
Between Stability and Suppression: China's Golden Shield and the Struggle for Cohesion

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Résumé

Ce travail examine le Projet *Golden Shield* comme une pierre angulaire de l'architecture de censure et de surveillance de la République populaire de Chine, en analysant ses implications sur le contrôle de l'État, la pression économique et les tensions sociales. Bien que la Chine garantisse nominalement la liberté d'expression, son cadre juridique permet des restrictions étendues de l'information, renforçant un modèle de gouvernance fondé sur des récits centralisés et une surveillance numérique omniprésente. L'expansion de l'appareil de sécurité intérieure à la suite des manifestations de la place Tian'anmen en 1989 illustre la dépendance croissante de l'État à la surveillance pour réprimer la dissidence. Cependant, cette stratégie entraîne des coûts financiers et sociaux considérables : l'augmentation des dépenses de sécurité intérieure s'est accompagnée d'une hausse du mécontentement public. À travers une analyse comparative du cadre de gouvernance canadien, ce travail met en évidence la manière dont la priorisation de la répression au détriment des réformes en Chine contribue à un cycle auto-entretenu d'agitation. En s'appuyant sur des tendances historiques, des données économiques et des études de cas de mouvements de protestation, cette analyse souligne les conséquences inattendues de la censure. Elle conclut en explorant des modèles de gouvernance alternatifs fondés sur la transparence, la participation citoyenne à la prise de décision et la confiance du public comme voies plus durables à l'ère de l'interconnexion mondiale.

Mots-clés: Chine, Projet *Golden Shield*, censure, agitation sociale, autoritarisme.

Abstract

This paper examines the Golden Shield Project as a cornerstone of the People's Republic of China's censorship and surveillance architecture, analyzing its implications on state control, economic strain, and social unrest. While China nominally guarantees freedom of speech, its legal apparatus allows for sweeping restrictions on information, reinforcing a governance model grounded in centralized narratives and pervasive digital monitoring. The expansion of the domestic security apparatus following the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests illustrates the state's increasing reliance on surveillance to suppress dissent. However, this strategy carries substantial financial and societal costs: rising domestic security expenditures have paralleled an increase in public dissent. Through a comparative analysis of Canada's governance framework, this paper highlights how China's prioritization of suppression over reform entrenches a self-perpetuating cycle of unrest. Drawing on historical patterns, insights from economic data, and case studies of protest movements, this analysis underscores the unintended consequences of censorship. It concludes by exploring alternative governance models rooted in transparency, participatory decision-making, and public trust as more sustainable pathways in the era of global interconnectedness.

Keywords: China, Golden Shield Project, censorship, social unrest, authoritarianism

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Introduction

In democratic societies, the right to free speech is a foundational principle. Free speech is widely regarded as essential for fostering accountability and ensuring governments prioritize the interests of their citizens. This freedom reinforces social cohesion by enabling a participatory political culture and provides states with legitimacy rooted in public trust. In contrast, authoritarian governments adopt a fundamentally different approach to maintaining social cohesion—one that prioritizes control over discourse and suppresses dissent to preserve state authority (Schedler & Hoffmann, 2016). In such systems, governmental legitimacy does not emerge from transparency or responsiveness, it is instead constructed through centralized and curated narratives, enforced by invasive surveillance and censorship mechanisms.

The People's Republic of China's (PRC) framework for controlling information exemplifies this approach. Multi-faceted and deeply complex, it operates through overlapping layers of state programs, institutions, and private organizations, administered by all levels of government (Zhang et al., 2024). Central to this strategy is the Golden Shield Project (GSP), an extensive information technology (IT) modernization initiative implemented by the Ministry of Public Security (MPS) to regulate internet activity, thereby reinforcing broader societal conformity (Pei, 2024). The GSP's implementation timeline has been marked by successive expansions of scope and capabilities, reflecting both technological advancements and the state's increasing

reliance on surveillance to enforce its narratives and maintain control (Pei, 2024).

