

# China Blog – February 2022

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## Casting the net wider: The centers for ‘new era civilization practice’

In a [brief article](#) uploaded by WWR on 15 February 2022, there was mention of China’s centers for “New Era Civilization Practice” (NECP), which have been in existence since 2019. A [detailed report](#) by China File (published on 31 January 2022) provides many more valuable insights worth sharing.

For example, in cities like Guangzhou, the NECP centers are integrated into the surveillance system called “grid management”, which has been explained in the recently published [Full Country Dossier on China](#) (WWR, January 2022, p.31). The ideological background and deeper reason for setting up such a network of centers is to maintain regime stability. As the China File report says:

*“The Party views imparting ‘civilization’ (wenming, 文明), as critical to long-term regime stability. ‘Wenming is a system of self-monitoring and state monitoring’, says Carolyn Cartier, a professor of International Studies and Global Societies at the University of Technology Sydney. ‘It is simultaneously undefinable and aspirational.’ The centers’ emphasis on wenming echoes the aims of the country’s much-discussed social credit system, which combines online and real-world surveillance in varying degrees to nudge people into more ‘civilized behavior’ [Sixth Tone, 2 August 2019], without recourse to heavy-handed ‘stability maintenance’ measures.”*

The echoes of the much discussed Social Credit System are interesting because cities like Tianjin are quoted by China File as being examples where a points system is used for getting citizens to comply.

In general, it would seem that the CCP is finding it increasingly difficult to get citizens to heed Communist Party ideology. One reason might be that the various state programs are being introduced with such frequency that it all comes across as a dizzying alphabet soup of ideological slogans. The China File article gives many examples for this, one being: “One goal, four arenas, five tasks, three attainments, four big capabilities”. This illustrates how confusing the messaging can be.

The total number of existing NECP centers is unclear as the program is still expanding and their number is already measures in the high thousands. The cost for setting up these centers is also unclear as in many cases they are financed from the budgets of various departments, including propaganda, human resources and social security departments, as well as even the local water resources bureau.

The biggest question is aptly asked at the end of the article and it is something that Christians in China need to have in mind as well, as it seems that the CCP is increasingly trying to replace or co-opt religions in giving spiritual guidance: “The coming years will tell whether or not these centers can truly ensure [that] the people’s ‘spiritual progress’ satisfies an atheist Party mostly concerned with its own salvation.”

## How to express disagreement in China

There is a widely shared perception in the West that in China no differing opinions are allowed, no dissent is possible and that, basically, the opinion of only one person matters: Xi Jinping. While there is a grain of truth in this line of thought, Chinese reality is much more varied and differing opinions are not just possible, they are even normal, as a CSIS [research article](#) based on survey data collected by two Stanford professors over several years explains (CSIS, 10 February 2022).

One of the more obvious areas where public opinion deviates from CCP ideology is family politics. A majority of respondents said that state authorities should not have the right to interfere in a family's decision whether or not to have children or how many. Such views are clearly at odds with the state's efforts at increasing the child-bearing rate. This issue is gaining political relevance, since China's [birth rate](#) is dropping faster than expected and the country may even have seen its population [peak in 2021](#) already, instead of in 2030 as previously calculated (Sixth Tone, 17 January 2022).

Another example is the rather [frank discussion](#) on social media about social inequality, as recently discussed by Ian Johnson in a podcast uploaded by the Council of Foreign Relations (CFR) on 8 February 2022. It is worth listening to the full 33 minutes.

An even larger majority of survey respondents was of the opinion that citizens should be able to freely share their views about the government, whether positive or negative. Thus, citizens seem less worried about free opinion potentially leading to social instability, pointing to the fact that the current repressive politics may be less popular than thought. This in turn may go hand in hand with the tacitly agreed social contract of trading a lack of freedom for growing prosperity. As one commentator said, this contract may also be in jeopardy due to [self-inflicted policy wounds](#) caused by hedging in the economy on ideological grounds (Project Syndicate, 8 February 2022).

These challenges have been multiplied by the Communist Party's strict [Zero COVID policy](#), leading a consultancy group to consider this the top political risk for 2022 (Eurasia Group, 3 January 2022). One answer the CCP gives seems to be its reliance on even more ideology. WWR has written about the 2021 Party history resolution before (WWR, [December 2021](#)), but another [commentary](#), published by Neican on 7 January 2022, is particularly worth being read in detail. In it, Professor Patricia Thornton from Oxford University (UK), explains that the 2021 resolution differs from the previous two in that it does not admit any party failures and shortcomings. On the contrary, mistakes have only been made in the distant past. As Xi Jinping is the core of the Party, the "pilot at the helm", Professor Thornton concludes:

*"Yet therein lies the danger: if history is any guide, the breakdown of Party norms favouring collective leadership can deprive the 'core leader' of reliable access to critical information, a healthy diversity of alternative perspectives, and a decision-making process with in-built checks and balances. ... Ironically, despite Xi's call to 'draw lessons from history and understand why dynasties rise and fall' [QS Theory, 13 July 2021], the Party appears to be ignoring the lessons of its past regarding the consolidation of power in the hands of a single leader bent on systematically removing limits to his own unchecked authority."*