

The Ideological Campaign in Xi's China

Rebuilding Regime Legitimacy

ABSTRACT

President Xi Jinping has launched the largest ideological campaign in post-Mao China, which has brought a Maoist revival. But Xi is not in a position to make a full return to the Mao era because ideologically driven repression offers no long-run solution to China's problems. Drawing on elements of Mao's legacy, Xi aims to rebuild the regime's legitimacy when it is increasingly vulnerable to economic slow-down and public anger about corruption, income disparity, and pollution, an embarrassing confession of regime fragility.

KEYWORDS: Xi Jinping, Maoism, ideological control, Communist Party of China, regime legitimacy

TAKING THE HELM OF THE CHINESE COMMUNIST PARTY (CCP) in 2012 and rising as the most powerful leader since Mao Zedong, President Xi Jinping has launched the largest campaign in post-Mao China to champion an official ideology mixing communism, nationalism, and Leninism. The goal is strengthening his dream of a great national rejuvenation for China. Communism has always been the official ideology of the CCP. But post-Mao market-oriented economic reform resulted in the widespread demise of communist ideology. It is truly astonishing that after several decades of communist authoritarian rule, the once-assumed notion of a Chinese nation uniting behind and sacrificing for a communist utopia was quickly discredited among many Chinese people. The collapse of public faith in communism not only weakened mass support for the party and threatened to erode its basis of legitimacy.¹ It also gave opportunity for the advancement of alternative

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1. Jie Chen, "The Impact of Reform on the Party and Ideology in China," *Journal of Contemporary China*, no. 9, Summer, 1995, pp. 22–34.

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visions when some intellectuals turned to Western liberal ideas and called for Western-style democracy. In response, the ideological campaign is determined to restore communism as an official ideology and reestablish the faith of the Chinese people in the Communist Party's leadership.

Nationalism is included in the ideological campaign not only because Xi is a strong nationalist but also because nationalism has provided the most reliable claim on the Chinese people's loyalty and the values shared by both the regime and its critics. Coming to a renewed realization of the power of nationalism after communist ideology crumbled, the communist regime has tried to link the nation-state-centered loyalty of the Chinese people to the modernization drive. By identifying the communist party-state with the Chinese nation, the regime wants to make criticism of the party an unpatriotic act. Young people, usually cynical about other creeds pushed by the regime, are particularly vulnerable to the renaissance of nationalism. They have always rallied behind the communist state when it positioned itself as the defender of China's national interests, pride, and territorial integrity.² Rejecting the demands for democratic reform on the grounds that liberal democracy would bring turmoil and political instability and thereby delay economic development, the regime has called upon the Chinese people to work hard and build a prosperous and strong China under the leadership of the communist party. The campaign, therefore, redefined the legitimacy of the communist regime on the basis of providing political stability and economic prosperity.

But nationalism is a double-edged sword: both a means to mobilize the Chinese people behind the state and a means for the Chinese people to judge the performance of the state. If Chinese leaders cannot deliver on their nationalist promise, they become vulnerable to nationalistic criticism.³ This criticism is particularly difficult to control in the cyber age, with the result that the regime has to play catch-up with the outpouring of nationalist emotions. The function of Leninism, therefore, comes in as a normative code of conduct, guiding the behavior of party members and Chinese people and making them comply with party policy and discipline. Leninist party

2. Shiru Wang, "Internet Exposure and Political Beliefs among Educated Youth in China," *Journal of Contemporary China* 23:90 (2014), <<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10670564.2014.898903>>.

3. Suisheng Zhao, "Foreign Policy Implications of Chinese Nationalism Revisited," *Journal of Contemporary China* 22:82 (2013), pp. 535–553.

discipline has become the coalescing force to keep the party and country together and inspire people to bear hardship for the sake of a better future, now that the decades of phenomenal, double-digit growth have come to an end and the economy has slowed significantly and persistently, challenging the party's leadership.

The ideological campaign has drawn criticism from liberal intellectuals as delineating the contours of a Mao-style, single-voice authority with Xi as the new emperor, tightening his grip to stifle Western ideas and to impose orthodoxy.⁴ Indeed, the campaign represents a disheartening turn backward for those who had hoped that a period of greater relaxation was on the horizon. But President Xi is not in a position to make a full return to the Mao era, when political legitimacy rested in the hands of a charismatic leader, because the reinvigoration of China's rulers to take steps backward toward ideologically driven repression offers no long-run solution. Drawing on elements of Mao's legacy, including centralization of political power and ideological control, Xi aims to rebuild the regime's legitimacy when it is increasingly vulnerable to economic slowdown; public anger about corruption, income disparity, and pollution; and challenges from liberals impatient for political change. His imperative is an embarrassing confession of regime fragility.

REBUILDING REGIME LEGITIMACY

The ideological campaign started shortly after Xi Jinping took the position of CCP general secretary. On a tour to the metropolis of Shenzhen in Guangdong Province in December 2012, he warned that one profound lesson of the Soviet collapse was that almost all party members in the USSR lost their ideological beliefs: "To dismiss the history of the Soviet Union and the Soviet Communist Party, to dismiss Lenin and Stalin, and to dismiss everything else is to engage in historic nihilism, and it confuses our thoughts and undermines the party's organizations on all levels."

Reserving scorn for Mikhail Gorbachev's failure to defend the party, Xi charged that, "Proportionally, the Soviet Communist Party had more

4. Suisheng Zhao, "Xi Jinping's Maoist Revival," *Journal of Democracy*, 27:3 (2016), pp. 83–97; Jinghai Zeng, "Changing Manners of Displaying Loyalties through Ideological Campaign in Post-Deng China," *Journal of Contemporary China*, 25:100 (2016), <<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10670564.2015.1132779>>.

members than we do, but nobody was man enough to stand up and resist.”⁵ Heeding the lessons of the breakup of the Soviet Union when a loosening of ideological control in the late 1980s ushered in a flood of destabilizing dissent, Xi required cadres to watch a six-part documentary. It portrayed the steady infiltration of subversive Western values as playing a leading role in the failure of Gorbachev’s reform, leading to violent unrest and opening the door for Western conspiracy to topple the Communist regime.