However, this evolving framework has coincided with concerning trends: domestic security expenditures exceed those of China's formidable national defence budget, amid rising incidences of civil unrest. As this paper will argue, these outcomes suggest that the rollout of measures designed to suppress dissent, paradoxically, exacerbate societal discontent, perpetuating cycles of grievance and resistance. An analysis of the Golden Shield Project's censorship methods highlights a paradox within authoritarian governance: while increased surveillance aims to maintain social stability, it often exacerbates societal unrest and imposes significant economic costs, raising questions regarding the long-term viability of such models in a deeply interconnected yet increasingly isolationist world.

Historical Evolution of China's Mechanisms of Control

In 1984, Chinese Statesman Deng Xiaoping aptly remarked, "[I]f you open the window for fresh air, you have to expect some flies to blow in" (as cited in MacKinnon, 2007, p. 33). With China's entry onto the global economic stage following the Cultural Revolution, the Communist Party of China (CPC) further entrenched censorship and surveillance as critical tools to control dissent, maintain national unity, and uphold its legitimacy— "swatting flies" of unwanted ideologies in the process (MacKinnon, 2007, p. 33). A pivotal moment in this narrative was the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989, a pro-democracy

movement led primarily by students advocating for political reform, freedom of speech, and government accountability. The Chinese government responded with a violent crackdown, declaring martial law and deploying the military, which resulted in the deaths of thousands of civilians (Henry, 2022). Faced with a crisis of legitimacy and growing demands for political change, the Chinese government responded by significantly expanding its domestic security apparatus. While investing in expanding its traditional activities and manpower, it also began developing new technologies to monitor and suppress potential political threats (Pei, 2024).

While the Constitution of the PRC (1982, Art. 35 § 2) nominally guarantees “freedom of speech, the press, assembly, association, procession, and demonstration,” these rights are significantly curtailed by laws that contain ambiguous provisions. Phrases such as “[to] organize, scheme or carry out subverting of the state’s political power” (Criminal Law of the People’s Republic of China 1997, Art. 103 § 2), “disturbing public order by spreading any rumor” (Public Security Administration Punishments Law, 2012, Art. 25.1.2 § 1), “engag[ing] in activities endangering national security, national honor, and national interests” and “[to] create or disseminate false information” (Cybersecurity Law of the People’s Republic of China, 2016, Art. 12 § 2), grant authorities broad discretion to monitor and suppress activities, information, or individuals deemed problematic. This could include censoring public posts on Weibo (a Chinese microblogging platform, similar to X

(formally Twitter)), surveilling private WeChat (a popular Chinese messaging, social media, and mobile payment app) conversations, and forcing internet service providers to track and remove content classified as “information that the law or administrative regulations prohibit the publication or transmission of” (Cybersecurity Law of the People’s Republic of China, 2016, Art. 47). By contrast, similarly invasive surveillance activities conducted by the Canadian Security Intelligence Service require judicial authorization and due process, must adhere to the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and are subject to oversight from other government departments (Canadian Security Intelligence Service Act, 1985, Art. 3.1 § 12). This establishes a system of checks that balances public safety and an individual’s rights to privacy.

The adoption of the GSP in 1998 marked a new beginning in China’s surveillance and censorship capabilities (Pei, 2024). Integrating advanced technologies and new administrative measures, the project enables comprehensive online monitoring, policing, and censorship among other capabilities (Pei, 2024). One of these is Deep Packet Inspection, a network sniffing technology and one of the GSP’s most effective tools (Farnan & Wright, 2014). By inspecting individual data packets in real-time, such as an image or a keyword, operators are able to quickly identify prohibited content, such as references to political dissent, banned organizations, or sensitive historical events (Farnan & Wright, 2014). With these technologies, the MPS is able to efficiently enforce the monitoring, blocking,

redirection, or throttling of internet connections automatically (Pei, 2024). While users sometimes circumvent these measures through memes, neologisms, and homophones, the system remains dynamic, frequently updating its prohibited content databases. A notable illustration of this adaptive censorship is the case of the children's television character Winnie the Pooh, which was systematically removed from Chinese digital platforms following the emergence of satirical visual comparisons between the fictional bear and President Xi Jinping (McDonell, 2017). This instance demonstrates how even seemingly innocuous cultural references become subject to censorship when they acquire politically sensitive connotations.

