China: emerging problems and measures to guide public opinion and fight dissent[a]

China: problemas emergentes e medidas para orientar a opinião pública e combater a dissidência

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ABSTRACT
This article highlights significant aspects of the contemporary reality in Chinese society, characterized by fast economic and cultural changes. It discusses how has the formation of a public opinion independent from institutional power occurred, increasingly more fragmented, heterogenous, and sometimes critical to the choices made by the regime. The diversity of opinions is favored by the internet. But this mean is also considered by the Chinese State, in initiatives such as the Social Credit System, a tool to strengthen trust and social cohesion, reducing destabilization risks for the leadership of the Communist Party.
Keywords: China, public opinion, politics, internet, Social Credit System

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RESUMO
O artigo destaca alguns aspectos significativos da realidade contemporânea na sociedade chinesa, marcada por uma rápida transformação econômica e cultural. Discute como tem se dado a formação de uma opinião pública independente do poder institucional, cada vez mais fragmentada, heterogênea e, em alguns casos, crítica às escolhas do regime. A diversidade opinativa é favorecida pela internet. Mas esse meio é também pensado pelo Estado chinês, a partir de iniciativas como o chamado Sistema de Crédito Social, como instrumento para fortalecer a confiança e a coesão social, reduzindo os riscos de desestabilização à liderança do Partido Comunista.
Palavras-chave: China, opinião pública, política, internet, Sistema de Crédito Social

INTRODUCTION

THE HISTORY OF post-Maoist China is characterized by alternate opening and closing phases in relation to Western society and, at the same time, of political and cultural opening and closing on its borders. The aim is not to discuss the reasons leading to such changes, also because they are events that were widely analyzed by other authors, and thus probably overall known. It will be enough to remind only the main inflexion points in the path leading to the current phase, represented by the presidency of Xi Jinping.

At the end of the 1970s, the reforms by Deng Xiaoping unleashed a quick process of economic development and created the conditions for a significant opening in Chinese society. At the end of the 1980s, after the *Tian'anmen protests* (June 1989), a closing phase was begun, observed in a part of the following decade, specially regarding the political and cultural control. At the beginning of the 2000s, with China's entry in the World Trade Organization (WTO), a new opening phase began, much deeper than the previous one, in which the country had to learn to directly confront the main protagonists of the world's economy, their products, culture and lifestyles. This phase began slowly, given the great changes imposed to China by the WTO accords, so that in many occasions the country was reported for not having complied to the commitment made. An emblematic example is the dispute for not opening the Chinese market (agreed on in 2001) to products of the foreign music and cinema industry; a dispute that only ended, partially, in 2011 (Richeri, 2013).

This article aims to highlight some significant aspects of the action developed by the current Chinese leadership guided by Xi Jinping – Secretary General of the Chinese Communist Party since November 2012 and President of the People's Republic since March 2013 – in order to strengthen the government and the role of the Communist Party in guiding the country in face of the quick economic and cultural transformation in the Chinese society. This action, according to many Western observers, constitutes the beginning of a new closing phase regarding foreign countries and of more cultural and political control within the country.

GROWING DIFFICULTIES IN MANY ASPECTS

In the last years, the Chinese leadership had to face many difficulties both internally and internationally. Some of them are carefully analyzed by Western media: specially the events regarding the economy and international relations.

In the first case, the slowdown in exportations and in growth rates of the Gross Internal Product (GIP), while unemployment was growing and the public debt reached critical levels, specially the ones by local governments. These are some of the main problems internally, and the maintenance of the country's institutional policy lies of that area. The increase in well-being and its dissemination all over Chine, even though unequally, actually constitute the core of the support to the Communist Party leadership, which many Chinese people keep.

