After news emerged on February 25 that the Communist Party was proposing to abolish term limits for China’s president and vice president from the state constitution, a long-standing meme comparing President Xi Jinping to Winnie the Pooh quickly resurfaced on Sina Weibo and Tencent’s WeChat, including this image showing the bear dressed as a king. Many online reactions to the news were censored and an item state broadcaster China Central Television issued was shared nearly 10,000 times within hours but had its comment section turned off.

Credit: What’s on Weibo
The events of the past month suggest several ways to counter antidemocratic pressure from China’s government.

As the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) grows more aggressive in its efforts to spread censorship, propaganda, and other features of its authoritarian system to foreign lands, it is easy to be disheartened—particularly when so many companies and political leaders have capitulated to the pressure from Beijing.

But further from the headlines, individuals and organizations are exploring more principled responses to this genuine threat to global freedom and democracy. Indeed, the past month alone has featured numerous impressive examples—including on Capitol Hill—of approaches that could also prove successful in the future.

The recent cases of pushback can be divided into four general types:

1. **Investigation and exposure.** A key element of the CCP’s overseas influence operations is their subtle and often stealthy nature. Consequently, rigorous and well-documented investigations by scholars, journalists, and civil society have been useful in unveiling the campaigns and countering false CCP narratives.

   On January 30, the [University of Toronto’s Citizen Lab](https://www.citizenlab.org) published a report analyzing phishing operations that target overseas critics of the CCP, particularly in the Tibetan exile community, but also Uighurs, Falun Gong activists, and Chinese rights defenders. The report identified basic digital security precautions that would help thwart the malicious tactic.

   On February 8, veteran Sinologist [Martin Hala](https://www.freedomhouse.org) published a detailed account of how the CCP-aligned energy and finance conglomerate CEFC has engaged in elite capture, media intimidation, and news outlet acquisition in the Czech Republic. These and other influence efforts in recent years have produced a Czech foreign policy that is far more favorable to Beijing.

   On February 13, the Jamestown Foundation’s China Brief published a piece by analyst John Dotson on the Council for the Promotion of the Peaceful Reunification of China (CPPRC), which presents itself as a private civic organization. According to Dotson, a “cursory examination of the organization’s leadership structure reveals that [it] is directly subordinate to the Communist Party’s United Front Work Department.” The article also mentions the CPPRC’s U.S. branch, the National Association for China’s Peaceful Unification, raising a variety of questions, including why the organization is not currently registered under the Foreign Agents Registration Act.

   Finally, a February 14 article in [Foreign Policy](https://foreignpolicy.com) outlined evidence of Chinese embassy
funding for Georgetown University's Chinese Students and Scholars Association (CSSA), sparking a broader discussion and social media exposure regarding Chinese government ties to CSSA branches on U.S. college campuses. China experts took to Twitter to share links and excerpts from CSSA charters or websites that reveal authoritative oversight by Chinese diplomatic missions, various levels of funding that other foreign governments generally do not provide to student groups, and potentially discriminatory membership requirements that exclude students who do not support all of Beijing's territorial claims. In many cases, the problematic wording was evident in Chinese versions of CSSA charters or websites, but not in the English versions that are typically reviewed by university administrators, highlighting the importance of bilingual research in this area.

2. **Increased public and policy debate.** Another set of actions and writings over the past month have focused on facilitating public debate and policy action. On February 5, two respected European think tanks published a joint report on the Chinese government's political influence in Europe. The document includes engaging graphics, maps, and charts that help make sense of a large number of incidents and trends across dozens of countries. Crucially, the report provides thoughtful and sober recommendations, such as suggestions on how European governments should respond to the phenomenon of CCP influence in a way that assists rather than demonizes local Chinese communities.

   Across the Atlantic, the Chinese government's Confucius Institute and Confucius Classroom initiatives received a new round of public scrutiny after Senator Marco Rubio of Florida wrote to several universities and a high school in his home state, outlining concerns that these programs have engaged in discrimination and limited academic freedom. At least one university responded by stating that it had already decided not to renew its contract. On February 13, Rubio also raised the issue at a House Intelligence Committee hearing, prompting a discussion about the potential intelligence and national security ramifications of the institutes.

