

Xi Jinping's Agenda and the Future of the Nation: Speaking Silence Within the Great Firewall

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Abstract—Chinese Internet users in the PRC are confined in the world's largest "Internet prison", with certain website contents blocked, blog entries and forum messages censored and deleted, and social media platforms banned or strictly monitored. Since Xi Jinping assumed the presidency, the CCP has been less tolerant of dissent than Xi's predecessors. Under the "Chinese-style democracy", China is becoming even more undemocratic, and the intellectual communities in the country have largely chosen to keep quiet on one hand while speaking silence in subtle, alternative manners on the other hand. Without any more resistance against suppressing dissent, how far can this second most populous country in the world go with such limited freedom of information and expression? Are the elites no longer concerned about the nation's future? This paper particularly examines individual experiences in Chinese media censorship and explores the mixed public attitudes and mentality behind the silence of the Chinese intellectual communities.

Keywords—China, internet censorship, democracy

I. INTRODUCTION

Xi Jinping's administration in the People's Republic of China (PRC) has been known for strict information control and censorship practices. Under his leadership, the PRC government has significantly tightened its control over the media, Internet, and public discourse. The government employs a comprehensive system of censorship and surveillance known as the Great Firewall, which restricts access to foreign websites and social media platforms. They also heavily monitor and censor domestic media outlets, social media platforms, and online discussion forums to regulate the flow of information and prevent the spread of dissenting views. In his speech at Georgetown University, Facebook's CEO Mark Zuckerberg registered his stance on the PRC's information and censorship practice, "I wanted our services in China because I believe in connecting the whole world... But we could never come to an agreement on what it would take for us to operate there. They never let us in" [1]. Indeed, China's network security measure as the Great Firewall blocks at least 18,000 websites according to a Harvard study [2]. The government also monitors netizens' Internet access, using self-censorship mechanisms, making China "the biggest prison for netizens" [3].

II. FIRST-PERSON EXPERIENCE: THE PROCESS OF SILENCING

There is no shortage of online coverage on the PRC's information censorship as well as tips on getting around the Great Firewall of China, but narratives on first-hand experience of a myriad of "silencing" measures are not widely found. As a former web content editor in Beijing, a former transnational independent filmmaker, and a former

Sina blogger from 2006 to 2012, I certainly have first-person experience.

In 2011, together with a local film production company and an investment company my collaborators and I submitted our film script, 《梦回北京》 (English working title: *City of Forbidden Ghosts*), to Beijing Municipal Bureau of Broadcasting, Film, and Television, a local censorship body serving as a subsidiary of the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SARFT). In the feedback we received, they provided suggestions for revisions, mostly related to the "image" of the country:

Firstly, the Boxer Rebellion fighters in the late Qing dynasty should not be depicted as "anti-Western extremists", for fear of "audience members having difficulty accepting it", and thus [this part] "should be removed" (my trans.).

Secondly, the female protagonist, Claudia, a Chinese American woman, is portrayed in the story as an orphan abandoned by her Chinese biological parents but later adopted by an American couple, who have thus become "the savior of the Chinese foundling". "For fear of audience members giving strained interpretations and drawing farfetched analogies culturally", it is therefore recommended that it be "revised accordingly" (my trans.).

Lastly, Mark, an American character in the script, says upon arriving in Beijing, "Jesus, the traffic here is even worse than Los Angeles!" For fear of audience members having problems accepting the comparison, it is recommended that it be "revised accordingly" (my trans.).

The official feedback concludes that the script is "not suitable" for registration and production and should be resubmitted after "substantial revisions".

Not only film productions receive strict censorship, the government also heavily monitors and regulates social media platforms. Censorship measures in the country's social media include keyword filtering, content removal, account suspension, and even the detention of individuals for posting sensitive or critical information. The government uses advanced algorithms and human moderators to identify and remove content that is deemed politically sensitive, including discussions about human rights, democracy, Tibet, Xinjiang, Taiwan, and other sensitive topics.