Regarding international relations, the growing tensions in the South China Sea and the case of the support by Western countries, specially the United States, to the Chinese Taiwan island were added, in the last years, to the commercial war with Trump's government, to which other country have joined. Besides, the extensive campaign launched in 2017 in Western media for the defense of human rights for the Urguri, a Muslim religious population that lives in Xinjiang (Castet, 2019), hampers the great efforts by the Chinese government to increase its soft power globally. Moreover, the first difficulties and revisions of accords with some countries that have joined the *New Silk Road* Project (Hard-Landsberg, 2018) have arisen. The long term stragetical initiative shall involve more the sixty countries in Asia, Africa and Europe in the construction of great infrastructures destined to strengthen the commercial flow between China and its partners. These first difficulties have also led to doubts and criticism inside the Chinese Communist Party itself (Devonshire-Ellis, 2018).

In the domestic front, other problems have gained shape. In particular, the formation of a public opinion that is independent from institutional power, increasingly more fragmented, heterogenous, and sometimes critical to the political regime's choices (Negro, 2017). The presence of *dissident* groups and the struggles in the People's Republic of China are not new; one has only to recall that, even within the Communist Party, there were always conflicts between political lines that not only mirrored power struggle among the leaders, but also different perspectives and interests present in society. The most known example is the group that led the *cultural revolution* under the rod of Mao Zedong and that, after his death, was called the *Gang of Four*, being accused, judged and condemned. In the following years, the cases known in the Western World were specially the ones that led to the events of the Tian'anmen Square, and, recently, in 2012, to the judgement and sentence of Bo Xilai, leader of the current neo-Maoist current, governor of Chongqing, one of the four autonomous municipalities with more than 33 million inhabitants. These events represent the tip of the iceberg of a deeper discontent that has stirred a non-marginal part of the country (Lam, 2012).

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The formation of a lively and varied public opinion, which has showed itself, in many occasions, to be capable of distancing from the choices and behaviors of the political and institutional leadership, is now seen as a problem to be suppressed. On the one hand, it is intended to promote an ideological battle capable to guide even the younger generations and counterbalancing the values of Western democracy, but, on the other hand, new tools are developed to control and censor media, specially what happens in the web.

The situation ripened after many factor, specially due to the accelerated economic development, which has substantially changed Chinese society, favoring the development of social classes differing as to income levels, access to public services, opportunities and perspectives.

To the constant improvement in material consumption, it was added certain cultural phenomena, contributing to shift the world view of many Chinese people, their interests, desires, and perspectives. Among them, the basic and higher education system, which is increasingly more spread, the great number of young people that have studied in U.S. and European universities, tourism, which has taken tens of thousands Chinese people around the world and, last but not least, the flow of Western cultural products (music, television, cinema, newspapers, and fashion), which promoted in Chine different values, society models, and lifestyles from the ones proposed by *Chinese socialism*. An example is the distribution, public and revenue success that Hollywood movies have been gaining for more than ten years in China (Richeri, 2016).

PUBLIC OPINION FRAGMENTATION

It was seen that the growing formation and weight of public opinion in China depend on economic, cultural, and social changes that the country has gone through the last decades. However, the role of dissemination played by the interned must also be highlighted, given that it is regularly accessed by 800 million Chinese people. Internet makes ideas known, given them visibility, and allows for the confrontation of different ideas blooming in many society segments, which are not, many times, homogenous and are at times clearly critical regarding the official points of view and initiatives. Ever since the 1990s, the Chinese State has favored the development of internet, considered a decisive vector for modernization and economy growth in the country; however, it has underestimated the role the network could play on spreading information, ideas, and social bonds between people who have been forming opinions to share (Richeri, 2018).

Despite the development of many tools to guide and, when needed, censor ideas being spread in internet nowadays, the debate is heated and the participants in the discussion also express, as mentioned, little orthodox ideas, sometimes critical or even hostile to the government and the party. Many of the people participating in the debates are part of the urban middle class. Which could better explore the benefits of the economic growth, and whose support is very important to ensure the government's political stability.

What happens in the internet shows an increasingly more differentiated society, which is eager to participate and discuss, with a share of it also capable of questioning the central and local powers when disagreeing with their actions. Groups of protestors with different ideological views appear, confronting ideas even on the political and economic order. Those who express positive opinions on Chinese singularity and identity obviously enjoy the explicit support by the Communist Party; on the contrary, the groups promoting liberal values such as democracy and human rights are criticized by the government as overly pro-Western and some of their representants are condemned or have to leave the country.

