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World Report 2024



In late 2022, the Chinese government abruptly ended its draconian “zero Covid” policy. As much of the population—and the medical establishment—was unprepared, Covid-19 infections, hospitalizations, and deaths surged. Officially, the government estimated that there were 60,000 “excess deaths” in December 2022; a [US academic study](#) put the figure at 1.87 million deaths between December 2022 and January 2023. The true toll will likely remain unknown due to severe censorship.

Ten years into President Xi Jinping’s rule, repression deepens across the country. The Chinese government continues its abusive policies against Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims in Xinjiang, which amount to crimes against humanity. In both Tibet and Xinjiang, those who contact family and friends abroad, or who advocate for their culture, language, and religion, risk being treated as “separatists” and have been given harsh prison sentences. Across China, the government is further tightening social controls. There is no independent civil society; even small pockets of freedom are eliminated. In Hong Kong, the Chinese government has assumed full control over the city since imposing the National Security Law in 2020.

The Chinese government’s list of political targets continues to expand. Even those who work for foreign entities in China’s cosmopolitan cities find themselves in the crosshairs, with revisions to a law on “counter-espionage” in July and with the state security ministry encouraging the population to report alleged spies.

As the economy slows, small protests have flared, such as those by pensioners against cuts to their medical insurance in February. Aspirations for a fairer society continue to run deep among many, especially those who have faced injustice, including women; lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people; Tibetans; Uyghurs; Hong Kongers; and those at the bottom of the socioeconomic hierarchy. Some who went into exile have coalesced into diaspora activist movements.

In November, crowds of people across the country mourned the unexpected death of former Premier Li Keqiang. For many, Li represented a more economically vibrant China, in contrast to Xi, who prioritized social control and is taking China backward.

Freedom of Expression

Through laws and regulations, criminal punishment, harassment, intimidation, and the use of technology, the Chinese government operates one of the world's most stringent censorship regimes.

In April, authorities [released Wuhan businessman Fang Bin](#), who was among the first to report on the Covid-19 outbreak, after three years in detention. But Shanghai-based activist and former lawyer Zhang Zhan, who went to Wuhan to report on the outbreak in February 2020, remains in custody. In July 2023, authorities transferred her to a prison hospital due to her deteriorating health.

Authorities released on bail some protesters who took part in the White Paper protests in late 2022, including Cao Zhixin, Li Yuanjing, Zhai Dengrui, and Li Siqu. But [in March](#), a court sentenced Uyghur college student [Kamile Wayit](#) to three years in prison for “promoting extremism” after she shared a video of the protests online. It is unknown how many protesters remain in detention.

In April, Chinese state security arrested a Taiwanese pro-independence politician [Yang Chih-yuan](#), who was living in Zhejiang province, on suspicion of “secession.”

In May, the Chinese government [fined](#) a comedy company 14.7 million renminbi (RMB) (about US\$2 million) for a joke by stand-up comic Li Haoshi, who compared the People's Liberation Army to dogs. In the same month, Weibo suspended a Malaysian comedian known as [Uncle Roger](#) for joking about the Chinese government's surveillance and sovereignty claims over Taiwan.

In August, a court in Guizhou province sentenced former economics professor, Yang Shaozheng, to 4.5 years in prison for “[inciting subversion](#)” after he raised concerns about the high annual cost of government personnel in China.

In September, the Chinese government released a draft regulation that, if passed, would penalize those who wear clothes in public that “hurt the Chinese people's feelings.” The regulations appear to target those who wear Japanese clothing or items that challenge gender norms.

The Chinese government continues to rely on tech companies to enforce censorship. After a roof in Heilongjiang province collapsed, killing 10 children and the coach of a middle school volleyball team, authorities swiftly [censored the outpouring of grief](#), including the names of the children.

