**China blocks 16 websites amid coup talk**

**By** [**Calum MacLeod**](http://content.usatoday.com/topics/reporter/Calum+MacLeod)**, USA Today**

Posted 4/2/2012 04:11:25 AM

BEIJING — BEIJING Numerous websites remained shut down Sunday as the Communist government sought to penalize popular social-media sites for circulating rumors of a coup.

State-run Xinhua News Agency said Beijing police questioned and admonished an unspecified number of Internet users and detained six people for "fabricating or spreading" online rumors. The government shut down 16 websites, including two Twitter-like services that have more than 250million users.

The microblogging services -- known as weibo in Chinese -- Sina and Tencent were disabled so that their comment functions could "clean up" rumors that included talk of "military vehicles entering Beijing and something wrong going on in Beijing," the state Internet Information Office told Xinhua.

Twitter, like Facebook and YouTube, is banned because the Chinese government wanted more control over the services.

The Chinese websites went wild with rumors after the unexplained disappearance March15 of Bo Xilai, the former mayor of the economic powerhouse of Dalian and a provincial governor who was rising high within the party ranks until he vanished into the state security apparatus while in Beijing.

The son of a revolutionary Maoist leader, Bo was being groomed for appointment this year to China's top decision-making body, the nine-member Politburo Standing Committee, when he disappeared.

His fall came soon after a scandal made unusually public by [Chinese Internet](http://content.usatoday.com/topics/topic/Chinese+Internet) users: the attempted flight of Bo's onetime police chief. Wang Lijun spent a night in a U.S. Consulate in Chengdu in March but was refused asylum and handed over to China's feared state security. Wang, who built a reputation for busting organized crime, also disappeared like Bo. The Chinese government said he left his job to relieve "stress."

The government's actions indicate its difficulty operating with traditional secrecy because of the explosion of Internet use in China.

<http://www.usatoday.com/USCP/PNI/Nation/World/2012-04-02-PNI0402wir-china-internet_ST_U.htm>

**China amid weird, wacky building boom**

**By Calum MacLeod, USA TODAY**

Updated 3/28/2012 8:19 AM

YANJIAO, China – The apartment blocks rising skyward entice buyers by using foreign names such as "Oriental Hawaii," the European-style "Provence" and "Olive Valley." But the most exotic, eye-catching architecture in this Beijing suburb is very Chinese.

* [](http://i.usatoday.net/news/_photos/2012/03/27/China-amid-weird-wacky-building-boom-OJ1786NO-x-large.jpg)

By Calum MacLeod,, USA TODAY

The Emperor Hotel in Yanjiao is designed in the shape of three deities: the Chinese gods of good fortune, prosperity and longevity.

EnlargeClose

"It was voted one of China's ugliest buildings," Zhao Pingping says of the bizarre Emperor Hotel, which offers accommodations in the shape of three 10-story, bearded deities representing the Chinese gods of good fortune, prosperity and longevity.

"Some older residents hope the gods can bring good luck and security to our neighborhood, but I prefer modern styles. I could never stay there," says Zhao, 30, shuddering as she walks past the hotel with her infant son.

An urbanization drive perhaps unparalleled in human history has turned China into a continent-sized construction site. Some of the new buildings have won international acclaim, such as Beijing's "Bird's Nest" stadium built for the 2008 Olympics. But far too many are eyesores, complain architects and online critics.

When the architecture website [www.archcy.com](http://www.archcy.com/) asked readers to vote for China's top 10 ugliest buildings, Li Hu, a Beijing-based partner at U.S. Steven Holl Architects, said, "Choosing 10 is very hard, choosing a million is perfectly possible.

"Development is too quick. Architects don't have time to reflect," says Li, who blames the ugly edifices in part on interference by government officials, a lack of imagination by architects and corruption. "A more serious problem than the visual impact is that old buildings are being torn down and new ones built blindly."

China's imperial palaces, temples and Great Wall help make this country of 1.3 billion people one of the world's top tourism draws. But cities, where more than 50% of the population lives, have lost their historic hearts. Traditional structures have been shorn from cities and replaced by nondescript, blocky modernity.

