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# XI JINPING'S MAOIST REVIVAL

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When Xi Jinping became paramount leader of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 2012, some Chinese intellectuals with liberal leanings allowed themselves to hope that he would promote the cause of political reform. The most optimistic among them even thought that he might seek to limit the monopoly on power long claimed by the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Had not Xi purged Bo Xilai, the ambitious CCP Politburo member who had evoked the rhetoric of the revolutionary past and led a movement to revive the teachings of Chairman Mao Zedong (1893–1976), the PRC's founder?

The liberals' hopes proved misplaced, however. After making himself one of the most powerful leaders in PRC history, Xi launched the largest ideological campaign that China has seen since Mao was in charge. Xi's ideology is a mixture of communism, nationalism, and Leninism that is meant to strengthen and discipline the CCP, reinforce its grip on power, maintain political stability, and (more nebulously) achieve the "China dream" of national rejuvenation.

Xi is trying to revive communism as an official ideology because communism's demise amid the reforms that followed Mao's death not only eroded the CCP's legitimacy and weakened its mass support, but also led some Chinese intellectuals to turn toward Western liberalism as an alternative. Nationalism finds a place in the official ideology not only because Xi is a strong nationalist, but also because nationalism has long had a reliable claim on the Chinese people's loyalty, and because it is a value that both the regime and its critics share. But nationalism is a two-edged sword: It mobilizes people behind the state, but it also gives them a ground on which to judge the state's performance. If lead-

ers fail to deliver on their nationalist promises, they become vulnerable to nationalist critiques. Even now, the regime is finding itself forced to play catch-up with the outpourings of nationalist emotion that have become prominent on Chinese social media.<sup>1</sup> Leninism, with its core idea of “democratic centralism” (in reality more centralist than democratic),

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takes on renewed importance in this climate of nationalist emotionalism because Leninism offers a way to keep a handle on things: It tells CCP members and ordinary citizens alike that compliance with Party discipline and Party policy is to be valued above all else.

Xi’s ideological campaign is making liberal intellectuals deeply uneasy. They fear the return of a Mao-style univocalism that will put Western ideas off-limits and impose official orthodoxy. But Xi cannot go “full Mao.” It is not in his power to return to a state of things

where all political legitimacy rests in the hands of a single charismatic leader. Ideologically driven repression offers no long-term solution to China’s problems, and cannot last forever. Still, Xi is intent on doing all he can to bolster the CCP regime’s legitimacy by using a Maoist emphasis on centralized political power and ideological control. Seen coolly and from outside, Xi’s gambit looks less like a show of strength than an embarrassing confession of regime fragility in a twenty-first century China buffeted by fears of economic slowdown, to say nothing of challenges by impatient liberals and a public angered by rampant corruption.

We can date the beginning of the ideological campaign from late 2012, when the nine-member Standing Committee of the CCP’s Politburo made Xi the Party’s general secretary and the head of its Central Military Commission (in effect, the commander-in-chief of the Chinese armed forces). In March 2013, the National People’s Congress (or NPC, the PRC’s national legislature) elected him president of the People’s Republic. The NPC has almost three-thousand members. There was one vote against Xi, and three other legislators abstained. But the presidency is largely a ceremonial post, useful for making state visits abroad, and Xi did not wait to assume it before making some things clear, at least in house. In early December 2012, shortly after becoming CCP general secretary, he gave a speech (subsequently leaked) to Party insiders in which he warned that the Communist Party of the Soviet Union—a bigger party, proportionally, than China’s—had collapsed because “nobody was man enough to stand up and resist” its downfall.<sup>2</sup>

Eager to avoid such a scenario in the PRC, Xi laid down several important markers, this time publicly. On 5 January 2013, he proposed his idea of the “two undeniabables,” insisting that “the historical period after [the 1978] economic reforms must not be used to deny the historical period before economic reforms, and the historical period before economic reforms must not be used to deny the historical period after economic reforms.” In other words, he rejected the idea of dividing the PRC’s history into a Mao era and a post-Mao era, with the subtext that any such division would tend to denigrate Mao and thereby skirt dangerously close to denying the legitimacy of CCP rule altogether. Xi was born in 1953, making him the first paramount leader whose birth postdates that of the PRC in 1949 (his two predecessors were born in 1926 and 1942, respectively). He belongs to the “princelings,” as the children of the PRC’s first-generation leaders are called. Aware of the risks that come with generational turnover, he has been careful to defend Mao’s legacy and eager to portray the PRC as boasting a record of proud accomplishments that stretches all the way back to its founding.<sup>3</sup>

Next, on 17 March 2013, Xi proposed his “three confidences.” He called for confidence in 1) the theory of “socialism with Chinese characteristics,” 2) China’s current path, and 3) its current political system. This was his answer to the “three crises of confidence” (in socialism, Marxism, and the Party) that had sprung from the reassessment of Maoism instituted by Deng Xiaoping during his time as paramount leader (1978–92). Xi was declaring that the CCP has a historical right to rule China—a right that he sought to place beyond doubt.

