



CHINESE CONFORMITY AND GLOBAL AUTHORITARIANISM

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PART 1

China has been increasing human rights abuses for years. Disappearances, persecution of ethnic and religious minorities, organs for sale, controlled press, and surveillance of its citizens have made international news. Authoritarianism on this scale takes years to cultivate.

This five-part series will discuss how social conformity was perfected throughout China's recent history and its role in creating the global authoritarian influence of modern China.

What is social conformity and why is it dangerous? Because humans are social beings, they look to create group cohesion. Conformity is common across all societies, races, and ethnicities. It is an inherent part of the human experience. Individuals seek to create agreeance with others by copying their beliefs and behaviors. No one wants to be ostracized. Therefore, individuals will look to the group to decide what to think and will behave as expected.

Psychologists call this social proof- the assumption that if other people are doing it, it must be correct. [i] This occurs mostly subconsciously. On one hand, conformity to group norms leads to a sense of belonging and encourages morality. On the other hand, when resulting norms and practices are never questioned, it can lead groups of people to allow the worst large-scale human atrocities. Most individuals will conform. When an authoritarian government controls the entire society, it is difficult not to. This level of control takes time to cultivate.

China is an ancient society. For more than 4,000 years, it was ruled by authoritarian dynasties. It was historically a peasant society. Dynastic rule solidified their dependence on their ruler. The feudal, peasant economy determined social and economic interactions. In agrarian societies, the local population is interconnected for their survival. Instead of individual achievement and rights, collectivism is the norm, necessary to ensure life continues for all.

In 1911, the Qing dynasty was overthrown ending the long tradition of dynastic rule. Modern political, social, and economic ideas were thrust upon the country through foreign assaults and occupation. During the period from 1911 to 1949, China attempted to redefine its new political identity. Warlords engulfed the country and government parties fought for control. In 1921, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was established, just two years after Lenin founded the Communist International (Comintern) to coordinate efforts to spread communism throughout the world.

In 1949, the CCP defeated the Nationalist Party and Mao Zedong became its leader. He established the People's Republic of China. The party assumed control throughout the country and created their version of social order and social stability. The goals of Mao were class struggle, anti-intellectualism, economic development through the communal system, and isolation from the rest of the world.

In 1958, the Great Leap Forward was introduced. Its goals were to maximize agriculture and industrial production through mass mobilization. At the forefront was the desire to eliminate all private property and forcibly impose socialist ownership. The goals were far too ambitious. Skilled managers were replaced by Communist Party cadres. Decisions were made in a communal setting, but these cadres lacked the necessary technical expertise. Several failures occurred because of this including a serious famine.

During the cultural revolution of the 1960s-70s, Mao organized young people into Red Guard units. Their job was to attack old thoughts, culture, customs, and habits. Economic, social, and political institutions were weakened, and the situation in China was chaotic. Because the police and other criminal justice components were under attack, the military was used to maintain order. This marks the beginning of military involvement in civilian and political issues in China. [ii]

Deng Xiaoping came into power after Mao. His agenda was far different from Mao's. He focused on agriculture, industry, national defense, and science and technology. This ended its isolationist policies. China began an open-door policy with the West to acquire knowledge and technology. Deng attempted to modernize China by establishing a strong military, grooming future leaders, giving authority to local governmental units, and creating a new Constitution and new criminal code in 1982.

Some freedoms were allowed during this era, unintentionally a result of growing capitalist methods that resulted in economic gains. Deng emphasized order and stability and adherence to party discipline and its leadership. Democratic reform was occurring in the Soviet Union and developing in Eastern and Central Europe. The protest of Tiananmen Square in 1989 began because of issues of corruption; however, scholars tend to agree that it developed as part of this democratic global movement. [iii]

Dang was determined to maintain control, and protesters from all classes, not just students, were killed by the People's Liberation Army in the streets around the square. Though China was modernizing, the Communist Party used police, procurators (prosecutors), judges, and even the military to maintain control at all costs. Some party members pushed for reformation to become more democratic in nature and have additional accountability.

