

China Blog – March 2024

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The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is trying to strengthen its appeal

Trying to understand Communist ideology can leave the (Western) reader at a loss. This is even truer when Communism comes in the Chinese variant and under the brand of “Xi Jinping Thought”. A recently published article by Professor Rana Mitter is very helpful for gaining a [better understanding](#) of current CCP thinking (Foreign Affairs, 20 February 2024).

Xi Jinping considers Marxism as being the “soul” of China and the country’s “fine traditional culture” as its “root”. Only Confucianism is meant by the reference to traditional culture; Islam and Christianity are regarded as imported religions. Wedding Confucian principles with Communism is convenient, but still surprising, given that Communists have opposed and actively fought against many Confucian traditions. At the same time, qualifying Marxism as the soul of China conveniently omits thousands of years of Chinese history preceding Marxism. Consequently, Professor Mitter highlights earlier discussions in Chinese philosophy and diagnoses a “crisis of faith” in the current system. She explains:

On social media, young Chinese people express disillusionment and disaffection, declaring that they are “lying flat” (tangping) or “rotting away” (bailan). The COVID-19 lockdown period eroded trust in the state. More and more, young Chinese professionals in business, academia, and the media are confronted with restrictions that they find baffling. (For instance, many Chinese students are eager to study abroad, but many are also told that if they do, their rise in the Chinese bureaucracy will be hampered.)

And although she states that in academic and intellectual discussion (self-)censorship has been getting more and more endemic, Professor Mitter ends on an optimistic note:

Chinese identity is still multiple, not monolithic, and Chinese thought has always best contributed to China’s flourishing when it has been free and disputatious, not closed and sterile. This is the aspect of Chinese tradition that today’s CCP cannot afford to ignore.

At the same time, it should be kept in mind what Professor Frank Dikötter stated in a recent [interview](#) (Radio Free Asia, 24 February 2024). He told the news outlet that at least for those being able to read Chinese it has always been clear that the goal has never been a democratic society, but a socialist one. In that respect, Dikötter says, Xi is “faithfully implementing the policies of his predecessors”. And this is true for the increasing limitations on civil society actors such as churches, both the state-approved and independent varieties.

However, Xi Jinping is [not a second Mao](#), as Wall Street reporter Chun Han Wong, who has been based in Beijing for many years, says (China File, 1 February 2024). In fact, Xi seems as much a “prisoner of the party and its history as its leader”. Strengthening the CCP and making its rule secure (with Xi Jinping as the “core”) is paramount and there is no room for debate. In terms of ideology, Wong says:

“What really matters day-to-day is not so much Marx, but Xi Jinping Thought. That is the number one thing for these regular political study sessions that Party members must attend, whether ordinary SOE [state-owned enterprise] Party members or senior Politburo members.

Reading Xi Jinping Thought, there’s nothing essentially Marxist or Leninist about it. A lot of it is just about what makes China a strong country, and the things we must deliver to make China the great nation that we know it is. The student’s ability to regurgitate the mantras is key. Xi’s ideological emphasis is not so much making people good Marxists, it’s making people good cogs in the Leninist machine, showing willingness to participate in these rituals.”

Asked about the legacy Xi Jinping wishes to leave, Wong thinks it is anybody’s guess. But he explains:

“There is a saying that Mao Zedong achieved [jianguo](#) [建國, founding the new Chinese republic], Deng Xiaoping [fuguo](#) [富國, enriching China], and Xi has presided over [qiangguo](#) [強國, strengthening China]. If we say Xi’s objectives are for China to be economically powerful, militarily powerful, internationally respected, you can argue he’s done much of these three elements, especially the last two.”

In the end, freedom had to be restricted

In a must-read, The Wire China explains the rise and decline of “Sixth Tone”, a Chinese state online magazine with surprisingly [independent and critical reporting](#) (The Wire China, 25 February 2024).

The mere existence of Sixth Tone baffled observers, as it went against many existing stereotypes. Founded under the state-owned Shanghai United Media Group, the magazine went on to report on relevant and critical issues, not shying away from calling out failures and criticizing local authorities. While some topics and outcomes were off-limits, like criticizing the central government, Sixth Tone enjoyed a surprising freedom under the imperative to “tell China’s story well” – and in such a way that non-Chinese speakers would be interested to listen in the first place. One reason the site enjoyed more freedom was arguably its publication in English only. Its reporting became so strong that well-respected media entities like the BBC started to quote them.