Since then, Xi has put out more communications on the ideological struggle. Couched for the most part as directives to the Party, these have circulated widely online. The most prominent, from April 2013, is generally known as “Document Number 9.” Bearing Xi’s unmistakable imprint and pointing the Party back toward Maoist ideas and tactics, this paper orders officials to fight the spread of subversive currents in Chinese society. These currents are seven in number, and to each corresponds one of the “Seven Don’t Speaks.” Among the forbidden topics are Western constitutional democracy, universal values of human rights, Western-inspired notions of media and civil society independence, ardently market-friendly neoliberalism, and “nihilistic” critiques of the CCP’s traumatic past. In August 2013, Xi made another widely circulated address at a national propaganda conference. Arguing that regime disintegration often begins in the realm of ideas and complaining of an intensification of Western cultural and ideological “infiltration,” Xi said that the entire Party, and particularly its leaders, must stress ideological work in order to avoid “irreparable historical mistakes.”<sup>4</sup>

Xi used Maoist imagery, rhetoric, and strategy to boost his own stature and revive public support for the Party. Mao Zedong, seemingly consigned to the bookshelf of history by Deng and his reforms, was dusted

off and restored to a place of reverence as the unifier of the nation. In a collection of speeches that appeared following the CCP's Eighteenth Party Congress in November 2012, Xi urged Party members to embrace "Mao Zedong Thought" lest China fall into chaos. On 26 December 2013, Xi honored the 120<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Mao's birth by lauding him as "a great figure who changed the face of the nation and led the Chinese people to a new destiny."<sup>5</sup>

Borrowing from Mao's playbook, Xi launched a campaign to enforce CCP authority. Harkening directly back to the Maoist era, when officials were required to "get close to the masses" and to become intimately familiar with their needs and demands, Xi urged Party cadres to "focus on self-purification, self-improvement, self-innovation, self-awareness" or, as he put it in his folksy way, "take a good look in the mirror, comb your hair, take a bath, and try to fix yourself up." The evocation of a Mao-style "rectification" movement—a tactic favored by the "Great Helmsman" when he wanted to purge rivals and enforce ideological discipline—was unmistakable. Xi, as observers noted, was "emboldening hard-liners who have hailed him as a worthy successor to Mao Zedong."<sup>6</sup>

### **Maoists Resurrected**

Among those cheered by Xi's ideological campaign have been Maoist ideologues. These may be divided into two groups. One might be described as a loose network of Mao admirers that includes officials and former officials, certain children of Party veterans, and ardently anti-Western academics and journalists. The other is a "new left" strain that not only harbors nostalgia for Mao, but draws encouragement from the critique of "unfettered capitalism" embodied in Bo Xilai's experiments as CCP boss of Chongqing. Maoists of both sorts see Mao's precepts as offering an alternative to market-oriented changes and the accompanying spread of values that are anathema to the Party and its traditions. Maoists' direct influence on the CCP leadership has been limited, but this has not stopped them from acting as inquisitors eager to hound liberal academics, journalists, and rights activists.

When the Politburo Standing Committee stripped Bo of his post (and eventually his Party membership) in 2012, his followers came under official suspicion and some of their websites and publications were shut down. But once Xi's ideological campaign gained momentum, the Bo faction made a comeback of sorts. Citing Xi's "two undeniabes," its members argued that the legacies of Mao and Deng are complementary: The former provided equality as well as a strong and "spiritual" version of Chinese identity, while the latter and his successors created a powerful economic base. Still, warned the Bo partisans, building that base had exacted a serious cost in terms of social and spiritual dislocation, while reform and opening had led to a loss of CCP ideological control.

