

Countering China's Malign Influence Operations in the United States

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Chairman Warner, Vice Chairman Rubio, and distinguished members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. This testimony focuses on how the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and related actors are attempting to influence media, news, and information flows in the United States as well as the state of our country's local response and resilience, addressing topics including:

- The CCP's objectives in targeting the US media environment
- The state of Beijing's current media influence efforts, including key tactics and emerging trends
- Influence efforts specifically targeting the Chinese diaspora and the role of the WeChat social media application
- Important sources of resilience in the United States
- Ongoing vulnerabilities and the impact of Beijing's media influence efforts
- Recommendations to Congress and executive branch agencies

This testimony draws on a recent country case study published by Freedom House in May 2023, the United States chapter from our global report *Beijing's Global Media Influence: Authoritarian Expansion and Power of Democratic Resilience*.¹ That 50-page case study, which I co-authored with Yuichiro Kakutani, provides a comprehensive analysis, from which I will highlight key points here.² I ask that this testimony be submitted into the record.

I. Introduction

The starting point for any discussion of Beijing's global influence **begins within China**, where the CCP exerts tight political and social control. Over the past decade, repression has intensified against a widening set of targets from an already high level.³ This change has also been reflected in the regime's more aggressive activities abroad, including a global campaign of transnational repression.⁴ Today, the world is facing the unprecedented situation of the second largest economy being ruled by one of the world's most authoritarian regimes.

It is in this context that Freedom House embarked on the Beijing's Global Media Influence (BGMI) project, the most comprehensive assessment to date examining actions taken by the

Chinese government and its affiliates to influence news and information flows abroad, as well as the democratic response in 30 countries around the world. I will be drawing on that report, focused on the period of 2019 to 2021, as well as more recent developments in my testimony.

Research methodology

The ways in which the CCP and its proxies influence media and information flows in other countries are complex and multi-faceted. They extend far beyond simple propaganda. Freedom House identified five categories of tactics that were used to assess each country: **propaganda, disinformation, censorship and intimidation**, control over **content-distribution infrastructure**, and **trainings** for media workers and officials who attempt to export the CCP's model of information control.

The graphic in *Figure 1 in the Appendix* outlines some of the activities and tactics that fall under each category. Freedom House's research found that Beijing's media influence efforts extend far beyond what is typical of overt public diplomacy. They involve elements that are covert, coercive, or corrupting, and they are becoming more sophisticated. While activities related to propaganda, disinformation, and censorship are already affecting the media space in many countries, tactics like trainings for officials and investments in communications infrastructure are building up potential avenues for control and influence in the future.

The BGMI project was global in scope, focused on 30 countries across six regions.⁵ Each country assessment includes both a scoring component, as well as an in-depth country narrative report that addresses qualitative and analytical dimensions.

In consultation with external experts, Freedom House created a new index methodology that includes a numerical score and status for each of the countries, appraising the scale and scope of CCP media influence efforts and a separate score assessing the strength of the local response and underlying media resilience. Based on the intersection between these dimensions, countries were classified as either Resilient or Vulnerable.⁶

II. United States' scores and status in the BGMI index

- The United States was rated as facing a **Very High** degree of **Beijing's media influence efforts**, notable for the wide range of tactics across the different methodology questions and categories being deployed by various CCP-linked actors. The United States received a score of **53 out of 85** (0 being the lowest, 85 being the highest), only second after Taiwan among the BGMI countries studied.
- Importantly, the United States also displayed a **Very High** degree of **local response and resilience**, receiving a score of 72 out of a possible 85 points for that category and again, placing second after Taiwan.
- Thanks to this strong performance, the **United States was found to be Resilient** overall, despite Beijing's wide-ranging avenues of attempted influence and some evident vulnerabilities.

III. What are the CCP’s objectives in trying to influence media and information flows in the United States and globally?

The CCP’s global media influence campaigns target both overseas Chinese and non-Chinese audiences. They have traditionally been designed to accomplish three primary aims, which are evident from official statements, analysis of state media content, and particular incidents involving CCP critics:

- 1) to promote a positive—or at least benign—view of China and of the CCP’s authoritarian regime;
- 2) to encourage foreign investment in China and openness to Chinese investment and strategic engagement abroad;
- 3) and to marginalize, demonize, or entirely suppress anti-CCP voices, incisive political commentary, and exposés that present the Chinese government, its leaders, or prominent Chinese companies in a negative light.

For overseas Chinese audiences, programming and news coverage have the additional goal of promoting nationalistic sentiment and Taiwan’s reunification with China .

Some of these goals can be identified in Xi Jinping’s own instructions regarding foreign propaganda, which have emphasized trying to “tell a good Chinese story.”⁷ Such messaging omits the negative dimensions of China’s authoritarian political system and rapid economic development, ranging from environmental pollution to lack of rule of law and egregious human rights violations against ethnic and religious minorities. It also avoids the dark side of China’s foreign engagement, which includes corrupt deal-making, elite capture, transnational repression, and the opaque accumulation of public debt.

Since 2019, analysis of Chinese state-backed narratives and the reality of how certain tactics are implemented, as outlined below, point to additional objectives, which include:

- Laying the blame on the US government for deteriorating bilateral ties, rather than the regime’s actions of economic espionage, increasing repression, or disregard for international law, including in regions like Xinjiang and Hong Kong;
- Deflecting blame for the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in Wuhan and actively spreading proven falsehoods that it originated elsewhere, including in the United States;
- And, a desire to amplify partisan divisions in the United States on contentious political and social issues and to sow distrust in the US government, including by masquerading as Americans across the political spectrum.

IV. What is Beijing’s media influence toolbox targeting the United States and how is it evolving?

Beijing maintains an arsenal of tactics and channels to influence the US information landscape. These methods have evolved since 2019, with Chinese state or pro-CCP actors displaying **increased use of covert and coercive tactics**. Disinformation campaigns, the use of paid social

media influencers, cyberattacks on news outlets, and cyberbullying of journalists have occurred with greater frequency as Chinese state media outlets struggle to gain a mainstream audience in the United States, and US public opinion toward Beijing has become more negative.

Below is a more **in-depth examination of five notable ways in which Beijing’s media influence efforts are present in the United States** and how they are evolving.

