

III. Respect for Civil Liberties

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Findings

- The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) continued to treat PRC news media as its mouthpiece to provide the Party’s version of the news and thereby shape public opinion. Xi Jinping framed the role of media as “ideological” work in his political report during the 20th Party Congress in October 2022.
- Many journalists, other media professionals, and “citizen journalists” remained in detention, in prison, or subject to bail conditions as a result of their reporting. Reporters Without Borders (RSF) estimated that China held 114 journalists in detention, and continued to rank China the world’s top jailer of journalists overall, and female journalists specifically.
- Authorities continued to harass, surveil, and restrict foreign journalists and Chinese nationals working for foreign media companies. According to the Foreign Correspondents’ Club of China (FCCC), harassment of foreign and local journalists and their sources significantly increased around the time of politically sensitive events. Of 102 survey respondents representing news organizations from 30 countries and regions, “100% said China did not meet international standards for press freedoms and reporting last year.”
- Authorities continued to harass, detain, and imprison people who participated peacefully in in-person protests, demonstrations, and other gatherings, including those involved in the White Paper protests. During and after the White Paper protests, authorities took at least 30 people into custody and detained at least 100, while also interrogating many more participants about “sensitive” topics unrelated to the protests.
- Authorities censored online discussion of sensitive topics in which sources criticized or contradicted official policy or positions, including the September 2022 crash of a bus carrying people to a COVID-19 quarantine site that led to 27 deaths, information about mortgage boycotts involving tens of thousands of people and related protests, and social media posts covering a hospital fire in Beijing municipality that killed 29 in April 2023.
- The Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) continued to unveil regulations diminishing freedom of expression in Chinese cyberspace, launching a “crackdown campaign” against “self media,” or news created by independent users not registered as journalists, and adding requirements to monitor and control commenters and the content of comments on all internet platforms.
- In anticipation of the 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, authorities launched physical and digital campaigns of “stability maintenance and security work” and internet “purification,” respectively—to suppress various sources of independent expression.

Freedom of Expression

- Censors continued to suppress various forms of entertainment content that did not conform to the PRC's priorities, including books, comedy shows, and online poetry.
- State security officials continued detaining publishers and editors responsible for material considered sensitive to the Chinese government, including a high-ranking editor at a Party newspaper and a Taiwan-based publisher of books critical of the Party.
- The PRC continued to limit freedom of expression within educational and research institutions, introducing a draft law on widespread "patriotic education" and also issuing a guiding opinion that would increase ideological control over legal education.

Recommendations

Members of the U.S. Congress and Administration officials are encouraged to take the following actions:

- Give greater public expression, including at the highest levels of the U.S. Government, to the issue of press freedom in China, condemning the harassment and detention of both domestic and foreign journalists; the denial, threat of denial, or delay of visas for foreign journalists; and the censorship of foreign media websites. Consistently link press freedom to U.S. interests, noting that censorship and restrictions on journalists and media websites prevent the free flow of information on issues of public concern, including public health and environmental crises and food safety, and act as trade barriers for foreign companies attempting to access the Chinese market.
- Sustain, and where appropriate, expand, programs that develop and widely distribute technologies that will assist Chinese human rights advocates and civil society organizations in circumventing internet restrictions so as to improve their ability to access and share content protected under international human rights standards—as well as to protect their own information from China's surveillance and interference. Continue to maintain internet freedom programs for China at the United States Agency for Global Media to provide digital security training and capacity-building efforts for bloggers, journalists, civil society organizations, and human rights and internet freedom advocates in China.
- Increase media literacy and transparency with regard to Chinese state-sponsored propaganda, censorship, and disinformation, including through greater support and funding for graduate-level area studies programs and language study, and greater support for media literacy efforts for international audiences. Provide forums for scholars, civil society advocates, journalists, and technology experts to discuss and disseminate "best practices" in Chinese media literacy.
- Highlight the fact that content creators who criticize the Chinese government on U.S. social media face risk of harassment, censorship, and demonetization efforts.

