

# Seeing through China's Lens: The Origins and Manifestations of China's Worldview

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## **Abstract**

While few would disagree that China is an emerging global economic superpower, interpretations of its ascendance are divided. China's controversial stance on issues including sovereignty, democracy, and human rights has become a core site of debate. It is convenient to simplify the intentions behind China's foreign policy into its supposed ambition to eclipse the United States' status as world leader. Yet, China's increasingly assertive and nationalist characteristics demand more complex explanations. It is crucial to accurately characterize the Chinese official worldviews while gauging influential non-state actors' attitudes. Exploring the underlying logic of such a complex worldview and its influence on foreign policy is equally urgent.

Four key factors shaping China's worldview: history, which shapes the ambition of reviving the past glory as a response to the 'century of humiliation'; education, covering the curriculums in early education as well as in universities; media, which produces an information asymmetry between the public and the government as a result of censorship and propaganda; and culture, highlighting how traditional and modern values as well as regional cultural differences shape foreign policy concepts, such as peace. It is noteworthy that the booming economy, technological advancement, and military modernization are the material conditions enabling PRC's ambition. However, the scope of the article covers mostly the socio-cultural aspect. These government-endorsed narratives are instrumental to Chinese officials and elites in terms of justifying their actions on the international stage. Moreover, these insights will help NATO gauge enablers and barriers of NATO-China relations and identify future opportunities for more effective engagement and collaboration.

## **Introduction**

In a time of rising tensions between China and NATO members, it is urgent to understand China's worldview,<sup>1</sup> especially on contentious topics like human rights, democracy, and

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<sup>1</sup> The paper makes an effort to distinguish China's ruling party (CCP), the state of mainland China (PRC), and Chinese people, culture and society. When referring to official rhetoric, ideology, and policies, Chinese government, "PRC", or "CCP" would be used. PRC would be used especially in the context of

sovereignty. This essay will examine Chinese perspectives on these concepts by examining how they have been understood both by officials in Beijing and members of the Chinese population, in comparison to common western understandings. The three concepts are interconnected in both western and Chinese discourse. In the post-Cold War context, universal human rights principles challenge an absolutist interpretation of sovereignty, thus legitimizing interventions for humanitarian interventions. The Third Wave of Democratization and the “end of history” rhetoric of the 1990s drove many authoritarian countries, including China, into a crisis of legitimacy. The People’s Republic of China (PRC) developed a set of unique responses to this challenge, including a rejection of universalism, alternative definitions for these contentious topics, and collaboration with like-minded countries.

### **Human Rights, Sovereignty, and Democracy**

Despite its troubled human rights record, the concept of human rights has existed and evolved in China’s political discourse in the post-1989 era.<sup>23</sup> Rejection of universalism and emphasis on national idiosyncrasies has been a consistent theme in official rhetoric. The ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) considers human rights development to be contingent on historical, socio-economic, and cultural conditions. Therefore, there are multiple legitimate paths to pursue such ideals according to one’s national condition (国情). Such conceptualization validates China’s approach, which places economic development, instead of civil-political rights, at the foundation of human rights progress.<sup>4</sup> Subordinating human rights to sovereignty is another strategy to deflect criticism. In the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square Massacre, the CCP identified liberal human rights norms as an existential threat to the regime. Thus, the CCP championed the principle of sovereignty, labelling all criticism of its human rights problems as foreign interference. The Chinese government further refuted similar criticism against other developing countries with this rhetoric, often coupled with discourses of anti-imperialism and decolonization.<sup>5</sup> Such a mindset persists to this day, especially in defense of atrocities committed in Hong Kong and Xinjiang.<sup>6</sup> It also emphasizes the collective dimension of human rights, in

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international relations/foreign policy. When referring to public opinion, culture, history, and society, China/Chinese would be used.

<sup>2</sup> China has a -1.3 human right score, a 9.10 human rights violation score (10 being the worst). Max Roser, “Human Rights,” Our World In Data, accessed June 20, 2021, <https://ourworldindata.org/human-rights>.

<sup>3</sup> China ranks 177th on the World Press Freedom Index. “2021 World Press Freedom Index,” Reporters Without Border, accessed June 20, 2021, <https://rsf.org/en/ranking#>.

<sup>4</sup> “为人民谋幸福：新中国人权事业发展70年(全文),” State Council of the People's Republic of China, <http://www.humanrights.cn/html/wxzl/2/5/2019/0922/45591.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Titus C. Chen and Chia-hao Hsu, “Double-Speaking Human Rights: Analyzing Human Rights Conception in Chinese Politics (1989–2015),” *Journal of Contemporary China* 27, no. 112 (2018), doi:10.1080/10670564.2018.1433487.

<sup>6</sup> “关于涉华人权问题的各种谬论及事实真相,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/zyxw/t1794112.shtml>.

contrast with NATO member states' individualistic approach. Internationally, the PRC routinely condemns Japan's denial of war crimes during the Second World War and NATO's bombing of the Belgrade embassy as violations of Chinese collective human rights.<sup>7</sup>

Sovereignty is another prominent theme in PRC's foreign policy strategy and discourse. It is also a field in which the country's interpretation of sovereignty seems to run counter to liberal paradigms and expectations. The modern concept of sovereignty, which entails non-interference from external powers and internal authority over a jurisdiction, was a concept formulated in Europe through the Treaty of Westphalia. It reached China in the 19th century. Currently, the PRC is commonly viewed as a defender of fundamentalist principles of sovereignty. First, sovereignty is construed as an entitled right to territorial integrity, non-interference, and equality, famously articulated in the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. These principles were first designated as guidelines for foreign policy from 1953 to the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution in 1967. They made a return to the 1982 Constitution as the basis foreign policy, which helps the PRC to repair damaged international relations, focus on domestic reforms, and show support for developing countries.<sup>8</sup> Such an idea is challenged by sovereignty as responsibility especially in the context of responsibility to protect (R2P). Responsible sovereignty emphasizes a country's responsibility to protect its citizens from human rights abuses. The failure to do so legitimizes other countries to intervene on humanitarian grounds. Unsurprisingly, the PRC has historically viewed R2P with suspicion and heavily criticized such missions in Kosovo and Iraq. Second, sovereignty is also considered non-transferable and indivisible, functioning as a guiding principle for foreign policy decisions.<sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless, it is possible that the PRC's non-conformity is exaggerated in western perception since there have been instances in which the country exhibited flexibility regarding sovereignty. For example, it participated in the negotiations to establish the International Criminal Court (despite not signing the Rome Statute). The PRC also espoused universalist rhetoric on several occasions, including in its 1982 Constitution and participation in the human rights council in 2006. Moreover, the PRC's focus on sovereignty also extends beyond defensive measures. Instead, it carries the more aspirational agenda of promoting multipolarity and inserting non-western and non-liberal stances into the international norm.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Chen and Hsu, "Double-Speaking Human Rights: Analyzing Human Rights Conception in Chinese Politics (1989–2015)."

<sup>8</sup> Li Li, Current Criticisms and Reframing of the Noninterference Principle of China, *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 28, no. 4 (2016), 564~565.

<sup>9</sup> Zhongqi Pan, Conceptual Gaps in China-EU Relations: Global Governance, Human Rights and Strategic Partnerships (2012), 19~34.

<sup>10</sup> "Historical Legacies, Globalization, and Chinese Sovereignty Since 1989," in *Sovereignty in China*, vol. 4, ed. Maria A. Carrai (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 4.

In conclusion, the PRC's interpretation of sovereignty has always been predicated upon its domestic and international priorities. Despite the fluctuation and flexibility exhibited over time, sovereignty has consistently been a tool to preserve regime survival vis-a-vis external pressures (from the ex-Soviet Bloc, colonial legacies, and western countries). Currently, one of the greatest pressures comes from the post-1990 democratization trend, and the accompanying limited sovereignty principle championed by western countries, creating normative conflict we observe today.

Similarly, there have been conceptual gaps, and thus tensions, between China and NATO countries regarding democracy. Democracy is an extremely nebulous concept that entails diverse practices which constantly evolves.<sup>11</sup> Some common features of democracy include a competitive electoral system, protection of human rights, separation of powers, and an active civil society. Although democracy is embedded in official state-based articulations, such as the "Twelve Core Socialist Values," it takes on a different meaning in China.<sup>12</sup> According to the Fourteenth Five Year Plan, democracy, rooted in Marxist-Leninist theory, entails leadership by the CCP, "the people as masters," and rule by law (依法治国).<sup>13</sup> "Democracy" under CCP, which is a uniparty system that theoretically gathers all voices from within and outside of the party, is posed as a viable and even more authentic form of democracy than liberal democracy.<sup>14</sup>

As a result, about 54% of PRC citizens perceive their country as semi-democratic,<sup>15</sup> while less than 5% of the population considers it a non-democracy. The satisfaction metrics are more telling, showing 70% of the people are satisfied with the country's democratic performance, according to a survey by World Value Survey. There are doubts about the authenticity of such a positive attitude being a result of duress and inauthenticity. However, most public opinion surveys conducted by western scholars have yielded similar results, thus excluding the possibility of political wariness.<sup>16</sup> The strong disparity between perception and reality indicates that the government has been successful in propagating an alternative discourse on democracy, the guardianship model. The guardianship model disguises autocracy as democracy by placing emphasis on a benevolent leader (or leadership group) and promoting meritocracy within an

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<sup>11</sup> Masanobu Ido, *Varieties of Capitalism, Types of Democracy and Globalization* (Routledge, 2012). doi:10.4324/9780203123980.