To avoid the same mistake, Xi made two important speeches that defined the themes of the ideological campaign. On January 5, 2013, he proposed “two undeniabables”: “The historical period after economic reforms [beginning in 1978] 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.”⁶ The two undeniabables rejected the division of PRC history into two eras, the Maoist period of great tragedies and the reform period of moving toward a better, brighter, and more prosperous future. For Xi, Gorbachev’s attack on Stalin undermined the legitimacy of the Soviet Union. If Mao were to be denigrated for all his mistakes, the legitimacy of the CCP’s rule would be challenged. As a member of the second-generation of Red leaders, or “princelings” as they are known in China, Xi has been careful to defend Mao’s legacy. He wants the cadres to take the PRC’s history as one uninterrupted period and to be proud of its accomplishments.⁷

The second important speech was made on March 17, 2013, to propose “three confidences”—confidence in the theory of socialism with Chinese characteristics, the road the country is following, and the current political system⁸—to counter the “three confidence crises,” that is, the crises of confidence in socialism, in Marxism, and in the party. These resulted from Deng Xiaoping’s reassessment of Maoism to eradicate ideological obstacles to market-oriented economic reform after Mao’s death, and to demonstrate his confidence in the party’s historical right to rule China.

5. Damian Grammaticas, “China’s New President Xi Jinping: A Man with a Dream,” BBC News, March 14, 2013, <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-21790384>>.

6. CCP Central Committee Party History Research Office, “Treating the Two Periods Before and After the Reform Correctively,” *People’s Daily*, November 8, 2013, p. 6.

7. Xiaoping Cong, “Road to Revival: A New Move in the Making of Legitimacy for the Ruling Party in China,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 22:83 (2013), p. 905.

8. On his visit to Macao on December 21, 2014, cultural confidence was added as a fourth confidence.

Since then, Xi has continued to speak on the struggle in the ideological sphere. Most of his speeches were relayed as party directives and widely circulated on the Internet. The zealotry with which the party propaganda machinery eulogized Xi's words of wisdom smacked of the cult of personality that was associated with Mao. The most important directive was Document 9, issued in April 2013. Bearing the unmistakable imprimatur of Xi and clearly suggesting the party's return to ideas and tactics that hark back to Mao's days, Document 9 ordered officials to combat the spread of seven subversive currents coursing through Chinese society and listed "seven don't speaks," including, among others, Western constitutional democracy, universal values of human rights, Western-inspired notions of media independence and civil society, ardently pro-market neoliberalism, and nihilist criticisms of the party's traumatic past.

Another widely circulated Xi speech was made at the national propaganda work conference on August 9. Calling for the whole party, particularly the party leaders, to emphasize ideological work because it concerned "the life and death of the party, the long-term stability of the country, and the cohesion of the nation," Xi warned that Western countries had intensified cultural and ideological infiltration and that the disintegration of a regime often started from the ideological sphere. The party had to uphold leadership, management, and discursive power in ideological work to avoid "irreparable historical mistakes."⁹

Launching the ideological campaign, Xi used Maoist imagery, rhetoric, and strategy to boost his own stature and revive public support for the party. Mao had been consigned to the bookshelf of history for a while after Deng Xiaoping started reforms, but was dusted off and revered again as the unifier of the nation. In a collection of Xi Jinping's speeches after the party's 18th Congress, in November 2012, Xi urged party members to embrace Mao's thought because China would fall into chaos if the party "totally repudiates Mao's thought." On a visit in July 2013 to a lakeside villa where Mao spent summers in the 1950s, Xi declared the villa a center for educating youth on patriotism and revolution.

9. Editorial, "Never Relax Ideological Works: Implementing the National Propaganda and Thought Work Conference Spirit," *Qiushi* no. 17, September 1, 2013, <http://www.qstheory.cn/zxdk/2013/201317/201308/t20130827_264732.htm>.

A week earlier, he had gone to Xibaipo, the village in Hebei Province from which Mao entered Beijing in 1949, and vowed that “our red nation will never change color.”¹⁰ Honoring the 120th anniversary of Mao’s birth on December 26, 2013, Xi described Mao as “a great figure who changed the face of the nation and led the Chinese people to a new destiny.” Defending Mao’s “mistakes in his later years,” he argued that, “We cannot use today’s conditions and level of development and understanding to judge our predecessors, nor can we expect the predecessors to have done things that only the successors can do.”¹¹

Borrowing from Mao’s tactical playbook of ideological work, Xi launched a mass-line campaign to enforce party discipline. Harkening directly back to the Maoist era, when officials were required to get close to the masses and to know their needs and demands intimately, Xi urged cadres to “focus on self-purification, self-improvement, self-innovation, [and] self-awareness,” or as he put it in a folksy way, “looking in the mirror, grooming oneself, bathing, and seeking remedies [*zhao jingzi, zheng yiguan, xi xi zao, zhi zhi bing*].”¹² The mass line campaign thus echoed Mao’s “rectification” movements to purge rivals and enforce ideological discipline, “emboldening hard-liners who have hailed [Xi] as a worthy successor to Mao Zedong.”¹³

DEFENDING THE PARTY LEADERSHIP AGAINST WESTERN INFLUENCE

Xi’s campaign, and its critique of unfettered capitalism, gave encouragement to two distinct factions: Maoist ideologues, including the old guard (consisting of a loose network of officials and former officials, sons and daughters of party veterans, and ardently anti-Western academics and journalists), and members of the New Left, associated with nostalgia for Mao and especially

10. Jeremy Page, “China’s Leader Embraces Mao as He Tightens Grip on Country,” *Wall Street Journal* blogs, August 16, 2013, <<http://blogs.wsj.com/chinarealtime/2013/06/21/what-to-make-of-xi-jinings-maoist-turn/>>.

11. Xi Jinping, “Speech to Celebrate the 120th Birthday of Comrade Mao Zedong,” *Xinhuanet*, December 26, 2013, <http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2013-12/26/c_118723453.htm>.

12. “Xi Jinping Important Speech at the Mass-Line Practice Work Conference,” *Xinhuanet*, June 18, 2013, <http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2013-06/18/c_116194026.htm>.

13. Chris Buckley and Andrew Jacobs, “China’s Maoists Are Revived as Thought Police,” *New York Times*, January 4, 2015, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/05/world/chinas-maoists-are-revived-as-thought-police.html>>.

with Bo Xilai's experiments in Chongqing.¹⁴ Both groups look to Mao's precepts to reverse the effects of China's market-oriented reforms and the spread of values that are anathema to party tradition. While their direct influence on the party leadership has been circumscribed, they have served as the party's eager ideological inquisitors against beleaguered liberal academics, journalists, and human rights activists.

