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## Defying the Dragon

When **protests** against strict Covid restrictions flared up recently in Red China, they made headline news all around the planet. Because the disease originated there, how the Chinese government deals with it has vital implications for the entire globe. When China sneezes, everybody else better mask up.

Beyond that, however, news from China is important because of the tremendous influence and power of that nation. Due to its long, complex history, civil unrest in China could indicate sweeping changes to come that would reshape the rest of this century.

In modern China, the internet plays a critical role in the state's ruthless control of the country. The Communist Party created a **digital dystopia** more intrusive and widespread than any other. Any protest is remarkable.

Yet their real importance in such a closely monitored society can only be understood within the context of Chinese imperial history.

### The center of civilization

If ever a country is destined to rule the entire world, it might be **China**. It is the most populous, with over **1.4 billion** people, and only Russia is geographically larger. China, along with India, also holds the records for the longest continuous history and government of any civilization anywhere on Earth.

India, however, has only one major land entrance – the **Khyber Pass** – and no exit, and was thus forced to become pluralistic in nature. China was wide open but has always tended towards monolithic rigidity. Perhaps the necessity of harnessing huge numbers of peasants to tame the wild floods of the **Yangtze** and **Yellow River** was responsible.

In fact, the Chinese name for their own country means “**the Middle Kingdom**”. China has always seen itself as the civilized heart of the world, with everyone else as scruffy barbarians lurking enviously about the edges. Their **Great Wall** was as much to keep their subjects within as to keep the hordes without.

While Portugal sent their few tiny ships to scout the way to India in the early Fifteenth Century, China launched **massive fleets** of over 300 enormous 500-foot galleons under **Admiral Zheng He** to dominate the Indian Ocean, gathering tribute from awed natives.

At that time, China could quite easily have established an unrivaled worldwide maritime empire and beaten Europe to the Americas. But they already had the best there was and saw no need for foreigners. When the admiral died, China turned inward to their later regret.

For by the Nineteenth Century, the West achieved technological superiority and was no longer content to **kowtow**. They began to intrude ever more aggressively into China with modern guns, missionaries, and drugs.

The shameful **Opium Wars** that enforced British dope dealing deeply humiliated China. They are still remembered as proof of Western treachery, just as Arabs recall the Crusades. This trauma eventually caused the final collapse of the empire, followed by decades of civil war made horrifically worse by the Japanese invasion and genocidal **war crimes**.

Finally, in 1949, the People's Republic of China was proclaimed. Under Mao Zedong, the Communists further traumatized the nation, first with the so-called **Great Leap Forward**, causing one of the greatest famines in history with tens of millions of casualties, and later with the **Cultural Revolution**, when Mao turned idealistic youth against tradition.

Then, a generation later on, their children sought to reform the system. The protests were crushed under the treads of tanks with the **Tiananmen Square Massacre** on June 4, 1989. To this day, any mention of the event is forbidden on Chinese social media, showing just how much the state still fears the people.

As well they should, for Chinese history is full of corrupt tyrannical dynasties that ultimately fell to improbable popular uprisings.

The current regime suffers from several irreconcilable contradictions at its heart. It is a communist collective to its core, yet to build economic power and keep the people happy, it must rely upon individualistic capitalism. And above all that, the siren song of its mighty imperial past beckons unceasingly.

## Inside the empire

The leaders seem to have recognized their danger, for they have turned the internet from a means of sharing information freely into a state-sponsored tool of espionage, surveillance, **propaganda**, and social control.

Just like their ancestors built the Great Wall, so to the modern Chinese have constructed a **Great Firewall** to keep their netizens safe from outside influences. Like the old Wall, this is a vast array of legal and technical means to monitor, control, and restrict access with the outside world. It is also equipped with special servers facing outwards. This **Great Cannon** can generate huge denial-of-service attacks to flood foreign websites.

Behind the firewall lies the largest **walled garden** of all on the internet, run by the Chinese Communist Party. Within it flourishes gigantic Party-blessed **high-tech enterprises**, homegrown knock-offs of Western Big Tech corporations – everything from Apple and Microsoft to Amazon, Google, and Facebook.

**Censorship** openly dominates all social media, and people must register under their real names. Those who seek information on banned topics may be blocked outright, see cleaned-up search results, or foreign sites might be slowed until they simply time out.

There are **many ways** to deny access, but the long-suffering people have quietly found methods to evade government restrictions, too. So the authorities use everything from fake websites to trap visitors to tools to spot VPNs tunneling through the Great Firewall.

Posting complaints, protests, or sharing certain info is risky, yet more and more continue to do so, knowing that the government

is extremely sensitive to mass discontent. To fight it, officials often employ the **"Fifty-Cent Army"**, an unofficial online legion of cheerleaders for the state, so called as each post earns them 50¢. These trolls swarm all over local social media and have been known to attack overseas Chinese on foreign platforms.

Other internal internet controls are applied through the **Golden Shield Project**, a countrywide database for monitoring the domestic internet. But the most Orwellian aspect of Chinese social control is their **"social credit"** scoring system that they began building across the country in 2014.

This ranks not only people but companies and institutions. The secret scores punish bad behavior, like not paying debts, and rewards positive. But it's tricky – just knowing a person with a low score can lower one's own.

Punishments can include travel bans or not being able to stay at the best hotels. Even slower internet speeds or having one's dog confiscated are also potential penalties.

## Pandemic prison

On top of that, China has suffered almost three years of draconian lockdowns, intrusive testing, plus extensive and continuous monitoring to suppress the coronavirus. The state became a net-driven **panopticon** prison.

Yet their policy of **absolute containment** does not seem to be working, while the constant threat of indefinite lockdowns has worn out the people's patience. They flee from the first sign of new restrictions. The police **search** phones for banned apps and content and so much has been forbidden that people use **blank sheets** of paper as protest signs.

That so many would risk arrest, defying government surveillance and control, threatens Xi Jinping and his cronies even at his moment of **triumph**. But however it turns out, a look at the "Made in China" labels all around shows that China still poses a challenge to us.

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