These warnings provided the context for the popularization of a new term—“cooking-pot destroyers.” This expression referred to those who lived off the CCP’s sustenance while mindlessly trying to destroy the means by which the Party provided that sustenance. According to the Maoists, any Party member—no matter how senior—who threatened the Party’s cooking vessel should be forbidden to eat from its rice bowl. Wang Weiguang, president of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, threatened to use the “dictatorship of the proletariat” to wage “class struggle.” In early 2014, the *People’s Daily* even revived an old Maoist metaphor referring to the handle of a sword, stating: “Political and legal organs, as organs of state power for the people’s democratic dictatorship, are the hilt grasped by the Party and the people.”<sup>7</sup>

Xi’s ideological campaign set him apart from his immediate predecessors Hu Jintao (2002–12) and Jiang Zemin (1989–2002). Each of them had chosen to downplay ideology and to tolerate—within limits—the expression of liberal ideas. Under Xi, things were different. One news analysis used the advanced-search function on Baidu.com, the most widely used search engine in China, to show that under Jiang and Hu, terms such as “universal values,” “constitutionalism,” “civil society,” “democratic politics,” and “intra-Party democracy” had been popular, but were being used far less often by 2013. “Universal values” and “constitutionalism” were still cropping up, but most often in negative contexts. “Mao Zedong Thought,” meanwhile, was becoming more common as political discourse continued to harden.<sup>8</sup>

In the 1990s, Chinese media became freer as the state withdrew funding and told media outlets to start paying their own way with circulation and advertising revenue. Looking for gripping stories to cover, journalists began reporting on social injustice, corruption, environmental degradation, and public-health crises. Although an embrace of press freedom as it is known in the West was never on the table, the media did question whether “supervision by public opinion” (the Chinese cognate of Western-style “watchdog journalism”) should always be subject to the Party and its political demands.

Xi Jinping wants to walk this back. He presses journalists to stop criticizing the CCP, demanding instead that they “speak with one voice” and offer “positive reporting” in support of Party policies. In his August 2013 speech at the propaganda conference, he even flatly said that “politicians [should] run the newspapers.”

One of his first targets was the well-known liberal publication *Southern Weekly*. State censors altered beyond recognition its 2013 Chinese New Year’s editorial, which was supposed to have been titled “The Chinese Dream: The Dream of Constitutionalism.” Every mention of constitutionalism—all eighteen of them—was stripped out, and the censors added embarrassing factual errors in new text that the magazine’s editors never even had a chance to review. In response, *Southern Weekly*

staffers mounted a protest that went on for days. This made international headlines and spurred a nationwide outcry defending freedom of speech. But in the end, the editor was replaced by a propaganda functionary and the formerly outspoken *Weekly* lined up with the Party, carrying only “positive and mainstream” stories and no negative coverage. Tuo Zhen, the CCP official who played a key role in rewriting the New Year’s editorial, was promoted in 2015, another signal that the Party and the state remained committed to tighter media control.

In order to ensure compliance, editors and reporters across China are now required to attend ideological training that imparts the “Marxist view” of journalism. They even have to pass a multiple-choice examination that tests their knowledge of the CCP’s myriad slogans. While foreign correspondents who criticize Chinese leaders find it increasingly difficult to get their visas renewed, Chinese journalists now risk being fired and even jailed if they publish stories that violate Communist Party policy. In the spirit of “pour encourager les autres,” the regime made an example of dissident journalist Gao Yu, sentencing her to nine years in prison for allegedly leaking state secrets (“Document Number 9”) to overseas contacts in 2014.

### **Locking Down the Information Environment**

Well aware of the importance of social media and the Internet, with their capacity for making stories “go viral,” the government has moved to put its hand on nearly every part of the digital world in China. Personally taking charge of the newly formed Central Leading Group for Cyberspace Affairs in 2014, Xi called for making China a cyber superpower able to counter what he sees as the anti-Chinese forces of the West and their plans for the digital subversion of the PRC. For this purpose, Beijing insists on the concept of “cyberspace sovereignty,” meaning the right of each state to regulate its own cyberspace and to manage the flow of information into, around, and out of its country, as new communications technologies shatter spatial and temporal constraints and blur the distinctions between author, publisher, and audience of news and information. This concept envisions an Internet world in which authorities patrol online discourse like border-control agents to keep the enemy out and draw the hundreds of millions of Chinese who regularly go online—the world’s biggest group of Internet users—away from the interconnected global information commons.