When Bo fell in early 2012, his followers came under official suspicion, and some of their websites and publications were shut down. But their voices were resurrected in vogue when Xi's ideological campaign gained momentum. Following Xi's two undeniabilities, Bo's followers argued that the legacies of Mao and Deng are complementary: where Mao provided equality and a strong, "spiritual" version of Chinese identity, Deng and his successors created a powerful economic base at the cost of social and spiritual dislocation.¹⁵ On October 17, 2013, the *People's Daily* reran an essay from the party journal *Qiushi*, "Firming Up the Common Ideological Basis for United Struggle by the Party and the People," which said that universal values and constitutional democracy are uniquely Western ideas and forms of governance. Zhang Haipeng, a Maoist historian, cited three cases to demonstrate that the situation in the ideological sphere was fraught and the party had already lost control of it. One case was the broadcast of the TV series *Toward the Republic* in 2003, which he accused of promoting Western constitutionalism. The second was an article published on January 11, 2016 in the *China Youth Daily*, attacking party history. The third was the publication of three articles in *Yanhuang Chunqiu* (no. 5, 2015) that criticized Marxism as historical nihilism. Zhang complained that although he wrote to the party leaders and official newspapers/journals to criticize these "wrong ideas," his criticisms were restrained in circulation.¹⁶

Dai Lixing, of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, warned that reform and opening-up led to the emergence of a variety of social thoughts against the official ideology. These included neoliberalism advocating privatization, marketization, liberalization, democratic socialism advocating

14. Bo Xilai was the leader in Chongqing who evoked the rhetoric of the revolutionary past and led a Maoist revival movement but was purged by Xi because of his power ambition to overtake Xi.

15. David Cohen, "Xi Evokes 'New Left' Vision of China's Future," *China Brief* 14:1, January 9, 2014, <<https://jamestown.org/program/xi-evokes-new-left-vision-of-chinas-future/>>.

16. Zhang Haipeng, "We Cannot Be Ambiguous on Important Ideological Issues," Hongshe-wenhua.net, May 22, 2015, <<http://www.hswwh.org.cn/wzzx/llyd/zz/2014-11-03/28678.html>>.

reformed capitalism, and Westernization in the name of universal values calling for Western political and economic systems. In response to the attempt to Westernize and divide China, the party should move proactively to guide public opinion, uphold Marxism, and oppose the pluralization of guiding thoughts. Dai also criticized cultural conservatism, which advocates using Confucianism to replace Marxism. Neoliberalism, historical nihilism, and cultural conservatism converge in their criticism of the Chinese revolution and in the negation of the advanced Chinese cultural tradition represented by Marxism.¹⁷

These warnings set the background for the popularization of a new term, “cauldron destroyers’ party [*za guo dang*],” referring to those in the government and party ranks who are “eating the Communist Party’s food but smashing the Communist Party’s cauldron.” The *Chinese Social Science Daily* reported a symposium hosted by the China Red Cultural Society on November 2, 2014. The participants vowed that they would never allow singing of a tune contrary to the party center, and never allow eating the Communist Party’s food and then smashing its cooking pots: “No matter how senior and famous you are, if you smash the cauldron of the CCP, your rice bowl [i.e., guaranteed income] given by the party has to be taken back.”¹⁸ Wang Weiguang, the president of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, threatened to use “the proletarian dictatorship to carry out ‘class struggle’.”¹⁹ The term “the hilt” [of the sword], referring specifically to the organs of dictatorship of the Mao era, appeared in the *People’s Daily* in the statement: “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.”²⁰

Xi’s ideological campaign sets him apart from his two predecessors, who tolerated limited expression of liberal ideas and downplayed the official

17. Dai Lixing, “The Six Relationships That Have Been Handled Correctly in Leading Social Thought,” *Red Flag*, May 22, 2015, <http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/hqwq/2015-05/22/c_1115377624.htm>.

18. Wei Hong, “Never Allow Smashing of the Communist Party’s Cooking Pots,” *China Social Science News* no. 665, November 5, 2015, <http://sscp.cssn.cn/zdtj/201411/t20141105_1390452.html>.

19. Wang Weiguang, “There’s Nothing Wrong with Adhering to the People’s Democratic Dictatorship,” *Qishi*, September 23, 2014, <http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/hqwq/2014-09/23/c_1112586776.htm>.

20. Editorial, “We Must Maintain the Party’s Leadership of Political and Legal Work,” *People’s Daily*, January 9, 2014, <http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2014-01/09/nw.D110000renmrb_20140109_2-01.htm>.

ideology. One news analysis of China's political discourse revealed that terms like "universal values," "constitutionalism," and "civil society" coexisted peacefully with terms of political reform within the party, such as "democratic politics," "political civilization," and "intra-Party democracy" throughout the Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao eras but were under assault by 2013. Using the advanced search function on Baidu.com, the most widely used search engine in China, the researchers from the China Media Project in Hong Kong found that in 2012 a total of 150 distinct articles appeared using the term "universal values" in the headline, of which 78% presented the term in a positive light. And 400 used the term "constitutionalism" in the headline, of which all uses were positive.

In 2013, however, there were 500 articles using "universal values" in the headline, of which 84% presented the concept in a negative light, and 1,200 using the term "constitutionalism," 86% negative. The use of the term "intra-Party democracy" fell 74% in the *People's Daily* and 81% in the larger universe of Chinese newspapers represented by the WiseNews database over the previous year. In the meantime, use of the term "Mao Zedong thought" in news headlines on Baidu.com reached a six-year high, at 2,120 uses, of which 312 came during December 26–31, 2013, signifying the revival of Mao. China's political discourse continued hardening in 2014. As the crusade against constitutionalism went into high gear, the *People's Daily* published 18 articles criticizing constitutionalism in 2014. Among them was a November 13 piece titled "China's Governance in Accord with the Constitution Differs from Western Capitalist Constitutionalism," marking the first time that the *People's Daily* gave negative treatment to "constitutionalism" in the headline of a piece dealing with domestic political issues.²¹

MEDIA CONTROL AND CENSORSHIP

One primary target of the ideological campaign has been the media, which had experienced a renaissance, on a Chinese scale, of critical journalism. Chinese journalists frequently reported on social injustice, corruption involving local officials, environmental degradation, and health crises to win readers after the government reduced or withdrew media funding, forcing a large

21. Qian Gang, "Reading Chinese Politics in 2014," China Media Project, December 30, 2014, <<http://cmp.hku.hk/2014/01/06/34866/>>.

portion of Chinese media to raise their revenue through circulation and advertisements. Even China Central Television (CCTV), the mouthpiece of the party, created news shows such as *Oriental Horizon* and *Focused Interviews*, which established their reputation for critical reporting.

Although the Chinese government still insisted on the cardinal concept of “guidance of public opinion” and never endorsed the Western concept of freedom of the press, journalists debated whether “supervision by public opinion,” a Chinese cognate of Western “watchdog journalism,” should be subject to the overarching political demands of party leaders.²² Talking of their profession as “dancing with shackles” provided by the propaganda authorities through directives about what could and could not be covered, reporters could break news of a protest or scandal before the censor swung into action, in a cat-and-mouse game.²³

Tightening the screws on the Chinese media, Xi Jinping has ratcheted up the pressure on journalists to stop criticism of the party, “speak with one voice,” and use “positive reporting” to support party policies. Xi said emphatically at the national propaganda work conference on August 9, 2013, that party leaders should “dare to show their swords” and “hold firm that the press is under the control of the party” and that “politicians run the newspapers.” He claimed that “while Western countries flaunt freedom of the press, they have an ideological bottom line, constraints on interest groups, and political party biases. There is no completely independent media.”

