

How the Xi Jinping Regime is Leading Public Opinion

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Social control in China is being rapidly strengthened. In the economic field, the Xi Jinping administration presented the concept of “common prosperity” on August 17, 2021, dividing the distribution of wealth into three categories: distribution through economic activities (first distribution), distribution by the government through taxation, etc. (second distribution), and voluntary distribution through donations, etc. (third distribution). The goal is to enrich society as a whole by strengthening the redistribution of wealth. Large companies such as Tencent and Alibaba.com were among the first to announce that they would return profits based on donation projects. In the field of education, the curriculum was changed to emphasize the history of the Chinese Communist Party or CCP by reorganizing the division of public history education into Party history, new China history, reform and opening-up history, and socialist development history from April 2021. In addition, “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era” became compulsory in all courses from elementary school to graduate school nationwide. At the same time, the CCP has set up regulations to reduce the burden on families, such as restrictions on school homework, making external tutoring schools non-profit, and imposing limits on the amount of time children can spend playing online games, displaying that the CCP is close to citizens’ lives.

The crackdown on a number of actors and entertainers that began around July 2021 was another measure to tighten control over the wealthy in a way that was visible to the public. In August 2021, actress Vicki Zhao’s name was removed from all video streaming services and other media, and the foreign media reported it widely. Taiwan media reported that Vicki Zhao had close ties to Alibaba Group founder Jack Ma, and, in August, Zhou Jiang Yong, senior official of the Standing Committee of the Zhejiang Provincial Committee of the Communist Party of China, where Alibaba’s headquarters are located, also lost the position, suggesting the aftermath of “political and economic collusion.” Although there are various examples, it seems that prominent figures who have had a great influence on public opinion and who were not necessarily well-behaved in the eyes of the CCP have been the targets of purges.

The Office of the Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission (hereinafter referred to as CCAC), the agency responsible for monitoring and censoring the Internet, is also responsible for the clampdown on the entertainment industry. On June 15, 2021, the CCAC announced that it would be implementing a nationwide action program to “rectify the chaos in the fan community or ‘Fanquan’” (activities to support one’s favorite idols or others, and communities for idols to interact with their fans) over the

next two months. The program began to regulate fan behavior, including celebrity rankings, inducements to consumption, and underage participation. Then, on August 27, the CCAC issued the “Notice on Further Strengthening the Management of Chaos in the ‘Fanquan,’” which consists of 10 items, urging tight and more detailed regulations. On September 2, the office of the National Radio and Television Administration also issued a “Notice on Further Strengthening the Management of Cultural Programs and their Staff” to call for the elimination of “vulgar and indecent” entertainment works and a clear demonstration of “love for the Party and the State, and a noble and artistic industry ethic.” It instructed the media to fill programs with the “main melody and positive energy” demanded by the Party and not to use people whose “hearts are far away” from the Party and the State. The content of the program was also subject to control and regulation.

This series of crackdowns on the business and entertainment sectors has many China watchers at home and abroad fearing a return of the “proletarian cultural revolution.” The so-called Cultural Revolution was a political campaign launched by Mao Zedong involving a violent purge of public opinion that lasted from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s. Under such slogans as “rebellion is rational” and “revolution is innocent,” unreasonable personal attacks were tolerated, causing a great deal of confusion and mutual distrust in Chinese society. It is well known that this was triggered by criticism of the Peking Opera script of *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office* (a historical play based on the true story of the dismissal of the innocent bureaucrat Hai Rui, who incurred the emperor’s wrath). The restriction on culture this time is certainly reminiscent of the Cultural Revolution. In addition, on August 29, official media such as People’s Daily Online, Guangming Online, and CCTV.com simultaneously published an article titled, “Everyone feels that a serious change is taking place!” which received a lot of attention. This article was originally posted by blogger Li Guangman on his SNS “WeChat” page, pointing out that “China is experiencing serious changes, or serious revolutions, in all areas from economics, finance, and culture to politics.” He argued that these changes were a return to the original intentions of the CCP, a return to a people-centered China, and a return to the basic principles of socialism.

