Chinese Economic Reform After 40 Years.  
by David Grunwald

In a recent Foreign Affairs article Rana Mitter asked readers to image what China might be like in 20 years. He suggests that in such time a version of China could emerge with which the West could coexist. Yet we are approaching an important marker when China split the economic and political casing that once seemed inseparable in a Communist country. This remains true even though China has grown to 70 times its size in 1979.

Forty years ago, China under Deng Xiaoping was leading China’s journey toward another phase of economic liberalization which eventually split the leadership. At the time comparisons were made to the Soviet New Economic Policy (NEP) introduced under Lenin to help consolidate the Russian Revolution. The Soviets launched a tactical retreat from “War Communism” by opening to the market in the face of economic hardship. They were particularly aware of the experience of Robespierre and were determined to hold the levers of political power firmly in the hands of a disciplined party. Before undertaking the reforms, which were never uniform or filled with foreign capital, the Bolsheviks banned political parties and factions within the Bolshevik party itself. It could be argued that the Chinese experiment with economic reform was more complicated and began in the 50’s travelling through various phases which under the current leadership are ongoing.

In the Chinese case, the Marxist framework has become unrecognizable today mainly because its traditional economic message has been obliterated. Used as a tool to explain and justify Western criticism, Marxism has become a kind of front idea behind which the key positions are held by a small coterie of men running a very populous country. It serves as a steady message to political challengers (which include ideas) that real opposition is not possible. Any errors in the system are identified, receive recognition and are resolved by the party in charge for the “good of the nation”. The Chinese are currently struggling in a ‘Leninist trap’ which offers no way forward except by ceaseless interventions and a mechanical kind of stability while the Russians appear returned to their autocratic past operating under the familiar pillars of Orthodoxy, Autocracy and Nationalism practiced by Peter and under Nicolas I after the Decembrist uprising in 1825.

While the genesis of the Chinese and Soviet experiments with economic reform can be traced back to crisis situations, the case with China deserves some attention because it is ongoing, and nobody has taken a good hard look at its true trajectory revealed by the last 40 years.

In 1985 as a young undergraduate my analysis led to the conclusion that several possibilities existed after Deng. At the time China was a communist country and remained loyal to four unchallengeable principles: Marxism-Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought, the dictatorship of the proletariat and the pursuit of socialism under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). By 2025 China had abandoned all but the last principle which is the key principle followed today.

This anacoluthic journey played out under the watch of 14 American Presidents with the end result being the hardening of authoritarian rule facilitated by technological capabilities that would make Mao smile. If the Chinese took a chance on economic reform, so did the US in falsely believing that a prosperous China was a more amenable China whose greed could be groomed, directed and put to use in serving the existing international order. How did this go on for so long?

This paper asks the question: what exactly was the crisis that the Chinese leadership sought to address beginning with a series of reform attempts in 1956? Did the millions killed or sent to labor camps really influence the Chinese leadership, the same group that oversees a country comprising five time zones into a single time zone. Or did the mass chaos and harm stemming from collectivization really influence the Soviet leadership for that matter?

Secondly, why did the attempt to achieve radical reform in China by raising living standards, opening safety values and restoring confidence in the ruling party make things even worse than before? At root isn’t greed and misguided assumptions — that world wouldn’t change — the screen behind Marxist dogma? Has the Chinese economic and political balancing act failed in the long term to address the changing future where quantum ideas are fast obliterating the nature of the Newtonian social structures which conceptualize society through the lens of classical physics, emphasizing order, predictability, and determinism, where social institutions and behaviors are governed by fixed, mechanistic laws akin to Newton's laws of motion?

This perspective has historically influenced disciplines like economics and sociology, promoting a view of society as a system where outcomes result from linear cause-and-effect relationships. In contrast, quantum social science introduces principles from quantum physics—such as uncertainty, entanglement, and superposition—to better understand the complexities of human behavior and social interactions. This approach challenges the deterministic nature of Newtonian models by acknowledging that human decisions and societal trends often exhibit non-linear, context-dependent, and probabilistic characteristics. The shift from Newtonian to quantum perspectives in social sciences reflects a broader move towards embracing complexity and uncertainty in understanding societal dynamics. Such a clear viewpoint was not possible 40 years ago.