The tightening has included both traditional and new media. One of the first casualties of the campaign was the well-known, liberal *Southern Weekly* (Nanfang Zhoubao). Its 2013 New Year editorial, originally titled “The Chinese Dream: The Dream of Constitutionalism,” was altered beyond recognition by censors in the provincial propaganda department. Censors removed all 18 instances of “constitutionalism” from the essay, and added, without input from editors, text that contained serious and embarrassing factual errors. In response, reporters at the paper staged days of protests, creating

22. Chang Jiang and Ren Hailong, “Television News as Political Ritual: *Xinwen Lianbo* and China’s Journalism Reform within the Party-State’s Orbit,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 25:97 (2016), pp. 14–20.

23. Simon Denyer, “Chinese Journalists Face Tighter Censorship, Marxist Retraining,” *Washington Post*, January 9, 2014, <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/chinese-journalists-face-tighter-censorship-marxist-re-training/2014/01/10/6cd43f62-6893-11e3-8b5b-a77187b716a3_story.html>.

a nationwide uproar for freedom of speech and grabbing international headlines. But the result was the replacement of the editor by a deputy director of the provincial propaganda department. The liberal trend of the newspaper was completely reversed. The once-outspoken paper has since adopted a raft of measures to align it with the party and run “positive and mainstream” stories while curbing negative coverage. Tuo Zhen, the provincial propaganda chief who played a key role in the last-minute decision to rewrite the New Year editorial, was promoted to deputy minister of the Central Propaganda Department in 2015, sending a clear message that the government would continue to keep up the pressure on the already tightly controlled media.

In the meantime, the propaganda apparatus, one of the most robust party institutions in China, ramped up the intensity of media control. To make editors and reporters comply with the party line, the propaganda authorities required reporters across China to attend ideological training on the “Marxist view” of journalism and to pass a multiple-choice examination on their knowledge of the Communist Party’s myriad slogans. While foreign correspondents who criticized Chinese leaders found it increasingly difficult to get their visas renewed, Chinese journalists now risked getting fired or even jailed for news stories that violated party policy. A few reporters were made examples of, to scare their colleagues into submission. In November 2013, investigative reporter Luo Changping was transferred out of his job at a leading economic magazine, shortly after receiving an award from the global anti-corruption watchdog Transparency International, because he used his acceptance speech to criticize the “political smog” hanging over Beijing. After a decade as a reporter and producer for China Central Television, Wang Qinglei was fired because he was tired of the increasingly “stifling environment” that turned Chinese journalists into “manipulated clowns” and took to social media to say so.²⁴ Journalist Gao Yu was sentenced to nine years in prison for allegedly leaking state secrets (Document 9) to overseas contacts in 2014. Publication of *Yanhuang Chunqiu*, an outspoken and influential political magazine, was halted following a reshuffle of top management in 2016. The journal had a monthly circulation of about 200,000 and voiced support for constitutional democracy. It was also known for running articles that contested the official version of Communist Party history.

24. Denyer, “Chinese Journalists.”

It has, however, been a challenge to control the social media and the Internet, which have competed with the state media for setting the public-opinion agenda and often have the upper hand because they can spread critical stories around the country in an instant.²⁵ Using social media to expose signs of official ineptitude during the Dongguan City anti-prostitution crackdown in the Chinese New Year holidays of 2013, China's netizens confronted the propaganda authorities by posting threads with statements like "Don't cry, Dongguan," "Dongguan, stand strong," and "Tonight we are all Dongguanians." This followed CCTV's morning news report on a covert police arrest of prostitutes and clients at hotels in the "Sin City," as it is popularly known, of Guangdong Province. One widespread Internet post read, "As a general rule those who sell their souls look down on those who sell their flesh."

Social media's onslaught against CCTV continued until the next evening, when the CCP Central Propaganda Department ordered all media outlets across the country to prohibit any deviation from CCTV. The authorities were in the highest possible dudgeon about the netizens' near-unanimous support for Dongguan because the incident marked the loss by China's official media of their long-held ability to shape political narratives.²⁶

To make sure that this kind of tug of war does not recur, the Chinese government has moved to exert influence over virtually every part of the digital world in China. Xi, in his 2013 speech, called for building a strong Internet army as network security became a national security and social stability issue. Western anti-China forces were trying to use the Internet to subvert China and were a *xin tou zhi huan* (threat from within) to the party. Xi divided the Internet into three zones: the red zone, where the mainstream media and positive forces had taken hold and the party had maintained control; the black zone, where negative views were voiced; and a gray zone in between. He called for consolidating the red zone and turning the black and gray zones red. The party was going to regain ideological and political

25. Paul Minard, "Does the Diffusion of Information Communication Technologies Increase Government Responsiveness in Autocracies? An Empirical Assessment of the Political Implications of China's Internet," *Journal of Contemporary China* 24:96 (2015), pp. 1048–1068.

26. Jia Jia, "Fury and Angst: The Recent Confrontation between State Media and Social Media in China," *China Change*, February 23, 2014, <<http://chinachange.org/2014/02/23/fury-and-angst-the-recent-confrontation-between-state-media-and-social-media-in-china/>>.

control over the commanding heights of social media and eliminate all threats.

Elevating the importance of Internet security and pledging to build China into a cyber-power, Xi personally took charge of a newly formed Central Leading Group for Cyberspace Affairs in 2014. To control the Internet, the Chinese government has insisted on the concept of “cyberspace sovereignty”—the right of each state to regulate its own cyberspace and manage the flow of information into, around, and out of its country. New communications technologies are shattering spatial and temporal constraints and blurring the distinction between author, publisher, and audience of news and information. This concept envisions an Internet world in which governments patrol online discourse like border-control agents to keep the enemy out, and also to draw the world’s largest group of Internet users away from an interconnected global commons. Lu Wei, director of China’s State Information Office, put it bluntly: “The current multilateral international state system, and not a multi-stakeholder model, is China’s solution to cyberspace management. The ownership of the Internet in China belongs to the state alone.”²⁷

The Internet control includes both its contents and technology. The Chinese government has established a huge Internet army to advance government narratives and block “unhealthy content.” One estimate is that it has about two million members, including Internet police, Internet commentators, and Internet content examiners.²⁸ The most renowned Internet army is the 50 Cent Party, Internet-literate youths who trawl the web for negative news and opinion, then refute it with positive information. They are paid 50 Chinese cents (US\$ 0.08) for each post. The Ministry of Public Security announced in August 2015 that it was setting up “cyber-security police stations” inside important website and Internet firms so that it could “catch criminal behavior online at the earliest possible point.”²⁹

Moreover, the government has created many laws and regulations to administer the use of, and access to, the Internet. On July 1, China’s

27. Eugene E. G. Tan, “China’s New Cyber Security Policy: An Exercise in Control,” *RSIS Commentary Summaries* no. 176/2015, August 20, 2015.