Zhao Ziyang was one of these casualties. He was a high-level official in the Communist Party who advocated for the party to enhance human rights and increase democracy. He was confined to house arrest after the Tiananmen Square massacre, where he remained for sixteen years until his death in 2005. He left an extensive collection of audio tapes and writing which were published after his death. His accounts tell the story of corruption among party members, human rights abuses, and the silencing of anyone who speaks out against the party. [iv]

Jiang Zemin was general secretary from 1989-2002. Under his leadership, the revolutionary views of the Communist Party were reshaped. They embraced ideologies that the Party represented society's most productive economic forces, society's most advanced culture, and the interests of all people. He encouraged individual initiatives across all industries, igniting the entrepreneurial spirit of Chinese citizens. During Zeman's tenure, the Communist Party was characterized as highly bureaucratic, highly centralized, and rigid. Seeing the demise of communism in the Soviet Union and other areas of Eastern and Central Europe, the Party concluded that political and social control should be enhanced. Many top officials were labeled as traitors and enemies of the state. They were removed from their posts, imprisoned, and killed for seeking reforms. These extremes still occur in today's China. Not even being a high-level government official will keep you safe from the conformity, corruption, and power of the party. In China, no one is safe.

Modernization has occurred in agriculture, industry, science and technology, and national defense. Another area of economic dominance is through trade and investment in developing countries.[v] Economic policies, since 1978, have raised more than 800 million people out of poverty.[vi] They have also increased access to health care and education for the masses.

People often become complacent when there is economic stability, willing to overlook abuses by the government. While the economy of China has modernized with policies to encourage entrepreneurship, the accompanying freedoms of individual rights have not followed suit.

Human rights are codified in the Constitution, but not practiced. Citizens are subjected to state-controlled media, statistics, and surveillance. It is dangerous to speak out against the government of China and those who do often disappear or are made public examples. China continues to feed incorrect statistics and news to the international community as it attempts to conceal its control and human rights abuses.

The general conformity of the people to socialist policy can be traced to the centuries of dynastic rule and, more recently, an oligarchic state. Centuries of feudalism created interdependency. To survive peasantry, communities had to work together toward collective stability and prosperity. With the onset of Communist rule and the crushing weight of the party, centuries of cultural collectivism were exploited. Conformity is no longer a choice; it is now a requirement.

[i] Psychology Today. (2019). Conformity | Psychology Today. Psychology Today. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/conformity>

[ii] Terrill, R. J. (2016). *World criminal justice systems: a comparative survey*. New York, London Routledge.

[iii] Fairbank, J., Schelle, O., Spence, J., Nathan, A., & Lizhi, F. (1990). *Children of the Dragon*. Collier Books.

[iv] Ziyang Zhao, Bao, P., Chiang, R., & Ignatius, A. (2009). *Prisoner of the state: the secret journal of Zhao Ziyang*. Simon And Schuster.

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[vi] World Bank. (2022a). China Overview. World Bank. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/china/overview>

PART 2

China has changed in significant ways since Xi Jinping came to power in 2012. Xi began an intensive anti-corruption campaign. To Western eyes, this was heralded as a step toward a more democratic society and accountability within the Chinese Communist Party.

More than 600,000 officials were investigated each year from 2019 to 2021, with nearly half receiving some form of punishment. [i] Many believe this was a way to find those who would question the party and remove them from office- thereby increasing Xi's power.

Massive crackdowns on borderlands including Tibet, Xinjiang, and Hong Kong have brought them under the control of Beijing. Xi created a national security law in 2019 to respond to anti-government protests in Hong Kong. Millions of people have been imprisoned in Xinjiang, while millions of dollars have been added to the security budget in Tibet.

Taiwan has become a contentious issue as China said it plans to reunify it with Beijing. They have been conducting military training in the region and now have the largest navy fleet in the world. Xi has taken over many sectors of the economy, making them state-owned and controlled. To centralize power at this level, the government must maintain control over its population.

China has become the world leader in population control. The government uses surveillance, controls information, suppresses any opposition, creates a network of informants, makes examples of those who question you, and feeds the international community false news and statistics. Silicon Valley-level artificial intelligence and a lack of government accountability have allowed it to infiltrate all aspects of daily life. The effectiveness of pre-emptive control largely depends on surveillance capacities, either from the governmental apparatus or grassroots informants. These combined efforts have paid off for the Chinese Communist Party.

The Digital Silk Road Initiative includes the building of global data infrastructure and surveillance technology. This is used domestically to assert authority over citizens, censor the media, quell protests, and oppress minorities.[ii] Much discretion is given to local authorities whose careers depend on how well they can exert control over their local population.

While voice and audio surveillance work well, nothing beats local informants who are willing to turn over their family members and neighbors for minor infractions such as littering or drinking too much alcohol. More than 180,000 protests take place in China each year. Protesters are often objecting to specific issues and not issues of human rights.[iii] Surveillance technology alerts the government of upcoming protests, which they combat swiftly. Local governments are afforded too much discretion and little oversight leading to human rights abuses and no accountability.

