

Can China be Defined as an Authoritarian State?

Written by Patrick Ervine

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PATRICK ERVINE, FEB 4 2011

The People's Republic of China was formed in 1949 from a country crippled by poverty, internal and external conflict, and has grown into one of today's economic superpowers. In order to answer whether or not China can be defined as an authoritarian state the following issues will be discussed; the definition of an authoritarian state and the parameters within which a state can be defined as authoritarian; a short summary of China's history and the effect it has had on modern China; the argument that China can be defined as an authoritarian state; the argument that China cannot be defined as an authoritarian state and that other features define it instead; and finally, it will be concluded that the China can be defined as an authoritarian state, from a western point of view, however the complex nature of China's political past, the nature of the world modern China was formed in, and the unique way China views its responsibility to its people, ultimately, mean that socialism with Chinese characteristics is a far better way of describing China.

The Oxford English dictionary defines authoritarian as "favouring or enforcing strict obedience to authority at the expense of personal freedom"[1] or "Showing a lack of concern for the wishes or opinions of others; dictatorial"[2]. This definition is a very specific but shallow definition and therefore another definition must be sought. The Encyclopaedia Britannica defines authoritarianism as a:

principle of blind submission to authority, as opposed to individual freedom of thought and action. In government, authoritarianism denotes any political system that concentrates power in the hands of a leader or a small elite that is not constitutionally responsible to the body of the people. Authoritarian leaders often exercise power arbitrarily and without regard to existing bodies of law, and they usually cannot be replaced by citizens choosing freely among various competitors in elections. The freedom to create opposition political parties or other alternative political groupings with which to compete for power with the ruling group is either limited or nonexistent in authoritarian regimes.

Authoritarianism thus stands in fundamental contrast to democracy. It also differs from totalitarianism, however, since authoritarian governments usually have no highly developed guiding ideology, tolerate some pluralism in social organization, lack the power to mobilize the entire population in pursuit of national goals, and exercise that power within relatively predictable limits.[3]

This definition is much more specific than the definition supplied by the Oxford dictionary and goes much further towards understanding what constitutes an authoritarian state. China's political model fits into this definition in a number of key issues. Firstly there is clear evidence that China does not have "freedom of thought and action"[4] as seen in the case of Liu Xiaobo, the political activist who has been a vocal critic of the Chinese regime and who has been imprisoned since 2008 for "inciting subversion of state power"[5], the fact that Chinese citizens were "detained, interrogated and harassed"[6] in the run up to Human Rights Day in 2008 and famously the Tiananmen Square massacre. Secondly, The highest parts of the Chinese leadership cannot be chosen by "citizens choosing freely among various competitors in elections" [7] as the system outlined by the Chinese constitution only has citizens voting at the lowest levels of government, with the members of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress being elected by the National People's congress, this is "the highest organ of state power"[8] and Chinese citizens have no control over its members or its decisions. The Chinese single party political system is another way in which China falls within the bounds of an authoritarian state, as "the freedom to create opposition political

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parties"[9] does not exist, while in the second amendment of the constitution it is implied that China has a multi-party system the rest of the document clearly outlines a system where the Communist Party of China is firmly in charge. The next part of the definition that "authoritarian governments usually have no highly developed guiding ideology"[10] clearly China does not fall into this category as the unique ideology of "socialism with Chinese Characteristics"[11] developed from Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong thought is a very highly developed guiding ideology. The other departure from the encyclopaedia Britannica's definition is the statement that authoritarian governments "lack the power to mobilize the entire population in pursuit of national goals"[12], this clearly does not apply to China as communist China has always been able to mobilise its population, notably during the long march and throughout the Cultural Revolution. From the point of view of this definition China is clearly an authoritarian state however the situation is much more complex and in order to understand China, socialism with Chinese characteristics must be understood. According to the Chinese Government socialism with Chinese characteristics refers to three distinct fronts; the economic fronts where "China sticks to a multi-ownership-oriented basic market economic system, with the public ownership in the dominance." [13]; its "political fronts, China upholds a system of the People's Congress, a system of multiparty cooperation and political consultation, and a system of regional ethnic autonomy." [14]; and culturally "China keeps its socialist value system at the core of social trends, while respecting differences and expanding common grounds." [15]

