With its strong emphasis on technology, the military, strong single-party leadership and a collective national identity that refuses to recognize pluralism, China is displaying increasing — and worrying — symptoms of fascism. From the military parade surrounding the 60th anniversary of the birth of the People's Republic of China (PRC) on Oct. 1 to forced relocation and assimilation programs targeting ethnic minority groups such as the Uighurs, China is in many ways reminding us of the fascist states that reared their ugly heads in the first half of the previous century.

In some ways, it is difficult to apply that term to the rising dragon, primarily because of some marked differences from its predecessors. For one, fascist states tended to be short-lived and led by strong — and often charismatic — rulers. China, even if we take 1949 as its starting point, has a long history and its leaders, with the possible exception of former premier Zhou Enlai (□□□), are not known for their charisma.

China's embrace of capitalism in the early 1990s has also masked its fascistic tendencies, because "unrestrained capitalism" was one of the principal targets of fascism. The fact that the PRC finds its roots in communism and class conflict — both of which fascism traditionally opposed — can also mislead the observer.

Still, today's China arguably represents fascism 2.0, neo--fascism or "fascism with Chinese characteristics."

One of the most peremptory signs of fascism is the state's negation of individualism and the idea that citizens draw their identity and raison d'etre from the state. Evidence of this emerged earlier this week when Chinese Vice Sports Minister Yu -Zaiqing (□□□) chided 18-year-old Olympic champion short track speedskater Zhou Yang (□□) for thanking her parents — but not her country — after winning gold at the Vancouver Winter Games last month.

"It's OK to thank your parents, but first you should thank the motherland. You should put the motherland first, not only thank your parents," Yu told the Southern Metropolis Daily.

In his book Anatomy of Fascism, American historian Robert Paxton defines fascism as "a form of political behavior marked by obsessive preoccupation with community decline, humiliation, or victimhood and by compensatory cults of unity, energy and purity, in which a mass-based party of committed nationalist militants, working in uneasy but effective collaboration with traditional elites [and] abandons democratic liberties," traits that are apparent in China today.

In his essay Fourteen Ways of Looking at a Blackshirt, published in the New York Review of Books in 1995, Italian intellectual Umberto Eco highlights aspects of fascism that have disturbing reverberations in contemporary China. Features of Ur-Fascism, or "eternal fascism," Eco writes, "cannot be organized into a system; many of them contradict each other, and are also typical of other kinds of despotism or fanaticism. But it is enough that one of them be

present to allow fascism to coagulate around it."

Let us explore the features unearthed by Eco that apply to China today.

For Ur-Fascism, disagreement is treason.

In contemporary China, this translates into the state's intolerance of dissent. Reporters (foreign and local), rights activists and ordinary citizens face censure, arrest and loss of employment if they dare criticize the state. Critical coverage of everything from lagging reconstruction in quake-hit Sichuan to calls, recently published in 13 daily newspapers, for an end to the unjust hukou passport — a system introduced during the Maoist era that prevents most Chinese, especially residents in rural areas, from moving to other parts of the country — is seen as treason. Even when motivated by love of country, anyone who criticizes the authorities over such matters as environmental catastrophes, social inequity, corruption, forced relocation, outbreaks of disease (such as SARS) and censorship can be assured of negative repercussions for himself and his relatives. Liu Xiaobo (□□□) and Gao Zhisheng (□□□) are two recent examples.

This phenomenon is behind Beijing's oft-used reference to the "feelings of the Chinese people" being hurt by negative news coverage or other counties' policies that run counter to the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) national policies.

Disagreement is a sign of diversity.

Eco writes: "Ur-Fascism grows up and seeks consensus by exploiting and exacerbating the natural fear of difference. The first appeal of a fascist or prematurely fascist movement is an appeal against the intruders. Thus Ur-Fascism is racist by definition."

