
Chinese censorship following the death of Li Keqiang

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About the Citizen Lab, Munk School of Global Affairs & Public Policy, University of Toronto

The Citizen Lab is an interdisciplinary laboratory based at the Munk School of Global Affairs & Public Policy, University of Toronto, focusing on research, development, and high-level strategic policy and legal engagement at the intersection of information and communication technologies, human rights, and global security.

We use a “mixed methods” approach to research that combines methods from political science, law, computer science, and area studies. Our research includes investigating digital espionage against civil society, documenting Internet filtering and other technologies and practices that impact freedom of expression online, analyzing privacy, security, and information controls of popular applications, and examining transparency and accountability mechanisms relevant to the relationship between corporations and state agencies regarding personal data and other surveillance activities.

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Key findings

- › As part of our ongoing project monitoring changes to Chinese search censorship, we tracked changes to censorship following Li Keqiang’s death across seven Internet platforms: Baidu, Baidu Zhidao, Bilibili, Microsoft Bing, Jingdong, Sogou, and Weibo.
- › We found that the presence of some keyword combinations in search queries triggers hard censorship (when all results are censored) whereas others trigger soft censorship (when results are only allowed from whitelisted sources).
- › Motivations behind censorship were complex and seemingly paradoxical, as terms both criticizing and memorializing Li were targeted.
- › Our results demonstrate China’s ongoing efforts to push state-sanctioned narratives concerning politically sensitive topics, impacting the integrity of the online information environment.

Introduction

On October 27, 2023, Li Keqiang, the former Premier of China, [passed away](#) due to a heart attack. His death invited commentators to [compare](#) Li’s legacy to that of Xi Jinping, while in China public memorials for Li were alternately [permitted](#) and [restricted](#). This report documents our discovery of Li Keqiang-related censorship rules on multiple Chinese platforms introduced in light of Li’s death. We found censorship rules relating to speculation over Li’s cause of death, aspirations wishing Xi had alternatively died, memorials of Li’s death, recognition of Li’s already diminished status in the party, and commentary on how Li’s death cements Xi’s political status.

Background

Li Keqiang (1955–2023) served as the Party Secretary of the provinces of Henan and later Liaoning before being appointed Vice Premier under former General Secretary Hu Jintao in 2007. Following Xi Jinping taking office as General Secretary in 2012, Li was promoted to Premier, a role he held from 2013 to 2023. With [a PhD in economics](#) from Peking University, some saw Li as a “[technocrat](#)” and a “[moderate voice](#)” within an otherwise conservative Xi administration. Over his ten years in office, Li’s power was circumscribed as Xi removed [allies of Jiang Zemin](#) and members of Hu Jintao’s [Youth League faction](#) and filled the government with loyalists. The replacement of Li Keqiang with former Shanghai Party Secretary and Xi ally Li Qiang at the 20th National Congress in 2023 signaled to some “[the end of collective leadership](#)” under Xi’s personalistic rule. Following Li’s death, obituaries published outside China referred to Li as “[less influential than his immediate predecessors](#)” and “[the least powerful premier in the history of the People’s Republic of China](#).”

Following Li's passing on October 27, Xi Jinping and other senior leaders [attended Li's funeral](#) at Beijing's Babaoshan Revolutionary Cemetery. While People's Daily eulogized Li as "[a time-tested and loyal communist soldier](#)," Li's death came during a period of [growing malaise](#) within China. Xi has [deepened personal control](#) over the Communist Party of China (CPC) during his third term in office, and [high youth unemployment](#) and a [declining property sector](#) have contributed to public concern about China's economy. Against this backdrop of tightened political control and economic uncertainty, many in China remembered Li as a [pragmatic economic planner](#) with a [human touch](#).