It is worth noting that a diverse range of China-linked entities and individuals are engaging in these activities on behalf of the CCP or in ways that serve its purposes. These include the various Chinese state media outlets, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Public Security, the Ministry of State Security, the People’s Liberation Army, and the Hong Kong government. Private companies and proxy entities with ties to the CCP or state media are also playing a role in propaganda and content manipulation, while cyberbullying may come from unaffiliated netizens responding independently to CCP propaganda or state media calls to action. These actors do not necessarily operate under a single unified bureaucratic apparatus, but all are responding to guidance from top officials or to the CCP’s incentive structure and some information operations are clearly coordinated campaigns.

That being said, even as Chinese state-media, diplomats, and other CCP-linked actors use various approaches to influence—and in some cases manipulate—public opinion in the United States, often the actions that reach the widest English-speaking audiences and have the greatest potential impact are those that involve collaboration with a US-based entity, be it a media outlet, public relations (PR) firm, local politician, or social media influencer, at times in exchange for generous payments from CCP-linked entities.

1. Beijing-backed content in mainstream media⁸

Although Chinese state media outlets have channels for reaching US audiences directly—be it *China Daily* newsstands or China Global Television Network (CGTN) on cable packages—the most significant avenue through which Chinese state-produced content reaches large American audiences is via writings and appearances by Chinese diplomats, content-sharing agreements, and other partnerships with local mainstream media, a tactic that Chinese officials have referred to in the past as “borrowing the boat to reach the sea.” Unfortunately, the clarity and frequency of labeling attached to this Chinese state content for US news consumers—especially on broadcast versus print media—is inconsistent and in some cases, absent entirely.

On one end of the spectrum, where the speaker’s ties to the Chinese government are clear, but the audience reached is nevertheless massive, are PRC diplomats’ interviews or op-eds in major news outlets. Since 2019, a Chinese ambassador has appeared in at least 10 high-profile interviews on television or radio with prominent hosts from channels like CNN,⁹ NPR, or NBC’s *Face the Nation*,¹⁰ collectively garnering millions of viewers and listeners.¹¹ The interviewers often challenged the ambassador to address sensitive topics like abuses in Xinjiang, the initial COVID-19 cover-up in Wuhan, or the CCP’s authoritarian rule, but PRC representatives dodged such questions and as a result, were effectively granted access to a large, national audience to voice key Beijing talking points. Former ambassador to the US Cui Tiankai (serving from 2013 to June 2021) was also an especially prolific author of op-eds in diverse outlets.¹² This format allows for less immediate opportunity to challenge false or distorted claims.

Chinese state media content also reaches news consumers in the United States through **offline and online paid inserts** from *China Daily* or the Xinhua news agency in national and regional news outlets, such as Time magazine, the *Los Angeles Times*, *USA Today*, CNN, and *Foreign Policy*. Filings with the Department of Justice indicate that from January 2019 to October 2021, *China Daily* paid print and online publications at least \$7 million to carry such material. During the coverage period, several major news outlets—notably the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*—discontinued previous agreements on paid inserts, but other publications continue to run them periodically. Separately, at least two radio stations in the Washington, DC, and New York City areas broadcast China Radio International (CRI) programming. During audio broadcasts, the radio hosts do not typically identify themselves as having ties to CRI, instead introducing themselves as a local radio station.

In the **television sector**, no US channels regularly broadcast programming coproduced with Chinese entities, but several partnerships exist that enable CCTV footage to potentially reach US news consumers without labeling and at least one coproduced documentary aired on PBS during the coverage period.¹³ CGTN’s FARA disclosures note that the outlet’s US subsidiary has “commercial arrangements with a number of news services, including NBC News, CNN, Reuters, the AP [Associated Press], and Agence France-Presse.”¹⁴ Although no further details are provided, the image licensing collection of AP and Reuters list CCTV+ as one of nine “featured partners”¹⁵ and one of 81 “news partners,”¹⁶ respectively. The partnerships allow subscribers to the AP and Reuters collection to access images and videos produced by CCTV+ as well. AP’s notes that “stories are clean (logo free).” Neither of the database’s descriptions of CCTV offered any indication of the station being a state-run, CCP-controlled broadcaster.¹⁷ Despite the potential for large-scale reach, however, a Freedom House search for the coverage period found only five videos, all related to the CCP’s July 2021 centennial celebration.

PRC-based tech companies are also present in the US information landscape, oftentimes disseminating messages that align with their and the Chinese government’s interests with greater efficacy than official state outlets. Huawei has actively reached out to journalists to try and shape the US narrative about the company, retaining a public relations firm to schedule interviews, set up virtual town halls, organize podcast interviews, and facilitate television appearances for Huawei executives. On one occasion, Huawei ghostwrote a 2019 article in *Fast Company* titled “Don’t Ban Huawei,” attributed to an MIT scholar, which did not disclose the link to the company.¹⁸ Alibaba, another Chinese tech giant, whose founder Jack Ma is a CCP member, has also provided funds for US media content, including a 2019 advertorial in *Politico* and nearly two dozen of the *Hill’s Morning Report* newsletter. There is no indication, however, that the company shaped its content and it was clearly labeled with the sponsor’s name.¹⁹

This phenomenon is not unique to the United States. Freedom House counted such partnerships with at least 130 media outlets across the 30 countries studied, including new or upgraded agreements reached with local media since 2019 in 16 countries.²⁰

2. Covert tactics and disinformation campaigns on social media²¹

Campaigns to **recruit social media influencers** to share Beijing-backed content and to manipulate social media posts using fake accounts are also emerging areas of activity. China-linked actors

have attempted to pay otherwise unaffiliated vloggers to produce or broadcast pro-Beijing content, obscuring the Chinese party-state connection for viewers.²²

Several such examples came to light in 2021. In June, American YouTuber Matthew Galat traveled across Xinjiang and recorded vlogs about his experiences in the region. Galat published nine such videos, many of which pushed pro-Beijing viewpoints.²³ In December 2020, Galat also published a video suggesting that “Maybe it was America first to infect the world with coronavirus,” which alone garnered nearly 120,000 views.²⁴ In comments to the *New York Times*, Galat acknowledged that he had received payments from Chinese state media for some of his travels in China and that the trip to Xinjiang had been planned by CGTN.²⁵

