

Talks at Google - Ep 34 - 2019 03 12 - Prof Rory Truex

[00:00:07]

MISTRAL MYERS: Welcome to another episode of the Talks at Google podcast. Where great minds meet. I'm Mistral bringing you this week's episode with Professor Rory Truex. Talks at Google brings the world's most influential thinkers, creators, makers, and doers all to one place. Every episode of this podcast is taken from a video that can be seen at youtube.com/talksatgoogle. Rory Truex is a professor at Princeton University focusing on Chinese politics and authoritarian regimes. During this talk, Professor Truex argues why the years of 2017 and 2018 may one day be considered critical for modern China. The year President Xi Jinping signaled, "A new era of its own making." He also highlights three troubling trends to watch moving forward. And now, here's Rory Truex. Xi for life. What does it mean for China and the world?

[00:01:02]

RORY TRUEX: I study Chinese politics, and I teach courses on Chinese politics, so I am grateful for this opportunity today to get to speak to you about events unfolding in China this past year. So often, when we talk about China we talk about it through the lens of China/U.S. The trade war. These sorts of things. But actually, in China, in mainland China and domestic politics, this has been a seminal year, in part, because of this man Xi Jinping. And so today, I wanted to really just focus on giving you a briefing. I thought that would be the most helpful thing, to give you a sense of what's unfolding this past year and what we can think about will happen moving forward. So I wanted to start--as I mentioned, I teach courses on Chinese politics, so I wanted to start with an exam question, which I can see there is little enthusiasm for that, but here we go. Bear with me. So this past fall, I taught a course on Chinese politics, and for the final exam, I asked the students to identify a year--a critical year in the development of China.

[00:02:04]

In particular, China's political development. So we have this concept, in political science. Something called a critical juncture, which is a kind of a jargon-y way of saying that is a turning point. A year where certain events unfolded/certain decisions were made that changed the trajectory of history. And so, if we look back at the last 70 years of the rule of the Chinese Communist Party, certain years come quickly to mind, which I'm sure many of you are familiar with. The first is, of course, 1949. 1949 is the establishment of the People's Republic of China. This is a picture of Mao Zedong standing in Tiananmen Square declaring the establishment of the People's Republic. And for the first time in decades, the territory of mainland China is consolidated under the rule of a single government. So this was a heady time for China and signaling the beginning of Mao's rule. Another year which is, of course, very important is 1978. The beginning of so-called reform and opening up.

[00:03:03]

Does anybody here speak Chinese or study Chinese? Some, so I remember when I started taking Chinese I took Chinese 101, and one of the first words we learned is "gaige kaifung" which means "reform and opening up," and it's--I swear 50% of our lessons were about reform and opening up. So it's an important year, and this--for those of you who are less familiar, this signals the beginning of China's economic miracle. So Deng Xiaoping comes into power and takes a much more pragmatic stance, with respect to economic policymaking. Basically undoes the command part of the Chinese economy and results in an influx of trade and foreign direct investment in the so-called 30 years of 10% economic growth. This is the beginning of this era. This is him visiting the U.S., and he's wearing a cowboy hat. This

is one of the famous images of reform and opening up. Another year is, of course, 1989. 1989 is the year of the Tiananmen Square movement and the Tiananmen Square massacre.

[00:04:00]

And this is the year where we learned that the Communist Party was willing to do whatever it took to stay in power and was not amenable to the idea of political reform. And this is the year where we saw them willing to use live ammunition on student protestors. And finally, what I'm gonna argue today and what I argue--I'm starting to come up with this argument. It's not fully developed, but what I argue is that potentially 2017 and 2018 have the capacity to be one of those years, so it's difficult to know. We haven't seen history unfold quite yet. We haven't seen the trajectory moving forward, but there have been a number of developments in the last 12 months that signal this might be a turning point for contemporary China. In particular, this is the year where Xi Jinping, the current General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, has fully consolidated his power, signaled the start of a new era under his rule that could last well beyond his expected time in power.

[00:04:57]

So today, I wanted to give you a briefing as to what happened this past year, why I think this might be a critical year, and then some trends to think about moving forward. Some things that might be worth paying attention to. So before I get into what happened this year, I wanted to kind of set the stage, to talk a little bit about how we used to talk about China. And when I say "how we" I mean mostly the political scientists' community. And when I say "used to" I mean not that long ago. I mean only a few years ago. We used to describe the Chinese Communist Party through the lens of almost an exceptionalism, so most authoritarian regimes, and the Chinese Communist Party is an authoritarian regime--they don't last very long. They live sort of short, brutish, violent existences, and they fall from a number of different threats. The two most pressing threats facing any authoritarian leader are the threat from within--the threat of a coup attempt. Actually, there's some data on this from Milan Svobik, who's a political scientist at Yale, and he actually shows that most authoritarian regimes die in this way. They crumble from within.

[00:05:56]

I think it's roughly 60-70% of authoritarian regimes fall via coup where one leader comes in and basically institutes a new authoritarian regime. And then the second way they fall is through the threat of revolution. This is the more romantic version of how authoritarian regimes collapse. The population comes together, demands political reform, and either through some violent struggle or some brokered transition, the authoritarian regime falls and is replaced with something else. Hopefully democracy. So this is how--these are the two problems facing any authoritarian leader, including Xi Jinping, Hu Jintao, Jiang Zemin, and all the way on back. And the way we used to describe the party was, "Wow this is a regime that seems to have learned the lessons of history and figured out how to mitigate some of these issues." So in particular, the key feature of the authoritarian regime in China was institutionalization. So one of the difficulties for any authoritarian regime is how to share power. How to keep elites happy. How to transfer power from one leader to another.

[00:06:56]

So if we look back, in the 2000s, there were a set of institutions, rules, and norms that the Communist Party had developed that seem to be solving this dilemma of threats from within. So in particular, there was a norm that no leader would stay in office longer than ten years, so leaders at the very top, including Xi Jinping, were expected to stay in office for two five-year terms. The successor would be anointed in advance, usually five years in advance. Potentially earlier than that, thus smoothing the

power transition, allowing that person to develop cachet within the system and experience. There would be well-established retirement ages, so people would be forced to leave office and wouldn't hang on too long. Power was exercised not by just one person, but collectively, where each leader at the top--when I say "the top" I generally am referring to what's known as the Politburo Standing Committee. The top tier of leadership of the Chinese Communist Party. Usually seven to nine leaders. Each leader would be given a portfolio, and while there would be one most senior leader, they would cooperate with each other. They would play nice.