China's History is very important in understanding why China operates in the way it does. The majority of China's history is dominated by the Imperial era, and for the majority of the period China was ahead of Europe in a number of ways. Feudalism died out in China in 207 B.C.[16] but it lasted until the 14th century in Europe, by the 1500s China had "an unparalleled transport infrastructure"[17] consisting of nearly thirty highways, over fifty main roads and a dense network of canals and rivers. By the thirteenth century China had invented "the compass and sternpost rudder and by the close of the fourteenth century gunpowder and the mechanical clock had been added to the list, all inventions eventually copied by Europe. China also boasted one of the best and most comprehensive bureaucracies in history, by the Northern Song Dynasty the entry exams were as fair as humanly possible; exams were kept in safe rooms, examinees were searched to stop cheating, transcripts were transcribed into identical calligraphy, marked by at least two independent examiners, and the Emperor read the best ones[18]. All of this was backed by severe punishment for abuse of the system,

In 1657 seven imperial examiners found guilty of irregularities were beheaded immediately, their private property was confiscated and 109 of their close relatives were exiled[19]

All of this points to a China that dwarfed European achievement throughout most of history and China is justifiably proud of that, however by the mid 1800s European powers, notably Britain, had clearly surpassed China as shown by the Treaty of Nanjing that forced China to allow opium to be sold throughout China, pay Britain's war costs and ceded Hong Kong to the British Empire[20]. This disastrous treaty was the beginning of the century of humiliation that has defined modern China more than any other period of Chinese history. During this period China was shaken by internal strife, such as the Muslim revolts and the Taiping Rebellion[21]. China was humiliated further with no fewer than twenty-six treaties that allowed foreign powers to control large parts of China without any of the costs of colonisation and occupation. The final humiliation was the invasion of mainland China by Japan and subsequent occupation that lasted until the end of the Second World War in 1945. After the destructive power of the Second World War China was again savaged by civil war, this time between the Nationalists and Communists, eventually the communists were victorious, seizing control of Mainland China while the nationalist leadership fled to Taiwan. Part of the communist victory was delivered on the promise that China would never again experience anything like the century of humiliation again, the memory of that period still haunts China today and it shapes much of modern Chinese politics. Without wishing to oversimplify the situation, Chinese politics today has two very important historical features, nostalgia for the greatness of the Chinese imperial period and an extremely strong desire to avoid any future repeat of the century of humiliation.

This part of the essay will detail the argument that China is indeed an authoritarian state. China is still seen as untrustworthy in the West, with the British Security Service listing China and Russia as "of greatest concern"[22] showing that while China's economic ties with western powers are extremely strong the political relationships between them are not as strong. While this is not direct evidence of Chinese authoritarianism it is interesting to note

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the West's distrust of China. As has previously been mentioned according to the definition of authoritarian put forward by the encyclopaedia Britannica China is, strictly speaking, an authoritarian state with a government that doesn't allow freedom of thought or action, places power into the hands of a small élite that is not democratically responsible to the citizens of China, wields power arbitrarily, cannot be replaced by citizens "choosing among various competitors in elections"[23], and does not allow alternative political parties or political groupings to compete for power. There is plenty of evidence for the Chinese government not allowing freedom of thought and action, however there is one example that stands out above the rest and that is the Tiananmen square massacre in 1989 where hundreds, maybe thousands, of students, locals and other supporters[24] were killed by the Chinese government in their attempt to disperse the crowds. The structure of the Chinese government shows how the communist leadership is not democratically responsible to the Chinese people, the people have no say over the membership of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, the "highest organ of state power"[25], nor do the people have control over the National People's Congress, the body that votes on the membership of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress. Evidence of the Chinese government's arbitrary use of power has come relatively recently in the case of the attack on Google in China that, according to diplomatic cables, was ordered, planned and initiated by Li Changchun after he used the search engine and found articles that criticised him and his family[26] and was "100% political" and had "nothing to do with removing Google... as a competitor to Chinese search engines"[27]. The lack freedom to create alternative political groupings in which to compete for power is another clear area where China falls into the authoritarian group, as China is a mono party government and while in the constitution mention is made of a multi-party system there is only one party in reality and no other groups can compete for power. Another negative for the Chinese political system is the fact that voters have no official system of contact with their representative.