In the past, the death of prominent figures like Li Keqiang have provided Chinese people with opportunities for protest and dissent. The [death of Premier Zhou Enlai](#) led to a million people gathering in Beijing's Tiananmen Square in April 1976 to mark his passing and obliquely criticize Mao Zedong and the Gang of Four. In April 1989, public mourning in Tiananmen for [former General Secretary Hu Yaobang](#) grew into a larger protest movement demanding political, economic, and social reform. In February 2020, the death of COVID-19 whistleblower Dr. Li Wenliang produced [an outpouring of anger online](#) against authorities who had admonished Dr. Li for spreading "false information" about the emergence of a novel coronavirus in Wuhan.

Given the potential for public grieving to escalate into political activism, the Chinese government has attempted to manage citizens' responses to Li Keqiang's passing. Authorities have closely monitored [spontaneous memorials](#) in Li's hometown of Hefei in Anhui Province and universities across China have [warned students](#) against gathering to pay respects to the former premier. Controls on public mourning have extended online. State censorship instructions cautioned media platforms against permitting "[overly effusive comments](#)" about Li's death, a potential reference to the satirical use of "[high-level black](#)" [praise](#) to mask political criticism. The National Radio and Television Administration's Online Media Department issued similar instructions to online media platforms to promote an "[affectionate and orderly](#)" response to former General Secretary Jiang Zemin's death in November 2022. Despite these controls, Chinese social media users have found creative ways to memorialize Li Keqiang, including visiting the late Dr. Li Wenliang's Weibo page to offer condolences for "[another truth-teller with the surname Li](#)."

Methodology

In [previous work](#), we designed an ongoing experiment to automatically test for changes in the automated censorship of search queries across seven Internet platforms operating in China: Baidu, Baidu Zhidao, Bilibili, Microsoft Bing, Jingdong, Sogou, and Weibo. To perform this testing, we automatically pull the text of recent news articles from the web, testing these texts on each platform for whether they are censored when searched for and, if so, isolating the exact keyword or combination of keywords in that text that is triggering

its censorship. We call the triggering keyword or keywords the censored *keyword combination*. We found that the presence of some keyword combinations in search queries triggers *hard* censorship, i.e., the censorship of all results, whereas the presence of other keyword combinations triggers *soft* censorship, i.e., the censorship of results from all but whitelisted sources. For web search engines like Baidu or Bing, soft censorship restricts results to only Chinese government websites or state media, whereas for a social media site like Weibo, soft censorship restricts results to being only from those accounts with a sufficient level of verification. Whenever we discover a new censored keyword combination, we record it, the platform on which it was censored, the date and time of discovery, as well as whether it was hard- or soft-censored. For the full details of our methodology, please see our [previous work](#). Our data collection began January 1, 2023, and is ongoing as of the time of this writing.

In this work, we analyze keyword combinations discovered since the announcement of Li Keqiang’s death. Specifically, we look at those introduced in a period from midnight October 27 to 5pm October 31, 2023, UTC.

Findings

Following Li Keqiang’s death on October 27, we found a significant uptick in censorship surrounding Li on most platforms that we monitor. This finding is notable as Li’s name was, similar to other senior CPC leaders, already broadly censored on most platforms before his death. For example, Baidu, Bing, and Weibo already broadly soft-censored any search query containing Li’s given name, 克強 (Keqiang), and Jingdong hard-censored and Sogou soft-censored his full name 李克強 (Li Keqiang). Therefore, new censorship rules that we discovered on these platforms were necessarily either even broader than the existing rules or targeted content that managed to avoid mentioning, depending on the platform’s pre-existing rules, either Li’s given or full name.

Below we highlight and categorize many of the new censorship rules that we discovered. While in many cases we can say confidently that the rules were added since Li’s passing, since there would be no reason for them to have been censored before, in other cases, it is also possible that we may be unearthing old rules that we had not previously discovered due to never having previously tested content that triggers them.