I was one of the first Sina blog users. Since my first blog entry posted in 2006, and with a total of 4,751 entries, I had received 2,752,885 views with 1,258 subscribers until it was deactivated by the Sina administration. I had never been and never wanted to be a political dissident and had been by no means a fanatic commentator of Chinese politics, and my blog was mostly a vehicle to document my daily life, covering from grocery shopping, outdoor activities, to traveling and sightseeing, usually concluded with a meagre reflection.

After the launch of my personal discursive platform, I experienced a few years of relative tolerance from the Sina administration. Removal of blog entries almost never happened at that time.

When Xi Jinping assumed the position as the leader of the CCP and the state government in November 2012, I was hoping that, with the new generation of the Politburo, there was going to be a positive change in China's politics, in freedom of expression, of accessing information and connecting on social media. For years thereafter, however, people had no clear clues of where Xi would be leading the nation. Little was known about his political ideology, his personal likes, and dislikes in the past. Many were hoping that he would become more liberal than the previous Hu-Wen administration, given the fact that his father, Xi Zhongxun (1913–2002), a founding member of the CCP, was persecuted and prisoned during Mao's turbulent Cultural Revolution (1966–1976).

Xi's large-scale anti-corruption campaign immediately after he took office was widely praised in the country, though some overseas critics regarded it as a political genocide as it lacked transparency and had potential political motivations. To political observers, it was not until his second term that Xi's style became clearer as seen from the "Belt and Road Initiative" which was announced in 2013, the "wolf-warrior" diplomacy, the "Zero-COVID" policy, among others. In fact, as early as in 2009, when he was still a low-profile vice president of the PRC, I could foresee his future style based on a brief speech he made to members of ethnic Chinese people in Mexico:

"[T]here are a few foreigners, with full stomachs, have nothing better to do than try to be backseat drivers of our country's own affairs... China does not export revolution, hunger, poverty, nor does China cause you any headaches... Just what else do you want?" [4].

These surprising and yet perplexing remarks of Xi almost immediately provoked widespread criticism and speculation overseas of his future policy. A quick textual analysis led me to such beliefs: First, Xi had ambitions and had his own agenda, but would be diverging from Deng Xiaoping's "韬光养晦" policy, a strategy of keeping a low profile internationally and concentrating on self-improvement domestically. Deng was the actual leader of the CCP, whose "reform and opening up" policy his successors Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao followed. Xi's agenda would eventually play a pivotal role in the USA's decoupling from China. Second, he would not be willing to take criticism by media, and he would not listen to opposing voices. Apparently, this has resulted in unprecedented censorship measures in the country a few years later. Third, he would not appreciate Western-style democracy, and ultimately would want to further defend, consolidate, and strengthen totalitarianism. The method would be to use the state apparatus to maintain stability in all aspects. Being no expert in international relations or economics and seemingly only accepting opinions that cater to his liking and beliefs, he would potentially only draw sycophants to his inner circles as his advisers.

Not surprisingly, Xi's government tightened restrictions over ideological discourse and intensified media censorship [5]. My Sina blog, almost simultaneously, went through rigorous screening, which led to the deletion of newly posted

entries, removal of posts from past years into "private" or trash folders, and warnings of content with "sensitive words" subject to revisions without specifying what words and without explaining the "sensitivity" criteria. During Xi's anti-corruption campaign which served as a measure to stabilize his power soon after he assumed office, Zhou Yongkang, a Politburo Standing Committee member and the third most powerful politician in the PRC, was expelled from the CCP in 2014 due to alleged abuse of power and corruption. Shortly after that, I posted a blog entry discussing the public response to corruption in the PRC with the closing paragraph:

"The Chinese people do not hate corrupt government officials. They just hate that they don't have the opportunity to be corrupt..."

Albeit widely embraced by my readers as evidenced by their comments following the post, after a couple of days it was deleted by Sina administration, citing that the post contained "improper" content.