   Separately, several pieces of legislation are pending in Congress, including a reform of foreign-investment review rules and restrictions on U.S. government contracts with certain Chinese technology firms.

3. **Upholding local legal standards.** One of the most important steps that democratic governments can take in response to the encroachment of Chinese government repression is to uphold their own laws and administrative procedures.

   In early February, the South African government followed its usual rules governing visitors traveling on U.S. passports and granted entry to Lobsang Sangay, the prime minister of the Tibetan government in exile. This was done despite Chinese government anger over the visit and a past record of denying visas to the Dalai Lama, who travels on refugee documents under a different set of regulations.

   In New Zealand, following reports that China scholar Anne-Marie Brady, who has played a pivotal role in raising awareness about problematic CCP influence in the
country, had suffered several suspicious break-ins at her office and home, the New Zealand authorities launched an investigation. In addition, the prime minister voiced concern that such crimes might be “in response to the work she is doing.”

4. **Action by influential private and civic entities.** In Malaysia, where the government has come under pressure to deport 11 Uighur refugees to China, the local bar association published a statement on February 15 urging the authorities to refrain from doing so. It also offered a detailed legal analysis outlining why such actions would contravene Malaysia’s own laws and international commitments. Hours later, a U.S. State Department spokesperson, perhaps emboldened by a strong local voice and sound legal basis, reiterated its appeal to Malaysia’s government not to return the detainees to China. On February 20, Malaysian authorities noted they were in negotiations with the Thai government regarding the Uighurs’ fate.

In Australia, several firms have in recent months refused to publish a book by academic Clive Hamilton regarding CCP influence in the country, reportedly out of fear of legal reprisals. But on February 6, news emerged that publisher Hardie Grant will be publishing the book next month after the author made some adjustments to address legal concerns. The company’s chief executive said, “It’s my experience that governments will try to prevent things from getting into the public domain that may damage their perceived interests. We value freedom of speech ahead of those interests.”

The success of any organized response to harmful CCP activities will depend on whether it is both precise and proportional. Effective remedies must avoid sweeping stereotypes and false equivalencies while also meeting the legitimate needs of all concerned—including Chinese students, targeted minorities, CCP critics, and foreigners who wish to learn Chinese. This will require thoughtful participation by a wide range of governmental and nongovernmental entities and individuals. The examples listed above represent a strong start.

**IN THE NEWS**

**New Year’s gala falls flat again**

The annual Spring Festival Gala program—a long, lavish variety show produced by state broadcaster China Central Television (CCTV)—has aired on the eve of Chinese New Year since 1983. While it remains a national tradition and the most-watched television show in the world, ratings have slumped in the past few years. The show now has to compete with a vast amount of alternative entertainment—on other television channels, on computer screens, and especially on mobile phones. On top of that, some of the recent skits, including an infamously sexist act last year, have met with jeers nationwide. The director seems oblivious to this criticism, telling SupChina’s Jiayun Feng that he “didn’t find a lot of criticism” online last year and that he “won’t take any mean taunts seriously” this year.
The 2018 show was the most “international” yet, including performers from over 10 countries and cameos or greetings by U.S. basketball star Stephon Marbury, International Olympic Committee president Thomas Bach, UN secretary general António Guterres, International Monetary Fund managing director Christine LaGarde, French president Emmanuel Macron, and British prime minister Theresa May.

Unfortunately, a skit on Sino-African friendship proved that the global outlook of Chinese state media still has a very long way to go. In “Sharing Joy, Sharing Happiness,” Kenyan women who in real life serve as attendants on the new Chinese-funded Nairobi-Mombasa Railway shared the spotlight with Chinese actress Lou Naiming, who walked onstage in blackface and large prosthetic buttocks. Netizens did not hold back their disgust. “Calling an Asian person ‘chink’ is racist, but when a yellow-skinned auntie appears at the Spring Festival Gala in blackface and proclaims her love for China, the media all love it. What a double standard,” fumed a user named @-OnlySoy-milk- on the Sina Weibo microblogging platform. Hundreds of users called out Lou on her own Weibo account, while many foreign observers, including Africans, denounced the skit as racist.

