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# Restrictions on Freedom of Expression Under Chinese President Xi Jinping in the Globalization Era

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## ABSTRACT

Much literature has highlighted the current Chinese government's restriction on freedom of expression on the internet and religious freedom. However, very little research has examined the nexus between freedom of expression in China and globalization. This article aims to offer a view on President Xi Jinping's increasing autocracy over the freedom of expression and its implications on China's performance in this globalizing world. A qualitative approach was utilized in this study and data were collected via library research. It was found that China's increasing autocracy under Xi Jinping, as shown in its tightening controls on online freedom of expression and rules on religious freedom, has created a setback for China's participation in globalization. This argument lies in two basic assumptions. Firstly, the spirit of globalization enables people to interact around the globe more freely in any way, while China's government restricts such interaction. Secondly, as a significant global player, China shows little respect for the freedom of religion. Accordingly, it violates the globalization of religious liberty, which is considered a universal human right in the 21st century.

## KEYWORDS

China; Freedom of Expression; Globalization;  
Religious Freedom



## INTRODUCTION

Expressing oneself is foundational in the actualization of human rights. By realizing their desire, a person has fulfilled his/her right to freedom of expression. Through information technology, one can exchange opinions and search for reliable information. In so doing, the internet allows one to express desires and seek answers to their interests in something. The basis of guaranteed human rights is freedom of expression, which means a democracy. Freedom of expression is a forum for the achievement of human rights including all civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights (Arjun, 2014).

Society is inseparable from media and communication due to its existence, which is increasingly required in globalization. They include mobile phones, radio, television, newspapers, social media, and the internet. Hence, the media is quite influential in shaping society's political and cultural life (Hodkinson, 2017). The press is experiencing rapid growth. It brings the flow of political information to the public and provides opportunities for institutions from all political indicators to quickly and effectively reach their target participants (Lynch, 2012).

Today's world has entered an era of globalization, the export and import of goods, services, and information which is commonplace. All countries, both democratic and non-democratic, have experienced the impact of globalization's positive and negative sides. China is no

exception. The digital age enables access for everyone through social media (Granados, 2016).

Yet, the Chinese government regulates the internet infrastructure commercial and social use of the Internet (Liang & Lu, 2010). As a country with a communist ideology, China monitors and controls the media because Beijing is aware of the media's great potential in the political field. Just because the government controls the internet does not mean Chinese people do not get media concessions. China had experienced two more press releases than usual: prior to the 1989 protests at Tiananmen Square and the Beijing Olympics in 2008 (Gracia, 2018).

When President Xi Jinping came into power in 2012, China again imposed restrictions on the press. President Xi visited the three main Chinese state media: the People's Daily newspaper, the Xinhua news agency, and the broadcaster China Central Television (CCTV), and demanded that the editors and reporters of the media company pledge absolute loyalty to the Communist Party and focus on the President's leadership in terms of ideas, political views and actions (Associated Press, 2016).

The Chinese government not only regulates the media for communication but also tightens religious freedom for its people. The Communist Party of China (CPC), which succeeded in seizing government power in the late 1940s, gained control over religious matters in China (Tao, 2017). Under the current

leadership of Xi Jinping, the Chinese government introduced a new decree on 1 May 2021. This decree commands all religious leaders to “follow the lead of and support the Communist Party.” The leaders who break the rules would face administrative sanctions and criminal charges (Ming, 2021).

This article argues that China’s increasing autocracy under Xi Jinping, as shown in its tightening controls on online freedom of expression and rules on religious freedom, has created a setback for China’s participation in globalization. This argument is based on two basic assumptions: 1) China’s policy to limit the interaction of its citizens with the outside world through various media has weakened the spirit of globalization which allows people to interact worldwide more freely, and 2) the character of China’s tightened religious movement has violated the globalization of religious freedom, which is considered a universal human right in the 21st century.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This section addresses China’s participation in globalization, as well as looking at online freedom of expression and religious freedom. First of all, what globalization is? According to Kolb (2018), globalization is a term used to depict how the world is interconnected in terms of economics, culture, and population. It occurs due to cross-border trade in goods and services, technology, and flows of investment, people, and information. Scholte (2002) argues that the notion of

globalization contributes to understanding contemporary social relations, or to be more precise, it is to offer transplanetary and super territorial connections between people. From this standpoint, it is fair to say that the spirit of globalization plays a pivotal role in connecting people all over the world. Indeed, no country is inseparable from the international community, including China, in today’s globalized world.

