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Isolationism from global media and its impact on societies:
The case of China

Estudiante: Luisa Reus Ruiz

Dirección: Prof.ª D. ª Isabel Escribano Bourgoin

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Abstract

As the world's worst abuser of Internet freedom, China introduces very strict censorship mechanisms to isolate its society in terms of the media they have access to. These policies in turn have a considerable impact on Chinese society, whether that be positive or negative. This paper explores the extent to which Chinese public opinion agrees with this media isolationism, by assessing the social impact behind it, and by exploring how much of this legitimisation of censorship is influenced by their culture. It also detects some trends that differentiate Chinese society from those of the West. In general terms, it aims to answer the following question: to what extent has Chinese society been impacted by the isolationist policies taken by the Chinese Communist Party?

Keywords: Chinese media, censorship, isolationism, global media, Chinese public opinion, Chinese society.

Resumen

Considerado como el peor país en libertad en Internet, China lleva a cabo mecanismos de censura muy estrictos para aislar a su sociedad en cuanto a los medios de comunicación a los que los ciudadanos tienen acceso. A su vez, estas políticas tienen un impacto considerable en la sociedad china, ya sea positivo o negativo. Este trabajo explora hasta qué punto la opinión pública china está de acuerdo con este aislacionismo mediático, evaluando el impacto social que hay detrás de ello y analizando cuánto influye la cultura en la legitimación de la censura existente. También detecta algunas tendencias que diferencian a la sociedad china de las occidentales. En términos generales, pretende responder a la siguiente pregunta: ¿hasta qué punto se ha visto afectada la sociedad china por las políticas aislacionistas adoptadas por el Partido Comunista Chino?

Palabras clave: medios chinos, censura, aislacionismo, medios globales, opinión pública china, sociedad china.

Outline

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1. Introduction

According to Freedom on the Net (2022), China is considered to be the worst abuser of internet freedom in the world for the eighth consecutive year. Likewise, traditional media such as the press or TV are not an exception when it comes to restriction and censorship. Government-controlled media, aiming to maintain stability in the country and preserve national interests, is capable of shaping the reality perceived by Chinese society due to the extensive regulations and institutionalization of the system that allows this complete control. In this sense, Chinese society as a whole is denied their right to access global media in a way that is transparent and not biased by specific political views.

For these reasons, it is relevant to assess how these measures taken unilaterally by the Chinese government affect and impact Chinese society both positively and negatively, focusing on giving a voice to Chinese people themselves who hold their own views with regard to media that are not biased in Western perceptions. More broadly, China is the perfect example to analyse how a country with limited access to media in a global environment shapes public opinion and influences its society from inside its borders.

With the purpose of analysing the perceptions of media isolation on Chinese society and its direct impact, some previous context on the media landscape of China will be given so as to understand the extent to which isolationism from global media takes place from within its borders, both in traditional media and online media. Some key concepts will also be defined, such as global media or censorship, which will help bring about a consequent analysis of the issue.

Once the objectives and hypotheses of this project as well as the methodology to be used have been defined, the paper will focus on how Chinese people perceive the media landscape they are confronted with, highlighting the little consensus between studies in approaching Chinese views of their political reality. The analysis will then focus on the social impact of limiting content and practising censorship, whether that be positive or negative, followed by a comparison of Chinese society to the West in a way that cultural nuances can be perceived to be a cause, to some extent, of a supposed legitimacy of media control in the country. Some concluding remarks will be given to argue whether this isolation from global media represents a threat to China or the rest of the international community in a world where censorship measures are taking a more prominent role every year.

2. Purpose and motivation

The present dissertation aims to understand how societies are shaped by the media they have access to, and the implications that a restriction of global media has on them from a sociological point of view. This is of particular interest in a context of censorship and policies of government control that limit people's accessibility to information in the global sphere.

In particular, special consideration is given to analysing the extent to which the People's Republic of China (PRC) plays a role in shaping the reality of Chinese society due to its state-led media and censorship methods that create a distorted view far from the reality of countries with full access to information. In fact, China follows "strict media controls using monitoring systems and firewalls, shuttering publications or websites, and jailing dissident journalists, bloggers, and activists" (Xu, B., et al., 2017). Taking this into consideration, it would be interesting to grasp how Chinese society acts and distinguishes itself from societies that have access to global media, as a result of growing up in an environment where communication is selective and global media is censored.

In fact, the policies and efforts carried out by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) concerning censorship and control of the media have created a hermetic environment in China which has shaped people's views and perceptions of the world and their own country over the years. It is key to tackle whether these restrictions have indeed played a major role in shaping the Chinese contemporary identity, or in the opposite case, they have had little to no effect on the minds of Chinese society. This question arises amid protests of Chinese public opinion against Covid-19 restrictions and their hope for more freedom, together with the ongoing pressure the CCP has had to deal with these past months to confront this discomfort in Chinese society.

At the end of the day, this study is also motivated by the rise of China as a global superpower, which in turn raises questions on the global communication system and its future in a way that is interesting to explore its reach. It is equally relevant to see whether the global importance of China presents a threat or not to the whole international community, potentially changing the rules of global media.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1   The evolution of global media

Global media can be defined as all sorts of mass communication that are accessible and reachable to a large number of people globally. These include both traditional media such as the press, radio or television, and new media like the Internet or social media platforms. This definition of media as being 'global' has long been referred to as primarily Western-centred, particularly based in the US. Although this seems to be shifting in the 21st century, US media continues to dominate the vast majority of information that flows globally (Thussu, 2019). Over the past decades, it has even been suggested that this globalization of mass media has in turn created a sort of cultural homogenization between nations that has, as a result, made a global culture emerge.

This so-called global culture triggered by this international flow of information has been unequally interiorised around the world. The reason for this difference between countries lies in the political actions taken in most cases by authoritarian regimes, with the purpose of restricting the media that is consumed in a country. In fact, limits to the consumption of global media are very useful mechanisms used by authoritarian regimes to control public opinion and create a separate cultural identity in a country's population, serving as legitimization for their own systems.

3.2   Censorship and the Authoritarian theory of press

According to Cambridge Dictionary, censorship could be defined as:

> *"a system in which an authority limits the ideas that people are allowed to express and prevents books, films, works of art, documents, or other kinds of communication from being seen or made available to the public, because they include or support certain ideas."* (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023)

The concept of censorship is indeed not new. In fact, it can be traced back to ancient times. In Ancient Greece, Socrates was sentenced to death for corrupting young people by making them believe in religious opinions that differed from those of the government. His successor Plato in his book "*The Republic*", also suggests the existence of a

censorship system limiting the opinions of the community when they went against the institutions and offended common public sensibilities (Anastaplo, 2022). The concept was developed throughout time giving special attention to concepts such as respect for individuality and freedom of speech, both of which were based on Christian and Western-centric values.

On the contrary, Ancient China introduced some values that contradicted those developed in the Western world. Confucius emphasised the respect for authorities and the collective gain over the individual interest, which spread the idea that one should not openly share their opinions on political matters if they are not part of that administration. Given the huge influence that Confucius would have in China in the following two millennia, this is one of the arguments used to understand why Chinese society may not have been as supportive of political liberties as the West has been over time (Anastaplo, 2022).