Starting April 2019, Sina blog administration claimed to be experiencing "system upgrading" in response to the order of Beijing Internet Information Office made on April 16, 2019, where the State Internet Information Office informed the Beijing Internet Information Office that the latter had failed to fulfill its duties to censor contents posted by its users that "violates laws and regulations", and "continues to disseminate and hype unlawful and harmful information that is misleading, vulgar and pornographic, or false". The former thus instructed the latter to contact Sina's management and order it to conduct a "self-inspection and self-correction". As a result, from April 17 through May 17, 2019, Sina blog and its app were down to receive "thorough rectifications" [6] (my trans.).

During the same month, I found out that over 600 of my past blog entries were unpublished by having been moved to a "private" folder, which were only visible to me as the author. Besides, these blog entries in this folder were frozen, so I could not move them back to the "posted" folders. Sina blog users call this "bei simi" (privatized). It seemed that this "privatization" had commenced long before this "rectification" campaign, as there had been complaints on Google search about the arbitrary practice prior to April 2019.

After I emailed Sina blog's customer service to address my concern, most of the "privatized" blog entries could be republished. Still, there are hundreds of them frozen in the "private" [unpublished] folder permanently. Besides, newly posted blog entries seem to have received stricter scrutiny than in the past since this campaign started.

In some cases, the blog entries are deleted by the administrator after having been posted for a length of time from a few hours to a few days. The deletion notification, however, does not specify the reason. My blog post titled *The Truth*, for example, was deleted soon after it was uploaded on May 26, 2019. The English translation of part of this post is as follows:

"Recalling my life in Beijing, no matter what TV channels I watch, be it Chinese Central Television (CCTV), or Beijing TV (BTV), or Tianjin TV (TJTV), or Hebei TV (HEBTV), I am pretty sure that they have the same tune. If I read a newspaper, no matter if it's *Beijing Youth Daily*, or *Beijing Evening Post*, or *The Beijing News*, they all carry the same tune also. If you surf online, Sina and Sohu are almost

identical. The reason is very simple: They have the same boss—the Party. They are all affiliated with the Party. A senior photojournalist with the *Beijing Youth Daily* once told me that media workers mostly had professional conscience and were committed to truth coverage. But sometimes when the duty editor has just greenlighted the news dispatch, the editor-in-chief calls in to cancel it. Sometimes it is a call from a more important leader ordering them to cancel it. This is a common practice in China, where the news industry runs a strict screening process regarding what the government wants its people to know and not to know...” (my trans.).

Sometimes a blog post is deleted even though the content is not relevant to China, such as another one of mine discussing why the USA had allies worldwide while playing a “bossy” role to the world, which had no mention of China. I would analyze that because it might potentially lead hypersensitive individuals to put the PRC’s foreign policy and diplomacy into comparison with those of the USA, which many of the politicians in Xi’s circles view as a threat and a rival to China, it was deleted by the Sina administrator to avoid unnecessary disputes.

In some other cases, the system may prevent the user from uploading the post on the condition of replacing certain words deemed “sensitive”. At the same time, an alert pops up, claiming that the post contains “sensitive words” and requesting revisions before resubmission. The system never specifies the exact words that are considered “sensitive”. Therefore, the author has no clue how to “revise” or replace the “sensitive” words. As a result, the only option is to withdraw that post.

In most other cases, a post is not immediately visible to the public after being uploaded, only visible to the author. A popped-up message indicates that the post is pending for “review” and “approval”.

Such restrictions inhibit free expression, and, as a result, will increase the user’s consciousness of choice of topics and vocabulary.