Many of the social media posts excoriating the skit remained online, but salty commentary on the gala has been filtered on Weibo. The hashtag “Spring Festival Gala roast” (春晚吐槽) was blocked less than halfway through the show’s four-plus hours. According to China Digital Times, other terms combining “Spring Festival Gala” and words like “ridicule” and “garbage” were blocked from both searches and posts on Weibo. Separately, a Hunan Television news anchor mispronounced President Xi Jinping’s name during the provincial network’s broadcast of the gala. He quickly corrected himself, but the clip of his slip-up was scrubbed from Chinese social media platforms. YouTube, the U.S.-based video-sharing site owned by Google, complied with Hunan TV’s request to remove the clip. In response, China Digital Times reposted the video to YouTube itself, only to have its version taken down as well.

While the gala has become the show to either ignore or hate-watch, it still had its sweet moments. Divas Faye Wong and Na Ying hit a high note in their duet “Years”; the pair last sang together at another CCTV gala in 1998.

#MeToo in China: Sexual harassment, censorship, and rice bunnies

Inspired by the #MeToo movement against sexual harassment and assault, which began in the United States, Chinese women have taken to social media to tell their own stories of mistreatment. In October 2017, an anonymous user posted on the question-and-answer site Zhihu about harassment she suffered from her doctoral adviser 13 years earlier at Beihang University. Then on January 1, she reposted her story to Weibo, this time under her real name. Luo Xixi’s accusations went viral, and her former adviser, Chen Xiaowu, was dismissed from Beihang on January 14. Soon other women followed Luo, posting their stories of harassment and abuse, often at the hands
of professors. Open letters calling on universities to address harassment also began to circulate online and were signed by hundreds of students, alumni, and professors. Some artists’ recent work notably helped draw attention to the topic. Vivian Qu won a Golden Horse for best director in November for her film *Angels Wear White*, a drama about two schoolgirls living through the aftermath of sexual assault. In Beijing this December, parents and young girls who saw the premier of Paula Vogel’s play *How I Learned to Drive*, which also deals with sexual abuse, were reportedly moved to stand up for their children and themselves.

On January 7, the Communist Party mouthpiece *People’s Daily* expressed its support for women who come forward to report abuse, but it did not take long for the authorities to curtail the budding movement. In the third week of January, a planned march from Beihang University to the University of International Business and Economics was canceled by its organizers. At least three students were told by their university not to participate, according to Reuters. Other students have been warned not to get too involved in #MeToo lest they be mistaken for “foreign hostile forces.”

Censorship has hit social media as well. Women have reported that their posts and open letters have been deleted, while keywords like “sexual harassment” began to be filtered from search results. But Chinese netizens have a great tradition of skirting the censors with creative homophones. In early February, users starting talking about “rice bunnies” (*mǐ tù*), a code word whose characters are so common in Chinese that they would be difficult to censor, or simply using the “rice” and “rabbit” emoji to keep the conversation going. Feminist activist Li Maizi says that young women’s linguistic creativity will bolster the movement in China, but warned that “there’s no space for [politics] on social media and the mainstream media.” It is likely just a matter of time before even the rice bunnies disappear.

There are both political and cultural factors that have caused #MeToo to falter in China. In the United States, the movement started with celebrities and was both backed and urged forward by investigative journalism. In China, by contrast, action has primarily come from young individuals speaking out on social media. Without coverage in mainstream state or state-sanctioned media, it is harder for the movement to gather momentum in China. The party-state is also wary of any type of grassroots collective action, so whatever traction #MeToo has gained in the country will soon be broken up. Luo Xixi herself says that being located outside of China—she lives in California—emboldened her to add her real name to her story.