Peterson, Wilbur, Schramm & Siebert (1963) introduced the four theories of the press[1] to help understand how all sorts of mass communication are related to the society and government of different countries. These four classifications are (1) the Authoritarian theory, (2) the Libertarian theory, (3) the Soviet Communist/workers theory, and (4) the Social Responsibility theory. In this case, we are focusing on the (1) Authoritarian theory to explain the link between mass media and political society in undemocratic regimes, such as the case of China. However, (3) Soviet media theory could also be useful to understand how media functions in the PRC, as it is very similar to the previous one but focuses specifically on promoting a communist ideology. Throughout history and at least up until more democratic regimes were formed, the Authoritarian theory had been popular as the main mass communication pattern around the world. As Siebert et al. defined it, "it is a theory under which the press, as an institution, is controlled in its functions and operation by organized society through another institution, government" (Siebert, F., et al., 1984).

The authoritarian system assumes that the government is infallible, and both media professionals within the country and foreign media should not have independence and be uncontrolled by the state. In this sense, there is a relation of subordination of the press to

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[1] Here the press is understood as all the media of mass communication. The authors put their emphasis on the press throughout the whole book, but television and radio are also included.

the state's own interests. There are various degrees of control, from (a) complete press control; (b) criticism allowed, but government invokes censorship; (c) special press laws lead to the arrest of editors; to (d) suppression of press opposition is more covert. China would be placed in the first category (a), as a country with complete press control.

The justification for control of mass communication as the basis for political action lies in Machiavelli's concern for power, which led him to propose that the security of the state was to be maintained whatever the means might be. Promotion of control of the media was then made possible in an attempt of sustaining the power of ruling elites in authoritarian regimes. Hegel, considered as the main philosopher in the political theory of authoritarianism, argued how freedom of the individual should be understood as "freedom within the state rather than from the state" (Siebert, F., et al., 1984). In the field of communications, this implies that the individual has to be engaged in public problems only in relation to society, but not to the level of the state.

All in all, this Authoritarian theory in mass communication supports the idea that mass media is influenced by the political sphere and must be subordinated to the state's objectives. It also helps explain the reasons why political regimes may engage in this control of the media, using tools such as censorship or propaganda. This is a useful means of achieving one's means by preventing the population from what the government regards as threats, affecting the nation as a whole. For this reason, authoritarian governments find the legitimacy to restrict any sensitive topics that go against their national security and apply the levels of censorship that they deem necessary.

Regarding the indicators of censorship, there are currently two main indicators around the world that help measure the lack of freedom in relation to the media consumed by country. These are the Freedom on the Net report by Freedom House, which focuses on Internet freedom; and the World Press Freedom Index by Reporters Without Borders, which focuses on press freedom. Use and combination of the two indexes helps measure censorship in its entirety.

The Freedom on the Net index measures countries' level of internet freedom, such as the free flow of information or protection of free expression online. The questions posed in the report are divided into (1) obstacles to access, (2) limits on content, and (3) violations of user rights. Each answer is given a number on a scale of 0-100, where 0 is

the least free and 100 is the freest. The adding up of all ratings creates the ranking by country (Freedom House, 2022).

The World Press Freedom Index aims to measure the level of press freedom enjoyed by journalists and media by country. A similar score from 0-100 is assigned to each country, calculated by: (1) a quantitative tally of abuses against journalists and media outlets; and (2) a qualitative analysis of the situation based on responses of press freedom specialists. They also include five contextual indicators reflecting the situation in all of its complexity: political context, legal framework, economic context, sociocultural context, and safety (Reporters Without Borders, 2022).

4. State of the Art

4.1   Media censorship in China

Article 35 of the Chinese Constitution states that all citizens of the PRC "shall enjoy freedom of speech, the press, assembly, association, procession, and demonstration" (Constitution of China, Article 35). However, these rights that could prevent the government from imposing censorship laws against its population are all denied in Article 51. As they put it, "when exercising their freedoms and rights, citizens of the People's Republic of China shall not undermine the interests of the state, society or collectives, or infringe upon the lawful freedoms and rights of other citizens" (Constitution of China, Article 51). Consequently, it could be suggested that freedom of speech is limited to those who have positive opinions of the government, and not to those who would go against it. This leaves Chinese citizens with nothing more than an illusion, and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) with a legitimization of government control over its population.

The Chinese Communist Party is the only party recognised as such in the Constitution. For them, safeguarding their own national interests legitimises any kind of right of citizens to exercise their freedom of speech or have free access to information. After the industrialization process that China overtook during the 80s, the CCP adopted what they referred to as a "market socialist economy". This approach let some private companies enter the market, even if the bureaucracy was tedious and state ownership was still highly incentivised. China then found itself in a process of globalization that menaced the survival of its political system. For this reason, the CCP knew that mass media and other communication channels were key to maintaining stability in the regime and controlling external pressures so that Chinese society could not doubt their performance in many areas. Indeed, the Chinese system has one main objective, which is "to ensure the permanence in this universe of changes that globalization entails, and the foundation of solid values imbricated in its own identity and national culture. Hence, it is important to avoid any permeability in the structure that could show vulnerabilities" (Real, E. et al., 2010). This new reality that the Chinese government has had to face ultimately explains their justification for using a wide variety of censorship tools in mass communication channels.

4.1.1 Traditional media

Regarding mass media, Xinhua (新华社) is the official news agency in China and the biggest in the world. This agency has been institutionalized to the point of being completely dependent on Beijing and administratively ruled by the own CCP. Xinhua can regulate its own information while complying with the guidelines of other institutions such as the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee Publicity Department (CCPPD), the National Administration for the Protection of State Secrets (NAPSS), or the Ministry of Public Security (MPS) (Real, E. et al., 2010). The concentration of all information in this agency allows the government to keep all information controlled so that censorship can be applied whenever it is needed.

For the press, China started a process of liberalization of the press market in the 90s that allowed the privatization of some press agencies, developing independently from the government. However, newspapers around China have to comply with very strict guidelines on which content can be published. For instance, the main newspaper, the People's Daily (人民日报), is completely subordinated to the CCP (Real, E. et al., 2010). Many international news outlets like the New York Times or the BBC are blocked, as well as those from territories that threaten the Chinese government, for example, those of Taiwan or Hong Kong (Freedom House, 2022). Moreover, some Chinese newspapers have started publishing in English to show openness in a globalized world, such is the case of the People's Daily or the South China Morning Post (Real, E. et al., 2010).

To illustrate this, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) allocates China in their World Press Freedom index as country 175 out of 180. This is part of the 15.6% of countries or territories classified as being in a very serious situation (RSF, 2022). For their contextual indicators, RSF explains the political context as a regime using media as a tool for censorship and state propaganda. In the legal framework, as we have seen, the Constitution of China allows freedom of speech but condemns all intentions to go against the regime. Economically, the majority of the industry is controlled by the CCP; and safety-wise, surveillance is widely used to prevent people from incentivising collective expression. When it comes to the sociocultural context, RSF concludes that Xi Jinping's era has "restored a media culture worthy of the Maoist era, in which freely accessing information has become a crime and to provide information an even greater crime" (RSF, 2022).