Despite all the evidence that China is an authoritarian power there are a number of factors that show that the situation is not as clear cut as the earlier definitions of authoritarianism would lead one to believe. The encyclopaedia Britannica's definition of authoritarianism does not completely fit with China's model of "socialism with Chinese characteristics"[28] and these disparities will be discussed here. The encyclopaedia Britannica states that authoritarian governments rarely have a highly developed ideology however China clearly does have a very highly developed ideology. China's backwardness at the beginning of the twentieth century meant that there was no basis for the spontaneous class revolution that Marx stated was the way for communism to take hold so instead Lenin's view that the communist party would have to actively lead the revolution was favoured, resulting in Marxism-Leninism. Also the fact that the Chinese peasants were actively hostile to the idea of collectivisation, a key idea in the Soviet style of communism, meant that Mao had to develop a system that redistributed the land and also respected property rights and lowered taxes[29]. This unique ideology has only grown more complex over time, particularly with the reforms of Deng Xiaoping that have, so far, successfully integrated capitalism with Chinese communism.

An important factor in Chinese politics is fear. As was previously discussed, the century of humiliation is still an open wound to the Chinese communist party and the Chinese people. The fear of a return to that period in Chinese history is a powerful motivating factor for Chinese politicians in pursuit of their foreign policy goals. Under Communist leadership China has once again risen to become one of the most powerful states on earth, particularly economically, and this makes the communist government very attractive to a large number of Chinese citizens as they still remember the century of humiliation that the communist party seemed to save them from. Chinese politician's desire to avoid any humiliation at all often makes China look overly aggressive, for example when China fired rockets into the Taiwan Strait in protest over the United States inviting the President of the Republic of China to the United State for an official visit. China is also much more democratic than Soviet Russia ever was. A system of indirect democracy is at work in China, while Chinese citizens have no direct say in the elections in the national people's congress, local peoples congresses of provinces or the army, and local people's congresses of cities that are divided into districts, they do have a direct say in the election of officials in cities that are not divided into districts and the local people's congresses of townships. In areas that voters do have a say the Chinese system is very fair, there are a number of candidates for each post, the campaigns are all paid for equally out of government funds so each campaign is equally funded, a much fairer system than that in the UK or US. In China suffrage is universal[30] and women's rights are protected specifically in the constitution.

In conclusion, China is not a democratic state by any stretch of the imagination, it is sometime brutal, has a system of

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democracy that is a long way from the democracy of western states such as that seen in Great Britain, is frequently guilty of suppressing freedom of thought and action, has a small elite in power that is not accountable to the Chinese public, and does not allow other political parties to challenge the communist party for leadership of China. All of these things mean that China can, strictly speaking, be defined as authoritarian and there is no way of getting around that, however there is evidence that China is not the evil regime that it is often made out to be in western press. China's history is extremely important, the memory of imperial China's greatness and the century of humiliation at the hands of foreign powers makes China feel the need to be seen as strong to the outside world in order to avoid a repeat of the century of humiliation. The democratic systems that are in place continue China's tradition of fairness, a number of candidates are selected and then voters are allowed to make their selection anonymously, individual campaigns are paid for out of government funds so each campaign is equally funded, suffrage in China is completely universal with a minimum age of 18. Equal rights are also not a problem in China, with regards to women, as their rights are enshrined in the constitution. Overall China can be defined as an authoritarian state however, socialism with Chinese characteristics is a far better way of describing China's unique system of government and economy.

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