

# Is China Still Communist?

**By:** Jeffrey Stafford, NCTA Ohio 2017

**Level:** High school

## **Essential Questions:**

- What is communism?
- What is socialism?
- What does it mean for a country to be “a communist country”? How can we identify which countries are communist?
- To what extent is China a communist/socialist country?
- To what extent is the United States a communist/socialist country?
- How is communism perceived in a communist country (specifically China)?

## **Learning Objectives:**      *Students will be able to:*

- 1) Know that China, North Korea, Vietnam, and Laos are considered communist countries
- 2) Understand the similarities and differences between communism and socialism
- 3) Understand the main ideas and goals of communism, and why millions of people around the world have been attracted to it
- 4) Understand that communism (as opposed to capitalism) is an economic system, not a form of government, is not the opposite of “democracy,” and is not equivalent to “dictatorship” (even if it has a tendency to lead to that)
- 5) Recognize common symbols used by communist groups throughout history
- 6) Analyze to what extent countries have communist/socialist characteristics
- 7) Critically compare how communism is perceived in the US as compared to how it is perceived in China, and understand that it is viewed positively by most Chinese people
- 8) Identify positives and negatives of communism/socialism and capitalism

## **Ohio standards addressed by this lesson:**

- Social studies:
  - Social transformations in the United States (1945-1994): Political debates focused on the extent of the role of government in the economy, environmental protection, social welfare, and national security
  - Government and the economy: The federal government uses spending and tax policy to maintain economic stability and foster economic growth. Regulatory actions carry economic costs and benefits.
  - Fundamentals of economics: Different economic systems (traditional, market, command, and mixed) utilize different methods to allocate limited resources.
  - Government and the economy: Economic policy decisions made by governments result in both intended and unintended consequences
  - Civic participation and skills: Individuals can identify, assess and evaluate world events, engage in deliberative civil debate and influence public processes to address global issues

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- National security and international diplomacy: Economic, political, and social differences between global entities can lead to conflict unless mitigated through diplomacy or cooperative efforts
- The global economy: The global economy creates advantages and disadvantages for different segments of the world's population
- World languages:
  - Culture: Analyze and describe relationships among products, practices and perspectives and compare them across cultures.
  - Identify, examine and compare products, practices and perspectives of the U.S. and target cultures
  - Identify, investigate and describe institutions, contemporary and historical figures, contributions and time periods of the target culture(s)
  - Identify cultural perspectives as they are portrayed in the media and other sources and share them with others
  - Develop an understanding that people in other cultures might view aspects of U.S. mainstream culture differently than the majority of U.S. residents view them
  - Identify aspects of U.S. mainstream culture that might be viewed differently by people in other cultures from the way the majority of U.S. residents might view them and investigate why people in different cultures have differing viewpoints on a variety of issues
- Also related to:
  - American History: the Cold War and the Red Scare
  - English literacy (reading informational texts)

### Instructional Activities:

- 1) Pass out packets with study guide and articles. Students should read the instructions & questions so they know what their goals are. Students should take notes throughout their readings and discussions. (There will be a quiz at the end of the lesson.)
- 2) Students read the first article: "What is Communism?" (by Michael Dhar, LiveScience, 2014)
- 3) Class discussion
  - a. Try to answer as many questions as possible from the study guide
  - b. Highlight the following points:
    - i. On the right side, famous communist countries and recurring symbols and words
    - ii. At its core, communism is an **economic** ideology, not a political one
    - iii. Karl Marx (Prussian, 1818-1843, co-author of *The Communist Manifesto*) is the most famous promotor of Communism. Make sure students don't think that means he supported repressive, authoritarian dictatorship as the ideal form of government; he was an economic philosopher who believed that capitalism leads to inequality, exploitation of the working class by the owner class, psychological alienation, as well as periodically recurring economic depressions and crises. To the extent that this affects

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the political structure of the society, it means the people – the proletariat – are in charge. (This sounds very similar to the goal of democracy – the opposite of authoritarian dictatorships.)