In April, [researchers found](#) that China's search platforms use [60,000 rules](#) to censor online content; the most far-reaching political censorship among web search engines was by Microsoft's Bing, its rules less numerous but broader and affecting more search results than the rules applied by Chinese companies such as Baidu. Bing said it would “look into the findings.” [In August](#), Apple reportedly removed over 100 generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) apps from China's app store as Beijing cracked down on the new technology, in part to maintain social control. Apple said these apps “include content that is illegal in China.” In May, LinkedIn announced that it would phase out its app for China, [InCareer](#), becoming the latest major US social media platform to shutter in China.

In May, the *Wall Street Journal* revealed that employees at TikTok, owned by Chinese company ByteDance, reportedly [monitored](#) content accessed by users, including those who watched LGBT content. TikTok said they had terminated such practices and that “safeguarding the privacy and security” of users is one of their “top priorities.” This is after a December 2022 revelation that the company [tracked](#) American journalists who were writing critically about TikTok, which the company attributed to “the misconduct of certain individuals” who were no longer its employees.

Freedom of Religion

State control over religion has grown since 2016, when President Xi called for “Sinicization” of religions. Police arrest, detain, and harass leaders and members of various “illegal” religious groups, including “house churches” (congregations that refuse to join official Catholic and

Protestant churches). Authorities also disrupt their peaceful activities—whether they are preaching religion or running summer camps for children—and ban these groups outright.

Beyond dictating what constitutes legal religious activity, authorities now seek to comprehensively reshape religions to be consistent with party ideology and promote allegiance to the party and Xi.

In provinces with a high proportion of Muslims, authorities have [closed down, demolished, or removed](#) the minarets and domes of mosques to “Sinicize” them or to remove foreign influences. In Yunnan province, authorities removed Islamic features from Najiaying Mosque leading to a [rare protest](#) by hundreds of Hui Muslims in May.

The Measures on the Administration of Religious Activity Venues came into force in September. They impose further restrictions on religious activities, requiring religious venues to indoctrinate followers in Chinese Communist Party ideology, and prohibiting them from “creating conflicts ... between sects” or receiving funding other than those approved by the state.

In July, the Chinese government transferred a Catholic bishop, [Joseph Shen Bin](#), to head the vacant Shanghai diocese, without consulting with the Vatican, in violation of the 2018 China-Vatican accord. While the Vatican publicly protested Beijing’s decision, it approved the move and has remained largely silent over Beijing’s religious persecution.

Attacks on Human Rights Defenders

Human rights defenders and government critics continue to face persecution.

In January, authorities released human rights lawyer Tang Jitian after forcibly disappearing him for 398 days. In March, a Guangxi court sentenced human rights lawyer Qin Yongpei to five years in prison for “inciting subversion of state power.” In April, a court in Shandong province sentenced prominent legal scholar Xu Zhiyong and human rights lawyer Ding Jiaxi to [14 and 12 years in prison](#), respectively, for “subversion of state power.”

In April, authorities [arrested](#) rights lawyer Yu Wensheng and his wife, Xu Yan, while en route to a meeting with the EU ambassador in Beijing. They placed human rights lawyers Wang Quanzhang, Wang Yu, and Bao Longjun under [house arrest](#). Between May and June, police harassed and forced Wang and his wife, Li Wenzu, to [move homes 13 times](#).

In May, a court in Guangzhou [sentenced](#) prominent human rights legal activist Guo Feixiong to eight years in prison for “inciting subversion of state power.” Guo was arrested in January 2021 at Shanghai airport as he tried to visit his critically ill wife in the United States; she died a year later.

Also in May, journalist-in-exile Yang Zewei was [disappeared](#) from his home in Laos and [reappeared in detention](#) in Hunan province. In July, Laotian police detained human rights lawyer Lu Siwei while en route to Thailand. Despite [calls from UN experts](#), on September 15, Laos deported Lu to China where he awaits trial for “illegally crossing the border.”

Hong Kong

Since Beijing imposed the draconian National Security Law on Hong Kong in June 2020, freedoms have sharply declined. Hong Kong authorities have arrested at least [279 people](#) for allegedly violating that law and the colonial-era sedition law. Prosecutions under the National Security Law had a 100 percent conviction rate at time of writing.

