



Congressional-Executive Commission on China

**Hearing on
Techno-Authoritarianism: Platform for Repression in China and Abroad**

November 17, 2021

**Testimony of Yaqiu Wang
Senior Researcher, China
Human Rights Watch**

Chairman Merkley, Chairman McGovern, distinguished Members of the Commission, thank you for the opportunity to speak on this issue dear to my heart. I owe my presence here today to the relative internet freedom China once had, and to the respect for freedom of information in the United States.

I was born and grew up in China. As a teenager, every day I would go online and listen to Voice of America's Special English, a news program broadcast in slow-speed English. That's how I started to learn English, and that's also how I and many others in China got information uncensored by the Chinese government.

That was 15 years ago, and Beijing has since gotten so much better at controlling the internet. It's not only that many foreign websites have been blocked, but also that some people from China who now live in the US—with free internet readily accessible—still go back to the censored Chinese internet to get their news.

I'd like to use my five minutes to focus on WeChat and TikTok, two Chinese apps that have a significant presence in the US.

First and foremost, it is essential to remember that all Chinese companies are subject to the control of the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

The Chinese diaspora heavily relies on the super-app WeChat for information, communication, and even political organizing. This allows Beijing to shape the Chinese diaspora's views in ways more amenable to the CCP. It allows Beijing to know a lot about the people who have left China, down to things like who is meeting whom, at what time, and where. And it also allows Beijing to surveil and potentially influence and mobilize an important demographic in the US.

Earlier this year, a network of fake social media accounts linked to the Chinese government attempted, but failed, to draw Americans out to real-world protests against racial injustice. The reason we know about the scheme is because it happened on Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter—American companies that periodically disclose influence operations, including by government and government-aligned actors. We don't know whether similar manipulations are also happening on WeChat because it's difficult to do research.

Then, there is TikTok, which has far deeper reach into the lives of the American public, especially young people.

One thing lawmakers need to understand is that the company's algorithm largely decides what users see. There is no way for outsiders to know what information is being suppressed or promoted on TikTok because of government influence. The Australian Strategic Policy Institute's [analysis](#) of the hashtag #Xinjiang showed a depiction of the region that glosses over the human rights suffering and instead provides a version that is filled with smiling and dancing Uyghurs.

In short, there is a lot we don't know about what Chinese tech companies are doing in the US—what is being censored, promoted, and suppressed, and how data is being harvested, accessed, used, and shared. There are risks that these companies can be or are being used by the Chinese government to undermine the rights of American users.

Congress has recently increased its scrutiny of American tech companies. Chinese tech companies' rising popularity in the US and their ties to the Chinese government should give added urgency to efforts to pass laws to require tech companies—regardless of where they are headquartered—to protect user data and to be more transparent in how they moderate content.

Lastly, here I speak not as an expert, but as a member of the Chinese immigrant community in America: to counter harm from Chinese tech companies and improve independent, professional Chinese-language media, the US government should invest in journalism training and similar programs for aspiring Chinese-language journalists. Making fact-based information available in our native language is one of the most effective ways to counter Beijing's malign influence.

Thank you and I look forward to your questions.

Additional Information:

Recommendations for the US government:

1. Enact comprehensive data protection laws that require all tech companies to practice data minimization for all users; conduct human rights impact assessments that address all aspects of companies' operations, including their underlying business model; and require human rights due diligence for their operations globally.
2. Consider regulations that encourage transparency from all social media platforms, including disclosure of their content moderation policies and enforcement, such as what content they've censored or suppressed because of their own policies or at the request of governments.

3. Improve independent, professional Chinese-language journalism by investing in journalism training and similar programs, expanding the space for Chinese-language speakers to learn about and discuss human rights issues inside China and around the world.
4. Invest in open-source technologies that provide other channels of communication and enable people in China to more easily circumvent censorship.

