

China Blog – July 2022

Author: World Watch Research analyst / Asia

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History is what the CCP says it is

In an extensive two-part report published on 7 and 8 June 2022, MEMRI looked at textbooks used in Chinese middle and high schools to investigate the issue of how is presented and taught (MEMRI [Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#), 7/8 June 2022). Granted that there is no such thing as neutral or objective teaching of history, since the subject is used all over the world to present the world from a certain angle, the investigation sought to show how much Chinese Communist Party (CCP) ideology is being ‘transported’ via teaching. In what can at least be called a selective or a colored version of historical events, the textbooks completely omit, for example, that the CCP in its beginning years was supported and basically funded by the Soviet-backed Comintern (established by Lenin in 1919), as this evidently does not fit into the narrative and picture the CCP wishes to present. Numerous other examples have been collated and commented upon by MEMRI, in a comprehensive and read-worthy article which [contrasts](#) quotes from the school textbooks with “mainstream” historical analysis (MEMRI, 26 July 2022).

Not surprisingly, a considerable number of pages in the textbooks are taken up with the so-called “century of humiliation”, a time spanning from 1839 and China’s defeat in the first Opium War up to the second Chinese-Japanese War ending in 1945. In this period, China was fragmented, lost almost all of its wars and was forced to accept concessions of territory and pay reparations. Students in today’s China are being taught that this time of bullying is finally over and that China is taking back its rightful place in the world. All of this is, of course, only possible under the rule of the Communist Party which has saved China from this humiliation and is the sole guarantor that this will never happen again.

Chinese citizens expect the government to ‘talk like a church’

In a wide-ranging [interview](#), published in CCP Watch on 17 June 2022, Professor Timothy Cheek talks about the successes and challenges of the Chinese Communist Party. He reminds the reader that it is always necessary to have the two main hinges of Communist politics in mind: Ideology and power. While the whole interview makes worthwhile reading, below are selected excerpts which highlight some crucial points.

Referring to successes besides the remarkable economic progress, Professor Cheek says:

Probably the greatest ideological success of the CCP in the past 20 years has been to identify the nation with the Party and to get most people to believe that even with its faults, there's no alternative to the Party to take care of China's national interests.

This singlemindedness (also called monism), whereby the CCP declares that it alone must be responsible for organizing every aspect of Chinese society, leads the interviewer to ask: "Is there any limit to the stuff they can claim is Communist?" The answer is surprising:

Yes. But it's awfully broad. It's clear there's a lot they can take on. But I would say that there is a prime directive, and that is monism: Only us, and never let the other guy organize. The reason the Party came down so hard on Falun Gong in the 90s was their demonstrated organizational capacity. Previous to that, there were a lot of senior Party members who were doing Falun Gong exercises.

There is, however, a problem with the CCP's drive for monism: The people need some kind of spiritual foundation:

On what basis do you not just cheat everyone and assume everyone's trying to cheat you? That's a pretty nasty, brutish, and short way to live, and China's intellectuals don't like it. That's why you see the revival of Confucianism, because combined with a sort of nationalism that responds in understandable ways to the underlying racism of Western liberal theory, as they experience it and as the more radical colleagues in my university put it.

This leads the interviewer to ask: "What are the other sources of ideology in China today? Has the Party-state succeeded in stamping out other potential sources, such as religion or foreign political ideology?"

The answer is not surprising for anyone who is watching China or has read Ian Johnson's seminal book "The souls of China":

Clearly not. There are a number of competing belief systems in China today. One of the great failures of the Communist Party, including in their own eyes, is their inability to eradicate religion. One of the weaknesses of the Chinese Communist state, perhaps its Achilles heel, is its inability to handle religion. The horrors of what they're doing in Xinjiang and their recurrent spats with Chinese Christians are so unnecessary from an agnostic political science point of view, but the Party feels challenged, because religion is another ideology.

A potential solution would be to simply add religion as a "Fourth Represent" to the so-called "Three Represents" (in Chinese: *San ge daibiao*) which the Central Committee formulated as the foundation of the CCP's social political theory in the 1990s. The Three Represents are:

1. The CCP represents the the advanced forces of production;
2. The CCP represents the advanced forces of culture;
3. The CCP represents all the people of China

However, to add "4. The CCP represents selected religions in China" would be impossible since the Communist goal is ultimately to eradicate religion and not co-opt it. Professor Cheek states:

Now, if they can do the Three Represents and say capitalists are fine in the Party, they could get a Fourth Represent. They could find a way to accommodate religion. I know a couple of Muslim Party cadres, and that's what they want. They would be happy to be Maoists and Muslims. The Party won't let them. It's an Achilles heel.

In a concluding remark, Professor Cheek shares a surprising observation, saying that the Chinese people expect the government to “talk like a church”:

Xi Jinping cannot tell people what to think and they will do it like a bunch of automatons. This is not the Borg. But people need to know why they're doing things. There's a broad expectation in China that the government ought to talk like a church. Chinese politics is about values and morality. Western politics at least used to be about interests. No wonder we misunderstand each other.