<sup>12</sup> Katja Drinhausen, "Democracy/民主," *Decoding China*, accessed June 20, 2021, <https://decodingchina.eu/democracy/>.

<sup>13</sup> "(两会受权发布) 规划纲要草案：加强社会主义民主法治建设 健全党和国家监督制度," *Xinhua Net*, last modified March 5, 2021, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2021-03/05/c\\_1127173255.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2021-03/05/c_1127173255.htm).

<sup>14</sup> Changjiang Yu and Bo Wang, "On "Democracy" in Socialist Core Values," *Journal of Fujian Institute of Socialism* 4 (2020), 37~38.

<sup>15</sup> Pan, *Conceptual Gaps in China-EU Relations*, 114~116.

<sup>16</sup> The author analyzed 32 survey-based political science research from 1986 to 2005. Melanie Manion, "A Survey of Survey Research on Chinese Politics?", in *Contemporary Chinese politics: New Sources, Methods, and Field Strategies*, ed. Allen Carlson (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 181~199.

authoritarian framework, thus sidelining the necessity for democratic institutions and procedures.<sup>17</sup>

It is challenging to accurately assess public opinion regarding sensitive topics like human rights, democracy, and sovereignty. Tight information control through censorship and propaganda and lack of political engagement contributes to this challenge. There are some fragmented surveys on these topics. For example, a recent survey conducted by *Global Times* (a CCP publication) indicates that more than 97% of the respondents view Taiwan as an indispensable part of China, while 79% expect reunification within two years.<sup>18</sup> Although it seemingly confirms the perception of Chinese ultranationalism, many criticize the survey's limited sample size, skewed question design, and the possible inauthenticity of responses.<sup>19</sup> However, hawkish public opinion on sovereignty is unlikely to hinder the Chinese government's ability to de-escalate crises because the government has a wide range of options to redirect the narrative, such as appealing to peaceful identity or discussing economic cost.<sup>20</sup>

### **History: Century of Humiliation**

Like many other governments seeking nation-building through history, the CCP curates an official narrative by simplifying regional and national history, amplifying certain events and deliberately erasing others. Accuracy is not the goal, since this project of history-making serves the future rather than the past.<sup>21</sup> The most widely studied aspect of China's foreign policy discussed by western scholars is China's use of history for diplomatic arguments. History has always been integral to the creation of China's national identity. Chinese people take great pride in the glories of the country's five-thousand-year civilization and its current economic advancements. It is a common conception among the Chinese public that their collective memory of the century of humiliation (1839-1949) that began with the Opium War has made the recent resurgence of China's Great Power status even more well-deserved and cathartic.

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<sup>17</sup> Jie Lu and Tianjian Shi, "The Battle of Ideas and Discourses Before Democratic Transition: Different Democratic Conceptions in Authoritarian China," *International Political Science Review* 36, no. 1 (2015), doi:10.1177/0192512114551304, 22~24.

<sup>18</sup> "台湾问题民意调查：‘和统’还是‘武统’？," accessed June 20, 2021, <http://www.tpaihang.com/survey/svresult-144.html>.

<sup>19</sup> Ping Hu, "胡平：环时民调用意何在——解读《台湾问题民意大调查》," Human Rights In China, last modified April 25 2016, <https://www.hrichina.org/chs/zhong-guo-ren-quan-shuang-zhou-kan/hu-ping-huan-shi-min-diao-yong-yi-he-zai-jie-du-tai-wan-wen-ti>.

<sup>20</sup> Kai Quek and Alastair I. Johnston, "Can China Back down? Crisis De-Escalation in the Shadow of Popular Opposition," *International Security* 42, no. 3 (2018), doi:10.1162/ISEC\_a\_00303, 10.

<sup>21</sup> Maria Adele Carrai, "Chinese Political Nostalgia and Xi Jinping's Dream of Great Rejuvenation," *International Journal of Asian Studies* 18, (2021), doi: 10.1017/S1479591420000406, 21.

### *Historical Development:*

The CCP's active promotion of the humiliation narrative on the international stage regained traction as the patriotic education campaigns took off in the 1990s. Though the century of humiliation remains a normalized discourse in Chinese foreign policy, the ruling party gradually shifted to focus on planting the humiliation discourse in domestic politics as a common-sense means for the public to understand China's modern history.<sup>22</sup> For example, in recent years, under Xi Jinping's leadership, China has intensified the development of "red tourism"—tourism of historic sites that signify China's past humiliation and the CCP's victorious records.<sup>23</sup> Through conceptualizing knowledge about the century of humiliation during these tours, Xi wishes to usher social and political transformation that can strengthen Chinese nationalism. According to Suisheng Zhao, the PRC has been increasingly responsive to popular nationalism in recent years, and the conflation of state nationalism and popular nationalism has also reached an alarming point.<sup>24</sup> Xi's red tourism plays to the popular nationalism predicated upon the humiliation narrative to counter foreign aggressions that were once responsible for China's humiliation and still remain threats to China's revitalization. It also aims to stabilize domestic tensions in social, economic, and political areas. Thus, the active deployment of the humiliation narrative is perceived by other nations as the party's deliberate extension of Mao Zedong's strategy to "use the past to serve the present".<sup>25</sup>

While Chinese political elites now project the century of humiliation as a source of bargaining power in the global arena, the late 19th century witnessed a much different sentiment towards the narrative of humiliation. The events that followed the Opium War forced an abrupt transition from "a powerful, proud, and unified nation to one whose territory was — carved up like a melon (guafen; 瓜分) by foreign powers."<sup>26</sup> This sent shockwaves through Chinese political and intellectual elites in the late Qing dynasty who realized that their outlooks about China and the world were no longer applicable. They soon turned to self-examination to reflect on the internal reasons that had led to China's defeat. This intellectual awakening and their intense self-

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<sup>22</sup> Ryan Kilpatrick. National Humiliation in China. (2011). <https://www.e-ir.info/2011/10/20/national-humiliation-in-china/>

<sup>23</sup> Wong, M. H. The rapid rise of 'red tourism' in China. (2021). <https://www.cnn.com/travel/article/china-red-tourism-sites-cmd/index.html>

<sup>24</sup> Suisheng Zhao, Foreign Policy Implications of Chinese Nationalism Revisited: the strident turn, *Journal of Contemporary China*, (2013), 22:82, 535-553, DOI: [10.1080/10670564.2013.766379](https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2013.766379)

<sup>25</sup> Callahan, A. W. National Insecurities: Humiliation, Salvation, and Chinese Nationalism. (2004). <https://www.humiliationstudies.org/documents/CallahanChina.pdf>

<sup>26</sup> Kaufman, Alison, The 'Century of Humiliation,' Then and Now: Changing Chinese Perceptions Of the International Order (2009). APSA 2009 Toronto Meeting Paper, Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=1449346>

questioning about China's place in the world remained as the defining characteristics of China's political thought during the republican era.<sup>27</sup>



Image 1 : "En Chine. Le gâteau des Rois et. . . des Empereurs". (Source : H. Meyer, Le Petit Journal, supplement, January 16, 1898, <https://heiu.uni-heidelberg.de/journals/index.php/transcultural/article/download/23700/17430?inline>).

The shift in the humiliation narrative came with Mao Zedong's triumphant declaration that "China has stood up," which is also incorporated in the national anthem. The humiliating past that China suffered was framed as a source of inspiration to establish a new world order. The CCP turned this perceived humiliation into its motivation to disrupt the systematic inequality between different nation-states by uniting with other nations that would recognize China as an equal.<sup>28</sup> With the advent of the 21st century, there is little doubt that China has become a predominant economic, political, and cultural force in world affairs. However, imposed international responsibilities, criticism of China's domestic policies, and other countries'

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Kaufman, Alison, The 'Century of Humiliation,' Then and Now: Changing Chinese Perceptions Of the International Order (2009). APSA 2009 Toronto Meeting Paper, Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=1449346>

suspicious of China's willingness to cooperate within the international system may have left bitterness among the Chinese public.