In September 2021, a purportedly Hong Kong-based company offered two American YouTubers who had been previously based in China to be paid \$2,000.²⁶ In exchange, they would publish a client-prepared video clip claiming that the coronavirus originated in the US deer population. The pair refused to publish the disinformation and exposed the attempt, including the fact that the initial outreach was sent to at least 100 English-speaking YouTubers. In another example, in November 2021, the Chinese Consulate in New York signed a \$300,000 contract with Vippi Media Inc. to contract at least eight influencers active on Twitch, Instagram, or Tiktok to promote the Beijing Olympics and Paralympics games, news from the consulate, and “good things in US-China relations.”²⁷

Multiple disinformation campaigns targeting US audiences were documented during the coverage period, a relatively new tactic as no such campaigns were exposed prior to 2019. The level of activity over the past three years from suspected PRC-linked campaigns points to experimentation with new tactics and attempts to refine media influence strategies, not only on topics related to human rights violations in China but also domestic politics in the United States.

Tens of thousands of fake accounts on Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube have been detected and shuttered for inauthentic behavior, including manipulation of the discourse about events within China (such as prodemocracy protests in Hong Kong and rights abuses in Xinjiang), US relations with Taiwan, the reputation of US-based critics of the Chinese Communist Party, and domestic issues like COVID-19 or US political divisions. This year, similar networks have been reported on a much wider range of platforms, including Reddit, Medium, and Tiktok, among others.²⁸

Genuine user engagement with the accounts and their impact on public debate appears limited in most cases, but isolated examples reached mainstream audiences. Investigations published over the past year point to increasing sophistication on the part of China-linked networks—including the use of generative artificial intelligence (AI) to create images²⁹ or fake news anchors,³⁰ recruiting unwitting Americans to produce or share content, and deploying multiple layers of content “laundering” to obscure the CCP-linked origins of content. There is evidence suggesting that these campaigns—including a recent one related to wildfires in Hawaii—are increasing the reach, engagement, and effectiveness of the manipulation efforts, at least in some cases.³¹

In one notable campaign revealed by the cybersecurity firm Mandiant in July 2023, a Chinese public relations firm known to have ties to the government piggybacked on recruitment websites for freelancers and newswire services in the United States.³² This enabled them to enlist unwitting

Americans to create content that aligned with CCP narratives or criticized U.S. policies.³³ The firm published the resulting material on legitimate news website domains via newswire services. In one case from mid-2022, the public relations firm successfully recruited a musician and actor to organize small real-world protests in Washington, D.C., images of which were then circulated as part of an influence campaign to discredit that year's International Religious Freedom Summit and U.S. lawmakers' efforts to ban the importation of products made by Uyghur forced labor.

Again, this phenomenon is not limited to the United States. In nine countries, Freedom House found at least one targeted disinformation campaign that was documented to have used fake social media accounts to spread falsehoods or sow confusion, not only regarding China-related news. Like in the United States, recent campaigns in Taiwan, Australia, and the Philippines reflect not only attempts to manipulate news and information about in China, but also to meddle in the domestic politics of the target country.

3. Rise in coercive tactics³⁴

Chinese officials, other CCP-linked entities, and local actors sympathetic to Beijing engage in various forms of intimidation and censorship to suppress reporting or viewpoints critical of the Chinese government or corporations. In the United States, Chinese state-linked actors have deployed a relatively wide range of such tactics in an attempt to restrict coverage opportunities for US correspondents in China, inhibit the operations of news outlets, and induce self-censorship.

These include obstructing the movement of **foreign correspondents in China**, restricting their visas and expelling them from the country, blocking websites and apps in China, retaliating against the families of US-based journalists in China, and engaging in cyberattacks against major news outlets. **Pro-CCP trolls have verbally attacked** or harassed ethnic Chinese journalists working for US media, especially women, a phenomenon that has increased in intensity and frequency since 2019.³⁵ These activities have inhibited certain reporting and had an economic impact on US news outlets, though they continue to carry critical coverage.

The United States is not alone, in **24 out of the 30 countries assessed, at least one such incident of intimidation or censorship occurred.** In at least 15 countries, Chinese diplomats or other government representatives took actions to intimidate, harass, or pressure journalists or commentators in response to their coverage. A newer phenomenon evident during the coverage period was how the Hong Kong authorities and companies with close CCP ties like Huawei also joined the fray, issuing legal threats related to Hong Kong's National Security Law in Israel and the United Kingdom or filing defamation suits against a critical scholar and local television station in France. Similar actions could potentially be deployed against US media and technology companies in the future.

4. Co-opting elites or other local influential actors to spread Beijing's messages or suppress unwanted coverage

One of the most potent and effective avenues of influence is when the CCP or its proxies are able to recruit influential local actors into promoting their preferred narratives—knowingly or

unknowingly—or guiding coverage to avoid topics disfavored by Beijing. In the United States, such targeting of elites has taken several forms and involved a variety of different proxies.

One notable and especially active proxy is the **China-US Exchange Foundation (CUSEF)**. CUSEF is widely viewed as belonging to the CCP’s United Front work targeting the United States, having been founded and chaired by Tung Chee-Hwa, former Hong Kong chief executive and vice-chair of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), and which includes various CPPCC members on its board.³⁶ The foundation is registered under FARA as a foreign principle in connection to various public relations, lobbying, and other firms it has hired. According to one expert’s count, **CUSEF has taken at least 127 US journalists from 40 outlets to China** since 2009.³⁷ US journalists from Bloomberg, NPR, Quartz and possibly other outlets traveled to China in 2019 under its sponsorship, with several subsequently publishing articles that arguably align with CCP narratives on Huawei, US trade policies, or Chinese history.³⁸ Notably, none of the journalists known to have attended the 2019 trip were veteran China reporters.