In July, the high-profile national security trial of 47 pro-democracy politicians began. Another national security trial, of 75-year-old media tycoon Jimmy Lai, was slated to begin on [December 18](#). In October, four former university student leaders were sentenced to two years in prison for

“incitement to wound with intent.” They were imprisoned for presiding over a student council meeting in 2021 that passed a resolution mourning a man who killed himself after stabbing and injuring a police officer.

In June, the Hong Kong government sought an injunction order to ban the broadcast and distribution of the protest song “Glory to Hong Kong.” The court denied the request in July, but the government [appealed](#). In August, a court sentenced a man to three months in prison for “insulting” the Chinese national anthem after he replaced the soundtrack with “Glory to Hong Kong” in an online video.

Since 2020, the Hong Kong government has removed a couple hundred titles it labeled “politically sensitive” from public libraries. In July, it set up a channel that encouraged the public to report publications that might “endanger national security.” In September, police charged a man with “sedition” for allegedly receiving 18 copies of a pro-democracy children’s book titled *Sheep Village* from abroad.

Self-censorship has become even more commonplace. In February, Disney’s streaming platform in Hong Kong pulled an episode of *The Simpsons* that mentioned forced labor camps in China.

Since June 2020, no major public assemblies have taken place in Hong Kong. In March, police initially allowed a protest on International Women’s Day, but the organizer canceled it after police stated, without giving specifics, that “violent groups” might join the protest. Organizers canceled a planned International Workers’ Day protest in April after national security police briefly detained one of the organizers.

The government’s targets of repression have extended beyond Hong Kong’s borders. In July, police issued baseless arrest warrants and bounties on eight exiled politicians and activists who reside abroad for offenses under the National Security Law. Police froze their bank accounts, interrogated their Hong Kong-based family members, and raided the homes of activists associated with them.

In November, a Hong Kong woman was sentenced to two months in prison for “sedition” over social media posts she published while studying at a university in Japan. In 2023, immigration authorities denied entry to three Japanese journalists and artists critical of the Hong Kong government.

There was some progress on LGBT rights. In February, the Court of Final Appeal ruled that the government’s requirement that transgender men undergo “full sex reassignment surgery” to change their legal gender was unconstitutional. In September, the top court ordered the government to establish a legal framework for recognizing same-sex partnerships.

Xinjiang

Beijing continues its massive abuses in Xinjiang, which Human Rights Watch has found to constitute crimes against humanity. Although some political education camps appear to have closed, an estimated [half-million](#) Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims remain in prison, detained during China’s “Strike Hard Against Violent Terrorism” crackdown that started in 2017. There have been no mass releases. In September, a court sentenced prominent Uyghur anthropologist Dr. Rahile Dawut to life imprisonment for spurious state security crimes. Many Uyghurs abroad continue to have little to no contact with family members in Xinjiang.

Xinjiang authorities are forcibly assimilating Uyghurs, including through the Sinicization of Islam. The government has been [promoting tourism](#) to the region, where it presents a sanitized and controlled version of Uyghur culture to domestic tourists.

In August, President Xi visited Xinjiang ahead of the first anniversary of a damning United Nations report that detailed widespread abuses across Xinjiang—including targeting of cultural and religious practices, family separation, arbitrary arrests and detention, rapes, torture, and enforced

disappearances—and concluded that Beijing’s policies in the region “may constitute crimes against humanity.” Xi pronounced that his policies in Xinjiang were a “success.”

In February and April, two Uyghur men died in Thai immigration detention after being held there for nine years, highlighting the plight of Uyghurs trapped in countries susceptible to Beijing’s influence even after escaping from the country.