Despite the disastrous Soviet experiment with collectivization and increasing grumbling from China’s population, domestic and international events steeled Mao’s resolve to surge ahead with the second Five Year Plan, also known as the Great Leap Forward which ended in the death of millions of Chinese. Perhaps it wasn’t so much that the leadership was concerned with launching inspired reforms that swung the direction of change in China, rather the criticisms launched at the regime as a result of the ‘Hundred Flowers Campaign’ from 1956-57. This led to a brutal attack named the Anti-Rightist Campaign, on anyone who had voiced alternative beliefs that economic development required only ideological correctness, not scientific or technical expertise. This included future leader Deng Xiaoping whose family was targeted for capitalist ways of thinking and whose eldest son Deng Pufang in 1969 became paraplegic after being thrown from a three-story building at Peking University and denied hospital admittance.

The leadership’s crisis was of its own making chiefly because the error correction mechanisms of opposition and criticism, an American capability, were not allowed to flourish in Chinese society. The belief in the perfectibility of man needed to be controlled by Beijing and its political mechanisms, doctrine and dogma. Today’s China faces the same question: what is the end result of the push to provide consumer goods and prosperity? What would China be like if it did possess the GDP of the United States? Perhaps the Soviet Union might have survived had not Brezhnev stubbornly kept to low yield agriculture, years of foreign debt to finance consumer imports to keep the people “happy” and bequeathed these problems to Gorbachev.

While people may matter, the Chinese forty year trajectory from 1985 teaches that above all the leadership enshrined in a party will do anything to remain in power including introducing reforms ostensibly for the people’s welfare, but in reality are little more than defensive measures to keep a growth averse system in place.

**最终目标不能只是更多的米饭**

If the history of human striving can be summarized: *the end goal cannot simply be more rice* which is the end station for all value inspired liberal utopias. The true goal of man must be identical with his freedoms. Also, linear histories common in Marxist theory, discount the emerging quantum view that the quantum paradigm introduces a more complex perspective, suggesting that history may unfold in multiple, coexisting realities simultaneously. This idea draws inspiration from quantum mechanics, particularly the Many-Worlds Interpretation, which posits that all possible outcomes of quantum events are realized in separate, parallel universes.

Today’s international relations are best understood not as a return to great power rivalry or the Concert of Europe, but as a form of *Lockean realism*—a world of sovereign states that pursue self-interest within a rules-based system that prioritizes order, mutual recognition, and institutional cooperation. Diplomacy, as an instrument of strategy rather than a creator of utopias, is a high value skill that is worth investing time into. Unlike the 19th-century concert model, today’s global politics involve a wide array of actors operating through legal norms, diplomacy, and interdependence rather than raw power balancing. While tensions exist, they are largely managed through established frameworks rather than imperial-style domination. Beneath this system, a pinch of economic determinism reveals that much state behavior is shaped by market dependencies, class interests, and the pursuit of economic stability rather than ideological or military ambition.

It is, for better or worse, a global negotiation table, where power is still real, but contracts and capital speak louder than cannons.

Lost in all this is the fact that the United States foundational principles is the pursuit of happiness at a foundational level which is found nowhere in the Chinese governing principles. The Greek word for tranquility was ἀταραξία (ataraxia) which described a desired state of "equanimity", or "tranquility". It was this concept that Jefferson took to mean “happiness” as a goal of American government. In this way we can fuse the human and divine and reach a consensus of unity in purpose referred to as “Christian Humanism” by Teilhard de Chardin.

**Balance Between Politics and the Economy**

The Chinese Communist Party’s attempt to balance political control with economic liberalization in its reform era ultimately backfired, as efforts to raise living standards, open safety valves, and restore confidence in the ruling party exposed deeper contradictions in the system—raising unfulfilled expectations, intensifying regime insecurity, weakening centralized authority without enabling real pluralism, turning controlled openness into platforms for dissent, and making the prison walls of authoritarian rule all the more visible amid growing demands for light and space. Technology has only instrumented the authoritarian state template creating an all-pervasive watchdog state with serious implications to human rights and creative freedoms necessary for progress in a changing world.

