

# Human Security and Governance: The Case of China

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## Governance as the Key

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How can we promote human security in the rapidly changing world order, especially when we face the threat of compounded crises? To explore this issue effectively, we need to carefully consider various perspectives on the role of a rising power like China.

China's power has increased rapidly since 1992 following the introduction of policies such as the acceleration of marketization and its admission to the WTO in 2001. As a result of these changes, China's continuous growth has been almost unprecedented in world history and has significantly improved the standard of living for many Chinese people. On the other hand, there has also been a downside to these developments, including compulsory expropriation of property with insufficient compensation, income disparities, and other economic distortions, demonstrating the stark contrast between the bright and dark sides of growth.

Many Chinese corporations have advanced their economic interests by seeking out resources and markets overseas. The Chinese government invested heavily in the construction of infrastructure in other countries. These investments are designed to ensure the security of sea lanes, enhance communication networks, and expand its political influence. Many countries benefited from these investments and have made use of them to develop their economies. However, there have also been questions and dissatisfaction over the

lack of transparency in the planning and implementation process, inefficiencies, and the unbalanced distribution of benefits skewed towards certain groups. Further, when countries default on their external debt, China has been reluctant to cooperate with other parties to rescue these countries from their plight, delaying the resolution of these issues. Thus, China's rapid growth and overseas advancement have greatly impacted the human security situation globally, both positively and negatively.

Governance provides a crucial perspective for verifying and evaluating the influence of the remarkable economic growth of large countries on human security. If the essence of human security is to protect the lives, livelihoods, and dignity of each and every person, it would be important to consider the conditions necessary for its realization. In this paper, I will address this aspect from a governance perspective.

Akihiko Tanaka categorized the systems that generate threats to human security into three components (Tanaka 2015): the physical system, typically responsible for natural disasters; the living system, which includes threats to survival, such as contagious diseases; and the social system that results in issues like structural poverty and military struggles. To address each of these problems and promote human security, governance is crucial. For example, global common action is required for climate change and pandemics, while responses to natural disasters require careful management by the national and local governments in every country. When domestic conditions in each country threaten the lives, livelihoods, and dignity of the people, the problems often

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stem from the failure of functional governance at the national or community level.

In the context of this study, governance refers to how authority is exercised in managing the economic and social resources globally, or in a country or region.<sup>1</sup> This essay critically reviews how China's authority is exercised both inside and outside the country and how that affects the enhancement or undermining of human security. While it is not possible to address all current problems using this approach, meaningful insights may be provided into some of the more significant challenges.

## China and Human Security

The Chinese government has been somewhat unwilling to adopt and positively use the concept of human security. However, especially during Hu Jintao's tenure as General Secretary (2002–2012), the slogans “put people first” and “construction of a harmonious society” were deployed in support of development policies based on a recognition of the social distortions caused by high-speed growth. In this context, the concepts of human security (*ren de anquan*) and security of mankind (*renlei anquan*) gained some traction among researchers and leaders (Ren 2003; Ushiroi 2010). However, use of these terms was not fully accepted and they were not commonly used. This was likely because of the change in leadership in 2012, and consequently, the slogans raised by the previous administration receded in prominence. Moreover, it is possible that Chinese authorities were concerned about the potential interference in Chinese domestic affairs on humanitarian grounds under the name of human security (Ushiroi 2010, 251; Fukushima 2010, 168).

The concept of governance also initially generated a similar sense of caution to that of human security (Takahara 2012, 103). The key question of “How authority is exercised”—a feature of the term governance—concerns not only the nature of the state but also the relationship between the state and society or between the rulers and the general public.

Thus, the main elements of governance usually consist of accountability of the government, transparency, efficiency, effectiveness, political participation, etc. Some donor countries also include democratization in their governance cooperation programs with developing countries (Howell 2004, 1). However, unlike liberty rights or the separation of the three branches of government, governance can be interpreted across a wide scope and is not considered to undermine the intrinsic principles of administration that would directly lead to rejecting the system of one-party rule by the Communist Party. Thus, governance, translated as *zhili*, has been adopted and entrenched in the lexicon of the Chinese Communist Party (Xu 2001, 317–326).

The current Chinese authorities are aware of the importance of governance. For example, the word “governance” was frequently used in the speech by General Secretary Xi Jinping at the twentieth National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (the so-called Party Congress) held in October 2022 (Xi 2022). It was acknowledged that it will be necessary to strengthen “law-based governance” in the context of realizing the rule of law and that the “environmental governance system” will be modernized to protect the environment. China will also become more actively involved in “global governance” with respect to climate change, while “global security governance,” “public safety governance,” and “social governance” are necessary for the safety of the nation and society.