Postscript

The fact that the Chinese people are not “a bunch of automatons” is nowhere as clear as in Chinese social media, especially in the possibility for viewers to add comments to blogs. While there is some censorship of the most challenging comments (besides the ubiquitous self-censorship), it is quite simply an overwhelming task for the Chinese authorities to monitor the billions of comments published daily on the various platforms. In an effort to close this loophole, the CCP has published new draft rules on making [social media comments](#), as reported by the MIT Technology Review on 18 June 2022. These regulations include increased monitoring and require real name authorship.

Surveillance is the name of the game

In a wide-ranging investigation, the New York Times analyzed more than 100,000 Chinese government tenders and found that tools developed and used for [surveillance](#) are increasing at unprecedented levels (New York Times - NYT, 21 June 2022).

Right at the beginning, the authors of the NYT article are clear about the Chinese government's goals as stated in the documents: Systems are to be designed which “maximize what the state can find out about a person's identity, activities and social connections, which could ultimately help the government maintain its authoritarian rule.”

One of the features high in demand were CCTV cameras with facial recognition features, which are then stored on police servers and are fed into an extensive analytical software. The intent, as exemplarily stated by Fujian province police, is clear - “controlling and managing people”. For the same reason, phone-trackers have become ubiquitous, all of China's 31 provinces and regions are using them, collecting data on the whereabouts of a person and more. Voice prints, iris scans and DNA samples are other items the government authorities are increasingly collecting.

However, the authorities are aware of their limitations as well. One of the biggest problems identified is that the data has not been centralized. Consequently, one emphasis was on consolidating the data scattered across different databases so that a single personal dossier can be created which is available for all agencies across the government.

While this system is still under development, a separate article in the New York Times from 25 June 2022 highlights another consequence of the excessive [data gathering](#). In what sounds like “predictive policing”, a technique used by some police forces in Western countries, but hotly debated due to its human rights implications, vast amounts of data allow authorities to identify patterns and see aberrations. According to the NYT, the authorities are casting their nets wide:

Citizens are being “recorded by police cameras that are everywhere, on street corners and subway ceilings, in hotel lobbies and apartment buildings. Their phones are tracked, their purchases are monitored, and their online chats are censored. Now, even their future is under surveillance.”

As social stability is paramount for the Communist government, such tools are embraced eagerly and further developed to keep every possible form of dissent at bay. A helpful side-effect of this is that citizens are becoming more cautious, as they know that their steps may be watched. As Maya Wong, researcher at Human Rights Watch, is quoted by NYT: “This is an invisible cage of technology imposed on society, the disproportionate brunt of it being felt by groups of people that are already severely discriminated against in Chinese society.”

Such systems can also be used to blacklist certain people or categorize them and send automated alarms to authorities when they are moving or gathering. As one Chinese petitioner in the article is quoted “In the past if you left your home and took to the countryside, all roads led to Beijing. Now, the entire country is a net.”

On a side note, it should also not be forgotten that systems like this, albeit less sophisticated, are being exported to other countries. As Reuters reported on 10 July 2022, Chinese companies won tenders to roll out [CCTV surveillance](#) with the aim of covering all 14 regions and states in Myanmar.

The Chinese Dream and the bank scandal in Henan

In Henan province, four rural banks have been caught up in a [scandal](#) which may have serious implications not just for provincial authorities, but also for the central authorities, as reported by Reuters on 12 July 2022.

Around 400,000 customers who had invested in banking products from four Henan banks (and another one in Anhui province) have been blocked from accessing and withdrawing their savings from since April 2022. While the products had often been bought [online](#) and categorized as “savings”, they may have been better categorized as “wealth management” products (SupChina, 15 July 2022) which are not covered by a state-wide insurance fund. Angry customers took to the streets and demanded that their “China dream” should not be shattered. ([‘China Dream’](#) is a catchphrase which Xi Jinping started using back in 2013 – BBC News, 6 June 2013.)

Initially, protests in June 2022 were hampered by the authorities using the COVID-19 tracking app to hinder citizens from traveling to Henan capital, Zhengzhou: Once they tried to board trains or find other ways of entering the city, they found that the health app on their phones had been [switched to red](#) (BBC News, 14 June 2022). After a public outcry, even the Global Times weighed in with an editorial saying that health code information should [never be misappropriated](#) (Sixth Tone, 15 June 2022).

Although the protestors did not formulate their demands as criticism of the central authorities and even used official government catchwords like ‘China dream’, another protest in July 2022 was violently attacked by unidentified assailants dressed in white (BBC News, 11 July 2022). Finally, however, the authorities did announce that depositors would get back at least part of their savings.

This is a reminder that in China not all protests can be subdued easily and that there are times when the authorities need to respond to citizens’ demands to maintain the levels of social stability they prize so highly. Another reminder of this need for the authorities to react is the ongoing housing and mortgage crisis which arguably has a far greater impact. According to a report by Radio Free Asia on 14 July 2022, buyers of residential housing projects across China [withhold paying](#) their mortgage until the projects are finished: “By July 12, buyers of 35 residential projects across 22 cities in China said they had decided to stop mortgage repayments, according to a report by Citigroup Inc. on Wednesday, despite the fact that it could mar their personal credit rating.” Particularly interesting in this is the last remark, as a bad personal credit rating can have far-reaching implications for their ability to act both in the economic sphere (e.g. being creditworthy for buying and selling) and be credit-worthy) and even in the social sphere (where a bad credit rating may become public and lead to neighbors and friends distancing themselves).

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