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China's Bad Old Days Are Back

Why Xi Jinping Is Ramping Up Repression

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Disturbing things have been happening in China lately. Hundreds of thousands of Muslim Uighurs have been sent to Orwellian reeducation camps ^[1] in the western province of Xinjiang. A political party in Hong Kong ^[2] has been outlawed despite the city's special status and history of free speech. Teachers in a southern port city were asked to hand over their passports so that closer watch could be kept on their movements. An ailing dissident, the Nobel Prize laureate Liu Xiaobo, was barred from seeking medical treatment abroad. Upon traveling to his native China, the chief of the international crime-fighting organization Interpol vanished, only to reappear in government custody, facing corruption charges. And the list goes on.

As reports of such events trickle out, each may be shocking in its own right but all too easy to dismiss as an outlier to more positive trends. Taken together, however, the dots connect to present a clear—and distressing—picture of China's course under President Xi Jinping. For all its talk of moving forward, the country is in many ways returning to the past, with its officials and leaders displaying a new brazenness in their crackdown. Rounding up five to ten percent of an entire ethnic group, as the government has in Xinjiang, is a method that seems to belong in the last century, not this one.

But these heavy-handed measures have not simply rolled back the reforms and opening of past decades. Beijing is widening the geographic scope of such measures, extending them from its Western border regions into areas that once seemed relatively free by comparison, and employing cutting-edge methods in service of old totalitarian ambitions. What we are witnessing, in short, is not a continuation of China's oppressive status quo but the onset of something alarming and new.

REPRESSION'S NEW FRONTIERS

In the vast western territory of Xinjiang, indigenous opposition to Chinese rule has a long history, as do Chinese efforts to suppress this opposition through controls on movement, speech, and cultural expression. But in the last two years, authorities have taken unprecedented steps to assimilate the region's Uighurs and other ethnic minorities into ethnic Han Chinese culture. The state has built a network of over 180 "transformation through education" camps, in which as many as one million Uighurs and other ethnic minorities have been confined without criminal charges of any sort. Authorities claim that these centers are for vocational and legal training. Former inmates describe a system of military-style discipline and widespread abuses, where prisoners chant party slogans and study Xi Jinping Thought [3]. Meanwhile, authorities have recruited huge numbers of Han Chinese citizens to enter Uighur homes, monitor families, and select individuals for reeducation. Behaviors such as giving up smoking, failing to greet local officials, or setting one's watch to local time reportedly all count as signs of "extremism"—and grounds for indefinite internment. According to local officials, the goal is to eradicate "weeds" and "tumors" that are "infected with ideological illness."

If Xinjiang demonstrates how Beijing's repression is intensifying, Hong Kong indicates how it is spreading to new geographies, even ones without large ethnic minorities. Citizens of semiautonomous Hong Kong have enjoyed a host of civil and political freedoms absent on the Chinese mainland. And yet the Hong Kong National Party, a small organization founded in 2016 that explicitly calls for full independence from Beijing, has been outlawed on the grounds that its beliefs are dangerously subversive. Opposition groups have long been routinely shut down on the Chinese mainland, but for Hong Kong the ban was a stunning first in 21 years of independence from British control. The controversy also stood out for officials' efforts to vilify the HKNP's leaders as "separatists" who, although nonviolent, were no better than "terrorists." In Tibet, Chinese officials have long used this rhetoric to discredit supporters of the Dalai Lama; in Hong Kong, such language is unprecedented.

Meanwhile, foreign journalists traveling to Beijing have long known that their visas may be revoked if their reporting becomes a thorn in the side of officials. This had never happened in Hong Kong—until October, when *Financial Times* Asia editor Victor Mallet had his visa revoked. Authorities refuse to explain the decision, but the obvious explanation is that it was an act of retaliation against Mallet for moderating an event with the head of the just-outlawed Hong Kong National Party at the Hong Kong Foreign Correspondents' Club.

Until recently, authorities did not apply mainland laws within Hong Kong, but this is also changing. At an immigration checkpoint at West Kowloon Station in Hong Kong, from where a high-speed rail line runs to the mainland, for instance, mainland security officials apply mainland rules.