Freedom of Expression

- Consider ways to ensure transparency on social media and consistency in labeling content from foreign governments across different social media platforms.
- Urge Chinese officials to end the detention and harassment of rights advocates, lawyers, journalists, and others subjected to reprisals for exercising their right to freedom of expression. Call on officials to release or confirm the release of individuals detained or imprisoned for exercising freedom of expression, such as **Zhang Zhan, Sophia Huang Xueqin, Cheng Lei, Kamile Wayit, Zhang Hai, Tong Menglan, Ruan Xiaohuan, Guo Yi, Li Yanhe, Dong Yuyu**, and other political prisoners mentioned in this Report and documented in the Commission's Political Prisoner Database.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Freedom of the Press

PARTY CONTROL OF THE MEDIA

During the Commission's 2023 reporting year, international observers continued to report harsh conditions for press freedom in China. Freedom House's 2022 Freedom in the World report scored China 0 out of 4 for "free and independent media,"¹ and Reporters Without Borders (RSF) ranked China 179th out of 180 countries and territories in its World Press Freedom Index.² These dismal conditions continue to violate Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR),³ which China has signed but not ratified.⁴

The Chinese Communist Party continued to treat Chinese news media as its mouthpiece to provide the Party's version of the news and thereby shape public opinion.⁵ In his political report to the 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in October 2022, Xi Jinping framed media as "ideological work," calling on Party authorities to use the media to "shape a new pattern of mainstream public opinion."⁶ The following month, in observance of China's National Journalists' Day, state-run media outlet Xinhua published an article calling on the media in China to "review the task earnestly entrusted by General Secretary Xi Jinping" and "be the broadcasters of the Party's policies and positions from start to finish."⁷ In line with these stated policy goals, state authorities continued to control the media to promote messaging favorable to the Party and Xi Jinping,⁸ as the Party maintained direct control over China's major media groups, including sending daily notices to every media outlet with detailed guidelines for the day's reporting.⁹

HARASSMENT, DETENTION, AND IMPRISONMENT OF JOURNALISTS

This past year, many journalists, other media professionals, and "citizen journalists"—non-professionals who publish independently to circumvent official restrictions¹⁰—remained in detention, prison, or subject to bail conditions as a result of their reporting. RSF recorded its highest-ever number of imprisoned journalists worldwide¹¹ and continued to rank China the world's "biggest jailer of journalists."¹² For example, on April 30, 2023, PRC authorities reportedly released citizen journalist **Fang Bin** from prison briefly before taking him to Wuhan municipality, Hubei province, to be placed under surveillance and control.¹³ Many others remained in jail or detention, including citizen journalist **Zhang Zhan**, who continued to serve a four-year prison sentence in Shanghai municipality for "picking quarrels and provoking trouble"¹⁴ in connection with her independent reporting on coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) conditions in China.¹⁵

In addition, RSF again ranked China the world's top jailer of female journalists.¹⁶ Authorities continued to hold journalist **Sophia Huang Xueqin**—whom they detained in September 2021 and who previously reported on sexual harassment and pro-democracy demonstrations in Hong Kong¹⁷—in pretrial detention in Guangdong province on suspicion of "inciting subversion of state power."¹⁸ In

Freedom of Expression

September 2022, Radio Free Asia reported that Huang had dismissed her lawyer, “suggesting she is under huge pressure to plead guilty and ‘confess’ to the charges against her.”¹⁹ Reports have also indicated that Huang requires urgent medical attention for severe weight loss and other untreated long-term conditions.²⁰ Authorities also continued to hold Australian citizen and China Global Television Network journalist **Cheng Lei**²¹—who had written openly on Facebook about concerns with the Chinese government’s response to COVID-19, among other topics²²—more than 16 months after trying her behind closed doors and three years after initially detaining her for allegedly “illegally supplying state secrets overseas.”²³ According to Deutsche Welle, Cheng’s eyesight has deteriorated during her time in detention, and authorities refused to allow her family to call or visit her and delayed sending letters she wrote for months.²⁴ Bloomberg News also reported on June 14, 2022, that Chinese state authorities released Bloomberg journalist **Haze Fan** on “bail pending investigation” in January 2022, more than a year after she was detained on suspicion of crimes related to “national security.”²⁵