Like the kitsch found along roadways throughout the [USA](http://content.usatoday.com/topics/topic/Places,+Geography/Countries/United+States), the more unusual new buildings in China were designed as calling cards for towns thirsty for attention from tourists and investors. Giant liquor bottles, teapots and lumberjacks may hardly shock Americans who've been to [Las Vegas](http://content.usatoday.com/topics/topic/Places,+Geography/Towns,+Cities,+Counties/Las+Vegas), but they rile some Chinese.

Developers copy designs ranging from Beijing's Tiananmen Gate to the [U.S. Capitol](http://content.usatoday.com/topics/topic/U.S.+Capitol) and the [Sydney Opera House](http://content.usatoday.com/topics/topic/Sydney+Opera+House), says Sun Lei, an architect and teacher in Shandong, east China.

"Many cities excessively pursue strange and unique buildings because leaders believe they are good for raising their city's renown and speeding the development of related industries," he says.

"Some designs can't be realized even in the West, but places in China spend hugely on them," Sun says, citing "foreign rubbish" such as the CCTV headquarters designed by Rem Koolhaus somewhat in the shape of a boxy upside-down pair of pants.

Exploiting China's rich heritage can be tricky.

The Fang Yuan building in northeast Shenyang resembles an old Chinese coin: round with a square hole in the middle. It won no accolades. In January, a [CNN](http://content.usatoday.com/topics/topic/Organizations/Companies/Publishers,+Media,+Music/CNN) website named the building one of the 10 ugliest buildings in the world.

"Beauty is different to different people," said Wang Zhanshan, chief engineer of another giant coin-shaped building underway in Guangzhou, the Guangdong Plastics Exchange. "If the building is discussed before and after its completion, it will have already proved it is a successful piece of architecture."

Among the most dramatic designs are the luxury hotels sprouting nationwide. Futuristic buildings are under construction on man-made Phoenix Island, a resort in [Hainan Province](http://content.usatoday.com/topics/topic/Hainan+Province). One developer is assembling hotels shaped like giant trees.

"Developers here are not constrained by preconceived notions of what a five-star hotel should look like," says Canadian John Jeakins, whose company, Hospitality Associates, helps Chinese clients design, decorate and manage hotels. "If your color scheme is purple, let's make a purple hotel. In the U.S., people might want to open a restaurant; here, people have more money, so they want to open a hotel."

One reason for the structural oddities is that the profession of architectural design has a limited tradition. Architect Wu Lianyong told the [*China Daily*](http://content.usatoday.com/topics/topic/China+Daily) that China's architectural style was greatly influenced by the [Soviet Union](http://content.usatoday.com/topics/topic/Places,+Geography/Countries/Soviet+Union), which discouraged charismatic individual design before its demise in 1991.

"It has now led to an outburst of fancy for the avant-garde, chic and novel," Wu says.

Many Chinese see the expenditure on excessively large official buildings, of sometimes bizarre design, as a problem, especially in poorer parts of China.

"So much money is wasted on fancy public buildings, when many people are still so poor," Yanjiao's Zhao Pingping says.

Other residents have warmed to the Emperor Hotel's three gods, now dwarfed by a development over the road.

"I was shocked at first," says Li Shuang, 27. "But now I'm used to it. I don't think it's ugly, and my 4-year-old daughter loves it!"

<http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/story/2012-03-27/china-buildings-emperor-hotel/53809972/1>

**'Chinese-style democracy' ensures Communists prevail**

**By Calum MacLeod, USA TODAY**

11/7/2011 8:43 PM

BEIJING – Between fashion shoots and shows across China, rising model Cheng Yuting tried on a new, political role this fall — running for office as a grass-roots legislator in Beijing. Her aim: "to explore the path of democracy when I'm young, and exercise a citizen's right and duty," Cheng, 23, wrote online.

* [](http://i.usatoday.net/news/_photos/2011/11/07/Communists-get-edge-in-Chinese-style-democracy-E7IKAT5-x-large.jpg)Wang Yujuan, left, a current local legislator, is among four Communist Party candidates competing for three seats in Beijing's Shijingshan district.