An indicator of the variety of opinion groups that were formed in the last years and that are recognized in the web is provided by the research carried out in 2016 by the Mercator Institute for China Studies, with the help of Chinese analysts. The research as based on the analysis of a wide sample of communications exchanged in the interned throughout the year (Shi-Kupfer, Ohlberg, Lang & Lang, 2017). The results allowed for the distinction of eleven types of opinions, ranging from the ones most integrated to the power system to the ones that are more critical or opposing to it. The interest in classifying proposed by the investigation lies on the fact that these typologies are present with a observable consistency, even with punctual differences. This is, thus, an indicator of plurality of ideas expressed in the web, and with which the Communist Party, as it will be seen, aims to reach an agreement, in order to restrict or censor what is considered as destabilizing its leadership. As examples, some of the most significant categories will be reported, followed by the label given to them by the research:

– The *Party Warriors* are those who are completely identified to the Communist Party and the State's ideology, and who defend the government policies in all their declarations; for them, *the love for China* is identified to the *love for the Party*;

– The *Defenders of China* support the Party's action to strengthen a Chinese ideology and a coherent political line; they also express criticism to the political and economic principles of Western liberalism, considered as the cause of the 2008 global financial crisis, and to

D the development of populism in the United States and in Europe. This group has a view of the Party that can be defined as *utilitarian*, since they see it as a guarantee of stability. According to this view, the current authoritarian regime has, in comparison to Western democracies, more tools to carry out rational political actions and to manage crisis situations;

– The *Industrialists* want China to be consolidated as one of the protagonists of world market; they believe the country must be prepared to support economic competition and that the technological progress is the most important mean to achieve a leading position in the international scenario;

– The *Traditionalists* appreciate the past Chinese empire and reject the Western modernity concept, emphasizing that China must gather its strength from its long history of cultural singularity. The criticism of Western culture concerns aspects such as its individualism, the loss of values represented by the family and the respect to elderly people, and an overall decline in morality. This group considers Confucianism an important tool to reinforce a common identity and to defend Chinese social and political principles;

– The *Mao Worshipers* would like to cancel the introduction of capitalism in China and for the State to go back to dominating economy. The opening policy and the reforms developed since the 1980s are seen as the cause for unemployment and for the great inequality in the distribution of wealth and well-being;

– The *Market Worshipers* are the ones most close to Western neoliberalism values, and would like for the market liberalization branch started in the 1980s to continue. They reckon current difficulties in Chinese economy happen due to the excessive presence of the State and to the role of public companies in the economy; they are, thus, in favor of the private administration of economy and of public services;

– The *Democrats* are in favor of promoting Western democratic values, such as universalism, political pluralism, and personal freedom. Democrats constitute the biggest dissident group, they directly criticize the legitimacy of the current leadership and their ideas represent the main menace to the Chinese State-Party.

The values of political pluralism, individual freedom and democracy are also well-considered by other groups, such as the *Defenders of equality*, the *Humanists*, and the *USA Worshippers*. Groups sharing these values are also seen as a danger by the current administration.

In 2013, however, the Statement on the current state of the ideological sphere, a well-known document by the General Direction of the Central Committee, has precisely indicated the main opinions circulating on the web, to which the Party supporters should effusively oppose (Document 9, 2013).

The ideas spread in the web that needed to be reported as fake were, for example:

– Western constitutional democracy: "*an attempt of undermine the current leadership*";
– Universal human rights values: "*an attempt to weaken the theoretical foundations of the Party's leadership*";
– Civil society: "*a political tool by Western anti-China forces*";
– Neoliberalism: "*an effort led by the USA to change China's basic economic system*";
– The West's idea of journalism: "*an attack to the Marxism view of news*".

RETAKING THE IDEOLOGICAL INITIATIVE

As aforementioned, what happens in the web has been long monitored with great attention by the Chinese Communist Party; analyzing the public opinion serves to support them as long as it is possible and, at the same time, to equip itself to combat them when they represent a threat to the country's stability and to the Party's leadership. The particular concern with pro-West ideas that new generations have been partially sharing has recently led to a new ideological battle. The growing disagreement among young internet users is of concern, and it is believed that on-line media has an unwanted influence. After forty years of continuous and quick development, young generations believe that, for them, there are less opportunities to improve their life conditions, while facing growing difficulties in work and life. The alienation feeling that is spread among the ones born in the 80s and 90s is caused by many factors; among them, the exponential growth on housing costs, the lack of social mobility, and the difficulty in finding a partner in China nowadays.