Internet control extends to both content and technology. The party-state pays more than two-million people—its “Internet army”—to advance regime narratives and block “unhealthy” online content. In addition to online police and censors, there are content creators such as the “Fifty-Cent Party,” a group of Internet-literate young people who trawl the Web for negative news and opinion about the PRC, and then refute it

with positive information. Their name comes from their reputed rate of pay for these piecemeal efforts: fifty Chinese cents for each post. In July 2015, the government released a draft cybersecurity law, supposedly meant to strengthen users' privacy against hackers and data resellers, but also giving the authorities more power to investigate and block information deemed illegal. A month later, the Ministry of Public Security announced that it was setting up "cybersecurity police stations" inside important websites and Internet firms in order to "catch criminal behavior online at the earliest possible point."<sup>9</sup>

These efforts have teeth: In September 2013, police in Beijing arrested Charles Xue, a Chinese-American businessman and prominent blogger. The official charge was soliciting prostitutes, but Xue's real offense was his custom of sharing his musings about corruption and political reform with his more than twelve-million followers on Weibo, China's version of Twitter. After his detention, Xue was humiliated by being made to appear on Chinese television to recite a confession of his "crimes."

Anxious to control Internet technology, Beijing has used policy and even direct funding in order to cultivate a domestic semiconductor and server industry, working with e-commerce giant Alibaba, online conglomerate Tencent, and information aggregator Sina. Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) have been shut down, and the Great Firewall of China stands between Chinese Internet users and any sites that authorities deem "sensitive." As a result, the sites that people across the world use to stay connected, including Gmail and other Google services, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, are generally unavailable in China. In their place are such heavily monitored Chinese counterparts as Baidu, Sina Weibo, Wechat, QQ, Youku, and Renren, where criticisms of the Party are censored and can even lead to police interrogation or jail time.

The China-only social-media sites are not spontaneous developments. Rather, they are creations of a party-state that wants to maintain central observation and control while giving the popular demand for online communities an outlet. To create a climate of fear and hence self-censorship, the government requires all Internet users who live in China to register under their real names. The anonymity that is so prominent a feature of the social-media scene in many countries is not allowed in the PRC. Users know that they live in a surveillance society, and they are warned about the dangers of accessing "unhealthy content" or forbidden websites. Authorities commonly suspend or close accounts that post prohibited items. Cybercafés are held responsible for the activities of their patrons.

Chinese Internet users call the Internet available to them a LAN (Local Area Network) as it becomes ever more isolated. In a play on words, they parody the oft-seen CCP poster that reads "Only the Party makes China strong" with the expression "Only the Party makes China walled"—in Chinese, the word for "strong" and the word for "wall" sound much the



same. One Chinese blogger warns, “The wall fences in a Chinese information prison where ignorance fosters ideologies of hatred and aggression. If the firewall exists indefinitely, China will eventually revert to what it once was: a sealed off, narrow-minded, belligerent, rogue state.”<sup>10</sup>

## Propaganda on Campus

Another target of the ideological campaign is higher education. Curricula and speech at Chinese universities have always been tightly controlled, though from time to time students and teachers have pushed back against the limits. While such pushback created space for freer expression during the Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao eras, the propaganda authorities under Xi have gone into overdrive to impose a “rectification” on higher education. Campuses are to exemplify not diversity, but uniformity of thought.

The rectification campaign began on 13 November 2014, when the editors of the CCP-run *Liaoning Daily*, a northeastern newspaper, published an open letter accusing university teachers across the country of being ideologically lax and overly “negative” toward China. The editors claimed that the story had its roots in a Web post they received from a student who was moved to write after the paper in October 2014 asked readers to comment on the question “How should China be discussed in the university classroom?” The student claimed that she often heard “bad things” about China in her courses, and that her teachers constantly used the PRC as a negative example.

