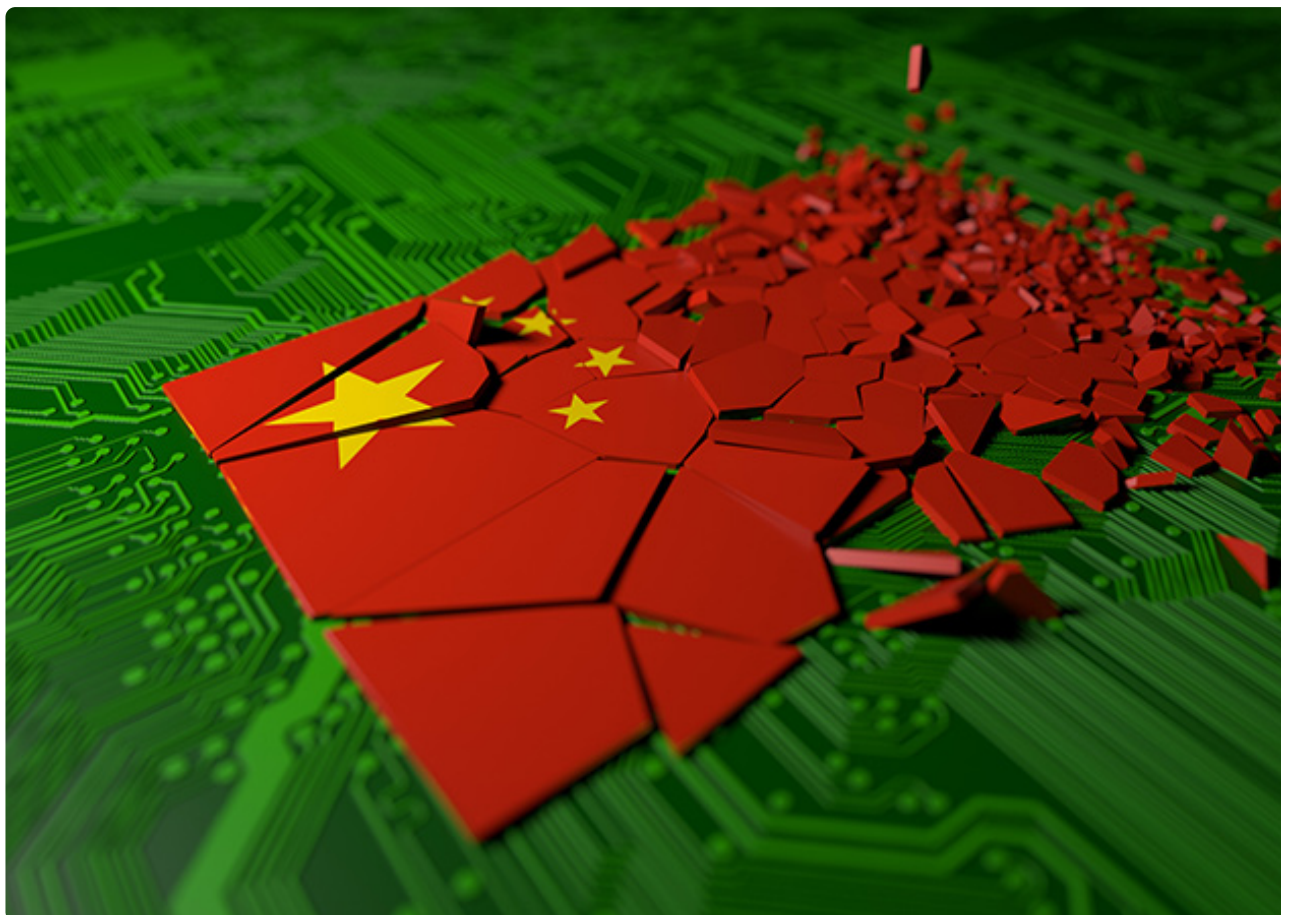


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Understanding Chinese media censorship: From Ming to Jinping

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[CHINESE CENSORSHIP](#)

[CHINESE COMMUNIST PARTY](#)

[UYGHURS](#)

[XI JINPING](#)

“Until they become conscious they will never rebel, and until after they have rebelled they cannot become conscious.”

“...The real power. The power we have to fight to for night and day, is not power over things but over men.”

These sentences are taken from the classic dystopian novel *1984* authored by George Orwell in 1949. They show the importance of psychological control in establishing a complete hegemony over society. In this article, the focus will be on Chinese perception control. It takes a quick look into the censorship history during the Ming Dynasty and examines today's constitutional provisions for highly controlled media in China. It asserts that the normalisation of censorship in Chinese society is because of the fear of being oppressed, which has been carried along the centuries of history. Finally, it concludes by showing the situation of current surveillance society and the state's more than required control over the citizen's life.