Cause of death

Much of the censored content concerned Li’s cause of death or implicated Xi in Li’s death. For instance, Sogou soft-censored “克強 + 死因” (Keqiang + cause of death), “總理 + 死因” (prime minister + cause of death), and “克強 + 被害” (Keqiang + harmed), which concern the cause of Li’s death and whether he was killed. Sogou’s soft censorship of “習總 + 干掉” (General Secretary Xi + get rid of) and Weibo’s hard censorship of “近平 + 暗杀” (Jinping + assassination) target discussion suggesting that Xi had Li killed, although

those rules would equally censor conversation calling for Xi to be killed, and therefore we cannot exactly know the rules' original motivation.

Wishing it were Xi instead

While much of the censorship targeted the implication of Xi in Li's death, other censorship targeted communication wishing that it were Xi instead of Li who passed. Some censorship targeted direct wishes for Xi to die. For instance, Sogou simply soft-censored “[卒习](#)” (die Xi). Baidu conversely hard-censored “[习近平 + 祈翠](#)” (Xi Jinping + pray Xi dies). While the character “[翠](#)” literally means “jade,” its radicals when decomposed [form](#) “[习习卒](#)” (Xi Xi die) and can therefore be understood as a way to call for Xi's death while trying to avoid censorship filters.

Other censorship rules did not target Xi by name, but nevertheless the intention of these rules is understood. For example, Weibo soft-censored “[该死的没死](#)” (the one who should die isn't dead) as well as “[好人不长命](#)” (good people don't live long). Many platforms also have censorship rules targeting references to “[可惜不是你](#)” (unfortunately not you), which is also the name of [a popular song](#) by Malaysian singer Fish Leong. Weibo soft-censored all references to the song, whereas Sogou only soft-censored search queries if the song's name occurred in the presence of other, related words: “[克强 + 可惜不是你](#)” (Keqiang + unfortunately not you), “[为什么敏感 + 可惜不是你](#)” (why is it so sensitive + unfortunately not you), and “[可惜不是你 + 下架](#)” (unfortunately not you + censored). The last two are significant in that content moderators are censoring queries by users attempting to ascertain why the name of the song is censored. Following the [assassination of former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe](#) in July 2022, some social media users had also previously used the title of the song to obliquely refer to Xi.

Places and memorials

Many place names and references to in-person memorials for Li were censored in response to his death. Weibo soft-censored “[曙光医院](#)” (Shuguang Hospital) and Sogou soft-censored “[克强 + 曙光医院](#)” (Keqiang + Shuguang Hospital), referring to the [hospital in Shanghai](#) in which Li reportedly passed. It is not clear why the name of the hospital would be particularly sensitive. Content moderators may have interpreted queries about the hospital as attempts to ascertain other information about the cause of Li's death, or authorities may have been concerned that the hospital could become a potential place for a memorial. Following the death of Jiang Zemin in November 2022, [police reportedly assembled outside the hospital](#) in which the former general secretary had been receiving care.

Other rules targeted memorializing Li. For instance, Sogou soft-censored “[校园 + 聚集性悼念](#)” (campus + collective mourning). As discussed in the “Background” section, in the past, collective mourning has provided Chinese citizens with an opportunity to criticize

the state. Chinese authorities at the national and subnational level [adopt different strategies in response to mass protest](#), including suppressing dissent and offering concessions. Chinese citizens have continued to engage in [public dissent](#) under the Xi administration, despite strong controls on collective action.

Sogou also soft-censored “真诚 + 忍让 + 善良” (sincerity + tolerance + kindness), targeting [a quote](#) from a letter Li wrote in 1982 to a graduate of Peking University: “Some people never win with force, but they move people with sincerity, tolerance, and kindness. In fact, these are the real strong people in life.” The motivation for censoring this quote could be concerns that Li’s words could be interpreted as hinting at Xi, whose conservative leadership is known for [broad social controls](#), “[strongman rule](#),” and an anti-corruption campaign that has doubled as a [purge of his political opponents](#). Similarly, Weibo soft-censored the aphorism “人在做 + 天在看” (what people do + Heaven sees). Because this aphorism is [commonly understood to mean](#) that the deeds of both good and bad people will be known, content moderators may interpret the saying as indirectly praising Li and criticizing Xi.

