



Why the Chinese Communist Party doesn't like Winnie the Pooh

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Communist systems, like dictatorships in general, and especially the Soviet Union, have always been a paradise for political jokes and amusing memes. This is not only because humour is sometimes a good way to circumvent, or at least slow down, censorship, but also because of the comic relief provided, which is good for the morale of dissidents and other party critics in an often-frustrating social environment.

Fast-forward to the turbo authoritarianism of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) under Xi Jinping. Starting seven years ago, Chinese social media have seen a growing number of references to similarities between China's 'Supreme Leader' and Winnie the Pooh, the anthropomorphic teddy bear featured in the 1920s' children's books by Alan A. Milne, and immortalised in several major Walt Disney animated films.

The original Winnie/Xi meme was born in 2013, when a photo of Xi and Barack Obama, walking next to each other during a visit to the US, was pictured next to an uncannily similar image of Winnie and Tigger (McDonnell 2017). This has to be seen in context: Xi had just been appointed Secretary General of the CCP, and shortly after that became President of the People's Republic of China. There were, at the time, some hopes for modernisation as well as liberalisation by Xi among Chinese intellectuals and bloggers—hopes which he quickly disappointed. Those were the days of the CCP's notorious 'Document Number 9'—to date the most concise and stringent official rejection of Western ideas such as checks and balances, and freedom of opinion (Buckly 2013).

Consequently, it was not surprising that Chinese bloggers felt triggered to poke some fun at the president. But what would have been seen as a pretty harmless meme by most heads of state (at least democratic ones) did not go down well with the CCP, in whose world-view the Supreme Leader is infallible and flawless, has no quirks and most

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certainly does not walk in a funny way. But that is precisely what made the comparison between Xi Jinping and ‘Little Bear Winnie’ (小熊维尼, xiǎo xióng wéi ní) so attractive to Chinese dissident bloggers. Needless to say, the memes were quickly banned from the Chinese Internet—a measure possible thanks to China’s ‘Great Firewall’, which virtually closes it off from the World Wide Web.

The same happened in the following year, 2014, when a picture of Xi and Japan’s Premier Abe was likened to one of Pooh and Eeyore the donkey (McDonnell 2017). The final nail in Winnie’s coffin in the eyes of Chinese censors came in 2015 when bloggers made fun of Xi riding in a car at a parade by putting a plastic Winnie-in-a-car next to him (McDonnell 2017). Since 2017, a specially developed piece of software has automatically blocked all Xi/Winnie comparisons on China’s Internet.

However, by that point, the story had reached the West. In June 2018, the US television channel HBO was blocked in China because John Oliver had picked up on Winnie’s newfound fame in China (Kuo 2018). And the 299th *South Park* episode in October 2019, ‘Band in China’, was, indeed, very soon banned in China, and led to a total ban on access to episodes of *South Park* there (Brzeski and Parker 2019).

Today, CCP censorship is total concerning Xi/Winnie comparisons. But not all references to Winnie the Pooh are banned: allegedly, some Disney animated films are still accessible to the Chinese public (China Uncensored 2019). There is still hope!

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