In addition to these measures, the government also requires social media platforms to verify the identities of their users and collect personal information, making it easier for authorities to monitor and control online activities. They also enforce strict rules and regulations on social media companies, making them responsible for the content posted on their platforms. Sina Weibo, often regarded as the “Twitter of China”, is a microblogging and social networking platform that allows registered users to post and repost messages which used to be restricted to 140 words. This word limit was increased to 2,000 in 2016 [7], while only the first 140 are publicly visible by default for browsing. Weibo may share the same user account as Sina blog, which means that a registered user can run the blog and Weibo at the same time using the same username and password. Registered users may also choose to have their Sina blog entries synchronized into their Weibo, revealing the title and the first few lines of the blog entry. Readers may click “read more” to read the rest of post. Generally considered to allow greater freedom of speech than other media platforms in the PRC [8], in recent years Sina Weibo has also gradually tightened its restrictions, from only forbidding Beijing-based users to register with pseudonyms starting on March 16, 2012 [9], to blocking certain terms with a sensitive nature, and to implementing the “comment

moderation” function in 2018, in that comments must be approved by the moderator first before being published [10].

As of September 2019, I found out that I could no longer log into my Sino Weibo. The failure-to-log-in message indicates that my account appears “abnormal”, and requires me to enter my cell phone number. Although there is an option for American cell phone numbers, the system keeps showing, “Sorry, operation failed”, when I have entered my American number. I presume that the system is preventing overseas Sino Weibo users to keep their old accounts. And, as a matter of fact, it has been reported that tightening the overseas use of Sina Weibo was a decision and order made by the CCP’s Propaganda Department [3].

During the same month, I found out that my WeChat account had been deactivated. WeChat, probably the most popular social media platform in the PRC and among overseas Chinese, is more than Chinese Facebook. Developed by Tencent, a Chinese company founded in 1998 providing Internet-related services and products, entertainment, artificial intelligence, and technology both in China and globally, it is an all-in-one messaging application that also provides games, online shopping, and financial services.

The inability to use this super app might cause extreme inconveniences. Each attempt to log in leads to the same following message:

“Your WeChat account has violated the user agreement and is blocked from login. But you can only use Wallet, Contacts, and Favorites with temp login. You can tap here to view details or unblock account.”

Type: Login blocked.

Self-service unblock allowed.

Reason: Reported for multiple instances of non-compliance.

This indicates that although my WeChat log-in is disabled, I can still unblock it by requesting another WeChat user to verify my identity, and I can still use the wallet feature as well as receive messages and browse posts. I have sent “unblock assistance” requests to several friends on WeChat, but none of them has received any messages from WeChat. This penalty seems more like a permanent removal. To reopen a WeChat account, I would need a new sim card.

While I am not sure if this removal could have been linked to my sharing and reposting a number of articles from different sources disfavoring the PRC’s state media on the Sino-U.S. trade war or the Trump administration’s sanctions against Huawei or the Hong Kong demonstrations, I have been informed by several other WeChat users whose accounts have also been deactivated that to be punished by WeChat it would need multiple anonymous tip-offs from fellow users who believe that you have committed certain “violations”.

Tencent, the parent company of WeChat and QQ—an instant messaging software service popular before WeChat—request users to report “violations of laws and regulations”. On the report platform, it shows the current total number of accounts that have been reported and that have received penalty of varying levels from temporary blockage of three days to 15 days to permanent removal. The “violations” include “non-compliance of Tencent’s services”, scam, pornography, gambling, drugs, and sending “other harmful or malicious messages”. In my case, WeChat claims that it is “non-compliance”, but I have no clue what that refers to.

Frustrations have literally silenced me and “deactivated” me from Chinese social media overtime. For those active bloggers, the focus of their writings has shifted to apolitical issues. In short, if you don’t want such trouble, then stay away from politics.

