In the final months of 2021, the Chinese authorities continued to silence LGBTQ+ groups and women’s voices. In September, in a major setback for China’s fledgling #MeToo movement, a Beijing court ruled against Xianzi in her landmark sexual harassment case against Zhu Jun, one of the country’s most popular television hosts. In the same month, journalist and feminist activist Huang Xueqing and labour activist Wang Jianbing went missing and were later officially detained under the charge of ‘inciting subversion of state power’. Huang had been involved in several #MeToo campaigns in China and had previously been detained, from October 2019 to January 2020, after covering the protests in Hong Kong. Wang, also a vocal supporter of the #MeToo movement, provided legal help for people with disabilities and workers with occupational diseases.

In early November, #MeToo gained traction again in China, as the country’s top tennis player, Peng Shuai, accused former vice-premier and Politburo member Zhang Gaoli of coercing her into sex in a social media post that was deleted and censored within half an hour. After her denunciation, Peng disappeared from public view for several weeks, triggering a global campaign under the hashtag #WhereIsPengShuai. Although Peng reappeared and seemingly retracted the sexual assault claims in an interview with a Chinese-language Singaporean newspaper in December, concerns over her wellbeing persist.

In other gender-related news, a woman was sentenced to three years in prison in November for killing her husband after suffering years of violence and abuse—an outcome that sparked widespread public outrage. In the same month, LGBT Rights Advocacy China, an influential non-profit organisation that has provided legal support in high-profile campaigns and raised awareness about the LGBTQ+ community, announced it had suspended its operations indefinitely and deleted its social media accounts amid an ongoing government clampdown on LGBTQ+ groups. In December, Chinese tech giant Alibaba fired a woman employee who accused a former colleague of sexual assault in August 2021.

The last quarter of 2021 also saw some changes at the policy level. To address the declining birth rate, in late November, a dozen Chinese regional governments extended maternity leave to appeal to women planning to give birth. This caused concern about the possibility of increased discrimination against women in the workplace by unscrupulous employers. Later that month, the Chinese authorities proposed revisions to the Law on the Protection of Women’s Rights and Interests to provide more protection against gender-based discrimination and sexual harassment in the workplace—the first major change to the law in nearly three decades. Yet, considering the government’s handling of the #MeToo movement, many remained sceptical that real progress would follow.

LL & DG

(Sources: Amnesty International; AP News 1; AP News 2; BBC; China Digital Times; Reuters 1; Reuters 2; Reuters 3; Reuters 4; South China Morning Post 1; South China Morning Post 2; South China Morning Post 3; SupChina 1; SupChina 2; SupChina 3; SupChina 4; SupChina 5; The Guardian 1; The Guardian 2; The Guardian 3; The Guardian 4; The New York Times 1; The New York Times 2; The Washington Post.)
Permanent Crackdown in Hong Kong

The crackdown in Hong Kong continued unabated in the final months of 2021. On 9 September, Hong Kong police raided the city’s museum commemorating the Tiananmen Square protest, hours after a dozen prodemocracy activists pleaded guilty to participating in an unauthorised assembly during the 4 June anniversary in 2020. Several days later, authorities warned that civil society organisations endangering national security would lose their charity status and no longer benefit from tax exemptions. In the same month, the China Human Rights Lawyers Concern Group and several other advocacy organisations dissolved following political denunciation by Beijing-backed media and investigation by national security police. Hong Kong’s largest independent trade union, the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions, and the militant Professional Teachers’ Union also disbanded. Even the last remaining humanitarian fund for arrested protesters was forced to end operation. On 19 October, five former students of the Chinese University of Hong Kong were each sentenced to nearly five years for rioting at the university campus in 2019. Around one month later, former food delivery worker Ma Chun-man was sentenced to almost six years in prison for ‘inciting secession’ by chanting pro-independence slogans. On 13 December, eight prodemocracy activists were sentenced to up to 14 months in prison for organising, attending, and inciting participation in a banned vigil in 2020 for victims of the Tiananmen Square protest. Amid worsening political freedom in Hong Kong, turnout hit a record low for the ‘patriots’-only Legislative Council election held on 19 December. A few days later, three Hong Kong universities removed their on-campus statues commemorating the Tiananmen Square protest. At the close of the year, independent media outlet Stand News was raided by police, and ceased operation on 29 December. JL

(Sources: ABC News; CNBC; Civicus; Hong Kong Free Press 1; Hong Kong Free Press 2; Radio Free Asia; Reuters 1; Reuters 2; Reuters 3; South China Morning Post 1; South China Morning Post 2; Ta Kung Pao 1; Ta Kung Pao 2; The Guardian.)

