

# [***A dissident in Europe is enraging Beijing. Now Chinese police are coming for his social media followers***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BKD-9R41-JBSS-S4BF-00000-00&context=1516831)

CNN Wire

March 19, 2024 Tuesday 00:27Invalid date found for VDI: L19jb21wb25lbnRzL2FydGljbGUvaW5zdGFuY2VzL2NsdHgyMXQ5dzAwMGthbHFsOXZlb2ZmMzc XCEDOCID: 1 LNI: 6BKD-9R41-JBSS-S4BF-00000-00. Date output 'as-is'.GMT

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**Byline:** By Nectar Gan and Yong Xiong, CNN

**Dateline:** (CNN)

**Body**

Hong Kong (CNN) &#8212; For more than a decade, Lee has been able to circumvent [*China's*](https://www.cnn.com/world/china) internet controls to go on Twitter, now known as X, without getting into trouble with the authorities.

The Chinese lawyer stayed away from politically sensitive topics and rarely engaged with other users, treating the platform mainly as an archive to back up his postings on heavily censored Chinese social media.

He has continued tweeting even as Beijing intensifies efforts to control free speech beyond its Great Firewall of internet censorship, interrogating, detaining and jailing Chinese Twitter users who criticize leader Xi Jinping and his government.

Last month, in a sign of the widening crackdown on foreign social media sites, Lee too was summoned by police - not because of what he tweeted, but because of who he followed.

In an early-morning phone call, an officer invited Lee to "have tea" - a euphemism for police questioning - to talk about the "sensitive accounts" he followed on X.

At the police station, it became clear that the officer had only one target in mind: an outspoken and unfiltered [*Chinese-language X account*](https://www.cnn.com/2022/12/10/china/china-twitter-teacher-li-profile-intl-hnk/index.html) with a cat avatar and 1.6 million followers whose handle translates to "[*Teacher Li is not your teacher*](https://twitter.com/whyyoutouzhele)."

"The police asked me if I followed the account 'Teacher Li is not your teacher,' but I honestly didn't know," Lee said in an interview. He logged into X under the watch of the officer, found the account and unfollowed it on the spot, he said.

That account belongs to Li Ying, a Chinese artist turned dissident in Italy who [*rose to prominence in 2022*](https://www.cnn.com/2022/12/10/china/china-twitter-teacher-li-profile-intl-hnk/index.html) for live-tweeting the [*nationwide protests in China*](https://www.cnn.com/2022/11/26/china/china-protests-xinjiang-fire-shanghai-intl-hnk/index.html) against Xi's zero-Covid policy.

Since then, Li's account has become a go-to source for news censored in China. His followers send him photos and videos from Chinese social media before they are wiped by censors, and Li reposts them on X, offering a rare and unflinching glimpse into aspects of Chinese life that Beijing doesn't want the world - or its own citizens - to see.

Li's X feed documents everything from school scandals and factory fires to protests by migrant workers demanding overdue wages - creating a parallel world to the sanitized version of reality presented by the Chinese government.

For more than a year, authorities have tried in vain to pressure Li into silence: paying frequent visits to his parents, interrogating his friends, classmates and contacts on Chinese social media, and freezing his bank accounts and mobile payments, he said.

The 31-year-old quit his job and moved four times over concerns for his safety, but he has carried on tweeting.

And now, Chinese authorities appear to be going after his followers in China.

The escalating campaign against one of the most influential Chinese accounts on X comes as Washington becomes increasingly wary of Beijing's reach in cyberspace beyond its borders. On Wednesday, the US House passed a bill that could lead to a nationwide ban on [*Chinese-owned app TikTok*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/18/tech/tiktok-bytedance-china-ownership-intl-hnk/index.html) over national security concerns.

'Emergent notice'

X, like Facebook and other Western social media platforms, is blocked in China. But a small number of Chinese people - typically city dwellers who are more educated and tech savvy - still access it via virtual private networks to keep up with the world beyond the Great Firewall.

Like elsewhere on the platform since its takeover by Elon Musk, Chinese-language X is increasingly filled with misinformation, propaganda and pornography. But for Chinese speakers inside and outside the country, it still provides a valuable space to air political dissent, discuss social issues and - increasingly with accounts like Li's - find out what's really going on in the country of 1.4 billion people.