28. “The Public Opinion Analysts,” *Southern China Weekly* no. 9, 2013, <<http://www.nbweekly.com/news/china/201312/35375.aspx>>.

29. Ministry of Public Security, “Setting Internet Security Stations,” *Xinhuanet*, August 4, 2015, <<http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2015/0804/c1001-27410883.html>>.

legislature passed a national security law, which included cyber-security, and asserted the nation's sovereignty over cyberspace to tighten the legal framework governing cyberspace. A week later, China released a draft cyber-security law, intended not only to strengthen user privacy protection from hackers and data resellers, but also to elevate the government's powers to obtain records on, and block dissemination of, private information deemed illegal.

In the meantime, the government has brutally suppressed criticism and even arrested popular bloggers and publicly humiliated them by airing their televised confessions. One prominent case was the arrest in September 2013 of Charles Xu, a Chinese-American businessman and blogger in Beijing, on charges of soliciting prostitutes but actually because his regular musings about issues such as corruption and political reform made him hugely popular, with more than 12 million followers on Weibo, China's Twitter-like microblogging site. After his detention, Xu appeared on TV to confess his "crimes." In late May 2015, a prominent activist-blogger, Wu Gan, was arrested in Jiangxi Province on charges of defamation, "inciting the subversion of state power," and "picking quarrels and provoking trouble."

In October 2016, the cutting-edge Caixin media group was punished with two months' suspension from the party's list of news outlets whose content may be freely syndicated and reposted online. This followed the group's reporting that some 168 Chinese lawyers had written to the State Council complaining about a set of new regulations from the Ministry of Justice threatening them with the loss of their jobs if they speak to the media or take protest actions on behalf of their clients. The directive from the Cyberspace Administration, which administers China's media whitelist, accused Caixin Online of "repeatedly violating news and propaganda discipline" during the past year. The website had also published "problematic reports" that had caused "seriously negative" repercussions when republished elsewhere, according to an October 11 directive reposted by the China Digital Times website.³⁰ The move came after a long string of attacks from Xi's administration on freedom of speech that have included management takeover at the aforementioned reform-minded political journal *Yanhuang*

30. "China Slaps Website With Two-Month Suspension From Media 'Whitelist,'" *Radio Free Asia*, October 13, 2016, <<http://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/caixin-punishment-10132016123546.html>>.

Chungjiu and the closure of the outspoken analysis website ConsensusNet, or Gongshiwang.

To control Internet technology, the government has provided financial and policy support to develop domestic semiconductor firms and servers, such as e-commerce giant Alibaba, online conglomerate Tencent, and information aggregator Sina. The government has also built the “Great Firewall of China,” which filters keywords typed into search engines, blocks access to sensitive websites, and shuts virtual private networks, which many residents had used to reach blocked overseas websites. As a result, Internet tools that people across the world use to stay connected, including Gmail, Google services, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, all fell under the censor’s blade and are being replaced by their heavily monitored Chinese counterparts, such as Baidu, Wechat, Weibo, QQ, Youko, and Renren, where criticisms of the party are censored and can even lead to police interrogation or jail time.

Developing Chinese versions of social media sites allows greater central management, while satisfying demand for popular participation in online communities. To create a climate of fear and hence self-censorship, the government requires users to register in their own names, preventing the anonymity that has been a key element in many countries’ social media. Fully aware that they live in a surveillance society, users are explicitly warned of the dangers of accessing “unhealthy content” or forbidden websites. Verifying the identities of users, the government has shut down or suspended many accounts that posted prohibited items. Cybercafes are held responsible for the activities of their patrons.

Because Chinese are not allowed beyond the firewall, Chinese Internet users have referred to their Internet as a LAN (local area network), effectively a type of intranet, as it becomes more isolated than ever before.³¹ Hating the “404 not found” error message, netizens use the word “wall” creatively. If your Internet account is canceled, it is “walled” (*qiang*). If you are arrested, your freedom curtailed, your posts deleted, these can also all be cases of being “walled.” Plastered all across China are propaganda posters with the slogan “Why is China strong? Only because of the party.” The Chinese word “strong” (*qiang*) is a homonym of “wall,” which inspires people to render

31. Sarah Cook, “Five Predictions for Chinese Censorship in the Year of the Sheep,” *Foreign Policy*, February 19, 2015, <<http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/02/19/five-predictions-for-chinese-censorship-in-the-year-of-the-sheep/>>.

the slogan as “Why is China walled? Only because of the party.” One Chinese blogger wrote: “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.”³²

THE RECTIFICATION CAMPAIGN ON UNIVERSITY CAMPUSES

Another primary target of the ideological campaign is the higher education sector. Curricula and speech at Chinese universities have always been tightly controlled, but students and faculty have pushed the limits from time to time. While these pushes at times opened up space for freer expression during the Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao eras, the propaganda authorities under President Xi have gone into overdrive to impose uniformity of thought among university teachers and students in a looming rectification of higher education.

The campaign started with the publication of an article in November 2014 in the *Liaoning Daily* titled, “Teachers, Please Don’t Talk about China Like That: An Open Letter to Teachers of Philosophy and Social Sciences,” which accused university teachers across China of being too “negative” about the country and the universities of being troubled by ideological laxity.³³ The newspaper claimed that the letter originated from its call for submissions in October on the topic of “How should China be treated in university classrooms?” A story from a university student caught the editors’ attention because she said that “saying bad things about China and cursing our society has become the rage. China has become the classic case study for all things negative.” She asked, “Is this an isolated instance, or something more widespread?” The newspaper then dispatched reporters across the country, who visited 20 schools in five cities and listened to nearly 100 classes in two weeks. They found that many instructors were politically insensitive and overly critical of Chinese society and the party but overly complimentary of Western ideas. Using social media to conduct a survey, the reporters found that 80%

32. Muruog Xuecun, “Scaling China’s Great Firewall,” *New York Times*, August 17, 2015, <<http://mobile.nytimes.com/2015/08/18/opinion/murong-xuecun-scaling-chinas-great-firewall.html>>.