Friedberg (2018) maintained that the history of modern China today can be traced back to 1978 when Deng Xiaoping proposed the initiative of a ‘reform and opening-up’ program. Although China initially struggled to find a pattern to replace its old policy, it finally succeeded in integrating itself into the global world. Friedberg explained that China’s decision to join the international community has far-reaching implications. Not only did it change the quality of life of Chinese people, it also raised China’s dignity and appeared to become one of the major regional and global players today. Manyika et al. (2016) observed that high flows of data and information are bringing globalization to enter a new phase, and China has become one of the countries gaining advantages for such economic growth.

However, Woetzel (2017) noted the downside of globalization: inequality and disruption. While some households face declining income, some rich men take more advantage of globalization. Lu (2018) also affirmed that although China is becoming a new champion in this

globalized world, as others retreat from the forefront, its business experienced difficulties in terms of cultural consideration. Lu presented a Chinese globalization case study of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), proposed by Xi Jinping, attempting to connect Asia and Europe. In this scenario, businesses in China are keen to benefit from globalization, like the implementation of Turnkey Project Management (Fitria, 2021). Yet, they are afraid of outsiders, given that Chinese business culture does not follow Western norms. Accordingly, the West comes up with the notion of a 'protectionist' manner which prevents and slows down China from taking the global stage.

On the flip side, the restrictions on freedom of expression in China take many forms, including freedom of expression on the internet and religious liberty. Moynihan and Patel (2021) examine the approaches taken by the current Chinese government against online freedom of expression. They observed that President Xi Jinping continued to maintain its restrictive policy on online freedom of expression even on the global stage by justifying its action to advocate the concept of cyber sovereignty. Consequently, it reduces citizen's ability and their right to access information and express freedom of thought. Momen (2020) argues that blocking freedom of expression on the Internet occurs across the globe particularly authoritarian states, including China. The authoritarian states always worry about the internet, thereby

regulating the internet censorship and blocking Google, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, as well as other foreign websites (Yuan, 2018).

China is a country having a long religious history, which can be traced back several centuries ago (Xiong, 2014). According to Wang (2017), China's freedom of religion has been tripartite, showing how China ensures the freedom of religion in China's law and other circumstances in which China should restrict religious freedom in an illiberal context. Wang classified the understanding of tripartite into three major parts: conditional freedom, limited freedom, and no freedom. Every religious group has to register with government authorities in accordance with the Regulations on Religious Affairs (RRA). Initiatives to establish religious schools or religious facilities must register and obtain approval from the China's government (Report for Department of Justice, 2018).

Overall, the literature review above indicates there are relatively few studies that explore the nexus between globalization and freedom of expression in China. Although several authors provide substantial explanations about how the China's government restricts freedom of expression on the internet and religious liberty, they do not link the issues with the China's role in the age of globalization today. As a result, this article aims to offer a view on President Xi Jinping's increasing autocracy over the freedom of expression and its implications

on China's performance in a globalizing world.

## METHODS

This article used a qualitative approach by collecting data through library research. George (2008) contends that library research is one of the data collection techniques comprising two fundamental aspects: learning and understanding, linked to the problems from books, theories, notes, and documents. Hence, this study endeavors to learn and understand the way China's government deals with freedom of expression in the country and examines the impact of its action in this globalized world.

The sources used in this study emanated from secondary data, including books, journals, Chinese government media posts, news media posts, and other related references, in the last ten years. Given that China has been through many decades with different styles of regimes and leaderships, this article limits the focus on the Xi Jinping Administration concerning his policies and action towards freedom of expression in China in the era of globalization. In this study, the data analysis process is divided into three steps: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### **China's Policy on Restricting Online Freedom of Expression under Xi Jinping**

The election of President Xi Jinping to the 5th Generation government at the 18th

Party Congress in 2012 enabled the government to continue to promote modified socialism. Fan et al. (2016) observed that President Xi is different from previous Chinese leaders. Indeed, he was able to develop a system pattern to worship his personality. As the government tightens control over the media and the internet, publicity increased through songs, videos, and banners praising Xi Jinping's leadership. This move is seen as an attempt by President Xi to strengthen his power.