The editors wrote that they wondered how common her experience was, and to find out sent reporters to twenty schools in five cities. These reporters audited almost a hundred classes over a two-week period. Their conclusion was that too many teachers were too critical of Chinese society and the Party and too complimentary toward Western ideas. The paper further claimed that it had results from a social-media survey in which 80 percent of university students said that they had encountered teachers—especially in the fields of law, management, economics, philosophy, and the social sciences—who were “fond of airing complaints” and “blackening” China’s reputation. The phenomenon of “being scornful of China” was real and worthy of concern, concluded the editors. The problem was a lack of “three identities” in university classrooms: theoretical identity with CCP history and ideology, political identity with the CCP, and emotional identity with the CCP and its policies.<sup>11</sup>

Many commentators on social media found the *Liaoning Daily* piece a dangerous encroachment on academic freedoms that were already under serious threat. Xi did not agree. Weighing in at a Party conference on higher education in December 2014, he called for “positive energy” and a “bright attitude” toward the CCP and the PRC, urging the Party to turn universities into hotbeds of Marxist studies. On 19 January 2015, the CCP Central Committee and the State Council circulated (as “Docu-

ment Number 30”) a summary of Xi’s speeches in which he demanded that the Party strengthen its control over universities and cleanse them of Western-inspired liberal ideas. Calling the Party “not afraid to draw the sword and take the responsibility of guarding the soil,” the document demanded that college teachers and students embrace the “three identities” in order to conform themselves to the communist regime. Textbooks were to be standardized and political training for faculty increased. Subjects related to the study of society—economics, political science, law, journalism, sociology, and ethnic studies—were to be handled in a politically correct manner at all times.<sup>12</sup>

To implement Xi’s calls, Education Minister Yuan Guiren in late January 2015 proposed “two reinforcements.” What this boiled down to was the regime restricting the use of Western sources in teaching and more aggressively pushing its official communist ideology in universities. “There is no way that universities can allow teaching materials preaching Western values and precepts into our classrooms,” said the minister, “nor should slanders and smears against Party leaders and socialism be tolerated on campus.” His reference to “slanders and smears” was aimed at intellectuals who dare to criticize the CCP and openly call for constitutional democracy. Yuan warned that young teachers and students are particularly susceptible to infiltration by hostile forces and that the party must stay vigilant against “ideological risks.”<sup>13</sup>

After Yuan’s speech, the Education Ministry got to work. In early March, notices began going out across China’s educational establishment, from universities in Beijing to provincial departments of education. The ministry wanted staff and teachers to fill out forms telling what they knew about “foreign original textbooks,” a term that means both books published abroad and books originally written in non-Chinese languages, then published within China as translated Chinese-language editions. Professors had to list such books and then detail the types of courses that employed them, the share of the total curriculum formed by such courses, the channels through which the books had been acquired, and the procedures that schools had used in deciding to approve them for classroom use. The main targets were the social sciences and the humanities.<sup>14</sup>

As part of its campaign, the regime in July 2015 decreed that senior officials from the municipal level on up would have to give a formal lecture to university students at least once per semester. Every official so assigned would have to submit a draft lecture to local propaganda bureaucrats two weeks before the talk, so they could verify that topics such as “socialism with Chinese characteristics,” the “China Dream,” and key Xi Jinping speeches would receive proper coverage. The lectures began in early September 2015, when the CCP secretary of Guizhou Province spoke to students at Guizhou University.

The campaign has had a chilling effect on Chinese academia: Scholars censor themselves or avoid certain topics altogether. Ideological vigilan-

tes have brought some professors down. Wang Congsheng, a professor of law in Beijing, was detained and then suspended from teaching after posting online criticisms of the Party. Qiao Mu, a journalism professor at Beijing Foreign Studies University, was yanked from the classroom and relegated to clerical drudgery for advocating Western-style journalism and affiliating himself with liberal civil society groups. Political loyalty has become a primary factor not only in whom colleges hire, but in whom they admit as students. In 2016, the Education Ministry began requiring for the first time that universities make applicants who pass written exams submit to a personal interview meant to test their political fitness. Universities are even authorized to send investigators to an applicant's hometown to look into political attitudes. In northwestern China, one school became so enthusiastic about the new ideological conformity that as 2015 neared an end it banned any observance of Christmas, calling it a "kitsch" foreign celebration unbecoming Chinese traditions, and made students watch communist propaganda films instead.

### **The New New Authoritarianism?**

Presiding over the severest and most sustained crackdown on freedom of expression in years, Xi has tried to turn the media and educational institutions into vehicles for the dissemination of Communist Party policy. One observer has labeled the campaign "the most relentless offensive against the tertiary education sector since the 1990s," and "the Great Purge of Tertiary Institutions." It is strongly reminiscent of Mao's "Pluck out the white flag, raise the red flag!" movement between 1958 and 1960 and reveals that China is now the grips of a miniature reprise of the Cultural Revolution through which Mao turned the country upside-down starting in 1966.<sup>15</sup> There has not yet been anything matching the scale and intensity of what happened back then, when all universities were closed as Mao's youthful extremists, the Red Guards, ran riot and targeted intellectuals for public humiliation and exile to rural labor camps. But the current crackdown is bad enough, and represents a step backward from the guarded openness enjoyed under Xi's immediate predecessors.