CONDITIONS FOR FOREIGN JOURNALISTS

This past year, authorities continued to harass, surveil, and restrict foreign journalists and Chinese nationals working for foreign media companies. According to a survey of the Foreign Correspondents’ Club of China (FCCC) completed in January 2023, harassment of foreign journalists spiked around the time of politically sensitive events, and harassment and intimidation of their Chinese colleagues and Chinese sources increased dramatically in 2022.²⁶ Of 102 survey respondents representing news organizations from 30 countries and regions, “100% said China did not meet international standards for press freedoms and reporting last year.”²⁷ The FCCC survey further found that online harassment remained pervasive, “fall[ing] disproportionately on female journalists of East Asian descent, as well as Chinese employees of foreign news organizations.”²⁸ In Shanghai and Beijing municipalities, public security officials reportedly harassed and held in custody foreign journalists attempting to cover what came to be known as the White Paper protests.²⁹ Moreover, the FCCC reported that “journalists from multiple outlets were physically harassed by police while covering the unrest.”³⁰ In one case, Shanghai public security officials reportedly beat and kicked BBC journalist Edward Lawrence and held him for several hours before releasing him.³¹ In a separate case, Shanghai public security officials reportedly took into custody Swiss journalist Michael Peuker and his cameraman, both of Radio Télévision Suisse’s RTS Info, for about an hour.³² Officials reportedly confiscated their equipment and later returned it.³³ As for journalist visas, although COVID-19 restrictions were lifted in December 2022, PRC authorities subjected foreign journalists to lengthy administrative delays citing “geopolitical tensions,” resulting in more than half of foreign news organizations still waiting in March 2023 for their visas to be renewed.³⁴

Freedom of Expression

In-Person Protest and Assembly

This past year, authorities continued to harass, detain, and imprison people who participated peacefully in protests, demonstrations, and other gatherings, violating Articles 19, 20 and 21 of the ICCPR.³⁵ While the true numbers of protests and detentions remained unclear, Freedom House documented over 2,000 “dissent events” between June 2022 and March 2023 and found “direct evidence” of detentions in 92 of them from June 2022 to January 2023.³⁶ Protesters demonstrated in response to a variety of issues, such as the PRC government’s COVID-19 response, reductions in medical benefits, delayed housing construction, and more.³⁷ Selected examples include:

- **Medical benefits:** In February 2023, crowds of elderly people—some sources estimated “thousands”—gathered in Wuhan municipality, Hubei province, and Dalian municipality, Liaoning province, to protest a reduction in medical benefits that reportedly occurred as a result of health insurance reform measures.³⁸ Public security officials detained protesters and their supporters, such as COVID-19 victim family member **Zhang Hai**³⁹ and Wuhan taxi driver **Tong Menglan**,⁴⁰ and in at least one case, public security officials reportedly warned a local man not to participate in the gatherings.⁴¹
- **Bank protests:** From May to July 2022, authorities suppressed peaceful protests by bank depositors in Henan province.⁴² Following the freezing of depositors’ accounts at several banks in Zhengzhou municipality in connection with a government investigation into the banks, some depositors took steps to organize protests.⁴³ In at least one case, authorities appeared to manipulate the health code apps of protesters, triggering COVID-19 quarantine measures that restricted individuals’ movement.⁴⁴ In one protest that took place in July, large numbers of unidentified individuals arrived at the scene and used violence to disperse protesters.⁴⁵ Some depositors said that authorities pressured them to delete information about the protests from their phones, and that authorities and employers visited them and their family members and warned them not to protest, warning of consequences “including threat of job loss.”⁴⁶