33. “Teachers, Please Don’t Talk about China Like That: An Open Letter to Teachers of Philosophy and Social Sciences,” *Liaoning Daily*, November 13, 2014, <<http://help.3g.163.com/14/1114/15/AB19DM6600963VRO.html>>.

of university students said they had encountered teachers who were “fond of airing complaints” and “blackening” the reputation of China, especially in law, administrative management, economics, and other areas of philosophy and the social sciences. The phenomenon of “being scornful of China” existed to a definite degree, and in some cases was quite excessive, deserving attention and concern. The newspaper summarized the lack of three identities with China in university classrooms: theoretical identity with CCP history and ideology, political identity, and emotional identity with the party and its policy.³⁴

Many commentators on social media found the *Liaoning Daily* piece worrisome, a dangerous encroachment on academic freedoms that were already under serious threat. But Xi made a response to the article at the national higher education party-building conference in December. Calling for “positive energy” and a “bright attitude” toward the party and state, Xi urged the party to enhance ideological guidance to turn universities into breeding grounds of Marxist studies: “Institutions of higher learning should shoulder the important tasks of studying, researching and publicizing Marxism, as well as training builders and successors of the socialist cause with Chinese characteristics.”³⁵

On January 19, 2015, the CCP Central Committee and the State Council issued nationally circulated Document 30, which relayed Xi’s speeches, demanding strengthened party control and the cleansing of Western-inspired liberal ideas from universities. Calling the party “not afraid to draw the sword and take the responsibility of guarding the soil,” the document responded to the *Liaoning Daily* and called for establishing the “three identities” (theoretical, political, and emotional) among university teachers and students. Specific measures included the creation and standardization of textbooks on socialist theory and the strengthening of political training sessions for faculty. Greater focus was put on molding the social sciences—journalism, law, economics, political science, sociology, and ethnic studies—to be politically correct.³⁶

34. Ibid.

35. “Xi Jinping Important Instructions on the Party Building in Higher Learning,” *People’s Daily*, December 30, 2014, p. 1.

36. CCP Central Committee and State Council, “Opinions Concerning Further Strengthening and Improving Propaganda and Ideology Work in Higher Education Under New Circumstances,” *Xinhuanet*, January 19, 2015, <<https://chinacopyrightandmedia.wordpress.com/2015/01/19/opinions->

Only days after Document 30 was released, the official website of the Central Propaganda Department posted an article which seized upon a recent incident, in which veteran Hong Kong actress Angie Chiu Nga-chi was slammed on the Internet when she said she felt proud of standing in front of the Tiananmen (Gate of Heavenly Peace) in downtown Beijing. The article complained that some in China thought it was trendy to smear their own country and that trend had something to do with how universities educated their students. It called for establishing an ideological bottom line that university educators could not violate and requiring teachers and students to identify with mainstream values.³⁷

Yuan Guiren, the minister of education, then proposed “two reinforcements” at a speech on January 29, 2015: “reinforce the management of ideology in universities” and “reinforce the management of the use of Western teaching materials.” He specifically called for enhancing the management of Western textbooks in the original language as well as translated, and emphasized that “there is no way that universities can allow teaching materials preaching Western values into our classrooms, nor should slanders and smears against party leaders and socialism be tolerated on campuses.” “Smears and slanders” referred to intellectuals who dared to criticize the party and openly call for constitutional democracy. Yuan warned that young teachers and students were particularly susceptible to infiltration by hostile forces and that the party must stay vigilant against “ideological risks.”³⁸

After Yuan’s speech, the Ministry of Education started running checks on Western teaching materials, sending a notice on March 3 to universities in Beijing and provincial education departments. The notice specified that “foreign original textbooks” referred both to textbooks published overseas and written in foreign languages and to those translated into Chinese and published in China. Professors were required to fill out questionnaires “honestly,” giving information on foreign original textbooks, the types of courses in which they were used, the proportion of all courses these classes accounted

concerning-further-strengthening-and-improving-propaganda-and-ideology-work-in-higher-education-under-new-circumstances/>.

37. Xu Lan, “Where Are the Difficulties in Propaganda and Thought Works in Higher Education,” *Qiusbi*, January 25, 2015, <<http://opinion.people.com.cn/BIG5/n/2015/0125/c1003-26444925.html>>.

38. Yuan Guiren, “Teachers in Higher Education Must Hold onto the Bottom of Line,” *Xinhuanet*, January 29, 2015, <http://news.xinhuanet.com/2015-01/29/c_1114183715.htm>.

for, the channels through which the textbooks were purchased, and the systems schools used to approve the textbooks. The main targets were courses in social sciences and the humanities.³⁹

As part of the campaign, the CCP Central Organization Department, the Central Propaganda Department, and the Ministry of Education jointly issued a document in July requiring senior officials at the municipal level and above to speak to university students at least once each semester. Officials were required to submit their teaching materials to the local propaganda department two weeks before the lectures, to speak on socialism with Chinese characteristics and the Chinese Dream, as well as the key speeches of President Xi, to respond to the concerns of students and faculty, and to help students distinguish right from wrong in terms of ideology and political theory.⁴⁰ Chen Miner, the party secretary of Guizhou Province, spoke to students at Guizhou University on September 10, becoming the first senior official to speak at the universities after the document was issued.

The campaign had a chilling effect on Chinese academia: scholars self-censored, or avoided certain topics altogether. Ideological vigilantes played a pivotal role in the downfall of some university professors. Wang Congsheng, a law professor in Beijing, was detained and then suspended from teaching after posting online criticisms of the party. Qiao Mu, a journalism professor and director of the Center for International Communications Studies at Beijing Foreign Studies University, was removed from the classroom and relegated to clerical drudgery, summarizing English-language books. Officially, he was punished for defying superiors who had withheld permission for him to travel abroad for conferences. But privately, school officials acknowledged growing pressure from above as retribution for his advocacy of Western-style journalism and a long affiliation with liberal civil society groups in China.

Political loyalty became the top priority for not only professors but also students. An instruction from the Ministry of Education on the management of 2016 master's degree student admissions for the first time required universities to interview applicants who passed written exams to find out whether they were politically qualified. If necessary, the universities could send

39. Cao Siqi, "Schools Check Foreign Textbooks," *Global Times*, March 18, 2015, <<http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/912597.shtml>>.

40. "Officials Required to Lecture on Xi Jinping's Speeches, Socialism in Colleges Each Semester," *Global Times*, August 6, 2015, <<http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/935717.shtml>>.

personnel to the localities of the applicants to investigate their political attitudes.⁴¹ As one extreme result of the campaign, a university in northwestern China banned a Christmas celebration, calling it a “kitsch” foreign celebration unbecoming of the country’s own traditions, and made students watch propaganda films instead.

NEO-AUTHORITARIANISM 2.0?