At the 19th Communist Party of China (CPC) National Congress in 2017, President Xi stressed the importance of developing new ideas about socialism. During the meeting, party members agreed to incorporate his ideas on socialism with features of China's new era into the party constitution and then into the national form in 2018 (CNTV, 2018). China's policy is to tighten restrictions on internet use after access to foreign media such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube has been blocked. The reason is that users of this website can post videos, audio, or images without government filtering (Xu & Albert, 2017).

Accessing foreign platforms in China is quite challenging because the Chinese government has enacted laws and regulations prohibiting illegal or inappropriate online content. In recent years, the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) has announced detailed rules regarding restrictions on foreign platforms. The CAC enacted new regulations in May 2017 asking any



websites that publish news, including social media platforms hosting short videos, live streams, and other microblogging, to obtain a license from the government (Xiang, 2019).

Farras (2019) outlines some of the obstacles that Google, Twitter, and Facebook experienced in China: First, the complex network of internet filtering systems used in China is called 'the Great Firewall', which blocks thousands of foreign websites. The Great Firewall still has a hole to penetrate using a virtual private network (VPN) that creates an encrypted channel between the user and the internet. However, authorities have cracked down on unauthorized VPN services in recent years, being fined and jailed by VPN vendors. Meanwhile, alternative applications circulating in China now provide 800 million domestic service users, equivalent to almost all global online services subject to state censorship. For example, Weibo for Twitter, iQiyi for Netflix, Baidu for Google, and other Chinese brands (Farras, 2019).

Second, Chinese censors can intercept large amounts of web traffic and redirect it to specific websites to damage users' systems. In 2015, the University of Toronto research group Citizen Lab reported that so-called DDoS (distributed denial of service) attacks were coordinated by another attack system alongside the Great Firewall. China's new attack tool is called the 'Great Cannon'. According to Citizen Lab, Great Cannon's first known targets were services designed to

circumvent Chinese censorship, including two pages on code provider site GitHub. In March 2015, GitHub went offline several times in response to a five-day DDoS attack from China (Farras, 2019).

Third, the Cyber-security Law passed in 2017 requires internet companies operating in China to store user data on local servers and allow inspections if deemed necessary by the authorities. For instance, Apple now allows the country's wireless carriers to process data from iCloud users based in China. However, data breaches do occur from time to time. According to Victor Gevers, a cyber-security researcher at the GDI Foundation, a database of some 364 million Chinese social media profiles leaked online in March 2018, with real names and ID numbers collected by a government-affiliated surveillance network (Farras, 2019).

Fourth, Chinese internet companies are deploying an army of human censors to monitor user-generated content on their platforms, and the number is growing. Last year, ByteDance, owner of the viral short video app TikTok, pledged to expand the review team for news aggregator app Toutiao from 6,000 to 10,000. Inke, one of China's most popular live-streaming apps, uses artificial intelligence to take the complexities of labeling, classifying, and sorting content to different levels of risk (Farras, 2019).

Internet censorship employees continue to face violations of government regulations. Content reviewing has become a thriving new business for state

media such as People's Daily, which provides third-party risk management services. China's National Security Law does apply to Chinese territory. Accordingly, restrictions on freedom of expression in Hong Kong have far-reaching implications. Laws apply to everyone in the world, no matter where they are. Anyone who violates the law can be prosecuted if detected interfering with the government accessed from Hong Kong or Chinese territory (Bristow, 2020).

By curbing social media and ignoring privacy, the Chinese government violates the right to communicate. McLeod (2018) affirms that the fundamental feature of humanity is communication. It strongly links to human interaction and participation; not only on a family, community, or national level but also on a global level. In social life, humans are inseparable from daily communication activities. Without communication, people cannot grow personally, socially, or cognitively. Communication is also closely related to the formation of society and culture from generation to generation.