[00:07:58]

So these were the key institutions that we look back on, under Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, the two predecessors of Xi Jinping, when we say these institutions contributed to the resilience of the Communist Party. So that's the threat from within. The threat from below--revolution. You know, the Communist Party is always--it's an authoritarian regime. It uses the language of democracy and claims to be democratic, but no self-respecting political scientist would call the Chinese Communist Party democratic. But nevertheless, in the 2000s, it looked like the party was starting to develop mechanisms for citizens to have a voice. So these weren't democratic. They were tightly controlled by the party, but nevertheless, they were channels through which citizens could voice their concerns. This is everything from a petition system, village elections, a people's congress system, which is their legislative system, online public opinion portals, mayor's mailboxes. It's getting increasingly online and digital, but there were channels in place where citizens could funnel their grievances, and the party could respond.

[00:09:02]

And so some of the language we use to describe the party at this time was we used to call it responsive authoritarianism or consultative authoritarianism. In general, this is sort of a kind of a more tolerable form of authoritarian regime. This wasn't a tin pot dictatorship. This was a regime that was sophisticated, and institutionalized, and seemed to be trying to mitigate these issues. So that's how we used to describe it, and this argument--I should cite the authors. His name's Andrew Nathan. This was made in 2003, if any of you want to do further reading. I'm sure you have plenty of other things to do with your time, but the article's called "Authoritarian Resilience". So enter Xi Jinping, and so Xi Jinping is the current General Secretary of the Communist Party. So I'm afraid I'm gonna have to get a little bit in the weeds here, in terms of the Chinese leadership system, but bear with me. So any top leader of China today actually has three different positions. So the first is that they are General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party.

[00:10:00]

That's the head of the party. That's the most important position. They are also de facto President of the People's Republic of China, which is the head of state. The government position. The party and the government, on paper, are separate things. In reality, they're heavily intertwined, and the party dominates the government. And actually, in my experience, many Chinese citizens have trouble differentiating the party institutions, and the party positions, and the government positions. But Xi Jinping's party position is general secretary. His government position is the president, and he also has a military position. He's chair of what's known as the Central Military Commission. So he's head of state, head of party, head of military. So he assumed these positions in 2012, and we are just finishing up his first term in office. And therefore, he's expected to retire in 2022-2023. Now, prior to coming to office, I just want to emphasize a couple things about Xi Jinping's rise. The first is, like many Chinese leaders, you might hear of this so-called China model.

[00:10:59]

This idea that China is a meritocratic system, and people are promoted based on their abilities, and talents, and experience, and so forth. That is a highly controversial argument to make. What I would say is that Xi Jinping, like many other Chinese leaders, had a lot of governing experience, upon entering his highest position. So he rose up the ranks from a young age, was party secretary, and mayor, and governor of various different parts of China. Was involved in the central party school. He actually helped run the Beijing Olympics. So by the time he became general secretary, he was highly experienced. The second feature of his rise is that he is what's known as a princeling. So in Chinese politics, a princeling is simply a leader whose father or grandfather--and apologies for using male nouns here, but this is empirically true. Almost all Chinese leaders are male. A princeling is a Chinese leader whose father or grandfather was also a leader.

[00:11:56]

And so Xi Jinping's father's name is Xi Zhongxun, who actually worked with Mao Zedong, before being purged during the cultural revolution. But Xi Jinping, because of this princeling status--an American princeling would be like Chelsea Clinton. George W. Bush. That's how you can kind of draw the connection. Because of this princeling status, he potentially had a more accelerated rise, and he had a certain level of prestige within the system early on. And then the third thing I would talk about, about his rise, is that, like many Chinese leaders, prior to him coming to power, we actually didn't know a lot about him. So one way to rise up through the Chinese system seems to be to keep your head down, to develop relationships with patrons who are higher in office than you, and not take any dramatic policy stances in either direction. So prior to coming into office, we really didn't know a lot about what Xi Jinping was all about, and if you look back at some of the discourse about him 2012 and 2013, a lot of people believed he was China's Gorbachev, so this is a democrat in waiting.

[00:12:57]

He's going to be the one who finally liberalizes China and embarks on political reform. And the basis for these claims was, in retrospect, fairly weak. Xi Jinping spent time in Iowa. This is him as a younger man. He spent time in Iowa, on an exchange program. So he spent time in Iowa. His daughter attends Harvard University. Therefore, he must get it. He must be a liberal. As it turns out, this conjecture couldn't have been further from the truth. Xi Jinping is a reformer, and I'll talk more about that later, but he is a reformer of the aliberal sort. So he's moving China in a more authoritarian direction, not a more democratic direction. So what happened in 2017-2018? Why is this year--past 12 months--such a big deal? Well, there were really three events that unfolded that really change what we thought we knew about Chinese politics. The first occurred at what's known as the Party Congress. The Party Congress occurred last fall. It's a meeting of the 2,000 most powerful members of the Chinese Communist Party.

[00:13:56]

It happens only once every five years, and during this event, we typically see the unveiling of leadership--new leadership circles. And what we were expecting to see, based on precedent, was that Xi Jinping--there would be a new group of top seven leaders. Xi Jinping would still be in power, right, 'cause he still has one five-year term left. But that there would be a successor, so we would see two new leaders put into the top tier of the Chinese Communist Party, and it would be generally understood, potentially even announced, that these people were going to take over from Xi Jinping. There would be a new successor in waiting. So first thing we learned this fall is that there actually--this was the event. This image that I'm showing here. That's actually four out of the new seven members of the Politburo Standing Committee. There was no successor announced, okay, so remember I talked about institutions. This is a big one. Having a successor named in advance. That one's gone, okay, and why is this a big deal? Well actually,

for basically--since the Tiananmen Square massacre/the Tiananmen Square incident there has been a successor in place, in the Chinese political system.