President Xi has presided over the most sustained and severe crackdown on freedom of expression since the Mao years, trying to turn media and education into vehicles for the dissemination of party policy. One observer labeled the ideological campaign “the most relentless offensive against the tertiary education sector since the 1990s” and “the Great Purge of Tertiary Institutions,” strongly reminiscent of Mao’s “pluck out the white flag, raise the red flag” movement between 1958 and 1960 and signifying an extension of the current “mini Cultural Revolution.”⁴² But it is a far cry from the excesses of the Cultural Revolution, when all universities were shuttered as Mao’s Red Guards ran riot and intellectuals were persecuted or exiled to rural labor camps.⁴³

Xiao Gongqin, a history professor in Shanghai known for advocating neo-authoritarianism, has called the Xi regime “Neo-authoritarianism 2.0, an enhanced Deng Xiaoping model,” also calling the current atmosphere “making use of Mao’s measures to walk on Deng’s road,” and “new wine in old bottles.”⁴⁴ Xiao’s take on developments can be summarized and paraphrased thus: President Xi tightened ideological control and strengthened the three powers (leadership, management, and discursive) in the ideological sphere, to prevent the “explosion of political participation” and revolutionary crisis, because reform and opening-up gave rise to radical demands for

41. Ministry of Education, “Recruitments of MA Students Should Organize Interviews to Investigate Applicants’ Thought and Political Backgrounds,” *Xinhuanet*, September 12, 2015, <http://www.moe.edu.cn/srcsite/A15/moe_778/s3261/201509/t20150911_207518.html>.

42. Ding Wang, “A Mini Cultural Revolution Is Storming Mainland Campuses,” *Hong Kong Economic Journal*, February 6, 2015, <<http://www.ejinsight.com/20150206-mini-cultural-revolution-storming-mainland-campuses/>>.

43. Tom Phillips, “‘It’s Getting Worse’: China’s Liberal Academics Fear Growing Censorship,” *The Guardian*, August 6, 2015, <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/aug/06/china-xi-jinping-crackdown-liberal-academics-minor-cultural-revolution>>.

44. Xiao Gongqin, “From Deng Xiaoping to Xi Jinping,” ifeng.com, December 8, 2013, <<http://news.ifeng.com/exclusive/lecture/dxwosalon/xingai/xiaogongqin.shtml>>.

political participation by social forces to challenge the status quo and call for revolutionary change, presenting a dilemma to the reform government. It is particularly dangerous in China, where a revolutionary populist tradition has developed in the past century. The explosion point is very low. Proper control in the ideological sphere could prevent the disruption of reform and help strengthen the government's capacity to implement reform policies. Reformist statesmen have to use an iron fist to maintain the relatively low level of political participation, avoiding the vicious cycle of reform-revolution and reaching a soft landing toward the higher goal of prosperity and democracy. Neo-authoritarianism is thus the inevitable path for China to move toward democracy.⁴⁵

Indeed, political stability and regime survival have been Xi's major concern because of the deeply seated discontent and resentment toward the party and government for staggering pollution, massive corruption, growing income inequality, ethnic tensions, and invidious social discrimination.⁴⁶ The party is a victim of its successes as well as its failures. No country can modernize as rapidly as China without suffering enormous social consequences. Those who were left behind by China's rapid economic growth in the past decades have carried placards bearing quotes from Mao in mass protests against corruption, and social and economic inequality that have become rampant in China today, becoming the biggest threat to the regime's legitimacy. As Mao admonished, in China, "a single spark can start a prairie fire."⁴⁷

Xi came into office as China's economic downturn began. His tightening of ideological control is meant to ensure that as social unrest increases, no single spark can emerge to start a prairie fire. The ideological campaign reveals the regime's fear of overthrow or disintegration.⁴⁸ In this case, although liberals raised the concern that ultraconservative and leftist voices were gaining momentum, the party clamped down on not only liberal sites but also radical leftist sites such as Utopia and Mao Flag, soon after the fall of Bo Xilai. The East Is Red website, a key online presence for China's vocal

45. Xiao Gongqin, "Reflection on the First Two Years of Xi Jinping's New Deal," 21ccom.net, January 9, 2015, <http://www.21ccom.net/articles/china/ggcx/20150109118739_all.html>.

46. Jonathan Benney, "Weiwen at the Grassroots: China's Stability Maintenance Apparatus as a Means of Conflict Resolution," *Journal of Contemporary China* 25:99 (2016), pp. 389–399.

47. Yan Xiaojun, "Patrolling Harmony: Pre-emptive Authoritarianism and the Preservation of Stability in W County," *Journal of Contemporary China* 25:99 (2016), pp. 406–414.

48. Jinghan Zeng, "The Debate on Regime Legitimacy in China," *Journal of Contemporary China* 23:88 (2014), p. 620.

leftists, was closed down in May 2015, “a clear [warning] shot to any political activists in China, regardless of their goals or ideology.”⁴⁹

Xi has, therefore, intensified the trend started in the Hu Jintao years, when stability maintenance became the number-one goal of the regime, sticking with the stability-preservation system based on the principle that “stability overrides everything” to “nip every element of instability in the bud,” as the party slogans claimed. In particular, the regime has blamed hostile forces in the West and their infiltration of the ideological sphere for the problems inside China. Correspondingly, the propaganda machine has to play the role of “hit man” of stability maintenance in the public-opinion sphere. When pro-democracy protests erupted in Hong Kong in 2014, the Chinese government accused “outside forces” and “external forces” of being “black hands” [i.e., instigators] behind the unrest.

As hostile foreign forces became the most convenient scapegoats for any problems in China, even the tumbling of the Chinese stock market in mid-2015 was blamed on Western conspiracy in general and US financial institutions in particular. This occurred even though foreigners were generally restricted from investing in the Chinese stock exchanges: the structural fault lines in China’s economic and political system were the ultimate culprit. Lin Zuoming, a member of the CCP Central Committee and CEO of China’s largest aerospace and defense conglomerate, the Aviation Industry Corporation of China, stated in an interview that China’s stock market crash was without any doubt an economic war against China covertly waged by the US. Its objective was to attack the confidence of Chinese society, to lure the Chinese masses into doubting the Chinese government and the CCP, and to topple the CCP’s ruling position, ultimately leading to the total collapse of China’s economy. Therefore, the economic war ignited in the stock market was “directly targeted at the five-starred red flag.”⁵⁰ The interview was subsequently carried by most of China’s major news outlets.

Such a dramatic discourse of fear has led to a general sense within the party that shadows are flickering everywhere, that trouble is on the way, and that enemies can be perceived on all sides. Therefore, the ideological campaign has included a growing series of assaults on human rights advocates. More than

49. “China Shuttters Maoist Website Citing ‘Ideological’ Problems,” *Radio Free Asia*, May 9, 2015, <<http://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/maoist-05092014110854.html>>.

