

BRIEF REMARKS ON CHINA

From Latin America

Silvia Mercado

Foreword by:
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With Xi Jinping's rise to power, the period of limited freedom ended. His regime adopted a much more coercive approach: he crushed the remaining civil society groups that still resisted, launched brutal crackdowns in Tibet, and lashed out violently against the Uighur minority in Xinjiang by imprisoning nearly one million people in re-education camps. In both Tibet and Xinjiang, the crackdown was fueled by religious motives.

FOREWORD

Siegfried Herzog,

Director of the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Latin America

China's history over the past 100 years has been extraordinary. Following the fall of the empire in 1912 came a civil war in the 1920s and 1930s, followed by the brutal invasion of Japan amid the backdrop of World War II. The civil war continued from 1945 to 1949, culminating in the victory of the Communist Party led by Mao Tse-Tung over the entire country, except for the island of Taiwan, where the Nationalists managed to survive.

China became an extremely violent communist dictatorship that famously brought about a famine with the "Great Leap Forward" — a political decision that brought the death of 15-55 million people in the 1950s, and, on top of that, a wave of terror and destruction driven by the Cultural Revolution.

The country took a much more peaceful and constructive direction under Deng Xiao-ping, who came to power in 1978 after Mao's death. Xiaoping opened the economy to private entrepreneurship, leading China into an explosion of economic energy. At the same time, however, the party continued its monopoly of power, and the Tiananmen Square democratic movement was crushed with tanks, resulting in the obliteration of hundreds of democrats. Still, the political system saw some minor changes: new limits for party leadership were set, new spaces for civil society were opened, and a slightly more open discussion of political issues was encouraged.

With Xi Jinping's rise to power, the period of limited freedom ended. His regime adopted a much more coercive approach: he crushed the remaining civil society groups that still resisted, launched brutal crackdowns in Tibet, and lashed out violently against the Uighur minority in Xinjiang by imprisoning nearly one million people in re-education camps. In both Tibet and Xinjiang, the crackdown was fueled by religious motives.

Externally, he doubled down on his aggressive policy-making by shredding Hong Kong's freedoms, in violation of international treaties on the city's status, while pursuing a threatening policy of militarization against Taiwan.

This brief historical overview shows that the hope many held for a possible liberalization of China's dictatorship never came to fruition. Under Xi Jinping's leadership, the regime we are seeing today is even more repressive, more aggressive, and much less transparent. It is certainly not as bad as in the times of Mao's China. But Mao's China was more isolated and much less powerful. Today China is the second strongest economy in the world, plus it has significant military power.

In recent years, it strengthened its alliance with Russia with the aim of challenging liberal democracies and supporting authoritarian governments. It also increased its investments and international cooperation, especially under its Belt-and-Road initiative to create a new "silk road" with transport and trade connections in the Eurasian area.

To secure access to raw materials and agricultural products, it also invested in Africa and Latin America, mainly through loans. For many governments, this form of “cooperation” proved attractive, since China did not impose requirements or demand transparency in the contracts. In fact, it did not demand much in the way of accounting, environmental care or democracy. But it did concern itself with demanding market interest rates and thus expecting countries to pay their debts.

If they cannot pay, China can potentially take control of important infrastructure hubs, as it did in Sri Lanka — a particularly concerning example, given that the Rajapakse brothers’ government, heavily supported by China, ended in political and economic chaos. It is a situation that shows how Chinese cooperation in many countries is fostering authoritarian and anti-democratic tendencies. And it should be of concern to all those liberals who are working to build societies around institutions, the rule of law, human rights, the market economy, and democracy.

China is also trying to sway discourse in various countries to discredit liberal democracies, promoting the theme of national sovereignty as opposed to universal human rights and, with its Confucius Institutes, steering and censoring academic research about China.

Students who criticize China’s policies or historical narrative are denied visas for study visits, a situation that significantly undermines academic freedom. Issues such as the repression of Uighurs, Tibetans, Falung Gong adherents or Christian churches are being censored.

At the same time, China intends to exclude Taiwan from all international forums and continues to threaten the island with an imminent invasion. The citizens of Taiwan clearly want to live in a democratic country and have their freedoms and rights protected, and the international community would rather not see China assert itself through armed force. Russia’s imperialist invasion war against Ukraine clearly shows us that the upheavals continue all over the world. Taiwan’s strategic positioning as a semiconductor producer would mean devastating consequences for the entire world if it comes to a war.

Those are some of the reasons why liberals in Latin America should learn more about China — the historical trajectory of its political system, its communication strategy, its influence in our region, its drivers, and its risks. The growing rivalry between China and the United States will face Latin America with increasingly more decisions as to its economic and political stance.

Deepening our understanding of this global phenomenon has now become a necessity. This publication represents an initial contribution to this strategic conversation.

Introduction

“The time in which the nation could be bullied and abused was gone forever. Only socialism can save China, and only socialism with Chinese characteristics can develop China.”

Xi Jinping, July 1, 2021.

That episode, the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), is perhaps one of the first events that motivated me to research, write and make some noise about China... to think about the 100 years of the Chinese Communist Party — and about all that communism means. Meanwhile, China has grown more and more powerful, more and more present, closer and deeper. More than initial musings, they were perhaps initial concerns that sought to be brought to light, discussed, or at least shared. That is how the first articles emerged — by the end of 2021, still in the midst of the pandemic — far from imagining that in early 2022 Russia would invade Ukraine and China would gain enormous geopolitical prominence.

