



## How China's Viral Authoritarianism Infects the West and Threatens the Enlightenment

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China's challenge to the United States over the coming decades will not only be a contest of economic and military might. It will be a clash of ideologies, as President Xi Jinping made quite clear in his marathon address to the 19th Communist Party Congress.

China is betting that its brand of authoritarianism will go viral and infect not only Eastern nations it hopes to bring under its hegemonic sway, but the Western world as well.

What China has undertaken is a complete inversion of the early promise of the Internet, and before that a core principle of Western foreign policy: the conviction that *liberty is viral*. Before the Internet, it was firmly held that exposing authoritarian nations to Western liberty and its tangible benefits through economic and cultural contact would gradually erode the power of dictators and politburos. "Engagement" was the key to spreading freedom around the world, a process that would be greatly accelerated by the Internet and its uncontrollable tidal wave of information.

A great deal of Western foreign policy in the postwar era was based on this conviction, especially after the so-called "end of history" when the Soviet Union fell and the Berlin Wall came down. Note well that the author of the thesis that authoritarianism suffered a permanent defeat at the hands of classical liberalism, Francis Fukuyama, worked for the U.S. State Department.

A funny thing happened on the way to that inevitable triumph of liberty: authoritarianism adjusted its tactics, teamed up with the Western left to attack the foundations of classical liberalism, and found ways to not only control the Internet but turn that gushing firehose of intellectual freedom into an instrument of control. If you enjoyed watching Russia use social

media to vandalize Western democracy, you are going to *love* how China uses it to surgically dismantle the Enlightenment.

China is already directly controlling Internet access for about a quarter of the entire planetary user base, and it exports its expertise by sending consultants abroad to teach other authoritarian regimes how to lock their nets down, too. China aggressively pushes its vision of tightly regulated speech and information as essential to social harmony. Does anyone doubt that it will find a growing audience among the increasingly censorious Western left?

Social media companies that long ago knuckled under Chinese demands for censorship, in exchange for access to its huge online marketplace, are growing more comfortable with speech policing and ideological control in Western markets as well. Twitter's recent purge of "blue checkmark" account verification for purely ideological reasons, when the system was originally presented as a completely impartial means of confirming that some users are who they claim to be, is a perfect example of Chinese thinking infecting the West, especially since the purge makes glaring exceptions for politically correct purveyors of "hate speech."

It is hard to argue with the concern expressed by observers such as Garry Kasparov that Big Tech companies "often have cozy arrangements in authoritarian states to do business there," and close contact with those states is making Big Tech more comfortable with authoritarianism. This is, again, precisely the opposite of how previous generations of foreign policy experts thought "engagement" would work.

The university system that feeds workers into Big Tech is also infested with viral authoritarianism. Campus crusades against "fascism" and "hate speech" are not much different in spirit from China's notion of controlling speech to reduce discord and craft a more efficient society.

A recent Cato Institute survey found that a strong 71 percent majority of Americans disapprove of "political correctness" – but the same survey found majorities saying it *works*, because they are fearful of speaking honestly about their political beliefs.

Even as they frowned upon P.C. tyranny, 79 percent of respondents agreed with its basic tenet that "hate speech" is "morally unacceptable." While Cato hopefully viewed that finding as evidence the public "appears to distinguish between allowing offensive speech and endorsing it," the survey also found hefty percentages of various groups willing to use state power, and even vigilante violence, to suppress speech they found particularly objectionable, such as 51 percent of "strong liberals" saying they find it "morally acceptable" to punch Nazis.

Of course, even the most energetic free speech advocates tend to accept some limits on speech in the interests of public safety or decency, but we are sliding further into the realm of aggressive limits on speech in the name of "social harmony," which is a key concept in Xi Jinping's vision of modern authoritarianism. China's censors have different standards for suppressing speech to minimize discord, but they are not that much different from where American society is heading, especially on campus.

China has become very adept at exploiting stress points in Western society and co-opting the language of its political class to sell authoritarian ideals. Social justice and income inequality? Those are staples of Chinese political speech, which boasts of using centralized power to distribute resources more fairly and efficiently – even though China has one of the worst “wealth gaps” in the world.

Environmentalism? China is keenly aware that hardcore environmentalists already fantasize about doing away with representative democracy to save the Earth, because free citizens are short-sighted and foolish. China will boast incessantly of how its system prioritizes doing the “right thing” over antiquated notions of inalienable rights and self-governing citizens. Certain quarters of Western academic thought are quite receptive to the idea that only command economics can save the Earth from the ravages of capitalism. Race relations? Chinese media loves to lecture Americans about that, even though its immigration policies are extremely restrictive, it has zero interest in taking in huge refugee populations, and disfavored minority groups in China are treated harshly.

Corruption? Honest government is a keen interest of people across the world. It was a major theme in the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign, and will probably resurface in many political contests to come. China loudly celebrates President Xi Jinping as a champion corruption fighter, even though the actual results have been mixed, and involved arresting a number of officials whose crime seems more like political inconvenience than corruption.

Human rights? China enjoys lectures about that, too, proceeding from effectively the same assumption as the Bernie Sanders wing of the American left: the only human right that really matters is a “roof over the head” and “food in the belly,” provided by an all-powerful state that demands complete obedience in exchange for its largesse.

It is no coincidence that Chinese media is more apt to describe its system as “socialism” than “communism” when writing for foreign consumption. They are keenly aware of millennials’ growing fascination with socialism, which signifies growing acceptance of the idea that wise and powerful government officials are better equipped to promote fairness and social justice than greedy capitalists. Apprehension about dishonest officials stealing public resources is one of the major factors keeping many people in free countries from openly embracing socialism.

It will not be difficult for China to tempt young people with a tale of socialism done right, a benevolent tyranny run by honest and wise planners who finally manage to deliver the proverbial free lunch. The level of obedience required to make centralized power work will be downplayed to an audience that likes to think of themselves as radical individualists.

China’s sales pitch is already well underway, with constant arguments that “enlightened Chinese democracy puts the West in the shade,” as the state-run Xinhua news service claimed in an October editorial. The heart of the argument is that centralized control under dedicated public servants is vastly superior to messy, angry representative democracy and heartless entrepreneurial capitalism.

“Unlike competitive, confrontational Western politics, the CPC and non-Communist parties cooperate with each other, working together for the advancement of socialism and striving to improve the people’s standard of living. The relationship maintains political stability and social harmony and ensures efficient policy-making and implementation,” Xinhua explained.

That is definitely a viral idea, and China’s tight controls on speech will ensure few voices from within China challenge the story Xi wishes to tell. Xi wants to tighten speech controls even further, in concert with a war on religion that removes all competing moral authority from the lives of his citizens. He is hard at work on “forging a uniquely Chinese national narrative” that can thrive in the Information Age, as the authors of a recent study on Xi’s agenda put it.

Xi is battering down China’s hatches and preparing to sail into economic and ideological battle for global dominance. The Internet is clearly no great threat to authoritarianism, because the maximum rulers quickly adapted by studying such landmark events as the Tiananmen Square student revolution, whose ideas spread by fax machine in the last hours before the dawn of the Internet. Chinese Communism survived first contact with the Information Age, and seems to be inoculated against dissident ideas.

Can a Western world riddled with internal strife, including populist revolts against incompetent and corrupt political elites, say the same? Where is anyone practicing a robust free-market entrepreneurial capitalism that can measure its results against China’s command economics and tight social controls? Which nation of the Anglosphere believes in free speech and individual liberty passionately enough to reject China’s arguments for control? The West will spend the next three decades fighting for financial turf it cannot hold, and moral high ground it doesn’t truly believe it should occupy.