WHITE PAPER PROTESTS

During and after demonstrations that came to be called the White Paper protests, Chinese authorities harassed and intimidated participants and eyewitness journalists. International non-governmental organization Chinese Human Rights Defenders reported that authorities definitely took at least 30 people involved with the White Paper protests into custody as of February 2023, though they estimate that over 100 may have been detained in total.⁴⁷ Prompted by news of a fire at an apartment building under COVID-19 lockdown conditions in Urumqi municipality, Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, that resulted in at least 10 fatalities,⁴⁸ protesters expressed grievances about zero-COVID measures.⁴⁹ In addition, some protesters held up blank pieces of paper to underscore censorship in China, and some expressed the need

Freedom of Expression

for human rights and freedom in China, calling for Party General Secretary Xi Jinping to “step down,” and even for an end to the Chinese Communist Party.⁵⁰ Beginning on November 26, 2022, over 77 protests took place across 39 cities in China for several days,⁵¹ prompting some analysts to assert that these demonstrations were the most widespread in China since 1989.⁵²

In the weeks following the protests, authorities tracked, harassed, and detained protesters and onlookers.⁵³ According to the Washington Post, protesters in Beijing and Shanghai municipalities experienced “heightened digital surveillance, strip searches, threats against their families, and being forced into physical duress during interrogation.”⁵⁴ Detentions and interrogations of some protesters reportedly served as opportunities for authorities to question participants about other topics deemed “sensitive,” including participation in feminist organizations and the use of banned messaging apps such as Telegram.⁵⁵ Public security officials questioned and later detained a group of friends who participated in the demonstrations: **Li Yuanjing**,⁵⁶ **Li Siqu**,⁵⁷ **Zhai Dengrui**,⁵⁸ **Cao Zhixin**,⁵⁹ **Qin Ziyi**,⁶⁰ **Yang Liu**,⁶¹ Yang’s boyfriend **Lin Yun**,⁶² and **Xin Shang**,⁶³ questioning at least some of the female detainees about feminist content they had shared online, asking if they were “feminists” or “lesbians.”⁶⁴ Some had studied abroad,⁶⁵ and authorities reportedly asked some if they were “backed by foreign forces,”⁶⁶ consistent with remarks around the same time from other senior officials regarding the protests.⁶⁷ After being accused of “picking quarrels and provoking trouble,”⁶⁸ authorities reportedly released Xin in February 2023;⁶⁹ Qin, Yang, and Lin on bail in January;⁷⁰ and Li Yuanjing, Li Siqu, Zhai, and Cao on bail in April.⁷¹ Authorities also detained a number of individuals belonging to ethnic minority groups connected to the protests, including Uyghur university student **Kamile Wayit**,⁷² Tibetan university student **Tseyang Lhamo**,⁷³ and four Tibetan women working at a restaurant in Chengdu municipality, Sichuan province, **Dzamar**,⁷⁴ **Dechen**,⁷⁵ **Delha**,⁷⁶ and **Kalsang Drolma**.⁷⁷ [For more information about the White Paper protests, see Chapter 2—Civil Society and Chapter 6—Governance. For more information about ethnic minorities in China, see Chapter 7—Ethnic Minority Rights and Chapter 17—Tibet.]

Internet

REGULATORY DEVELOPMENTS

The Chinese Communist Party’s cyber regulatory authority, the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC), implemented additional regulations this year that restrict freedom of expression in the cyber sphere. Selected examples follow:

- **Online comment requirements:** In November 2022, the CAC revised the Internet Comment Service Management Provisions (“Provisions”), requiring internet platforms that offer commenting functions to monitor and control commenters and the content of comments.⁷⁸ For example, the revised Provisions require social media account operators to report “illegal and unhealthy” content and punish the commenters through account restrictions,⁷⁹ as well as evaluate the “credibility” of

Freedom of Expression

users and prorate functionality accordingly.⁸⁰ The revised Provisions also require operators of social media accounts to “carry forward the core values of socialism.”⁸¹

- **“Self Media” controls:** The CAC launched a two-month campaign in March 2023 targeting “self media,” or news independently created and posted on social media or the internet by independent users who are not registered as journalists.⁸² To control the spread of information in this emerging sphere, the directive calls for all online platforms to crack down on “self media rumors,” including information from the specific sectors of “public policy, the macroeconomic situation, major disasters, hotly debated incidents, etc.”⁸³

