

# CHINA MEDIA BULLETIN

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## PHOTO OF THE MONTH

### Soccer Speech

Soccer fans hold up protest signs at a China vs. Hong Kong World Cup qualifying match on November 17, illustrating political tensions between the autonomous territory and Beijing. The "BOO" signs are also a silent protest for free speech after the Hong Kong Football Association was fined earlier this year because fans verbally booed the Chinese national anthem during a match. The photo was shared on Sina Weibo over 16,000 times before censors deleted it, though the original post's accompanying comment was pro-China. Credit: [Weiboscope](#)



## FEATURE

# Resisting Beijing's Global Media Influence

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A Chinese Canadian woman is barred from attending the Miss World contest in China because of her human rights advocacy and spiritual beliefs, with [no protest from pageant organizers](#). A political cartoonist fleeing persecution is [deported](#) back to China by Thai authorities, who ignored his UN refugee status. And a [Reuters](#) investigation finds that 33 radio stations in 14 countries are subtly broadcasting Chinese Communist Party (CCP) propaganda.

These incidents from November alone exemplify an ongoing Chinese government campaign to promote its views and suppress criticism around the world.

The phenomenon is not new. A 2013 [study](#) by the Center for International Media Assistance described Beijing's palpable influence over news outlets in the United States, Europe, Asia, and Africa. However, as Chinese president Xi Jinping has tightened ideological controls at home, related content restrictions and manipulation are affecting an ever-broadening array of institutions and economic sectors overseas.

Since November 2012, when Xi took the helm of the CCP, Freedom House's *China Media Bulletin* has noted over 40 instances—in 17 countries and international institutions—of Chinese information controls negatively affecting free expression outside China. These are likely only the tip of the iceberg. The CCP's interventions and influences extend to a surprising range of media, including pop music, hot air balloons, and video games.

Disturbingly, as Beijing has pushed harder with economic incentives, intimidation tactics, and even cultural arguments to support its demands, the response from foreign entities has been rather weak, with examples of passivity or complicity proliferating.

In 2014, at the behest of a Chinese printer, [Reader's Digest](#) removed a fictional story from an anthology for the international market due to its references to religious persecution and torture in China. This July, leaked e-mails from [Sony Pictures](#) executives revealed recommendations to preemptively remove scenes from the movie *Pixels*—the same version that was screened globally—for fear of upsetting Chinese censors.

Last month, prominent artist and dissident Ai Weiwei reported that the Lego company had refused to fill a special bulk order he requested for a planned artwork on free speech because it would amount to “actively engaging” in a project with a “political agenda,” a violation of company policy.



Cartoon depicting Chinese artist Ai Weiwei as a Lego figurine after the company refused to fill a bulk order for his next art installation. Credit: [Rebel Pepper](#)

Meanwhile, the Chinese government has continued investing in propaganda and exploring new ways of insinuating CCP influence into foreign-language media content. Over the past month, [news](#) emerged that Chinese companies will increase [financing](#) for English-language feature films, and media representatives from Brazil, Russia, China, India, and South Africa discussed a joint “information network” at the first [BRICS Media Summit](#) in Beijing.

The result of these dynamics is that more and more people around the world are encountering the kinds of difficult ethical and practical choices that many Chinese face daily. Meanwhile, liberal Chinese, victims of persecution, and civic leaders risk being marginalized and occasionally even barred from fleeing to freedom.

Given the CCP’s track record, it is difficult to excuse foreign organizations that are or claim to be caught off guard by political or economic pressure from Beijing. Indeed, there are many around the world who have found the resolve and ingenuity to push back, reaffirm democratic values, and resist enticing incentives, even if it comes at a cost.