*Psychological Impact:*

Modern PRC's foreign policies have capitalized on China's victimhood as a result of the humiliation, as the CCP invokes emotions such as pride and pettiness.<sup>29</sup> The most poignant portrayal of China's sense of pride and pettiness came from one of Lu Xun's most influential fiction novels from a century ago — *The True Story of Ah Q*. Ah Q was a character who dealt with demoralizing losses and unfortunate circumstances through self-proclaimed spiritual victory. Ah Q's story is still relevant today for it sheds light on how China as a nation approaches feelings of shame and inadequacy.<sup>30</sup> Instead of reflecting on the long-standing debility during the century of humiliation, many Chinese people chose to see the experience of defeat as a sign of virtue — a demonstration of their moral superiority in peace and harmony.<sup>31</sup>

China's obsession with this part of history explains not only the origin of China's national pride but also its deeply rooted emotions of unfairness and injustice. The shared understanding of the Opium War as a historical divide that turned China from the centre of the world to subjugation by foreign forces (especially western forces) is still much alive. As a US commentator noted in 1959:

“The Chinese have one very broad generalisation about their own history: they think in terms of ‘up to the Opium war’ and ‘after the Opium war’; in other words, a century of humiliation and weakness to be expunged.”<sup>32</sup>

Evidently, Chinese policymakers regard the century of humiliation “as a starting point for their views on how China should interact with other nations.”<sup>33</sup> From accepting the world order as a natural consequence of dynastic complacency to blaming the inherent international hierarchies established by the West, China's attitude towards the Opium War has changed. The core of policy discussions has come to recognize China as a victim and foreign powers as predators. The western ideological and cultural dominance is thus construed as threatening, which needs to be

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<sup>29</sup> Ryan Kilpatrick. National Humiliation in China. (2011). <https://www.e-ir.info/2011/10/20/national-humiliation-in-china/>

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Leung Man-tao, 向“百年国耻”说再见. (2012). <http://roll.sohu.com/20120101/n330971026.shtml>

<sup>32</sup> Harris, R, “China and the World,” *International Affairs* 35, Issue 2 (1959). 162

<sup>33</sup> Kaufman, A.A. The “Century of Humiliation,” *Then and Now: Chinese Perceptions of the International Order*. *Pacific Focus*. (2010). 25: 1-33. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1976-5118.2010.01039.x>. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1976-5118.2010.01039.x>

reined in by a nation like China so that “weaker” nations can avoid repeating similar humiliation.<sup>34</sup>

By placing the blame of China’s experience on the immoral West, the CCP successfully reignited public resentment and hostility towards foreign influence. Leung Man-tao, a Hong Kong writer and critic, once referenced Max Scheler’s concept of “ressentiment” to explain the psychological impact of the humiliation discourse. Scheler suggests that resentment happens to individuals but also to populations as a form of shared social emotion, which can occur if two conditions are satisfied. First, one must believe oneself to be fundamentally comparable to other groups. Second, one must believe other groups’ enviable status is attainable and should have belonged to themselves. To situate these two requirements in the Chinese environment, Leung Man-tao believes that China’s current political strategies are perfect brewing machines for “ressentiment.”<sup>35</sup> In the meantime, constant amplification of China’s greatness in earlier dynasties, instead of examining internal policy failures, further attributes misfortune to external factors. To this end, economic prosperity notwithstanding, the CCP continues to utilize this narrative of national humiliation to frame China as the disadvantaged party that needs recompense.<sup>36</sup>

### **Reception of Modern Political Concepts:**

#### *Government Response:*

The CCP has repeatedly interpreted diplomatic crises as the unfortunate legacy of past humiliation. Beijing’s unsuccessful bid to host the Summer Olympics in 1993, the Belgrade Embassy bombing in 1999, and the spy plane collision off the coast of Hainan in 2001 were all examples used by the government to perpetuate the need to exorcise China’s unresolved trauma.<sup>37</sup> At this point, undoing the humiliation transcends simple healing from historical trauma. This approach transformed into the CCP’s turn-key solution to further the party’s agenda by modifying the humiliation rhetoric at its will. The CCP can, therefore, justify its nationalist policies of building a unified, nationalist front that can withstand the so-called “western incursions.” As the Chinese indulge in nationalist sentiments, their preoccupation with the West enables the CCP to stabilize the nation by diverting domestic attention to foreign affairs.

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<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Leung Man-tao, 向“百年国耻”说再见. (2012). <http://roll.sohu.com/20120101/n330971026.shtml>

<sup>36</sup> Ryan Kilpatrick. National Humiliation in China. (2011). <https://www.e-ir.info/2011/10/20/national-humiliation-in-china/>

<sup>37</sup> Callahan, W. A. ‘Beyond cosmopolitanism and nationalism : diasporic Chinese and neo-nationalism in China and Thailand.’, *International organization*. (2003). 57 (3): 481-517

Domestically, accounts of loss and tragedy help the Chinese government create a sense of urgency for solidarity. Internationally, they are fundamental mechanisms that underlie China's concept of sovereignty and integrity of land. As Jiang Zemin noted at the speech of the hand-over of Hong Kong in 1997:

“From the Qin Dynasty to Emperor Daoguang's Reign of the Qing Dynasty, China exercised jurisdiction and sovereignty over Hong Kong. In mid-19th century, after launching two Opium Wars, Britain forced the corrupt and incompetent Qing Government to sign the Treaty of Nanking, 1842 and the Convention of Peking, 1860. In 1898, Britain again coerced the Qing Government into signing the Convention of the Extension of Hong Kong, thus occupying the entire Hong Kong region. Notwithstanding the prolonged separation, the flesh-and-blood bond between the people on mainland and Hong Kong compatriots had never severed; nor had their shared sentiment for the well-being of the nation. The Chinese people have never recognized the unequal treaties imposed on them, never forgotten for a single day the humiliating state of Hong Kong under occupation and never stopped their indomitable struggle for state sovereignty and national emancipation.”<sup>38</sup>

By eliciting emotional responses from the perceived humiliation, the CCP aims to stress how China considers its boundaries immutable and everlasting. In recent years, as the PRC tightens administrative and political control of Hong Kong, its violations of freedom and democracy have received persistent pushback from Hong Kong and the western world. Similarly, separatist movements from Xinjiang (Uyghur) and Tibet have also induced further aversions to China's ethnic oppression, not to mention China's ambition to “reunify” with Taiwan. However, the central government insists on the “correctness” of their views on territorial matters. The CCP's firm stance on sovereignty energizes the public sentiment of injustice and the protectiveness of territorial integrity. The Chinese believe that what was once theirs should remain that way, and counterclaims of other countries and nationalities (such as Tibetan and Uyghur) are a provocation to their nation. All these views provided the foundation of the government's hardline approach on territorial disputes over the South China Sea and the East China Sea as well.

Yet, China's national interests and economic ambitions are more salient reasons for the country's uncompromising attitude toward sovereignty issues. All these regions are of geopolitical importance to China. Therefore, the CCP's ability and will to keep them intact is a propaganda strategy to persuade Chinese people that the CCP was the only party that can lead China to escape from its former weakness.<sup>39</sup> As Harold and Margaret Sprout say: “what matters is how

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<sup>38</sup> Jiang Zemin's Speech at Ceremony for Establishment of HKSAR. (2007).

[http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2007-06/20/content\\_6163468.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2007-06/20/content_6163468.htm)

<sup>39</sup> Chinese Worldviews and China's Foreign Policy. (2015). Lowy Institute.

[https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/chinese-worldviews-and-china-s-foreign-policy#\\_edn21](https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/chinese-worldviews-and-china-s-foreign-policy#_edn21)

decision-makers imagine the state's power to be, not how it actually is.”<sup>40</sup> This showcase of power parallels China's rhetoric to achieve the “Chinese Dream (中国梦)” — a popular discourse born out of the humiliation narrative. The Chinese Dream simply refers to the CCP's desire to restore dynastic glories, which is used by the CCP to earn Chinese people's loyalty to the party. Xi Administration emphasized more of China's past as a superpower to frame its current ascendancy as restoring China's rightful place.<sup>41</sup>

### *Further Implications:*

To the Chinese, the century of humiliation is a historical lesson that taught them to stay alert and never forget about the consequences of lagging behind their international competitors. During a speech at the Seoul National University in the Republic of Korea, Xi Jinping stated: “Modesty helps one go forward, whereas conceit makes one lag behind.” China's relentless efforts to catch up with developed nations and even supersede them demand respect from the international society. The Chinese feel entitled to reclaim their leading role in international affairs after much suffering at the hands of the West, especially given China's recent economic and military rise.

Another by-product of the century of humiliation is China and the West's mutual distrust of each other's intentions. The CCP often interprets western criticism of China's policies as veiled and ill-intentioned. It is argued that international endorsements of Xinjiang, Tibet, Hong Kong, and Taiwan are attempts from the West to undermine China's political ascendancy. The Chinese phrase “外患 (waihuan)” is the Chinese government's way of framing the foreign aggressions, and the Chinese believe that waihuan is a priority before they can address 内忧 (neiyou) or domestic strife. Evidently, the rhetoric of humiliation helps China justify some of its controversial political stances by invoking trauma and moments of shame. It also acts as a default defense mechanism when Chinese political tactics come under attack by western countries.