Beijing is exporting pressure elsewhere, too. In 2015, the state began preventing parents in Xinjiang from giving their children names associated with Islam. Now, this type of cultural policing is spreading to the neighboring province of Ningxia, which has traditionally been ruled with a softer hand. In September, authorities in Ningxia announced that they

would rename a local river to strip it of any potential reference to an Islamic past. Because the river's old name, Aiyi, was suspected to allude to A'isha, the wife of the prophet Muhammad, it will now be called Diannong.

No need even to travel to these far-flung provinces on the country's western periphery: in late September, officials called on teachers in the southeastern city of Xiamen to hand over their passports ahead of the October National Day break, preventing them from traveling to nearby Hong Kong or overseas without official permission. This is a tactic known from Tibet and Xinjiang, but it is new in mainland cities on the east coast.

RETURN OF THE PAST

Together these stories, along with others that have emerged in the five years since Xi took power, show that the Chinese state is responding to modern discontents and political tensions with repressive tools it had begun to discard. The country has made massive strides in technology and economic development over the past few decades. On the political front, it is walking in circles.

Xi is no Mao Zedong. Where Mao used mass movements to rile things up, Xi emphasizes stability and order. Mao reviled Confucius as a "feudal" figure whose beliefs had held China back; Xi extolls traditional Confucian values. And yet the past is making some notable comebacks. Reeducation camps, a favorite mechanism of social control in the 1950s and 1960s, had gradually fallen out of use. These days, they are in vogue again. Political prisoners were once barred from going abroad for medical treatment, but by the 1990s, imprisoned dissidents like Wei Jingsheng and Wang Dan were granted medical parole and allowed to leave China. When the late Nobel laureate Liu Xiaobo fell ill with cancer in 2017, Beijing's refusal to let him to seek treatment abroad felt like an ominous throwback to pre-reform times. Xi's predecessors had introduced term limits for the country's leader; Xi came in and dismantled this guardrail. Move aside, Little Red Book—this is the era of Xi Jinping Thought.

The other complete reversal from recent decades is the way techniques once reserved for more tightly controlled parts of the country have migrated to hitherto less tightly controlled regions. Previously, enclaves of relative freedom seemed to be expanding: newspapers in places just across the border from Hong Kong, for instance, began to operate more and more like their counterparts in the former British colony. In some cities in Tibet and Xinjiang, everyday life began to resemble, at least on the surface, life in any other mainland city. Now, by contrast, the flow is in the other direction.

Put together, the rebooting of bad old practices and the eastward migration of mechanisms of control should alarm observers of Chinese politics and calls for a rethinking of much that has been assumed about the overall trajectory of the country since the start of the reform era almost forty years ago.

This is partly a story of economic change. Slowing economic growth has forced the Communist Party to look for new narratives to explain why it deserves to stay in power, and its ability to maintain social stability has emerged as a central selling point. For the same reason, the state's propaganda increasingly draws on themes of ethnic nationalism and pride in Han accomplishments. It is no accident that those suffering the harshest measures belong to non-Han ethnic groups or, in the case of the Hong Kong National

Party, are presented as Han who have become traitors to their ethnicity. These shifts began during the run-up to Xi's rise to the Party leadership in late 2012, four months before he became president. They then accelerated dramatically on his watch, in part because of his personal obsession with order.

The recent crackdowns are also enabled by international factors. It makes a difference that the party has paid a relatively small price abroad for its repressive moves at home. In the past, small liberalizing moves showed a desire in Beijing to avoid or at least minimize pushback from other countries, foreign investors, and international organizations on matters of human rights. Now, Xi and those close to him are less worried, confident that China's wealth and strategic importance will limit any fallout from domestic repression—the same calculus that has emboldened other authoritarian leaders, such as Saudi Arabia's ruling family. Add to this the chaotic state of politics in the United States and Europe, and it is clear why leaders in Beijing assume that they can do with impunity what their predecessors shied away from. Unless leaders elsewhere can muster enough outrage to call out Beijing's transgressions, and unless observers recognize that seemingly separate incidents are part of single wave of repression, don't expect the news coming out of Xinjiang or Hong Kong to change any time soon.

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