EnlargeClose

Journalism major Zhang Shiyu, 22, campaigned at People's University with posters and leaflets, saying if she were elected a "people's deputy" she would pursue social justice and supervise the government.

Neither of these would-be candidates even made it onto the ballots for a citywide vote today for local people's congresses — the lowest tier of China's parliamentary system and the only one directly chosen by the public.

China's people may be embracing social media, especially Twitter-like microblogging services, to effect change, but authorities remain vigilant in maintaining Communist Party control. Their methods range from disqualifying unwelcome candidates on spurious technicalities to threatening and detaining them, reports [Chinese Human Rights Defenders](http://content.usatoday.com/topics/topic/Chinese+Human+Rights+Defenders), an activist group.

The elections held every five years usually attract little attention because they are for spots on toothless local legislatures. But this year, spurred by the Internet boom and growing rights consciousness, hundreds and possibly thousands of Chinese citizens have run as independent candidates for the roughly 2 million seats in people's congresses nationwide. Elections began in May in some areas and will continue into next year.

Residents vote -- mostly symbolically -- in Yichang, part of China's Hubei province.

While many independents declined to be interviewed, some more experienced in challenging authority in China are speaking out. Han Ying, 37, promises to represent fellow residents who, like her, lost land and homes to development projects in northwest Beijing.

"The authorities should be supporting not suppressing us, as different voices better reflect grass-roots concerns, so the upper levels will better understand our situation," she says. "This will help build rule of law in China."

One of 13 independent candidates who coordinate closely, Han came closest to reaching the official ballot. The three candidates ultimately approved in her area are all Communist Party members, "but no one here knows them," says Han, who was detained for 10 hours in September after police broke up her group's meeting.

Han still hopes supporters will write her name into a box left blank for "other candidates" on the ballot paper but thinks police may prevent her from voting.

The failure of independents to get on Beijing ballots reveals "the local government is very conservative and scared and uses many illegal and legal ways to stop independent candidates from running in elections," says Li Fan, a civil society expert and director of the World and China Institute in Beijing.

Although independents have contested previous elections, and won a few, the numbers have soared this year, says Li, who estimates more than 500,000 non-Communist candidates are competing.

Actual power in China is managed behind closed doors by the ruling Communist Party and without troubling its people to vote. The party's 350-member [Central Committee](http://content.usatoday.com/topics/topic/Central+Committee) and its Politburo Standing Committee are the key organs through which it exercises power.

Chinese leader [Hu Jintao](http://content.usatoday.com/topics/topic/People/Politicians,+Government+Officials,+Strategists/World+Leaders/Hu+Jintao) is to step down as general secretary in 2012 and president in 2013. So China is preparing for a "transition" of both party and state top leadership in the next two years. Significant change is unlikely until the leadership picture is settled.

Which may be why in the Beijing district of Shijingshan, Cheng Jin, director of the electoral work office, has no time for troublesome independents.

"There are 1.3 billion people in China, if they all expressed their opinions, who would we listen to?" says Cheng, a Communist Party member.

The current system "is Chinese-style democracy, and the only way for a country with such a large population," says Cheng, a two-term people's deputy.

Ye Jingchun, 55, a part-time insurance saleswoman, and one of the 13 independents, is still courting "write-in" votes.

She says the 3,000 followers of her microblog make her efforts worthwhile. "They now know a bit more about politics, and know that they too can participate," she says.

<http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/story/2011-11-07/china-style-democracy-elections-Communist-Party/51115784/1>

**China takes knock-offs to a new level, copying entire stores**

**By** [**Calum MacLeod**](http://content.usatoday.com/topics/reporter/Calum+MacLeod)**, USA TODAY**

Updated 8/2/2011 1:11 AM

BEIJING — In millenniums past, China developed the compass, gunpowder and papermaking, among multiple inventions that have shaped world history. In recent years, it has grown infamous as counterfeit central, from fake films to bootleg bags, and from Disney characters to DuPont chemicals.