## **Culture**

Traditional philosophies made a return to Chinese intellectual and political discourse in the 1980s, after decades of denunciation in favour of communism and radical anti-traditionalism. Jiang Zemin initiated official support to the revival of Confucianism, to restore CCP's cultural leadership vis-a-vis decline of communism ideology and westernization. The CCP cherry-picked certain tenets of Confucianism, such as collectivist morality, loyalty and obedience and pursuit

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<sup>40</sup> Zhang, Biwu. "Chinese Perceptions of American Power, 1991–2004." *Asian Survey* 45, no. 5 (2005): 667-86. Accessed May 28, 2021.

doi:10.1525/as.2005.45.5.667. [https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/as.2005.45.5.667?read-now=1&refreqid=excelsior%3A200a69b9aebb361b45313ad5cb95ef9b&seq=2#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/as.2005.45.5.667?read-now=1&refreqid=excelsior%3A200a69b9aebb361b45313ad5cb95ef9b&seq=2#page_scan_tab_contents)

<sup>41</sup> Carrai, “Chinese Political Nostalgia and Xi Jinping's Dream of Great Rejuvenation,” 7–9.

of harmony, to soften its image, complement official stances, and claim genuine representation of China.<sup>42</sup> Following his predecessor, Xi Administration continued to promote concepts drawn from traditional culture in both domestic politics and diplomacy.<sup>43</sup> High profile features of Chinese philosophies lead to the question, is PRC genuinely incorporating them into policies or only paying lip service? It is also worth noting that Confucianism and Legalism promoted by the Party is only one (and also the most pro-establishment) interpretation of them. Thus, the essentialization and East-West dichotomy prompted by this narrative deserves scrutiny.

### *The Concept of Peace*

The official discourse about peace, with allusion to Confucianism and history, has been controversial. The international audiences are skeptical of this constructed image when witnessing its aggression towards Taiwan, Japan (regarding Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands), and Philippine (regarding South China Sea). Multiple Chinese leaders iterated PRC's commitment to peace by emphasizing peace-loving as an inherent and unchanging national characteristic. Wen Jiabao stated at the 2019 Summer Davos meeting in Dalian: "peace, development and cooperation remain the trend of our times. The international environment is generally conducive to China's pursuit of peaceful development." Xi Jinping's speech at the the Seoul National University<sup>44</sup> and Germany reiterated China's commitment to peaceful development, Chinese inherited peaceful nature, and contrasted China's approach to previous colonial powers.<sup>45</sup>

The official rhetoric argues that China's desire for peace is immanent in its cultural traditions and behaviors and thus will remain the same in the future. Besides tradition, the current international climate also compels China to serve as a protector of peace. The CCP's emphasis on a peaceful China also extends to the party's choice of terminology. In 2014, the CCP proposed to replace the concept of "peaceful rise" with "peaceful development" to

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<sup>42</sup> Shufang Wu, "The Revival of Confucianism and the CCP's Struggle for Cultural Leadership: A Content Analysis of the People's Daily, 2000–2009," *Journal of Contemporary China* 23, no. 89 (2014), 971–99, doi:10.1080/10670564.2014.882624.

<sup>43</sup> Delia Lin, The CCP's exploitation of Confucianism and Legalism, from Routledge Handbook of the Chinese Communist Party, in *Routledge Handbook of the Chinese Communist Party*, ed. Willy Wo-Lap Lam (Routledge, 2017), 47. doi:10.4324/9781315543918.

<sup>44</sup> "President Xi Jinping Delivers an Important Speech in ROK's Seoul National University, Stressing That China Will Always Be a Country That Maintains Peace, Promotes Cooperation and Is Modest to Learn from Others, and That China Will Create the Future of China-ROK Cooperation and Accomplish Asia's Revitalization and Prosperity Together with ROK," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, last modified July 4, 2014, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/topics\\_665678/xjpzxdhgjxgsw/t1172436.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/xjpzxdhgjxgsw/t1172436.shtml).

<sup>45</sup> Speech by H.E. Xi Jinping President of the People's Republic of China At the Körber Foundation, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, last modified March 28, 2014, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjdt\\_665385/zyjh\\_665391/t1148640.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/zyjh_665391/t1148640.shtml).

underscore the non-threatening nature of China's growth.<sup>46</sup> All these measures aimed to convince other nations that China's development will only bring "stability, peace and other positive spillover effects to the rest of the world."<sup>47</sup>

Although the study of Confucianism is sponsored and controlled by the state, Chinese academics still pose challenges to official stances, albeit mildly and subtly. Some are dissatisfied by the government merely paying lip service to traditional thoughts and values. The moral realist Yan Xuetong argued that China cannot successfully replace the US as the next global hegemon without moral leadership. Drawing upon examples from the Warring State Period (春秋战国 476 BC – 221 BC) and the Tang Dynasty, Yan suggests that the government should shift its focus from economic growth to humane governance at home, such as reducing inequality, eliminating corruption, and attract talented immigrants. Internationally, the PRC needs to create more high-quality relationships by providing protection to weaker countries.<sup>48</sup> His suggestions apparently failed to stir Beijing away from its set directions. Scholars also refute the myth that Imperial China, following defensive pacifism of Confucian ideology, had been mostly peaceful. For example, Feng Zhang pointed out that Confucian theorists had advocated for punitive action toward nomads and vassal states when they caused disturbance without penance.<sup>49</sup>

Even though the verdict of China as a peace-loving country is widely circulated among Chinese elites, it seems proponents of this narrative have only convinced themselves. Many western nations fundamentally question the validity of China's cultural argument because of China's past and present behaviors. Its commitment to global security (or the lack thereof) originates from realist concerns instead of tradition-inspired moral leadership. For example, PRC's recent diplomatic reception of the Taliban was motivated by containing terrorism in Xinjiang province and protecting its investment.<sup>50</sup> Fast-growing investments overseas, increasing military spending, and an uncompromising political stance on foreign policy issues have all produced an impression of China as a headstrong, unruly country.<sup>51</sup> Coupled with China's sizable territory, economy, and population, the western world often views China's claim of its "peaceful rise" with anxiety and uncertainty.

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<sup>46</sup> Su Hsing Loh, "China: China's Rhetoric Of Peace," *The World Today* 67, no. 11 (2011): 20-21, accessed May 28, 2021, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41962597>.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Yan Xuetong, "How China Can Defeat America," *The New York Times*, last modified 20 November 2011, [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/21/opinion/how-china-can-defeat-america.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/21/opinion/how-china-can-defeat-america.html?_r=1).

<sup>49</sup> Feng Zhang, "Confucian Foreign Policy Traditions in Chinese History," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 8, no. 2 (2015), 200~205, doi:10.1093/cjip/pov004.

<sup>50</sup> [https://cn.nytimes.com/china/20210729/china-taliban-afghanistan/?utm\\_source=top10-in-article&utm\\_medium=articlepage&utm\\_campaign=web](https://cn.nytimes.com/china/20210729/china-taliban-afghanistan/?utm_source=top10-in-article&utm_medium=articlepage&utm_campaign=web)

<sup>51</sup> Su Hsing Loh, "China: China's Rhetoric Of Peace." *The World Today* 67, no. 11 (2011): 20-21. Accessed May 28, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41962597>.

### *Filial Piety, Domestic Legitimacy, and Regional Hegemony*

The CCP has used a paternalistic analogy of the nation as family to deflect foreign criticism, preserve legitimacy at home, and justify its regional ambition. Isomorphism of family and state (家国同构 *jiaguotonggou*) refers to the notion that the state (国 *guo*) is seen as an extension of the family, and the family (家 *jia*) a reduced version of the state. The first mention of this relationship between the family and the state appeared in *Daxue* (大学) — *The Great Learning* — one of the Confucian classics:

“Only with the help of sincerity, one would be able to rectify one's heart (*zheng xin* 正心), and only this way man would be able to practice self-cultivation (*xiu shen* 修身). Once cultivated, the own family was brought to unison (*jia qi* 家齊), and only with families in unison a state could be governed (*zhi guo* 治國) in the right way. If all this were achieved, there would be peace on earth (*tianxia ping* 天下平).”<sup>52</sup>

In this narrative, the country and the family are two entities that support and reflect each other. In ancient China, the father as the household leader was entitled to obedience and respect from the rest of the family. Similarly, the emperor as the country's leader was entitled to the same degree of respect from his citizens. By this logic, the nation's ruler is presented as the parental figure, and its citizens are expected to follow and fulfill their family obligations as children.

Anthropologist Vanessa Fong highlighted the wide acceptance of this guardianship model in China where “China was identified with a long-suffering parent who deserved the filial devotion of her children, despite her flaws.”<sup>53</sup> In many of Xi Jinping's talks and speeches, he also used the phrase “sons and daughters of China” to resonate with this sentiment. For instance, in his efforts to rally Chinese people to support the government's position on the Cross-Straits relationship, he said in a talk in 2013:

“We are committed to safeguarding the fundamental interests of the Chinese nation and the common interests of all sons and daughters of China, including our Taiwan compatriots.”<sup>54</sup>

Xi Jinping drew on this view that the country is a bigger family unit led by one benevolent leader to obtain people's loyalty to the party. It creates a strong sense of unity and assuages domestic tensions since citizens as children should overlook the Party-state's imperfections. This guardianship model helps the CCP control the narratives on topics including human rights,

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<sup>52</sup> ChinaKnowledge.de - An Encyclopaedia on Chinese History, Literature and Art. (2010)., <http://www.chinaknowledge.de/Literature/Classics/daxue.html>

<sup>53</sup> Fong Vanessa, “Paradise Redefined: Transnational Chinese Students and the Quest for Flexible Citizenship in the Developing World,” Stanford University Press. (2011): 52.