Documentation in FARA filings points to other outreach CUSEF and its proxies conducted in the media space during the coverage period. For example, a contract with Wilson Global Communications USA for 2019-2020 cites public relations services worth over \$300,000 to assist CUSEF in “building, enhancing, and retaining positive relationships with **key opinion leaders in African American communities**, students from underserved communities, and African American media outlets.”³⁹ The contract explicitly cites the goal being to enable targeted individuals to “formulate personalized perspectives that can be articulated as balanced opinions when presented with Sino-US relationship issues.”⁴⁰ The filings include details of various delegations of Black university students and presidents of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) sponsored by CUSEF to visit China. The contract was a renewal of a similar agreement covering 2017–18 that focused on “African American leaders.”⁴¹

Pro-Beijing narratives have also entered the US media landscape through **friendly local commentators, politicians, and former officials, especially at the subnational level**. Beijing has invested significant efforts in nurturing ties to governors, state legislators, and local officials—especially as bilateral ties at the federal level have worsened.⁴² The US Heartland-China Association, for example, has partnered with CUSEF to bring local and state officials to China and cultivate friendly ties with Chinese counterparts, including a 2019 trip for mayors from Indiana, Ohio, and South Dakota.⁴³ These efforts have in some cases translated into local and state officials deliberately or unknowingly promoting CCP narratives, such as by portraying the benefits of closer trade and other ties as unconditionally positive and “win-win,” while discounting legitimate national security risks.⁴⁴ One 2019 study by a Chinese thinktank evaluated US governors as being “Friendly,” “Hardline” or “Ambiguous.” On key indicator informing the assessment was public statements officials had made regarding China and their state’s ties to the country or Chinese government.⁴⁵ Though not an objective assessment, the thinktank concluded that 17 governors were “Friendly” and 6 “Hardliners” with remaining ones having a mixed or “unclear” record.⁴⁶

In other cases, individual commentators, former officials, or business executives with ties to pro-Beijing entities like CUSEF have made **statements or published op-eds in US outlets echoing CCP narratives**. One example is the George H.W. Bush Foundation for US-China Relations in Texas, founded by Neil Bush. He made comments in 2019 that democracy “would not work for

China,” downplayed the threat posed to US national security by Beijing, and claimed that prodemocracy protesters in Hong Kong were motivated by “outside influence.”⁴⁷ Bush and other individuals affiliated with the foundation have regularly been interviewed or cited by Chinese state media like CGTN⁴⁸ and *China Daily*,⁴⁹ and have published articles in national media outlets like *Foreign Affairs* and in local newspapers like Missouri’s *Springfield News Leader*.⁵⁰ Such articles during the coverage period called for a renewed “engagement consensus” on China, warned of the dangers of a “new Cold War,” and called for revived trade cooperation. In June 2021, an Axios investigation revealed that the foundation had received a \$5 million grant from CUSEF—\$1 million a year over five years ending in 2023—which per tax filings would entail a large proportion of the organization’s revenue.⁵¹

In another example, a few organizations and **publications on the far left of the US political spectrum** have downplayed or denied documented human rights violations committed by the Chinese government against Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslim minorities. In some of these cases, financial ties to Chinese party-state entities were evident. A detailed 2022 investigation by *New Lines* magazine—and a more recent article in the *New York Times*⁵²—traced a network of far-left entities and found that over the past five years, many had received funds from individuals or charities with current or prior ties to Huawei, Chinese government agencies or the CCP.⁵³ In other cases, links to Beijing were unclear and repetition of CCP preferred talking points may have been the result of authentic anti-imperialist, Marxist, nationalist, or other ideological alignment—but nevertheless served to amplify and add credibility to CCP narratives for the organization’s readership. One report by Coda found that denial of CCP abuses in Xinjiang on discredited fringe websites like Grayzone had nevertheless trickled out to a wider range of progressive or left websites and outlets.⁵⁴

Echoing of certain CCP narratives was also evident in **right-wing media**, as commentators found certain Chinese official viewpoints aligning with their own perspectives, not necessarily because there was any direct influence being exerted from CCP-linked actors. In several monologues in 2020–21, former Fox News television commentator Tucker Carlson referred approvingly to authoritarian actions of Chinese leaders, including placing restrictions on gaming and discussions of celebrity fandom, to support critiques of the Democratic Party or progressive policies.⁵⁵ Prominent authors and publications on the New Right, part of the conservative movement, have also published pieces admiring the Chinese government’s authoritarian practices, such as population transfers used in poverty alleviation, including in Xinjiang, as necessary for the common good.⁵⁶

Although difficult to document, there have also been isolated instances of **corporate pressure on journalists** apparently inducing self-censorship or otherwise influencing coverage. Many US media or technology corporations have diverse business and content portfolios, including entertainment and financial reporting reaching audiences in China. In some cases, this has created pressures from high-level executives on journalists or commentators to restrict content that may endanger such operations, as occurred in a widely publicized incident at Bloomberg in 2012.⁵⁷ A more recent example reportedly took place at the sports network ESPN, but more may have occurred behind the scenes. In late 2019, news reports described a leaked memorandum from a senior news director at ESPN that explicitly discouraged political discussion about China and Hong Kong, after general manager Daryl Morey of the National Basketball Association’s Houston

Rockets publicly expressed support for prodemocracy protests in the territory.⁵⁸ Some of the station's coverage appeared to comply with the memo instructions.⁵⁹ At the time, the station was facing broadcast bans and other backlash in China over Morey's tweet, with the potential for significant financial losses.⁶⁰

Effective co-optation of elites is not limited to the United States and in some countries, is even more prevalent. In Freedom House's BGMI project, **local officials or media executives** in 17 of the 30 countries studied attempted to suppress critical reporting, either because they received a call from the Chinese embassy or pre-emptively encouraged self-censorship to protect other business interests from potential reprisals.

V. **Beijing's influence over the China diaspora media landscape in the United States**

The Chinese-language media sector in the United States is a space where Beijing's footprint is especially evident, particularly in the television sector and via the WeChat app. Nevertheless, compared to other countries, Chinese-speaking news consumers in the United States seeking independent news about topics of interest to them have multiple options, with some garnering a notable audience.