Further reinforcing these surveillance mechanisms, internet service providers, search engines, and social media platforms are mandated to comply with government directives, ensuring respect for “social morality” is maintained (Cybersecurity Law of the People’s Republic of China, 2016, Art. 9). This could include blocking and removing prohibited content and maintaining user activity databases, enabling authorities to track individuals suspected of dissent (Cybersecurity Law of the People’s Republic of China, 2016, Art. 28, 29, 55). The introduction of compulsory real-name registration further strengthens this system, ensuring behavioural conformity while simplifying the identification of those engaged in restricted activities (Fu et al., 2013). Together, these measures form a robust framework for control, allowing the Chinese government to tightly regulate

online content and consolidate its political authority.

Economic Strain and Rising Unrest

Domestic security spending in China encompasses funding for an extensive array of institutions and activities, including the MPS, the People’s Armed Police, national security agencies, prisons, the justice system, and various other measures aimed at suppressing social unrest (Greitens, 2017). In March 2011, Reuters reported that China’s domestic security spending had, for the first time, surpassed the budget allocated to the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), highlighting the rapidly escalating costs of maintaining internal stability. In subsequent years, these budgets became shrouded in secrecy. By 2014, official domestic security spending was reported at 205 billion yuan—down from 769.1 billion yuan in 2013—as China’s central government deliberately excluded provincial and regional public security budgets from the publicly disclosed total (Martina, 2014). The decision to curtail transparency in economic reporting reflects not only a desire to obscure the scale of internal unrest and rising investment in domestic security, but also a strategic effort to conceal the rapid advancement of censorship and surveillance capabilities (Pei, 2024). Official statistics across various areas remain deeply compromised by political incentives: local and regional governments frequently distort fiscal data to appease central authorities (Gong et al., 2025), while national reporting selectively omits or obscures key data, such as excluding students and rural residents from the youth unemployment rate (Bu &

Woo, 2025). Based on my independent aggregation of provincial and regional public