<sup>54</sup> Foreign Languages Press Co. Ltd. Xi Jinping: The Governance of China. (2014): 260

democracy, freedom, and transparency by claiming to have acted in the best interests of Chinese citizens. Therefore, the CCP can minimize the need for democratic institutions and agencies that might amplify the party's mistakes. This mindset also equates criticism against the government with attack on its people. Thus, the CCP emphasizes how these comments have "hurt the feelings of Chinese people" to mobilize domestic rejection of foreign criticism.

It is popular among both western and Chinese commentators that China is seeking to project its family-state isomorphism and Tianxia order into its foreign policy, specifically relationship with its Southeast Asian neighbours. For example, Dr. Martin Stuart-Fox anticipates that "history, culture and traditional modes of interaction" are likely to be more important as their relationship evolves.<sup>55</sup> PRC has been partially successful in pursuing greater influence in Southeast Asia through China-ASEAN Community of Common Destiny, by raising visibility, increasing FDI, loans and trade, and negotiating a Code of Conduct to resolve the South China Sea dispute. The trend is increasingly visible as US credibility and presence in the region recedes during the Trump administration.<sup>56</sup> PRC's increased attention and influence to ASEAN leads some to predict that it was constructing a familial hierarchy where PRC assumes paternalistic role over smaller Southeast Asian countries.<sup>57</sup> However, both the PRC and ASEAN member states rejected this prospect, at least in rhetoric. Premier Li denied that China intends to be the "big brother" to ASEAN countries<sup>58</sup>, while ASEAN countries showed a desire for reciprocity and autonomy, speaking in terms of "mutual understanding, mutual respect and mutual benefit."<sup>59</sup>

ASEAN member states are extremely cautious about entering an exclusive political-security alliance with China while maintaining its connection with the US and Japan. The South China Sea Code of Conduct also failed to address the core of the conflict and remained symbolic.<sup>60</sup> Although the power imbalance, assertiveness (if not aggression) of PRC in China-ASEAN relationship is apparent, it is debated unclear to what extent does Chinese culture and

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<sup>55</sup> Martin Stuart-Fox, *A Short History of China and Southeast Asia: Tribute, Trade and Influence* (Crow's Nest, New South Wales: Allen & Unwin, 2003), pp. 73–94.

<sup>56</sup> Hoang Thi Ha, "Understanding China's Proposal for an ASEAN-China Community of Common Destiny and ASEAN's Ambivalent Response," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 41, no. 2 (2018), doi:10.1355/cs41-2j.

<sup>57</sup> Merriden Varrall, "A Risen China and the Dawn of a New Era?," Yusof Ishak Institute, last modified November 2017, [https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/NOV\\_ASEANFOCUS\\_WEB.pdf](https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/NOV_ASEANFOCUS_WEB.pdf).

<sup>58</sup> "China Not Seeking Role of Asia's 'Big Brother', says Premier Li Keqiang", *Straits Times*, last modified June 1 2016, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/china-not-seeking-role-of-asias-big-brother-says-premier-li-keqiang>.

<sup>59</sup> "Concluding Remarks by Singapore Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean at the Singapore Lecture by Chinese Premier Li Keqiang", last modified November 18 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LzLd7eqXpGQ&feature=youtu.be>.

<sup>60</sup> Hoang Thi Hau, "From Declaration to Code: Continuity and Change in China's Engagement with ASEAN on the South China Sea," Yusof Ishak Institute, accessed August 13, 2021, [TRS5\\_19.pdf \(iseas.edu.sg\)](https://www.iseas.edu.sg/TRS5_19.pdf).

legacy of ancient statecraft shapes PRC's rhetorical and policy choices. As former Assistant Secretary of State Christopher A. Ford argued, "No one, presumably, thinks that China's present is entirely the prisoner of its past or that this past is entirely irrelevant."

### *Encountering Western Values*

Western concepts, such as democracy and human rights, were imported to China in the late 19th century. These concepts, often lacking a Chinese counterpart, took a rather arduous process to be localized. Deborah Cao's research illustrated that "the universal and innate nature of the word 'rights' is not tenable."<sup>61</sup> For example, there was no linguistic equivalent to the word right (not mentioning human rights), it was translated as *quanli* (权利). The character *quan* (权) means power and authority, while *li* (利) means interest. Natural and inalienable entitlement is absent from the indigenous meaning of *quanli* (权利). Right as a concept was also non-existent in pre-modern Chinese political ideologies and systems. Humans were viewed as social beings, whose socio-political status depends on one's social role and personal effort. In contrast, Enlightenment values view humans as natural beings with universal qualities, which are independent from one's action and roles.<sup>62</sup> However, linguistics and intellectual history (or the absence thereof) shouldn't be interpreted as Chinese people inherently lacking desire for human rights protection. Societies that share the same language and traditional culture, like Taiwan and Hong Kong, are capable of upholding human rights principles.

It is also a common conception that Chinese political-cultural tradition (especially Confucianism) is at odds with democracy. Paternalistic vision and hierarchy espoused in Confucianism inspired cultural nationalists to justify the authoritarian status-quo, often with the CCP's support. However, the intellectual tradition of Confucianism is complex and diverse, with at least parts compatible with deliberative democratic ideals. For example, in the canonical texts Mencius and Analect, Zi Chan and Xun Zi respectively recognized that rulers (despite their erudition and morality) are fallible and have limitations, thus they should take others' knowledge and advice into account.<sup>63</sup>

## **Media**

Media has long been used for political persuasion and control in the PRC, as "the mouthpiece of the party". Censorship, propaganda, and disinformation are common impressions of the country's heavily-regulated and relatively insulated media environment. This section will provide a survey of China's post-reform era media landscape, and the political and economic

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<sup>61</sup> Deborah Cao, "On the Universality of "Rights": Absence and Presence of "Rights" in the Chinese Language," *Intercultural Pragmatics* 14, no. 2 (2017), 278, doi:10.1515/ip-2017-0012.

<sup>62</sup> Deborah Cao, "On the Universality of "Rights": Absence and Presence of "Rights" in the Chinese Language," *Intercultural Pragmatics* 14, no. 2 (2017), doi:10.1515/ip-2017-0012.

<sup>63</sup> Sor-hoon Tan, "Early Confucian Concept of Yi (议) And Deliberative Democracy," *Political Theory* 42, no. 1 (2014), doi:10.1177/0090591713515682.

forces at play. It will then analyze the complex practice and resistance of censorship in traditional and new media.

### **History of Information Control in PRC**

The PRC employs increasingly sophisticated strategies to create a favourable, if not false, image of itself domestically and internationally. This approach entails near-total control of traditional media, heavily surveilled and censored internet, and creative social media campaigns at home and abroad. The institution and political tradition of propaganda and censorship can be dated back to the foundation of PRC.

Systematic application of ideological propaganda started with Mao Zedong, who created a “control system” through centralized propaganda, which was critical to consolidating ideological loyalty through cultural unity. In his 1942 *Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Art and Literature*, Mao stressed how culture could serve a political purpose. He pushed for the indoctrination of “mass culture” (群众文化) and “revolutionary culture” (革命文化) to bolster socialism and alienate the bourgeoisie in Chinese society. Many of his theories on propaganda were inspired by the Soviet, Nazi, and other totalitarian states’ propaganda methods and reflected the Leninist philosophy on indoctrination and mass mobilization.<sup>64</sup> Maoist propaganda strategies included expanding media infrastructure (e.g. broadcast, newspaper) and assuming total control of them; indoctrination through education system and incarceration; and mass mobilization. Some tactics involved the whole society, while others specifically targeted segments of the population.<sup>65</sup> The Cultural Revolution (1966~1976) marked the height of Maoist indoctrination, during which his fanatic supporters violently attacked perceived enemies and traditional cultural legacies.<sup>66</sup>

Although Maoist ideology became marginalized and ideology control relatively relaxed in the post-reform PRC, the legacy of propaganda continued to influence China’s worldview. The CCP’s information control system gradually grew more sophisticated and flexible vis-a-vis a more open society. It continued to implement conventional policies against any potentially threatening zeitgeist. For example, the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign in 1983 aimed at curbing western ideologies rooted in liberalism, democracy, and freedom. Many traditional media outlets underwent privatization after reform and opening up. In response, the party adapted and developed a new system of control, strategizing their propaganda system to assert the party’s authority in novel ways, such as using “mass communications theory, public relations, advertising, social psychology, and patriotic education.”<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Foreign Languages Press Co. Ltd. Xi Jinping: The Governance of China. (2014): 397

<sup>65</sup> Shambaugh, David. "China's Propaganda System: Institutions, Processes and Efficacy." *The China Journal*, no. 57 (2007): 26-27. Accessed May 27, 2021. doi:10.2307/20066240.