However, the author does not believe that the aim of the Xi Jinping administration is simply to reenact the Cultural Revolution. This is because the authorities’ announcements indicate that they do not intend to seize power by stirring up social conflicts within the country as they did in the Cultural Revolution, but rather to prevent the division of Chinese society. The fact that major media outlets such as the People’s Daily published the Li Guangman essay suggests that the message of promoting structural change in society is basically in line with the authorities’ intentions. However, in reprinting the article in the official media, the paragraph calling for the elimination of the entertainment industry and “large purchase capital groups” such as Ant Group Co., Ltd. and Didi Chuxing Technology Co., Ltd. as “a cancer on society” was deleted. Perhaps this point was made more fiercely than the authorities intended. Furthermore, Hu Xijin, former editor-in-chief of the People’s Daily-affiliated Global Times and a well-known hawkish commentator, criticized Li’s essay on September 2 on his

WeChat for “being misleading and deviating from the state’s fundamental policy” and said that the series of crackdowns Li described were “all about further upgrading social governance, and not some kind of ‘revolution.’” These statements reveal the authorities’ intention to change the social climate in a gradual manner without overly provoking the people. There may be a desire to show the antithesis of American society, which has clearly become divided, including the concept of “common prosperity” based on the voluntary return of wealth by the wealthy.

So, in what direction is the Xi Jinping administration trying to steer Chinese public opinion? So far, the policy seems to be characterized by two directions. First, it is trying to shut down dissent against the CCP’s policies, while at the same time providing people with a certain level of “understanding” and encouraging them to recognize that “we are doing the right thing.” In terms of reforming the education system, for example, it calls for correcting the excessive emphasis on cramming in education. Crackdowns on entertainers and their fan communities encourage the correction of behavior that disturbs social climate, and are linked to the healthy development of the youth population as well. Making donations is a way for companies to fulfill their social responsibility. However, it is also a very important objective to keep under control individuals and organizations that have influence over public opinion. On July 29, 2021, the United Front Work Department of the Central Committee (the organization in charge of relations with political and religious organizations other than the Communist Party) announced a policy titled “Open Up a New Phase in United Front Activities for Intellectuals Outside the Party” and launched a political campaign for intellectuals who do not belong to the CCP, such as academics, executives of private companies, and those who have studied abroad. Since then, not only the media but also opinion leaders are expected to increase their voices to express that Chinese society has become better.

The second characteristic is the growing exclusionism with a strong sense of “the West” in mind, as the competition with the US continues. In fact, its effects are gradually becoming apparent. For example, in July 2021, a foreign reporter covering the floods in Zhengzhou City, Henan Province, was surrounded by locals who were dissatisfied with his “biased reporting.” In September 2021, a Japanese-inspired “Shengtang Little Kyoto” (Little Kyoto at the height of the Tang Dynasty), in Dalian City, Liaoning Province, was shut down within a week of its opening, reportedly because of criticism that it was an invasion by Japanese culture.

The growing exclusionary nature of Chinese society is also related to the first point and is inextricably linked to the government’s official insistence on the superiority of Chinese-style governance. In this regard, we have recently seen the advocacy of “Chinese democracy.” For example, spokesperson for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Hua Chunying, criticized the “Western democratic model” on August 20, 2021, using the deterioration of the situation in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of US troops as an example, saying, “Chinese democracy is people’s democracy while that of the US is money democracy; Chinese people enjoy substantial democracy, while Americans have democracy only in form; China has a whole-process democracy while the US has voting

democracy that comes every four years.” At first glance, this is a terribly biased view and includes the exaggerations of so-called “wolf warrior diplomat,” but in fact the “theorizing” of political system is actually underway in China. The State Council Information Office released a white paper titled “China's New Political Party System (zhongguo xinxing zhengdang zhidu)” on June 25, 2021, which describes the representative democratic system based on elections adopted by Western countries as an “old-fashioned political party system.”¹ It spoke highly of the “System of Multi-Party Cooperation and Political Consultation” in China as a “new political party system” in which the eight other political parties in China and people who do not belong to any political party (political independents) work together with the CCP to manage the political system through consultation. If such an original institutional theory based on Chinese subjectivity permeates Chinese society through the education system and the lectures of experts, its impact will be enormous.

The fundamental problem in China’s political system is the excessive concentration of power in the hands of the CCP and the lack of functioning checks and balances on that power. However, in China, the image of a “better society” that leaves this issue behind is about to take precedence. Perhaps people’s short-term satisfaction will improve, and we will be admonished by our Chinese friends, without other intention, “You misunderstand China. The reality is much better than what is reported in the West.” It is true that Chinese society may be more stable in a few years. But we should always keep in mind that the Chinese government’s control of information has become very sophisticated.

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Notes

¹ The Chinese government emphasizes the “new model” in messages to countries where Chinese characters are used or were used, including Japan, claiming the newness and superiority of the China’s party system in comparison with the “old-fashioned party system in the West.” However, in the English version of this white paper, the term “new model” is used only twice, and the term “old-fashioned party system” is used only once. It is thought that this is to avoid criticism from Western societies.