As Deng began his economic reforms, I asked: to borrow the metaphor I used in 1985—of flowers planted in a prison courtyard —was it not quite another matter altogether to knock down the prison walls so that they might have enough light to bloom?

This event led to the reimposition of party control and a measure of economic reform that solidified into Deng’s 1992 “Southern Tour”. He reaffirmed that market-oriented changes should continue. His message was that economic modernization would proceed without political liberalization. The Tiananmen fiasco showed the Chinese leadership that democratization was not an irresistible force and many freedoms were not essential to the monopoly of political power. This launched China into a new phase of rapid, state-managed capitalism and a return to Deng Xioping’s directives promulgated in 1978 by the 3rd plenary session of the 11th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party. Post-Tiananmen reforms included creating new forms of governance —technocratic, performance-based, and reliant on surveillance and control. The party invested heavily in propaganda, internal security, and digital technologies to forestall dissent while permitting a degree of social and economic mobility.

It was the US fate to have believed that the Chinese political directives were amenable with economic successes. Tiananmen bolted the door on political reform.

The fruits of globalization were then used by the Chinese Communist Party to reinforce its rule. Few might have imagined the extent in which the decoupling of economic and political liberalization might have proceeded in 1985, especially since the Soviet Union under Gorbachev appeared to me making changes that opened political expression. In the summer before Gorbachev’s assumption of power the Soviet state had seemed on autopilot as the ailing Brezhnev ally Konstantin Chernenko was nowhere to be found. Behind the scenes another Brezhnev favorite specializing in agriculture was being readied for an unsteady future. Events in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe as well as Gorbachev’s visit to China in Spring 1989, along with the death of Chinese liberal party General Secretary Hu Yaobang on April 15, 1989, had a lot to do with the timing of the Tiananmen Square Massacre. On May 18, 1989 the final day of Gorbachev’s Beijing visit, and 16 days before the Tiananmen crackdown, 1.2 million people had amassed in the square.

**How Things Got Worse**

Lost in the endless discussion of Chinese economic reform is the idea that it made things worse for all parties because it reinforced human greed and the unequal systems that spring from it. In 1985 it was a fair question to ask whether the Chinese would take their reforms one step further — using economic growth to further socialist aims. And it turns out that is exactly what happened. Shortly after the Tiananmen Massacre, Chinese party leaders implemented a program of political and economic retrenchment with a thirty-nine point plan blaming hostile Western actions although Chinese thirst for economic reform continued under Deng because massacres don’t raise GDP.

Yet the Chinese leader knew enough not to step outside the stream of history when it came to the necessity of financial power. When Deng showed up on US shores in 1979 his per capita GDP was well under 200 bucks a year which was one-50th of that of the United States. With more money, China was able to harden its constraint store, reify its Marxist predicate store and make authoritarianism and its accoutrements into a commodity because they reformed the ownership system essentially resurfacing terms like “investment hunger” and introduced other expediency measures like a “market with macroeconomic management”. According to Mitter, selling this unique blend of political and economic thinking or essence (*zhongti)* might become an alternative for many middle powers. As we should have learned from the Soviet experience: be wary of all messianic ideologies that present unfinished utopias and sell themselves as “works in progress.”

Of course, this New Thinking (NT) failed to address political issues which had been simmering since Mao’s hubristic “One Hundred Flowers” campaign in 1956/57 ended in persecution of free thinkers. This I believe is an overlooked feature of the Chinese experience that draws a stark contrast to liberal democracies: *essence*. At root positive liberty is the belief that human nature has an essence, and that we are free if and only if we succeed in realizing that essence in our lives.[[1]](#footnote-1) According the Hannah Arendt politics and freedom coincide and this freedom is primarily experienced in action.