The regime's influence is exercised in various ways and at different stages of the news production and dissemination process. The CCP's influence on diaspora media in the United States is especially strong in the **television sector**. A review of Chinese-language offerings for major cable providers in the United States (Verizon,⁶¹ Comcast,⁶² and Spectrum⁶³) shows that the main packages for both Mandarin and Cantonese are monopolized by stations either owned or heavily influenced by the Chinese government or CCP. These include Chinese state broadcaster CCTV-4; the partly state-owned, Hong Kong-based Phoenix television; a Taiwan-based media company known for its pro-Beijing editorial line; and a Hong Kong television firm providing Cantonese programming that has been accused of a pro-Beijing bias. Taiwan-based outlets or US stations known to be more critical of the Chinese government, such as New Tang Dynasty Television, are absent from cable packages in most parts of the United States.

The United States is also home to a wide range of **print publications** in Chinese, both national and local, with varying degrees of pro-Beijing alignment.⁶⁴ On one end of the spectrum are publications like *Xinmin Evening Newspaper*, which the US State Department designated as part of the PRC foreign mission in October 2020.⁶⁵ Another publication, *China Press*, based in New York, closely follows the CCP's editorial line and prints large amounts of Chinese state media content.⁶⁶ Many diaspora outlets have also been purchased over the past three decades by tycoons friendly to Beijing, including ones from Hong Kong, Malaysia, or Taiwan. *Singtao*, a subsidiary of the Hong Kong newspaper by the same name, was required in 2021 by the Department of Justice to register under FARA after a change in ownership that brought it closer to the Chinese government,⁶⁷ although in filings the company claimed that its US subsidiary is editorially independent from the Hong Kong parent company.⁶⁸ The *World Journal* is another leading national paper tied to the Taiwan-based *United Daily Newspaper*, which within Taiwan is known to be relatively friendly to China in its coverage but that does report occasionally on topics like human rights violations in the PRC.

Joining these are various local newspapers and in some cases small-scale radio stations, many of which maintain ties to the Chinese government and CCP. The regime also uses global fora—like an October 2019 World Chinese Media Forum gathering of over 420 media representatives held in Hebei—to bring Chinese-language outlets from around the world into the CCP’s orbit.⁶⁹ In a list of participants to the 2019 forum, a total of 64 news outlets from the United States were listed, one of the largest delegations. These included US representatives for Chinese state media but also from local outlets in San Diego, Seattle, Chicago, and Dallas, among others.⁷⁰

The **Hong Kong government**’s crackdown on media in the territory since adoption of the National Security Law in 2020—prompting the closure of prominent outlets liked *Apple Daily* and *Stand News* and reduced editorial independence of the public broadcaster Radio Television Hong Kong—has also diminished the quality and quantity of investigative or other reporting related to Hong Kong that is available to Chinese speakers and others in the United States.

Alongside enticements and support from the regime, implicit or explicit **reprisals** face those who dare to criticize the CCP or challenge its grip on Chinese-language media. Individual journalists, media owners, and editors who depart from the Party line risk dismissal by pro-Beijing media bosses or retaliation from PRC state security agents, including harassment of journalists’ family members in China, or detention and even imprisonment of sources and relatives of journalists.⁷¹ US-based Chinese diaspora outlets or news aggregators critical of the Chinese government also report pressure applied on advertisers and being targeted regularly with distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks or phishing attempts apparently linked to or originating in China.⁷²

The popular **WeChat application**, owned by Chinese tech giant Tencent, **is a crucial vector of control and influence**. The app is heavily used among Chinese-speaking Americans and others wishing to maintain personal, professional, or business contacts with individuals in China. Tencent retains close ties to the CCP and as of early 2023, a government stake purchased in the company.⁷³ Estimates vary as to the number of WeChat users in the United States, but there have reportedly been 22 million downloads of the app in the United States since 2014 and approximately 2 to 3 million monthly active users.⁷⁴ Notably, clear evidence exists of censorship or monitoring of US-based users of the app.

Chinese diaspora news outlets or politicians who wish to broadcast posts to Chinese speakers outside China via the platform’s **“official account” feature** are subject to the same politicized censorship that is applied to accounts inside China, forcing administrators to screen the shared content.⁷⁵ American news outlets and civil society groups critical of the CCP—such as Radio Free Asia, Citizen Power Initiatives for China, or Freedom House for that matter—are excluded from opening such accounts or reaching large audiences on the platform.⁷⁶ A Freedom House survey of US-based Chinese language reporters and commentators found that respondents from a range of outlets (including US-funded broadcasters, individual commentators, and privately owned Chinese media or news aggregators) reported that either they personally or their news outlet had experienced politically motivated censorship, had a WeChat account shuttered, or was unable to open an account.

More broadly, some Chinese Americans—political dissidents and average users—have reported facing censorship on the platform for sharing content that is critical of the party, Xi Jinping, or Chinese government policies. Penalties include having posts deleted, groups shut down, being shadow banned (meaning messages appear to be posted but other users in a group or private conversation are unable to view them), or having accounts being temporarily or permanently shuttered. Such incidents appear to have increased in recent years amid a tightening of information controls within China and a sensitivity to a broader range of topics, including the COVID-19 pandemic.

In January 2020, the prodemocracy group Citizen Power Initiatives for China (CPIFC) filed a lawsuit in California against Tencent on behalf of the organization, its founder, and six plaintiffs.⁷⁷ The complaint documents various forms of censorship and their consequences for plaintiffs' free speech, privacy, mental health, and livelihoods, as well as apparent evidence of surveillance when Chinese security agents interrogated friends or family based on contact made over the app. According to the complaint:

*CPIFC's ongoing investigation has uncovered hundreds of examples of...harms, all flowing from WeChat users in the United States, including in California, making comments perceived as critical of the Party-state... [WeChat users] describe living in fear that they or their loved ones will be punished for their postings critical of the party-state, and who describe having to suppress the human urge to voice their thoughts and feelings to their social networks out of such fear—that is, to engage in extreme self-censorship.*⁷⁸

Such restrictions also apply to US policymakers and election candidates who might wish to use WeChat to reach Chinese-speaking constituents, while retaining a critical stance toward the CCP and not endangering a Chinese national or business who would take responsibility for the account.⁷⁹ Academic research, news reports, and civic activists have also expressed concern over the sensationalist nature of news content on the platform, limited fact-checking of false information, and the vulnerability of large chat groups to the spread of political misinformation and conspiracy theories.⁸⁰

Beijing's influence is not complete, however. **Alternative sources of information** have gained ground among Chinese-language audiences in the United States. These include Chinese-language versions of mainstream international outlets, editorially independent public broadcasters, news aggregators, independent outlets founded by members of the mainland Chinese, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Tibetan, or Uyghur diasporas, and political commentary by YouTube influencers, with some posing real competition to pro-Beijing media.⁸¹ The above array of alternative sources offer viewpoints and information to Chinese speakers such as writings by CCP critics, rights activists, or victims of persecution; live talk shows and debates on Chinese political and social issues; investigative reporting on rights abuses or other topics heavily censored in China; objective coverage of US government statements regarding China; unfiltered simultaneous translations into Chinese of major speeches by US officials or election debates; and cultural programming independent of CCP influence.

