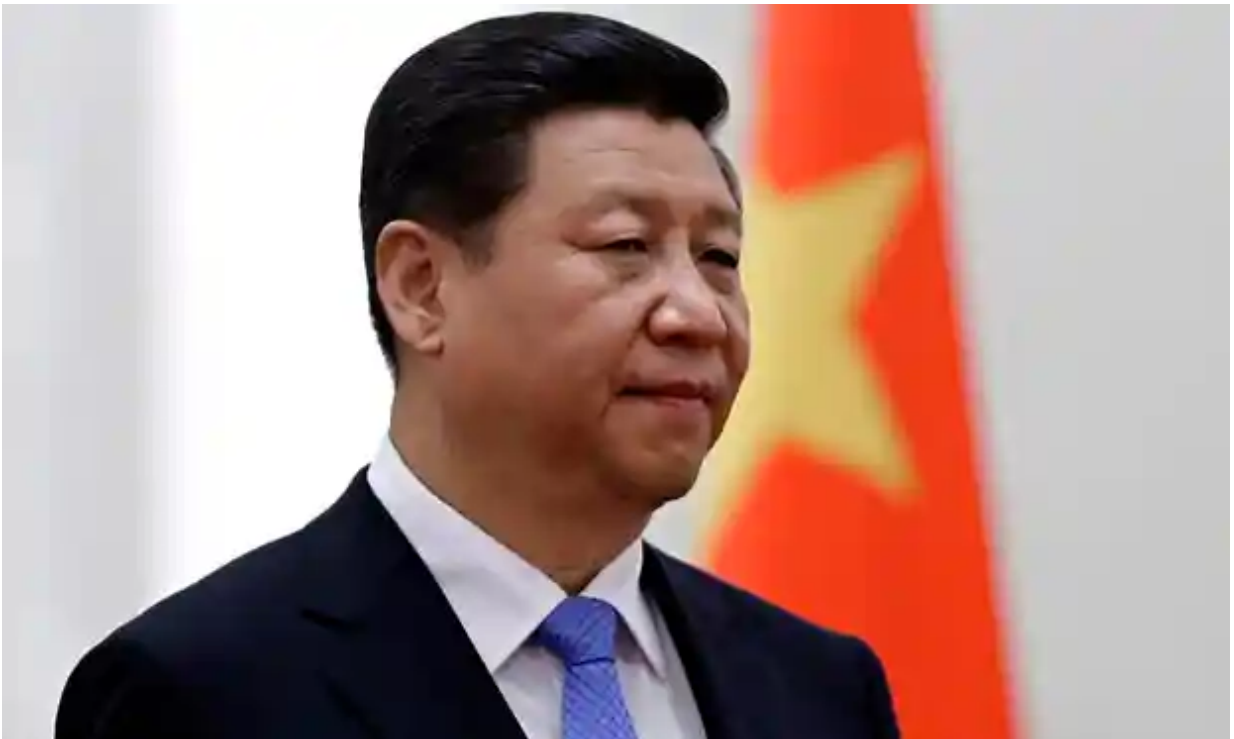


# Chinese repression of dissent intensifies under ruthless Xi Jinping

[Simon Tisdall](#) 31 Dec 2014

**Series of moves to curb personal freedoms and free speech demonstrate China's drift towards a new authoritarianism**



Xi Jinping, the Chinese president. Photograph: Jason Lee/Reuters

Tue 30 Dec 2014 16.06 GMT

Last modified on Thu 30 Nov 2017 02.21 GMT

China's drift towards a new authoritarianism under the unsmiling leadership of [Xi Jinping](#) has found new expression in a series of alarming year's-end moves to curb personal freedoms and free speech. The country's

implacable president and Communist party chief is forcefully driving China towards economic and geopolitical superpower status. But the social cost is mounting steadily.