Tibet

The authorities in Tibetan areas enforced severe restrictions on the freedoms of religion, expression, movement, and assembly. Tibetans who speak out over issues such as mass relocation, environmental degradation, or the phasing out of the Tibetan language in primary education are met with repression. Local officials are required to educate the public to “obey the law,” and cash rewards are offered to citizens prepared to inform on others. Having banned content on one’s phone or merely contacting Tibetans in exile can result in detention. A revered monk, Geshe Phende Gyaltsen, arrested in good health by Litang county police in March 2022, died in police custody in January 2023.

In June 2023, a group of UN special rapporteurs requested information about the cases of six Tibetans detained for [possession of photos](#) of the exiled religious leader, the Dalai Lama. The Chinese government has not responded.

Women’s and Girls’ Rights

On January 1, revisions to the 1992 Law on the Protection of Women’s Rights and Interests came into effect, which addresses [workplace discrimination and sexual harassment](#). However, victims still [face difficulties in seeking accountability](#) while legal experts question the amendments’ effectiveness.

Largely because of the decades-long “one-child” policy, for the first time in six decades, [deaths outnumbered births](#) in China. Some local governments have shifted to promoting births, including [cash rewards](#) for brides ages 25 or younger in Zhejiang county and [birth subsidy plans](#) in several Chinese cities. Official language in some laws and policies suggests a restrictive role for women. The amendments to the Law on Protection of Women’s Rights and Interests, for example, tells women to “respect social morals ... and family values.”

The Women’s Tennis Association [returned to China in September](#), ending its suspension of tournaments in the country after Peng Shuai, a three-time Olympian and Grand Slam doubles champion, accused former Vice Premier Zhang Gaoli of sexual abuse in 2021.

Journalist Huang Xueqin and labor rights activist Wang Jianbing were put on trial by a Guangzhou court in September for “inciting subversion of state power” for their leading involvement in the #MeToo Movement.

Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

LGBT people and rights activists have experienced increased harassment and censorship.

In February, two Tsinghua University students [filed a lawsuit](#) against the Ministry of Education after school authorities disciplined them in July 2022 for leaving rainbow flags in a campus supermarket.

One of the oldest LGBT organizations in China, the Beijing LGBT Center, suddenly [announced its closure due](#) to “force majeure” in May. This closure is the latest in a string of forced shutdowns of

LGBT groups since 2019.

On August 22, the Chinese version of Valentine's Day, known as Qixi, [several LGBT organizations](#), including TransBrotherhood China, Beijing Lesbian Centre, and the Beijing branch of Trueself, and other [community public accounts](#), including Beijing Lala Salon, Wandouhuang, Transtory, Outstanding Partners, Ace, and the Flying Cat Brotherhood, found that WeChat had banned their accounts. This follows the deletion of dozens of university student-run LGBT social media accounts by WeChat in 2021.

Disability Rights

In a case that has captured national attention, in April, a court in Jiangsu province sentenced [Dong Zhimin](#) to nine years in prison for his wrongful imprisonment of a woman with schizophrenia, Xiaohuamei. In 2022, a netizen filmed Xiaohuamei shackled at the neck in a squalid shack. Local officials repeatedly tried to restrict activists' searches about her origins, but it is believed that she was trafficked, sold to Dong, held in sexual slavery—giving birth to eight children—and shackled for years. Xiaohuamei's case is a rare example where shackling of people with real or perceived psychosocial disabilities—often due to inadequate support and mental health services—have been discovered and their perpetrators punished.

Climate Change Policy and Impacts

As the world's [largest emitter](#) of greenhouse gases, with per capita emissions that rank 11th among the [G20 nations](#), China is contributing to the climate crisis and its growing toll on human rights around the globe. China is the world's [largest producer](#) and consumer of coal, burning more coal every year than the rest of the world combined. It is the largest importer of [oil](#) and [gas](#). A Chinese bank was the [largest financier](#) of fossil fuels between 2016 and 2022. China's plans to continue to increase production of fossil fuels are contrary to its human rights obligations, which require that all governments phase out fossil fuels.