China and its surveillance nature

Surveillance appears to be an inherent attribute of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) behaviour. Incidents such as the [psychological isolation of Liu Xiaobo](#) – who took part in the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989, torture of foreign scribes, [disappearance of human rights journalist Ding Lingjie](#), the suppression of Uyghurs, and the crackdown on the liberties of Hong Kong—present a faint picture of the *1984* novel. It would not be an exaggeration to apply the slogans of the fictional Ministry of Truth, ‘War is Peace, Freedom is Slavery, Ignorance is Strength’ to the Chinese way of societal perception control.

Apart from what liberal scholars or even Lutyen's Delhi talk about, China seems to be very peaceful regarding the censorship and surveillance of its media. What has made the people of China so patient? Is it the threat posed by the regime or is being oppressed there in their psyche? We shall find answers to these questions through the following sections.

Historical look into Chinese control of society

It has been in existence since the establishment of the Ming dynasty, which strengthened Confucius rule in modern China.^[1] Even though the roots of Ming rule were thought to have been built on Confucius thought, His book is known to be the first totalitarian manifesto in history. The period between the 1370s to the 1450s (Ming Dynasty), is known to be the darkest period for Chinese intellectuals. There was continuous repression of political dissent in literary history. Poets and scholars were forced to work in the imperial house and do the chores of official documentation. Not just the individual in question was repressed, the entire family used to get punished for even the mere suspicion of any member being against the political authority. One such incident from history was that of Gao Qi, that is discussed below.

Gao Qi was a member of the Suzhou (it is originally a name of the place) artists, also known as the Four Literary Giants of Suzhou, who gave to the world various famous works of art including the Lion Forest Garden. Zhang Yu (1335-1385), Yang Ji (1334-1383), Xu Ben (1333-1380), and Gao Qi possessed exceptional literary talent, which was arrogantly not promoted.

by the Hongwu Emperor, Zhu Yuanzhang, who was the first emperor and the founder of the Ming dynasty.

When Wei Guan became the new prefect of Suzhou by rebuilding his office in the area occupied by Zhang, Gao Qi wrote a poem for the new prefect, congratulating him for his success. This made Zhang furious, leading him to take extreme steps. Zhang ordered the execution of Gao Qi, Wei Guan, and the other two poets publicly. Such assassinations were justified with vague reasons making people hide their resentment. Many such incidents show the historical existence of strict perception control and censorship in China.

Media Control with the Violation of Rights

Such severe public control has been carried down to modern societies from the era of Ming. This nature of political repression and intolerance towards any opposition to power has been coded into the constitution of China. When the internet was launched in 1994, there was surprisingly no censorship. Well, after the launch of the Golden Shield project in 1997, the [entire blueprint of the internet has been changed](#).

The Regulation on Administration of Publication (Regulatory body that oversees publication across the country. There are other regulatory bodies which oversee online content, New media, television broadcast, and etc.) restricts the actions of the press because of the four cardinal principles of the Chinese constitution. These [four cardinal principles](#) are mentioned within 'state, social, and collective interests' of [Article 5 of the constitution](#). They were framed by Deng Xiaoping in 1979 which states:

1. We must keep to the socialist road
2. We must uphold the dictatorship of the proletariat
3. We must uphold the leadership of the Communist Party
4. We must uphold Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought

If these are the restrictions that exist at the level of a regulatory body, even the bottom-up approach to disseminate information in the internet age appears impossible. [Article 25](#) of the constitution provides publishers with a list of types of content that are strictly prohibited. They include 'incitement to secession', 'sabotage of national solidarity', 'disclosure of state secrets', 'promotion of obscenity, superstition or violence' and, 'harm to social morality and excellent cultural tradition of the nation'. [Article 8](#) categorises acts that are 'manufacturing ethnic conflict and incitement to secession' through 'fabrication or distortion of facts' or 'publication or spreading of words or speeches'.

It is not clearly mentioned as to exactly what writings will lead to sabotaging national solidarity or will lead to a revelation of the state's secrets. Due to its vagueness, authorities can easily catch hold of the publisher at any point blaming him for violation of the rules. V

the uncertain criteria of what opposes national security, one cannot think aloud on social media.

Article 9 of State Security Law defines “state’s secret” as anything related to ‘state security and interest, the disclosure of which may damage the state security and interest in political, economic, defense, diplomacy and other areas’ that includes ‘secret matters in the major decisions of state affairs’ (clause 1); ‘secret matters in national economy and social development’ (clause 4); and ‘state secret matters of political parties’. Such vague definitions make people shut down their thoughts even before they emerge. Another interesting clause is that, if a media agency has applied for registration and has gotten rejected, it is considered a suspect entity and would also be considered illegal. All these restrictions encourage people to self-censor their thoughts and actions.