One of the central demands of the Tiananmen protesters was the expansion of civil liberties, particularly freedom of speech and press. Students and intellectuals called for an end to state censorship, the right to publicly criticize government policies, and the emergence of a media independent of Party control. In the wake of the 1989 crackdown, however, the Chinese Communist Party not only rejected these demands but moved aggressively to expand its mechanisms of control. The Party tightened censorship over newspapers, books, television, and, later, the internet, establishing an intricate system of surveillance and self-censorship that limits even modest critique. Instead of opening space for public discourse, the state institutionalized a media environment in which only officially sanctioned narratives could thrive, equating dissent with destabilization. This repression has stunted intellectual life and public trust, deepening the disconnect between society and the ruling elite while exacerbating the very legitimacy crisis the protesters sought to resolve through reform.

Another key demand of the Tiananmen movement was greater political accountability and a transparent system to combat corruption among Party officials. Protesters expressed deep frustration with the privileges of the elite and the lack of legal mechanisms to check their power, calling for rule of law and institutional reforms to curb abuse. In the aftermath of the crackdown, the CCP claimed to address corruption through top-down disciplinary campaigns, but these initiatives were politically selective and lacked the independent judicial oversight necessary for meaningful reform. Far from enhancing accountability, the post-1989 system has produced a form of governance in which corruption remains entrenched but hidden, and where the legal apparatus serves the Party rather than the people. By refusing to introduce real checks on authority, the state preserved a political monopoly while sacrificing the legitimacy and responsiveness that true reform could have fostered. In doing so, it transformed popular demands for justice into further justification for authoritarian centralization.

The refusal to implement the political reforms demanded at Tiananmen set the stage for a hybrid model in which economic liberalization advanced without accompanying political change—what some have called "authoritarian resilience." By suppressing calls for freedom of speech and official accountability, the Chinese Communist Party created a framework of controlled openness: market reforms flourished, raising living standards and integrating China into the global economy, but always under the shadow of tightened ideological and political control. The state learned to manage dissent through surveillance and co-option rather than concession, relying on rapid economic growth as a substitute for democratic legitimacy. Yet this strategy sowed long-term contradictions—rising inequality, alienation among youth, and a political culture of fear and cynicism. The technologies once hoped to liberate expression became tools of discipline. In refusing to "knock down the prison walls," the regime preserved stability at the cost of political stagnation, moral erosion, and a future increasingly burdened by the unaddressed demands of its past.

**Separation of Economic and Political Power**

The separation of economic and political power has raised unfulfilled expectations to this day, creating "economic bargain" doctrine which is an unspoken contract between the people and the leadership that above all economic growth needs to be assured. China weakened centralized authority in economic matters by sharing power with local authorities without enabling real pluralism. We do have an ancient example of what happens when newfound wealth flows into a community.

In the late Roman Republic, a surge of wealth from military conquests created a false sense of prosperity that ultimately deepened social divisions and led to political collapse. While Rome grew richer, the benefits were concentrated among the elite, displacing small farmers and swelling the ranks of the urban poor. Attempts at reform by leaders like the Gracchi brothers, who sought to redistribute land and address inequality, were violently suppressed, marking the rise of political polarization and unrest. Corruption, patronage politics, and widening inequality undermined the Republic's institutions, paving the way for civil wars and the emergence of autocratic rule under the Empire. This historical case illustrates how economic growth without political reform or social equity can fracture a society.

**Global Example of Authoritarian Excess**

The Chinese leadership's intensification of regime insecurity can be exemplified through its heavy reliance on surveillance, censorship, and repression to maintain control, even as it champions economic modernization. For instance, the state’s deployment of AI-powered facial recognition, massive data monitoring systems, and social credit mechanisms creates a digital authoritarian infrastructure that limits dissent and punishes perceived disloyalty. The 2019–2020 crackdown on Hong Kong’s pro-democracy movement, the internment of over a million Uyghurs in Xinjiang, and the silencing of whistleblowers during the COVID-19 outbreak illustrate how regime insecurity manifests in preemptive, often harsh, measures to suppress alternative voices. These actions, while maintaining surface-level stability, reflect deep anxieties about legitimacy, trust, and the regime’s vulnerability to spontaneous or organized challenges. In doing so, China sets a global precedent for technologically enabled authoritarianism, where control is pursued not by consent but by coercion.