Historian Xiao Gongqing calls the Xi regime "neauthoritarianism 2.0, an enhanced Deng Xiaoping model."<sup>16</sup> Xi Jinping, in this view, is using Mao's methods to walk Deng's path. Xi has tightened the Party's ideological grip in order to prevent what Xiao Gongqing terms the "explosion of political participation" that Deng's economic reforms threaten to unleash. In China, which over the past century has developed a tradition of revolutionary populism, the boiling point is very low. This view holds that reform can proceed smoothly and be kept from tipping over into uncontrollable pressure for change only if the Communist Party and the state remain strong and firmly in control. In Xiao's view, reformist statesmen who take the long view of how to achieve prosper-

ity and democracy must use the iron hand to keep political participation at bay, avoiding the problem of reform that slips into revolution and giving the system good prospects for a soft landing. In this analysis, neoauthoritarianism is necessary if China is to avoid disaster during its long march toward democratic modes and orders.

Political stability and regime survival are Xi's major concerns precisely because he recognizes how much deep-seated discontent and resentment the communist party-state faces in China today. Pollution and corruption are severe, income inequality is wide and growing wider, and various social tensions are simmering. The CCP is a victim of its successes as well as its failures. No country can modernize as rapidly as China has in just a few decades without suffering vast social consequences. Xi took office just as an economic downturn was beginning and growth was slowing. Those left behind by dizzying economic change, already in an unsettled position and least able to cope with new shocks, were the largest and most immediate threat to regime legitimacy that Xi had to worry about. And they were precisely the sort of people likely to protest by waving placards blazoned with quotes from Mao.

Xi's ideological clampdown can be understood as a form of risk reduction: He knew upon taking power that tough economic times—and thus higher chances of social unrest—most likely lay ahead, and was eager to do all he could to shield the regime from possible overthrow or disintegration.<sup>17</sup> His clampdown caught in its vise not only liberals, but also radical leftists. Xi shuttered their websites too, closing not only Utopia and Mao Flag but also *The East Is Red*, a key leftist voice that authorities stilled in May 2015. One blogger called this last move “a clear shot across the bow to any other political activists in China, regardless of their goals or ideology.”<sup>18</sup>

Under Hu Jintao, the maintenance of political stability became the regime's top goal. Xi has only intensified this trend. His insistence that “stability overrides everything” is meant to “nip every element of instability in the bud.”<sup>19</sup> Western influence in the ideological sphere is one such element. When Hong Kong—a “special administrative region” of the PRC supposedly operating under a “one country, two systems” approach—erupted in prodemocracy protests in late 2014, Beijing accused “external forces” of causing the unrest. The Chinese stock market's mid-2015 stumble was also blamed on a Western conspiracy—this one supposedly led by U.S. financial institutions, even though foreigners are generally banned from investing in the Chinese stock market. Lin Zuoming, a member of the CCP Central Committee and the head of China's largest aerospace and defense conglomerate, openly charged that the market's problems were the result of covert U.S. economic warfare against the PRC.<sup>20</sup> The U.S. goal, he said, was to topple the CCP and the PRC by torpedoing China's economy.

Such a dramatic discourse of fear leads to a general sense within the Party that the shadows are flickering everywhere, that trouble is on the

way, and that enemies are lurking on all sides. National security has become regime security, which “means the security of the party or political security.”<sup>21</sup> Therefore, the Xi years have featured a growing series of assaults against political activists and dissidents, particularly human-rights advocates. During a single weekend in July 2015, a nationwide police sweep run by the Ministry of Public Security detained more than a hundred rights-defense lawyers from fifteen cities. A Xinhua News Agency article headlined “Uncovering the Dark Story of ‘Rights Defense’” said that the operation was meant to

smash a major criminal gang that had used the law as a platform to draw attention to sensitive cases, seriously disturbing social order. These lawyers publicly challenged the court . . . and mobilized troublemakers to rally petitioners . . . outside the court.<sup>22</sup>

But legal scholar Stanley Lubman finds that “the current assault on [rights-defense lawyers] is the latest and strongest expression to date of the Chinese leadership’s anxiety about social stability.”<sup>23</sup>