III. THE “FIFTY-CENT” ARMY AND THE RISE OF NEO-NATIONALISM

Some people suggest that I might have run into “Fifty-Cent Party” (*wumao*) members in a WeChat group that I initiated, called, “Remain true to our original aspiration”, a slogan that appeared in Xi Jinping’s report at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China [11]. The “Fifty-Cent Party” is a Chinese cyber slang term for Internet commentators. Since in the cyber space it is not as easy to control as traditional news outlets, the Fifty-Cent Party is used by government departments to manipulate public opinion to the benefit of the CCP. These people are allegedly paid 50 Chinese cents for each post they upload with pro-government comments, and as such, they are nicknamed “Fifty-Cent Party” [12]. The members are dubbed as “fifty-centers”. A 2017 Harvard study estimates that the PRC government has hired about two million people to fabricate social media posts under the Chinese regime’s strategy “to avoid arguing with skeptics of the party and the government, and to not even discuss controversial issues” [13].

Following the creation of the terms “Fifty-Cent Party” and “fifty-centers” came another cyber slang term, “volunteer fifty-centers” (*ziganwu*), which refers to those who voluntarily fulfill regular fifty-centers’ job without any paid compensation. The emergence of volunteer fifty-centers may be perceived as one prominent sign of the rise of nationalism on the Chinese Internet, as opposed to the period of national introspection soon after the Cultural Revolution ended. Interestingly, while these volunteer fifty-centers were warmly praised by the government-run *Guangming Daily* as “firm practitioners of core socialist values” [14], dissident voice from overseas pities them as “the products of the subject education” under the one-party dictatorship [15]. In his *Governance and Education: From Denizen to Citizen, the author*, Jie Xu, a Chinese professor at Saint Mary’s College in California, examines citizen education in the American Democratic-Republican era and the Party-State education of Nazi Germany and argues that the purpose of education is to empower people with greater capability for self-governance, rather than assist the rulers to control people however they wish to [16].

While Xu does not directly criticize Chinese politics in the book, his attitude towards the current political system in the PRC is very clear, which is evidenced by the consistency in his interview and personal blog: One of the great accomplishments of the CCP since 1949 is the people under its rule has been successfully convinced that nation is the synonym of state—a concentration of power under the one-Party rule, regardless of the different versions of a “Chinese state” for around 4,000 years, and that patriotism or national pride is equated with loyalty and obedience to the ruling Party, its government, and its system. In other words, it takes the measure of silencing all the voices and vanishing unwanted votes if believed to be disapproving of the ruling Party’s ideology and propaganda; it also means erasing traces of

individual existence, abandoning basic values of citizen’s society based on freedom and equality, and totally immersing in a large-scale scheme to defend the ruling legitimacy of the one and only ruling Party. While in the Republican era Chinese nationalists expressed the desirability of a centralized Chinese state under Sun Yat-sen’s *Three Principles of the People*—nationalism, democracy, and the livelihood of the people, currently the new version of nationalism in the PRC is often manifested as regarding the centralization of authority by the CCP as the only guarantee of building and reviving a powerful, prosperous, Chinese state. Only a highly centralized power must—and can—achieve unity in thinking, as it claims to hold the absolute power in its hand with the unparalleled ability of self-correction, and yet unity in thinking has never been possible, as long as each individual keeps their own judgment independent of external influences, along with their own likes and dislikes, their values, benefits, and beliefs. Outsiders or common people do not have a clue of the disagreements and even disputes among top authorities, and yet are convinced that unity in thinking is prevailing from top down. Internal conflicts are either covered up or leaked in the name of anti-corruption campaigns. Eradicating independent thinking is the best way to erase dissidence, which in turn is the best way to control people’s minds.

IV. THE SILENCE OF THE INTELLECTUAL COMMUNITIES—AWAITING THE LAST STRAW?

While some overseas Chinese scholars such as Jie Xu see the promise of the rule of law in a non-liberal society such as China, I would maintain that under the current political climate in the PRC, the CCP is implementing the rule by law rather than the rule of law. The rule of law may run into obstacles in attempting to silence people, while the rule by law can and has to do so.