Anastasia Lin, the Canadian pageant contestant mentioned above, has refused to remain silent about her activism on behalf of Falun Gong and other human rights causes, despite [harassment of her father](#) in China and the lost opportunity to compete for the Miss World crown. [Tsai Ing-wen](#), the opposition candidate in Taiwan’s upcoming presidential election, responded to thousands of critical posts sent by mainland Chinese users—possibly with the blessing of Chinese authorities—on her [Facebook page](#) with a principled message, welcoming them to the usually blocked social-networking site and inviting them to experience Taiwan’s democracy. In Ai Weiwei’s case, so many people expressed support for his project and disappointment at Lego’s response that he set up collection points in three countries for individuals to donate blocks to his art installation.

As institutions, at least three universities in the United States and Canada have chosen since 2013 to [discontinue](#) their Beijing-sponsored Confucius Institutes after negative experiences involving discriminatory hiring practices, Chinese state media coverage, and restrictions on academic freedom.

Other entities have responded more systematically. In June 2014, the [American Association of University Professors](#) urged U.S. universities to cancel their agreements with Confucius Institutes unless they gain greater control over curriculum and hiring. In October 2015, twelve major U.S. publishers signed a [pledge](#) by the PEN American Center to monitor and address censorship in Chinese translations of books by foreign authors, affirming an industry standard that favors transparency and free expression.

As a new year approaches, there are many uncertainties regarding China’s future relationship with the world. But one thing is clear. Despite the Chinese government’s rhetoric of not interfering in other countries’ affairs, CCP censorship and propaganda are now a global phenomenon.

It is therefore up to members of the international community—individuals, institutions, governments, and corporations—to decide whether to accept this trend or work together to reverse it.

## PRINT / BROADCAST

### New 'ethics committees' institutionalize party-state media controls

On November 5, the official [Xinhua news agency](#) announced the creation of a new committee to monitor implementation of a [self-discipline pledge](#) signed in September by at least 50 media organizations. The committee, to be established under the rubric of the China Alliance of Radio, Film, and Television (CARFT), will be tasked with meting out warnings, demotions, dismissals, orders for public apologies, or even blacklisting for media organizations in response to violations of the pledge. The formation of the national committee fits a [broader pattern](#) in which provincial and city-level news ethics committees have emerged across the country since mid-2013. The panels include officials from various government agencies and are led by local party propaganda offices. The most recently announced subnational committee formed in [Anhui Province](#) on November 30. In most cases, the surface justification is to counter the growing problems of vulgar content, fake news, and paid-for news. But as [David Bandurski](#) of Hong Kong University's China Media Project notes, a close examination of official wording reveals the overarching aim of reinforcing journalists' [political obedience](#). For example, Clause 1 of the September [self-discipline pledge](#) states that the signatories commit to "preserving the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party" and "not publishing or spreading any language that damages the image of the Party."

Under President Xi Jinping's leadership, regulators and the party's propaganda department have methodically sought to reinvigorate the party's dominance over public discourse, online and offline. For instance, [Xinhua](#) announced on November 6 that online news reporters were granted press cards for the first time, allowing them to conduct interviews and report news directly, rather than simply republishing reports by traditional news media. Although 594 reporters received accreditation, all were from party or government-run websites, while staff from more popular commercial portals like Sina and Sohu were excluded. Such discriminatory treatment, combined with limits on the syndication opportunities for commercial media, match the findings of a 2014 [Freedom House study](#) of news outlets' microblog feeds, which showed a dramatic shift in influence on Sina Weibo from commercial to government-controlled outlets after Xi took over as head of the CCP in late 2012.