VI. Key sources of US resilience and remaining vulnerabilities

As noted above, the US has proved relatively resilient to Beijing’s media influence efforts, compared to many other democracies. **Underlying media resilience and press freedom protections** form a vital cornerstone in democratic resilience to foreign influence efforts from Beijing or other authoritarian actors. Freedom House’s research found that certain types of laws present in many democracies—such as freedom of information laws, media ownership transparency rules, or investment screening mechanisms—were also activated to enhance transparency or scrutiny surrounding influence activities from CCP-linked entities. The United States has some of the strongest constitutional protections for free speech in the world, with courts consistently upholding journalist and internet users’ rights to free speech under the First Amendment. The Freedom of Information Act is widely used by journalists to obtain information from government offices and other public entities.⁸² Strong legal protections against defamation—including anti-SLAPP legislation in at least 31 of 50 states—support investigative reporting, including related to China and Chinese companies.⁸³

The United States also has in place **laws governing foreign-agent registration and investment screening**, which have been applied to Chinese media influence efforts. The level of transparency provided to the public under Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA)—especially regarding expenditures and the money trail tying Chinese party-state entities or Beijing aligned individuals with local news outlets and media outreach—is rare globally, even unique. There are legitimate concerns about the law’s vague and outdated wording and sometimes inconsistent application, and general consensus that FARA should be updated, but stronger enforcement with regard to Chinese state news outlets has enhanced transparency on the financing of content placements in mainstream media and social media, within and outside of the United States.

Political leaders across the political spectrum and government agencies under two administrations have shown increasing awareness of the potential security challenges posed by CCP media influence, holding congressional hearings such as this one and creating new bureaucratic initiatives and government policies to address the problem. For example, since February 2020, the US government has treated Chinese state media operations as extensions of China’s diplomatic missions in the country. Several **interagency mechanisms** exist or have come into fruition in recent years, with mandates that include foreign influence efforts from the PRC. These include the Committee for Foreign Investment in the United States (CFIUS) for investment screenings (including in the social media application sector), formalization of Team Telecom’s role in licensing by the Federal Communications Commission and its renaming in 2020 as the Committee for the Assessment of Foreign Participation in the United States,⁸⁴ and a new Foreign Malign Influence Center (FMIC) under the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) that began functioning in September 2022.⁸⁵

A high level of expertise on China and the CCP itself in academic, national media, and thinktank circles contributes to the United States’ high degree of resilience in the face of CCP’s influence efforts. News reporters, civil society groups, and technology firms have taken steps to monitor media influence and disinformation, uncovering networks of fake accounts and amplifying filings on paid inserts. Some of these experts have been recruited into government, enhancing in-house policy expertise. The United States is an outlier in this regard, compared to other countries, where

gaps in China expertise and few resources for investigative and non-profit reporting on these topics is a major challenge.

Despite these concerted efforts, **vulnerabilities** remain. Enforcement of laws like FARA, which enhance transparency surrounding Chinese state media activities, remains incomplete, and interagency coordination on how to respond to the CCP's efforts to influence US politics is nascent.⁸⁶ The United States' lack of comprehensive federal data-protection legislation that would limit how private companies can use personal information and share it with government authorities, including foreign governments, contributes to concerns and vulnerabilities surround surveillance by China-based apps like WeChat and TikTok.

Political polarization and growing distrust in news outlets that are seen as aligned with specific political parties create a fertile environment for disinformation campaigns aimed at enhancing societal divisions and for domestic actors to repeat talking points from Beijing, even if inaccurate, in pursuit of perceived political gain over their rivals.

At the same time, **lack of awareness of CCP influence efforts, especially at the subnational level**, renders many Americans potentially vulnerable to unknowingly being influenced or used to amplify Beijing's messages. As federal policymakers and agencies have become less friendly towards certain overtures, state-level elected representatives, local officials, university administrators, and journalists without background on China or the CCP foreign influence apparatus appear to be growing as targets for sponsored travel to China, interviews by Chinese state media, or opportunities for collaboration with entities whose links to the CCP may not be immediately evident to nonexperts.⁸⁷

The strong presence of Chinese state-run or pro-Beijing news outlets in the **Chinese-language media environment**, especially on television, creates a fertile environment for mis- and disinformation regarding not only China-relevant topics, but also US government policies, electoral candidates, and events occurring in the United States. The exclusion of independent news outlets and critical voices from WeChat, due to the platform's account registration and politicized moderation policies, further skews the diversity of perspectives and information sources available to Chinese-speakers in the United States. Given the demographics of Chinese speakers in the United States, many WeChat users are concentrated in particular geographic areas, such as California, New York and New Jersey, and Texas. This pattern increases the potential impact of any election-related manipulation on WeChat in local races with high concentrations of Chinese-speaking voters, even if the total number of such voters is proportionally small in the overall electorate. Despite the creation of credible news content by US-funded broadcasters such as Radio Free Asia and Voice of America, rules prohibiting dissemination to Chinese-speaking audiences in the United States limit their reach, except for access on global social media platforms like YouTube.