* [](http://i.usatoday.net/money/_photos/2011/07/31/Chinas-fake-Western-goods-now-include-stores-Q78PNMF-x-large.jpg) A bite of the Apple: Customers browse at a fake Apple store in Kunming.

EnlargeClose

Now some business people here are copying not just the products of hot Western brands, but the entire store, too. In the southwest China city of Kunming, officials found five Apple stores last month, including one near flawless "branch," yet none were authorized by the U.S. electronics company. Another fake Apple store operates in Chongqing City, the [*China Daily*](http://content.usatoday.com/topics/topic/China+Daily) newspaper reported.

A photo exposé posted by an American expatriate blogger in Kunming recently became a global Internet sensation and prompted the government's own belated inspection. For those in the front-line fight against China's pirates, these bad apples taste all too familiar.

"You get everything from McDonald's and Starbucks lookalikes to whole hotels copied," says [Chris Bailey](http://content.usatoday.com/topics/topic/Chris+Bailey), a China-based executive at intellectual property consultancy firm Rouse. "It's pretty normal, not just the look and decoration but … fake certificates too, and good enough to fool people," he says. And why so brazen? "The penalties don't outweigh the benefits."

Last week, an entrepreneur in the southern city of Zhongshan faced trial for running an Abercrombie & Fitch store, packed with fake merchandise, reported the *Zhongshan Daily* newspaper. The U.S. clothing company has yet to open a China store. China's market remains chaotic and counterfeiters still reap large profits, says Beijing intellectual property lawyer Han Fei.

"The government must educate the public to buy less fakes, improve overall moral quality, and revise the laws to raise fines," he says.

A fake Starbucks in Beijing, China.

China is well-known for counterfeiting. For decades, it has exported knock-offs of high-end designer bags such as Fendi, [Louis Vuitton](http://content.usatoday.com/topics/topic/Organizations/Companies/Personal+Products,+Petcare/Louis+Vuitton) and Coach, as well as fake Rolex and Omega watches and cigarette brands such as Marlboro. Pirated DVDs of American films can be bought on streets and the Web. Even fake collectible U.S. coins are minted.

But with China's economic rise, there been a boost in demand for Western brands. Snoopy and the Playboy bunny logo are often stitched onto clothing. If consumers can't find or afford [KFC](http://content.usatoday.com/topics/topic/Organizations/Companies/Food+and+beverage,+Agriculture,+Chemical/Kentucky+Fried+Chicken) or McDonald's, lookalikes include KMC and MKC, while several coffee chains mimic Starbucks' logo.

Plants in China's southern provinces near [Hong Kong](http://content.usatoday.com/topics/topic/Places,+Geography/Towns,+Cities,+Counties/Hong+Kong) have been caught producing imitation Windows software, Duracell batteries, Chanel fragrances and even Viagra.

A major obstacle is China's *shanzhai* culture, whereby some Chinese delight in making cheap imitations, sometimes in parody, of expensive, famous brands. At its most innocent, *shanzhai* celebrates the Chinese office worker who last month surprised colleagues by turning up in his homemade [Iron Man](http://content.usatoday.com/topics/topic/People/Fictional+Characters/Iron+Man) suit.

More seriously, fake Chinese products, such as food and medications, threaten consumers.

"There is too much tolerance of the *shanzhai*," says Paul Ranjard, a lawyer at Beijing's Wanhuida, a law firm and intellectual property agency. "It's infringement, but there is an ambiguous attitude" in Chinese society and its courtrooms, he says.

Even at Apple's flagship Beijing store, one of only four nationwide, there appears some grudging respect for the Kunming copycat.

"We were surprised, and had to laugh, as it looks just like our store, but I hope it is shut down soon," salesman Ge Heng says.

<http://www.usatoday.com/money/industries/technology/2011-07-31-China-counterfeiting-fake-Western-goods-stores_n.htm>

**Chinese villagers have hope for first real election**

**By Calum MacLeod, USA TODAY**

3/1/2012 11:26 PM

WUKAN, China – On a temple stage honoring a Taoist immortal, under a triple-tiered roof topped by dragons, Lin Zuluan made his modest bid for office.