<sup>66</sup> McCarthy, Michael. *The Historical Roots of Chinese Propaganda*. Vol. 3. No.1.

<sup>67</sup> Brady, Anni-Marie. *Marketing Dictatorship: Propaganda and Thought Work in Contemporary China*. Rowman & Littlefield. (2008): p. 1. [ISBN 978-0742540576](#). [OCLC 968245349](#).

Media landscape became more decentralized, diverse, and commercialized<sup>68</sup> in the 1980s and 1990s, while the PRC underwent tectonic socio-economic changes. Therefore, the regulation of the media adopted new aims and methods. The CCP exercised control over newspapers through a licensing system, which required the newspaper to be sponsored by a governmental entity. For example, *People's Daily* is sponsored by the Central Propaganda Department, thus under the control of the central government. Press censorship is hierarchical, with the Department of Propaganda situated at the top. The local departments had to interpret and implement vague guidelines on forbidden topics from the central Department of Propaganda. This elusive standard was difficult for journalists and editors to grasp since most of them never had access to the official documents, leading to many articles being censored ex-ante.<sup>69</sup> In addition to effective ideological and information control, the superficial diversity of the media industry lends credibility to state-sponsored propaganda. Relatively liberalized media became more effective in collecting information on social issues and discontent, thus facilitating a better targeted governmental response.

Besides targeting the domestic population, the CCP also had a long history of attempting to influence the international public opinion. The United Front has been a crucial institution to achieve this goal. The predecessor of today's United Front Work Department (UFWD) emerged in the 1920s, known as the Kuomintang (the Nationalist Party)-Communist cooperation (KMT-CPC cooperation) — as a strategy to “rally as many allies as possible” to defeat Japan.<sup>70</sup> In the present day, it is an institution that aims to increase other nations' reception of Chinese policies and to allay the international concerns on “China's economic rise, military build-up and increasing political and diplomatic influence.” As an integral part of the UFWD project, external propaganda passes through loyal overseas academics, intellectuals, and interest groups to continue driving nationalist rhetoric.<sup>71</sup>

### **Contemporary Propaganda and Censorship**

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<sup>68</sup> The number of Chinese-language newspapers available to the public surged during the post-Mao reform period. From 1978 to 1998, the number of newspapers grew from 193 to 2053, while magazines grew from 930 to 7999. Bing Tong, “Review of the Journalism and Communication History of the Six Countries: Germany, the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Japan and Russia,” in *Journalism and Communication in China and the West*, ed. Bing Tong, Sociology, Media and Journalism in China (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2020), 51.

<sup>69</sup> Ya-Wen Lei, *The Contentious Public Sphere: Law, Media, and Authoritarian Rule in China* (Princeton University Press, 2018). doi:10.1515/9781400887941, 69~103.

<sup>70</sup> Groot, Gerry. *Managing Transitions: The Chinese Communist Party, United Front Work, Corporatism and Hegemony*. New York: Routledge.(2004): 2–8. ISBN 0203502949. OCLC 54494511

<sup>71</sup> Brady, Annie-Marie. "Magic Weapons: China's political influence activities under Xi Jinping". Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. (2017).

Currently, propaganda weighs considerably in PRC's domestic, as well as foreign policies. Technologies, institutions, and interest groups involved are also more complex. This section will provide a survey of PRC's domestic and international information control effort in the digital age.

Domestically, propaganda and censorship shores up the ruling party's legitimacy by promoting patriotic narratives, justifying policy decisions, and quelling dissent. Patriotism, which conflates the state, the CCP, and Chinese nation, replaced communism in preserving the CCP's legitimacy in the post-reform era. For example, in 2011, the former Chongqing party Chief Bo Xilai started a "Red Songs Campaign", which mandated that all districts, government departments and educational institutions, enterprises, and state radio and TV stations to sing "red songs" to celebrate the success of the CCP and PRC.<sup>72</sup> In 2020, Xi Jinping launched several campaigns to reinforce the party's confidence in beating the U.S in terms of coronavirus containment. After Mike Pompeo claimed that the origin of the virus was a lab in Wuhan, the CCP immediately used smear campaigns to express the party's outrage.<sup>73</sup>

The party also devoted much effort to controversial policies, like anti-terrorism campaigns in Xinjiang. This year, the CCP released two state-endorsed films to sway the public's view on Xinjiang's human rights issues. One was a musical titled "The Wings of Songs", intended to portray Xinjiang as a peaceful region free of Muslim influence and ethnic conflicts.<sup>74</sup> The second one was a four-part documentary designed to portray Xinjiang as the culprit behind terrorist attacks and separatist sentiments in China. This film was well-received and widespread among the Chinese public who trusted the CCP's justification for its policies in Xinjiang.<sup>75</sup> Due to increasing western criticisms of the CCP's re-education camps in Xinjiang, the central government's propaganda shifted to insisting the nature of the camps was nothing but humane and educational. In addition to state-owned media outlets, the CCP also increased propaganda on internet platforms such as Douyin and TikTok. As a Sydney-based Uyghur activist Alip Erkin noted in an interview, the visuals on Douyin and TikTok "are very reflective of the facade of the situation and the fake acts of being happy and dancing and singing in public."<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> The Sydney Morning Herald. "Chinese city of 30m ordered to sing 'red songs'."

<https://www.smh.com.au/world/chinese-city-of-30m-ordered-to-sing-red-songs-20110420-1dohw.html>

<sup>73</sup> Jacobs, Emily. "China launches smear campaign against Pompeo after coronavirus criticism". *New York Post*. (2020). Accessed 5 May 2020.

<sup>74</sup> Brouwer, Joseph. "Propaganda Films Attempt to Cloak Xinjiang in Disinformation". *China Digital Times*. (2021).

<sup>75</sup> Shepherd, Christian. "China intensifies Xinjiang propaganda push as global backlash grows". *Financial Times*. (2021). Accessed from: <https://www.ft.com/content/80a4500d-84b0-4e4e-b208-7cf3e7d80df4>

<sup>76</sup> "Xinjiang's TikTok wipes away evidence of Uyghur persecution". *Rappler*. Coda Story.



Image 2: A "The Wings of Songs" poster. (Source: Tian Shan Film Studio, <http://en.people.cn/n3/2021/0329/c90000-9833607.html>)

Cyberspace is an increasingly more important “ideological battlefield,” according to Xi Jinping. The introduction of the internet was a project led by the central government instead of the private sector. The government gradually upgraded its control from simply blocking foreign sites (1998), real name registration (2005~2006), to AI-driven surveillance and censorship systems operating today. Internet censorship has multiple layers, including restricted internet access (at international gateway level), technical blocking (no access to the target), search result removal (through controlling browsing company), content take-down and inducing self-censorship. The PRC employs a mix of these methods to retain ideological control over cyberspace. The earliest politically-motivated internet regulation took place in 1998, when the country first started to filter out undesirable foreign websites. The state faced challenges in terms of regulating anonymous and decentralized media, like blogging, with conventional methods. This initiative led to real name registration and localized management in the mid-2000s. Ideological control and

cybersecurity became a policy priority in the 2010s, as a response to the politicization of social networks in the Arab Spring, the UK Brexit referendum, and the 2016 US presidential election. Xi's administration started to centralize internet governance, which was once a quagmire of bureaucratic competition (more than 50 departments issuing 300 regulations per year), by establishing the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC).<sup>77</sup>

Censorship in the digital realm is decentralized, fragmented and varies depending on space and time. The government had to outsource censorship tasks to private companies because the former lacks technical expertise and resources. Like censorship guidelines in traditional media, instructions for digital content moderation are extremely vague. Incentivized by preserving their business and improving their reputation, companies are left to draft out the details on their own.<sup>78</sup> Since tech companies vary in resources and priorities, censorship standards vary across platforms. The standard of censorship fluctuates depending on time and location. Posts from certain regions (e.g. Xinjiang) are more heavily vetted than others (e.g. Beijing). Censorship is tighter during special occasions (like the national congress) than during normal times.<sup>79</sup>

Internationally, the PRC carried out *Waixuan* 外宣 (external propaganda) to denounce western accusations and shape the global narratives favoring the CCP's interests. The films and musicals mentioned above were also for the CCP to pacify outside aggressions towards China's stance on Xinjiang, though usually with little success. Compared to domestic propaganda that usually carries an accusatory tone towards western media, propagandistic content produced for international audiences is much less critical, since the main purpose is to illustrate the rationality in the CCP's treatment of Uyghurs.<sup>80</sup> The aforementioned United Front Work Department disseminates these talking points, such as human rights issues and China ascendancy through loyal overseas academics, intellectuals, and interest groups to continue driving nationalist rhetoric.<sup>81</sup> It was reported that China's UFWD (United Front Work Department) network is all across Europe and that its mission is to intensify external propaganda to ensure that the Chinese diaspora remain loyal to the CCP.<sup>82</sup> Other types of external propaganda echo China's historical

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<sup>77</sup> Peng, Bo; Zhang Quan (2020): The Formation and Evolution of China's Internet Governance Model. In *Journalism & Communication* 27 (8), 44~65.