The PRC’s government has been promoting the idea that economic development and political stability are more important than democratic reforms. They argue that their system of governance, which combines elements of market capitalism with strict political control, has led to rapid economic growth and improved living standards for many Chinese citizens. The government also emphasizes the concept of “social harmony” as a priority, focusing on maintaining social order and stability. Therefore, democracy could potentially lead to political instability and divisions within society, pointing to examples of countries where democratic transitions have been accompanied by social unrest or economic downturns. Additionally, the government justifies its governance model by highlighting the unique historical, cultural, and social context of China. One idea repeatedly promoted by the state-run media is that Western-style democracy may not be suitable for China and that their system is a better fit for the country’s specific circumstances.

I argue that the greatest achievements of the PRC’s censorship are not merely to have successfully instilled their ideas into minds, but also have largely silenced the intellectual class, particularly since the Tian’anmen Square demonstrations in 1989.

The Tian’anmen Square massacre had a profound impact on the Chinese government’s approach to dissent and protests. The Chinese government responded to the pro-democracy

demonstrations with a violent crackdown, resulting in the loss of many lives and widespread international condemnation. Following the Tian'anmen Square massacre, the government implemented strict measures to suppress dissent and maintain social stability, especially strict control over media and information. These actions, along with economic reforms that have brought increased prosperity to many Chinese citizens, have contributed to a more compliant and controlled society. While there may be occasional smaller-scale protests or acts of resistance in the country, they are often quickly suppressed, and the government's control over information and the media prevents widespread awareness or coverage of such events.

Are the Chinese being "brainwashed"? This is a complex and sensitive topic. Some scholars may disapprove of the "brainwashing" accusation since nowadays mainland Chinese—especially those educated—have access to alternative sources of information and have diverse opinions and perspectives. It is important to note that information flow between overseas Chinese and Chinese in China on social media such as WeChat is taking place every second. Many measures have been created and widely adopted to get away from censorship, such as using homophonic characters. Besides, people are increasingly conscious of the likelihood of the government manipulating news through the state-run media. Although the world within the Great Firewall is not completely enclosed, it does not reverse the impact of long-term information control and censorship at all. After all, having lived in this authoritarian and monolithic system year after year, people tend to tire of climbing out of the wall to seek "truth" or transparency; they know that it will be getting nowhere, and have begun to focus more on their own well-being. Of the many university faculty members in the PRC with whom I have communicated frequently about current Chinese social issues, what impresses me the most about their thoughts is not how they conform to the government, but a self-indulgence mingled with self-denial and mild satire as the outcome of having been silenced in public as well as in private. Only a very few dissidents, including retired and fired university professors, have been able to move to the USA to start a new life, including Zhou Xiaozheng, Xia Yeliang, and Cai Xia. Most of the intellectuals must choose silence for self-protection and self-sustaining.

Before the pandemic, I had met visitors from Shanghai and Guangzhou who were vacationing in North America. They would stay at Airbnbs or hotels, traveling from coast to coast. When younger, they were among the enthusiastic supporters of the 1989 Tian'anmen Square democracy movement, but now they are no longer persistent for "freedom" or democracy. One says, "Teachers [in China] used to be poorly paid, but now I can afford to travel abroad every summer. I've also had my own condominium with mortgage paid off. Besides, the pension is not bad. So far so good, I have no complaints!"

J, a professor emerita in her 70s from Nanjing, the capital city of the affluent eastern Chinese province, Jiangsu, travelled abroad with tour groups for vacation several times a year until the pandemic lockdown. She says, "Now after several [pension] increases, I make more than enough [for me to spend]! So, I must spend the money traveling and vacationing when my health still allows [me to do so]!" She was a sympathizer of the student protestors during the 1989's Tian'anmen uprising and an active advocator of freedoms of

the press and of speech as well as a former Falun Gong practitioner. On WeChat, she frequently reposts others' politically controversial content without any commentary.