World Press Freedom Index in the 15 biggest economies in terms of GDP (2022)
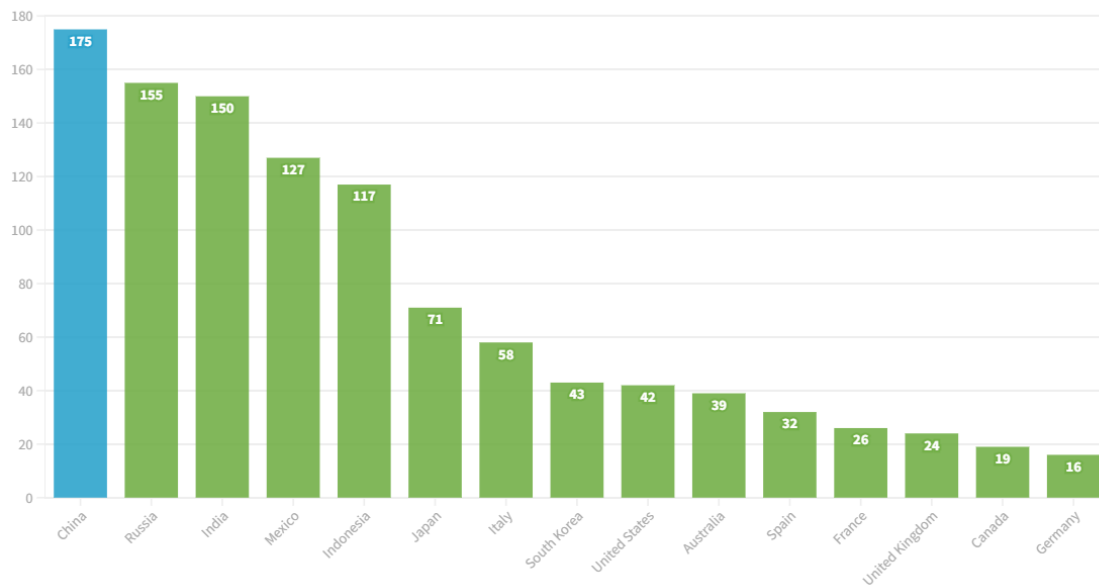

Figure 1. Own elaboration based on data from Reporters Without Borders (RSF) (2022).

Likewise, audio-visual media is also subordinated to the CCP's interests. For example, China Central Radio (CNR) became the party's mouthpiece since its creation in 1940. Regarding television, all emissions are under the control of Xinhua agency, wherein China Central Television (CCTV) is the main public television group. Both radio and television are organized according to the National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA) (Real, E. et al., 2010), and they have to comply with strict regulations on different types of content to be banned or use of propaganda to ensure that the socialist values are promoted in the media (Freedom House, 2022).

4.1.2 The 'Great Firewall of China'

Officially called the 'Golden Shield Project' (金盾工程), it is referred to as the 'Great Firewall of China' abroad, due to the magnitude of the information blocking system that is deployed. It deals with everything related to online censorship, and it was finally implemented in 2008 by the Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission (CCAC) after twelve years of intense construction. Together with the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC), they "oversee the telecommunications sector and regulate internet content" (Freedom House, 2022). According to the Chinese government, "the intention behind the

Golden Shield Project is only to filter and censor wrong information originating from outside of China to protect the society from its influence" (Chandel, S. et al., 2019). This project is seen both by the government and the local citizens as a way of stabilizing Chinese society. The idea behind the scheme was to prevent society from being influenced by Western ideologies after the country got access to the Internet in 1994.

Chandel, S. et al. (2019) analysed the four stages of the firewall's technology development. Firstly, the Golden Shield blocked certain domain names and IP addresses, and Internet cafés were required to install surveillance software. Then, keyword censorship was implemented, which was able to block websites if they provided content deemed "sensitive". In the third stage, the Great Firewall also started detecting VPNs, blocking their use as well. Finally, the last stage was dedicated to passing laws to prosecute VPN service providers (Chandel, S. et al., 2019). Ultimately, the main objective behind this project is to prevent society from being corrupted and possibly start questioning the political system.

Moreover, every internet user has to be registered in the Ministry of Public Security and comply with the requirements of the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT). These new means of communication are subject to the same rules applied to traditional means. Hence, the Xinhua agency has to give its approval on the content to be shared online in the same way that it is restricted in the press, radio, or television. There is special state permission to be granted for any website willing to participate in the spreading of news. Besides, thanks to the imposition of filters, certain websites are blocked so that no information related to topics regarded as threats to the CCP is accessed by the general public (Real, E. et al., 2010).

To illustrate this situation with regard to online censorship, the Freedom on the Net 2022 index gives China only 10 points out of 100, classifying it as the "world's worst abuser country in terms of Internet freedom for the eighth consecutive year" (Freedom House, 2022). Freedom House states that the CCP has become more repressive in recent years under Xi Jinping's rule, tightening its control over media and the content that is available to Chinese users, especially after the strict zero-Covid measures taken to tackle the pandemic that triggered an awakening in Chinese public opinion.

Freedom on the Net Index in the 13 biggest economies in terms of GDP (2022)
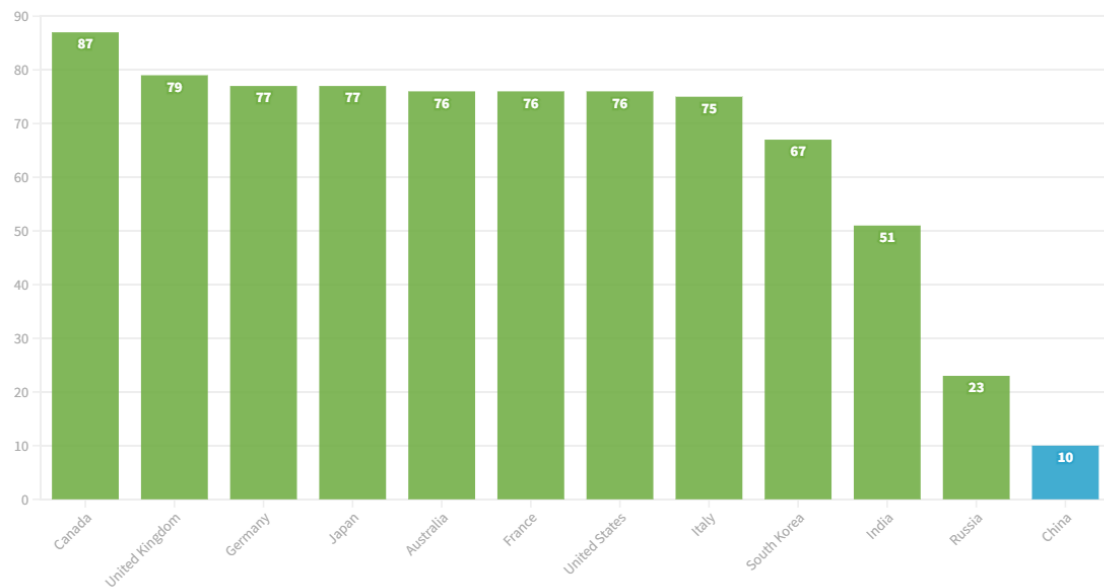

Figure 2. Own elaboration based on data from Freedom House (2022).

For the first category on (1) obstacles to access, even if internet penetration in China reached 74% on June 2022 (CNNIC, 2022), which is considered decently high, the CCP "maintains control over China's gateways to the global internet" (Freedom House, 2022). This means that authorities can restrict all the content that is hosted on servers abroad, including internet access shutdowns to maintain national security when the CCP deems it necessary.

In relation to (2) limits on content, this Great Firewall acts as a censorship apparatus blocking many international news agencies, popular websites, social media platforms and think tank websites. Instead of using these globally wide platforms, they have their own equivalents that are subject to censorship rules (see Figure 3). They are also especially careful with all content online that talks negatively of the Chinese government or the Chinese historical past. These include blocking information about the Tiananmen massacre in 1989, the Uyghurs in Xinjiang or the Taiwan-China conflict, amongst many other issues. Another example of a recent topic that has been subject to censorship is that of Covid-19, which triggered a huge response in public opinion that had to be erased according to the CCP's interests. Hence, as it can be deducted, these locally hosted websites must comply with very strict requirements on the type of content published and the information they provide (Freedom House, 2022).