The clampdown campaigns have produced mixed results. Arrests and propaganda can deter dissent: According to a 2014 survey of the political attitudes of students who attended propaganda courses at a Chinese university, “A sufficient amount of propaganda can serve to demonstrate a regime’s strength in maintaining social control and political order, thus deterring citizens from challenging the government, even if the content of the propaganda itself does not induce pro-government attitudes or values.” These students were “more likely to believe that the government is *strong*, but not more likely to believe that the government is *good*.”<sup>24</sup> A Chinese student came home from doing graduate work at Harvard to discover that

Chinese leaders might believe that isolating grievances helps them contain the society-wide discontent. In reality, however, it only leads to a vacuum of trust that ultimately undermines the Communist Party’s own credibility.

Increasingly, the party’s aggressive censorship strategy betrays a mounting anxiety over its ability to manage popular discontent. Behind the grandiose discourse of the “Chinese Dream” in newspaper editorials and political meetings are talks of fear of a post-Soviet-style color revolution.<sup>25</sup>

The impact of the CCP’s effort to reassert control over academia has been limited. Universities hold mandatory political-education classes, but students and faculty snooze through them and go out to face unchanged economic and social realities. The dominant trends in Chinese higher education remain internationalization and experimentation with different models of liberal-arts education. In the Internet age, moreover, muzzling discontent is nearly impossible. The regime knows this; its real aim, therefore, is less killing criticism than preventing any collec-

tive action that might be based on it. As one study of the real-time censorship in Chinese websites found, the purpose of the censorship was to make collective action less likely by severing social ties whenever any collective movements were in evidence or expected. The regime used aggressive online censorship to counter such actions by eliminating discussions associated with events that seemed as if they might spark collective action.<sup>26</sup>

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***Authoritarianism 2.0 may be about indefinitely extending authoritarianism rather than gradually paving the way for some kind of transition to more democratic ways of governing.***

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The ideological-repression campaign is not without cost or risk to the regime. Constricting online freedom could backfire by breeding too much resentment and distrust. It could also hold back China's development by making it harder for businesspeople and scientists to access research and other online resources that make the Internet a powerful force for productivity and innovation.

President Xi may have stigmatized universal values with the label “Western” as a ploy meant to spread the impression that freedom is somehow “un-Chinese.” This does not mean, however, that he has successfully advanced a coherent ideological alternative to ideals of constitutionalism, ordered liberty, human rights, and free nonviolent political competition. While the CCP still nominally embraces communism, the regime increasingly resorts to Confucianism, with its convenient emphasis on benevolent governance in a hierarchical order.<sup>27</sup> Confucianism and communism, however, coexist uneasily because the communist emphasis on equality goes against Confucian principles of hierarchy.

Although Xi has repeatedly said that cadres and officials should look to history for lessons and moral principles, Professor Qi Fanhua of Renmin University has warned that using history and traditional culture as guidelines for modern governance can have serious drawbacks. One inherent flaw in Chinese political history is an emphasis on attaining power at any cost. The Chinese classics are replete with stories of how emperors, courtiers, and other figures battled for power through sometimes insidious means. This feature of classic Chinese traditions, notes Qi, is in conflict with modern ideas of how a state should be governed. Chinese leaders cannot simply use methods from prosperous ancient dynasties to rule a modern society.<sup>28</sup> The confusion is demonstrated clearly in the socialist core values released by the Xi leadership in 2013 and posted everywhere in China, which include “prosperity, democracy, civility, harmony, freedom, equality, justice, the rule of law, patriotism, dedication, integrity, friendship.” The list reads more like an ad hoc patchwork—a grab bag of good things—than something that flows from a coherent political vision.

Neoauthoritarian thinkers like to predict that reforms can be expedited

if a truly authoritative patriarch pushes them, but that presupposes a will to reform, and Xi has shown no evidence of harboring any such intention. Pressing a power-consolidation agenda is not the same as pressing a reform agenda. As noted above, historian Xiao Gongqing has been willing to credit the possibility that Xi does have long-range intentions that are friendly to democracy, but even Xiao is alarmed by the president's calls for beefed-up executive control and a return to class-struggle ideology. Authoritarianism 2.0, it seems, may be about indefinitely extending authoritarianism rather than gradually paving the way for some kind of transition—however hazy and distant—to more democratic ways of governing.

## NOTES

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