finance data sourced from China’s Ministry of Finance, public security

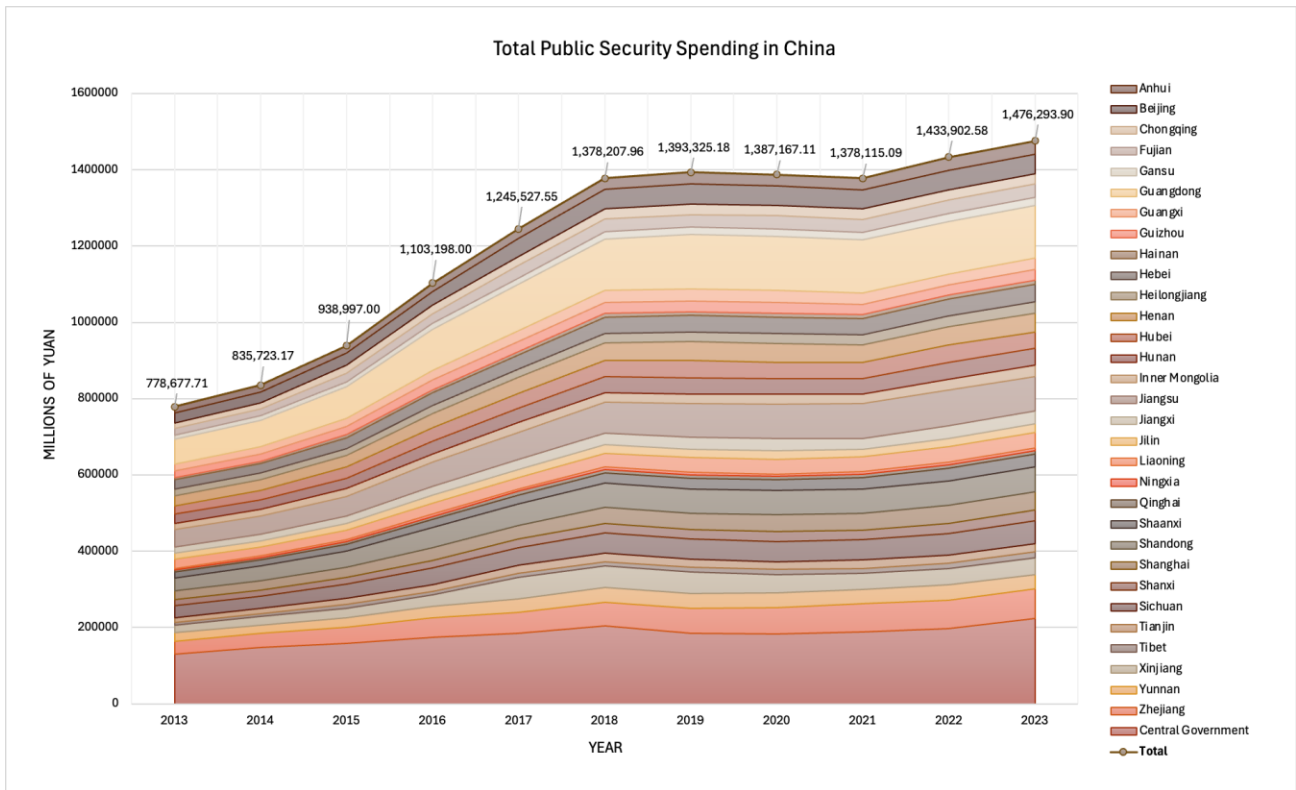


Figure 1: Public security spending in China by jurisdiction (2013–2023).

Note. Data sourced from the Ministry of Finance of the People’s Republic of China (accessed via the China Economic Information Centre (CEIC))

spending across all jurisdictions in 2023 totalled approximately 1.476 trillion yuan (Figure 1), underscoring the growing financial burden of internal security. These figures should also be interpreted with caution, as China only scores in the 2nd quintile in the World Bank’s Statistical Performance Indicators framework. This indicates a below average reliability of statistical data and raises questions about

whether internal reporting reflects the full extent of security expenditures.

Tracing spending back to the early phases of the GSP, the financial strain immediately becomes apparent. Between 2004 and 2011, total domestic security expenditure surged from 154.8 billion yuan (~30 bn CAD) to 522 billion yuan (~102 bn CAD), proportionally outpacing China’s rapid economic growth during this period (Pei, 2024). Such spending coincides with the dramatic rise in what China’s categorizes as “mass incidents”—a

euphemism encompassing protests, demonstrations, riots, and other forms of collective action challenging authority (Steinhardt, 2017). These incidents reflect a growing public discontent with social, economic, and political grievances.

Although official statistics on mass incidents have become increasingly restricted, academic reconstructions based on accumulated reports estimate that incidents involving more than 15 participants rose from approximately 8,700 events in 1993 to 74,000 in 2004 (Zhang & Wu, 2017). These figures suggest a steep escalation in collective unrest during the late 1990s and early 2000s. By 2010, unofficial estimates based on the Chinese General Social Survey indicated that the number had soared to 180,000 (Steinhardt, 2017). These incidents, encompassing a broad range of public grievances such as land disputes, cultural repression, and allegations of corruption, reflect growing public dissatisfaction with local governance and systemic inequalities. Land disputes, in particular, accounted for nearly 65% of reported mass incidents during this period, as rapid urbanization led to widespread forced acquisitions of rural land, often without adequate compensation, deepening resentment toward local authorities (Göbel & Ong, 2012).

