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"Invitation to tea": Chinese regime's Orwellian threat to journalists

Just a few days before the Lunar New Year holidays, Beijing strives to intimidate the public with "invitation to drink tea", a common practice of summoning individuals and threatening them with criminal prosecution, should they dare to share information contrary to the regime's interests. Nine of the ten offences mentioned can be applied directly to journalists and their sources.

With a Political commentator recently [given a suspended death sentence](#) for "*espionage*", the Chinese regime is continuing its unrestrained crackdown on the right to information. "*Suspected acts endangering national security*" or "*leaking state secrets*" are among the ten offences punishable by an "[invitation to tea](#)". This term, more sinister than it sounds, represents in popular parlance, a summons by the authorities, often followed by criminal proceedings or arbitrary detention in the regime's black jails.

The list of matters that would warrant an "*invitation*" was published on the Chinese social media WeChat by the Ministry of State Security on 30 January, just a few days before the Lunar New Year holidays, which begins on 8 February. As 1.4 billion Chinese citizens prepare for the New Year's family gatherings, this list of offences is a chilling reminder to choose their conversation topics carefully.

As customary in the country, the offences are defined in terms so vague that they could apply to any type of online or offline activity, and the work of journalists, including exchanges with their sources, are specifically threatened. Of the ten offences listed, nine directly concern the sharing of information contrary to the interests of the regime.

"Framed as a reminder of legal regulations, in reality the list is yet another ploy by the Beijing regime to further intimidate the Chinese public, clearly including the media and their sources, into self-censorship during the Lunar New Year holidays. We call on the international community to step up the pressure on this Orwellian regime to stop violating press freedom and the right to information, two principles that are enshrined in the country's constitution.

Cédric Alviani

RSF Asia-Pacific Bureau Director

Occasions for "invitation to tea" tailored to repress journalists:

1 - "Suspected acts endangering national security": this catch-all expression can cover any activity considered to be contrary to the interests of the regime. It refers to the [National Security Law adopted in 2015](#), which allows for the punishment of "terrorism", "separatism" or "subversion". In the Xinjiang autonomous region in western China, where the authorities are waging a ferocious crackdown on the Uyghurs, at least 70 journalists [are being detained](#) on the pretext of national security.

2 - "Acts or complicity in espionage": this expression directly targets Chinese or foreign journalists, who by their very nature seek information hidden from the public, as well as their sources and collaborators. In 2023, the regime [adopted an extended version of the counter-espionage law](#), which now covers all journalistic activities. At least eight Chinese journalists are currently imprisoned for "espionage", including [Dong Yuyu](#).

3 - "Failure to take security precautions against spying": the relatives or colleagues of a person accused of espionage could be made co-responsible for their alleged "failure" to take security precautions against spying. This provision refers to [Article 8 of the new counter-espionage law](#), which states that *"citizens must support counter-espionage efforts in accordance with the law and protect state secrets."* It encourages paranoia towards journalists and could also force them into self-censorship to protect those around them.

4 - "Violation of permits for construction projects involving national security issues": this offence is the only one on the list that does not concern the sharing of information.

5 - "Refusal to cooperate with an espionage investigation": this provision, contained in the [counter-espionage law](#), seriously compromises the principle of confidentiality of sources by obliging journalists to disclose the origin of information to which the regime wishes to have access.

6 - "Illegally acquiring or holding state secrets": in China, any information that is negative for the regime's image is potentially a "state secret". Investigative journalists are frequently convicted of "illegally obtaining or

possessing state secrets", like journalist **Huang Qi**, 2004 RSF press freedom prize laureate, who is [currently serving a 12-year prison sentence](#) on this charge.

7 - "Illegal production or use of spy devices": the absence of a definition of the offending "*devices*" suggests that any video or audio recording device, such as a camera or tape recorder, or even a smartphone, could be considered by a Chinese judge to be a spy device. [Article 25 of the new counter-espionage law](#) authorises the authorities "*to inspect the electronic equipment, facilities, and related programs and tools*" of persons suspected of espionage.

8 - "Disseminating state secrets": this provision supplements offence number 6. Swedish publisher **Gui Minhai** was kidnapped in Thailand in 2015 and [sentenced in February 2020 to ten years in prison](#) for "*illegally providing state secrets and intelligence overseas*".

9 - "Violation of the order to leave the country": this offence, which is based on the [law on control of the entry and exit of foreigners](#), particularly targets foreign correspondents in China, who can be arbitrarily ordered to leave the country. In recent years, Beijing has increasingly resorted to "visa blackmail" to [intimidate foreign journalists](#).

10 - "Acts endangering national security other than espionage": this offence seems totally redundant with the first on the list.

Since Chinese leader Xi Jinping took power in 2012, he has been conducting a full-scale crusade against journalism as revealed in RSF's report [The Great Leap Backwards of Journalism in China](#). On 5 February, in a further escalation, the regime [announced a suspended death sentence](#) for Australian political commentator **Yang Hengjun** on trumped-up charges of "*espionage*".

China is ranked 179th out of 180 countries and territories in [RSF's 2023 World Press Freedom Index](#). It is the world's largest captor of journalists and press freedom defenders, with at least 120 detainees.

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Austrian Centre for	32, 1041 Wien	Imprint & Disclaimer
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Asylum Research and	F +43 1 589 00 589	Data Protection Notice
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