**New Platforms for Dissent**

In China, state-sponsored “open forums” — originally introduced as controlled spaces to release public pressure and promote limited dialogue — have often evolved into unexpected platforms for dissent. Initially intended to signal responsiveness and legitimacy, these forums, including online comment sections, local petition systems, and moderated public hearings, gave citizens a taste of participation and critique. However, as grievances mounted over corruption, inequality, land seizures, and lack of accountability, these spaces were increasingly used to air discontent. For example, online platforms such as Weibo or forums like Tianya were once monitored but allowed some leeway for criticism, enabling users to mobilize public opinion, highlight abuses, and expose local officials — sometimes leading to mass outrage or even protests. Other forms of protest include “blank paper" protests, where demonstrators hold up white paper to symbolize their silence and dissent. The Chinese dissent monitoring site Freedom House lists one crime as “picking a quarrel and provoking trouble” (寻衅滋事罪) and reports a rise in retiree protests especially after healthcare reforms. This unintended empowerment forced the central government to clamp down, turning open forums into highly surveilled, censored, or co-opted arenas. Instead of diffusing discontent, the process often magnified the gap between public expectations and state responsiveness, undermining the regime’s original intent of controlled liberalization and revealing the inherent contradictions of authoritarian openness.

**Ask and You Shall Not Receive**

Communist societies have a special panache for making the prison walls of authoritarian rule all the more visible amid growing demands for light and space. My experiences in Communist Eastern Europe, in particular Czechoslovakia, taught me all I needed to know about surveillance societies and the corrosive societal anger it generates.

China's extensive efforts to surveil and punish dissent have, paradoxically, heightened public awareness of authoritarian constraints, making the "prison walls" of state control more visible amid growing demands for freedom and transparency.

The pervasive surveillance infrastructure, exemplified by programs like "Sharp Eyes," employs tens of thousands of cameras and sensors to monitor citizens continuously. In cities such as Chongqing, this has led to an environment where residents live under constant observation, with some areas described as lacking natural light due to dense urban planning and persistent smog. This omnipresent surveillance fosters a sense of unease and highlights the extent of state control over daily life.

Moreover, the state's aggressive censorship tactics often backfire, drawing more attention to the issues they aim to suppress. For instance, the 2022 Sitong Bridge protest in Beijing, where a lone demonstrator displayed banners criticizing the government, was swiftly censored online. However, this censorship led to increased interest and solidarity, with similar protest slogans appearing in other cities and on international campuses. The attempt to erase the incident only amplified its impact, illustrating how suppression can inadvertently fuel dissent.

Additionally, the intensification of online censorship has extended beyond content creators to include their followers. Individuals engaging in political discussions on platforms like Discord have faced police interrogations, even when using VPNs to bypass restrictions. This broadening of surveillance targets not only stifles free expression but also fosters resentment and a sense of injustice among the populace.

These measures, intended to reinforce regime stability, often have the opposite effect. They expose the lengths to which the government will go to maintain control, thereby undermining its legitimacy and fueling public desire for greater openness and reform.

**Threat of Technology**

China's integration of advanced surveillance technologies into its governance model has significant implications for liberal democracies. Domestically, China's deployment of AI-powered facial recognition, biometric tracking, and the Social Credit System has led to a society under constant surveillance. In cities like Chongqing, residents live amidst thousands of surveillance cameras, fostering an environment likened to an Orwellian dystopia exemplified by the concept of "doublethink," where contradictory beliefs coexist, and historical records are continuously altered to fit the Party's narrative.

In Václav Havel's seminal essay "The Power of the Powerless," the story of the greengrocer serves as a poignant illustration of what it means to live a lie under a totalitarian regime. The greengrocer routinely displays a sign in his shop window proclaiming "Workers of the world, unite!"—not out of genuine belief, but to avoid scrutiny and maintain his livelihood. This act of compliance, though seemingly innocuous, contributes to the perpetuation of a system built on falsehoods and conformity. Havel argues that such participation in the lie reinforces the regime's power, as the system relies on the passive acceptance of its citizens to sustain its authority. However, when the greengrocer chooses to remove the sign, he breaks the cycle of complicity, exposing the regime's reliance on enforced unanimity and demonstrating the profound impact of individual dissent. This act of "living in truth" challenges the very foundation of the oppressive system, revealing that its power is contingent upon the collective acceptance of its falsehoods.