Most popular internet platforms (websites and social media) in China and its equivalent globally
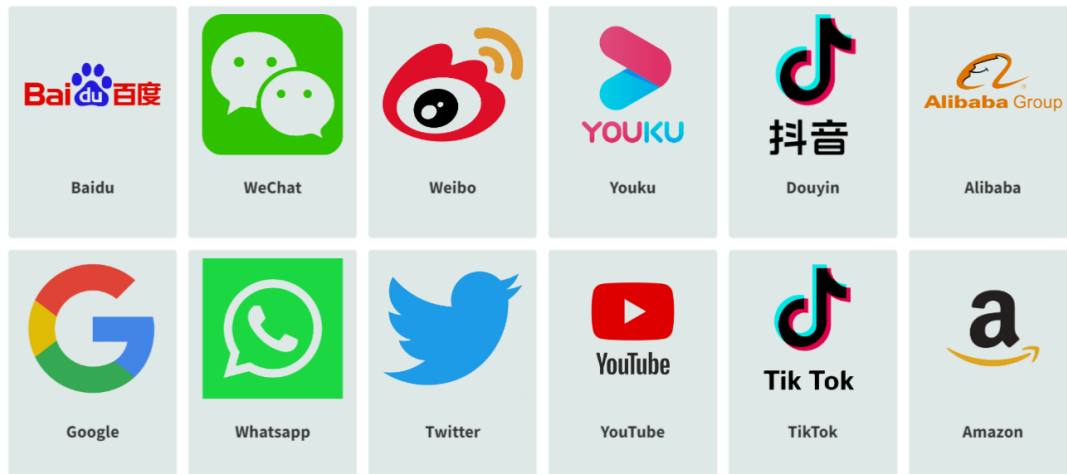
Figure 3. Own elaboration.

In terms of (3) violations of user rights, Chinese internet users are detained regularly for the online content they post if this goes against the CCP's national interests. Journalists are also usually imprisoned, as well as activists and human rights lawyers. Specifically, this past year there have been many cases of people being prosecuted for speaking out on the violations of human rights after implementing highly strict Covid-19 lockdown measures all throughout the country (Freedom House, 2022). According to Reporters Without Borders, there are 102 journalists currently in prison (RSF, 2022). Moreover, the Chinese government uses highly sophisticated technology that allows them to monitor citizens' private conversations and interactions with other people, which in turn creates an environment of fear around Chinese people and deters them from expressing themselves freely. Regarding extra-legal violence, there have been cases of torture, killings and even people being sent to re-education camps because of the content consumed and published online (Freedom House, 2022).

Regarding how Chinese people perceive this matter, there seems to be a divided opinion in society. Some Chinese citizens, especially younger generations, are more aware of this issue and are directly affected by this blockage because they themselves are users of platforms and websites whose use is forbidden. They also acknowledge that traditional media is being manipulated to satisfy the party's needs. However, there is a part of the population who does not seem to care at all if certain information is blocked or censored both online and offline, not even regarding it as a problem (Chandel, S. et al., 2019). This duality in society is what will be explored in the following analysis.

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5. Research goals and questions

As it has been aforementioned, the main aim of this dissertation is to analyse the extent to which Chinese society and public opinion have been shaped due to the media they consume and their isolation from global media. To achieve this, it is necessary to respond to the following specific research objectives:

1. Understand Chinese public opinion and their perception of the media.
2. Explore the implications that a restriction of global media has on Chinese society from a sociological point of view.
3. Explore how Chinese society acts and distinguishes itself from societies that have access to global media.
4. Analyse if media control is the main cause of social differentiation between China and the West.

Given the research goals proposed, the main question of research aimed to be answered in this dissertation would be the following:

"To what extent has Chinese society and public opinion been impacted due to the isolationist media policies taken by the CCP?"

To answer this question, the following specific questions are being proposed:

Q1. What is the social awareness of the Chinese on this limited access to media?
Q2. Analysing the CCP's performance, how effective have policies related to censorship and control of the media been?
Q3. What is Chinese society's opinion on this limitation of social freedoms? Is culture related in any way?
Q4. Is media restriction creating a separate Chinese social identity?

Hence, the main hypothesis to be sustained throughout this project is that China's media control regarding global media is directly isolating its society and causing a social and cultural differentiation between them and the rest of the world. However, it is also hypothesized that Chinese society is generally aware of these factors and is changing its perception of the media more every year. This is bound to change Chinese public opinion in the long term in ways that could challenge the survival of the CCP, at least how we know it today.

6. Methodology

In order to proceed with the analysis, a deductive methodology will be used. This will be based on extensive research and documentation about Chinese public opinion and perception of the media, followed by an analysis of the impact that isolationist media policies have in Chinese society. Both primary and secondary sources will be used to sustain the analysis.

The primary sources used will mainly be reports and surveys conducted on media attitudes in China, from research centres such as Freedom House with the China Dissent Monitor and the Freedom on the Net Index, the Pew Research Center, the CSIS, the Edelman Trust Barometer Global Report, or projects like Big Data China or China From the Ground Up, among others. Secondary sources like news articles, essays, and other research-based projects will be used to provide an analysis that is as complete as possible to detect trends in Chinese society and media control of the CCP. However, it is important to note that there is a lack of Chinese sources due to the complex censorship mechanisms that are used in the country, which limits the information available on this topic to a great extent.

Quantitative data will be mainly used to contrast the opinions of Chinese society towards media attitudes and public opinion, which are very useful insights to assess the reality of what people really think about their government and media. Likewise, the use of graphs will help detect these trends in Chinese society with regard to the media they consume.

Qualitative analysis will also be conducted in terms of cultural differences between China and the West, and also to detect any nuances that numerical data cannot accurately explain certain trends in Chinese society.

7. Case study: the impact of media isolationism on Chinese society

The present case study seeks to understand how Chinese society perceives the media landscape they are confronted with as a result of living in a state where censorship is used and limits to content coming from outside of the country are frequent. This analysis will first introduce the different perceptions and opinions that Chinese citizens hold with regard to the media. This will explore their consent to the policies carried out, as well as any cultural nuances that alter these perceptions. Then, it will be explored the extent to which isolationist policies taken by the CCP have had a considerable impact on Chinese society. Finally, it will be argued how different exposure to global media is directly causing some differentiation between Chinese and Western societies. The research is carried out upon the limitation of the research available, given the lack of Chinese public opinion surveys in China that can effectively show the most accurate tendencies of Chinese people when asked about their government and media.

7.1   Chinese public opinion and perception of the media

In Western societies, there is the conception that Chinese public opinion and their perception of the media are directly aligned with the views of the CCP. This is because the image from the outside is that such powerful censorship mechanisms must be altering how Chinese society regards politics and other social issues. However, the reality is that Chinese citizens are generally aware of these restrictions and hold diverse opinions, instead of being fully manipulated into believing just the ideology that aligns with the government. Big Data China analyses research on China, in this case, the views of Chinese citizens with regard to their government and concludes that, even if confronted with a lot of media control, citizens hold diverse views on policy matters and are not always supportive of the government.