The government compiles data on individuals, government officials, and companies by using a nationwide tracking and biometric system known as the Social Credit System. Individuals can be flagged for minor offenses such as "spreading rumors" online. People with low social credit scores may be barred from travel, lose access to educational and job opportunities, and be denied other social services. This credit system is a means of exerting even tighter social control. This makes it dangerous for a person, and their family, to question the government.

Though the Chinese constitution allows freedom of speech and press, Chinese media regulations allow authorities to infiltrate any news stories by claiming they "expose state secrets and endanger the country." Officials know they must retain control over the news to keep power. In 2010, the government issued directives requiring all Internet users in China, including foreign organizations and individuals, to abide by Chinese laws and regulations

about Internet information. The goals of these directives are not free speech and the free flow of information but "must reflect the party's will, safeguard the party's authority, and safeguard the party's unity."

President Xi emphasized that the nation's media outlets are essential to political stability, but the international community knows information control is essential for political power. China relies on censorship to control information in the news online and on social media. Chinese journalists and media organizations are forced to censor themselves and if they do not, they are subject to libel lawsuits, arrests, and other means of force.

The group Reporters Without Borders ranked China 179 out of 180 countries in the 2023 worldwide index of press control. [iv] Because so many foreign and domestic journalists have been imprisoned in China, it has been dubbed the "world's largest prison for journalists." Many U.S. websites and social media outlets including Facebook, Instagram, and Google are blocked from the Chinese public. This extreme censorship is called the Great Firewall, and it is increasing in its censorship. [v]

China also publishes daily news articles highlighting various homicides in the U.S. to show its citizens that the U.S. is a violent, tumultuous country where no one is safe and where no Chinese should venture. [vi] It is important to note that the news industry is very profitable. It is entirely controlled by the government and the Chinese Communist Party. The Party is seeking to pass a law banning all private investment in the media, which would further its control. With the news censored, it is difficult to know just how bad the situation is in China.

Because China censors the news, it is no wonder that they tamper with crime statistics as well. Access to reliable crime statistics makes it difficult to gauge the criminal justice system's fairness or effectiveness. Crime and death penalty statistics often go underreported by Chinese officials to legitimize the authoritarian regime. The published statistics show that Chinese crime rates stay low when compared to other countries, though recent leaked information shows a growing rate of violent crime, drug use, and gang-related delinquency. [vii]

Interestingly, a recent study found that 53% of Chinese citizens support various forms of state surveillance.[viii] It is uncertain whether respondents were under duress. Like all Chinese statistics, there is a good probability this statistic has been altered by the government. If, however, the collective citizenry favors such heavy surveillance and punishment tactics, the theory of social conformity is proven. Prioritizing public interest over individual rights allows the government to use such tactics to keep social control. This level of control has led to persecution, human rights abuses, and punishment in recent years.

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PART 3

The U.S. government designated the atrocities against the Uyghurs as genocide. Undeterred by such international scrutiny, China continues its persecution of religious persons. The 2021 “Measures on the Management of Religious Clergy” instituted new measures for tighter control and surveillance of clergy. It bans any religious activity from independent religious clergy.

Articles VI and XI prohibit clergy from “engaging in illegal religious activity, religious extremism, and foreign infiltration using religion.” It also requires a political test to ensure the clergies’ loyalty to the Chinese Community Party. Experts agree that these new measures are another legal route for the government to persecute religious citizens freely and openly under the guise of national security. [i]

China has increased its efforts to silence, and in some cases annihilate, ethnic and religious minorities such as the Uyghurs, Tibetan Buddhists, and Christians. Christians specifically have come under extreme persecution after a 2018 law restricting religious freedom. According to Open Doors International, there has been an increase in surveillance and restriction including demolition of churches, abduction, arrest, and detainment. [ii] Anyone can be charged at any time, and in China, it is nearly impossible to defend oneself once charged. Many charges are vague such as “stirring up trouble” or “being a threat to state security.”