CENSORSHIP

Adhering to the above regulations and many others, this past year authorities and social media platforms censored online discussion of selected topics in which sources criticized or contradicted official policy or positions and continued to prosecute some internet users who posted content deemed sensitive. Selected examples follow:

- **Guo Feixiong:** In May 2023, the Guangzhou Intermediate People’s Court in Guangzhou municipality, Guangdong province, sentenced human rights activist **Yang Maodong** (pseudonym Guo Feixiong)⁸⁴ to eight years in prison for “inciting subversion,” after detaining him since December 2021.⁸⁵ Prosecutors cited essays Guo had written over many years and a pro-democracy website he helped establish.⁸⁶

- **Ruan Xiaohuan:** In early 2023, the Shanghai No. 2 Intermediate People’s Court sentenced blogger Ruan Xiaohuan⁸⁷ to seven years in prison on charges of “inciting subversion of state power” for his administration of an anonymous blog that published technical advice on how to circumvent China’s “Great Firewall.”⁸⁸ The blog in question, “program-think,” had in its twelve years amassed a large following within China and hundreds of posts, discussing topics such as the 1989 Tiananmen protests, information security, and the criticism of the Chinese Communist Party.⁸⁹ [For more information about Ruan, see Chapter 16—Technology-Enhanced Authoritarianism]

- **White Paper protests:** Following the beginning of the White Paper protests, local authorities reportedly issued directives calling for censorship of protest content and suppression of censorship circumvention tools, such as virtual private networks.⁹⁰ Even though officials continued to censor online posts about the White Paper protests, citizens attempted to remember the protests, as seen in a WeChat post showing a photo at the steps of Communication University of China, Nanjing, in Nanjing municipality, Jiangsu province, where the first person held aloft a piece of blank paper.⁹¹ The WeChat account was linked to a student photography association affiliated with Beijing Youth Daily, a Party-run media outlet administered by the Communist Youth League.⁹² The photo reportedly was quickly censored.⁹³

Freedom of Expression

- **Mortgage boycotts:** Authorities attempted to censor online information about mortgage boycotts involving tens of thousands of people and related protests.⁹⁴ Beginning in July 2022, international media reported a significant increase in protests, as well as threats of payment boycotts, among mortgage borrowers in China who were paying in advance for unfinished properties that developers had stopped building due to financial constraints.⁹⁵ Subsequently, internet and social media content and blocked keyword searches related to the issue were deleted,⁹⁶ and some online platforms in China reportedly banned shared files that contained information about the issue.⁹⁷
- **COVID-19 remembrance:** After declaring victory over COVID-19 in February 2023, authorities in China have worked to shape the online narrative surrounding the pandemic and its impacts.⁹⁸ Censors shut down discussions on social media about the psychological effects of China's "zero-COVID" policy and shut down social media commemorations of the first anniversary of Shanghai's lockdown.⁹⁹
- **Hospital fire:** After a fire in a Beijing municipality hospital killed 29 people in April 2023, Chinese state media did not report on the event for eight hours, while many citizens' social media posts discussing the fire in real time quickly disappeared.¹⁰⁰ Some Weibo users compared the event to the fire in Urumqi municipality, Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, which sparked the White Paper protests only a few months earlier, and many posted on social media to condemn the apparent censorship of the fire.¹⁰¹

Suppression of Independent Expression before the 20th Party Congress

In anticipation of the 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, authorities launched a campaign of physical and digital efforts—"stability maintenance and security work"¹⁰² and internet "purification," respectively—to suppress independent expression. Amid speculation that Party General Secretary Xi Jinping would secure a precedent-breaking third presidential term at the 20th Party Congress,¹⁰³ which he did,¹⁰⁴ some Chinese and international experts said that authorities sought to suppress expression that they viewed as "extreme," "destabilizing," or distracting from the positive image they desired for the 20th Party Congress.¹⁰⁵ Official reports from sectors including the internet, television, public security, and local government called for a "safe and stable political and social environment," "correct political views," and "public opinion guidance" in the context of the 20th Party Congress.¹⁰⁶