[00:15:02]

So it was known that Jiang Zemin would transfer power to Hu Jintao. Xi Jinping came to office as in the Politburo Standing Committee in 2007. It was known that he would take over for Hu Jintao. So now, for the first time, we don't have a successor, which means this can generate instability right? So if an authoritarian regime---we don't know. If something ever happened to Xi Jinping, if he had a health problem or something like this, there would be a major public power struggle. So that was event number one. Event number two is a little more into the weeds, but I thought we'd have some fun with it. So this is event number two, and then I had to write it down, because I have trouble remembering all of the language, but I encourage you all to memorize this. Xi Jinping thought on socialism with Chinese characteristics for the new era. This is a mouthful. I am not a native speaker of Chinese, and my Chinese is probably suspect, but Xi Jinping [foreign language]. That's it in Chinese. To me, it also sounds like a mouthful in Chinese.

[00:16:00]

There are native Chinese speakers in the room. I heard you before, so maybe you can tell me if you agree, but another feature of the Chinese political system is that any elite leader is expected to make an ideological contribution to the Communist Party doctrine. So every leader has their pet phrase. Mao Zedong has Mao Zedong Thought. Deng Xiaoping has Deng Xiaoping Theory. Jiang Zemin's contribution is known as the Three Represents. It should be said that it's not called Jiang Zemin's Three Represents. It's just called the Three Represents. Scientific Concept of Development is Hu Jintao. And so now, Xi Jinping's contribution is known as Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for the New Era. This phrase was put into the constitution--the charter of the Communist Party itself. And it was done so while Xi Jinping was still in office; still in power. Usually, it happens after the fact. So if we dissect this phrase, a few things stand out. First, Xi Jinping. His name is in it okay, so it's a named phrase.

[00:17:02]

This honor had only been reserved for Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping. So here we have Xi Jinping placing himself on par with those two leaders. The second word I want you to pay attention to is thought--sixiang. So remember, there is Mao Zedong Thought and Deng Xiaoping Theory. So there are some analysts who believe that a thought actually is higher than a theory. It depends your--and now we're getting into semantics, but it's telling that Mao Zedong had Mao Zedong Thought. So now we have Xi Jinping Thought. Mao Zedong Thought. So not only is he putting himself on par with Mao and Deng, he may be only putting himself on par with Mao and above Deng. Socialism with Chinese characteristics is an old sort of tired phrase in Communist Party ideology. It's basically their way of justifying the fact that they've gone a market direction while still using socialist language, so this is actually not a new phrase. But the last thing that I think is, in some sense, the most important is "a new era".

[00:17:59]

So Xi Jinping is declaring that we are in a new era, and he is at the center. And up until this point, we have generally thought that China was in the so-called reform period. So beginning in 1978, we have the reform and opening up. That was the period we were in. Xi Jinping is saying we are in the end of that period. We are in a new era, and I am at the center. So that was event number two. Event number three occurred this past March where we had an amendment to China's constitution that got rid of term limits for the position of the presidency. So prior to this, the position of the presidency, which remember is Xi Jinping's government position, was governed by two five-year term limits. And this past spring, which

honestly would have been unbelievable five or ten years ago, that term limit was gotten away with. So the interpretation of all of these events--so again, just to reiterate, so we have no successor. We have Xi Jinping Thought in the constitution, and now, we have no term limits. The interpretation, among the China studies community and the China watcher community is that this signals that Xi Jinping is potentially trying to stay on past his expected retirement in 2022.

[00:19:06]

The so-called Xi for life, and I titled the talk not "Xi for Life". I titled it "Xi for Life?" With a question mark at the end of it, because I think it's important for us all to remember that what we know about elite politics in China is actually quite little. It's an extremely opaque system, and so people that observe the system were left to take these very crude signals and try to infer what's going on between the party leaders and what's going on in their heads. And so I think it's a bit premature to say, "Oh, he'll be in there until--for the rest of his life," although Donald Trump actually congratulated him on being--just I went 20 minutes without bringing up Donald Trump. So my own interpretation--so one possibility--he is intending to stay on. That's one possibility. A second possibility is he is using these moves to further consolidate power and create uncertainty.

[00:20:01]

So one feature of the Chinese political system is, if you anoint a successor, you actually are creating a rival, and you're creating a new base of power. And instantly, that person who's the successor in waiting becomes quite powerful, and you're a lame duck for five years. And so maybe, by not anointing a successor and signaling that he might want to stay he's just maintaining his own bargaining leverage. So that's one other interpretation that I think is important to think about. Either way, my own feeling is that, whether or not he stays in office or retires, it actually doesn't matter as much as you might think, because if he does install a successor, he will likely try to install a lackey of his own. So he will install someone who is loyal to him, and he will rule from behind the scenes, and this is also common in the Chinese system. Deng Xiaoping continued to rule, despite not actually having the highest-level title, so power, in the Chinese system, is in some sense about titles, but in many others, it's actually about personal relationships within the system.

[00:21:00]

So either way I think one takeaway I want you to come away with from the talk today is that we are likely in an era where Xi Jinping is going to be at the center of the Chinese political system, not just for the next five years, but likely for the next 10, 15, possibly even 20 years. Of course, it's difficult to predict, so what do we know about Xi Jinping? So if we're in his era, we've gotten a chance to watch him in office now for five years. So what is he actually about? What does he care about? What makes him tick? If I had to describe him in three words, I would use the following. I would say he's nationalist, he is authoritarian, and he's populist. It's that combination. So nationalism. One of the key phrases of Xi Jinping Thought, and I encourage you to go study Xi Jinping Thought, is this idea of the so-called China Dream or Chinese Dream, depending on how you see it translated. Zhongguo Meng in Chinese. The Chinese Dream dates back to this idea of national rejuvenation. There is a narrative in the Chinese political system that China was once a great nation.

[00:22:01]

That status was robbed of it by foreign imperialist powers, beginning with the Opium War. There is a century of humiliation where China is repeatedly infringed upon by foreign powers, and only when the Chinese Communist Party comes to power, in 1949, that's the establishment of a new China, and China has stood up. And so Xi Jinping's China Dream is an extension of that narrative, and the basic dream, as

it has been articulated, is that China will once again become a strong, powerful, and prosperous nation. One of the most cliché things you can say about China is that it is a collectivist culture. This is a pet peeve of mine. It's a very simplistic way of thinking, and it's an, in some sense, Orientalist way of describing China. But in this instance, I think it's important to emphasize that this China Dream-- Americans hear this, and they think, "Oh, that's the American Dream. That sounds pretty good." It's actually quite distinct.