Is it possible to evaluate the extent to which human security has been realized in China, a country with 17.5% of the worldwide population? The accomplishment of freedom from fear and want under the peace and development policies over the past several decades can be rated highly. China's rapid economic growth has led to significant improvements across various social indices. For example, in 1980, when economic systemic reform and opening-up policies began to be implemented, per capita GDP in China was only USD 312. By 2022, four decades later, it had reached USD 12,720—an increase of approximately 40 times (World Bank n.d.). Improvements in living standards and public health are reflected in the growth in longevity, with the average lifespan increasing from 64.4 years in 1980 to 78.2 years in 2021 (United Nations n.d.).

<sup>1</sup> This is in line with the definition by the Asian Development Bank (see Burns 2004)



In 2021, the centenary year of its foundation, the Chinese Communist Party declared that poverty had been eliminated in China. According to the World Bank's international poverty standards, approximately 770 million people have risen out of poverty since the end of the 1970s. This constitutes more than 70% of the decrease in the worldwide poverty population during the same period (Xi 2021). While poverty reduction in China was not solely achieved by infrastructure development in poverty-affected areas or advancing the economic structure, a significant portion of the success resulted from the provision of subsidies. Thus, even after rising out of poverty once, the danger of backsliding remains, underscoring the need for caution. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that Chinese society has accomplished rapid progress in terms of its physical wealth in recent years. Aggregated across the population, the positive effects of governance under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party have contributed to China's rise in recent times.

In light of the composite nature of threats derived from the three systems identified by Tanaka—referred to earlier in this paper—it is evident that further strengthening of governance is required in China from the viewpoint of human security. With respect to the physical system, for example, the impact of climate change is causing severe flood damage in many areas annually. Needless to say, the outbreak of COVID-19 brought major threats to the living system. Stringent restrictions on people's movements to contain the pandemic were possible under the Chinese social system; however, they consequently threatened the lives, livelihood, and dignity of people. This situation will be discussed further in the next section.

## Challenges to Governance: Accountability

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Governance is extremely important for realizing human security. This is becoming increasingly evident in the current situation marked by global compounded crises. One critical aspect of the compounded crises is each country's response to the worldwide COVID-19 outbreak. The effectiveness of China's response to the pandemic serves as a significant

illustration of how well governance can influence outcomes in crisis situations.

COVID-19 initially spread across China from Wuhan, then globally from the beginning of 2020. When some doctors tried to share warnings about the appearance of the virus at the end of December 2019, they were reprimanded by the Public Security Bureau for spreading inaccurate information on the Internet. The authorities made an incorrect decision from the outset and neglected the publication and dissemination of health warnings (Caixin Editorial Department 2020a). Although there is no consensus on the source of the virus, it is certain that the delay in initial reaction led to its explosive outbreak.

The death from COVID-19 of Li Wenliang—a doctor who was reprimanded for his early warnings about the outbreak—had a powerful impact on Chinese society. Eight days before his death, Li told the media that “A healthy society should not have just one voice” (Caixin Editorial Department 2020b). Although likely unintended, Li's comment contradicted an earlier statement made by Xi Jinping. In July 2018, Xi asserted that “The central party committee is the cerebrum and nerve center. It should be stipulated as the sole authority that defines the overall tone by one hit of the gong” (Xi 2018). At the time of his statement, Xi Jinping was facing criticism over constitutional revisions to abolish presidential terms. Following Dr. Li's death, an increasing number of people, especially young people, began to recognize issues in a political regime that restricts freedom of speech and the communication of truth.

The Xi Jinping administration subsequently contained the virus and sought to capitalize on its success by attributing it to the strong leadership of the party. Initially, the administration exercised its power by implementing stringent controls on the spread of the virus, as symbolized by the lockdown of urban Wuhan. Leaders of the community residents committee—equivalent to a neighborhood association in Japan or neighborhood community association during wartime—monitored the movement of people. Apps were developed to record people's travel routes on public transport and access to buildings. Monitoring of Chinese social network services like WeChat was also strengthened to avoid the spread of criticism against the authorities or distrust of the system. Finally, advertising campaigns were launched on public mass



media in an attempt to restore the prestige of the Communist Party and its leaders.

At this time, the Chinese Communist Party was inadvertently helped by the US and President Trump. The Chinese authorities pointed their collective fingers at the confusion in the US in its response to the pandemic and propagated the idea that “the Chinese system under the strong leadership of Comrade Xi Jinping contained COVID-19 and is therefore vastly superior to democracy.” The epidemic prevention campaign was remarkably successful and largely stopped the spread of the infection after April. As a result, the reputation of Xi Jinping and the Communist Party within China grew higher than it was prior to the COVID-19 epidemic.