Freedom of Expression

Suppression of Independent Expression before the 20th Party Congress—Continued

Authorities characterized their efforts as follows:

Physical: Officials implemented a “stability maintenance and security work” campaign, which included a “hundred-day” summer public security operation that reportedly resulted in the detention of over 1,430,000 suspects by late September 2022.¹⁰⁷ An official characterized the operation as focused on criminal cases, disorder, the protection of vulnerable groups in society, safety hazards, drunk driving, and traffic accidents,¹⁰⁸ while other official reports linked the operation to the prevention of “group petitioning” (petitioners are those who use the petitioning system, or *xinfang*, to report grievances to authorities);¹⁰⁹ control of “key persons” (*zhongdian ren*, persons of “key” interest to security authorities);¹¹⁰ ensuring loyalty to the Party;¹¹¹ and establishing the political nature of “stability” for the 20th Party Congress.¹¹²

Digital: The Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) said that its 2022 and 2023 Lunar New Year internet “purification” campaigns contained a focus on serving the interests of the 20th Party Congress,¹¹³ and in reviewing the 2022 campaign, a senior CAC official reported that as of mid-August 2022 authorities had “cleaned up” over 2,350,000 short videos and “dealt with” over 220,000 livestreaming and short video accounts.¹¹⁴

Selected cases of suppression follow:

Sitong Bridge protest: Three days before the start of the 20th Party Congress, authorities in Beijing municipality detained a protester—whom observers widely reported was **Peng Lifa**¹¹⁵—after he hung banners from Beijing’s Sitong Bridge that called for the removal of Xi Jinping, criticized authorities’ response to COVID-19, and called for elections, among other things.¹¹⁶ Subsequently, individuals across China—in 30 cities, according to one source¹¹⁷—engaged in other forms of protest that echoed themes from Peng’s protest.¹¹⁸ Beijing authorities detained at least one person in connection with hanging up posters related to Peng’s protest: **Guo Yi**.¹¹⁹ In some other locations, authorities detained or held for questioning people who published or shared online content related to the incident, such as **Gu Guoping**,¹²⁰ **Xu Kun**,¹²¹ and **Wu Jingsheng**.¹²² In addition, authorities reportedly ordered Beijing print shops to review the content of orders,¹²³ and authorities censored related content online, including content that could be interpreted as carrying indirect connotations, such as a song titled “Sitong Bridge” that predated the incident.¹²⁴ A China Digital Times analyst characterized the post-protest censorship as “the strictest crackdown I have seen in years, in terms of the sheer breadth of things they are taking down.”¹²⁵

Suppression of Independent Expression before the 20th Party Congress—Continued

Critics and petitioners: Some China-based rights advocates characterized restrictions on critics and petitioners before and during the 20th Party Congress as particularly strict.¹²⁶ From September 12 through October 22, 2022, Civil Rights & Livelihood Watch reported more than 60 cases in various locations in which authorities or unidentified individuals subjected rights advocates, lawyers, petitioners, and others to “stability maintenance” measures following the 20th Party Congress, including detention, home confinement, extralegal detention, and harassment.¹²⁷ As in past cases, authorities reportedly took some high-profile critics on forced “vacations,” including **Gao Yu**,¹²⁸ **Shen Liangqing**,¹²⁹ **Hu Jia**,¹³⁰ and **Li Meiqing**.¹³¹ In one case, authorities in Suzhou municipality, Anhui province, reportedly sentenced petitioner **Li Bencai**¹³² to 2 years and 10 months in prison for “picking quarrels and provoking trouble”¹³³ after he told Suzhou authorities that he would travel to Beijing to petition if they did not provide redress for his grievance.¹³⁴ Another petitioner, Wu Jixin, characterized Li’s sentence as a warning to petitioners ahead of the 20th Party Congress.¹³⁵