Having observed similar attitudes among many others, I have been rethinking what constitutes a meaningful life. Jiang Zemin, the former General Secretary of the CCP and the former President of the PRC once quoted an old saying with unknown sources to educate the "simple" and "naive"—in his own language—Hong Kong reporters who questioned the election of the first Chief Executive of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. "In silence is one making a great fortune" (闷声发大财), said he, meaning, "Keep your mouth shut and concentrate on making money". Can we really achieve happiness under a concentration of power, no matter how much material gratification it brings? When basic material needs are met, can we ignore the fundamental needs for freedom of expression and democracy? Happiness cannot always be measured in terms of material gain. Eventually, people will realize something is missing in life. I would question how long this meta-silence will last. If it has an end, then when shall we speak up to break this silence? Discussing silence instead of remaining silent to silence is progress in the awakening of public consciousness [17]. The cause of societal deterioration comes from within, not from without. When the intellectual communities have all discarded their consciousness of social and moral responsibility, everyone will become the victim of their own silence.

Although CCP-owned media strongly defends the "Chinese-style democracy", with the even more centralized authority of the CCP which represents and acts in the interests of "people" under Xi's regime, China is becoming more undemocratic. At a Peking University conference in Beijing in December 2016, senior faculty members of the top school in China communicated to me the bitterness of resigning themselves to the fact that nothing had changed in the state's politics and institutional life for the better over the years, but only for the worse, regardless of the improved standard of living. The COVID-19 pandemic a few years afterward, while slowing down the country's economy, provided another excuse to legitimize and glamorize the CCP's rule under Xi's personal "guidance and deployment" as in his own words.

In *The Road to Serfdom (Der Weg zur Knechtschaft)*, the author Friedrich Hayek maintains that centralized planning requires "that the will of a small minority be imposed upon the people", and thus undermines the rule of law and democracy and deprives individual freedoms [18]. While Xi's unprecedented third term as Chinese president and the most powerful leader after Mao Zedong has even substantially weakened the limited democracy within the CCP's Politburo, we are seeing that it is becoming more of the will of him rather than of "a small minority" to be imposed on the majority in pursuit of his agenda and centralized goals.

Centralized planning seems to be working if we only look at the prosperity on the surface, as demonstrated by the stunning infrastructure for example, while ignoring humanitarian needs. Typically, in China, this centralized system requires state propaganda, as Hayek has put it, so that the people are made to believe that the state and the people share the same goals [19]. We don't know yet when it will no longer work effectively to the public eye and for how long it

will be sustained. Perhaps the last straw has not come yet.

V. CONCLUSION

How far can the CCP go? Its future trajectory is certainly uncertain, and any prediction of decline or stability should be taken with caution. Over the years, the CCP has maintained its grip on political, economic, and social institutions. Its control over the military, media, and judiciary, along with its ability to suppress dissent, has allowed it to maintain its authority.

How far can Xi go? Xi Jinping's leadership style has been often described as more autocratic and less tolerant of dissent than his predecessors. Xi has also introduced constitutional changes that removed term limits for the presidency, allowing him to potentially stay in power indefinitely. This move has raised concerns about the concentration of power, and yet Xi does not seem to have run into obstruction in his pursuits.

And, under Xi's regime, the unprecedented strict media censorship and suppression of free expression do not seem to have met with a public backlash, especially from the intellectual communities across the country, as compared to the 1989 Tian'anmen Square protests. The public attitudes behind the silence should not be oversimplified as comprise of personal material gain and the country's immense economic growth at the price of trading in individual freedoms. There are more silent observers than loud dissidents and protestors—observers of certain factors that could potentially impact the CCP's long-term stability, including but not limited to persistent social issues such as corruption and information censorship while technology continues to evolve. Instead of addressing challenges and adapting to changing circumstances, the CCP seems to have silenced the public by tightening its control over people's minds and expressions. For many of the silent, however, silence is treated more as an observer's wait-and-see attitude to "let it play out" till the last straw. As the old Chinese saying goes, "The full moon wanes, and water overflows", if Xi's highly centralized power only draws non-dissents, lasts for indefinite terms, silences dissents, and prohibits free and transparent information, then there is no other way out for the people and especially the intellectual communities but see how the "moon" and "water" will pan out.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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