[00:23:00]

So this is an image of one of the propaganda posters of the China Dream, and you'll see in Chinese it says, "Zhongguo Meng," China Dream, and under it [foreign language] means "my dream." So we literally have the individual being placed subservient to the nation, and to be working under the China Dream is, for an individual Chinese citizen, it's about achieving the goal--the collective goal of national rejuvenation. So this isn't about, "I'm gonna work hard and better myself," like the American Dream. This is a collective dream. This nationalism has been ramped up, in recent years, and it seems to me that increasingly the party is relying on nationalism as a source of legitimacy. So under the Mao era, the source of legitimacy was ideology and Mao himself. Under the reform period, under Deng Xiaoping and his successors, the source of legitimacy was performance, so we're going to deliver goods. Economic growth, public good provision, and so forth. Now, economic growth is slowing in China. It's down to roughly 6%, and so the new source of legitimacy--seems that nationalism will be the source of that.

[00:24:03]

And we see Xi Jinping being increasingly assertive on the international stage. You might have heard about the South China Sea. China's territorial claims there. His willingness to build islands and install military installations on those islands, to buttress territorial claims. China's growing increasingly aggressive, with respect to Taiwan and reunification with Taiwan. You might have heard of the One Belt One Road initiative or the Belt and Road initiative. It's constantly rebranded, but this is China's so-called Marshall Plan. It will be a multi-billion dollar investment project spanning multiple countries and multiple continents. So we have a nationalistic, assertive Xi Jinping. The second adjective I used to describe him is authoritarian. China always has these cycles. If you look at the long arc of Chinese history, there are ups and downs. There are periods of opening and periods of closing.

[00:24:57]

So we have Mao Zedong comes to power, and we see a closing with the Great Leap Forward and the cultural revolution. Deng Xiaoping comes to power, and we see an opening where political discourse is liberalized a little bit. Then we have Tiananmen Square massacre. A closing. And then actually, if we look back at the 2000s, we didn't maybe realize it at the time, but that was a period of relative openness in Chinese society. Under Xi Jinping, we have entered into another closed period. And I would argue, and I don't think I'm alone in this, that China today is the most repressive it's been since the period just following the Tiananmen Square incident, and this has manifested itself in a lot of ways. There's increasing control among civil society organizations. One of the key tenets of Xi Jinping Thought is that party should dominate all aspects of society. We also see the party willing to use good, old-fashioned repression, detentions, torture, intimidation to groups that it doesn't like. This is an image of Li Wenzu. She is the wife of the man in that picture there, Wang Quanzhang, who is what's known as a [foreign language] lawyer.

[00:25:57]

The [foreign language] lawyers in China--[foreign language] just means "rights protection." These are effectively public defenders. They are a group of lawyers who are civic-minded and have tried to use the

principles of the Chinese constitution, which is actually quite liberal, on paper, to help Chinese citizens protect themselves from the government. So they take cases on everything from labor issues, environmental issues, property rights protection, so people who've had their property demolished by the Chinese government. So these are people that are trying to work on behalf of the population and to protect them from the government using the constitution. So they are not radicals actually. They're not advocating revolution. Most of them are advocating that the government abide by constitutionalism and rule of law. Today in China, such individuals--to be this type of lawyer has become a crime, and hundreds of them have been detained. This particular individual, Wang Quanzhang, was detained for three years without any meeting with his lawyer.

[00:26:57]

There's a certain irony in that. Not allowed to meet his family. We just found out last week that he is still alive, but up--I was at an event two weeks ago where his wife spoke, and she was unclear whether he was still alive, so it's important to keep talking about this. I think a lot of us, when we go to China, myself included, you get there, and you think, "Oh, this isn't so bad. Really it's not that bad at all. It seems pretty normal here," and that's on purpose. And a lot of the repression hums along in the background, and it's easy to overlook it. And it doesn't affect most of the population, but for those individuals that do try to advocate things like human rights and political reform, the regime is willing to do the dirty business. So Xi Jinping is authoritarian. He is nationalistic, and the final thing I would say is he's populist, so one of the hallmarks of his rule, which you might have heard of, is the anti-corruption campaign. So Xi Jinping came to office, and he was quite different from his predecessors. He had a little charisma. Hu Jintao was kind of known as being kind of a bland technocrat.

[00:27:59]

Xi Jinping, upon coming into office, he went to esteemed bun shop in Beijing and kind of ate with normal people. He fosters this image as a man of the people, and one of the key features of his rule has been cracking down on corruption. And corruption in China was the main threat to the survival of the Chinese Communist Party, so if you look at survey data in China, corruption was always ranked as the number one or number two issue, among the Chinese population, and the levels of corruption were quite high. This is a feature of an authoritarian system with no electoral accountability. Stilted. No freedom of the press. A lack of civil society organizations. Undergoing the process where business assets are being gone from public to private, so this is a recipe for corruption. So Xi Jinping comes to power, and immediately we see a crackdown on so-called tigers and flies. Tigers are senior levels of officials within the Chinese system, so he's willing to go after the big officials. And then flies are--if you're a lower-level official in China, you're called a fly. Just stuff.

[00:29:00]

Maybe one day you'll grow up to be a tiger, but for now, you're a fly. So Xi Jinping's anti-corruption campaign signals his willingness to tackle the tough issues. The interpretation about this campaign--there are really two that you'll hear. The first is that this is all just a political ploy to purge his enemies, and I believe there is some truth to that. If you look at the highest levels of the Chinese Communist Party, individuals who have been investigated invariably are not in Xi Jinping's personal clique. They're people who are in kind of the rival faction or people who might be opposed to him. That said, the other interpretation is that this is a genuine effort at cleaning up the party. And if you go to China, and you talk to individuals, there is some optimism that Xi Jinping is a strong leader, he's a competent leader, and he's the one that is going to clean up the party. I think there's some truth to both narratives. If he's investigated hundreds of thousands of individuals, I have trouble believing that all of this is politically motivated. I do think there is some genuine anti-corruption behavior going on, but it's important not to

be too rosy about this development, in the sense that actually fighting corruption is difficult, but we kind of know the recipe for success, in political science and economics.