The United Nations estimates that 1-2 million prisoners are held in prisons and re-education camps in China.[iii] Political prisoners are remanded to a facility whose goal is reform through labor. These facilities house 3,000-5,000 inmates. Inmates are part of a squadron of ten. They go through their entire day together. Through this collectivism, they control, monitor, and report on each other. According to the government, they can receive visitors monthly and write letters. The nature of the work will depend on the geographic location of the prison. For instance, the United States recently banned the import of cotton produced by Uyghur prisoners in the Xinjiang province.[iv]

The prison diet has low nutritional value, and rations are tied to work production. Inmates are required each evening to study communist ideals. A trained political instructor monitors the inmates and determines if they are eligible for early release. Reformation is considered complete when the inmate acknowledges their guilt for the offense, criticizes their own antisocial behavior, and conforms to the facility’s rules. An inmate has the opportunity for parole after serving half of their sentence, or at least 10 years of a life sentence. This depiction of prison life was provided through published Chinese documents.[v]

But as we know, China controls all information. Personal accounts of prison life have surfaced from former prisoners. They recount horrors such as forced medical tests, sleep deprivation, barbaric torture, humiliation, beatings, being forced to eat their own feces, marching, standing, and sitting for long periods on tiny stools. [vi] The China Tribunal concluded that China is harvesting organs for sale from prisoners. The organs are sold on the black market and generate over \$1 billion for the Chinese government annually.[vii]

China allegedly carries out more executions than anywhere in the world.[viii] Though statistics are not published, it is estimated that between 2009 and 2015, at least 19 foreign nationals were executed in China for drug charges alone.[ix] American citizens are not exempt from receiving the death penalty. An American was sentenced to death over alleged drug trafficking, even though no evidence was found on his person or belongings.[x]

The presumption of guilt, instead of the presumption of innocence in democratic societies, makes it difficult for one to defend oneself from accusation. Simply being a suspect can have severe consequences for both suspects and their families. Those who defy norms or question the government are held as examples of civil disobedience to the socialist order. The government regularly uses death sentence parades and public executions to ensure social conformity.[xi] Codifying human rights may have little effect in a society where crime is viewed as a violation of collective rights and a rebellion against the socialist order and government.

China's detention and investigation policies allow great discretion by local police, which can lead to corruption. China is an example where forced confessions and false imprisonment occur because of their commitment to keeping the communist party in power. Anyone who speaks out against the party will receive swift sanctions. China has perfected an authoritarian regime on its home front and wishes to expand its communist ideals to other parts of the world. China uses its infrastructure financing to gain influence and control over second and third-world countries. Because of this, the world is becoming more authoritarian.

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PART 4

TChina has the second largest population on Earth at 1.4 billion. With two million active soldiers and the largest navy fleet in the world, China is a force to be reckoned with. [i] China is now a global actor, exerting its influence in every corner of the world including the South Pacific, South and Central Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America. China is transitioning from a manufacturing-driven economy to a services-oriented financier. Worldwide, China invested nearly \$1 trillion in emerging markets in the last ten years. It is the world's single largest creditor nation.

China's trade reached \$495 billion in Latin America and the Caribbean with infrastructure projects and fuel trade. South America is the largest producer of lithium which is important for Chinese supply chains and electric vehicle batteries. China has increased investment in Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Nicaragua, and Peru. Argentina is negotiating a series of construction projects with China. In January, the two countries agreed to drop the U.S. dollar in bilateral trade.

In Peru, China committed \$3.6 billion to build a mega port after acquiring 60% of a Peruvian mining group. Chile has benefited from \$8 billion of investment from China, and China is seeking to build its own factory in Chile to produce lithium. Recently, Brazil signed 15 agreements with China to include cooperation on semiconductors, cybersecurity, and 5G mobile communication. Many other Latin American countries are seeking investment from China to build mega ports, data centers, and telecommunication centers.

Free trade agreements are for the mutual benefit of both countries. However, China is facing criticism for its lending practices to poor countries, leaving them struggling to repay debts and open to a Chinese takeover. More

than 40 low- and middle-income countries have debt exposure of more than 10% of their GDP. Countries such as Djibouti, Laos, Zambia, and Kyrgyzstan have debts equal to 20% of their GDP. [ii]

This allows China to exert considerable influence on nations it has loaned money to. Critics have pointed to Sri Lanka as an example of how Chinese investment can leave a country crippled and under Chinese power. Sri Lanka borrowed funds from China to build a massive port project using loans and contractors from China. The effort struggled to be viable leaving Sri Lanka saddled with growing debts. In 2017, Sri Lanka agreed to give China a 70% stake in the port on a 99-year lease in return for further Chinese investment.

With debt enslavement on a massive scale, China can exert its version of human rights on the African continent. The Burkina-Faso ambassador, Adama Compaore, stated that “Western forces were hyping up the so-called Xinjiang-related issues and launching unprovoked attacks on China” while the Congolese ambassador, Daniel Owassa called the genocide of the Uyghurs “anti-terrorism measures.” [iii] Poor developing countries- many highly indebted to Beijing and dependent on China for most trade- are not able to condemn China for human rights abuses. China also organizes academic conferences and supplies the technology in Africa to normalize its alternative, authoritarian international law, and illiberal, China-dominated global order.[iv]

Other countries that trade extensively with China, such as Myanmar, India, and Malaysia are mimicking China's policies and becoming more authoritarian.