To deal with this negative situation, the Party has first tried to adapt its propaganda to reach the younger segments of the population. The first step was to organize a group of new media specialists, capable of overcoming the old jargon of the official propaganda and to use the *internet language* to tell stories that could resonate with younger internet users and activate more *positive energy* among them (Jing, 2019).

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The president Xi himself, in a meeting carried out in the beginning of 2019, has warned the Party boards to closely examine the risk of political disagreement and to consider it a priority, since it could lead to a critical situation.

Public disagreement has become particularly dangerous in a moment of economic slowdown and when there are worrisome signs from many flanks, such as the protests by army veterans (Bukley, 2018; Chan, 2018) or the mobilization of Marxist professors and young university students to support workers (Sonam, 2018).

The initiatives to solve these problems follow many paths. Some are more traditional: insisting on the presence of an external enemy, on the danger of a hostile siege by foreign potencies, on the threat of an imminent military conflict. Or even working to reinforce the collective identity and the shared values related to China's history and cultural tradition, the role of the Party, the leadership the country has achieved globally. Other paths concern the launch on a new wide ideological battle to recover the youth adhesion to the values of Chinese socialism (Han, 2019); and, after that, there are much more complex initiatives, which intend to create tools for generalized observation and control of individual behaviors. Anyway, those are actions that highlight the relevance that Xi's presidency must face and that must be attentively watched.

The first and most recent signal concerns the call to reinforce the ideological control of the youth made by Xi Jinping in a conference that, in the beginning of 2019, brought teaching assistants and teachers from all over China to Beijing (Kuo, 2019). At schools and universities, educators were urged to systematically intervene to combat what the Communist Party denounces as *wrong ideas*. Besides, the president has affirmed that it is necessary to strengthen ideology and political theory courses in all levels, ever since primary school up to the universities. It is necessary, overall, to gather attention on correct political positions so that the ones who believe in the Party may advocate for what they believe in.

According to Xi's directive, China, starting by the younger ones, must form generations of students that support the Communist Party's government and the Chinese socialist system. These people must be capable of analyzing problems with the correct political perspective and distinguishing clearly what is right from what is wrong.

The ones responsible for the education of young people must take the initiative of promoting patriotism and rejecting wrong ideas and ideologies. Teachers have the essential role of strengthening ideological and political education; it is their responsibility to promote the ideology approved by the Party. The students must be trained to nourish patriotic feelings and to trust

Chinese socialism, so to spontaneously participate in the construction of a great modern socialist nation and in the fight to renew the Chinese nation. Teachers must also be the example for their students, both in their public and private behavior, and when using the internet. These guidelines, which should become behavior rules in schools of all levels, were followed by a series of initiatives to reduce the presence of *Western values* in schools and universities; and the first measure taken was to eliminate text-books that promoted *Western ideas*, such as democracy, elections, and universal human rights.

THE SOCIAL CREDIT SYSTEM

The initiative that best represents the tools developed by the Chinese State to strengthen social trust and cohesion and to reduce the risks of destabilizing the Communist Party's leadership and the still solid power system is the so-called Social Credit System. This system intends to give each citizen a personal score designed by an algorithm developed to interpret a series of related data. The aim, in sum, is to identify *good conduct, reliability*, and *honesty* for each citizen to encourage a positive behavior and to penalize the ones behaving badly in relation to society and the State. The project, initiated experimentally in 2010, was officially adopted by the government in 2014 and will lead to the definition of a score for each Chinese citizen in 2020 (State Council of China, 2014). An important aspect of the *System* is the intended use and dissemination of collected information. In fact, the initiative will allow everybody to know the reliability degree of a person or company; the foreseen classification will be used to allow a person to get a loan, to be hired for a specific job, to freely travel abroad, to obtain or to be excluded from public services, accessing places, demonstrations and events. Those with higher scores will have advantages, while those with lower ones will be penalized. Therefore, according to official declarations, the System will allow for the construction of a credible judicial context, formatting a public opinion to which being reliable will become a prestige factor and strengthen the sincerity on Government business, on trade, and on society in general. Another expected result is the reduction of corruption, food frauds, and the patronage behavior of local authorities.