[00:30:10]

How do you stop corruption? Well, you provide information to citizens on things like government contracts and assets of officials. You have a free press which is allowed to do kind of muckraking journalism. You have a civil society organization that works with them. You have anti-corruption agencies that are independent and a court system that's independent, and over time, you will see the reduction of corruption. None of those features that I just named are present in Xi Jinping's anti-corruption campaign, so this is a top-down campaign driven by the party, kept within the party, and the party is basically trying to police itself. And so that's important to keep in mind when we talk about the anti-corruption campaign. So that's what Xi Jinping's about. He's populist, he's authoritarian, and he's nationalistic. In terms of his popularity, I would say--I look at it, and I actually see--if he is popular, it's for the same reasons that Donald Trump is popular.

[00:31:07]

I went another ten minutes without bringing up his name, but so the Chinese Dream is kind of a version of Make America Great Again. Let's make China great again. I hate to be simplistic, but there is a similarity there. The authoritarianism. So Donald Trump and Xi Jinping are both willing to speak the language of law and order and use the tools of coercion to try to repress out groups. That is a common feature in their rule. And then the populism, so the anti-corruption campaign is actually kind of a version of "Drain the swamp." And actually, I think in the Chinese case it's more authentic than what we're seeing with Donald Trump, in terms of a commitment to clean governance, of course. So the question is, is Xi Jinping popular? And as a foreigner standing in New York, I'm hesitant to even weigh in on this, but my own sense--first of all, any time we try to assess the popularity of an authoritarian regime this is sort of one of the classic questions in political science.

[00:32:03]

It's very difficult to do, 'cause let's say you could do a survey, and you ask people, "Do you approve of the performance of Xi Jinping in office?" First of all, in China, you can't ask that question. I do surveys in China. You're not allowed to ask this sort of question. In other authoritarian countries--so Putin and other authoritarian leaders have public opinion polling about them. In China, you're not allowed to ask about the performance of any individual leader, but let's say even if we did have that question, and we see a lot of people approve, is it because they actually approve? Is it because they've been indoctrinated to say they approve, or is it because they are scared, and they say they approve, even though they don't approve? So it's very difficult to differentiate those different possibilities. So we don't really know how popular Xi Jinping is okay. That's the important thing to emphasize. My own sense, through my conversations with students, friends in China, and other people is that he does maintain a broad base of support.

[00:32:58]

So people who are intellectuals, liberals, business elites are generally less supportive of him, because of the themes I've just outlined. But among the common population, he seems to be viewed as a strong leader who is helping change China for the better. He's assertive abroad, and he's tough at home on people who have been guilty of corruption. So he does have a base of support. So all that being said, what are we looking about--what should we be thinking about moving forward, for China? And why was 2017-2018 a big year? I wanted to point to really three troubling trends for us to think about as a group. The first is that we're seeing an increasing cult of personality about Xi Jinping. So again, another cliché or

trope in the study of Chinese politics. You'll see a lot of "Time" magazine covers or magazine covers where you'll see, like, an image of Mao Zedong, and then it'll be peeled back, and there'll be an image of Xi Jinping underneath or something like that.

[00:33:58]

So people keep referring to him as the next Mao or China's next emperor. There's just a series of phrases that are used over and over again, along with, like, things like dragon. Like, there's a certain way people report about China which is a little simplistic, but there is some truth to this idea that there is a cult of personality being fostered around Xi Jinping. This is the cover of "The People's Daily/Renmin Ribao", which is the mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party. This is not my own analysis. This was a report in the "Wall Street Journal", but they noticed that Xi Jinping had been mentioned 11 times. The leading word in 11 titles on the front page of "The People's Daily". And he's been mentioned more in "The People's Daily", on the front page of "The People's Daily" than any other leader since Mao Zedong. So this is troubling in and of itself. What's particularly troubling about it is it leads to a second phenomenon which is yes man politics, and so it seems to me that, at the elite level in China today, to oppose Xi Jinping, especially publicly, is career suicide.

[00:35:02]

And so what we're observing instead is a lot of sycophants; a lot of people trying to ingratiate themselves with Xi Jinping. Praising Xi Jinping Thought. Universities are building institutes where they study Xi Jinping Thought, and we know this is one of the basic tenets of government is that power should not be concentrated too much in the hands of one person. At best, that person is benevolent, but at worst, that can lead to extreme policymaking. Uninformed policymaking. This is the vote count and the National People's Congress of that amendment that I mentioned. The constitutional amendment where they got rid of term limits for the presidency, which is one of the more controversial pieces of legislation to happen in China within the last 30 years. This is in Chinese, but the National People's Congress is huge. It's the institution I study. It's the largest parliament in the world. It's got almost 3,000 members. We see 2,958 people voted for it. Two people voted against it, and three people abstained.

[00:35:59]

And there is some--we don't know who the people are that abstained or voted against it. It's a closed system. There's some speculation that Xi Jinping himself may have been one of those people, to kind of say, "Oh, yeah. People are willing to oppose me," but to me, this is--you know, the National People's Congress. I don't want to get too much into it, but all of the Chinese political system goes according to script. The party controls everything, but even within these institutions there usually is some opposition, and what we observe in China today is that a lot of people are bandwaggoning around Xi, and I worry about that. The final trend I thought it was important to bring up here, of all places, is the increasingly sophisticated surveillance state we see in China. So I mentioned that China's going through a repressive turn. What makes it particularly worrisome is that this--we have a highly sophisticated authoritarian regime that is now using the fruits of technology to repress its population and monitor its population.

[00:36:57]

So this is an image of facial recognition software that's currently being rolled out. It's not national yet, but it's being rolled out in different localities in China. And so we are nearing the point where the Chinese Communist Party, within the next few years, will likely have full information on its population. So using closed-circuit televisions, they have--I've heard the estimate of 200 million, but I've heard that number is gonna rise to 300 million or 400 million closed-circuit television cameras around the country,

within the next five to ten years. Using those, in combination with AI which can do facial recognition, and I understand that the technology's not perfect yet, but it will likely get there. That combined with social media data--so as you all know, Chinese citizens commonly use an app called Weixin/WeChat, which is sort of like a "one app to rule them all." Not only is it a social network, but it's also a way for people to make purchases. So the Chinese government, of course, has a backdoor to that.