With the ruthless crackdown on dissent in Hong Kong still fresh in the memory, Xi's latest anti-democratic coup came in the form of [expanded action to block Gmail](#), Google's email service, presumably because it gave users a degree of autonomy that Xi and his unelected party cadres find threatening. China already regularly blocks foreign websites such as Facebook and YouTube. Google pulled most of its business out of China in 2011 after a row over censorship.

Attempting to justify the Gmail shutdown, the Global Times, which is close to the Communist party, accused Google of failing to comply with Chinese law. But an [editorial](#) also suggested China's action "must have been prompted by newly emerged security reasons" including "ideological security". It then offered some specious reassurance: "We only need to have faith that China has its own logic in terms of internet policy and it is made and runs in accordance with the country's fundamental interests." For many Chinese, that is a big ask.

Aspects of Xi's policy of "autocracy with Chinese characteristics" are familiar to the country's academic community, which is under renewed pressure to toe the party line. Instructions issued by the president after a

higher education conference on Monday included the demand that universities do more to promote Marxist doctrine and Communist party ideological guidance, the Xinhua news agency reported.

“Enhancing [party] leadership and party-building in the higher learning institutions is a fundamental guarantee for running socialist universities with Chinese features well,” Xi was [quoted as saying](#).

Political indoctrination is already a routine feature of university life for Chinese students, while their teachers are subject to monitoring to ensure political correctness. In an echo of the Stalinist era in the Soviet Union, this year reporters from state-controlled media were ordered to attend university lectures and detect and denounce teachers whose ideas might be considered “scornful of China” or pro-western.

Prof Zhang Xuezhong, of East China University of Political Science and Law in Shanghai, and Prof Xia Yeliang, of Peking University in Beijing – both noted champions of free speech and the rule of law – were [sacked in 2013](#) for what they said were political reasons. “I’m just a university faculty member who expresses his own opinions, thoughts and proposals, which is absolutely my right. This is an out-and-out witch-hunt,” Zhang said.

China’s repression of political activists, writers, independent journalists, artists and religious groups who

potentially challenge the party's monopoly of power has intensified since Xi took office nearly two years ago. In the most recent instance, on Tuesday a court [sentenced Shen Yongping](#), a filmmaker, to a year in jail for running an illegal business. But Shen's supporters suggested his real offence was to have made a documentary recording the party's ongoing failure to uphold the country's constitution and laws.

China's estimated 60-70 million Christians have not escaped persecution during the Christmas period, according to reports from Beijing suggesting their plight has worsened under the new leadership. Members of Shouwang, a Beijing Christian group, [told Agence France-Presse](#) that several pastors had been under house arrest since they tried to arrange Easter services in a public square in 2011.

Most Chinese Christians shun state-run churches and worship in "house churches" beyond government control. But official tolerance of such independent activity is waning, judging by a crackdown on 400 churches in eastern Zhejiang province, some of which were reportedly demolished.

Offering an insight into paranoid party thinking, an official recently told Beijing worshippers to "resolutely resist the use of Christianity by foreigners to infiltrate China". Crosses have been torn down at many churches and [at a nursing home](#). The authorities have [made an issue out of](#)

[Christmas lights](#), which are increasingly popular in Chinese cities, saying they may pose a safety hazard.

Many in China refuse to accept Xi's self-serving prescripts about what they may and may not do or say. A recent example was provided by the Sony Pictures comedy *The Interview*, which caused such offence to North Korea's dictatorship. Despite being condemned by Chinese state media, the film was gleefully (and illegally) downloaded by tens of thousands of Chinese within hours of its online release, [according to the Washington Post](#).

“Many Chinese ‘netizens’ left positive reviews online, even without seeing the movie, as a gesture of protest against censorship, while others appeared to enjoy the lampooning of the North Korea regime. The country's leader is often mockingly referred to by Chinese web users as ‘Fatty Kim III,’” the Post reported.

This is exactly this sort of public irreverence, bordering on lese-majesty, that grim Xi fears most.

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