Internet content about senior Party leaders: A Wall Street Journal (WSJ) analysis released two days before the start of the 20th Party Congress found that it was “essentially impossible to search [online] for viewpoints about [Xi Jinping] or other senior politicians that don’t offer unstinting praise.”¹³⁶ The WSJ found that searches related to Xi or other senior Party officials returned results predominantly from state-affiliated sources, notifications that results could not be displayed, or zero results.¹³⁷ In July 2022, China Digital Times reported that social media platforms Weibo and Bilibili announced that they would crack down on “typos” and “homophones,”¹³⁸ which the author noted internet users in China have “long employed” to avoid censorship online, including censorship of references to senior officials.¹³⁹

Social media: Some social media users in China reportedly said that content controls on social media platforms such as Weixin, Douyin, and Weibo—including the blocking of chat groups and the dissemination of warning messages from public security authorities about spreading or believing “rumors” online—increased in the lead-up to the 20th Party Congress, curtailing freedom of expression.¹⁴⁰ In August 2022, Chinese and international media reported that authorities even froze social media accounts belonging to high-profile pro-Party internet users Sima Nan and Kong Qingdong for nationalistic commentary deemed too extreme and, thus distracting from the 20th Party Congress.¹⁴¹

Enhanced blocking of censorship circumvention tools: Less than two weeks before the start of the 20th Party Congress,¹⁴² Great Firewall Report, a censorship monitoring platform, said that “more than 100 users [in China] reported that at least one of their transport layer security (TLS) based censorship circumvention servers had been blocked,”¹⁴³ which TechCrunch referred to as a “fresh round of crack-downs in the run-up to the [20th Party Congress].”¹⁴⁴ TLS is an internet security protocol¹⁴⁵ that Great Firewall Report estimated “more than half of China’s netizens who circumvent online censorship” use.¹⁴⁶

Freedom of Expression

Art, Entertainment, and Literature

This past year, Chinese authorities continued to censor, suppress, and detain people for various forms of artistic and entertainment content that did not conform to the Chinese Communist Party line. The following are illustrative examples of multimedia censorship:

- New book publishing in China declined significantly this year, continuing a trend throughout Xi Jinping's leadership.¹⁴⁷ According to a report released in March 2023, "there were 25,000 fewer book titles released in China in 2022 than in 2021," including a drop of 5,000 new original Chinese titles, and a drop of 20,000 in imported titles in translation.¹⁴⁸ Several Chinese book editors indicated that they believe this decline is due to tightening controls on content deemed appropriate by the Party.¹⁴⁹
- As for book publishers, state security officials continued detaining publishers and editors responsible for material considered sensitive by the Chinese government. Chinese authorities detained Taiwan-based publisher **Li Yanhe**, who has published books critical of the Party's history and politics, in March 2023, confirming a month later that Li was "under investigation by national security organs on suspicion of engaging in activities endangering national security."¹⁵⁰ **Dong Yuyu**, columnist and deputy editor of the editorial section at the Party-run newspaper *Guangming Daily*, was placed under "residential surveillance at a designated location" for six months before being formally arrested on suspicion of "espionage."¹⁵¹
- Chinese authorities fined several stand-up comedians this year as punishment for jokes made about the Party or domestic policies. In November 2022, authorities fined Li Bo 50,000 yuan for joking about the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown.¹⁵² Later, the Beijing Municipal Bureau of Culture and Tourism fined the Shanghai municipality-based Xiaoguo Culture Media comedy studio around 13 million yuan (US\$1.9 million) for a joke made by its popular comedian, Li Haoshi, during two live performances in Beijing municipality in March 2023.¹⁵³ In his joke, Li Haoshi reportedly compared the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) well-known slogan of "maintain exemplary conduct, fight to win" to two stray dogs chasing a squirrel.¹⁵⁴ The joke garnered responses from multiple groups, as Beijing police opened an investigation into Li's performance, the China Association of Performing Arts issued a notice calling for its members to boycott Li, and the PLA's Western Theater Command posted on WeChat criticizing Li's words as "shameless remarks."¹⁵⁵
- Authorities continued to censor poetry in connection with sensitive events.¹⁵⁶ In September 2022, authorities reportedly banned poet Hu Minzhi from social media platforms Weibo and Douyin after she published a poem that Radio Free Asia described as "apparently satirizing people's lack of agency around the [P]arty [C]ongress."¹⁵⁷ In August 2022, following the death of Jiang Zongcao—wife of former Party official and high-profile