Edward Hall, cited in Mulyana (2005), stated that culture is communication and communication is culture. On the one hand, communication is a mechanism that spreads the cultural norms horizontally from one community to another or vertically from one generation to the next. On the other hand, culture defines the criteria (communications) deemed appropriate for a particular group. In addition to limiting

freedom of expression on social media, the Chinese government under President Xi has also restricted religious activities, as discussed below.

### **China's Rules for Restricting Religious Activities**

China has introduced new rules to limit religious activities. These activities are related to communities and religious groups from abroad. A draft bill issued by China's Ministry of Justice calls for restrictions on foreign pilgrims. It is done to suppress the spread of radicalism. President Xi oversaw a massive crackdown on the Uighur and Islamic minorities in the western Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region. About two millions Uighurs and other ethnic minorities also went through re-education camps (Arbar, 2020). Journalist Barbara Demick once said that the way China treats Buddhism, Daoism, and other folk religions is different compared to Islam or Christianity because they are deemed as their traditional religions existing for a long time. Therefore, China's government shows more tolerance to its traditional religions than to Islam or Christianity, or other new religions (Albert & Maizland, 2020).

The government of China also eliminated the collection of assets for religious activities channeled to mosques and other Islamic religious institutions. This situation hit Chinese Muslims and significantly impacted the social, economic, political, and cultural fabric (Fathurrahman, 2019). The Chinese

government replaced the Arabic, Sinking, and Kansu writing systems that characterize Islamic culture and Cyrillic. This incident shows how Beijing suppresses the minority cultures developed in its country. They also seek to intervene in the enforcement of Islamic law by issuing regulations that prohibit state and government officials from fasting (Dharma, 2017).

Although China is a communist country and officially atheist, the government legalizes five religions: Buddhism, Catholicism, Daoism, Islam, and Protestantism (Tong et al., 2021). These religions, however, were overseen by public institutions governed by the Labor Ministry of the Communist Party's United Front. The communist government tightly controlled activities outside the boundaries of these groups. Underground churches, denominations, and private religious research groups are regularly treated with strictness (Arbar, 2020).

As long as foreigners avoid all activities enacted in Article 21 of the regulations, like not setting up religious groups, recruiting followers, or accepting donations from Chinese citizens, they will not be apprehended (Chaudhury, 2020). Many religions, such as Mormonism, Judaism, and Quakerism, are not officially recognized by the government; but they can operate in China if the adherents are foreigners. However, sensitivity to foreign religious groups remains strong. In the 2018 China paper on religion, the government stated that colonialists and

imperialists have long controlled and exploited certain beliefs (Arbar, 2020).

The rules emphasize China's commitment to respecting religious freedom for foreigners, yet a list of potential new restrictions and requirements could make this belief very difficult to put into practice. Specifically, the Bill lists activities that foreigners are not allowed to do in China, such as interfering with or controlling the work of Chinese religious groups. The government is afraid that foreigners can harness religion to carry out terrorist activities and interfere with the appointment and guidance of clerics in China (Arbar, 2020).

Father Wang Yi, a founder of the Early Rain Covenant Church in China, was sentenced by a court in Sichuan Province to nine years in prison for infiltration and illegal business conduct. One year after his arrest and secret trial, Father Wang was deprived of his political rights for three years and confiscated 50,000 yuan worth of movable property. Religious activists called the government the toughest in ten years and painted a grim picture of religious repression under President Xi Jinping (VoA, 2019).

Father Wang and his wife were among dozens of church supporters arrested by Chinese police last December. Before becoming a pastor, the 46-year-old priest was a writer, social activist, and law scholar at Chengdu University. According to Bob Fu, founder of China Aid in Texas, a Christian human rights group that defends religious freedom and the rule of law in China, Father King's decision



remained the longest in 10 years. It shows that President Xi's government is determined to be control and define the boundaries of religious freedom, fearing Father Wang's domestic and international influence (VoA, 2019).

