

Don't Worry About Us, Worry About China: Why Facebook Went from Appeasing to Criticizing China

Maarten van der Plas, J.D. Candidate Class of 2022

Recent comments by Mark Zuckerberg—thus far hardly known as a China critic—suggest that Facebook is abandoning its charm offensive aimed at China and shifting toward its own flavor of an “America First” policy. After years of trying to enter the Chinese market, Zuckerberg now unabashedly invokes the specter of Chinese dominance in technology to thwart critics. For instance, Zuckerberg recently [told](#) the House Financial Services Committee that his Libra cryptocurrency experiment would “extend America’s financial leadership,” while warning Congress of China’s progress in cryptocurrency technology. However, some view Facebook’s change as a sleight of hand designed to [divert attention away](#) from the company’s mistakes.

“[China’s a great country](#)”—said Zuckerberg, employing the full extent of his Mandarin proficiency at a Tsinghua University conference in 2014. The next year saw Zuckerberg jogging through a smog-covered Tiananmen Square and meeting with President Xi Jinping in Seattle. During these years, Facebook worked hard to reverse China’s decision in 2009 to ban its website, a decision made amidst Uyghur riots in China’s Xinjiang province. But Facebook made little progress: Facebook did not utilize a [2015 permit](#) to open an office in Beijing and only briefly registered before quickly taking down a [subsidiary in Hangzhou](#) in 2018.

Facebook now seems to have abandoned its efforts to scale the Great Firewall of China altogether. Instead, Zuckerberg has started to characterize Facebook as the antithesis of Chinese authoritarianism. Speaking at Georgetown University in October this year—at an event named “Standing for Voice and Free Expression”—Zuckerberg [warned](#) that “China is building its own internet focused on very different values.” Zuckerberg called attention to “our services, like Whatsapp, [that] are used by protesters and activists everywhere,” in contrast to “TikTok, the Chinese app.... [where] mentions of these protests are censored.” Meanwhile, in August, Facebook [deleted](#) accounts attempting to undermine the protests in Hong Kong.

At the same time, Facebook is facing a litany of antitrust probes, hostile central banks, privacy investigations, and other challenges. Facebook is currently under three [antitrust investigations](#) in the United States,



respectively launched by the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), Congress, and a group of 47 attorneys-general. In Europe, governments and central banks have set a “[very high bar](#)” for regulatory approval of Libra. In July, Facebook paid \$5 billion to settle privacy cases with the FTC. And this month, California’s attorney general filed a [lawsuit](#) against Facebook, alleging non-compliance with inquiries over its privacy management. Further, prominent people, such as presidential candidate Elizabeth Warren and Facebook co-founder Chris Hughes, now argue that Facebook [should be broken up](#). It is against this backdrop that Zuckerberg tries to take the moral high ground by emphasizing American values and looming Chinese dominance—to conquer the hearts and minds of the voting public, if not the regulators and politicians.