It was no great surprise that, since we were on the subject, there was speculation about a possible Chinese invasion of Taiwan. By then, the sieges and military exercises threatening war against the island were already constantly reported in the international press; What did not seem to be so evident all of a sudden was the stealthy advance of China in Latin America, with allies within governments and partners in industry, through loans, contracts, arrangements, scholarships, diplomatic visits... gaining ground even in universities and in the narrative of intellectuals, taking advantage of the anti-American sentiments that seem to be part of the Latin American DNA.

Certainly, the ways of the Chinese Communist Party and its soft power strategy proved to be efficient: Latin America opened the doors to its presence, if not influence, and does not cease to celebrate it as “cooperation.” It is around this concern that the following pages present issues that have to do with the human rights situation in China, censorship — naturally — the use of technology to control citizens, and other issues that should be raising our concern. The following articles are intended to raise the alarm that the Chinese Communist Party is closer than we would like to accept.

Silvia Mercado.



China: The End of Its Soft Power?



In recent months, China-related news has been all about tension, invasion, and even war. It is at its worst moment in decades as far as its global image is concerned. The country's *soft power* strategy, which for years was intended to build trust and garner support for Chinese interests, may not be enough, considering its strong ties with Russia and its potential (and perhaps imminent) attack on the island of Taiwan.

China did an about-face on its relations with the rest of the world most conspicuously after the death of Mao Zedong (1976) and the end of the Cold War (1976-1978). It undertook determined efforts toward economic development and focused its mission around the concept of “Pacific Ascent,” the official Chinese government's policy that sought to persuade the world that its political, economic, and military power did not pose a threat to international peace and security. But most importantly, it adopted a diplomatic strategy known as soft power: operating in the perception of the other. Joseph S. Nye used an interesting metaphor to describe it in his article “*Soft power: the evolution of a concept*” (2021), which could be paraphrased as follows: while hard power means pushing, soft power means attracting. The strategy was aimed at placing China on the multilateral agenda, creating bilateral ties (state diplomatic visits and direct visits abroad), presenting the Asian giant as a splendid provider of infrastructure projects — think of the *Belt and Road Initiative* (BRI), also known as the New Silk Road, the Chinese mega-project that has already involved over 70 countries — and promoting cultural approaches with particular care and attention, including the Confucius Institutes network.

Who would ever question the image of the wise Chinese thinker? And Why would anyone question the selflessness and generosity of China's mission to offer programs to make its culture and language known to the world? At first glance, it is an offer to be celebrated, of course. And what would be the difference with the Alliance Française, the Goethe Institute, or the British Council? Basically, it is the fact that Confucius Institutes — active since 2004 and already deployed in at least 162 countries with over 500 subsidiaries — are embedded within universities as “extension centers,” allowing them to provide staff wages, research grant funds, faculty travel expenses, and study trips to China. This all sounds wonderful, but it should not go unnoticed who is behind it and with what intentions. Official sponsorship of the program comes from the Ministry of Education of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), so it would be naive to play down an underlying political agenda to improve China's public image. It would be worth recalling what Xi Jinping announced in his early speeches: “We should deepen and better elucidate China's excellent features.

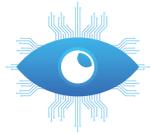
“Traditional culture, and make greater efforts to creatively transform and develop traditional Chinese virtues, promoting a cultural spirit that will transcend time and borders...”

[Plenary Session of the 18th CPC Central Committee 2014].

So, again, why should we be wary of this cultural, almost spiritual, endeavor?

It is clearly not a matter of questioning beliefs, traditions, customs, or artistic manifestations, but rather what China — and especially Xi Jinping — wants to hide at all costs. For example, the crimes against humanity against Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities, already denounced by *Human Rights Watch* in a report that documented a series of crimes ranging from mass arbitrary detentions, enforced disappearances, permanent surveillance, and separation of families to sexual violence and other atrocities, or even the trafficking of organs extracted from prisoners of conscience killed by the regime with the most comfortable impunity... There are plenty of serious issues that Beijing wishes to cover up. Hence the concern is that the network of Confucius Institutes may not only infringe on academic freedom but also bring direct propaganda to universities. A new generation — on which the future and global power will depend — is being formed in the midst of bias and misinformation, and even censorship. If the next generation of scholars, professionals, and intellectuals receive scholarships, favors, and funding from the Chinese regime, there will be less possibility for criticism and, of course, freedom of thought.

Today (August 2), upon the visit of U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi to Taiwan, China's Foreign Ministry reported that military operations will be conducted around the island and issued an explicit threat that "Those who play with fire will be burned." It seems that Xi Jinping's China is about to show its true colors and *hard power*.



The Cultural Surveillance Chip

It is comforting to think that we are far from living under surveillance and control systems like they do in China. "Can you imagine? It's completely different over there. The government there uses artificial intelligence to track you down at all times. They put chips on the children's uniforms to monitor whether they fall asleep... It's something else, like science fiction." And that's it. We change the subject. But... are we really that far away?

According to a Comparitech report, *Surveillance camera statistics*: which cities have the most CCTV cameras?¹, 16 of the 20 most monitored cities in the world (based on the number of cameras per 1,000 inhabitants) are in China. The report also notes that there are already 770 million cameras in use worldwide, and 54% are in China. On paper, all these devices are designed to prevent crime and monitor traffic. So, as far as their purpose is concerned, that is no different from what we see in any other capital city in Latin America: cameras wherever possible. Only in China there are more of them, and, what is more, many are linked to a centralized facial recognition system.

The Chinese government is leading the way in using technology for personal data collection in combination with algorithms that serve its authoritarian goals. That approach is helping it to refine its "social credit system" (SCS), which will be aimed at monitoring and "improving" its citizens' behavior.