The graph below shows Chinese public opinion on a survey conducted in 2019 by Stanford professors Jennifer Pan and Yiqing Xu (Mazzocco & Kennedy, 2022). When asked about freedom of speech, a majority of Chinese citizens (58.04%) are in favour of allowing people to freely express their views on government policies, whether that be positive or negative. In terms of limiting gatherings in public spaces and participating in

demonstrations, Chinese public opinion seems to be more divided, with a majority holding a neutral opinion on the topic, and a slightly smaller percentage of people who agree there should not be limitations, 33.43% compared to the 27.73% who disagree. Finally, in the case of allowing journalists from abroad to enter China, when they frequently publish negative news reports about the country, 52.9% of the respondents seem to disagree. It could therefore be inferred that Chinese citizens believe that they should be able to express their views without being subject to censorship rules. Nonetheless, they are much more cautious when it comes to freedom of assembly, and they also still regard global media from outside the country as a threat, believing that this plurality of opinions is not positive for them. This is probably due to a strong nationalism that portrays the outside world, especially the West, as a recurrent threat always going against China (Mazzocco & Kennedy, 2022).

Chinese public opinion regarding freedom of speech, free assembly, and foreign journalism

■ Strongly agree ■ Agree ■ Neutral ■ Disagree ■ Strongly disagree ■ Refuse to answer

The government should allow people to express their positive or negative views toward government policies

| 21.38% | 36.66% | 25.87% | 8.79% | 4.2% | 3.1% |

There should not be a limitation on people gathering in public spaces and participating in demonstrations

| 7.61% | 20.12% | 34.83% | 23.92% | 9.51% | 4% |

Foreign journalists who frequently publish negative news reports about China should be allowed to enter China

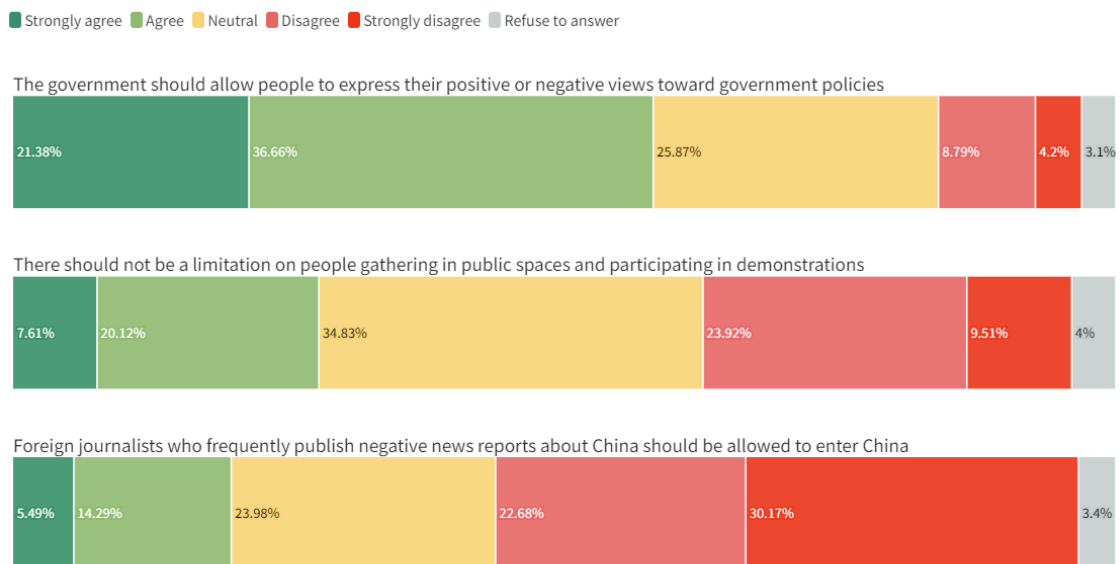| 5.49% | 14.29% | 23.98% | 22.68% | 30.17% | 3.4% |

Figure 4. Own elaboration based on a survey conducted in 2019 by Pan and Xu from the CSIS.

In terms of demographics, there seems to be a much more liberal population in urban areas, which makes them more likely to go against certain government regulations compared to those citizens living in rural areas of China. In fact, Big Data China reveals that "there is a silent majority in favour of economic reform and political liberalism", which is bound to keep on growing as the country further modernises. These opinions that go against predominantly authoritarian policies are also more popular among people

with higher incomes and higher levels of education. In addition, it is important to note how Chinese students perceive these authoritarian measures, as they are key for the future of the country. In fact, for those who study abroad in the US, data shows that they are more supportive of freedom of speech and media, compared to those who study in China (Mazzocco & Kennedy, 2022).

On the other hand, there is a widespread idea in the West that believes the reason why the CCP can easily legitimise their media control policies is that Chinese citizens themselves value more social stability than political freedom. However, Pan and Xu argue that most of the respondents in their study preferred allowing free speech even if it led to social instability (Mazzocco & Kennedy, 2022). This shows that a good part of Chinese society values this freedom of speech more than it was initially hypothesised. It also suggests that recent events related to protests against growing repressive policies by the CCP are much more accepted now by the general public in China.

Indeed, in these past few years, Chinese public opinion seems to have shifted towards a more reticent stance regarding control of the CCP. The China Dissent Monitor by Freedom House is a new database that tracks the frequency and diversity of dissent in China following recent events. In their reports, they aim to show how Chinese society is responding to an increasing repressive rule of the CCP, in part with regard to media restrictions in the country. It is primarily based on collective action in public spaces, although some online dissent is also pictured. The data provided shows that, from June to September 2022, there was a total of 668 dissent events recorded, while the period from October to December 2022 saw an exponential rise to a total of 1,080 dissent events collected. This can be explained by the rise of protests against the strict zero-Covid regulations in place, which were subject to a lot of censorship.

The main way of dissent was in the form of group protests such as demonstrations, marches, and obstruction of roads, which accounted for 66% of the events. There were also other protests like single-person protests or sign protests. There was a minority that decided to express dissent using online means, mainly because it is much more difficult to circumnavigate the extensive censorship mechanisms of the CCP. For instance, it was recorded that there were ten online hashtag movements criticising the government. Other types of dissent include collective petitioning, strikes, or marches (Freedom House, 2022).

Although there is an inability to know the real amount of people's protests in the country due to said censorship, the diversity of protests of Chinese public opinion is illustrated very clearly by using this mechanism.

Number of dissent events in China by mode (June-December 2022)

Others
263

One-person demonstration
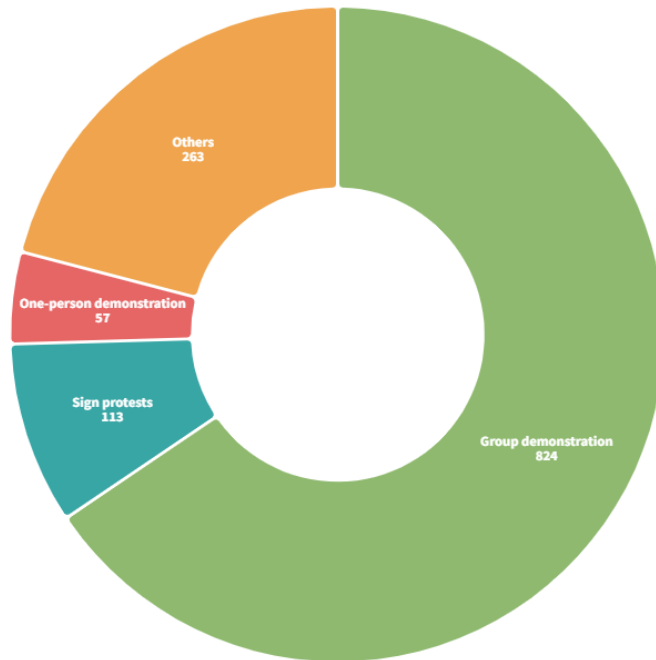57

Sign protests
113

Group demonstration
824

Figure 5. Own elaboration based on data from the China Dissent Monitor (2022)

When it comes to online public opinion, social media can be a powerful tool to express opinions and hold the government accountable for the policies carried out. Obviously, these forums of discussion online are heavily restricted given the censorship mechanisms used in the country, but this does not mean that they do not exist. Citizens usually employ political satire and ironic uses of politically correct language to dodge the controls and express their opinions on a wide range of topics, including the lack of freedom of speech in media platforms (Stockmann, D. & Luo, T., 2017). Indeed, online users commonly use humorous neologisms, homonyms, and cryptic allusions to substitute certain keywords that are censored, such as "rice bunny" ("*mi tu*" in Mandarin) instead of the censored #MeToo hashtag, or abbreviations like "XJ" for Xinjiang or "JC" for police ("*jing cha*" in Mandarin) (Freedom House, 2022).