Lastly, certain actions and policies adopted by the US government to respond to Beijing's aggressive influence efforts have themselves been a form of **problematic pushback**. Executive orders and legislation enacting wholesale bans on WeChat or TikTok have encountered legal challenges for imposing excessive restrictions on free expression or concerns from Chinese Americans of discriminatory targeting. Physical attacks on people of Chinese and East Asian

descent have increased in the United States since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.⁸⁸ When voicing legitimate concerns about China’s regime, some politicians and prominent media commentators have used inflammatory or racist language about Chinese people in general. Even those not seeking to offend often conflate China, the Chinese people, and the CCP, using sweeping terms like “Chinese influence” when referring to CCP political interference efforts rather than narrower depictions. Other officials, however—including secretaries of state Mike Pompeo and Antony Blinken and FBI director Christopher Wray—have in speeches and government websites explicitly made the distinction between the CCP and Chinese people or people of Chinese descent.⁸⁹

VII. **How effective have Beijing’s media influence efforts been at achieving the regime’s goals?**

The answer to this question is mixed. At first glance, the impact of Beijing’s efforts targeting the United States would thankfully appear to be limited. Mainstream media coverage is broadly independent and critical of the CCP. Outlets commonly feature reporting on rights abuses, alternative perspectives from China, including accounts by victims of persecution, and investigations of Chinese companies and CCP political or media influence in the country. For the most part, public opinion across the political spectrum is broadly unfavorable toward the Chinese regime, and aggressive messaging from Chinese officials on social media tends to backfire.

But measurements of public opinion do not tell the full story. Other dimensions of Beijing’s media influence campaign have born fruit, specifically:

- Chinese officials and their proxies have scored **periodic successes at quashing critical news stories**, silencing commentators, and reducing the information available globally about events in China by imposing limitations on foreign correspondents. Corporate financial incentives and partisan loyalties can also result in gaps in coverage or self-censorship. For example, travel for foreign correspondents to rural China has become increasingly difficult, thereby limiting Americans’ understanding of events outside major cities, while investigative reporting on the finances of China’s leaders remains rare, as access to relevant corporate data has also become more difficult. Reporting on the Falun Gong human rights crisis in China is glaringly missing and detailed reporting on events in Tibet is infrequent, even as outlets and academics have effectively documented and raised the alarm about systematic abuses in Xinjiang.
- Media influence builds upon other forms of political influence. **Co-optation of elites** to help amplify propaganda and suppress unwanted coverage is very potent, but also hard to detect. As outlined above, narratives preferred by Beijing have gained some traction and repetition on the extremes of the political spectrum (both left and right) and among some state and local political and business leaders.
- Beijing’s direct or indirect influence on the news consumed by **Chinese-speaking Americans** remains relatively strong, including via Tencent’s WeChat platform. Risks to family in China reduce the attractiveness of a career in journalism for Americans of Chinese, Uyghur, or Tibetan descent, and make some members of these communities reluctant to speak out publicly about rights violations in China or cases of transnational repression in the United States.

- Wide dissemination of blatant falsehoods and **disinformation**, even if only believed by a small proportion of news consumers can have real-world implications. In a June 2020 speech, for example, then National Security Adviser Robert O’Brien noted that conspiracy theories promoted by Beijing of the US military bringing COVID-19 to Wuhan resulted in a “soldier and her family need[ing] a personal security detail to protect them from death threats” in Maryland.⁹⁰
- Lastly, there is also a foundation being laid for **future manipulation**. Beijing is indirectly gaining influence over crucial parts of many countries’ information infrastructure, as Chinese technology firms with close ties to the CCP build or acquire content-distribution platforms used by tens of millions of foreign news consumers. This too is true in the United States. Besides WeChat, **Tiktok** is of course a widely used app owned by China-based company ByteDance. Within China, and in isolated cases outside China, ByteDance has complied with Beijing’s censorship guidelines and its chief executive publicly apologized in 2018 for failing “to live up to the guidance and expectations supervisory organs have demanded” with regard to content on a China-based app.⁹¹ It is difficult to assess the extent—or even existence—of political censorship or manipulation on the platform due a relative lack of transparency. Moreover, Tiktok has repeatedly been exposed as having employees who took actions counter to the company’s public statements, calling into question the trustworthiness of other claims.⁹² Regardless, the app’s widespread use—and the potential pressure or legal reprisals that its executives and their families in China could face if they do not comply with future CCP demands to manipulate public discourse in the United States—remains a serious risk. This risk is amplified as American elected officials, candidates, and media outlets have also opened accounts to communicate with voters and news consumers.⁹³

VIII. Conclusion and Recommendations

The economic, cultural, and technological contributions that China, its companies, and its people have to offer provide real benefits to people in countries around the world, including the United States. But even as these ties grow, being open-eyed about the regime that rules China is vital and putting in place safeguards against actions that violate democratic norms, breach local laws, or undermine the rights and freedoms of citizens (including members of Chinese diaspora and exile communities)—in ways that themselves respect human rights—is essential.

Anyone engaged in the US media space must acknowledge the influence exerted by China’s authoritarian regime on the news and information circulating in American publications and social media feeds. They need to be prepared for how to respond when pressure to adjust content in Beijing’s favor inevitably emerges.

Indeed, Beijing’s outreach to media and pressures from diplomats are likely to continue to increase in the coming years. Moreover, given the findings of recent investigations related to disinformation campaigns targeting the United States, as well as examples from countries like Canada, Australia, and Taiwan, it is almost certain that some part of the party-state apparatus will seek to influence US voters in the run-up to **crucial elections in 2024**. They may not necessarily favor one presidential candidate over another, but rather try to amplify existing partisan discord or undermine

faith in election candidates across the political spectrum. Influence campaigns targeting local, state, or Congressional contests—including in districts with large numbers of WeChat users—are a real possibility and could potentially be more fruitful given the lower level of safeguards and narrower margins of victory.

Given the tight competition between political parties in US legislative elections, an effective targeted campaign from Beijing—if it so desires—could have wide-reaching consequences, even if it only affects one seat. This may be an extreme scenario, and it is far from clear that the CCP even holds such ambitions. Nevertheless, in the current information landscape and given the resources the regime and its proxies have devoted thus far to influence operations, it is not outside the realm of possibility that they could succeed if attempted. Even as relevant US agencies and electoral authorities prepare for other threats to election integrity or public trust in results, they should also be aware of and on guard for such a campaign emanating from Beijing.