The Chinese government under President Xi has intensified the persecution of Christians, Muslims, and even Buddhists. In addition to arresting the priest, authorities closed churches, removed thousands of crosses, and stated that no one under the age of 18 could attend church services or be influenced by religious teachings. It was the worst religious persecution since the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s (VoA, 2019).

### **The Implications of China's Restriction on Freedom of Expression for its Participation in Globalization**

As one of the leading players in the current world order, China is inseparable from its integration with the international community. In this context, not only do Chinese companies interact with the outside world to benefit from globalization, but its citizens also need to integrate themselves with the outside world through today's advances in Internet technology. However, with restrictions on freedom of expression – including the expression on the internet and religious freedom – China is demonstrating an increase in its autocratic system, which indirectly creates a setback for its participation in globalization. At least two supporting arguments are provided for this view.

Firstly, it is worth noting that globalization allows citizens to interact more freely across the globe than ever before. It can occur through face-to-face meetings and in cyberspace through Internet access via various online media sites such as Google, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and other related websites. Stromquist and Monkman (2014) affirm that globalization has many faces. Apart from the economic aspect that focuses on the free trade area and foreign investments, as well as the social element that influences lifestyle changes, globalization also includes cultural aspects. Stromquist and Monkman explained that the cultural aspects of globalization include the communication process reflected in people's ability to access information, exchange images, human interaction, and other related matters.

From that standpoint, it is fair to say that China is not moving forward to embrace the globalization era – given that Chinese President Xi still restricts the internet use of its citizens and even takes control over China's internet giants. China should enable its citizens to interact with the outside world to obtain first-hand information, deepen new friendships, and express themselves through online platforms. The government of China should also not block Google, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram; instead, it should offer education about using online media correctly and not threatening state security. The Chinese government should also not interfere too much with

companies' freedom as long as they comply with existing regulations.

Secondly, the Chinese government's restraint on religious freedom in China also provides potential downsides for China's role in globalization. Salleh et al. (2017) explained that freedom of religion in globalization is seen as a universal human right in the 21st century. In this sense, when a country demonstrates its inability to ensure religious freedom, it may lead to conflict and damage its reputation in the international community. From this perspective, it is clear that China violates the norms of globalization of religious freedom as the Xi government continues to tighten restrictions on religious freedom in Chinese society. If China desires to integrate into the globalization era, it must respect the freedom of religion.

Although Brasnett (2021) describes China's efforts to restore its reputation in international relations through the concept of religious diplomacy by inviting some religious leaders to visit China, much needs to be done to ensure religious freedom in China. Those actions could include giving equal treatment to the five religions recognized by the government of China (Buddhism, Catholicism, Daoism, Islam, and Protestantism). There should be no difference between the minority and the majority religion. In addition, China also needs to slightly loosen the rules so that cases like Father Wang and Uighur do not happen again in the future.

## CONCLUSION

This article has examined China's increasing autocracy under Xi Jinping on the freedom of expression and the implications on its performance in a globalizing world. Freedom of expression is part of human rights that a country must respect. This article focuses on case studies of the freedom of expression on the internet and religious liberty as part of freedom of expression in China. Under Xi Jinping's rule, China continues to limit the freedom of its citizens to access the internet as enjoyed by citizens in other countries; even some foreign sites such as Google, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are blocked. Some internet companies such as Apple are also required to store data on local servers and be prepared to be inspected if required. On the flip side, the government of China also shows poor treatment of the freedom of religion for minorities. Despite gaining recognition, new religions such as Islam and Protestantism received different treatment than Chinese traditional religions. It can be seen in the case of Father Wang and Muslim Uighurs.

This article finds that China's tightening controls on online freedom of expression and rules on religious freedom under the leadership of Xi Jinping have created a setback for China's participation in globalization. That occurs because globalization requires people to interact more freely, regardless of their platforms. At the same time, the Chinese government restricts such interaction by proposing regulations prohibiting illegal online

content. Moreover, China violates the globalization of religious freedom by limiting the right and movement of Muslims and Christians to exercise their belief. As a significant global player, China should show respect for religious freedom. Continuing to restrict the right to religious liberty will only exacerbate China's reputation on the worldwide stage.

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