However, it needs to be acknowledged that even after dealing with some dissent in the past months, Chinese citizen satisfaction with the government has been increasing in

general terms over the course of the past years. These high satisfaction levels come as a result of the effective policy measures for rapid growth and development by the CCP.

According to the 2022 Edelman Trust Barometer Global Report, China is the country that trusts institutions the most out of the 27 countries surveyed. This Trust Index is the average per cent trust in NGOs, businesses, governments, and media. In fact, China has moved from a score of 72 in 2021 to 83 in 2022 and 2023, increasing by 11 points, while the rest of the world saw a steady decline in trust in institutions. This is interesting to analyse, as it suggests that the general population in China trusts the government and the media to a high extent. Indeed, China is the country with the biggest support for media scoring 79 points in the last report. The average lies at 50 points. It is also worth noting that 80% of Chinese society worries about false information or fake news being used as a weapon, which is an increase of 9 points from the previous year and slightly above average.
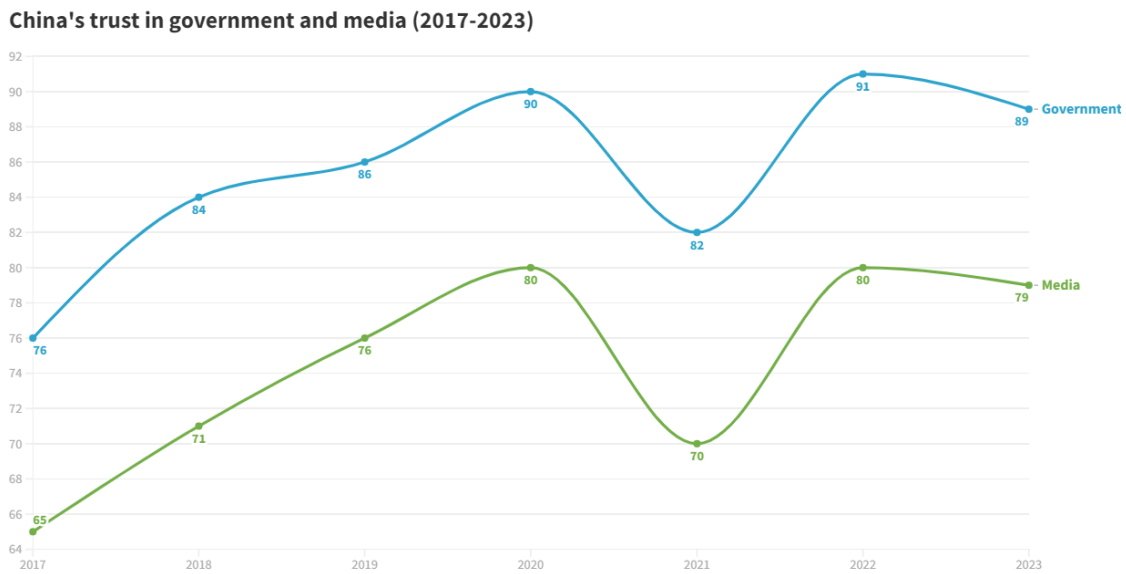
Figure 6. Own elaboration based on data from the Edelman Trust Barometer Global Reports (2017-2023).

In a similar trend, a survey conducted by China From the Ground Up project found that 79% of Chinese people were satisfied with freedom of expression in China, compared to 21% who were dissatisfied. This shows that Chinese society believes to a high extent that the level of freedom of speech they have is what they actually think is best for their society.

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When surveyed about foreign influence, it is really important to acknowledge how willing Chinese society is to allow more global media influence in their country. In fact, according to a study led by the Pew Research Center, a majority of 79% of Chinese citizens believe their way of life needs to be protected against foreign influence. This suggests that the isolationist policies of the CCP may, to some extent, answer the concerns of Chinese society effectively.

Chinese public opinion towards foreign influence affecting their way of life

Agree ■ Disagree ■ No answer

Our way of life needs to be protected against foreign influence

| 79% | 17% | 4% |

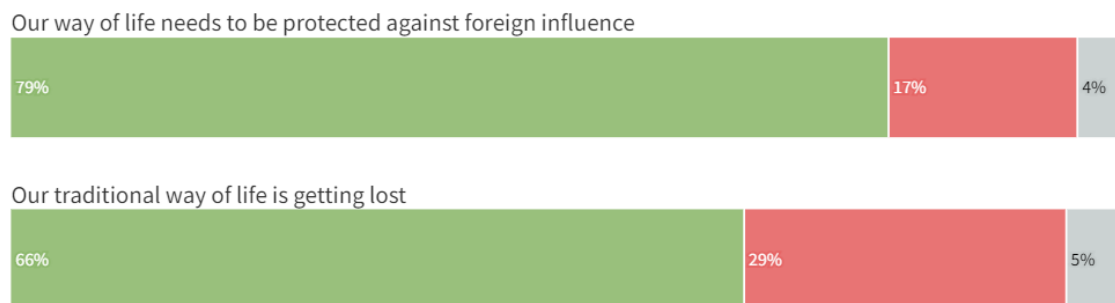Our traditional way of life is getting lost

| 66% | 29% | 5% |

Figure 7. Own elaboration based on data from the Pew Research Center (2015).

The West has an erroneous perception of Chinese public opinion in the sense that it believes that propaganda and censorship in China are effectively deterring Chinese citizens from holding well-formed views on a variety of controversial topics. Although it is true that the Chinese generally trust their media even with the isolationism that it entails, it needs to be acknowledged that their concept of freedom of speech and expression may be limited by how they define it, which obviously cannot be approached from the Western point of view.

This could suggest that their culture is deterring them from holding individual political views which are not necessarily for the common good, and instead, their concept of freedom of expression is ingrained in the ability to act as a collective for these common goals. Ultimately, Chinese people are aware of the limitations of the media they have access to, but the West has tried to portray the negative impact it has on them without extrapolating it to a different context and without considering how Chinese people themselves view this limitation of content in their own lives. Other considerations such as cultural differences causing a real impact need to be considered.

Additionally, the West assumes that the CCP faces no challenges from domestic public opinion when the reality is that there is a silent part of the population that does not believe what the party communicates, and recent dissent events have proved so. Therefore, the traditional Western viewpoint can be argued to represent a simplistic view of Chinese public opinion which needs to be acknowledged by Western researchers in order to conduct more realistic research on the perceptions of Chinese society.

7.2   Impact of media isolationist policies on Chinese society

Once the perception of the media from the point of view of Chinese society has been analysed, it is relevant to explore the impact that this isolationism of global media has on its people. As it will be argued, the impact can be regarded as both positive and negative, highlighting socially different perceptions between cultures with regard to accessing information.