**Tech updates: Mobile pay services, Weibo reprimand, cloud data localization**

- **Mobile payments on the rise:** About 97.5 percent of internet users in China connect via mobile phone, and 65.5 percent of internet users use mobile payments for nonfinancial products, according to the 2017 annual report of the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC). The rise of mobile payments is
perhaps most noticeable during the Spring Festival, when people send even more virtual “red envelopes” (hongbao) than usual (mobile pay has turned them into a year-round tradition) and participate in phone-shaking sweepstakes. Alipay and WeChat Pay have been locked in a hongbao war for the past few years, but WeChat seems to have already won in the Year of the Dog. Some 668 million people sent hongbao via WeChat Pay on the eve of this Chinese New Year. The increase in mobile internet connectivity in recent years may help explain the urgency and thoroughness with which authorities have pursued a crackdown on virtual private network (VPN) mobile applications that are used to circumvent censorship over the past year.

- **Regulator rebukes Weibo:** On January 27, the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) accused Weibo, the popular social media platform operated by the Sina internet portal, of spreading “content of wrong public opinion orientation, obscenity, low taste, and ethnic discrimination” and subsequently ordered the suspension of several Weibo services for one week. The charges followed revelations that some celebrities had bought their way onto Weibo’s list of top 10 trending topics. The CAC also demanded that Weibo do more to remove “false information” and keep a copy of user content for six months after it has been posted.

- **Crackdown on videos may have gone too far:** Popular animated characters including Peppa Pig and Princess Elsa have partly or entirely disappeared from major Chinese video-streaming sites following scrutiny from the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film, and Television (SAPPRFT). The media regulator launched an investigation into several internet companies after videos surfaced featuring children’s cartoon stars in violent, pornographic, or otherwise inappropriate scenarios, but streaming sites apparently decided to err on the side of caution and limit access to any video featuring the characters in question.

- **Evernote complies, Asus flies:** On February 8, the U.S.-based note-taking app company Evernote announced that Chinese users’ data will be transferred to Tencent Cloud by mid-2018 to comply with a Cybersecurity Law provision that requires Chinese users’ information to be stored in China, where it may be subject to intrusive monitoring. The move could cut China off from public notebooks created abroad. Around the same time, Taiwanese hardware company Asus decided to move in the opposition direction: Rather than partnering with a local cloud computing provider or complying with onerous new regulations, Asus will close its Shanghai data center on May 1.

- **Apple may be hiding bad air:** Reddit user @-IntoTheVoid- reported that poor air-quality ratings seem to be disappearing from the Weather app on his iPhone in China. Some commenters responded by saying they had no trouble loading air-quality data, though the readings they cited were good and may not have been deemed sensitive by censors. In 2017 Beijing banned nongovernmental sources from reporting air-quality data.
**Hong Kong: ‘Umbrella’ activists freed, candidate banned, detained bookseller interviewed**

Three events over the past month highlighted both the dwindling space for freedom of expression in Hong Kong and the continued functioning of the courts as a bulwark against arbitrary government decisions.

- **‘Umbrella Movement’ activists freed**: Joshua Wong, Alex Chow, and Nathan Law, all of whom played leading roles in the 2014 Umbrella Movement protests calling for full democracy in Hong Kong, were freed by the Court of Final Appeal on February 6. The court rejected the Hong Kong government’s appeal for harsher sentences and overturned a lower court’s decision to impose jail terms. At the same time, the judges affirmed the possibility of prison sentences for unlawful assembly and civil disobedience under “new guidelines” that could “set a dangerous precedent for sending people to prison for protesting in the future,” as Human Rights Watch’s Maya Wang told Time. Tim Hamlett of the *Hong Kong Free Press* argues that the judgment is not all that disconcerting, as it is focused on potentially violent acts. “Persistent protesters also need to bear in mind that the essence of civil disobedience is accepting punishment, not escaping it,” writes Hamlett.