Li’s former status

Some of the censorship highlighted Li’s already diminished status in the Party even before his death. Baidu hard-censored “弱势总理 + 习近平” (weak prime minister + Xi Jinping), a direct reference to Xi Jinping’s [reduction](#) of the authority of the office of prime minister during Li’s tenure. Sogou soft-censored queries containing “架空 + 总理” (figurehead + prime minister), another [reference](#) to Li’s restricted authority as prime minister.

Xi’s cemented status

While some censorship targeted queries concerning Li’s former status, other censorship targeted how Li’s death relates to Xi’s status as China’s paramount leader. As an example, Baidu hard-censored “习近平 + 集权于一身” (Xi Jinping + centralization of power), a reference to Xi’s [personalistic rule](#). Some censorship made reference to Xi as an emperor. As examples, Weibo hard-censored “当今圣上” (reigning emperor) and soft-censored “圣上” (your majesty), the former term being one which [prior to Li’s death](#) had been used to refer to Xi.

More generally, Sogou soft-censored “大选 + 主席” (general election + chairman). Although we had already discovered the simplified Chinese version of the rule prior to Li’s death, we only discovered the one made up of traditional Chinese characters after. The general secretary of the CPC, the senior most role in the party-state, is not directly elected but is instead [elected by the Central Committee](#). While the Chinese government has promoted “[whole process democracy](#)” as an alternative to liberal democracy, discussion of competitive elections for senior leaders is [politically sensitive in China](#). Sogou also soft-censored “中共大方向不改 + 就没有出路” (no change to the CPC’s general direction

+ there will be no way out), a reference to [an interview](#) with former Central Party School professor and exiled dissident Cai Xia on the future of China.

Conclusion

As part of our [ongoing project](#) monitoring changes to Chinese search censorship across seven Internet platforms, we tracked changes to censorship following Li Keqiang's death. Motivations behind censorship were complex and seemingly paradoxical, as terms both criticizing and memorializing Li were targeted. In China, criticism of senior leaders is prone to censorship. At the same time, out of a general motivation to prevent mass movement and because some senior leaders may be seen as potential rivals to Xi, censors restrict memorializing senior leaders, especially if doing so appears to challenge the legitimacy of Xi's rule. Most censorship we discovered was soft censorship, indicating that the censors did not desire to block all results for search queries concerning Li but rather direct users to state-approved content. The hard censorship we documented was often targeting content unconvertible to approved content, such as content calling for Xi's death or content implicating Xi in an assassination of Li. Despite monitoring Microsoft Bing, the only non-Chinese-operated platform featured in our study, we did not discover any new notable rules relating to Li on this platform. However, our [previous work](#) noted that Bing's rules were the most broad and thus were the least reliant on requiring a large number of highly specific rules to capture sensitive queries. This observation may provide an explanation for why we found no notable rules introduced on Bing in the aftermath of Li's death.

Our results demonstrate China's ongoing efforts to push CPC-sanctioned narratives concerning politically sensitive topics. Suppressing natural search results on the web and social media when searching for content concerning Li's death presents a distorted narrative for users attempting to discover information pertaining to Li and the CPC more broadly, impacting the integrity of the online information environment.

This work builds on our greater effort to automatically track real-time censorship in response to significant political events in China, including [Tibetan Buddhist events](#), the "709 Crackdown" on legal practitioners, the death of Nobel Prize laureate [Liu Xiaobo](#), and the [initial outbreak](#) of COVID-19 as well as its [continuing spread](#) across the globe. Our work makes use of novel [automated methods](#) which we use to exactly and efficiently determine which combination of keywords is responsible for triggering the censorship of sensitive text. Our ongoing monitoring can quickly recognize the introduction of new automated Chinese censorship in response to unfolding world events.

Availability

We have made all of the data collected from our ongoing measures beginning January 1, 2023, through the end of this report's data collection period available [here](#).

