

## **“Tiananmen at 30: Examining the Evolution of Repression in China”**

Testimony before the Congressional-Executive Commission on China and the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission  
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I would like to thank the Congressional Executive Commission on China, the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, and the House Foreign Affairs Committee for the opportunity and privilege of presenting testimony here today.

On this day, we grapple with the events of Tiananmen – both the hope and the bloodshed – and their legacy thirty years later. Part of that legacy is an unsettling disconnect. Even as people have grown more connected, and our collective access to information has expanded exponentially, there has been a curious muffling surrounding the world’s remembrance of June 4th. Over the years, as vigils diminished and stories grew more hushed, a Tiananmen Square-sized gap emerged not only inside China, but outside as well.

The excising of Tiananmen not merely from Chinese history but from the world’s collective memory is, in fact, no accident. As Reuters recently [reported](#), Chinese internet firms now use machine learning, image and voice recognition to detect and block Tiananmen-related content, with previously unimaginable levels of both accuracy and automation. Tiananmen – alongside a broader swath of topics deemed sensitive to the Chinese Communist Party – has disappeared down what the scholar Glenn Tiffert, borrowing from Orwell, calls the CCP’s memory hole, with pernicious effects on the entire historical record. Tiffert has [documented](#) how Chinese academic databases have redacted their holdings and sanitized historical narratives to serve present political purposes. The effect is not limited to the technological realm: two authors who have written about Tiananmen, Louisa Lim and Ilaria Maria Sala, have [noted](#) “how successful the party-state has been in pathologizing reporting on Tiananmen, seeding self-regulating, self-censoring mechanisms, even among foreign journalists.”

This memory hole constitutes just one aspect of a vast apparatus designed to shape the broader information ecosystem around the world, in ways that will help solidify the CCP’s rule at home as well as reshape the global order to favor this outcome. This apparatus – which encompasses the party-state’s vision and direction, the firms engaged in developing technology, the application and popularization of that technology, the regulations governing its use, and the setting of future standards – is hardly a flawlessly functioning machine, even within China’s borders. It is not impervious to economic shocks, shifting political winds, or bureaucratic inefficiency and infighting. Yet its cumulative impact both within and outside China’s borders is likely to reinforce authoritarian norms and institutions, and undercut democratic ones, on a global basis.

### **Informatization and Intelligentization**

The Chinese party-state is keenly aware of the transformative, value-laden role of information, and has always viewed the harnessing of information as fundamental to its power. It successfully – and against all expectations at the time – centrally steered the country’s entrance into the modern information age

in the early 2000s, allowing for the gradual, widespread, and innovative spread of the internet while [managing the political impact](#) of its use. Initially linked to modernizing economic production, the term “informatization” (信息化) gradually became [synonymous](#) with a complete rethinking of how information technology would both penetrate and power economic, political and social development. This indicates a party-state that, rather than simply fearing information, fears even more the implications of not mastering it.

With the advent of new tools, informatization has proved crucial in the implementation of China’s modern surveillance state, with some [observing](#) that it is impossible to overstate informatization’s role in the development of public security intelligence over the past twenty years. With the introduction of artificial intelligence (AI), informatization has been [joined](#) by the newer “intelligentization” (智能化), with its corresponding augmentations and implications. Even the projection of capabilities that [might not actually exist](#) yet represents the logical development of longstanding CCP thinking on information, surveillance and social control, predating the advent of modern apps and social media.

As AI evolves and becomes seamlessly integrated into the normal functioning of society, it will become increasingly invisible – and thus, in societies that are not alert to its ramifications, increasingly open to abuse. Crucial questions about democratic [rights](#) and standards are correctly being [asked](#) and debated in democracies by policymakers, companies, developers, scholars and activists. China’s authoritarian system, however, [restricts what type of questions](#) are allowed to be asked about the praxis and governance of technology, who gets to ask those questions, and, ultimately, who decides. It is cause for concern when “standards for research on the latest technological frontiers are being set by a government that has always prioritized power over ethics,” [writes](#) physicist Yangyang Cheng. For technologies designed to both disappear into and dictate the rhythms of everyday life, the effect may be to imperceptibly manipulate debate and shape individual behaviors in an increasingly targeted way, buttressed by millions of data points that enable previously unimagined specificity. More than that, it will present those affected by CCP-guided AI enhancement – including not only Chinese citizens, but millions around the [world](#) who may be wittingly or unwittingly participating in Chinese government-affiliated [smart city projects](#) – with an imperceptible fait accompli that subjects them to the standards of the CCP information ecosystem.