However, as the prevalence of the Omicron subvariant increased, the situation began to change. In October 2022, General Secretary Xi boasted that the party central committee firmly upheld “People First, Life First,” and they would continue to support the “dynamic zero-COVID” policy steadfastly. He declared at the party congress that he would stick to the policy of containing the virus through frequent PCR testing and strict restrictions on people’s movements—both central pillars of the “zero-COVID policy.” Health officials cited several reasons for continuing the zero-COVID policy: the strong infectiousness of the Omicron subvariant, the possible scarcity of medical resources in China in the event of its widespread transmission, and the overwhelming number of elderly people at risk (National Health Commission 2022). In May of the same year, however, amid severe restrictions on movement imposed in Shanghai, Xi delivered a pep talk, asserting that “Our policy on epidemic prevention and management was determined by the nature and basic tenets of the party. We won the battle to protect Wuhan and are sure to win the battle to protect Great Shanghai as well. We will uphold the overall policy of dynamic zero-COVID and resolutely struggle with all the words and acts that distort, doubt or deny the guiding principles and policies of our country” (People’s Daily 2022). This stance demonstrates that the zero-COVID policy continued partly because of its successful implementation in the past and because the top leader had attributed it politically to the superiority of the Chinese system of government.

However, people’s frustration grew steadily as a result of

overly strict restrictions on movement, quarantine and testing. Food and drugs were difficult to obtain. A whole building or district could be locked down if there was a single case of infection, and quarantine was enforced strictly. Some sick people and pregnant women were unable to receive treatment and died, or in other cases, committed suicide (NHK International News Navi 2022). Regardless of such strict measures, the epidemic began to spread throughout the country in the fall of 2022 and social costs to control the infection increased (Xinhua News Agency 2023).<sup>2</sup>

Thus, on November 10 of the same year, measures were introduced that eased restrictions, such as shortening quarantine periods and decreasing the size of quarantine areas. However, the pandemic continued to spread. An article by the New China News Agency acknowledged that “complicated emotions like a sense of fatigue, frustration and tension occasioned by the zero-COVID policy began to spread in society, and costs of continuing epidemic prevention measures increased day by day” (Xinhua News Agency 2023). In late November, people’s frustration took the form of protests called the “white paper movement.” Some people even cried out on the streets for the Communist Party and Xi Jinping to step down. This was an extremely exceptional situation emerging despite the strict social controls in recent years.

On December 7, 2022, most zero-COVID measures were lifted, including regular PCR testing for residents, presenting a negative certificate at the time of travel, and checking of activity records. The zero-COVID policy, which had become increasingly ineffective in protecting people’s lives, livelihoods and dignity, was fully abolished. However, as a result of this rapid policy change, there was an explosive spread of infection, with many people dying due to the lack of adequate preparation—particularly insufficient vaccination and reserves of vital drugs. While the Chinese authorities did not publish the number of deaths, an overseas research center estimated that excess mortality for two months from December 2022 to January 2023 reached nearly 1.9 million people.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> This is a documentary article by the Xinhua News Agency, which has the highest authority among the official media, explaining the alleviation and elimination of the zero-COVID policy.

<sup>3</sup> This data comes from a research paper by Joseph Anger et al. of the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Center, cited by Cortez (2023, 1).



Strict restrictions on movement to contain the virus were not unique to China. Democratic countries like Australia and New Zealand implemented similar controls, which proved as effective as those in China, especially in the early stages of the pandemic. However, the strict controls implemented in China were unable to effectively ensure the long-term safety of its people. Thus, it is clear that the issue is not with the system but the policy. Without adequate mechanisms to check authority and ensure accountability to residents, governance loses flexibility and it becomes difficult to adapt policies in response to changes in circumstances. Moreover, if the system motivates officials to prioritize the approval of higher authorities over addressing the actual conditions on the ground or the needs of the population, policy implementation may become excessively stringent. Although the above is a general observation, measures against COVID-19 in China do seem to have taken on such characteristics.

## Threats to Human Security: Lack of Transparency in Overseas Projects

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The above analysis of the domestic situation in China indicates how the exercise of authority without accountability can be a threat to human security. This issue extends to cases of overseas projects that China is engaged in.

There is no doubt that many developing countries have gained greatly from China's economic rise and overseas expansion. For example, any discussion of the development of the African economy in recent years must include the significant impact of the expansion of economic exchanges with China through investment and trade (Hirano 2020). Moreover, various public opinion surveys conducted in developing countries generally indicate a high favorability toward China (Pew Research Center 2022; Endo 2020). Overall, the role that China has played in promoting human security in the world is substantial.