[00:37:55]

So we have a situation where an authoritarian government has full information on the social networks, the political commentary, the purchases, and the geographic locations of all of its citizens. And this is the dark side of AI, and big data, and this sort of technology. And it's something, again, we need to be talking about, and you all, as tech leaders, I'm sure are aware of this, but it's something that we need to be having discussions about. And it's an abuse of this sort of technology. In China, I should say that it seems that this technology is being described as, again, a way to preserve law and order. And it's being said, "Oh, this is going to be used to catch jaywalkers and other petty criminals." And again, it's unclear whether or not Chinese citizens support this. There might be a faction of them that does and says, "Okay. You have nothing to worry about, if you're not doing anything wrong." But it doesn't take a genius, or a critic, or a skeptic to say this technology will also be used to target political dissidents, protestors, petitioners, and so forth. Anybody that's causing trouble in the Chinese system.

[00:38:58]

I should say that, as a political scientist, a lot of us do field work in China, and I was party to a couple conversations in the last couple years about--the one thing we do often with our interview subjects is we guarantee anonymity. We say, "Okay. We can meet, and I will never use your name in anything I write, and there will never be any record of this interview out in public." Now that we're operating in China, I don't think I could go to China and tell someone that, "I can assure you that no one knows about this meeting," because the state is everywhere. I should also say that this technology is being rolled out in a part of China called Xinjiang. Xinjiang is a province in Western China where there is a large Muslim population known as the Uighurs. I encourage you to read about Xinjiang. X-I-N-J-I-A-N-G. And this is not my area of expertise, but there's increasing evidence coming out of Xinjiang that these sorts of technologies are being used to basically put a large chunk of the Muslim population into reeducation camps.

[00:39:56]

So the level of repression that's being used, in concert with this technology, is very alarming. So I wanted to leave time for questions, and I wanted to close by just using this phrase "end of an era" which is not mine. There's a book that just came out called "End of an Era" by Carl Minzner which does a nice job of summarizing some of the trends that I just spoke about. But Xi Jinping is saying we're at the beginning of a new era, which inherently means we're at the end of an old era. And to me, it seems one of the big takeaways of the last year or the last five years has been that the Communist Party--the Chinese Communist Party--the success or failure of the Communist Party now lies in the hands of this person. And one of the old lessons of Communist Party history--and this is the lesson of the Mao era is that no single leader should become too powerful. And it seems to me that this lesson has been forgotten, so thank you. I will leave it there, and we can open it up to questions. Thanks.

[00:40:59]

Yes. Hi.

PERSON: Hi. One of the things that I was thinking about during the talk was why is this happening now? and you know, I can sort of imagine maybe it's Xi's personality and his strong leadership, or maybe it's a weakening of the existing institutions, but you know, why didn't this happen with the previous leader? What sort of kept them in check?

RORY TRUEX: That's a good question. It's difficult to answer. The common narrative you would hear is that the previous leader, Hu Jintao, was actually--didn't have the force of personality. He wasn't a particularly strong leader. He was not anointed by his predecessor, Jiang Zemin. He was actually anointed by Deng Xiaoping. So Deng Xiaoping leaves office and anoints his next two successors--Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao. So Hu Jintao had a reputation as sort of a bland technocrat. A guy that, you know, knew how to make policy, but didn't know actually how to command the party. And so this, in some sense, leaves a power vacuum that Xi Jinping has been willing to step in.

[00:42:01]

In terms of why now, I think another thing to emphasize is that this was incremental. So there were little moves that happened, along the way, and they went unchecked. So for example, so Xi Jinping, upon entering office, there was a dramatic purge of one of his rivals named Bo Xilai where this person was trying to get himself on the Politburo Standing Committee, and there's evidence that Xi Jinping engineered his very elaborate downfall. This would be unusual, and so that sort of thing happens. And then we start seeing the anti-corruption campaign unfold. And over time, he becomes so powerful it's like a self-fulfilling prophecy. Once someone becomes this powerful, now to be opposed to him is futile. So I think that's one of the elements, too, is that the institutions maybe weren't strong enough, in the beginning, to constrain him. Yeah. Thanks. Here maybe. Hi.

PERSON: Hi. Sorry to bring up Donald Trump again, but just a curious thought experiment.

RORY TRUEX: Oh, great.

[00:42:58]

PERSON: Because when Xi Jinping decided to get rid of the term limit, I think that we're sort of seeing Donald Trump said, "Hey, maybe we should try"...

RORY TRUEX: "Maybe we should do this someday." Yeah.

PERSON: So my question is--

RORY TRUEX: That wasn't alarming, at all, to hear.

PERSON: So my question is a thought experiment, so assuming that, given Trump's having a populist agenda, if he manages to get reelected--and I know that culturally the U.S. is very, very different from China, but if he were to try to get rid of terms in the U.S., like, based on authoritarian regimes, how would--what might be the path of least resistance for him to go about doing that?

RORY TRUEX: Well, it took a very dark turn, this conversation. And we're already in a dark place. So the question is about Donald Trump, if he were also to try to similarly consolidate power and potentially erode the term limit institution. It's interesting. Right when Donald Trump was elected there was a lot of political scientists--much more senior than I am--I'm junior, if you couldn't tell.

[00:43:58]

People who have been in the field for a long time were sincerely alarmed about the erosion of democracy in the United States. And democracy is something we take for granted here. It's been around for hundreds of years. We expect it to be around in the future, but democracies elect themselves out of democracy. They elect leaders that have authoritarian tendencies that consolidate power, so there were legitimate causes for concern among the political science community about Donald Trump's authoritarian tendencies. And I think he's, time and time again, revealed that he has a certain envy, let's call it, of authoritarian leaders. He's done so with Kim Jong-Un, Putin, and Xi Jinping. In terms of this specific scenario, my hope, as an American citizen, was if this ever came to pass, we would see opposition among not just the Democrats, but among the Republican Party. At some point, the Republican Party needs to realize that this is unusual and unsustainable, and they need to side with democracy over the party.