In the 2010s, as surveillance and censorship intensified under Xi Jinping's leadership (Pei, 2024), the character and scale of mass incidents evolved. Protests in this period often matched or exceeded the intensity of earlier unrest, underscoring the persistence of public grievances despite heightened government control. The 2019

Hong Kong protests, for example, drew international attention as hundreds of thousands mobilized against proposed extradition laws to mainland China (Purbrick, 2019). More recently, during the COVID-19 pandemic, public frustrations over extreme lockdowns and inadequate government support culminated in the 2022 White Paper Protests, named for the blank sheets of paper held by demonstrators to symbolize censorship (Henry, 2022). Similarly, starting in mid-2022, protests and mortgage boycotts erupted across China after major real-estate developers, notably Evergrande Group, defaulted on over \$300 billion in liabilities (Kirton & Pomfret, 2024). This marked a significant shift, as the middle classes—who had long upheld an implicit bargain with the CPC, accepting authoritarian control in exchange for economic prosperity (Miao, 2016)—began actively participating in dissent (Kirton & Pomfret, 2024). The government responded with censorship, silencing discussions on social media and blocking accounts. Yet, the mass incidents continue, reflecting the cyclical nature of discontent fueled by unaddressed systemic grievances.

The scale of China's domestic security spending is even more striking when contrasted with countries like Canada, where public security comprises a smaller share of national budgets. Liberal democracies typically rely on input driven institutional legitimacy and social services to maintain order (Keman, 2025), resulting in proportionally lower domestic security spending (Eurostat, 2025). These systems typically emphasize national defence over internal policing when coercive spending is

necessary (Van Vark, 2021). Yet as Figure 2 shows, China not only sustains a large military apparatus, it also devotes a high proportion of its total government expenditure to internal security. From 2013 to 2023, China’s public security spending consistently exceeded 6% of total government expenditure and shows no sign of dramatically slowing, reflecting the significant financial commitment required to uphold security infrastructure and maintain domestic stability. Canada’s proportion over the same period remained around 2.5%,

with public security and defence spending tracking closely—reflecting, in part, Canada’s chronic underinvestment in its military, a point of frequent criticism in NATO circles (Fitz-Gerald & Padalko, 2025). This comparison illustrates not just a difference in spending levels, but a divergence in governance philosophy: while China emphasizes internal control and coercive capacity, Canada places a greater proportional weight on trust-building through accountability and the provision of broad public services.

