

## Rare act of dissent at China's annual parliament

By John Sudworth BBC News, Beijing  
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After 11 days of interminable speeches, followed by ritualistic voting to approve everything put before it, China's annual parliamentary gathering will, once again, leave little worthy of note in its wake.

That is precisely the intention of course because it is not meant to hold power to account.

That is kept tightly in the hands of the ruling Communist Party, and the key policies have long been decided in advance.

Nonetheless, every year, the meetings do provide an occasional glimpse of something meaningful for those watching closely.

Here then are two of them for 2016; the first, a rare act of dissent that could not be stifled and the second, paradoxically, an all-too-common act of obeisance that was mysteriously hidden from view.

Much has already been written about Jiang Hong.

As thousands of his fellow delegates began arriving in Beijing two weeks ago, with their rubber stamps at the ready, Mr Jiang had different ideas.

He had already given an interview to a Chinese online current affairs magazine, Caixin, suggesting that delegates should be free to speak their own minds, rather than be compelled blithely to follow the will of the party.

Government censors promptly deleted that interview, a clear demonstration that delegates are not free to do anything of the sort.

Undeterred, Mr Jiang proceeded to give another interview to the same magazine in which he described the censorship as "terrible and bewildering".

Published along with a daring photo of a mouth gagged with masking tape, that follow-up article was deleted too.

### *Hurried away*

But still far from cowed, Mr Jiang agreed to a BBC interview, conducted inside the meeting hall close to Tiananmen Square.

"If a society only listens to one voice, then mistakes can be made," he told us.

"A good way to prevent this from happening is to let everyone speak up, to give us the whole picture."

"I feel there's been an increase in things being deleted online - articles and blogs and posts on Wechat," he continued.

"This has made people worried about expressing their opinions."

Before we could finish our interview, Jiang Hong was hurried away by an official who insisted that we would make him late for his meeting - something other media outlets have experienced amid reports that delegates have been advised against impromptu discussions with the foreign media.

But Mr Jiang's determined insistence on exercising his right to free speech illustrates how China's annual parliament is not always quite so rigid and compliant as it first seems.

For the few who choose to use the opportunity, with the media access and at least the pretence of openness, it offers a precious moment in which they can push the boundaries a bit and, in doing so, highlight the debates that are often rumoured to be raging inside the ruling elite.

And Mr Jiang has done exactly that.

The response to his comments suggests that there is growing disquiet over the recent tightening of the restrictions on freedom of expression, with even one state-run newspaper weighing in with an old saying that "a thousand yes men cannot compare with one person who criticises frankly".

## As China's '2 Sessions' Convene in Beijing, Delegates Are Wary

New York Times (Sinosphere blog)

By DIDI KIRSTEN TATLOW

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BEIJING — To many people around the world, Chinese politics can seem murky, even treacherous. To people in China, it is hardly different.

In fact, “dazed” is how many Chinese felt as the “two sessions” — the annual meetings of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference and the National People's Congress — were getting underway in Beijing, according to a delegate quoted in Caixin, a financial magazine.

The problem: a recent, highly public attack on free speech, this time not against a little-known rights advocate, but against a wealthy and politically well-connected businessman who dared to criticize the leadership.

“Certain events” had cast a shadow over debate at the meetings, said Jiang Hong, a delegate to the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, a government advisory body which opened its annual session on Thursday.

On Saturday, the National People's Congress, the country's legislature, convenes. The two sessions bring about 5,000 delegates to Beijing, many of them politically, economically or socially influential, for significant, if closed-door, deliberations.

“The two sessions are for discussing important national matters and putting forward constructive opinions, not for the discussion of trivia,” Mr. Jiang, who is a professor at the Shanghai University of Finance and Economics, told Caixin in an article posted on Thursday.

“But because of the influence of certain events, everyone is a bit dazed, and people don't want to talk so much. That's what the atmosphere is like,” he said, without explaining what those events were.

The annual meetings come amid a tightening ideological atmosphere that is chilling speech.

On Sunday, the Cyberspace Administration of China, which oversees the Internet, shut down the Weibo account of Ren Zhiqiang, a real estate tycoon, which had nearly 38 million followers. The action came after Mr. Ren criticized increasing controls over the news media summed up by President Xi Jinping's phrase: “The media is surnamed ‘party.’ ”

The news media in China is controlled directly or indirectly by Communist Party committees.

On Weibo, Mr. Ren wrote: “When did the people's government turn into the party's government? Is it party dues that they're spending?”

He added: “Are things so divided into two camps? When all the media have a surname, when they don't represent the people's interests, the people will be cast into a forgotten corner!” He followed this with a crying emoticon.

Hinting at the reasons behind the chill that Mr. Jiang discerned, another article this week, in the newspaper belonging to the Central Discipline Inspection Commission, the country's powerful antigraft

agency, said that people should be allowed to speak truth to power and that the Communist Party could, and should, tolerate that.

Its title was borrowed from a 2,000-year-old phrase — “The promises of a thousand people aren’t worth the truth of one adviser” — from the “Shiji,” or “Record of the Grand Historian,” by Sima Qian.

It included, approvingly, tales from other dynasties of officials speaking truth to power.

“Don’t be afraid of saying something wrong,” it said. “Be afraid of saying nothing at all.”

The party, it told readers, had a tradition of “seeking truth from facts.”

In his interview with Caixin, Mr. Jiang said he was not personally concerned. “I’m not after anything and don’t want to be an official,” he said. “I won’t become rich. I’m just a grass-roots person without any worries.”

But in the veiled way of politics here, he seemed to allude to the issues raised by Mr. Ren’s situation and whether the media controls might stifle policy discussions and the exchange of ideas.

“The thing I’m most concerned about now,” he said, “is whether the points of view of delegates to the two sessions can be fully communicated by the media.”