Despite improved targets, the Climate Action Tracker rates China's domestic emission reduction target as "highly [insufficient](#)" to meet the Paris Agreement goal to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels.

China leads the world in renewable energy production. It also processes the vast majority of the minerals and metals needed for batteries and other renewable energy technologies. Some of these materials are made by companies in Xinjiang, creating a risk of links to forced labor. Researchers have, for example, documented links between polysilicon production, a key material for solar manufacturing, and forced labor in Xinjiang.

Key International Actors

The end of China's "zero Covid" policy prompted a wave of high-level visits to China over the year, from German Chancellor Olaf Scholz to Brazilian President Lula da Silva. Few publicly raised human rights issues.

Diplomats friendly with the Chinese government from Indonesia, Iran, Mexico, North Korea, and Saudi Arabia, among others, and representatives of the League of Arab States and Islamic scholars, visited Xinjiang as part of Chinese government propaganda tours. The Chinese Foreign Ministry and state media reported that these visits affirmed "peace" and "happiness" across the region.

The German government published a long-awaited China strategy, which advanced a sober view of ties to Beijing.

In June, European Union heads of state reiterated concerns about China's record but fell short of initiating new actions. Many human rights groups questioned the relevance of the resumption in February of the EU's human rights dialogue with China. In October, EU top diplomat Josep Borrell visited Beijing, and in December, the EU and Chinese government held an EU-China summit.

In the EU, efforts proceeded in the legislative process toward the adoption of legislation on human rights and environmental due diligence for companies and on banning products made through forced labor from being imported into or exported from the EU market. Neither measure is country-specific, but import restrictions may play a key role in preventing such products from being imported from Xinjiang.

In May, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk urged "concrete follow up" on his office's August 2022 report on the Chinese government's severe violations in Xinjiang. However, he has yet to brief the UN Human Rights Council on the report or indicate what "concrete follow up" he intends to take to advance implementation of the report's recommendations or end the abuses.

Since the June 2022 entry into force of the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act, US customs officials had, as of November 29, 2023, [denied entry](#) to goods worth US\$561 million due to suspected links to forced labor in Xinjiang or elsewhere in China.

Foreign businesses in China experienced unprecedented pressure in 2023. In April, the Chinese government made vague [amendments to](#) the Counter-Espionage Law, leaving foreign firms uncertain as to whether previously acceptable business practices are now criminal. In March, Chinese authorities raided the Beijing office of the US corporate due diligence firm, Mintz Group, and detained staff. In April, authorities [raided](#) the Shanghai office of global consulting company, Bain. In June, authorities obliged staff members of financial firms Franklin Templeton and BlackRock to [attend classes](#) on "Xi Jinping Thought."

Foreign Policy

In 2023, Beijing launched its new Global Security Initiative, Global Development Initiative, and Global Civilization Initiative, each designed to challenge existing global governance, security, and human rights norms and institutions.

Xi's previous flagship global development program, the Belt and Road Initiative, which has been criticized for a lack of transparency and rights violations, has reduced in scope. But he continues to build strong coalitions with the Global South, such as prioritizing attendance at summits like BRICS in South Africa.

Xi continued to lend crucial support to Russia despite international sanctions imposed on Russia for its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Shortly after an arrest warrant was issued against Russian President Vladimir Putin by the International Criminal Court in March, Xi traveled to Moscow to meet Putin. In September, Xi welcomed to Beijing the Syrian president, Bashar al-Assad, who is alleged to have committed war crimes.

Chinese government efforts to silence critics in other countries brought new attention from governments, including [indictments](#) by the US Department of Justice against 40 Chinese police officials.

Chinese diplomats continued their campaign to mute criticism of the government's human rights record and to weaken UN human rights bodies. They interrupted and harassed civil society representatives at the UN Human Rights Council. In September, Chinese diplomats sent one *note verbale* discouraging government attendance at a civil society event focused on Xinjiang taking place on the margins of the UN General Assembly and another with a similar message to Geneva-based missions about an event on press freedom in Hong Kong.