## PRINT / BROADCAST

### State media, censors promote and protect Xi Jinping's image

Daily reports about the activities of top leaders have long been a signature feature of Chinese state-run media and particularly Communist Party mouthpieces. But under President Xi Jinping's rule, this phenomenon has reached new heights, as personalized coverage of "[Xi Dada](#)" far exceeds that of his predecessors or fellow Politburo Standing Committee members. On December 4, the front page of the Communist Party's flagship publication, the [People's Daily](#), included mentions of Xi in no less than 11 of 12 headlines. Page 2 was nearly filled with an array of photos showing Xi meeting with various African leaders. Premier Li Keqiang did not receive mention until page 4. According to a 2014 study of leaders' mentions on the front page of the *People's Daily* by China Media Project director [Qian Gang](#), references to Xi exceeded even those of Deng Xiaoping, and were more than twice as nu-

merous as those of Hu Jintao and Jiang Zemin during the relevant time periods. State media coverage has been supplemented with a book of Xi's sayings, [a smartphone app](#), and an interactive QR code quiz. Overwhelmingly positive coverage of Xi has also seeped into commercial papers, including the *Southern Weekly*, previously known for its more critical investigative coverage. Its December 3 edition included a 13,000-word, front-page feature praising reform under Xi's leadership.

Meanwhile, censors have worked equally hard to delete and discourage unofficial photos or comments that even indirectly portray Xi in a negative light. On November 13, [Zhang Aijia](#), a teacher at the Hong'an International Education School, was fired after posting a [comment](#) on WeChat arguing that truly knowledgeable people do not boast about the books they have read. Although the post made no reference to Xi, Zhang's superiors were pressured by police and the local education bureau to dismiss her because her comment was interpreted as mocking the president's tendency to display his knowledge of Chinese and international literary works during visits abroad. In a more direct violation of discipline, on December 6 the *South China Morning Post* reported that four staff from the official China News Service newswire were suspended after they published an article with a typographical error that accidentally referred to Xi's speech at the China-Africa summit in South Africa as his resignation. Separately, the official [Xinhua](#) news agency posted a copy of an impromptu selfie of Xi, British prime minister David Cameron, and Argentine soccer star Sergio Aguero, but the image nevertheless became one of the most rapidly censored images on Sina Weibo's microblogging platform in October/November, according to Weiboscope, a research project at Hong Kong University that tracks Weibo deletions in real time.

## NEW MEDIA

### Ban on 'improper discussion' by party members prompts reprisals, netizen humor

On October 21, the CCP Central Committee issued a new set of [disciplinary regulations](#) for the party's 88 million members. Amid a long list of requirements related to political discipline, organizational discipline, relations with citizens, and personal integrity, one article in particular sparked controversy. Article 46 prohibits "improper discussion [of the policies] of the central Party" (*wangyi zhongyang*). [Wendy Zhou](#) notes in her analysis of the term "improper discussion" as used in the CCP mouthpiece *People's Daily* that it has rarely appeared in the context of an internal party ban in the past four decades, but it has gained prominence over the past year. This has prompted comparisons of the new rule to internal party purges and political campaigns of the Mao era, and the censorship of any such allusions. One [Weibo post](#), deleted within 50 minutes, featured an image of a newspaper headline announcing the regulations, coupled with the statement, "The wind of the Cultural Revolution is quietly rising; the voice of one man clearly rules." Others raised similar concerns, including prominent law professor He Weifang.

Since the announcement of the disciplinary rules, two cases have been reported in which individuals were fired for public comments—including online—that were deemed critical of the party. On November 2, a state-run paper in Xinjiang reported that one of its editors,

[Zhao Xinwei](#), had been fired for making public comments opposing central government policy in the region. On November 11, Guangdong Province's party disciplinary committee reported that [Liang Xinsheng](#) had been removed from his post as deputy head of a university English department for publishing "radical opinions" on his Weibo account. The new rules and punishments, alongside recent campaigns to identify and punish cadres in Xinjiang and Tibet for holding even private religious or political beliefs, underscore the increasing use of the party's Committee for Discipline Inspection to root out internal dissent, not just corruption.

The new rules have also drawn mockery from netizens. One noted that a post about the next [Spring Festival](#) was deleted even though it didn't "improperly discuss" the central government, while others asked whether the [UN Committee against Torture](#) should be punished for "improperly discussing" central party policies.