<sup>78</sup> Yu, Yang; Ma Tingting (2018): Government-Enterprise Subcontracting: The Mode of Internet Governance Under Double Constraints. A Study Based on Internet Information Governance. In *Journal of Public Management* 15 (3).

<sup>79</sup> Ruan, Lotus, Masashi Crete-Nishihata, Jeffrey Knockel, Ruohan Xiong, and Jakub Dalek. "The Intermingling of State and Private Companies: Analysing Censorship of the 19th National Communist Party Congress on WeChat." *The China Quarterly*, 2020, 1–30. doi:10.1017/S0305741020000491.

<sup>80</sup> Sudworth, John. "China's Pressure And Propaganda - The Reality Of Reporting Xinjiang". *BBC News*. (2021). <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-55666153>

<sup>81</sup> Brady, Annie-Marie. "Magic Weapons: China's political influence activities under Xi Jinping". Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. (2017).

<sup>82</sup> Tatlow, Didi Kirsten. "The Chinese Influence Effort Hiding in Plain Sight". *The Atlantic*. (2019).

arguments about China's humiliation and peaceful rise. The CCP seeks to persuade the rest of the world of China's deservedness of Great Power status and its disinclination to hegemony.

## Education

As discussed in the previous sections, the PRC espouses a set of unique interpretations of human rights, sovereignty, and democracy. This section will explicate how primary, secondary, and tertiary education contribute to the dissemination of these ideas and the reception of them.

The PRC implements a nine year mandatory education system, which consists of six years of primary school (105.61 million students in 2019) and three years of junior middle school (48.27 million in 2019).<sup>83</sup> Afterwards, students have the option to attend 2~4 years of vocational training, or continue academic education in senior middle school (24.14 million in 2019).<sup>84</sup> Some choose to continue their education in vocational-oriented short-cycle programs (12.81 million in 2019), while others pursue a bachelor degree (17.51 million).<sup>85</sup> Students have to take a highly-competitive National Higher Education Entrance Exam (*GaoKao*) to enter a bachelor program. Although the admission rate was 81.13%,<sup>86</sup> admission to highly-desirable top-tier universities is relatively low and exhibits significant regional inequality (rates vary from 34.13% in Beijing to 7.8% in Yunnan).<sup>87</sup> International educational exchange is becoming increasingly prevalent in China. Chinese students seeking education abroad steadily grew to 662.1 thousand in 2018,<sup>88</sup> while China accepted 258,122 international students.<sup>89</sup>

### *Civic Education in Primary and Secondary Levels*

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<sup>83</sup> "Number of Students at Elementary Schools in China Between 2009 and 2019," Statista, last modified November 9, 2019, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/227034/number-of-students-at-elementary-schools-in-china/>.

<sup>84</sup> "Number of Undergraduate Students Enrolled at Public Colleges and Universities in China from 2009 to 2019," Statista, last modified November 9, 2019, <https://www.google.com/url?q=https://www.statista.com/statistics/227028/number-of-students-at-universities-in-china/&sa=D&source=editors&ust=1624301381267000&usg=AOvVaw2AyVZ64K7Eq8FuiYmvZ7rM>.

<sup>85</sup> "Number of Students at High Schools in China Between 2009 and 2019," Statista, last modified November 19, 2019, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/227024/number-of-students-at-high-schools-in-china/>.

<sup>86</sup> "2019高招调查报告," Education Online, accessed June 21, 2021, [https://www.eol.cn/e\\_html/gk/report/2019/content.shtml](https://www.eol.cn/e_html/gk/report/2019/content.shtml).

<sup>87</sup> Zhiya Education, "2019高考录取率公布：600万考生无缘本科，高考真的越来越难？," Sohu News, last modified August 7, 2019, [https://www.sohu.com/a/332117090\\_100262507](https://www.sohu.com/a/332117090_100262507).

<sup>88</sup> The top destinations include the United Kingdom, United States, Canada, Australia, and Japan. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/227240/number-of-chinese-students-that-study-abroad/>

<sup>89</sup> 60% of international students in China were from Asia, including South Korea, Thailand, Pakistan, and India. Mini Gu, Rachel Michael, and Claire Zheng, "Education in China," World Education News+Review, last modified December 17, 2019, <https://wenr.wes.org/2019/12/education-in-china-3>.

Most people's understanding of politics, including topics like human rights, democracy, and sovereignty, originate from primary and middle school, specifically the civic education curriculum. Citizenship and civic education in China is distinct from the West, since citizenship is an imported idea that has been marginalized in PRC political discourse until the post-reform era. Although cultivating civic virtue is a common goal for civic education in both China and the West, the definition of good citizenship diverges.<sup>90</sup> In China, maintaining prosperity and harmony, instead of political contestation and institutional checks and balances, legitimize the regime. Therefore, patriotism, loyalty and obedience, and positive interpersonal and communal relationships are often viewed as features of a good citizen.<sup>91</sup>

Patriotic education is a crucial part of Chinese civic education. Patriotism serves as a substitute for communism in the era of opening-up and reform, since the pursuit of economic growth and discrediting of Maoist policies cost the party legitimacy. The 1989 Tiananmen Square protest, during which the youth turned to liberal ideals in the name of patriotism, demonstrated the severe consequence of losing people's trust and confidence. In response to this crisis, CCP started to implement large scale patriotic education programs, to deliver the following concepts: 1) pride for China's history, tradition, and cultural legacy, 2) CCP's leading role in historical achievements and contemporary developments, 3) the contrast and incompatibility of Chinese and western values and systems, especially the threat of peaceful evolution. The education aims at blurring the boundary between the state and the party, socialism and patriotism, delegitimizing any criticism against the government as unpatriotic.<sup>92</sup> In the 2000s, the curriculum gradually incorporated jurisprudence, economic reform, mental health and interpersonal relationships.<sup>93</sup> Under the Xi administration, victimhood during the Century of Humiliation made room for more content on the ascendancy of China.<sup>94</sup> The spotlight on Xi Jinping in political education, especially through platforms like *Xuexi Qiangguo* (学习强国), is unprecedented among post-reform leaders.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Hui Li, Kerry J. Kennedy, and Chuan B. Tan, "Chinese Teachers' Perceptions of the 'Good Citizen': Implications for Implementing China's Civic Education Curriculum," *Citizenship Teaching & Learning* 11, no. 2 (2016), doi:10.1386/ctl.11.2.139\_1.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> Suisheng Zhao, "A State-Led Nationalism: The Patriotic Education Campaign in Post-Tiananmen China," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 31, no. 3 (1998), doi:10.1016/S0967-067X(98)00009-9, 288~291.

<sup>93</sup> Li, Kennedy and Tan, "Chinese Teachers' Perceptions of the 'Good Citizen': Implications for Implementing China's Civic Education Curriculum,"

<sup>94</sup> Orna Naftali, "'Being Chinese Means Becoming Cheap Labour': Education, National Belonging and Social Positionality Among Youth in Contemporary China," *The China Quarterly* 245 (2021), doi:10.1017/S0305741020000120, 55.

<sup>95</sup> Haiwei He, "In China, an App About Xi Is Literally Becoming Impossible to Ignore," *New York Times*, last modified April 8, 2019, <https://cn.nytimes.com/china/20190408/china-xi-jinping-study-the-great-nation-app/dual/>.

The implementation and reception of these ideas are more complicated than ideology on paper. Teachers who disseminate these ideas firsthand would not strictly follow the guidelines, instead mixing in their own interpretations. For example, some teachers make a distinction between patriotism and support for the regime, contrary to the government's intention. Students were also taught of responsible patriotism, which obliges citizens to identify and give advice on defective policies.<sup>96</sup> Despite individual agency, there is tighter ideological control over the entire education system now than when the survey was conducted by researchers Li, Kennedy and Tan. For example, Beijing City Education Committee issued directives targeting those who “jeopardize CCP's authority, socialism with Chinese characteristics, and deviate from the party's discipline and policy in pedagogical activities.”<sup>97</sup>

Many researchers have observed differences in student attitudes between urban and rural areas, metropolitan and peripheral spaces, and academic and vocational training schools. Urban youth are more likely to associate themselves with cosmopolitan ideals, and show higher levels of criticism (albeit still a minority) than those from peripheral provinces. In contrast, youth from rural areas and peripheral provinces are more adherent to official patriotic rhetoric, as a form of cultural capital. Despite the government's effort to blend the state and party, students from neither background actively associate China with the CCP. Students from vocational training schools are more aware and critical of inequality, while affluent and academically-oriented students' criticism tends to focus on abstract topics, like freedom of speech.<sup>98</sup>

### *Political Education and Control in Universities*

Universities have been tasked with producing socialist conformists who have technical expertise to contribute to the country's development since 1949. The government often views university students and faculties with wariness as potential destabilizing actors, especially after the Tiananmen Square protest. This section will explore the existing mechanism for ideological control in universities and its efficacy.