* [](http://i.usatoday.net/news/_photos/2012/03/01/Chinese-villagers-have-hope-for-real-election-7D1319FL-x-large.jpg)Hong Ruiqing, 35, left, and her brother, Hong Ruichao, 28, are running for office in a rebel village now buzzing with democratic fervor.

EnlargeClose

I'm an old guy, without much ability, but I do have a heart that keeps close to the villagers," said Lin, 67, to the applause of hundreds of onlookers Wednesday.

They know he also has the courage to defy corrupt officials and hundreds of armed police after a violent standoff over land grabs, China's leading cause of social unrest. The unusual victories won by Lin and other protest leaders have turned Wukan, a coastal village in south China's Guangdong province, into an unlikely beacon of democracy in this one-party state.

For two months, villagers have taken part in a remarkably free electoral process that culminates Saturday with a poll for a new village committee. China's Communist Party elites select the country's top leaders, but allow villagers to elect councils with power over local issues, such as village finances and land use. Since they began in the 1980s, such elections have often proved more symbolic than competitive, and are heavily influenced by upper-level party members.

Even so, villagers here believe something different is happening in their election.

"The banner called this our village's fifth election, but this is the first real one, as the committee just elected itself in the past," said electrician Zhu Zhonggui, 45, after stump speeches from Lin and 21 other hopefuls. "They were corrupt and not democratic. I have genuine hope now. It's a new start for Wukan."

Analysts agree that this widely watched village may herald a new start for the country also.

"Wukan's problems are common in Chinese villages, but the way the Guangdong government tried to solve them this time is unusual," said Li Jingpeng, a [Peking University](http://content.usatoday.com/topics/topic/Peking+University) expert on civil society.

For 10 days in December, the 13,000 people of Wukan were bracing behind barricades to keep out a Communist government that usually handles such challenges with brute force. The people had chased out all government representatives from the town after the officials had sold farmland to developers.

Villagers chose their own representatives, but security agents abducted four of them. Then the authorities backed down, choosing compromise instead.

"That's why the 'Wukan incident' is significant," Li Jingpeng said.

Throughout China's countryside, where half of its 1.3 billion people live, the authorities' heavy hand usually stamps out dissent in the name of "maintaining stability." Just 3 miles north of Wukan, in Longguang village, people fear that may still happen.

"People are scared here, as they worry they will be punished for petitioning about our lost land," said Chen Hanqiu, 43, a rice farmer. "We must learn from Wukan. They were all brave and stood up to pursue justice and fairness."

That struggle cost the life of Xue Jinbo, whose death in police custody on Dec. 11 galvanized the Wukan protests.

"He always said, 'If you do something, go out in front and do the best you can, don't stand at the back,' " said his daughter Xue Jianwan, 21, a teacher who defied official pressure and stood for election Wednesday.

Wukan sends an urgent message to the rest of China about the need for smarter social management, said Yu Gao, China program director for Landesa, a Seattle-based group focused on land rights for the poor. "There are many, many other Wukans which are burning in silence, but at some point they will burst."

Private land ownership does not exist, but the state leases use rights to farmers and others. A Landesa survey released in February found 43% of villagers had land taken for non-agricultural purposes since the late 1990s, and 18% were forceful evictions. When land grabs occur they can cause major disturbances. Of China's 180,000 "mass incidents" in 2010, 65% involved land confiscations, Yu said.

Wukan now buzzes with discussions about electoral procedure. Hong Ruichao, 28, came home to Wukan in September to get married and planned to return to his small trading business in Shenzhen city. Instead, he was swept up in the protests.

"I must stay here and fight for our rights," said Hong, who campaigned for a slot on the village committee, and plans to run the village's first library. His sister is also running.

"I don't mind if I receive no votes, but to get real democracy, I need to participate," said Hong Ruiqing, 35.

Fisherman Wu Seqi, 48, is proud of Wukan's boldness. But real success requires villagers get their land-use rights or at least fair compensation.