The information on how the Social Credit System is being implemented are but a few and the mentioned official document is dated from 2014 (State Council of China, 2014). The experimental phase is not yet complete, and the results will have to be assessed before starting the operational phase in 2020, according to predictions. There are a few local administration and private companies already

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in operation. The initiatives taken by local governments highlight, above all, the *public* behavior of citizens, such as the respect for civil cohabitation rules or a virtuous social behavior: ranging from traffic speed limits to domestic residue storage, from the children's school attendance to volunteering activities, assistance to elderly people in the family, etc.

In 2017, an article published in the British edition of the *Wired* magazine has provided a few clarifications on the initiatives managed by private companies (Botsman, 2017). Here follows a summary of the most interesting aspects. The government has granted license to eight private companies to collect data from individuals and companies, which will be processed by their own algorithms in order to define the social credit score of the ones who agreed to take part in the initiative. Among them, *Wired* mentions two great companies leading the most famous projects. The first one is China Rapid Finance, partner of the giant Tecent, one of the biggest on-line service providers in China and owner of the WeChat, the Chinese correspondent of Facebook, with over 850 million active users. The other one, Sesame Credit, is administered by Ant Financial Services Group, a subsidiary of Alibaba, one of the main electronic commerce companies. Ant provides financial services and loans to small and medium-sized companies, among them the on-line payment service AliPay, which is used not only to on-line purchases, but also for paying hotels, restaurants, taxis, movie tickets, and any other kind of daily transactions.

Sesame also has agreements with other platforms that collect on-line data so that, on the whole, it is capable of managing a great amount of data on the behavior of citizens and classifying them.

But how are citizens classified? Sesame ranks each one of the people involved in the initiative in a position that may vary from 350 and 950 points. The complex algorithm used to define the score is unknown, but the five factors considered are indicated.

The first one concerns the economic behavior of the subjects involved, such as regularly paying light, telephone and other bills. The second to meeting contract obligation. The third factor refers to personal characteristics such as housing, family, education and more. The fourth one refers to social behavior and commercial preferences (purchases). The fifth factor, the most delicate one, is the behavior in interpersonal relations and its content. For example, positively commenting with friends on-line about an initiative of the local or national government, expressing a positive attitude in relation to the nation, its culture, history, or expressing adhesion to the values promoted by the Communist Party increases the score. Alibaba affirms that these data are

used to increase the score, while negative ones are not used to lower it, but the mentioned article raises doubts over this affirmation. However, it is clear how the system could fully work after 2020, when the project for citizen classification should be integrally implemented. In the currently available source, however, there is a lack of information to understand how and when the many public and private initiatives will be interconnected, if the set of data, algorithms to treat them and resulting classifications will be homogenous to reach an interoperable National Social Credit.

The probability that this System has been conceived not only as a tool to promote *positive energies* and improve society, but also as a powerful mean of control, or the possibility of controlling, is a currently debated matter, which will increasingly resonate on the web as its realization progresses and everybody will be able to verify its use – a possibly abuse – by the leadership in power. In sum, it is possible, however, to highlight the different perception that the project has raised in China and in the West.

In the first case, Chinese and Western opinion polls highlight the high acceptance degree of the project by Chinese citizens (Kostka, 2019; Minter, 2019): the opinion that the Social Credit System may be a positive tool to improve individual behavior, their reliability, and, generally, the social cohesions and the Chinese trust on their country, institutions and leadership prevails. On the contrary, the widely predominant opinion on Western media (Kuhnreich, 2018) is that the Social Credit System may be a powerful tool to control individuals to reduce, censor and suppress critical opinions and behaviors, which are sometimes hostile to the State, the Communist Party and the country's current government. **M**

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