7.2.1 Positive impact

When it comes to the positive impacts of media isolationism and censorship in Chinese society, this comes as an opportunity to maintain social stability and to prevent sensitive or harmful information to spread, whether that be political or not. For the CCP, a strategy of broad sweeping is used, where not only inherently harmful information is controlled but everything falls into being susceptible to being deemed as a threat (Fallows, 2008). With regard to maintaining social stability, the first question to address is why social stability is so important for the CCP, and why this can be positive for Chinese society.

Having social stability is key to peaceful economic development and political stability in a country, which China has long-term kept thanks to the governance of the CCP. According to them, "the picture of political and social stability, economic development, and ethnic unity in China is in sharp contrast to aggravating social divisions and political upheavals in some countries due to their systematic ills and selfish partisan interests" (The State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2021). Hence, maintaining social stability is key for the development of Chinese society in the sense that it has achieved

progress and better well-being for its citizens, contributing to the improvement of their lives. The argument here lies in the fact that, with disruption, decisions to be made take much more time to be implemented and stagnate societies to the point of negatively contributing to their growth and development as better-off societies in the global sphere.

In this sense, content reflecting pornography, violent content, spam or junk mail, advertisements, or slander against individuals can be restricted so that it has a positive impact in the well-being of Chinese society as a whole. A survey conducted between 2000 and 2007 about internet use in China shows that a clear majority of people agree with this limitation on content, and they believe in the positive outcomes it brings for them.

Percentage of Chinese people who believe it is positive to limit media content on these categories

Category	Percentage
Pornography	87%
Violent content	86%
Spam or junk mail	83%
Advertisements	66%
Slander against individuals	64%

Figure 8. Own preparation with data from a survey conducted by the Research Center for Social Development, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (2007).

Some of the positive effects of limitations on harmful content may include promoting good mental health habits, reducing exposure to content that may lead to addictions or the development of mental illnesses that can have a negative effect on people. It can also help detect misinformation accordingly, although this is subject to the CCP's own parameters on what misinformation really is and what is not. Even if controlled for the party's benefit, limiting misinformation in many cases can still be deemed positive in cases that are not regarded as political, for example, wrongful medical advice. Lastly, it can help protect vulnerable groups such as children from accessing information that can be inappropriate for their age.

7.2.2 Negative impact

In terms of its negative impact, many factors could be argued to be the most influential. In this case, the focus will be on a limit to freedom of expression and freedom of speech, a negative economic impact, and a negative cultural impact due to isolationism from other societies around the globe.

First, the government's strict policies regarding disobedience with the contents to be published involve in many cases extra-legal intimidation and violence, such as detentions or even torture. This especially affects vulnerable communities such as religious and ethnic minorities, or activists that want to exercise their freedom of speech to talk about censorship (Freedom House, 2023). As of April 2023, there are 57 journalists in prison according to Reporters Without Borders (RSF, 2023). Hence, it is pretty clear that reprisals in China create an environment of fear around Chinese society that prevents them from expressing themselves as they want. This is no other thing than the method used by Chinese authorities to maintain the stability of the system and continue to isolate its society from the rest of the world, building a hermetic environment inside its borders.

Similarly, this limitation of freedom also affects regular citizens in China who want to access certain information from abroad, whether that be for educational purposes or any other purpose. In fact, globalisation has brought immense opportunities to learn about the rest of the world in ways that would have been unimaginable some decades ago. According to the 2018 World Economic Outlook from the IMF, "the spread of knowledge and technology across borders has intensified because of globalisation" (IMF, 2018). This shows the importance of living in an interconnected society where there is a free flow of ideas that can help all societies to advance towards the right path. The consequences of a non-free flow of information across borders consequently have an impact on the economic growth and development of a certain country. A negative economic impact can also be seen with regard to the inability of certain enterprises to go global when platforms and websites cannot operate.

Moreover, by limiting the possibility of Chinese people to accessing information on many topics from diverse parts of the world, their overall understanding of the world is limited by their position and background in which they have grown up. This can lead to a lack of cultural understanding which in turn does not challenge people's views and their comprehension of many social and political issues. Ultimately, their lack of exposure to

other opinions and cultures creates a collective group in which the agreed view becomes an absolute truth. This effectively weakens their civil society considerably. Even if it is true that the general population in China still finds its way to avoid certain censorship mechanisms, thus accessing "forbidden" information, the reality is that there is still part of the population which has no access to any sort of outside information that has not been previously revised by the government, creating a very dangerous environment for those who are unaware.

This further enhances more extreme nationalism and patriotism, which have been increasing in popularity over the past few years among new generations. One can find online many critics directed towards the US government and the West in general, accusing them of being anti-China and fostering a hostile environment regarding ideals and different points of view. Sentiments for nationalism have increased considerably to the point of not only including security or territorial issues, but also discussions of culture, technology, or medicine (Wang, 2020). At the end of the day, these nationalistic views have a very plausible component of radicalisation, which can be dangerous for its society.

Finally, this isolationism has a negative impact on the image that countries around the world have of the Asian giant. This affects its society directly, as the negative perceptions of foreigners regarding the country make them hostile towards interacting with them or engaging in business elsewhere, for instance. At the end of the day, if China aims to present itself as the first global superpower, economic and military capacity will not be enough. The ability to be regarded as the leading power in the international sphere requires international support instead of animosity. In fact, each step closer to complete total media isolation is a step further from the rest of the world, a distance gap between societies that will be difficult to close from one day to another.

7.3   Differentiation from Western societies

As it has been explored, the social impact of lacking access to global media and other information has both its positive and negative sides. From a Western point of view, falling into the misguided conclusion that the impact is mostly negative even if it deals with some positive consequences would result in ignoring the bigger picture. This is why the Chinese view has to be adequately presented as well if the analysis aims to be objective. In fact,

this first-seen contradiction between Chinese perception of the media and the negative impact on their society only happens if approached from a predominantly Western point of view, which in turn highlights the different approaches to media isolationism from different cultures and societies. Indeed, the Chinese have shown high trust in the media even if they do hold opinions that are contrary to the government to a certain extent, therefore the question now should lie on what makes the Chinese and the Western world differ in their approach towards censorship and the impact it has on them.

As it has been argued in the previous subsection, this limited exposure to ideas can lead to different misunderstandings across cultures, notably accentuated by their lack of global media access. This results not only in stereotypes but also in the development of different cultural and political values regarding issues such as what freedom is, or which human rights are inherent to people. Furthermore, this conflict of values cannot be judged, unless they go against intrinsic ethical values, even if they have been caused by a clear factor or have been shaped by media, as society itself is entailed to hold its own views.

A question that arises from this analysis is whether their culture is in a way a legitimization of their lack of interest in participating in the global media sphere or, conversely, it is the political situation that is altering and shaping their culture from the inside.

In this case, it is relevant to see how Chinese cultural values are different to those of the West, notably with regard to power distance, indulgence, and individualism. These three categories are key cultural dimensions for Hofstede's analysis of cultural differentiation and seek to explain how different societies hold certain views due to the culture in which they have grown up. This helps tackle the extent to which Chinese culture might be legitimising the decisions that are taken in the political sphere.

The following graph is an approximation of cultural differences between China and the West. It shows the score of China, Spain and the United States [2] to reflect the differences between them, highlighting fundamentally different approaches to these three areas.

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[2] In this case, the examples of the US and Spain are used to make it more accurate in the sense that both an American country and a European country are represented. This does not by any means mean that the scores for all Western countries are the same, even if they follow a similar tendency.

Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions in China, Spain and the US

■ China ■ Spain ■ United States

Power distance
- China: 80
- Spain: 57
- United States: 40

Indulgence
- China: 24
- Spain: 44
- United States: 68

Individualism
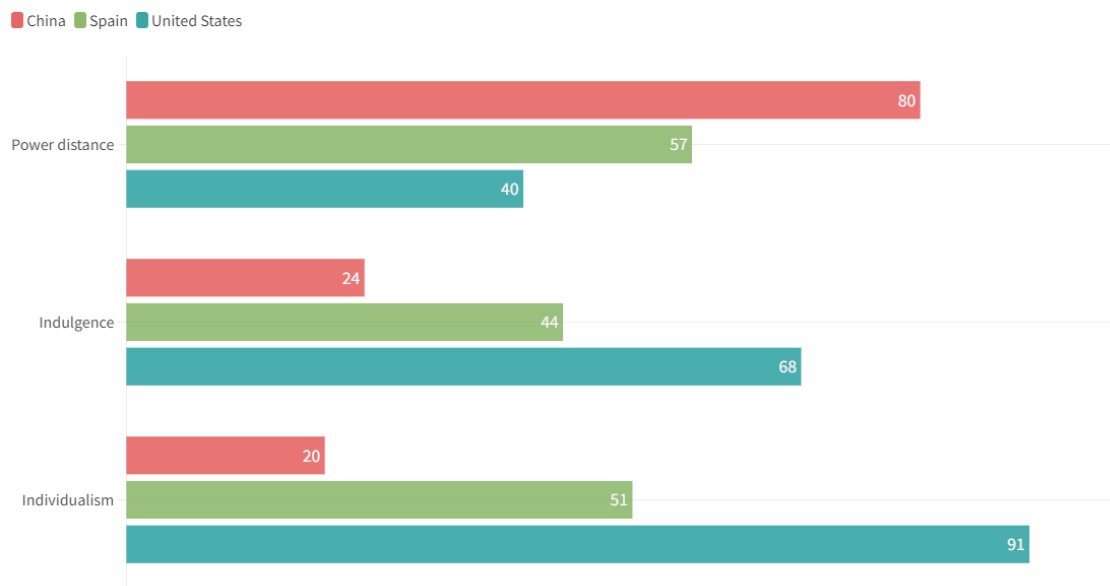- China: 20
- Spain: 51
- United States: 91

Figure 9. Own elaboration based on Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions (2023).

The results show that China scores really high in power distance when compared to Spain and the US, which means "the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organisations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally" (Hofstede, 2023). In this sense, Chinese society accepts that the authorities in power stand in an unequal position with them and believe they are enforcing policies for the good of the whole society. This would help explain why trust in the government and media is so high in China. Regarding indulgence, or "the extent to which people try to control their desires and impulses" (Hofstede, 2023), China is classified as a "restrained society", meaning that social norms are in place and there is no need to aim for gratification. This can explain why Chinese civil society is not that keen on changing the current scenario with regard to media, as it is deeply ingrained in their culture. Last but not least, China scores really low in the individualism dimension or "the degree of interdependence a society maintains among its members" (Hofstede, 2023), meaning that they are a highly collectivist society. This entails that Chinese people act for the group and not for themselves, putting group interests over theirs. This serves as a justification of why they let the government work for supposedly the interests of the group in exchange for loyalty.

As it has been seen, these social and cultural differences might have an impact on the way Chinese people regard their limited access to global media. This would suggest that a separate Chinese identity could be emerging as a result of the media isolationism that its people are subject to, going completely in the opposite direction to those free countries that are moving closer to further cultural homogenisation. This enhanced differentiation of Chinese society in turn creates challenges in the current world of globalisation, where exchanges between peoples around the world is closer and more necessary than it has ever been before, especially for a country with such a big impact in the international sphere as China now is.

8. Conclusions and proposals

Throughout the present dissertation, the impact of media isolationism in Chinese society has been analysed, taking special consideration into how Chinese citizens regard their media and the impact that culture has on their point of view. It has been concluded that media isolationism from global media can have both positive and negative impacts on societies, although the predominant Western view assumes that the impact is merely negative. Whatever the case might be, the reality is that the Chinese government has built a hermetic environment in which its citizens cannot make use of global media in the same way that democratic societies can. This further enhances differentiation between societies around the world, especially considering the surge of globalisation we are witnessing.

With regard to Chinese perception of the media, there is a misconception in the West that Chinese citizens are not aware of the censorship control they are subject to, so Western researchers should approach the issue from a wider point of view and should be weary not to ignore the Chinese perception. It is concluded as well that the Chinese are generally advocates for freedom of speech in the broad sense, however, they still regard global media and foreign influence as a threat. This would help explain the general high trust in the government and media from the part of Chinese society. It is important to note as well that demographics are important to look at, so future research focusing on specific segments of the population, such as young people or the urban population, would add very interesting perspectives on Chinese public opinion studies. This is especially interesting to analyse seeing the rise of dissent from the Chinese population regarding certain government policies in recent years, even if those are not that concerned specifically with issues related to media.

On the one hand, there are two main positive impacts of this limitation of media on Chinese society. First, the fact that social stability is easily maintained and is deeply valued by the Chinese. Second, the fact that harmful information and misinformation can be prevented, especially among vulnerable groups. On the other hand, media isolationism has more negative impacts that can be observed. The most notable one is the limitation of freedom of speech and expression, both values that let people think by themselves and express themselves freely without no fear of reprisals. The creation of an environment of fear can have very negative consequences for the entirety of the population of the country. Besides, the lack of a free flow of ideas can bring about a lack of critical thinking and

increased nationalism and radicalisation. In many cases, it can have a negative effect on economic growth, a lack of cultural understanding of other cultures and ideas, and a negative perception of its society overseas. This is especially concerning considering the era of globalisation that we live in, where people from all corners of the world can participate in a dialogue to learn from each other.

Finally, it has been seen that different cultures approach censorship differently. This is explained when looking at some cultural differences between China and the West, the most notable ones being the collectivist society where they live in, the relationship they hold towards authorities, and the importance of social norms for the functioning of their society. This shows that the cultural component is very relevant to consider so that we do not fall into misconceptions that affect the entirety of a society. For future research, it would be interesting to deepen on the cultural aspect by untangling which values are inherently Chinese and which ones have been shaped by the current government.

All having said, as the Authoritarian theory in mass communication explained, the CCP has the opportunity to use censorship mechanisms to guide its political interests, which in turn affects society directly. The main hypothesis can be confirmed as media control regarding global media is directly isolating its society due to the complex censorship mechanisms in place, although this impact might be also affected by culture, not only by government policies. Even so, it can also be confirmed that this media isolationism is causing a social and cultural differentiation between China and the West. It can be verified that the Chinese population is generally aware of these censorship policies, although demographics need to be considered. This presents a challenge for the Chinese political system, in fact, the survival of this system might be conditioned by the capacity of the CCP of maintaining its isolationist policies while managing the economic and cultural fluxes that menace it, and more importantly, the awakening of a strengthened Chinese public opinion, especially in the current globalised environment.

This raises questions about what the Chinese example means for the future of global media. Indeed, the Chinese case is very relevant to illustrate how global media could be shaped in the long term. Given the importance of China as a global superpower in the international sphere, we could be witnessing an "end" to global media as we know it today, especially considering the recent deterioration of countries' media freedom and a rejection of globalisation after the Covid-19 crisis. The question is: are we ready for a shift in what global media means in the current world context?

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