Real freedom is illusory, individual empowerment is a myth and truth is what a party says it is. While these measures aim to maintain social order, they have also heightened public awareness of state control, leading to increased dissatisfaction and a desire for greater freedoms. More to the matter, such a system splits truth which can be understood from the outset in a two-fold way; its existence and its pronouncement. Truth is a universal fundamental, its parts cannot be reduced or divided. It is the irreconcilability of this fundamental gap that becomes evident in such a society. My own experience in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe confirmed this. The people lived dual lives at great personal cost. The experience trying to function inside such a society is unnerving because things are not what they purport to be.

Internationally, China's export of surveillance technology and its digital governance model presents challenges for liberal democracies. The proliferation of AI-powered surveillance systems has empowered governments seeking greater control with tools that entrench non-democracy. China's promotion of its digital authoritarianism model can embolden authoritarian tendencies in other countries, potentially leading to a decline in democratic values globally. Moreover, reliance on Chinese technology for critical infrastructure raises concerns about data security and potential foreign interference.

**Quantum New Thinking (QNT)**

Quantum mechanics is opening new debate in diverse areas like International Relations. What can it mean for new paradigms about the state system? New discoveries inform experimental thinking. For example, a person may have a “spin” direction or belief in goodness, say to the highest level of 5 and the lowest -5. Global factors can mean allegiance to beliefs and the intensity may diminish or become “entangled” or smeared into one as the human mind is essentially a quantum computer. Some individuals have lower levels of awareness which does not indicate fickleness rather a weaker idea immune system. Some individuals possess a negative 5 level which stays pointed backwards and can all those around them. They build social systems, often removing the level 5 persons whom they consider threats to their desire to dominate the social order and create obligations to harness the people to very personal leadership goals. For the vast majority of people, the progression from a higher level of intensity “spin” to a lower and back ebbs and flows with the energy of the day. Pioneering Quantum Political Scientist Alexander Wendt considers the state is a state of mind … before it is an agent, structure or practice.

Classical IR theories, such as realism and liberalism, typically portray states as rational actors operating within an anarchic international system, emphasizing material power and interests. The quantum paradigm, however, shifts the focus to the fluid and constructed nature of reality, where identities, interests, and power relations are not fixed but continuously shaped through interactions and perceptions. This perspective aligns with constructivist approaches but further incorporates principles from quantum physics to account for the inherent uncertainty and complexity of international relations.

Unlike classical IR theories that assume a singular, objective reality, the quantum perspective acknowledges the coexistence of multiple, overlapping realities. This allows for the simultaneous existence of conflicting identities and intentions within states and individuals, leading to a more nuanced understanding of international dynamics.

Quantum entanglement suggests that entities are deeply interconnected, such that the state of one instantly influences the state of another, regardless of distance. In IR, this implies that the actions and beliefs of one actor can have immediate and unforeseen effects on others, highlighting the complexity of global interdependence.

The observer effect posits that the act of observation itself can alter the state of the observed system. Applied to IR, this underscores the role of perceptions, narratives, and subjectivity in shaping international outcomes, challenging the notion of objective analysis.

Embracing nonlinearity, the quantum approach recognizes that small changes can lead to disproportionate effects, and that systems can exhibit emergent properties not predictable from their individual components. This perspective allows for a better understanding of complex phenomena such as sudden political shifts or the rapid spread of social movements.