50. Li Shuping, “The Enemy Was Directly Targeted at the Five-Starred Red Flag,” *Pengpai News*, July 19, 2015, <http://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1354200>.

100 rights defense lawyers from 15 cities were detained as criminals by the Ministry of Public Security in a nationwide police operation in July 2015. A *People's Daily* article defended the operation as intended to “smash a major criminal gang that had used the law firm 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.”⁵¹ But one legal scholar in the US found that, “While the party-state has tried to marginalize rights lawyers by painting them as provocateurs who encourage disobedience of the law, the current assault on them is the latest and strongest expression to date of the Chinese leadership’s anxiety about social stability.” The crackdown “is the strongest assault to date on a small number of pioneers who have struggled to advance the rule of law . . . in the name of stability maintenance.”⁵²

The results of the ideological campaign have been mixed. Flashing like knives to strike terror into people’s hearts and make them step into line, the forceful campaign may deter dissent but not necessarily result in true believers. A 2014 survey of the political attitudes of students who attended propaganda courses at a Chinese university found that “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*.”⁵³ A Chinese student of East Asian studies at Harvard reported from Beijing: “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.”⁵⁴

51. Huang Qingchang and Zou Wei, “Uncovering the Dark Story of ‘Rights Defense,’” *Xinhuanet*, July 11, 2015, <http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-07/11/c_128010249.htm>.

52. Stanley Lubman, “After Crackdown on Rights Lawyers, China’s Legal Reform Path Uncertain,” *Wall Street Journal* blogs, July 31, 2015, <<http://blogs.wsj.com/chinarealtime/2015/07/31/after-crackdown-on-rights-lawyers-chinas-legal-reform-path-uncertain/>>.

53. Haifeng Huang, “Propaganda as Signaling,” *Social Sciences Network*, July 31, 2014, <http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2325101>.

54. Helen Gao, “China Sharpens Its Censorship Blade,” *New York Times*, February 2, 2015, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/03/opinion/china-sharpens-its-censorship-blade.html>>.

The real impacts of the party's effort to reassert control over academia were limited. Universities held mandatory political-education classes, but students and faculty simply snoozed through them and then went on to face economic and social reality. The big picture or trend in higher education has still been internationalization and experimentation with different models of liberal arts education. Muzzling discontent has also been nearly impossible in the Internet age. Simply killing all criticism cannot be the regime's ultimate aim. As one study of the real-time censorship in Chinese websites found, the purpose of the censorship was to reduce the probability of collective action by clipping social ties whenever any *collective movements* were in evidence or expected. The regime used aggressive online censorship to counter such actions and events by eliminating discussions associated with events that had collective-action potential. As a result, the Chinese people were individually free but collectively in chains.⁵⁵

Xi's campaign could backfire. By constricting Internet freedoms, it could alienate users and foster distrust of the government. It could also hold back China's development by making it harder for businesspeople and scientists to access research and other tools that make the Internet a powerful force for innovation. In a war between surveillance technology and Internet technology, it is hard to imagine that a government that opposed creativity could permanently wield the upper hand.

CONCLUSION

In spite of the neo-authoritarian prediction that reforms can be expedited if they are pushed by a really authoritative patriarch, there is no evidence that President Xi is set to move forward on political reform after years of power consolidation. Waiting to see whether Xi will moderate his repressive course and gradually move toward democratic reform, even Xiao Gongqin cautioned that the ideological control of Neo-Authoritarianism 2.0 has to be limited to prevent the resurrection of dead leftist ideas. He was alarmed by the call to return to class struggle and use of the "hilt" to strengthen government executive power and deterrence.

55. Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts, "How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression," *American Political Science Review* 107 (2013), p. 1–18.

To justify the ideological campaign, Xi made the famous remark, in his first overseas visit to Moscow as president, in March 2013 that, “Only the wearer knows if the shoe fits his foot. Only the people of the country know best whether or not the development path is appropriate for the country.” The Chinese people, however, are not given the opportunity to speak their minds. While refusing Western universal values, President Xi has not successfully advanced a coherent ideological alternative. While the party still nominally embraces communism, it has increasingly resorted to nationalism and Leninism to enhance regime legitimacy. Seeing maintaining the party’s hold on power as his chief accomplishment, President Xi has placed the Chinese Dream at the top of his political agenda. The central theme of the Chinese Dream is the idea of a Chinese renaissance, or in Xi’s words national rejuvenation, bringing China back to the glorious times of past dynasties, when an economically and militarily powerful Chinese empire succeeded in unifying and incorporating vast areas into its territories.

The Chinese Dream has thus become a propaganda phrase, a powerful slogan to revitalize Chinese people’s confidence in the country’s future when Chinese economic growth has come to a sensitive slowdown. The most important message of the narrative is that only under the leadership of the CCP can China rejuvenate its glorious past. In other words, to realize this dream, China needs to perpetuate the one-party rule of the CCP, which not only has deep historical roots but also is well placed for the future national rejuvenation. Xi has therefore returned to China’s history, including Confucianism, with its convenient emphasis on benevolent governance in a hierarchical order,⁵⁶ and used “rejuvenation” as an instrument to realize the Chinese Dream.

Confucianism and communism, however, coexist uneasily, because the emphasis on equality in communism goes against Confucian hierarchy. While President Xi has repeatedly said that cadres and officials should look to history for lessons and moral principles, Qi Fanhua, a professor at Renmin University, cautions that using history and traditional culture as guidelines for modern governance has drawbacks. One inherent flaw in Chinese political history is an emphasis on attaining power at any cost. The Chinese historical classics are rich in stories of how emperors, members of the court,

56. Shufang Wu, “The Revival of Confucianism and the CCP’s Struggle for Cultural Leadership,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 23:89 (2014), p. 971.

and other figures battled for power, by sometimes insidious means. Zhou Dongxu, a staff reporter at Caixin, writes: “This is a feature of classic Chinese traditions that conflicts with the ideas of modern state governance. You cannot use methods from old prosperous dynasties to rule a modern society. It does not work that way.”⁵⁷ The confusion is demonstrated clearly in the socialist core values released by the Xi leadership in 2013 and posted everywhere in China. They include “prosperity, democracy, civility, harmony, freedom, equality, justice, the rule of law, patriotism, dedication, integrity, [and] friendship.” The list reads more like an ad hoc patchwork than a coherent vision.

57. Zhou Dongxu, “China Prepares ‘Traditional Culture’ Textbooks for Its Officials,” *Caixin Online*, June 18, 2015, <<http://english.caixin.com/2015-06-18/100820633.html>>.