In the majority Buddhist country of Myanmar, thousands of Christians and Muslims have been murdered in a nationwide government crackdown on religion. [v] While another 700,000 have been forced to flee to Bangladesh. [vi] India continues to build concentration camps to house religious minorities. When the state of Manipur had a violent ethnic clash in May, the government shut the internet down to “prevent social media from stirring unrest.” [vii]

Recent legislative amendments have been enacted in Malaysia to codify torture and prevent protests. [viii] What do all these countries have in common? They all rely heavily on trade and investment from Beijing. China's global investment and growing authoritarianism are dangerous to freedom, particularly religious freedom.

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PART 5

While the theories of socialism have appealed to many in America in recent years, its reality falls short of the utopian dream. While China has created a dynamic economic system, it has not afforded the norm of individual and fundamental human rights to its citizens. China codifies laws to appear sensitive to international human rights standards. The reality, however, is quite different for both citizens and foreign nationals.

China has kept its past socialist ideals and expanded its control over its citizens. It has committed genocide and other atrocities on its people in recent decades. Its detention and investigation policies allow great discretion by local police, which leads to a lack of accountability and corruption.

Forced confessions and false imprisonments are normal occurrences. Anyone who is even suspected as an opponent of the Chinese Communist Party receives swift sanctions. Because of the Silicon Valley-level technology they own and growing global influence, they may just be the most dangerous party in the world.

Surveillance and control of information have reached unprecedented levels in China. The international community must demand access to reliable news and crime statistics. Crime and death penalty statistics often go underreported by Chinese officials to legitimize the authoritarian regime.[1] Reported Chinese crime rates stay low when compared to other countries, though it is difficult to know if the statistics are correct. The growing rate of violent crime, drug use, and gang-related delinquency is concerning.

The general conformity of the people to socialist policy can be traced to the centuries of dynastic rule and, more recently, an oligarchic state. The people of China were groomed to accept social conformity, and this conformity continues to be exploited by the Chinese Communist Party.

Citizens may see these harsh punishments as fair and equitable because, in their eyes, crime violates the collective rights of society. The presumption of guilt, instead of the presumption of innocence in democratic societies, makes it difficult for one to defend oneself from accusation.

Simply being a suspect can have severe consequences for both suspects and their families. Those who defy these norms are held as examples of civil disobedience to the socialist order through various means, such as death sentence parades and public executions.[2] Codifying human rights may have negligible effect in a society where crime is viewed as a violation of collective rights and a rebellion against the socialist order and government.

Chinese citizens must work together and fight against the oppressive government. To do that, they must have access to non-controlled domestic and international information and adopt democratic principles. Only then will they understand the value of individual inalienable rights and fight the oppressive government for their freedoms.

While watch groups, religious persecution organizations such as International Christian Concern (ICC), and journalists have done their part to expose China's atrocities, the international community has done little act against China. The international community must continue to expose China's human rights violations and its persecution of ethnic and religious minorities. Imposing government sanctions on China is one way to increase compliance and accountability. The international community should demand that China publish its capital punishment statistics. In addition, China should allow for more humanitarian actions to be afforded to the condemned, such as psychiatric evaluations for mental illness and contact with family and friends before the execution. [3]

People of faith supply important checks on government because they hold an allegiance to a power higher than the government. The government is a God-ordained institution, accountable to God. The function of government is to restrain evil and support and protect the sanctity of life. When the government is no longer just, it is the task of the church to expose the government and demand its officials repent. The local church is the hope of the world, and that is the case in China. Christianity has grown faster in China than anywhere else in the world in the last 40 years- from 1 million to 100 million currently. [4]

China is in a recession now. The state-controlled economy drove up urban unemployment and lowered consumer confidence. While incomes are going up for those who are employed, students, and the massive aging population find it hard to find jobs and stay afloat. With economic prospects bleak, this may be the perfect time for citizens to question and challenge the government.

Centuries-old social conformity has led to increasing global authoritarianism by China. The spread of China's investment and authoritarian principles to other countries is concerning. The atrocities committed by the Chinese government against their people must be met with action by the international government. The Christian church must be strengthened by its global brothers and sisters as it looks to combat the evils of the Chinese Communist Party.

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