¹ <https://www.comparitech.com/vpn-privacy/the-worlds-most-surveilled-cities/>

How will that work out? With some of its phases already implemented, this system is not very different from any other credit rating system in any bank in our continent, except that in China, “the system” is intended to go a little bit further. In addition to client financial data, it would have more intrusive access to personal data on people’s lives, including their purchase history, their social interactions, and their political activities, to name a few. They are planning to use the SCS to give each citizen a “score” that will vary as a function of their behavior and will rely on a reward-and-punishment system. Actually, there are already blacklists of individuals whose credit has been reduced “because of their bad behavior,” and that comes along with a number of restrictions on things like getting a plane ticket or even a medical appointment².

There is no denying that we are talking about a flagrant violation of individual liberties and the right to privacy and dignity of each person. The Chinese government, however, argues that it is about “promoting honesty among citizens” and, of course, “ending corruption.” That is a slogan Xi Jinping has used strategically since he came to power, knowing that honesty is considered a chief moral virtue in the Chinese culture — and that preserving one’s reputation and social position is vital. And the cultural rhetoric behind the social credit system certainly seems to be effective, as it taps into the need for trust and portrays itself as a solution to the dishonesty crisis — just as any other social engineering and control system that offers, or rather “guarantees,” security can be.

³In an article entitled “*We’re Just Data: Exploring China’s Social Credit System in Relation to Digital Platform Ratings Cultures in Westernised Democracies*,” Karen Li Xan Wong and Amy Shields Dobson, from Australia’s Curtin University, warned that: “Although there are no systems as comprehensive as China’s SCSP being implemented in Western democratic countries anytime soon, similar cultures and structures are already in place. Credit score systems such as the FICO scores are ⁴already mandated and in use.”

Going without any accountability, Latin American governments are rushing to acquire surveillance technology produced abroad (typically in China), obviously giving the excuse that it will help them to ensure increased security. The report ⁵*Surveillance Tech in Latin America* notes that arbitrariness and lack of transparency in the use of these technologies pose a grave threat to human rights, giving “authorities the capacity to identify, follow, single out and track people everywhere they go, undermining our rights to privacy and data protection, the right to free assembly and association [...]”. It also notes, “The COVID-19 pandemic has now given governments a new excuse to deploy dangerous surveillance tools in the name of public safety, even as they fail to protect human rights.”

We can see then that, in reality, China is far away only in terms of geographical distance. When it comes to cultural foundations, basic infrastructure, and even access to technologies for control and surveillance systems, we are closer than we would like to imagine. There is certainly a *delay* in terms of the sophistication and efficiency of those systems, and in the openly more authoritarian way they are implemented there — it still needs to be kept under wraps here. But the cultural “chip” by which we are willing to consent to be surveilled and which makes us clamor for security is already ingrained in us.

2 China categorizes good and bad citizens using a social credit system: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pZu9N-3yn_M
3 Social Credit System Program
4 FICO is a key type of credit score used in a loan applicant’s report
5 <https://www.accessnow.org/cms/assets/uploads/2021/09/vigilancia-latam-espa.pdf>

Challenging China



Comments and insights on *Challenging China: Smart Strategies for Dealing with China in the Xi Jinping Era*, the most recent work by Sam Kaplan. A key book to understand China and its expansionist strategy

We should be worried, the new world power order may depend on China, or rather the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). In fact, we are a little late in the face of a situation that should have triggered alerts perhaps since 2012, when Xi Jinping assumed power with a clearly authoritarian profile and an expansionist agenda. This is one of the reference points around which Sam Kaplan, author of *Challenging China* [Tuttle, 2021], offers a comprehensive study to understand the geopolitical context and analyze strategies to deal with China in the Xi Jinping era.

To be clear: Kaplan is not being apocalyptic. He is simply noting that China has more power than it did 30 years ago and is naturally gaining ground and influence, as it possesses the size and the economic structure to do so. By pointing out that China is seeking a change in the global order, he means that the CCP's government intends the world to serve its interests and adopt its authoritarian practices. There is no hiding the fact that in recent years the human rights situation has become increasingly alarming for activists and for any citizen who is denied freedom of assembly or, most certainly, free Internet navigation. Although Xi Jinping had indeed already warned on this point that the Internet would not be a space exempt from regulation or control, the fact is that censorship has become more radical since 2019, as the fear of free information has made international news almost impossible to access.

Another point that the author discusses with great clarity is China's economic growth. But first, he makes it clear that the economy is not like a pie but rather like a bakery. "If China continues to grow economically, it does not mean there are fewer slices for Americans or the rest of the world. It means there are more pies for the rest of us to eat, or cakes, pastries, and torts for those not into pies." It stands to reason that China's economic growth represents a benefit for the world and that such an economic bonanza has enabled it to establish itself as a benchmark for innovation, artificial intelligence, and biotechnology. The issue is not in questioning such developments but in anticipating what the CCP can do with them, considering that its political agenda often comes before ethics and respect for any kind of limit.

Jumping into one of the central questions raised in the book — what makes China a problem for the world? — Kaplan points to its aggressive international policy, its authoritarian government, and its no-less-than-warlike economic approach. The author then notes that an aggravating factor that adds to this combination is that China's prominence appears to be proportional to the decline of the United States in the international leadership stage. He even more pointedly surprises us by claiming that China is the future and the United States is the past: "We are in the Asian century. The 20th century may have been the American one, but that's already 20 years in the rearview mirror. It is China's economic success that empowers it to export its ruling values. China's economic success is why parts of the rest of the world seem willing to adopt the China way."