[00:44:56]

And so I hope--we've said that before. There's been--the Trump presidency has been a constant series of events where we're all saying, "Is it this? Are they finally going to oppose him?" So my hope is that we would see opposition. I would also say there are major, major differences, of course, between the Chinese political system and the United States. In particular, the strength of our institutions, and the court system, and the legislative branch, and the media, and the ability to have public discourse is way above what there exists in China. So I think the outcry--the public outcry would be enough, so that that scenario will never come to pass. That's my optimistic take. Hi.

PERSON: Hi. Two short questions.

RORY TRUEX: Sure.

PERSON: What do the Chinese people know about these constitutional changes and specifically the term limits? And also, in Xi Jinping's Thought, is there any mentioning of Confucianism, at all? Does it refer back to those kinds of thinking?

[00:45:53]

RORY TRUEX: Yeah, so those are two good questions. So again, as a foreigner, I am hesitant to ever make claims about, "This is what the Chinese people know, and this is what they don't."

PERSON: But specifically in the media, has it--

RORY TRUEX: Yeah, so I would say the depiction of this, in the Chinese media, has been that this wasn't a big deal. And a lot of the outcry that occurred was among people like me, foreigners who study China or write about China. And the reason it was pinned as not a big deal is because, actually, the position of president, in the People's Republic of China, if you actually look at the Chinese constitution, it's basically a ceremonial position. So that office is not, in and of itself, that important. It's important because the person who inhabits it is the head of the party. So that's one reason why it was deemed not that important. The second reason is that there actually are no term limits on the position of General Secretary of the Communist Party, so that position has never had any term limits. There's been a norm that that person only stays in power for two terms, but there was never actually anything on paper that prescribed that. So the way this was positioned among people in China who were describing this was that all this reform does--all this amendment does is put the position of the presidency--syncs it up with the position of the General Secretary of the Communist Party, so now nothing has term limits.

[00:47:05]

So that's the way it was phrased, but for those of us on the outside looking in, it seems that this is a very obvious example of an existing institution that was designed to curb excess abuses of power/accumulation of power being eroded. So my sense is that the average Chinese citizen is probably not in uproar about this, but I think it does remain a pretty significant political event. In terms of Confucianism, one of the elements of Xi Jinping has been not just a nationalism sort of on a foreign policy front, but a cultural nationalism and the Communist Party as being the bearer of Chinese cultural traditions. So Confucianism--I am no expert, but there are elements of Confucianism that are conducive to authoritarian rule. In particular, the emphasis on hierarchy and the relationship between the ruled and the ruler. And so we've seen a resurgence of Confucianism and the emphasis on Confucianism in China, especially as an alternative to foreign ideologies like Christianity and so forth.

[00:48:06]

So I don't believe--I'd have to look back--that Xi Jinping--there's a whole book on Xi Jinping Thought, and I couldn't get through it, to be honest with you. But I don't believe it's mentioned in great detail, but culturally and politically it has been an emphasis to focus on traditional Chinese culture and heritage, and the Communist Party and Xi Jinping are protectors of that. Thank you. Yes?

PERSON: Hi. My question is about the surveillance tape, and I'll come through a detour which is...

RORY TRUEX: Sure.

PERSON: In the last question from this microphone, you mentioned the big, institutional differences between, well, this country and China.

RORY TRUEX: Yeah.

PERSON: And I'd say democracies in general, in China, and authoritarian regimes. Now, all of the world is going into the world of new surveillance technologies together, and we don't have institutions surrounding those yet.

[00:49:04]

So do you think there's a chance or danger that democracies around the world will follow in the model that China is developing and will probably first develop to the greatest extent, and then everyone will just sort of stumble into an authoritarian machine? Literally a machine.

RORY TRUEX: Yeah, so I have a certain--yeah. I have that personality type that worries about this sort of thing, and the rise of the surveillance state. And Google, as a company, as you, of all people know, is involved in the collection of information on normal citizens which could potentially be used by a government for these sorts of purposes. So I am glad you brought up the question. It's something we need to be talking about a lot, and I hope--I assume you all are talking about this quite frequently. I think, in the U.S., it has a different flavor to it. Again, I'm not within the CIA. I don't have much of a window as to what's going on, but it seems that it's being used, again, for issues of national security and information collection that can be used by the U.S. government to monitor terror suspects and so forth.

[00:50:05]

In China, they would also argue that this is about national security, right, so the dissidents, and protestors, and so forth are undermining national security. So it's always governments using the lens of national security to infringe upon people's civil liberties, and so it is something I think we should be concerned about. And I think the difference in the U.S. versus China is that, in the U.S., there's at least a dialogue about this, and citizens have willingly given over their information, because the technology is so good. Facebook, Twitter, and so forth. The tools are so great that we willingly give forward our information, but I think we are at a point where, if it falls into the wrong hands, or if you have a certain type of leader, even in the U.S., this information can be abused. Thanks. Never answered that question before, but thank you for asking it. Yeah.

PERSON: Could you expand a little bit on the world's largest parliament? I know you made a point about how well it's orchestrated by the party, but what's it like in its daily affairs? How often does that orchestration happen? How deep does it go?

[00:51:01]

RORY TRUEX: Thank you for asking this question. So this is the topic of my dissertation, so this brings me back to a sad, lonely, depressing time in my life. So I'll just give a brief answer, 'cause I could talk about this for a while, but the National People's Congress is China's parliament, and it has 3,000 members. It meets only once per year, for two weeks. So you can imagine such an institution is not exactly a forum for great policy discussion. And they sit in a large room called the Great Hall of the People which has 3,000 people. So often, when you hear about the National People's Congress you hear the words "rubber stamp," and there is some truth to that. So nothing ever before the parliament, in the history of the institution, before the full body, has ever been voted down ever, so if that's not a rubber stamp, I don't know what is. That said, so one of the arguments I make--I did write a book on this. It's one of those books that I wouldn't wish it on anybody to read it, but if you're interested, I have a form. I might as well self-promote. It's called "Making Autocracy Work".