"Unless the upper levels of government have free elections like us, how can they stop corruption and improve our situation?" he asked.

China's leaders aren't ready to experiment in elections above the village level, said He Baogang, an expert on Chinese elections at Deakin University in Australia. However, Wukan "shows people are thirsty for the waters of democracy," he said.

China's size and complexity preclude swift change, said academic Li Jingpeng. "We have taken 30 years to do economic reform. We will take at least 30 years to conduct some political reforms and achieve a modern, democratic system," he said.

<http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/story/2012-03-01/wakun-china-village-elections-democracy/53324076/1>

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| **Life in limbo for China's migrant families**  By David McKenzie and Kevin Voigt , CNN  March 7, 2013 |

Beijing (CNN) -- Liu Ming Xing is a student at Jin Wei Elementary School, where her favorite class is music.

The 13-year-old loves the class. "It makes me feel good," she said. And she says about her school life at Jin Wei: "This place is good, I like it. I want to stay here."

But she may have to leave. Liu's family migrated to the Beijing from the countryside for work, and Jin Wei is a school for migrants. But the surrounding community, once filled with families like Liu's, is under pressure as the government began dismantling the neighborhood to make way for new development. The school, funded by migrant parents, may soon close.

"The children of the rural migrants won't be able to continue to attend school in this area," said human rights lawyer Zhang Zhiqiang, referring to the area where Liu's family lives.

In China, families are registered as rural or urban. When rural migrants move to the cities they live in a twilight zone: They can't access healthcare, social security or even public education as part of the nation's "hukou" system, which requires household registration. Migrant workers still must be registered in their rural town of origin, not the city to which they move -- which keeps public services out of reach for many who have flocked to cities for work.

"What makes this bad is that it violates the rights of migrants to live and work here," Zhang said. "Secondly, and more importantly, it violates children's rights to get compulsory education because when parents are forced to move back to their hometown.

Beijing has made urbanization a main goal for increasing domestic consumption and closing the wealth gap. Hundreds of millions have moved to the cities from the countryside in search of jobs. Last year, the urban population of the world's most populous nation exceeded the rural population for the first time, according to the National Bureau of Statistics.

But activists say that the government's own policies are forcing these migrants out of cities and creating an underclass in China. About 250 million people -- equivalent to about 80% of the population of the U.S. -- are migrant workers in China.

It's the children of migrant workers, like Liu, who are often hardest hit. "They don't have a lot of connections back home. Their kids don't speak much of local dialect," Zhang said. "The government is forcing these people to move elsewhere without understanding their difficulties."

But registration of children is tied to their parents, so children of migrant workers eventually will have to return to their parents' home village to register and continue their education.

Beijing has pledged to reform the hukou system but is hampered because many social services are funded by local cities rather than the national government.

"The government is trying. They're definitely making efforts, they realize that this is a big problem," William Nee of the China Labour Bulletin said. "The problem is the finances of the health care scheme and education are all done at the local level, so I think it's very difficult for the government at the national level to say, 'Okay, let's just reform the hukou system'."

The political cost of reforming the hukou system is onerous. "The mayors and party secretaries of many major cities are concerned that if hukou is freed up, there will be a huge fiscal burden in providing services for these migrants," said Yukon Huang, senior associate of the Carnegie Endowment and former World Bank director of China.

"If you ask the residents, the established residents of the major cities, they would say I don't want more people coming, this may mean fewer job opportunities for us," Huang added.

"They also associate inflows of migrant workers in terms of crime, pollution or congestion. So this is going to be a political issue. And I think it is a political issue that requires very careful management," he said. "China has been very successful in avoiding some of what I call 'the urban sprawls' in places like Calcutta or Manila or even Bangkok. In that sense, it's going to be a new challenge for China."

If reform is on the horizon, it may come too late for Liu's family, who is watching their neighborhood being torn down as her father recovers from heart disease. "I just hope that my father can get well as soon as possible and that we will be okay," said Liu, breaking down in tears.

<http://www.cnn.com/2013/03/06/world/asia/china-migrant-families/index.html?iid=article_sidebar>