And yet, despite outlining the advantages of the Asian giant, overall, the book makes an invitation to think with intelligence and a sense of perspective. Kaplan begins at home. He argues that the U.S. must be and prove to be more successful and lead by example in every way. It must also seek and cement alliances, especially with those with whom it shares concerns, like the European Union, which has also condemned intellectual property theft, a lack of transparency in contracts, and, more broadly, the protectionist policies that make the relationship with China very difficult. Also, we must not fail to take notice of China's unpopularity. The world today has become ever more distrustful of Xi Jinping. Why? Because every day he stands out as the number one aggressor of human rights.

On a more optimistic note, the author also invites us to realize that China's growing repression is a symptom of weakness, not strength. If its leaders had full confidence in its system and in their ability to maintain power, there would be no need to censor the Internet, imprison human rights defenders, build a burial system for 2 million Uyghurs, destroy Tibet's cultural heritage, and many other measures that are no less cowardly.

Challenging China will not be easy. Unlike other authoritarian regimes, it has the money and the size. And it is only too eager to assert its influence and "[spread] a China-friendly world order to supplant the liberal rules-based order." Against that backdrop, the last thing the West should do — or anyone on the side of freedom, for that matter — is to demean the democratic system, under which we do have respect for human rights, laws, and trade rules. On the contrary, we should redouble our efforts to get China to adopt market rules, both to live in harmony with the international community and to ensure a promising future for the next generations of its own people.



Is Peace in the Hands of China?



"Look like the innocent flower, but be the serpent under it"

William Shakespeare

China is seeking to escape any blame for the dramatic situation in Ukraine. While it professes to be neutral, condemns violence, and maintains that the solution lies in dialogue, it refuses to refer to the Russian attack as an invasion and instead chooses to speak of diplomacy, collaboration, and peace. Such pro-Russian pseudo-neutrality can hardly gloss over the fact that, a few weeks ago, Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin posed in a photo that would deserve no other title than "together defying the West" after pledging a "friendship without limits" to each other and "no forbidden areas of cooperation."

But now China wants to talk peace and let time pass, evading the demands from the international community to make good use of its enormous influence for once. As some analysts cited in *The Economist* have suggested, the fear is that China might have decided to "sit back and watch the disaster." Indeed, China may be hoping that the wait will work in its favor: in the short term, to capitalize on the blockades and sanctions against Russia (as its only major ally, China can catch hold of both its exports and its imports), and in the long term, to wait for the right time to offer to rebuild the shattered cities in Ukraine.

Meanwhile, Xi Jinping's government is stalling and playing the game by staging unhelpful diplomatic stunts, including the call that his Foreign Minister Wang Yi made to his Ukrainian counterpart, Dmytro Kuleba, to tell him that "China stands ready to play a constructive role in this regard in an *objective position*", when in fact what would be expected of China is an official communication from Mr. Xi to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky offering to negotiate a cease-fire with Russia. That would indeed be doing something for peace, even if it were already a belated response. If China had actually wanted peace, it would have raised its powerful voice before or at least immediately after the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

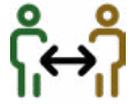
The fact is that, as of this date [April 7], the latest report published by @UNHumanRights on social media recorded "3,893 civilian casualties in [the] context of Russia's armed attack against Ukraine: 1,626 killed, including 132 children; 2,267 injured, including 197 children, mostly caused by shelling and airstrikes. [The] actual toll is much higher." It goes without saying how cruel and unjust this state of affairs is, especially considering that there are already indications of potential war crimes and genocide as civilian bodies have been found scattered in the streets and mass graves. This situation led the United Nations General Assembly to vote this Thursday, April 6, to suspend Russia from its Human Rights Council over reports of "gross and systematic violations and abuses of human rights" committed during the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Only 24 countries voted against the resolution (93 votes in favor and 58 abstentions). Along with Belarus, Syria, Cuba, and Nicaragua, among others, China voted against it.

And that was to be expected. How else could the world's authoritarian regimes have shown greater complicity? Officials from the Chinese Communist Party condemned this new sanction against Russia, claiming that it will only set a "dangerous new precedent" and that China resolutely opposes "politicizing and instrumentalizing the human rights issue."

The question is what kind of moral authority would grant China a license to speak on "the issue," considering that the human rights record in that country is among the worst in the world: harassment, persecution and intimidation, unfair trials, censorship, mass and arbitrary detentions, torture, and other abuses are part of the repertoire of denunciations constantly made by activists and lawyers, who unfortunately find very little echo of their demands.

The interests and ambitions of authoritarianism cannot be reconciled with peace. As Taras Kuzio, a British scholar and policy expert, claimed in an interview with the BBC, most likely "China is very happy. The decline of Russia means its rise. They share a position against the West, but the difference between the two countries is that China is a power on the rise, and Russia is a power on the decline. And the difference is also that China has a really strong military. Russia, no."

Mexico Practicing Social Distancing with China



Mexico and China recently celebrated 50 years of diplomatic relations, a Golden Wedding Anniversary celebration that could not have taken place on any other day than — drum roll — Valentine’s Day. As was to be expected, of course, there was plenty of feasting, *mole*, and chop suey, not to mention the speeches that spared no words to praise “the deep fraternity between the two peoples,” their historical and cultural ties, etc. But there were also some comments that, albeit spoken in a low voice, sounded somewhat like a reproach.

Much of the echo produced by this landmark event revolved around the opportunities that are being lost, or as a Colmex professor pointed out, “Mexico has not been sufficiently willing to enter into China.” Along the same lines, several scholars and diplomats saw the event as an opportunity to express their concern about “everything that is not being taken advantage of” in its trade relations with the Asian giant, which accounts for over one-third of the current global GDP growth.