In his book When China Rules the World, British author Martin Jacques, whose views on China are hardly critical, argues that the greatest problem likely to accompany China's rise will not be political, but rather "Han Chinese" racism. Beijing's attempts to portray its citizens, regardless of ethnic background, as "Han Chinese," is part of that feature. Its refusal to regard Taiwanese or Aborigines as ethnic groups in their own right is also a symptom of its enmity toward diversity.

To people who feel deprived of a clear social identity, Ur--Fascism says that their only privilege is the most common one, to be born in the same country.

This, of course, is the very core of nationalism.

"At the root of the Ur--Fascist psychology," Eco writes, "there is the obsession with a plot, possibly an international one. The followers must feel besieged. The easiest way to solve the plot is the appeal to xenophobia."

Yu's berating of Zhou for thanking her parents but "neglecting" the nation — her "only privilege" — stems from this phenomenon. The obsession with plots, both domestic and

international, is also prevalent in CCP rhetoric, from fears of US "encirclement" and "containment" to "splittism" in Tibet, Xinjiang and Taiwan.

The followers must feel humiliated by the ostentatious wealth and force of their enemies.

"However," Eco writes, "the followers of Ur-Fascism must also be convinced that they can overwhelm the enemies. Thus, by a continuous shifting of rhetorical focus, the enemies are at the same time too strong and too weak. Fascist governments are condemned to lose wars because they are constitutionally incapable of objectively evaluating the force of the enemy."

This obviously applies to perceptions of the US and, to a lesser extent, Japan and India. It also explains fears, mostly expressed by political scientists, that China could "miscalculate" by expecting that it could prevail in a conflict in the Taiwan Strait despite US participation. As the Chinese military modernizes, reinforced by notions of victimhood and nationalism, the likelihood that it will embark on military adventurism — either against Taiwan or elsewhere, such as a border conflict with India — will increase.

Elitism is a typical aspect of any reactionary ideology … [and] cruelly implies contempt for the weak.

"The members of the party are the best among the citizens [and] every citizen can [or ought to] become a member of the party," Eco writes. However, "knowing that his power was not delegated to him democratically, but was conquered by force, [the leadership] also knows that his force is based upon the weakness of the masses; they are so weak as to need and deserve a ruler."

The CCP's claims that Chinese are "not ready" for democracy also derive from this aspect of fascism.

Ur-Fascism is based upon a selective populism, a qualitative populism.

"For Ur-Fascism ... individuals as individuals have no rights, and the People is conceived as a quality, a monolithic entity expressing the Common Will. Since no large quantity of human beings can have a common will, the Leader pretends to be their interpreter," Eco writes.

Not only do Chinese citizens have no "common will," but the "interpreter" — the CCP — endeavors to ensure that no large group can achieve common will, which would threaten its hold on power. Religious groups like the Falun Gong and the Roman Catholic Church, opposition parties, ethnic groups and protesters — all are closely monitored, forced underground or dispersed when the "threat" of organized opposition to central rule begins to form.

This fear is also inspired by memories of warlordism, which for decades compelled the CPP to impose restrictions on each region's control over the armed forces, even at the cost of loss of effectiveness.

"There is in our future a TV or Internet populism, in which the emotional response of a selected group of citizens can be presented and accepted as the Voice of the People," Eco writes.

China's control of information, its use of Internet Police to monitor Web and SMS activity, and a strong emphasis on Chinese symbolism and culture that is prevalent in the film industry are Eco's future, and it has arrived.

Ur-Fascism speaks newspeak.

"Elements of Ur-Fascism are common to different forms of dictatorship. All the Nazi or Fascist schoolbooks made use of an impoverished vocabulary, and an elementary syntax, in order to limit the instruments for complex and critical reasoning," Eco writes.

The CCP's imposition of simplified Chinese, which deprives Chinese citizens access to ancient texts and, in many ways, created an intellectual Year Zero in 1949, is such an instrument, as is censorship of the media and control of the material allowed to enter the country.

"Ur-Fascism is still around us, sometimes in plainclothes … [It] can come back under the most innocent of disguises," Eco writes.

It is rising next door.

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