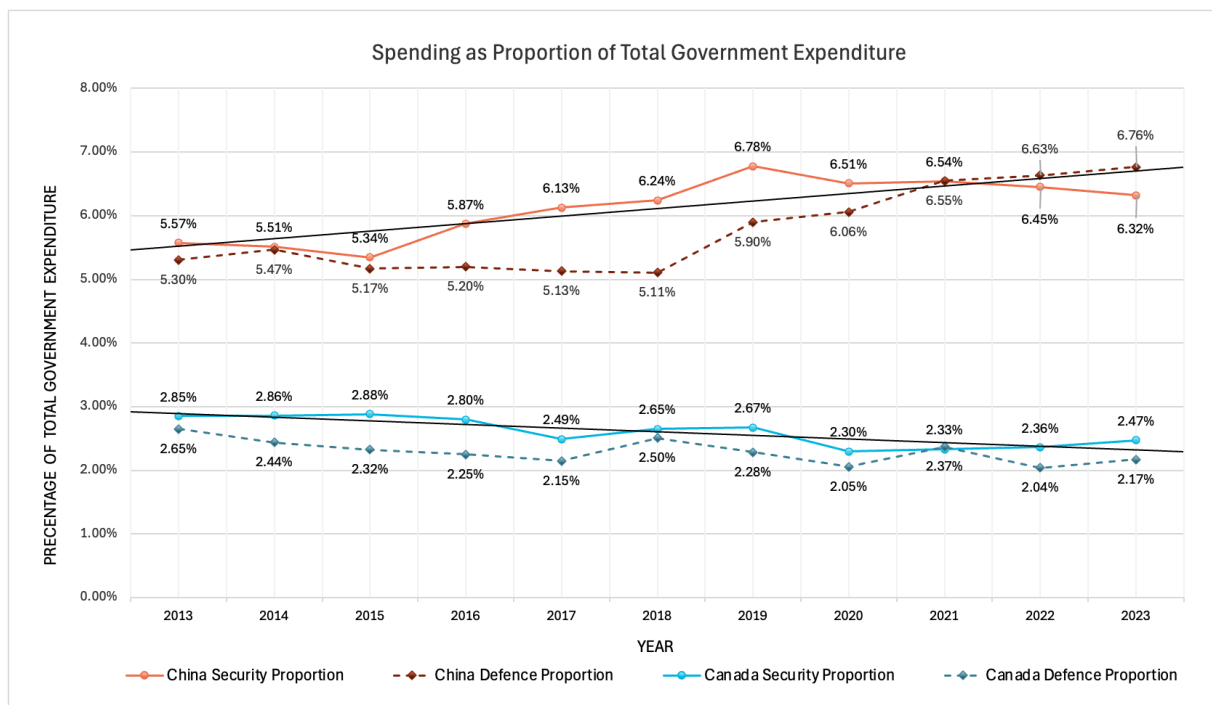


Figure 2: Spending as a proportion of total government expenditure (2013–2023).

Note. Data sourced from the Ministry of Finance of the People’s Republic of China (via CEIC), National Bureau of Statistics of China (via Statista), Statistics Canada, and the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat. Canadian public security spending encompasses police services, justice departments/institutions, correctional services, intelligence agencies, and border services across all jurisdictions. 2019 police services data substituted for unavailable 2020 data.

As China’s domestic security costs continue to escalate, the resulting financial strain disproportionately impacts smaller,

less affluent local governments, which face increasing difficulty meeting centrally dictated mandates (Greitens, 2017). Unlike

wealthier coastal provinces that can absorb these costs through flexible budgets, poorer inland and rural regions are compelled into reactionary governance practices—such as aggressively imposing fines or prioritizing short-term coercive measures—to manage immediate stability targets at the expense of longer-term investment in essential services and infrastructure (Göbel & Ong, 2012; Zhang, M., & Wu, X., 2017). This dynamic exacerbates existing regional disparities, entrenching patterns of reactive and performative governance that undermine national cohesion and institutional effectiveness (Jia, 2024). A more balanced governance framework—particularly crucial for a country as populous and diverse as China—would prioritize substantive fiscal decentralization, enhanced local autonomy, and more robust accountability mechanisms. Such reforms would mitigate structural inequities, reduce reliance on coercion, and foster sustainable stability grounded in public trust and responsive governance (Wu et al., 2017).

The financial strain and increasing protests reveal a deeper societal cost: the erosion of trust in government and the perpetuation of a cycle of dissent. These dynamics not only question the sustainability of China's governance model but also underscore the broader societal consequences of its surveillance and suppression strategies. This invites a closer look at how censorship and authoritarian control impose broader social and economic trade-offs, further compounding cycles of unrest.

The Cycle of Suppression and Resistance

Beyond the financial burden, China's efforts to suppress dissent through surveillance and censorship impose profound social and opportunity costs. While these measures are designed to maintain stability, they often yield unintended consequences by exacerbating societal grievances, stifling social cohesion, and undermining trust in the government.

China's strategies primarily target the organization and logistics of protests, using internet censorship and surveillance to purge content such as meeting times, locations, and tactical details (Qin et al., 2024). However, dissent often manifests in subtler forms. Signaling “windows of opportunity” for collective action through emotionally resonant content allows protestors to mobilize without relying on overt coordination (Qin et al., 2024). These adaptations illustrate the limits of censorship in suppressing public discontent. Moreover, increased awareness of censorship laws can paradoxically fuel political expression (Lu & Zhao, 2018), as citizens express grievances in ways that further challenge state control.