But the truth is that Mexico and China do maintain significant and substantial economic exchanges. Indeed, trade flow between the two countries amounted to a record 100 billion dollars in 2021. Furthermore, while there is no denying that China is Mexico’s second-largest trading partner — only surpassed by the U.S. — there is also an evident imbalance: “Imports from China amount to around 90.5 billion dollars, while exports only amount to 8.4 billion dollars.”⁶ This means that Mexico is running an \$82.1 billion deficit.” However, reproaches around this controversy seem to revolve more around the implications of China being the partner “second only to the U.S.” and not so much around the imbalance.

The point is that much attention is being given to the position Mexico has decided to play. Thus the question is: Could Mexico have missed the opportunity to establish itself as a convenient ally of China, or was it that it preferred to preserve its relationship with its brothers in North America?

Mexico owes its economic and social stability to the care it has taken in playing its cards in the foreign trade game. Keeping peace and harmony around the USMCA [the free trade agreement between Canada, the United States, and Mexico] allowed Mexico, for example, to weather the global contraction caused by the pandemic in a not-so-catastrophic way.⁷ Meanwhile, President Andrés Manuel López Obrador’s proposal to “create a North American front to rival China’s expansion” was not just a catchy phrase from his traditional *mañaneras*,⁸ especially when he said — with particular forcefulness — that “if China continues to grow at the same rate as in the past 30 years, it will dominate 64.8% of the world market by 2051, while North America will only dominate 4% – 10%,” a circumstance that he described as “unacceptably disproportionate.” Many things could be said about López Obrador, but we cannot help but agree with him on this point. His projections coincide with what several expert sources have been warning: If appropriate measures are not taken soon, China’s economy will become the largest in the world within the next 10-15 years.

6 [Mexico-China trade to reach a record \\$100 billion in 2021](#)

7 [Comerciar o resistir: medio siglo de relaciones México-China](#) | América economía

8 *Mañaneras* is the popular name for the daily press conferences given by Mexico’s President.

But it is not only the Mexican government that has shown a clear preference for economic integration with its northern neighbors. Mexican business people have also not risked exploring the Chinese market. Furthermore, we must also consider the fact that, according to Forbes magazine, “with the entry into force of the Trade Agreement between Mexico, the United States, and Canada (USMCA) in 2020, the barriers for Chinese companies to establish themselves in Mexico in order to export to the large North American market have been raised.”

Will Mexico resist the temptation to take its relationship with China to another level? China will not let up the pressure, as its goal of building a “Lachina America” is not too far off. In 2021 alone, the total value of trade between China and Latin America and the Caribbean increased by 41.1% compared with 2020. These unprecedented figures should make us think about all that is being compromised along the way. Hence the importance of having countries that remain firm and cautious.



Censorship means censorship everywhere, including in China



This article was originally intended to polemicize against the gross cutting and editing that the Chinese censors made of the ending of the 1999 film “Fight Club.” In the Chinese edition, not only did the narrator (Edward Norton) fail to discover that Tyler Durden (Brad Pitt) was a product of his schizophrenia, but also — as per the Chinese epilogue — Tyler was committed to a mental institution for psychiatric treatment and later released in 2012. The idea was to discuss the level of ridiculousness reached by censors when they removed the magnificent final scene where the explosives that destroy the skyscrapers are detonated in order to replace it with a black screen with a note to viewers saying that the police “rapidly figured out the whole plan and arrested all criminals, successfully preventing the bomb from exploding.”

But we actually changed course. As it turns out, exactly 15 days after “Fight Club” premiered in its censored version, the Tencent Video platform — the most popular streaming service in China — managed to reinstate the original ending. We might say: It’s a happy ending, Internet users “succeeded in winning a battle against censorship,” or even “the people have been heard.” But this is China we are talking about, a country whose government has stood out as the number one abuser of Internet freedom (*Freedom on the Net*, 2019). It would be a bit naive.

Evidently, “Fight Club” is not the first film to be “adapted” for Chinese audiences. Other examples include “Bohemian Rhapsody” (2018), a movie about the life of Freddie Mercury that was also cut by at least ten scenes under the excuse of “sensitivity” regarding HIV and homosexual relationships. What is important is to note two related concerns: the fact that China’s censorship is no longer seen as a problem — and it is even a way of understanding and establishing a relationship with the Asian giant — and the fact that Western producers are willing to embrace it as an opportunity cost.

Today, China is clearly one of the world's leading film markets — and that means so many millions of dollars — but seeing the acceptance of such gross distortion of stories only to conform to a government's standards, or worse, seeing even Hollywood actors subordinate themselves and go as far as publicly apologizing to them, is just shameful. It might sound like an exaggeration, but here are the examples: John Cena from "Fast & Furious" had to apologize in Mandarin for referring to Taiwan as a country rather than as a "part" of China, as the regime likes to say; Sharon Stone also had to apologize for making personal statements regarding the Chinese government's attitude towards Tibet; Marvel Studios decided to get ahead of things with the 2016 film Doctor Strange, casting a white Tibetan woman (Tilda Swinton) lest they offend China and jeopardize the screening of the film in its millions of movie theaters. These decisions obviously have more to do with numbers than with ethical considerations or concerns about respect for human rights — the kind of concerns that both Hollywood and Disney often feel urged to show off by suddenly adopting inclusive moral roles and promoting diversity.

"Today, China is clearly one of the world's leading film markets — and that means so many millions of dollars — but seeing the acceptance of such gross distortion of stories only to conform to a government's standards, or worse, seeing even Hollywood actors subordinate themselves and go as far as publicly apologizing to them, is just shameful."