[00:52:05]

But the argument I try to make is that actually this is one of those institutions that the Communist Party is trying to use to channel citizen grievances through their institution. So rather than have people go protest on the street and potentially engage in violence, they're trying to create political institutions that they control but that, nevertheless, serve some conduit of information that the government can then respond to. So the People's Congress system is actually a network of these institutions. There are five different levels of government, and all the way on down to what's known as the township level, in China. And there are hundreds of thousands of legislators in China. People's deputies they're called. And so what I've argued in this book is that these people are--their task is to go out, and learn about the population, and try to convey this information to the central government. But this shouldn't be confused with democracy. This shouldn't be confused with full representation.

[00:52:59]

These people are hand-picked by the Communist Party, and they are not allowed to cross the boundary. So you'll never hear about a People's Congress deputy saying, "Oh, maybe we should talk more about the surveillance state," or, "Maybe we should have elections for the position of the presidency," so it's a very constrained system, but thank you for that question. That's the easy one, for me.

PERSON: Hi. Thank you very much. That was very informative.

RORY TRUEX: Thank you.

PERSON: I also wanted to ask you about the international affairs aspect of Xi Jinping's administration. You talked a little bit about nationalism and how the Xi Jinping administration is becoming more assertive internationally, especially in South Asia area. The belt and road. Could you talk a little bit more about that, and where do you see this administration sort of--do you see them applying the tools that they apply internally--the repression, the surveillance--outside of the borders of China through technology, and also through politics, and kind of money?

[00:54:02]

RORY TRUEX: Yeah. That's a great question, so it's a broad question, because China's foreign relations are multi-faceted, and you know, span everything from territorial claims and ambitions to the economy, environment, and so forth. But one thing I did want to mention, which I haven't yet, is this idea of Chinese overseas influence. And so there's a lot of discussion going on in the U.S. Congress right now about so-called China's influence operations and the way that it's increasingly using some of these tools to try to shift discourse in the U.S. and other advanced democracies. In Australia and New Zealand this is a major issue. We see this manifest itself in a lot of different ways. The one trend that I'm noticing and worrying about is this using the market--using the access to China as a way to coerce people. and here at Google, a company that has had its search engine throttled over the years and is now--no longer has the market share it should in China, because of this reason--so a lot of companies, journalists, academics, universities are facing this decision of, "Do I play by the party's rules and compromise my business or my values, in order to get access to China?"

[00:55:15]

So this manifests itself in a lot of different ways, so academics--we face pressure. If we write about certain things, we have a fear of potentially losing visa access. In the grand scheme of things, a visa is not a huge deal. We're gonna be fine, but it's a manifestation of that. Firms. You might have read about a lot of U.S. airlines now have been forced to change their websites, because they can no longer have the word "Taiwan" on their website, because Taiwan is a sensitive topic, and it's considered part of China, according to the Chinese government. And on and on and on. Cambridge University Press is an example that's closer to home, for us. Cambridge University Press runs a journal called "The China Quarterly" which is a China journal. At the pressure of the Chinese government last year--or was it two years ago? I can't remember.

[00:56:00]

They removed upwards of 300 articles from their website in China, and the articles were all about things like Tiananmen Square and Xinjiang. Tibet. Sensitive topics. And this is alarming, right, because then, if you're a Chinese citizen, and you're reading the "Chinese Quarterly" you're getting a sanitized version of scholarship on China. You're getting a sanitized version of history, and that's the version that the party wants you to get. So fortunately, as a result of academic pressure, we saw Cambridge University Press eventually reverse its stance, but all these individuals are facing this decision. And it's a commonality actually between firms, journalists, universities, and academics. So that's one thing that's alarming to me. Another thing that is concerning is the monitoring that we used to see reserved for China is now being extended overseas, so there are a lot of Chinese students at American universities. And this is something we need more research on, so I'm hesitant to make a statement, but it seems, from what I've heard, that there are many Chinese students who feel that they are under the same level of surveillance in an American classroom that they would be at a Chinese university.

[00:57:03]

So I teach a course on Chinese politics, and we talk about sensitive topics. A Chinese student in my course might feel reluctant to say how they really feel or what they think about the Chinese government, because they're worried that they might be being monitored, or that information might make its way back to the Communist Party. So we are entering a phase where Xi Jinping's assertiveness has now led the Communist Party to try to influence discourse and dialogue in other countries, and that's a trend that I'm worried about. Thank you for the question. Here, yes?

PERSON: You partially answered my question, but I want to extend the topic.

RORY TRUEX: Sure.

PERSON: You mentioned the influences going abroad, but mainly focusing on, like, Chinese particularly, what is influence globally? What other countries? And do you see a possible backfire with other countries trying to--how would I say--interfere with China's government issue and stuff?

[00:57:58]

RORY TRUEX: So that's a great question. So for a long time, the party rhetoric about this was that China does not interfere within the sovereign affairs of other countries. That was the line. It's sort of this doctrine of non-interference. "Leave us alone. We'll leave you alone." It's unclear whether we should believe that ever, but it's increasingly obvious that they do interfere, in some of the ways I just mentioned. More interestingly, important to think about is this idea that the Chinese system of governance itself could increasingly become a model for other countries, particularly developing countries, to emulate. This is the so-called China model, and it means different things to different people, but it's basically where you have a system of authoritarian government. Soft authoritarianism, if we wanted to call it that, although I don't know how soft it is, coupled with state-led capitalism. And China has the record of economic performance that is potentially appealing to other countries, so it remains unclear how much they're actually trying to shift the governance models of other countries.

[00:58:58]

I have a friend, Maria Repnikova, who's a great political scientist based at Georgia State, and she's doing some work on this. And she's interviewing officials throughout Africa who are increasingly going to China to be trained and to study governance techniques from the Chinese system, as opposed to a Western system. So I think it's still too early to tell how much influence there will be, but I think it will likely increase. So on that, I think I'm actually out of time, so thank you all for this opportunity. Thank you.

MISTRAL MYERS: Thanks for listening. If you have any feedback about this or any other episode, we'd love to hear from you. You can visit g.co/talksatgoogle/podcastfeedback to leave your comments. To discover more amazing content, you can always find us online at youtube.com/talksatgoogle or via our Twitter handle [@googletalks](https://twitter.com/googletalks). Talk soon.