections and the release of mainland democracy advocate Liu Xiaobo for medical treatment abroad.

In the run-up to the anniversary on July 1, there were numerous reports of restrictions on those wishing to express critical views on China or draw Xi's attention to their causes, including:

- A [ban on protest slogans](#) and images, especially in parts of the city that Xi would visit.
- The [detention of protesters](#) at Golden Bauhinia Square—the site of the flag-raising ceremony for Xi’s visit. About two dozen young activists staged the protest on June 29, with some [chaining themselves to the sculpture](#) at the center of the square; police removed them after a standoff that lasted several hours.
- The prohibition of a planned [June 30 gathering](#) by those opposed to Chinese rule at Hong Kong Clock Tower.

July 1 began with Xi inspecting thousands of Chinese troops stationed in Hong Kong and then attending the swearing-in ceremony of the territory’s new chief executive, Carrie Lam. In a speech, Xi took a hard line on Hong Kongers who wish to distance the territory from China or support rights activists on the mainland. Xi warned that “any attempt to endanger China’s sovereignty and security, challenge the power of the central government,” or “use Hong Kong to carry out infiltration and sabotage against the mainland is an act that crosses the red line and is absolutely impermissible.” This marked the first time that a Chinese leader had used the term “red line” on such issues, implying that in the future, localist activists could face more serious penalties.

Xi also [claimed](#) that “the people of Hong Kong enjoy more extensive democratic rights and freedoms than at any other time in its history,” despite a widely acknowledged deterioration of press freedom and other civil liberties in recent years. [Lam](#) notably delivered her own speech in Mandarin, the dominant language on the mainland, as opposed to the Cantonese spoken by most Hong Kongers.

In another worrying [official statement](#), a spokesman for China’s Foreign Ministry said on June 30 that the Sino-British Joint Declaration, in which China pledged not to interfere with fundamental rights and freedoms in Hong Kong after the handover, was “history and of no practical significance.”

Xi departed the city soon after the [swearing-in ceremony](#), missing the annual protest march by prodemocracy and Chinese activist groups, though the tense atmosphere and heavy police presence that characterized Xi’s visit remained. Police reportedly [failed to protect](#) prodemocracy activists from pro-China thugs who attacked them, and even [detained several](#) of the protest leaders, allegedly beating them inside a police van. [Avery Ng](#), chair of the League of Social Democrats, told the media that activists had suffered “a whole new level of intimidation and direct violence” surrounding Xi’s visit.

Despite the tensions, protest restrictions, and arrests, the anniversary still illustrated Hong Kong’s greater freedom of expression relative to the mainland: Protesters were seen with cardboard cutouts of [Xi holding a yellow umbrella](#), numerous marchers punched blow-up dolls of former chief executive Leung Chun-ying, [a Falun Gong marching band](#) made an appearance, and Hong Kong journalists who got close enough to Xi Jinping asked whether he was going to [release Liu Xiaobo](#).

BEYOND CHINA

Soft power in Australia, U.S. Dalai Lama warning, 'BoJack Horseman' censored

- Influence operations in Australia:** China's aggressive—and often covert—push for “soft power” in Australia was the focus of a series of [high-profile reports published in June](#). Australian media, including [Fairfax](#) and the [Australian Broadcasting Corporation](#), shed light on questionable donations to Australian politicians by [Chinese billionaires](#) with murky backgrounds, attempts to guide and [influence government policy](#) toward China, and Chinese diplomatic outposts' role in controlling Chinese students at Australian universities through [proxy student groups](#). A documentary titled [Power and Influence: The Hard Edge of China's Soft Power](#) that aired in early June featured one leader of a Chinese student association, Lu Lipin, saying that if dissident students were organizing a protest, she would “definitely” inform the embassy, “just to keep all the students safe and to do it for China as well.” Chinese Communist Party authorities also exert enormous influence over the [Chinese-language Australian press](#); most such publications—with notable exceptions run by dissident communities—are pro-Beijing. Chinese state-run media have increasingly sought to collaborate with mainstream English-language outlets in the country.
- Chinese film removed from French festival:** *Have a Nice Day*, a film by the Chinese director Liu Jian, [was dropped](#) on May 30 from the French animation festival Annecy under pressure from the Chinese authorities. The festival directors initially refused to comply, but when the film's producers made the request themselves, the organizers felt they had to agree lest the dispute endanger the film's team in China. “We're disappointed about the official pressures that have prevented us from presenting this remarkable film this year and we hope that international audiences will soon have the possibility to see it,” [said a statement](#) from festival directors. The film follows a set of characters chasing a bag of money in a small Chinese town and may have been deemed politically sensitive because it shows a dark underside of Chinese society.
- Dalai Lama's U.S. university speech:** The Dalai Lama delivered the [commencement address](#) at the University of California San Diego on June 17, telling students that they should use their knowledge as “a source of peace.” Although the speech went ahead [without incident](#), the university's branch of the Chinese Students and Scholars Association—which analysts believe is often managed from afar by Chinese consular officials—had previously [staged a protest](#) against the Tibetan spiritual leader's planned appearance. China's [nationalistic state-owned newspaper Global Times](#) ran an article attacking the U.S. school's Indian American chancellor for the choice of speaker and urging the Chinese government to “not issue visas to the chancellor and not recognize diplomas ... by the university in China.” This prompted a curt [rebuttal](#) from U.S. senator Dianne Feinstein of California: “I find it unconscionable that a reporter for the *Global Times*, a mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party, would threaten UC San Diego and its chancellor and students for inviting the Dalai Lama to speak.”