But as we are still following the trend of coexisting with hypocrisy, let us get back to the controversy over "Fight Club," which, as we already mentioned, was grossly cut and censored for its release on streaming platforms and then "benevolently reinstated" as a result of the barrage of criticism from Internet users. It certainly seems odd that we are only now beginning to hear complaints from China on social media. We cannot help but conjecture how easy it might be to distract people with smoke screens and exhaust valves. The risk lies in the fact that little precedents such as this one seem to be trying to solve the problem by using the problem itself as means. But we cannot lose sight of the fact that the actual elephant in the room is, and will never cease to be, censorship, as censorship means censorship here and there and in China. To censor is to remove, cut, modify, mutilate, limit, or simply and plainly ban something. That is why there is so much concern about China today. The government there not only restricts access to the Internet but also monitors its users and controls its population in all aspects of their lives.



China: Sportswashing and Human Rights

While we will most likely not be keeping a close eye on the upcoming Winter Olympics to be held in February, it should be of interest to us that the host of this multi-sport event will be China, the world champion in human rights violations..

We should start by considering one fact: hosting the Olympic Games or a football World Cup is extremely expensive, with budgets reaching outrageous levels and becoming grossly excessive when public resources are involved. For example, according to MUY Negocios y Economía magazine, both the South Korea 2018 Winter Olympics and the Brazil 2016 Olympics cost around 13.2 billion euros, and the 2020 Tokyo Olympics reportedly cost no less than 15.4 billion dollars. Needless to say, there are powerful interests at play here, and while we wish they were purely economic, the truth is that they often involve perverse political interests seeking to use sports to whitewash crime records and human rights violations. This is known as sportswashing, an expression that refers to the act of using sports competitions as a form of “reputation laundering” — which has become relatively widespread in various disciplines and contexts. It happens in major football leagues, boxing matches, tennis tournaments, and, more recently, in Formula One races, as was recently the case in Bahrain, with Amnesty International calling attention to the murky human rights situation in the country as well as in other Middle Eastern countries. But never mind those distant cases, we cannot forget about the case of the 1978 World Cup in Argentina, at the height of the military dictatorship, when the revelry around the goals helped to conceal all the torture, assassination, and enforced disappearances.

Notably, two major sporting events will be taking place in 2022, and we must remain vigilant: the World Cup in Qatar, to be held in November, and the Winter Olympics, to be held in Beijing in February. Qatar is still months away, but we must take the opportunity to condemn the abuse of migrant workers in the construction of stadiums and echo the denunciations already made by top football players like Toni Kroos, a German player for Real Madrid, who once said in a podcast: “Immigrant workers are subjected to days without rest under torrid 50-degree heat. They suffer from insufficient nutrition, without drinking water and [working] in crazy temperatures.”

And if we talk about the Games in Beijing, we have to be aware that it is China, which is a big deal. The Asian giant urgently needs to appear as a charming host to raise the profile of Xi Jinping, whose administration is being accused of committing crimes against humanity against Uighurs and other Turkic Muslims in the north-western Xinjiang region, according to recent reports by *Human Rights Watch*.

The encouraging news is that the world is not entirely apathetic. The United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, and Japan — finally — have announced a diplomatic boycott in protest of the human rights violations reported in China. This move arose as an initiative led by President Joe Biden, who announced in December that the United States would not send an official delegation to the sporting event in Beijing — which does not prevent U.S. athletes from competing, nor the athletes from the countries that joined the boycott.

It is certainly a significant political gesture, even coming from leaders whom we might otherwise question in relation to other current issues — we are not going to talk about COVID, at least not in this article. Such is the case of Canada’s Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, who stated on his Twitter account: “Canada remains deeply disturbed by reports of human rights violations in China. As a result, we won’t be sending diplomatic representatives to Beijing for the Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games. We’ll continue to support our athletes who work hard to compete on the world stage.”

China’s power is a crippling reality. The least we can do is applaud the strong condemnations against the Chinese communist regime. Indeed, the spotlight turning on Beijing should be taken as an opportunity for the world to challenge and repudiate a government that already constitutes a global threat to human rights.



Openness and Technology, the Taiwanese Model

Audrey Tang, the Minister of Digital Affairs, is the genius behind this democratic revolution.

Once again, Taiwan is leading by example, but this time around how technology can strengthen democracy and empower people. Audrey Tang, the Minister of Digital Affairs of the Republic of China (Taiwan), was a guest speaker at the first Summit for Democracy, an initiative led by U.S. President Joe Biden. During the forum, convening leaders to discuss the challenges facing democracies in the 21st century, the Taiwanese Minister made her mark by sharing Taiwan’s experience in leveraging digital democracy to counter authoritarianism and reaffirm democratic values.

In office since 2016, Minister Tang is one of the most compelling personalities in the open source world and one of the most inspiring political figures from President Tsai Ing-wen’s government. Hailed as “the genius hacker,” Tang and her team played a key role in the battle against COVID-19. So much so that the UK-based weekly *The Economist* recently published an article where the Minister described how her country achieved effective cooperation among citizens, businesses, and government, even leveraging the crisis caused by the pandemic.

After almost two years of living in a world hit by uncertainty, anxiety, and piecemeal information around the virus and its consequences, Taiwan has remained a beacon of calm and good practices by adopting a model of constant collaboration and ensuring a solid digital infrastructure. For example, when Taiwan faced its first wave of COVID-19 infections, the g0v community, a group of “civic hackers,” sprang into action. As technology experts, they worked intensively to improve registration systems, allowing them to make the leap into quickly deploying a new system that allowed for fast and efficient contact tracing of potentially infected contacts without compromising the privacy of personal data. “We worked with Taiwan’s five leading telecommunications carriers to develop 1922 SMS. By scanning a QR code using a smartphone camera and sending a text message, check-in records are created and stored with no need for an app. When necessary, contact tracers can retrieve data from the system for quick and effective tracing,” said Audrey Tang, noting that the system — which was later replicated in some Latin American countries — was built in just one week, which would not have been possible without a robust partnership between the public and the private sectors.