Freedom of Expression

critic Bao Tong (who subsequently died in November 2022)¹⁵⁸—authorities reportedly required review and approval of poems submitted by mourners.¹⁵⁹ One former participant in the 1989 Tiananmen protests said, “You couldn’t even submit an elegiac couplet, either physically or online, particularly if it was signed by someone like me, or [veteran journalist Gao Yu].”¹⁶⁰

Educational and Research Institutions

This past year, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) continued to control freedom of expression within educational and research institutions. Selected examples follow:

- In June 2023, a draft law to strengthen “patriotic education” came before the National People’s Congress Standing Committee, aimed at “integrat[ing] love for the country, love for the Party, and the love of socialism.”¹⁶¹ The draft bill includes nine “main content” points of patriotic education, including explicitly political areas such as “the theories of Xi Jinping” and Marxism, as well as “excellent traditional culture” aspects.¹⁶² Although the draft includes guidance for educational institutions,¹⁶³ it also contains requirements for online content providers, cultural institutions, and civil society groups, while charging the PLA to enforce the law’s provisions.¹⁶⁴ Foreign analysts have voiced concerns with the tight ideological nature of the draft law, arguing that, if passed, it would allow PRC authorities to criminalize “anything they don’t like, [including] ideas or comments,” as unpatriotic.¹⁶⁵
- In February 2023, the State Council General Office and Chinese Communist Party Central Committee General Office issued an opinion that called for increasing ideological control over legal education.¹⁶⁶ The opinion calls for adherence to ideological concepts developed by the Party and associated with Xi Jinping, and it calls for “insisting on the correct political orientation” in legal education.¹⁶⁷

Notes to Chapter 1—Freedom of Expression

¹Freedom House, “China,” in *Freedom in the World 2023*, March 2023.

²Reporters Without Borders, “China,” *World Press Freedom Index 2023*, accessed May 9, 2023.

³International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, adopted by U.N. General Assembly resolution 2200A (XXI) on December 16, 1966, entry into force March 23, 1976, art. 19.

⁴United Nations Treaty Collection, Chapter IV, Human Rights, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, accessed June 8, 2023.

⁵Reporters Without Borders, “The Great Leap Backward of Journalism in China,” December 7, 2021; Congressional-Executive Commission on China, *2022 Annual Report* (Washington: November 16, 2022), 348.

⁶Xi Jinping, “Gaoju Zhongguo tese shehui zhuyi weida qizhi, wei quanmian jianshe shehui zhuyi xiandaihua guojia er tuan jie fendou—Zai Zhongguo Gongchandang Di Ersi ci Quanguo Daibiao Dahui shang de baogao” [Raise high the great banner of socialism with Chinese characteristics, wage a united struggle to comprehensively establish a modern socialist country—Report at the 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party], October 16, 2022, *People’s Daily*, sec. 8(1).

⁷“Zuo Dang he renmin xinlai de xinwen gongzuozhe—Jizhe Jie daolai zhi ji chongwen Xi Jinping Zong Shuji de zhunzhun zhutuo” [Be media workers the Party and people can rely on—As National Journalists’ Day arrives, review the task earnestly entrusted by General Secretary Xi Jinping], *Xinhua*, reprinted in *People’s Daily*, November 7, 2022. See also “Zhongguo Jizhe Jie, Xi Jinping jiyu meitiren zhongcheng, jiangding, chuanbo Dang zheng” [On China National Journalists’ Day, Xi Jinping tells media professionals to faithfully and firmly disseminate Party policy], *Radio Free Asia*, November 8, 2022.

⁸Reporters Without Borders, “The Great Leap Backward of Journalism in China,” December 7, 2021; Congressional-Executive Commission on China, *2022 Annual Report* (Washington: November 16, 2022), 348.

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Freedom of Expression

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Freedom of Expression

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Freedom of Expression

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Freedom of Expression

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