- **Agnes Chow banned from election**: Hong Kong’s election officials disqualified Agnes Chow from running in a March 11 legislative by-election on the grounds that her party, Demosisto, “promote[s] self-determination,” suggesting that she would not uphold the Basic Law, Hong Kong’s constitution. “The ban against me isn’t personal,” Chow told the *Guardian*, “it’s targeting an entire generation of young people who have a different view from the government” and are seen as a threat by Beijing. The Hong Kong Bar Association decried the government’s decision as a de facto “political screening process” based on a “vague and imprecise” requirement. Stanford University professor Larry Diamond said that rather than protecting the official “one country, two systems” principle, which guarantees Hong Kong’s autonomy within China, the disqualification was actually “another step towards the evisceration of that principle.” Demosisto, cofounded by Chow, Joshua Wong, and other Umbrella activists, advocates “democratic self-determination” for Hong Kong rather than outright independence.

- **Gui Minhai gives questionable interview**: Gui Minhai, one of five Hong Kong booksellers who were abducted and detained by mainland authorities in 2015, gave what amounted to a confession on February 9 to the *South China Morning Post* and *Oriental Daily*. “Looking back, I might have become Sweden’s chess piece,” said Gui, a naturalized Swedish citizen who three weeks earlier was seized by Chinese authorities while on a Beijing-bound train accompanied by two Swedish consular officers. He had been en route to a medical appointment at the Swedish embassy at the time, and his statement appears aimed at undermining Sweden’s diplomatic efforts on his behalf. Gui had been in mainland China since he and four other colleagues at Mighty Current Media, which specialized in books on Communist Party political intrigue, were detained in late 2015. Gui gave an earlier
confession on Chinese state television in January 2016. His latest “interview” follows a disturbing pattern in which Chinese rights activists and journalists confess through Hong Kong media, including Oriental Daily, the Post, and Phoenix TV. These developments occurred in the context of a decline in independent publications and a rise in Chinese propaganda—including Xi Jinping’s books—at stores in the city.

BEYOND CHINA
AU headquarters bugged, foreign firms self-censor, fake activist emails

- **African Union bugged**: The Addis Ababa headquarters of the African Union (AU), a “gift” from China to its “African friends,” hemorrhaged data every night from January 2012 to January 2017, according to an investigation published on January 26 in the French newspaper Le Monde. In January 2017, AU technical staff noticed that the building's data usage peaked from midnight to 2 a.m. They soon discovered that confidential information was being siphoned through a digital back door to a server in Shanghai. Staff also found microphones hidden in walls and desks. The building's entire information-technology system was changed after last year’s discovery, and state-owned Ethio Telecom no longer handles communications. Both China and the AU have repudiated Le Monde’s report. Paul Kagame, the current AU chair and ruler of Rwanda since 1994, denies both that the building was bugged and that the organization would have anything to hide. About 73 percent of the AU’s nonpeacekeeping budget comes from foreign donors.

- **Marriott, Mercedes self-censor**: On January 11, Beijing chastised international hotel chain Marriott for listing Tibet, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau separately from China in an online customer survey. Chinese regulators suspended the site and related mobile applications for one week, while Marriott suspended its Twitter accounts (which are inaccessible in China), issued a profuse apology statement, and dispatched two senior executives to acknowledge the error on Chinese state media. Companies including Zara, MUJI, MedTronic, and several airlines have recently issued apologies after supposedly offending the Chinese people with maps or country lists that failed to conform with Beijing’s definition of its territory. On February 7, Mercedes-Benz apologized for posting an ad with a quote from the Dalai Lama on its Instagram account; the apology was particularly striking given that the ad was in English, intended for non-Chinese audiences, and on a platform that is blocked in China.

- **Foreign money for media ‘sensitized’**: Film production, news media, sports clubs, real estate, weapons manufacturing, and a number of other industries will be listed as “sensitive” sectors for investment abroad starting March 1, China’s National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) revealed on February 11. Chinese entities wishing to invest more than $300 million overseas will also be required to gain approval from the NDRC. The reinforced scrutiny implies that investment in
overseas media and film studios by Chinese individuals and companies will entail more explicit coordination with the Chinese government. Nonfinancial overseas investments declined in 2017 as Beijing seeks to keep assets and wealthy officials in the country.