That is just one example of how collaborative work and strategic alliances have been leveraged to meet social demands on the island. According to the Taiwanese authority's report, since the creation of g0v in 2012, the platform has become one of the largest open-source civic technology communities in the world, providing a basis for building an incentive system consisting of grants and rewards for project proposals that can potentially solve problems and benefit the public interest. Another example of the success of this collaborative approach is the annual events known as "hackathons," a government initiative to bring together technology experts, public officials, and civil society members, who form teams to compete with innovative projects aimed at improving government services. The 2019 hackathon featured a group of engineers, designers, and NGO representatives who identified limitations in the government's open data platform (data.gov.tw) and offered to improve information request tracking processes. Likewise, in 2020, a team of landscape and geospatial data experts proposed a system to identify urban areas where trees could be planted, relying on satellite data to map land use and tree distribution.

Taiwan's democratic culture, enhanced by the work of its bold Digital Minister, has proven that creativity and innovation can only be harvested from open and competitive public policies that encourage people's involvement.



He Who Is Most Powerful in a Superpower

While the world continues to swirl with controversy over Elon Musk — “the richest man in the world,” according to Forbes magazine — the actual most powerful man is effectively consolidating his supremacy. And it is already becoming clear that the world will soon run out of room for his ambitions.

We need to talk about Xi Jinping, President of the People's Republic of China, Secretary-General of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, President of the Central Military Commission... the chief, the messiah, the father of the nation, the man who has been tasked with bringing “the new era of socialist modernization,” and the leader whose party has granted him the opportunity to remain in power at least until 2027. The resolution made at the 6th plenary session of the 19th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party — which, as international newspapers headlined, “elevated President Xi Jinping to the level of Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping” — can only be described as historic. But how much do we really know about Xi Jinping? Perhaps surprisingly, his profile is not very different from that of any Latin American *caudillo*, speaking highly of his own peasant roots in his speeches and never missing an opportunity to remind everyone that he came from the bottom of the pyramid: “I am myself part of the common people. I worked as a farmer for seven years, then I became mayor of a town, a district, a city, and then governor of a province,” he said on one of his visits to Latin America. He is also one of those leaders who feel the need to centralize power in any way possible and lead with absolute authority.

His face is said to be found — displayed on huge posters — in every corner of Beijing, and Liangjiahe, the village where he devoted his youth to the Communist Party, is now reportedly a theme park, an almost spiritual sanctuary where people can go to venerate him. And what can we say about the inclusion of “his thoughts” in the Constitution itself as a theoretical reference to be read as mandatory reading, bearing the title: “Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era.” Xi Jinping is clearly determined to become a myth, and he spares no effort or resource to fuel the cult of his personality — as much as or even more than the father of the People’s Republic of China, Mao Zedong. It goes without saying that Mr. Xi is backed by the entire state apparatus, the official press, and the elite of business people who are friendly to those in power and ceaselessly praise his genius and personality.

Following the manual of the good populist, he has undertaken highly effective banner projects like his anti-corruption policy, under which he fired, imprisoned, and executed thousands of public officials. It is a course of action that not only raised his popularity but also allowed him to purge his entourage at will. And we cannot fail to mention his flagship ideological formulation: *The China Dream*, which, unlike the *American Dream* — that ideal of prosperity and opportunity for every citizen — is primarily aimed at turning China into an unprecedented superpower. To put it plainly: while the American dream is somehow individual-oriented, the Chinese dream is unequivocally state-oriented.

As if that were not enough, in 2021, Xi Jinping coincidentally had to lead the centennial anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party. As is the case with everything else that has to do with the Asian giant, it is the largest party in the world (with 95 million members), one of the oldest, and certainly the one that has remained in power for the longest. The celebration provided an ideal platform to send a clear message of intimidation, to say the least: while Mao Zedong undertook the mission of building a united China and Deng Xiaoping of building a wealthy China, Xi Jinping has it in his hands to build a strong China: “We will never allow anyone to bully, oppress, or subjugate [China].” [...] Anyone who tries “will find themselves on a collision course with a steel wall forged by 1.4 billion people,” he said vehemently in his speech, according to the BBC report. Some have conjectured that those “warnings,” as well as the ostentatious displays of weaponry, are aimed at the United States — that other superpower with which relations are not at their best. Tensions have arisen largely due to the Pentagon’s criticism of Xi Jinping’s regime for recurrent human rights violations, repression in Hong Kong, and, of course, the ticking time bomb that Taiwan represents. Still, the willingness to engage in dialogue is manifest — and for the good. In mid-November, Joe Biden and Xi Jinping engaged in a first virtual meeting. We do not know yet what will ensue from that encounter, but the intentions are certainly worth noting — though we do not yet know whether they are good or true, especially considering that one of the interlocutors is the most powerful authoritarian player in the world.

Taiwan's Courage



It would seem that the world, and certainly Latin America, has chosen to unquestioningly bow down to mighty China. Economic dependence is as real as it is shameful, and so is the submission displayed by governments and international agencies.

With over 1.4 billion inhabitants (the world's most populous country) and a surface area of nearly 9.6 million square kilometers (the fourth largest country in the world), this mighty economic and military power has certainly been challenged by an island smaller than Cuba. We are, of course, talking about Taiwan, that brave island that should be rightfully called the true Republic of China.