After 1989, China's trajectory can be viewed through a quantum lens as a state shifting between multiple potentialities, where authoritarian resilience and economic liberalism existed in a superposition. The trauma of Tiananmen created an entangled memory state that influenced both domestic governance and international posturing—never fully observed, yet shaping behavior through its spectral presence. As global observers focused their attention, the observer effect played out: scrutiny altered China's internal calculations, prompting a recalibration of visibility, control, and openness. Entanglement with global markets introduced a paradox—China became simultaneously more integrated and more insular. Political values fluctuated, with some actors maintaining high alignment with state narratives while others decohered into resistance or apathy. Like quantum particles, individual and institutional intentions were not always predictable; minor shifts—an online post, a local protest—sometimes collapsed into waves of control or reform. China's development thus unfolded as a nonlinear, probabilistic evolution, where power, identity, and influence emerged not from fixed ideology but from dynamic interaction with global and domestic uncertainties. In such an analysis ideology becomes a fluid component within a universe of change where words and actions do not necessarily correspond to a true reality and hidden things, for example norms, take on more significance as they can be and often are separated from morality.

Other spiritual lenses might conclude that the Tiananman massacre spread entheta (enturbulated theta, i.e., disturbed spiritual energy), creating a civilization in which high-tone operation became impossible. Chinese advances in quantum technologies may reveal profound truths leading to a significant gap between those natural forces (which include spiritual forces) and those exercised by reactionary leaders unable to govern without brute force.

**Reforming More than the Economy**

China's increasing influence in international institutions, led by its own economic reforms, has helped reshape global human rights norms. China’s success at splitting the political from economic continues as its vision unfolds globally. By promoting a state-centric interpretation of human rights, the Chinese government seeks to prioritize economic development and social stability over individual freedoms. This approach undermines the universality of human rights and emboldens other authoritarian regimes to justify their repressive actions. For instance, China's influence has been observed in the United Nations Human Rights Council, where it has worked to dilute language on civil and political rights. Michelle Bachelet, former U.N. High Commissioner issued a report in 2022 that called for an investigation of serious abuses in particular in the Uyghurs and other Turkic communities in the Xinjiang region. This trend poses a threat to the global human rights framework itself, potentially making it more difficult to hold governments accountable for violations thus inviting new ones.

Domestically, China's extensive censorship apparatus stifles artistic expression, academic inquiry, and media freedom. The government's control over information limits the diversity of perspectives and inhibits innovation. Internationally, China's model of digital authoritarianism, characterized by surveillance and information control, has been exported to other countries, providing tools for repression and setting a precedent for limiting creative freedoms. This exportation of censorship technologies and practices threatens the open exchange of ideas essential for progress in a changing world.

Historically, the rise of authoritarian regimes has had a contagious effect, influencing other nations and leading to a decline in freedoms. In the interwar period, the emergence of fascist governments in Italy and Germany inspired similar movements across Europe, resulting in widespread suppression of democratic institutions and civil liberties. These regimes often collaborated, reinforcing each other's power and creating an environment hostile to dissent and pluralism.

The pattern demonstrates how authoritarianism in one nation can embolden and facilitate the rise of similar systems elsewhere, leading to a global decline in freedom.

The separation of the economic and political reforms had far reaching implications on a global scale. Some have suggested this could be used promote a Chinese “brand” and that an illiberal global atmosphere might normalize Chinese behavior making it less sensitive to Western criticism. Perhaps this facet was the least explored by those who offered gratuitous aid to China in the beginning which exposed the fallacy that an economically thriving China would be compliant to Western political norms enshrined in the U.N. Charter. This proved an egregious error in judgement that had never been successful: thinking that a communist country would be amenable to sharing political power with any other party. Or worse — use the new status as a strategic stratagem to enmesh less fortunate countries hungry for development to dance its tunes — creating a vasseldom of states seeking to perpetuate its system. In the end things were made worse as the political and economic division scaled to a challenge to the existing global order.

Using its new wealth and economic skills acquired at little or no cost on a river cruise of handpicked economists on the Yangtze River, in 1991 dubbed by a 2016 article in Foreign Affairs titled “The Cruise that Changed China”, emergent divisions between liberal and conservative voices in the Chinese leadership only sharpen in the coming years.

**A Useful Post-Mortem**

After affirming that knocking down the walls of a prison garden to allow more light for the flower garden proved not to be the chosen option, the next question to answer is just exactly how the international order unraveled and to what degree we might find hubris at the core.

1. Quentin Skinner "A Third Concept of Liberty" London Review of Books Vol. 24 No. 7 · 4 April 2002 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)