- **Netflix animated series removed from Chinese platform:** The Chinese video platform iQiyi [removed the Netflix program](#) *BoJack Horseman* from its site without explanation in late June, just two days after it went online. iQiyi was Netflix’s [sole partner](#) for its content in China after a failed attempt to break into the China market on its own. Precisely what about *BoJack Horseman*—an animated show centered on an anthropomorphized horse’s search for meaning—irked Chinese censors is unclear. The series had established a [cult following](#) online, however, with Chinese users posting screenshots and creating memes with their favorite lines.

FEATURED PRISONERS

Yao Guofu and Liang Xin

Yao and his wife Liang were detained on December 5, 2015, when at least 30 plainclothes police broke into their apartment in Nanyang, Henan Province. According to [Amnesty International](#), the officers also confiscated computers, printers, and boxes filled with material related to Falun Gong, the banned spiritual and meditation discipline practiced by the couple. On December 12, 2016, they were each sentenced to 4.5 years in prison and fined 10,000 yuan (\$1,470).



They were charged with “using a heterodox religion to undermine implementation of the law,” an offense often invoked to jail Falun Gong adherents. The specific allegations cited in the verdict are that Liang and Yao had used a VPN on their home computer to search Falun Gong–related websites and disseminated printed and electronic Falun Gong materials to the public, including: a collection of 162 books, 47 CDs, 3200 flyers, and 214 desk calendars. The verdict also notes 380 audio files, 235 videos, and 817 documents related to Falun Gong found on their computer.

The couple’s case is tied to a larger trend involving what one scholarly account likened to a “[Chinese samizdat](#).” [Freedom House](#) has verified more than 50 similar cases since January 2016 of Falun Gong adherents being sentenced to prison for circulating such prohibited content—a peaceful exercise of their rights to free expression and access to information.

Both Yao and Liang are currently imprisoned in Henan Province. Liang marked her 63rd birthday in custody on June 25. According to the couple’s daughter, who resides in the United States, both have been permitted to receive visits from family members, but they have lost weight; Yao has been beaten and forced to engage in prison labor, and his wife’s heart disease and high blood pressure, which had eased when she took up Falun Gong, have apparently worsened in custody.

WHAT TO WATCH FOR

Leaks and censorship during August leadership retreat: Each August, Chinese Communist Party leaders depart Beijing for the resort town of [Beidaihe](#), meeting in secret and making decisions on personnel and policy. This year’s retreat may be especially significant given that the 19th Party Congress—which could involve naming Xi’s eventual successor—is scheduled for the fall. Watch for leaks surrounding important decisions, plotting, and infighting, as well as censorship of any such information.

Xu Zhiyong release, Wang Quanzhang condition: Prominent rights attorney Xu Zhiyong is scheduled for release from prison on [July 15](#). Xu was detained in 2013 and subsequently sentenced to [four years](#) in prison for disturbing public order and “public spaces on the internet” due to his role in organizing nonviolent protests under the banner of the New Citizens Movement. Separately, [Wang Quanzhang](#) is the only rights lawyer detained nearly two years ago—as part of what came to be known as the “709” crackdown—who remains in incommunicado detention. His family and lawyer have been denied access, adding to fears that he has been badly tortured, but they were notified that he is being charged with “subverting state power.” Watch for censorship surrounding Xu’s release, reports of continued surveillance or restrictions affecting him and his family, and any news regarding Wang’s condition and potential release or sentencing.

New Hong Kong chief executive’s approach to press freedom and dissent: On July 1, Carrie Lam was sworn in as Hong Kong’s first female chief executive. Her predecessor’s tenure was marked not only by increasing Chinese government encroachment on free expression in Hong Kong, but also by a restrictive approach to the press from the Hong Kong authorities themselves, including curbs on journalists’ access to official information and exclusion of digital media from government press conferences. As Lam begins her term, watch for whether her administration takes a more open approach to the media, presses charges against prodemocracy activists detained during Xi Jinping’s visit, or reintroduces controversial security legislation under Article 23 of the Basic Law.

TAKE ACTION

- **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](#).
- **Support a prisoner:** Two Chinese activists, one Canadian citizen, and one Taiwanese NGO worker being held in China for exercising their right to free expression are the focus of international petitions or letter-writing campaigns. Visit the relevant link to add your voice on behalf of [Liu Xiaobo](#), [Huang Qi](#), [Sun Qian](#), or [Lee Ming-Cheh](#).

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 2017, Freedom of the Press 2017, Freedom on the Net 2016



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