Human Rights Still in the Spotlight

Human rights in China remained an international point of contention in the final months of 2021. In late September, Canadian citizens Michael Spavor and Michael Kovrig, together with two American nationals, Cynthia and Victor Liu, were released by Chinese authorities after being detained in China since 2018; their release was widely perceived as an exchange for the release of Huawei executive Meng Wanzhou. On 7 October, former journalist Luo Changping was arrested for defaming ‘heroes and martyrs’ after he questioned the justification for China’s involvement in the Korean War. While Wu Yishan, a labour rights activist involved in the Jasic campaign of 2018, was released in late October after serving a three-year jail term, journalist Zhang Zhan was reportedly close to death due to months of intermittent hunger strikes. In late December, teacher Li Tiantian was believed to have been detained in a psychiatric hospital after writing critically about the firing of a lecturer who had encouraged her students to verify official accounts of the Nanjing Massacre. The situation in Xinjiang also remained in the spotlight. A 20-minute video, filmed by an anonymous Chinese national and uploaded to YouTube in October, showed fresh evidence of Uyghur detention camps in Xinjiang. In mid-December, the United States imposed trade restrictions on more than 30 Chinese entities because of their human rights violations and blacklisted eight Chinese companies, including SenseTime and DJI, for their involvement in the surveillance of Uyghurs in Xinjiang. On 23 December, US President Joe Biden signed the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act into law. Within days of its enactment, American corporations, including Intel and Walmart, faced a tough balancing act between complying with the new law and avoiding a backlash from Chinese consumers and authorities. Within China, Ma Xingrui, former Governor of Guangdong, replaced Chen Quanguo as Communist Party Chief in Xinjiang. JL

(Sources: BBC News; China Digital Times; CNBC; Deutsche Welle; Australian Financial Review; Market Watch; Radio Free Asia 1; Radio Free Asia 2; Reuters; The Washington Post.)
Regulatory Changes of Gig Workers

As part of a wave of regulatory tightening under President Xi Jinping’s call for ‘common prosperity’, the Chinese authorities adopted new rules to push tech giants to better safeguard workers’ rights in the gig economy. In mid-September, Chinese food delivery giants Ele.me and Meituan promised to stop forcing delivery workers to register as independent businesses after regulators pushed delivery and ride-hailing firms to improve conditions for workers. In late September, the Beijing Municipal Federation of Trade Unions issued guidelines to regulate and encourage unionisation for delivery workers and other labourers in the gig economy. In late November, China’s Transport Ministry announced new rules requiring ride-hailing platforms to provide drivers with social insurance and make their earnings public, as a measure to protect workers’ rights and strengthen anti-monopoly regulation in the new service industry. In December, the Chinese authorities planned to review an amendment of the trade union law to allow ride-hailing drivers and food delivery workers to form unions. In the same month, Chinese provinces hiked minimum wages. Tech workers were also again in the spotlight. In early October, thousands of tech workers filled in a collaborative spreadsheet to share information about their companies’ work hours, revealing that most of them worked from around 10 am to 9 pm, five days a week—a slight improvement compared with the infamous ‘996’ schedule. However, overwork remains a very real problem. In December, 30-year-old Mao Xingyun, a leading video game programmer at Tencent, committed suicide, sparking outrage against the company’s culture of overwork. In the same month, after a year of regulatory crackdowns by Beijing on the country’s once vibrant internet industry, job cuts mounted in China’s big tech firms, with ByteDance, Kuaishou, and Iqiyi all saying they would trim their payrolls.

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(Sources: China Labour Bulletin; Collective Action in Tech; Global Times; Nikkei; Quartz; Reuters 1; Reuters 2; Reuters 3; Reuters 4; Reuters 5; South China Morning Post 1; South China Morning Post 2; South China Morning Post 3; SupChina 1; SupChina 2; SupChina 3; The New York Times; The Wall Street Journal 1; The Wall Street Journal 2; ZC-Labor.)