As with domestic affairs, accountability to ordinary people is also missing in the governance of overseas projects. China's rise causes both positive and negative impacts on human

security. I will avoid fully expanding this issue since it would go beyond the scope of this paper. For example, issues such as climate change, war in Ukraine, and hostilities in Gaza will require detailed analysis and need to be handled in separate studies. This section will present issues caused by China's overseas advancement in relation to the governance of host countries based on the results of a research project conducted by the Ogata Sadako Research Institute for Peace and Development. The project, "The New Dynamics of Peace and Development in the Indo-Pacific: How Countries in the Region Proactively Interact with China," examined the relationship between small countries and China.<sup>4</sup>

First, in cases where the Chinese government or corporation is involved in the formation and implementation of overseas projects, the main entity of governance regarding the project is naturally the local government. If the relationship between government officials and people on the Chinese side is unclear, governance by the local government can be negatively influenced. In the Philippines, for example, it was revealed that Chinese corporations cultivated deep relations with government officials through entertainment and gift-giving during the time of the Arroyo administration, and were implicated in government embezzlement schemes (Camba 2023). The following Aquino administration took a strict attitude toward China; however, when it was replaced by the Duterte administration, more than 120 Chinese online gambling companies entered the Philippines. According to one estimate, this caused approximately 500,000 employees to move to metropolitan Manila—already struggling under a population of 12 million people—resulting in strains in public services and a strong backlash from local residents. The core members of the Duterte administration were reportedly receiving a large amount of funds from the gambling companies. The Chinese government pressured other countries into controlling illegal online gambling. However, unlike the Aquino administration, the Duterte administration demonstrated a cooperative attitude on the issue of the South China Sea, so China was unable to assert its usual influence.

Second, in situations where decision-making by the local

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<sup>4</sup> All papers from the project are available open access from the Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies 2023, vol. 12, Issue 1: <https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/reas20/12/1?nav=tocList>



government lacks transparency and mechanisms for checks and balances of power are insufficient, even beneficial projects may threaten the livelihood and dignity of affected residents as a result of their implementation. For example, a semi-high-speed railway that connects Vientiane, the capital of Laos, to Boten, a town at the border with China, opened in December 2021. After years of earnest requests from the Laotian side, China finally agreed to support this project. The economic effects have largely been positive, and almost two years after its opening, it was reported to be “popular with the tourists and is contributing to the recovery of the Laotian economy” (Kyodo News 2022).

However, to implement the project, many families were reportedly forced to move and without timely compensation payments, they could not afford to relocate themselves. This situation would not have occurred if the infrastructure development project had been implemented by other countries adhering to international standards. Local resentment has mounted against the government's negligence and harassment by land sharks (Kwik and Rosli 2023). Along with the government, which lacked accountability to its residents, the investors and funders should also be held responsible.

The research team of the Ogata Sadako Research Institute for Peace and Development demonstrated in its project that recipients of investment and loans from China have a certain level of agency—i.e. the ability to determine their actions.<sup>5</sup> However, if options to choose other partners are limited, as in the case of Laos, or if non-governmental organizations do not exist or lack a voice, the government's agency with regard to China will be restricted. In the latter case, this happens due to the lack of community capacity for action, which could otherwise serve as leverage in the government's dealings with foreign parties (ibid.). After all, the key to realizing human security is governance, including transparency and accountability to the residents. This is primarily an issue for the host countries, but of course, the investors and funders

also need to be held responsible. Japan should not consider this to be somebody else's problem. We must constantly be mindful of the relationship between human security and governance when we extend and implement our cooperation projects.

## Expectations for the Future

As mentioned earlier, the Chinese leadership pays significant attention to governance. With respect to overseas projects, they also seem to be deepening their understanding of the importance of transparency as well as obtaining support from the local people. For example, President Xi Jinping stated the following in the second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, held in April 2019: “In pursuing Belt and Road cooperation, everything should be done in a transparent way, and we should have zero tolerance for corruption” (Xi 2019). In the third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation held in October 2023, he also emphasized promoting “small and beautiful” livelihood projects along with signature projects (People's Daily 2023). It was an instruction to increase projects that will allow local people to receive direct benefits.

China's national interests undoubtedly underpin these dynamics. This shift may be influenced by several factors, including competition to acquire support from the so-called Global South, which arises from the intensifying strategic competition with the US, and the continued slowdown of the Chinese economy that led to the decrease in the amount of China's financial cooperation offered to other countries, which peaked around 2017. However, for protecting the lives, livelihood and dignity of people globally, whether or not the motive of countries with power for cooperation is driven by altruism or self-interest is less important. In doing so, rather, it is essential to ensure transparency and accountability in the process of project formation and implementation. While it is discouraging to see a major power like Russia invade other countries, even in the 21st Century, we trust the wisdom of human beings is not lost entirely. Given the current compounded crises, there are undoubtedly lessons to be learned that can guide further improvements. It remains to be seen how the Chinese people will respond to future pandemics.

<sup>5</sup> According to the Cambridge Dictionary, one of the meanings of agency is: “the ability to take action or to choose what action to take” (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/ja/dictionary/english/agency>). Regarding agency, please also refer to UNDP 2022 Special Report “New Threats to Human Security in the Anthropocene” (<https://hdr.undp.org/content/2022-special-report-human-security>).



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