## PRINT / NEW MEDIA

### Jailed journalist released, others punished for political speech

Recent developments in cases involving journalists and free expression activists indicate that occasional releases after domestic and international pressure do not signify a broader easing of repression.

- **Veteran journalist to serve prison sentence at home:** On November 26, the Beijing high court reduced the sentence of journalist [Gao Yu](#) by two years, then ordered her released from custody, permitting her to serve the remainder of her sentence at home or in hospital care. Gao, 71, was sentenced to seven years in prison in [April](#) for allegedly providing an internal party memo to an overseas news site, a charge she denies. She has been repeatedly denied medical parole, but domestic and international calls for her release on humanitarian grounds may have pressured the Chinese authorities to show lenience.
- **Activist jailed for joining press freedom protest:** On November 27, a court in Guangzhou [sentenced](#) prominent rights activist Yang Maodong, also known by the pen name Guo Feixiong, to six years in prison. Fellow activists Sun Desheng and Liu Yandong were sentenced to two and a half and three years, respectively. The three were punished for their participation in a 2013 protest outside the offices of the [Southern Weekly](#) newspaper calling for greater press freedom. The case was riddled with due process violations, including the judge's unexpected, last-minute announcement at the sentencing hearing that Guo was guilty of a [new charge](#) of "picking quarrels and provoking trouble." In a [statement](#) about the verdict circulated online, Guo expressed determination and optimism about a democratic future for China. He previously served a five-year sentence for his activism, from 2004 to 2009.
- **Lawyer incommunicado after criticizing friend's jailing online:** On December 2, [Radio Free Asia](#) reported that prominent attorney Gao Zhisheng had lost communication with the outside world. Shortly before he went silent, Gao authored a letter firmly criticizing the jailing of Guo Feixiong (see above) and calling for a future special tribunal to prosecute CCP officials responsible for human rights violations.

As the [letter](#) circulated on social media, Gao was placed under house arrest at his late mother's traditional cave dwelling in rural Shaanxi Province. Prior to Gao's own stints of extralegal detention and then imprisonment from 2006 to 2014, he and Guo had worked together on several rights-defense cases.

- **Hong Kong journalists, book publishers face mainland reprisals:** On November 5, two journalists appeared in court in [Shenzhen](#) to plead guilty on charges of operating an "illegal business." Publisher Wang Jiamin and editor Guo Zhongxiao were involved in producing two magazines in Hong Kong that often touched on sensitive political dynamics among the Chinese elite. Although the amount earned from the small number of copies sold in China was insufficient to meet the legal minimum for the "illegal business" charge, the judge accepted the inclusion of the profits from Hong Kong, where the publications are permitted, to justify the charge. The pair were detained in [May 2014](#); their sentences have yet to be announced. Separately, in late October, [four people](#) involved with a Hong Kong-based book publisher known for printing salacious accounts of Chinese leaders' personal lives disappeared in Thailand and China and were believed to be in the custody of Chinese authorities. No further information was available on their status as of early December.

## HONG KONG / BEYOND CHINA

### Media acquisitions and cyberattacks

The Chinese Communist Party's indirect influence over media outlets in Hong Kong and Taiwan has grown in recent years, and two possible acquisitions could add to the problem. Meanwhile, China-based hacking attacks continue, but there are signs that some forms of deterrence can be effective.

- **Purchase of 'South China Morning Post' by mainland billionaire?** In recent weeks, several media outlets reported plans by Chinese businessman [Jack Ma](#), or his e-commerce conglomerate [Alibaba](#), to purchase a stake in Hong Kong's prominent English-language newspaper the *South China Morning Post*. [Robin Hu](#), chief executive of the South China Media Group, which owns the paper, fueled the speculation with a November 25 statement confirming that the paper was in talks with an unnamed buyer. Should the purchase go through, it would be the first instance of a Chinese internet company buying a newspaper outside mainland China, though Alibaba and Ma personally have both already acquired a variety of [media assets](#) in China and Hong Kong. The potential purchase, following the replacement of the chief editor and [resignations](#) by key staff in recent months, has added to concerns that the paper's editorial independence from Beijing could suffer.