WeChat censorship and surveillance affecting the Chinese diaspora

International WeChat users are estimated at between 100 million and 200 million; there are an average of 19 million daily active users in the United States.

Over the past couple of years, I've interviewed members of the Chinese diaspora around the world on the Chinese government's activities undermining human rights abroad. A recurring problem I've run into is that some of my sources only wanted to use WeChat to communicate, mainly because they had not installed any other messaging apps.

The centrality of WeChat in information acquisition and communication among the Chinese diaspora, especially first-generation immigrants from China, should be a source of real concern.

Chinese law requires internet companies to store internet logs and relevant data for at least six months to assist law enforcement. WeChat's own privacy policy notes that it may need to "retain, disclose and use" user information in response to requests from the government. Hence, the Chinese government can—if it wants—know a lot about the people who have left China, down to things like who is meeting whom, at what time, and where. And because WeChat is a payment app as well, it can see to whom they send money or from whom they get it or even who pays for dinner.

WeChat is also where many members of the Chinese diaspora obtain information, including about the countries they immigrated to. A survey of Mandarin speakers in Australia found that 60 percent of those polled identified WeChat as their primary source of news and information, while only 23 percent said they regularly accessed news from mainstream Australian media, such as the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

Some of the most popular publications catering to the diaspora originated on WeChat. In order to attract readership, traditional Chinese-language media outlets now also publish through WeChat. In this sense, news produced by a local Chinese-language outlet in New York goes through censors in Beijing before it reaches the Chinese-speaking community in New York.

Because of the importance of WeChat among the Chinese diaspora, some political parties and politicians in countries such as [Australia](#), [Canada](#), and the US have opened their own WeChat accounts or regularly utilize popular accounts to reach out to their Chinese speaking constituencies.

And there is evidence that the Chinese government, through censorship on WeChat, has interfered with communications between elected officials and constituents in Western democracies.

In September 2017, Jenny Kwan, a member of the Canadian parliament, made [a statement](#) regarding the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong in which she praised the young

protesters who “stood up and fought for what they believe in, and for the betterment of their society.”

The statement and anything related quickly disappeared.

After it was taken down, Kwan told me in an email, “We posted the statement on Sept 6, 2017. One hundred people viewed it, 1 liked and 3 comments were posted before it was deleted by the WeChat management. We only noticed that it was taken down since you asked the question.”

In this case, the Chinese government quietly and effortlessly prevented an elected official in a democracy from being heard by her own constituents. Imagine the consequences if the Chinese government decided to disrupt these conversations on a broader scale.

Censorship on TikTok

TikTok has [repeatedly stated](#) that the Chinese government has not asked it to remove any content, and that if it does, the company will not comply. But such reassurances have not found broader acceptance.

For example, there are [few videos](#) on TikTok concerning the Hong Kong protests—even though the largely youth-led movement has garnered massive international attention. After American teenager [Feroza Aziz](#) posted a video condemning the Chinese government’s mass detention of Uyghur Muslims that went viral, her account [was suspended](#). TikTok asserted the suspension was the result of an earlier satirical video of hers referencing Osama Bin Laden being mistakenly flagged for violating the app’s [anti-terrorism policy](#).

In 2020, my colleague and I tried to test some of these concerns. We started by uploading clips of [Tank Man](#), the young man who famously stood his ground in front of a procession of Chinese army tanks during the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown in Beijing.

One clip, uploaded to an account registered in Australia, was visible to the account holder but not to anyone else. When we raised the issue with TikTok, representatives of the company said via email that the video was “incorrectly partially restricted based on guidelines related to displaying identifiable military information.” Our video was later reinstated.

After I published an [article](#) mentioning the incident, including TikTok’s response, Tik Tok’s representative emailed me, calling my reporting “misleading” and demanding retraction. Because we considered our report to be fair and accurate, we declined to do so. Yet, I was taken aback by the incident and thought about how I would have acted differently if I were an independent researcher without the support of an institution—it’s possible I would have given in to this pressure.