This is not only of relevance in the far future. To some extent, it is happening already, including with the platforms that are widespread within China and around the world. Existing platforms such as WeChat have become indispensable for Chinese citizens, providing the allure and convenience of deftly integrated communication, services and amenities – even as this convenience is backed by an equally seamless surveillance and censorship apparatus. With these platforms increasingly being used in [Australia, Canada](#), and elsewhere for news, political communication and other purposes, it is imperative that users understand and interrogate these issues, not simply through the lens of consumer benefits, business models or economic competition, but through the prism of implications for rights and governance.

### **Reframing the debate over norms and standards**

This matters not only at the platform level, but in the animating ideas and values shaping the next iteration of the internet. Using rhetoric that mimics yet undermines the liberal order, the Chinese party-state is reshaping or injecting its own vision into the existing global framework of norms, institutions, policy models and standards governing the internet and information technologies. For instance, the

modern internet evolved in a patchwork fashion, and the systems that sprang up to govern it similarly did so in an overlapping, non-centrally directed fashion, relatively elevating non-state actors. This original vision of a globally interconnected, free and open internet represents the opposite of the CCP's idea of "[cyber sovereignty](#)," loosely defined as a system in which national governments reign supreme over a fragmented internet, incorporating authoritarian values of expression and privacy. Implicit within the CCP's rubric is a top-down model of social management, predicated on harnessing the rich and ever-growing streams of data emitted by everyday life, including the growing network of interconnected physical objects broadly known as the internet of things (IoT).

And yet, to listen to the Chinese party-state's official rhetoric, it is at times hard to tell the difference between these fundamentally opposed visions. This is because the CCP intentionally uses the rhetoric of shared liberal values to promote its own, [illiberal](#) vision. "China supports a free and open Internet," reads the [text](#) of China's international strategy for cooperation in cyberspace, released in 2017. The document also notes that the Chinese government "fully respects citizens' rights and fundamental freedoms in cyberspace and safeguards their rights to be informed, to participate, to express and to supervise while protecting individual privacy in cyberspace." This longstanding practice of definitional and substantive warping has manifested itself in numerous related areas as well, including those [pertaining](#) to human rights and [development](#). For China, Russia, and other repressive states, categorizing the speech and activity of political dissidents as threats to security, and the attempted [enshrinement](#) in the language of the international system, would represent a victory for an authoritarian-tinged future.

Again, this is no accident. The ability to shape and repurpose narratives is a fundamental part of the CCP's conception of "discourse power" (话语权) in international relations, as Samantha Hoffman [points out](#). The concept underlies many aspects of China's ambitions in the broad information space, including internet governance, big data, AI, social credit systems, and even the often invisible standards-setting process for the next generation of technological infrastructure.

### **Responding beyond the usual policy templates**

It should be clear that the Chinese party-state's actions in the global information space are not limited to China "exporting" hardware and know-how to other ambitious authoritarian states. Beijing's actions have serious implications for all democracies and democratic actors, and for the web of democratic norms and institutions they both support and rely upon.

Any [response](#) is thus likely to require new types of policy language, frameworks, and cooperation between democracies, at both the governmental and, importantly, non-governmental levels. Indeed, to address a competition in the ideas space of both robust and vulnerable democracies, civil society will have a key role to play. The leadership of institutions critical to the health of the public sphere, including but not limited to publishers, media and technology executives, university administrators, and so on – will need to reinvigorate their commitment to democratic standards and free expression, even if the mechanisms for doing so are not immediately self-evident or straightforward. Only through crystallizing understanding of these matters, and galvanizing civil society's contribution, can democracies address their vulnerabilities, shore up resilience, and reclaim their own discourse power.