Before getting into the specific issue, it will be helpful to understand the historical and geopolitical situation in China — at least from a general point of view. Following the Chinese civil war between communists and nationalists (1927-1949), the victory went to the communists, led by Mao Tse Tung, giving the Chinese Communist Party dominance over all of mainland China, which has managed to retain it since then. Given the circumstances, the nationalists were forced to take refuge on the island of Taiwan, and from there, their government consistently claimed to be the legitimate representative of the Republic of China. But the People's Republic of China waged a campaign of intimidation that, over the years, led them to lose that status in the international arena, as we shall see below.

Whatever the case, over time, the Republic of China, "Taiwan," managed to astound everyone with the rapid growth it achieved by opening its economy, revitalizing its industrial production, and remaining ahead of technological innovations. Furthermore, it managed to transform its political and government system, moving from a single-party military regime to a multi-party democracy.

So you may ask, why do we know so little about Taiwan?...

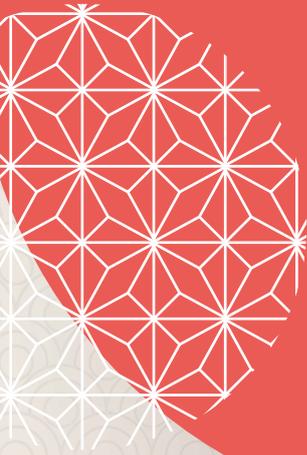
Today, the Republic of China, "Taiwan," ranks 6th on the Index of Economic Freedom. This score tells the world that Taiwan is "mostly free" and that it boasts "open markets," "regulatory efficiency," and "rule of law." The report issued by Heritage (the foundation that publishes the index) noted that such good ratings are mainly due to the structural integrity of its model and governance. Moreover, according to the People Power Under Attack 2020 annual report, Taiwan is the only Asian country rated as open, which means that it is recognized as an example of respect for human rights and civil liberties — precisely in a region where several countries are characterized by constant censorship and repression of dissidents, activists, and journalists. And to top it all off: the world's most prosperous and free island was a pioneer in taking the LGBT agenda seriously, being the first Asian country to legalize same-sex marriage.

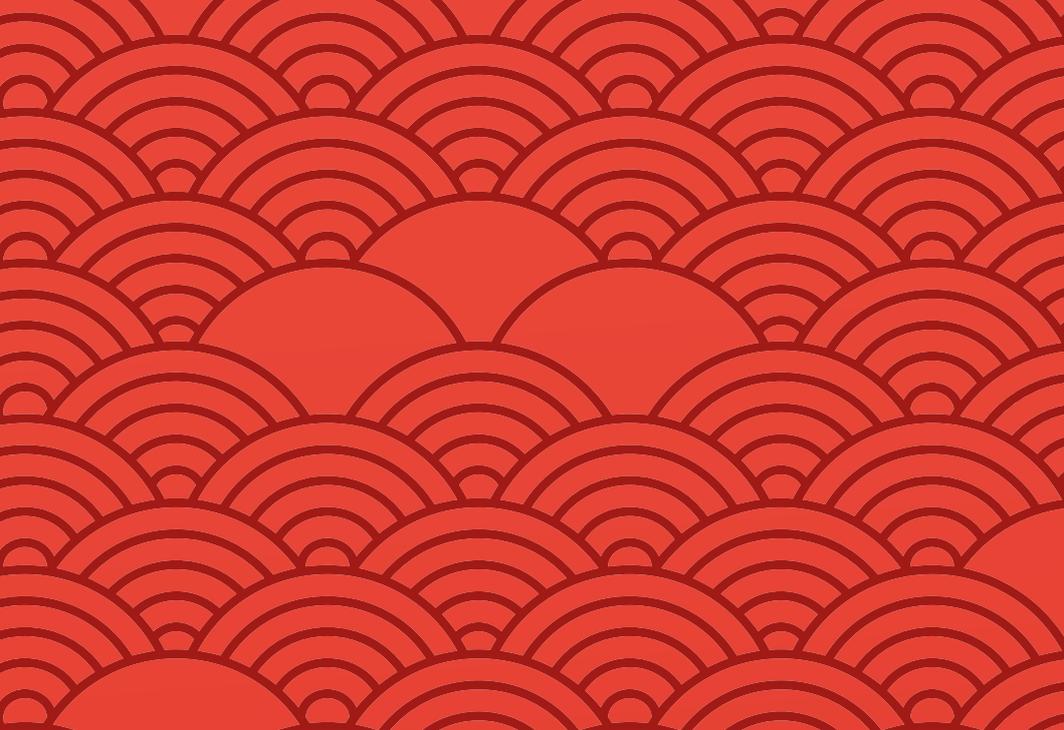
Unfortunately, we hardly know anything about this remarkable country. This is primarily due to the fact that the Republic of China, “Taiwan,” is not a member of the United Nations (UN), as it was replaced by the People’s Republic of China in 1971. But there is also the fact that mighty China refuses to engage in diplomatic relations with countries that do recognize Taiwan. Nonetheless, since its economic potential is not at all negligible, some leading countries do maintain ties with Taiwan via representative offices. The Republic of China “Taiwan” is not a member of the World Health Organization (WHO) — a big mistake that has already cost us dearly, considering that Taiwan has ample experience in crisis and epidemic management. Had Taiwan been included as a WHO member country, the response to the COVID-19 crisis would have been more effective and, most importantly, more timely.

Overall, Taiwan is at the forefront of key issues, including hunger reduction, poverty alleviation, and environmental sustainability, and it has proven to be a powerful ally in improving the living conditions of the countries that are in most need in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean. The fact that Taiwan has been restricted from participating in the international community has proven extremely detrimental to the world. It can only be interpreted as an abuse on the part of communist China.

Taiwan is a benchmark for freedom, democracy, the rule of law, and respect for human rights. To defend Taiwan is to defend those principles.







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