Li's popularity has surged since China's protests against Covid lockdowns, and his follower count doubled in the following year.

But on February 25, Li warned his readers in China that the Ministry of Public Security was going through his 1.6 million followers "one by one," and local police were summoning users to "have tea" once they were identified.

"I suggest anyone who feels scared to just unfollow me, you can bookmark one of my tweets or search my account name to read about the day's news in the future," Li wrote in an "[*emergent notice*](https://twitter.com/whyyoutouzhele/status/1761748049590690213)" on X.

He also urged users to better protect their accounts, so as not to give away their identity. Under the post, Li shared screenshots of private messages he received from followers who said they were interrogated by police.

CNN has reached out to the Ministry of Public Security for comment.

Li's warnings sent shock waves through the small but influential Chinese X sphere. In just a few days, he lost some 200,000 followers. Other prominent Chinese dissidents and activists on the platform reported a plunge in follower counts, too. The panic also spread to YouTube, an important source of income for many exiled dissidents, including Li.

"I certainly knew it would cause some panic, but I didn't expect the panic to reach such an extent," Li said. "It shows that fear is more deeply rooted in our hearts than freedom."

Li said he issued the warning because police harassment of his followers had intensified drastically in recent months. From December, he had received messages from more than 100 followers across China who said they had been summoned by police over his account.

Many of the followers facing interrogation had never tweeted about ***politics*** or criticized the government, and the only question the police had for them was why they followed Li, he said.

Yaqiu Wang, research director for China at advocacy group Freedom House, said police interrogations for merely following an X account is an escalation from the past, when X users were usually targeted for expressing their own views.

"To the authorities, following a certain account means that you are thinking of the wrong things in your head and should be punished, in other words, committing 'thought crimes,'" she said. "This is a clear sign of the Chinese government's further tightening control of freedom of expression in the country."

Documenting China

According to Li, the police summons ramped up after China's former premier, Li Keqiang, [*died of a sudden heart attack*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/27/china/china-former-premier-li-keqiang-died-intl-hnk/index.html) at age 68, just months after his retirement.

Li Keqiang's death sparked nationwide mourning. For many, it also offered [*a rare opening to air pent-up discontent*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/01/china/china-li-keqiang-death-xi-discontent-intl-hnk/index.html) with Xi, the supreme leader widely seen as having sidelined his former premier.

On X, Li Ying's account provided a window into the outpouring of grief and disaffection. Followers sent him photos of the flowers and notes left in tribute to the late premier in public spaces across the country. Some users said they were encouraged to act after seeing the posts on Li's account.

"(The authorities) were upset that I had so many posts about people mourning across China. That was something they were trying to underplay in mainstream media and hide from the public," he said.

Li said his account was targeted for a simple reason: it documents what's happening in China.

"Within China, the authorities have many ways to make things disappear in a heartbeat, be it a fire or a highway accident," he said. "But once it's posted here, it'll be seen by many more people and sometimes make its way back into the Chinese internet. This is something out of the government's control."

Wang, the researcher at Freedom House, said that, amid rising discontent at political repression, the slowing economy and other societal issues, more Chinese people want to know the truth about their country and are taking the risks to scale the Great Firewall to access free information.

"Beijing is growing increasingly insecure about its hold onto Chinese people ideologically and fearful of 'foreign influence' on people inside the country," she said.

The widening clampdown is a sign of weakness, not strength, of the party-state, and a reflection of the power individual activists wield, Wang said.

"The Chinese authorities are fearful of young people like Teacher Li, seeing him as a threat to its rule," Wang said.

"People often say that activism and political mobilization is not possible in China given the level of government repression, but Chinese activists are constantly adapting and finding new ways to express dissent and forge a resistance movement."

Lee, the Chinese lawyer who was questioned by authorities, said he knew little about Li's backstory or his role in the anti-zero-Covid protests prior to the police station visit - he only came across the account because it posted so much news from China.

"Teacher Li's content tells the truth. He's one of the few accounts on X who don't talk nonsense," he said.

According to Lee, the police officer remained "polite and civil" with him throughout the questioning, which lasted less than half an hour.

"I didn't feel any sense of fear because I've done nothing bad or wrong," he said. "And I followed Teacher Li right back the moment I stepped out of the door."

By Nectar Gan and Yong Xiong, CNN

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