By the end of 2012, came “[Document No. 9](#),” another secret circular that identified seven crucial ideological dangers, including the promotion of Western constitutionalism, universal values, civil society, neoliberal economics, freedom of the press, historical nihilism, and challenging Socialism with Chinese characteristics. What’s important to note is, the “[Internet](#) and “[Academia](#)” were asserted to be the vantage points of these ideological risks. Now, the general public and academic research have also been restricted.

As if this is not sufficient, the New Hong Kong Security Law has made the situation worse. The pretext of putting an end to the violent protests and bringing back Hong Kong’s stability, China passed this legislation. What’s surprising is that the contents of the bill were not made public even after the legislation has been passed. They were released to national media outlets and they are the only source available to know its contents. According to a *BBC* report, this [legislation criminalises subversion, secession, violence against people and public property](#), and any collusion with foreign entities undermining the national government. It is important to understand the term subversion—‘undermining public authority.’ This means one cannot criticise and question authority.

It has been like this from Ming to Jinping

Tracing back to the existence of censorship from the Song dynasty (960-1279) to date, it is very clear that China does not want to lose control over its people.

The constructed self-censorship in Chinese society shows that truth, criticism, and freedom cannot exist together. The fear of being examined and punished has forced people to restrain their ideas before they emerge. If people are threatened and forced to self-censor, there will be no political participation from their side at any level. Even school classrooms have surveillance cameras and their access is with the party. Now even children have to be conscious of their behaviour. Though we see this aspect of Chinese media as a restriction imposed on its people; on the other hand, it also shows that this is the way the Chinese government has been working on.

Current Regime’s Extreme Censorship Control using Technology

China is creating a digital illiberality with an [emphasis on a rule-based internet](#). Xi Jinping's emphasis on internet sovereignty shows an extensive usage of technologies like Artificial Intelligence, Internet of Things (IoT), and Big-data to control the behaviour of citizens. As already extrapolated in the previous sections, extreme surveillance is used to curb any resentment in action or thought against the party. In 2013, the Supreme People's Court passed a judgement authorising a jail term of up to three years for those who post defamatory posts against the party, spread false news—if [such posts are shared more than 500 times](#). In this highly ubiquitous social media era, getting 500 shares is not a difficult task; individuals will restrict themselves from expressing even a genuine concern owing to fear of the authorities. Further, a 2017 report in the *Wall Street Journal* reported that the party would consider taking a [1 percent stake in the big internet companies](#) like Weibo and Tencent. Such decisions would severely restrict freedom of speech and people would live in constant fear of being nabbed or detained. This situation is much worse in the region of Xinjiang.

Xinjiang and its Orwellian structure

It was the 2009 Urumqi riots which triggered the need for a severe crackdown on the Xinjiang region. The Communist party has started collecting DNA, fingerprints, iris scans and also facial images of all the residents of the region. Officials have declared that they have almost [mapped them to the new Social Credit System \(SCS\)](#). This system collects and quantifies an individual's behaviours such as shopping habits, [social media comments, personal circle, a dutifulness of the citizen](#). It is also mandated that all the residents of XUAR (Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region) have to install a cyber security application called "Cleannet bodyguard". It collects information regarding websites searched, content read, and social media usage. This is done on the [pretext of tackling the three evils](#) of terrorism, ethnic separatism, and religious extremism. In an incident, officials also called for a shared atmosphere having a collective [hatred against the enemies](#). This is very similar to what George Orwell described in his dystopian novel *1984* as hate speech.

Conclusion:

It has to be noticed that the citizens of China (excluding the XUAR region) have voluntarily given up their freedom in return for stability and security. Also, what seems to be a constraint to us might be a normal thing for the Chinese, which is not even worth discussing. Apart from what western scholars talk about, China seems to be very peaceful regarding the censorship of its media. Which takes us back to the questions asked at the very beginning of this article: What has made them so patient? Is it the threat posed by the regime or is being oppressed their psyche? The answer to these questions is that it is both. Further, it has been substantiated from the historical trace of censorship that censorship has been normalised in Chinese society.

Having started the article with Orwell's quotes, it makes sense to wrap up with the same. In order to paint a surreal image of China or its near future, one has to read George Orwell's *1984*. An article in the *Journal of Contemporary China* has also espoused the close

similarities between Orwell's dystopian novel *1984*, and also with the erstwhile German Democratic Republic's intelligence agency, commonly known as *Stasi*. The impact of vague definitions of national security and a total censorship of thoughts and media has caused, in the words of James Leibold, "Husbands to mistrust their wives; sisters their brothers; Uyghurs other Uyghurs; and Party officials one another."

It will not be wrong to say in the words of Alejandro Jodorowski – "*Birds Born in a Cage think*

flying is an illness."

[1] Taken from the Masters dissertation of the author

The views expressed above belong to the author(s).

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