- **Fake emails sow confusion, seek information:** Suspected agents of the Chinese government have in recent years used email impersonation as a tactic to mislead politicians, harm the reputation of CCP critics, and obtain sensitive information. A report on Chinese harassment of activists in Canada submitted to the Canadian government in January noted that as recently as the previous month, emails purporting to be from practitioners of the Falun Gong spiritual group that made grandiose and fanatical claims had been sent to members of Parliament in an effort to reduce support for the group, which is persecuted in China. In early February, council members in Ipswich, Australia, received threatening emails from a woman claiming to be a Falun Gong adherent, but who according to Falun Dafa Information Center director Levi Browde was unknown to Falun Gong coordinators in Buffalo, New York, where her IP address was located. Browde said that IP addresses of such fake emails had been traced to China in the past, but are now more often found in Western countries. The same impersonation tactic has been used to try and obtain information from overseas activists. In October, a message sent from a Gmail address purporting to belong to Freedom House’s Sarah Cook was sent—from a U.S. IP address—to representatives of the World Uyghur Congress, awkwardly seeking the “contact information of your propaganda staff” ahead of the group’s General Assembly.

**FEATURED PRISONER**

**Tsegon Gyal**

Tsegon Gyal, 55, a former Tibetan journalist from Qinghai Province, was sentenced on January 10 to three years in prison, apparently in retribution for a post on WeChat in which he criticized the Chinese government for failing to genuinely promote its proclaimed policy of “ethnic unity.”

Gyal’s sentence came more than a year after he was taken into custody in December 2016 and held incommunicado. He was charged two weeks after his arrest with “inciting separatism,” an offense often invoked to punish Tibetans who criticize government policies in the region. He reportedly staged a silent protest in custody, refusing to answer interrogators’ questions. In April 2017, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention ruled that Gyal’s arrest was indeed arbitrary and urged his immediate release. Nevertheless, the
Restricted access to Tibet: March 10 will be the 10th anniversary of the 2008 protests against Communist Party rule that began in Lhasa and spread across the plateau to Tibetan areas in nearby provinces. Each year, the authorities typically restrict access to the region for foreigners and increase security surrounding the anniversary. But given the decennial date and a February 17 fire at the sacred Jokhang Temple—about which sparse details have been released and social media posts have been censored—restrictions may be greater than usual next month.

Censorship around the ‘Two Sessions’: On March 5, the annual two-week meeting of China’s parliament, the National People’s Congress, and its affiliated advisory body, the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference, will begin in Beijing and include the selection of state leaders. The gatherings are typically accompanied by censorship directives to avoid reporting on topics that might distract from the official political theater. In recent years, some attendees have voiced concerns regarding tightening internet censorship. Watch for intensified restrictions on reporting and whether, in the current political climate, critiques of censorship are raised.

Cybersecurity law in Macau: On February 8, Global Voices reported that Macau, a former Portuguese colony that is now a special administrative region of China, had undertaken consultations on a proposed Cybersecurity Law published in December. While local authorities claim that the law’s aim is to help prevent cyberattacks, critics and some experts fear that such measures are unnecessary and that certain provisions—such as those requiring real-name registration and monitoring of data flows—would facilitate intensified surveillance and censorship, including website filtering. Watch for any updates on the law’s progress and hints that it might also serve as a model for future legislation in neighboring Hong Kong.
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.

• Support a prisoner: A human rights lawyer, an online activist, and a bookseller with Swedish citizenship who are being held in China and at risk of torture for exercising basic rights, including to free expression, are the subject of international letter-writing campaigns. Visit the relevant link to add your voice on behalf of Yu Wensheng, Zhen Jianghua, or Gui Minhai.

For more information

• For archives, go to: www.freedomhouse.org/China-media