However, this freedom was not to last. While in earlier cases editors and journalists were able to negotiate with censors and in most cases, small adaptations to the texts had to be made, this changed with a year-end piece on 2022, written by its Nepali journalist Bibek Bhandari. The Wire writes:

Several weeks before, on one of the last days of December 2022, the Shanghai-based outlet had run a year-end review, reflecting on the year’s biggest headlines. There were highlights, such as the Winter Olympics in Beijing, but overall, it was a tough year for China. Bhandari, Sixth Tone’s head of news at the time, had mostly selected buzzwords like

“baby bust,” “housing crisis,” “gender violence,” “climate catastrophe,” and “COVID” to represent the year.

The article had to be taken offline and Sixth Tone came under a new management and strict guidelines were implemented to tell positive stories about China. This fits into the general effort to curb debate and stifle any passing on of negative information to the outside world. As The Wire reports:

“The growth of the personality cult [of Xi Jinping] is basically sucking the oxygen out of the system,” says Phil Cunningham, who writes about CCTV’s daily evening broadcast in his newsletter China Story. “More and more time is devoted to puff pieces about the supreme leader and the supreme thinking of the Communist Party. Everything good is attributed to the Party and everything bad is tinged with being somehow connected to the outside world, especially the U.S., the U.K. and Japan.”

Beijing’s growing hostility towards foreign countries has trickled down to affect the foreign press as well, culminating in China’s expulsion of over a dozen reporters, including Johnson, in 2020. While some individuals were allowed to return, access was never fully restored, leaving many mainstream outlets reporting from afar.

The foreign journalists that are left “are under heavy surveillance, they are threatened, they are being followed in the street, and there is constant blackmail on their visa renewal,” says Cedric Alviani, Asia-Pacific bureau director for Reporters Without Borders, which ranked China at the second lowest out of 180 countries in its press freedom index last year.

*Fewer sources, be they scholars, businessmen or ordinary people, are willing to even speak to foreign press on the record for fear of being accused of aiding foreign forces — or *di daozi* (递刀子), ‘passing the knife’, as it’s known among the public. Foreign correspondents have even been confronted by angry mobs.*

This not only leads to less information being made available, but also causes reporting to become more and more one-dimensional, making all efforts to tell China’s story well, in vain.

In an extensive report titled “The increasing challenge of [obtaining information](#) from Xi’s China”, Merics (15 February 2024) highlights the growing scarcity of sources within the country, especially in fields considered sensitive like human rights, and concludes:

The implication for stakeholders is that there needs to be an even bigger premium on interpretative skills of the remaining information. Observers cannot understand any piece of information in isolation; they must have a very keen awareness of the context in which it is produced and made available as well as what is missing. This has realistically always been the case but is becoming even more crucial now.

With less access to reliable sources of information, risks to global stakeholders will inevitably increase. Some large companies might be able to overcome specific restrictions on foreign access, such as through Chinese partners or subsidiaries, but there are few workarounds if information is never shared with the public in the first place. Moreover, China’s amended Anti-Espionage Law appears to target entities finding creative

workarounds, which might present unacceptable risks especially in the fields like due diligence research.

Global discussions of China will increasingly coalesce around a narrowing set of source materials. One likely consequence is an amplification of extreme viewpoints, especially the beliefs that China is about to collapse and take over the world at the same time. The government will show observers the big plans but not the (often messy) implementation, while protests will continue to make headlines abroad but the mixed perceptions that many citizens have of the state may remain veiled. With fewer sources at our disposal, finding a middle ground will become increasingly difficult.

People from within China try to circumvent such limitations, as the number of [VPN services](#) used almost doubled in 2023 (Voice of America, 15 February 2024). It remains to be seen how the authorities react: One option is not to try and shut down all VPN connections, but to slow down the connection speed to make its use unattractive and to intimidate its users. Kian Vesteisson, senior research analyst for technology and democracy at Freedom House is quoted as saying:

People face severe consequences for using prohibited VPNs, particularly if they belong to a marginalized ethnic or religious minority or try to access content censored by the authorities. ... The government even removes discussion of VPNs from China-based social media platforms, preventing people from learning about circumvention technology.

Both of the above items in this March 2024 China Blog underline the risk which has been outlined as Trend 2c in WWR's [China Full Country Dossier, January 2024](#): "The serious risk of miscommunication".

A final note about surveillance

In some regions, the use of mass surveillance by the authorities can serve additional purposes. While CCTV cameras in China are ubiquitous, especially in urban areas, some local authorities are apparently using them for [earning money](#) for cash-strapped villages and cities (Quartz, 21 February 2024). According to Caixin, a Chinese business magazine, reporting in 2021, in just over a year, the southern Chinese city of Foshan issued 620,000 tickets for a small infraction — driving on road line markings — at a single poorly marked expressway intersection, racking up 120 million yuan (\$16.7 million). The central government is now trying to curb such excesses.