China's censorship and surveillance apparatus, while expansive, creates a self-reinforcing cycle of discontent. By restricting legitimate channels for grievance expression, such as petitions or public critique, the government drives protests underground, intensifying public frustration (Göbel & Ong, 2012). Grievances such as corruption, housing disputes, environmental concerns, and inadequate labour protections—accounting for nearly 80% of all mass incidents (Qin et al., 2024)—

highlight the systemic roots of public unrest. Addressing these grievances directly, rather than suppressing them, could reduce the frequency of dissent and build trust in governance.

The social and opportunity costs of censorship extend beyond societal discontent and slowed progress; they can manifest in more existential movements like “lying flat”, reflecting broader disillusionment with authoritarian control. By opting out of competitive societal and economic structures, Chinese youth challenge the state's emphasis on productivity and growth (Berkeley Economic Review, 2023). This quiet resistance not only critiques systemic inequalities but also exposes the vulnerabilities of a governance model heavily reliant on economic performance for legitimacy. The broader impacts of laying flat extend into the economy and social cohesion. Reduced workforce participation, a byproduct of this movement (Yeh, 2022), could further hamper China's ability to sustain high growth rates and exacerbate existing demographic pressures—above all a quickly shrinking working-age population brought on by record low fertility and rapid ageing (Sun et al., 2023). Moreover, the symbolic rejection of state narratives around collective striving undermines the CPC's authority by fostering alternative social values and identities. These dynamics, compounded by the government's suppression of dissent, suggest that the current strategy of control inadvertently fuels cycles of resistance and weakens different aspects of society. This illustrates how censorship creates ripple effects that not only hinder individual

potential but also compromises broader state objectives. The true cost of control, as demonstrated by these phenomena, is perhaps greater than its benefits.

Conclusion

These observations on the cycle of control invite a deeper reflection on alternative governance philosophies, particularly those with roots in Chinese tradition. To paraphrase the *Dao De Jing*—a classical Daoist text that has had a lasting influence on Chinese political thought and culture — “[t]he Great Dao flows everywhere, at our every right and left. Relying upon it, the things of the world are born, yet it remains wordless; its work done it takes no name as the doer. [...] It may be termed small. The things of the world return to it but it never acts as their lord — it may be termed great. Because it never takes itself to be great, it is able to complete its greatness.” (Laozi, trans. Eno, 2010, ch. 34). Taken alongside Confucian notions of *dé* (moral virtue) and *mínběn* (people as the foundation), this passage reminds us that legitimacy in the Chinese tradition is conditioned on moral leadership more than coercion. China's contemporary reliance on censorship and surveillance may have suppressed overt dissent, but it has also generated mounting financial burdens, social costs, and an undercurrent of public resistance.

These strains expose the fragility of a system that prioritizes suppression over responsiveness. Local governments struggle with ballooning security budgets while citizens protest over housing, corruption, and land expropriation—

grievances that rigid controls cannot permanently silence. Arguments discussing an imminent “collapse,” however, are overstated (Lin, 2025). A more plausible scenario is a protracted period of slower growth—already evident in the continuing post-2013 economic slowdown (Li & Zheng, 2025)—coupled with demographic headwinds that could eventually erode the fiscal base needed to fund high-cost coercive tools. With a Politburo Standing Committee dominated by Xi loyalists, the central government is unlikely to significantly alter its current approach in the near term (Tian & Munroe, 2022). Nevertheless, the long-term calculus still favours reforms that reduce suspicion of ordinary citizens and embrace more transparent, participatory governance.

China’s experience therefore poses a wider question: in a rapidly changing world, can durable social cohesion be achieved through pervasive control, or does it ultimately rest on the trust and confidence of the governed? The answer depends not only on whether China can rebalance toward a less totalitarian, more collaborative model, but also on how other societies negotiate their own balance between stability, liberty, and legitimacy in an era of democratic backsliding.

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