

## Chinese politics &amp; policy

## China turns up heat on individual users of foreign websites

Guangdong man fined as Beijing crackdown moves beyond actions targeting corporations



Users in China are banned from accessing foreign websites © AFP

Yuan Yang in Beijing YESTERDAY

A Chinese man has been fined for accessing foreign websites in a rare punitive measure against an individual user, highlighting the government's tightening of internet freedoms.

Zhu Yunfeng was fined Rmb1,000 (\$145), roughly a fifth of the average monthly wage in his city of Shaoguan in Guangdong province, according to a state media report over the weekend.

His case comes as Chinese citizens as well as foreign businesses are being threatened by a wave of crackdowns on [virtual private networks \(VPNs\)](#), which are used to bypass Beijing's internet controls in order to access banned websites, such as Google and Twitter.

Mr Zhu had used the popular VPN app, Lantern, to access foreign websites, and was punished under a public security law introduced in 1997 that forbids access to the "foreign internet" without permission, the police statement said.

"Over the past couple of years, the Chinese authorities have made legitimate headway in shutting down and limiting the use of VPNs from within China," said Charlie Smith of Greatfire.org, a censorship watchdog.

"But we have rarely seen individual VPN users get targeted in this way," Mr Smith added.

In 2017 China passed new regulations stipulating that only government-approved providers could operate VPNs, and has since pushed multinationals to buy costly state-owned VPN services, sometimes by [cutting off](#) their private connections. That year, Apple removed [674 VPNs](#) from its China App Store.

However, internet users were unsure how far the authorities would go in cutting off ways around its "Great Firewall" of internet controls. The government heavily censors the internet to restrict citizens' access to information, but is also aware that companies [as well as universities](#) need to use banned platforms to do business and research.

In a statement to the Financial Times, the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology said it was "still researching" the implementation of its anti-VPN measures.

Mr Zhu’s case is a worrying sign of further deterioration of internet freedoms, said Maya Wang, a researcher at Human Rights Watch in Hong Kong. In China’s border region of Xinjiang there is already a de facto ban on the use of VPNs, and those caught using the software can be subject to arbitrary detention in “re-education” camps.

#### Recommended

According to a photo of a police notice circulated on social media, the police bureau of Rongchang district in the city of Chongqing last week summoned Huang

Chengcheng on suspicion of “illegally conducting connections to the international internet”. The Rongchang police could not be reached for comment.

Domestic analysts said that arrests would probably be made to punish political activities online, as opposed to the sole use of VPNs.

Last November Pan Xidian, a 48-year-old man from the southern city of Nan’an in Fujian province, was sentenced to 15 days in jail for using a VPN and writing “inappropriate” posts on Twitter, according to a copy of the police statement shared by Mr Pan. Over the past year, Chinese authorities have taken an interest in Twitter despite it being banned in China, and pressured activists to delete their posts.

“These are little pockets of freedom that people use to come up for air. The government is squeezing out these pockets,” said Ms Wang.

Research by the anti-censorship organisation Freedom House shows that at least 20-30m people in China circumvented the Great Firewall in 2018, and that VPN use increased during politically significant but censored events, such as the arrest of Huawei’s chief financial officer in Canada, or Taiwan’s local elections.

*Additional reporting by Nian Liu*

Get alerts on Chinese politics & policy when a new story is published

Get alerts

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2019. All rights reserved.

#### Latest on Chinese politics & policy

#### Follow the topics in this article

**US & Canadian companies**

**Chinese politics & policy**

**Asia-Pacific companies**

**China**

**Yuan Yang**