There are intricate ideological control mechanisms in Chinese universities, permeating the academic and social lives of students (Figure 1). Political education courses which indoctrinate socialist values are worth 10% of undergraduate credits, for social sciences and natural sciences students alike. The communist party has a prominent presence in campus life.<sup>99</sup> The party, the

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<sup>96</sup> Li, Kennedy and Tan, “Chinese Teachers' Perceptions of the ‘Good Citizen’: Implications for Implementing China's Civic Education Curriculum,” 149~151.

<sup>97</sup> Yang Yu, “北京市教育委员会关于北京高校教师师德失范行为处理的指导意见,” last modified June 17, 2019, <http://www.wdu.edu.cn/gljg/gaoj/gjdt/201907/t4228764.shtml>.

<sup>98</sup> Naftali, “‘Being Chinese Means Becoming Cheap Labour’: Education, National Belonging and Social Positionality among Youth in Contemporary China,” 64~66.

<sup>99</sup> Xiaoxin Du, *Role Differentiation in Chinese Higher Education* (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2020). doi:10.1007/978-981-15-8300-1, 1~9.

communist youth league, and the student work committee, are all responsive to the university party committee instead of the university president. University party committee is accountable to the provincial department of education. These institutions ensure top-down control and grassroots influence upon the student body. On the ground, students are monitored by political counsellors, who are both faculty members and party cadres. Universities screen potential “deviants” through lengthy “psychological assessments,” and direct suspects to political counselling. The student party branch, composed of student CCP members, recruits new members, monitors students’ trend of thoughts, and makes pertinent decisions. Extracurricular political meetings are commonplace. They become more frequent and intense during sensitive periods, such as the 2011 Jasmine Revolution in China, to insulate students from sympathizing or participating.<sup>100</sup> Under Xi’s administration, the political atmosphere on campus has become more sombre after a series of policies targeting infiltration of “western values and precepts,” such as constitutional democracy, universal values, and civil society.<sup>101</sup> The tightening of control resulted in some professors, such as Qiao Mu and Cai Xia, losing their jobs and the rest practicing stricter self-censorship.

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<sup>100</sup> Xiaojun Yan, “Engineering Stability: Authoritarian Political Control over University Students in Post-Deng China,” *The China Quarterly* 218 (2014), doi:10.1017/S0305741014000332, 500–508.

<sup>101</sup> “Seven Don’t Speaks (七不讲)” from Document No.9 issued by Xi forbades discussion of the following topics: 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.

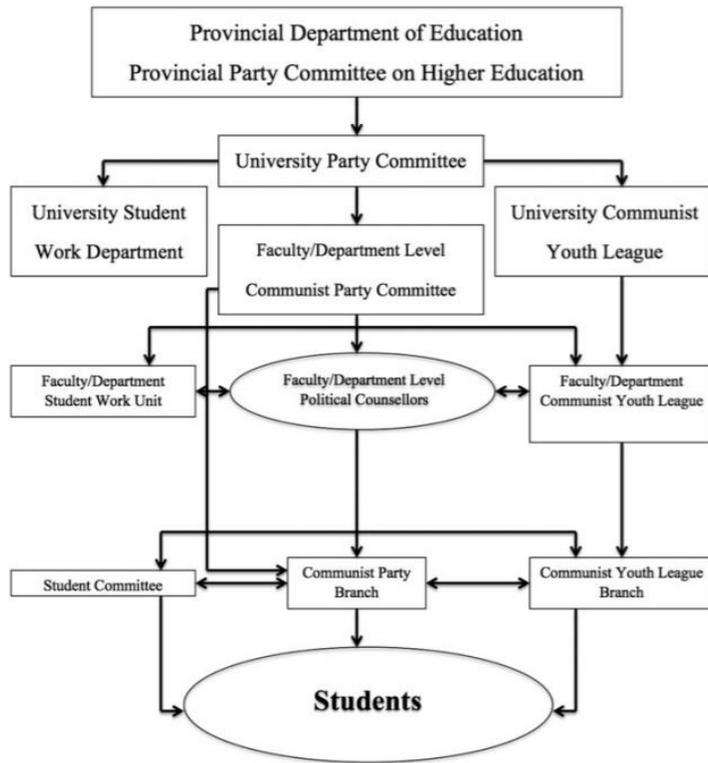


Image 3. The Governance Structure of Chinese Universities. (Source: Yan, “Engineering Stability: Authoritarian Political Control over University Students in Post-Deng China,” 499)

The efficacy of political education on university students is unclear. Surveys sometimes provide contradictory conclusions on their worldviews, depending on the sample, method, and time. Generally, the reception of state-endorsed ideology varies based on family income, academic background, gender, and media consumption. Students from medium income families are more politically engaged, subscribing to liberal or nationalist/leftist ideology. In contrast, low-income and high-income students are relatively apolitical because the former have to focus on survival, while the latter are detached from social issues. Compared to natural sciences students, social science and humanities students are more attracted to liberal ideology (~40% more) and likely to develop nuanced political stances (92~119% more), due to their advanced knowledge. Conversely, natural sciences students identify more with “democracy with Chinese characteristics” than liberal democracy. Female students are more apolitical, thus less attracted to extreme ideologies.<sup>102</sup> This lack of interest reflects in their higher identification with Chinese ideas of democracy rather than western ones, which conforms with mainstream political

<sup>102</sup> Fen Lin, Yanfei Sun, and Hongxing Yang, “How Are Chinese Students Ideologically Divided? A Survey of Chinese College Students' Political Self-Identification,” *Pacific Affairs* 88, no. 1 (2015), doi:10.5509/201588151, 65~68.

discourse.<sup>103</sup> Media consumption has a significant impact on political orientation. Unsurprisingly, students consuming Chinese liberal media are more liberal leaning than those who consume nationalistic media.<sup>104</sup>

Despite the nuance and ambiguity, there is a significant conceptual gap between Chinese university students and western institutions on democracy. In a 2017 survey, Chinese students rated four countries' democracy as such: US (7.55/10), Japan (6.49/10), PRC (6.23/10), and India (4.79/10). The rating hugely contradicts with the ratings of third-party analysts such as Freedom House and *The Economist*, in which PRC ranks at the bottom as a non-democracy.<sup>105</sup> This contradiction conforms with PRC's alternative definition of democracy, and the perception of the Chinese public. More alarmingly, support for ultranationalism and rejection of universal values among Chinese university students has been on the rise in recent years, since media consumption plays a central role.<sup>106</sup> Smear campaigns against public intellectuals, stricter censorship, suppression of liberal media, and creative propaganda are likely amplifying this trend.<sup>107</sup>

## Conclusion

Based on the analysis above, it is reasonable to conclude that the divergence in opinions between domestic and international viewers of China is rather difficult to reconcile. On topics regarding sovereignty, human rights, and democracy, most Chinese citizens view these concepts from a Chinese perspective based on the country's history, culture, media, and education. However, this point of view in mainland China is mainly cultivated through the CCP's lens and the party's active manipulation of narratives in those four domains. As western countries cast a more critical eye on China's rise, the discussion on the rule-based international order becomes essential to future sustainability in global politics. In particular, China and the United States must collaborate with the rest of the world to define and further safeguard rules of international conduct. While NATO needs to understand how Chinese people and government developed their outlooks in foreign policies, Beijing also needs to understand how the government's distortions of these narratives to serve its own benefits will also cause political instability in the long run.

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<sup>103</sup> Hongbo Yu and Xinjie Wu, "我国大学生对民主评价的差异分析: 以中国、美国、日本、印度为评价对象," *Youth Studies* 5 (2017), 45~46.

<sup>104</sup> Fen Lin, Yanfei Sun, and Hongxing Yang, "How Are Chinese Students Ideologically Divided? A Survey of Chinese College Students' Political Self-Identification,"

<sup>105</sup> Freedom House rating: Japan (96/100), US (90/100), India (77/100), China (16/100); The Economist rating: US (8.05/10), Japan (7.96/10), India (7.74/10), China (3.14/10). Hongbo Yu and Xinjie Wu, "我国大学生对民主评价的差异分析: 以中国、美国、日本、印度为评价对象," 43~44.

<sup>106</sup> Jiajie Tang, "官媒民调: 九成中国年轻人“平视”、“俯视”西方," Radio Free Asia, last modified April 20, 2021, <https://www.rfa.org/mandarin/yataibaodao/junshiwaijiao/jt-04202021150353.html>.

<sup>107</sup> Sebastian Veg, "What Role Will Intellectuals Play in China's Future?," ChinaFile, <https://www.chinafile.com/library/excerpts/what-role-will-intellectuals-play-chinas-future>.