The good news is that momentum is on democracies' side—and the United States is in many ways more resilient today to Beijing's influence efforts than it was even five years ago. Still, as the CCP adapts and expends more human and financial resources to achieve its goals, it will be the individual choices of those in the media, government, civil society, and tech sectors that will determine whether in the coming years Beijing gains more influence over the US information space or whether press freedom and fact-based reporting win out.

Recommendations

- **Maintain strong funding for media development generally and for documenting Beijing's foreign media influence activities and strengthening local resilience specifically:** These areas have seen increased and strategic support from various US government funders in recent years, helping to raise awareness and enhance resilience to Beijing's authoritarian influence and other threats to free expression. Congress should ensure continued bureaucratic and funding support for such programming globally. Private philanthropists should expand support for civil society research, advocacy, training, and media literacy programs that enhance the United States' own resilience in the face of CCP influence efforts, including among Chinese speakers. Private resources for these activities are especially important given the limited availability of public funding.
- **Improve reporting on China through training, networking opportunities, and funding for journalists, while incorporating China-related topics into broader programming.** Given the global role that Chinese state-linked actors are playing in the media and information space, professional training programs for journalists and other media workers should include background material on China and its regime as well as case studies on CCP propaganda and censorship tactics around the world. To counteract the factually incorrect or incomplete information provided to journalists at Beijing-backed junkets and training programs, democratic donors should sponsor journalist travel and networking opportunities, including engagement with Chinese human rights defenders and representatives of ethnic and religious groups that face persecution in China. Programs tailored to improve expertise on China could provide background information on the different Chinese state media outlets and

their ties to the CCP, examples of past disinformation campaigns, and China-based apps' track record of surveillance and censorship within China.

- **Include Chinese-language media and speakers in funding opportunities and media literacy programs.** Media literacy initiatives should include components that serve Chinese-language news consumers and equip them to identify problematic content on WeChat and other CCP-influenced information sources. Donors should support investigative journalism initiatives among diaspora and exile media serving Chinese-speaking communities. They should also finance research dedicated to tracking self-censorship and other subtle pressures on media outlets. Any projects focused on supporting Chinese-language media should include those serving diaspora, immigrant, and exile communities, providing dedicated funding for the latter.
- **Impose penalties for transgressions by Chinese officials.** When CCP representatives—including Chinese diplomats in the United States—engage in bullying, intimidation, or other pressure aimed at local journalists and commentators, the US government should respond promptly, for instance by issuing public statements of concern or diplomatic rebukes. In especially serious cases involving threats against journalists and their families, the government should consider declaring the perpetrators *persona non grata*, and, if necessary, prosecute in accordance with the law. The US government should also deploy targeted sanctions against Chinese officials for the use of transnational repression and screen Chinese diplomats for a history of harassing diaspora members in their postings. US officials—at the highest levels—should publicly condemn assaults on or obstruction of correspondents from US media in China, including the delay or denial of visas, and continue to pursue the matter until a satisfactory resolution is reached.
- **Enhance interagency and multistakeholder coordination.** The federal government should expand recent efforts to improve interagency coordination related to China's foreign media influence and targeted disinformation campaigns, particularly in advance of national and local elections. Congress should ensure that such agencies and activities are sufficiently funded. Civil society, technology firms, and media outlets should be routinely consulted on emerging trends and to coordinate effective responses.
- **Align US government designations of Chinese state media, enhance transparency mechanisms.** The Department of Justice should examine each of the Chinese state media outlets that have been designated as foreign missions by the Department of State since 2020 to determine whether those outlets should also be registered under FARA. For newly registered Chinese state outlets such as China Global Television Network and Xinhua, the Department of Justice should enforce FARA filing requirements, including submission of details on content partnerships with US media and payments to social media influencers, to the extent possible under current law.
- **Take action against transnational repression.** This should include codifying a definition of transnational repression and providing training for government officials, including law enforcement, who may encounter transnational repression cases. Several agencies including the FBI, Department of State, and Department of Homeland Security have begun instituting

trainings, but they vary in consistency and content. Coordinated, mandated requirements across agencies could help ensure officials are equipped with matching and sufficient information to help protect those at risk and not unwittingly become a player in an authoritarian regime's campaign of transnational repression. US government agencies should also conduct strategic, consistent, and culturally sensitive outreach to communities that are at risk of experiencing transnational repression from the CCP in order to equip them with the resources to report these activities. From this perspective, Freedom House supports adoption of the Transnational Repression Policy Act, which includes a number of important provisions around sanctions, support for victims, reporting, and training for officials.

- **Increase Chinese-language capacity in federal agencies.** As we have engaged with federal agencies over the years, it has become clear that there is a need for Mandarin language skills, including in key offices handling China-related issues. The federal government, with new funding from Congress, if necessary, should employ additional Chinese speakers at key US agencies that deal with CCP media influence.
- **Increase Congressional scrutiny of WeChat censorship and surveillance in the United States.** Tencent's WeChat application and the company's politicized moderation and monitoring actions pose a serious threat to the privacy and free expression of millions of U.S. residents and citizens, particularly Chinese speakers. Yet, information available to the public and to U.S. policymakers about the full extent of this phenomenon is lacking. Congress should hold a hearing to shed greater light on the challenges experienced by users in the United States and include among witnesses Chinese activists and ordinary users who have encountered censorship on the platform in the United States, as well as executives from Tencent. Members of Congress should also write formal letters to Tencent asking explicit questions regarding its data protection, moderation, and official account policies as they relate to users in the United States.
- **Explore a diverse set of responses other than blanket bans when seeking to reduce the vulnerabilities to manipulation and surveillance posed by some apps:** Recognizing both the potential threat posed by PRC-based applications like WeChat or ByteDance's TikTok, but also the disproportionate restriction on freedom of expression that a blanket ban would entail, the US government should first explore other options for addressing the concerns raised by these applications, including: holding hearings, introducing third-party risk assessment audits, restricting usage on government or military devices, and adopting laws that require more transparency on company policies and practices, including their content moderation, recommendation and algorithmic systems, collection and use of personal data, and targeted advertising practices. Congress should also adopt stronger data privacy laws that limit what information can be collected and how it can be stored, used, and shared. In the current absence of a federal data privacy law, regulatory bodies like the Federal Trade Commission should explore what options exist for improving protections for Americans data under existing authority.

Appendix

Figure 1:



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