- **U.S. film producer with China ties bids for Taiwan TV network:** On November 21, the [Los Angeles Times](#) reported that Dan Mintz, an American film producer often referred to as "Mr. China" in Hollywood circles, had reached a deal with the U.S. firm Carlyle Group to personally purchase a [61 percent](#) controlling stake in Taiwan's Eastern Broadcasting Company television network. The network owns 20 channels in Taiwan and subsidiaries abroad, making it the largest private Mandarin-language

network in the world. [Mintz](#) is the chief executive of the U.S. arm of Chinese television and film company DMG Entertainment. He played a key role in the U.S.-China coproduction of *Iron Man 3*, whose Chinese version featured [changes](#) meant to appease authorities and appeal to Chinese audiences. If concluded, the television deal would require approval by Taiwanese government regulators, who have said they will closely [scrutinize](#) it given Mintz's China ties.

- **China suspected in hack of Australian weather bureau:** On December 2, the [Australian Broadcasting Corporation](#) reported that computers at the country's Bureau of Meteorology had been hacked, with official sources saying they had little doubt that the "massive" breach originated in China. The bureau owns a supercomputer and other resources that link into, among other agencies, the Department of Defense, making it a high-value intelligence target. Australian officials have not publicly accused the Chinese government of being behind the breach, and a Chinese foreign ministry spokeswoman denied Beijing's involvement.

- **Some Chinese cyberespionage declines after U.S. indictments:** On November 30, on the eve of a new round of U.S.-China cybersecurity talks, the [Washington Post](#) cited current and former U.S. officials stating that commercial cyberespionage by the Chinese military had dropped since the U.S. Justice Department indicted five Chinese officers in May 2014. Officials and private-sector analysts report that cyberespionage intrusions have continued overall, with responsibility shifting to civilian intelligence agencies like the Ministry of State Security. Nevertheless, the change seemed to indicate that the firm, law enforcement-based approach effectively changed Chinese behavior.

## WHAT TO WATCH FOR

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- **Increased censorship, activist trials during holidays:** The Chinese authorities have an uncanny tendency to intensify censorship and prosecute prominent activists during the Christmas/New Year holiday season, possibly to minimize international media attention and any political or diplomatic backlash. Guo Feixiong's recent sentencing on the day after Thanksgiving may not bode well for the coming month. Watch for new upgrades to the Great Firewall and the trial or sentencing of prominent lawyers, especially [Pu Zhiqiang](#) (in custody for 20 months without trial) and attorneys detained during the July 2015 crackdown.

- **More punishments, pushback over 'improper discussion' rule:** Watch for more cases of Communist Party cadres being punished for "improperly discussing" central policies, but also signs of growing internal discontent and resentment as party insiders critical of Xi Jinping's leadership are silenced.

- **New censorship circumvention tactic:** In late November, [technology](#) news sites reported on a new browser plug-in that could enable users in China to access blocked websites. Developed by researchers at the [University of Massachusetts](#), Amherst, the so-called [CacheBrowser](#) tool takes advantage of the fact that censors have difficulty blocking specific information in a content delivery network

(CDN); blocking a whole network would cause considerable collateral damage. Watch for the tool's end-user version to be available soon (only a prototype is ready now, available [here](#)), reports of its use by Chinese netizens, and efforts by government censors to block more cloud services or CDNs in response, despite the collateral damage.

### For more information

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- For archives, go to: [www.freedomhouse.org/china\\_media](http://www.freedomhouse.org/china_media)
- For additional information on human rights and free expression in China, see: *Freedom in the World 2015*, *Freedom of the Press 2015*, *Freedom on the Net 2014*



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

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