- iv. The opposite of communism is capitalism. Capitalism means that private businesses own the means of production. Communism (or socialism) means that the means of production are owned “communally” by the “society,” which in practice means they are owned by the government, but in theory the government is designed to be temporary, until the true communist state is set up.
  - v. Socialism and communism are basically the same, but socialism is less extreme: communism advocates revolution in order to set up the new society, while socialism works through existing democratic structures. Communism is the theoretical endpoint of a transformation or revolution, where everything is truly communal. Socialism is the process that gets you there. In practice, no country has ever achieved a truly communist society, leading many people to think it may be impossible.
  - vi. Almost all capitalist countries (including the US) have some socialist characteristics: anything where the government takes from everyone (not necessarily equally – people who have more pay more) in order to provide for everyone (not necessarily equally – people who need more get more) in hopes of having an equal society where everyone has access to the same resources. Examples include public schools, free school lunches, public libraries, public parks, museums, zoos, non-toll roads and bridges, street lights and signs, Medicare, Medicaid, the VA, Social Security, unemployment, the military, police, prisons, fire department, postal service, garbage collection and landfills, sewers, water treatment, hydroelectric dams, snow removal, farm and other corporate subsidies, student loans/grants/scholarships, scientific and medical research grants, food stamps (SNAP), WIC, court-provided public defenders, regulations and enforcement of regulations by the EPA/FDA/OSHA/USDA/FAA/etc. to protect the quality of our air/water/food/drugs/working environments/etc., public services provided by FEMA/CDC/CIA/FBI/NSA/TSA/HHS/National Weather Service/etc., FDIC guarantees of your bank accounts, regulations of companies to prevent them from exploiting workers (such as minimum wage, overtime laws, etc.)
  - vii. One reason communism might get such a bad reputation in the US is because people in the US equate communism with authoritarianism and fear it spreading here.
- c. Discuss any other questions that arise
  - d. Look up unknown facts on the internet if necessary. Teacher doesn't have to know everything in advance; let students observe how you find out something you don't know.

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- 4) Students read the second article: “Is China still communist?” by Zeeshan Aleem (Vox, 2017)
- 5) Class discussion
  - a. Answer questions from the study guide & any other questions that arise
  - b. Highlight the following points:
    - i. Mao Zedong (surname: Mao), known as Chairman Mao, is the George Washington and Thomas Jefferson (rolled into one) of China. Founder of the country, founder of the national political philosophy, first president, glorified everywhere.
    - ii. The People’s Republic of China – the modern country of China, run by the Communist party – was founded in 1949. China has a history of thousands of years, but for millennia they were ruled by emperors.
    - iii. Lenin was a famous Communist leader from Russia/USSR.
    - iv. Early in the history of the PRC, China had a planned economy: your job was decided by the government, your food was rationed by the government, etc. Nowadays it’s not like that. China still calls themselves communist, but people can start their own businesses, make and sell their own products, buy what they want with their own money, etc. Living in China nowadays is not a drastically different experience than living in the US, at least in terms of how the economy works.
    - v. The Communist Party is basically the only political party in China and completely controls the government. Certain civil liberties such as freedom of speech and assembly are not guaranteed in China, and there is a lot of censorship on the internet. But it doesn’t actually affect most people’s lives in China, unless they want to protest the government a lot, which most people don’t.
- 6) Students read the third article: In general, how popular are the Communist Party and the Chinese government to the ordinary citizen of China? (Answer by Greg Burch, Quora contributor, 2015)
- 7) Class discussion
  - a. Answer questions from the study guide & any other questions that arise
  - b. Highlight the following points:
    - i. The Communist Party, and communism, are generally perceived positively in China
    - ii. Speaking for myself (Jeffrey Stafford, the person writing this lesson plan), after having lived for several years in China and being in continued contact with many Chinese people, I agree completely with the writer (Greg Burch)’s assessment.
    - iii. Most Chinese people just stay out of politics. This may be due in part to their completely tumultuous political history over the last century, with revolution after revolution, neighbors turning on each other, etc. – most people now just keep their heads down and go about their lives.
- 8) Introduce vocabulary: market economy, command economy, and mixed economy.
  - a. Discuss which one China has and which one the US has.

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- b. Relate these terms to what we have been calling “capitalism” and “communism”
  - c. Communism was a reaction against pure market economies and their negative aspects
  - d. In the early years of the PRC, China really did have a command economy, and it went very badly
    - i. Feel free to introduce more materials or discussion relating to this, if you have time
- 9) Quiz – use as an actual grade or simply as a teaching tool, but either way actually give the quiz and then go over the answers.
- a. See discussion points with answer key below

### **Resources & Materials Required:**

- Copies for each student (could be pre-assembled as a packet, or passed out individually)
  - Communism Study Guide - attached
  - What Is Communism - attached or at <http://www.livescience.com/42980-what-is-communism.html>
  - Is China still communist - attached or at <https://www.vox.com/latest-news/2017/1/19/14176896/china-facts-trump> (part 4)
  - In general, how popular are the Communist... - attached
- Copies for each student (not part of packet):
  - Quiz – attached
- Answer key for quiz – below:

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### Answer Key for Quiz

1. b

2. b

3. d

- a may be true but its focus on racism makes it a modern idea, not related to traditional communist views
- b is an idea popular in current American Republican political discourse which is kind of the opposite of communism: communism takes the view that corporations exploit workers and if corporations weren't there then workers would be able to benefit more fully from the products of their labor
- c is a description of laissez-faire economic policies associated with Adam Smith

4. a

5. c

- a is generally used to defend "trickle-down"/supply-side economic theories (help the rich and it will "trickle down" to help everyone)
- b is a joke in the style of Yakov Smirnoff. Authoritarian government is not a necessary feature of communism, at least in theory, and either way that slogan doesn't "promote" communism
- c (the correct answer) is actually a popular slogan to describe communism
- d may be true (or may not) but it's not really about communism in any way

6. a

- c is epicureanism / hedonism / Ayn Randian objectivism
- d is Nietzschean moral philosophy

7. c

- a & d are problems that tend to be exacerbated, not healed, by communism
- c has never happened anywhere

8. a

- b describes pure capitalism, the opposite of communism
- c describes an oligarchy or oligopoly, the scenario communism is trying to avoid

9. d

- b is wrong because a country can be democratic and elect socialist leaders (e.g., Bernie Sanders)
- c is wrong because **private** schools, prisons, etc., are capitalist enterprises; public ones are socialistic

10. d

- There are currently only about 5 communist countries in the world, but there used to be more (including former USSR members)
- The "true" end state of communism does not even require a government, because the people communally own everything. This has never happened, and given human nature, may well be impossible.

11. a

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- b & c are wrong because “food stamps” and European social programs are socialist, not capitalist, policies

12. c

- Even if students haven’t memorized the names of the communist countries, they should recognize that phrases like “People’s Republic,” “Democratic People’s Republic” and “Socialist Republic” are likely to be communist, and hopefully remember that China is communist (given that that’s what the lesson is about), and maybe even remember that North Korea is communist, not South Korea.

13. c

- a – may or may not be true, but is not how you determine whether or not a country is communist
- b – describes the US, not China
- c – describes China: people call themselves communist and support the communist party and communist government, even though the actual economic structure of the country is not that different from the US
- d – again, this is true, but whether or not a country is communist is not about how much freedom there is

## Communism: Study Guide

Take notes during your reading and class discussion to understand the main ideas about communism, including (but not limited to) the following:

- What are the goals and main ideas of communism? What problems was it created to help solve?
- What is the difference between communism and socialism?
- How does the economy look under communism/socialism?
- What is the opposite of communism? Give the word and explain what it means.
- Who are some famous communist historical figures?
- What are the main current and former “communist” countries?
- How many countries have achieved a “true” communist (communal) society?
- What symbols do communist groups use? What words are often used in communist countries’ names?
- Is China a communist/socialist country? Why or why not? Identify socialist & capitalist characteristics.
- How is communism perceived in China? Why?
- Is the US a communist/socialist country? Why or why not? Identify socialist & capitalist characteristics.
- How is communism perceived in the US? Why?
- Vocabulary: define **proletariat** & **bourgeoisie**. Which one is your family members of?

# What Is Communism?

By Michael Dhar | January 30, 2014 12:39pm ET

Though the term "communism" can refer to specific political parties, at its core, communism is an ideology of economic equality through the elimination of private property.

The beliefs of communism, most famously expressed by Karl Marx, center on the idea that inequality and suffering result from capitalism. Under capitalism, private business people and corporations own all the factories, equipment and other resources called "the means of production." These owners, according to communist doctrine, can then exploit workers, who are forced sell their labor for wages.

The working class — or "proletariat" — must rise up against the capitalist owners, or "bourgeoisie," according to the ideals of communism, and institute a new society with no private property, no economic classes and no profits.

Communism differs from socialism, though the two have similarities. Both philosophies advocate economic equality and state ownership of various goods and services. However, socialism usually works through the existing democratic structures of capitalist countries. Almost all capitalist countries, in fact, have some socialist characteristics, like the public schools and Social Security program in the United States.

In contrast, communists state that capitalist economic and political systems must be completely overthrown through revolution.

Historically, such communist revolutions have never yielded their intended utopias of equality. Communist theory predicts that, after the proletariat revolution, special leaders must temporarily take control of the state, leading it toward an eventual "true" communist society. Thus, the governments of the Soviet Union, communist China, Cuba and others were intended to be provisional. In practice, these "temporary" governments have held on to power, often subjecting their citizens to authoritarian control.

Communist ideology also states that these revolutions should spread across the globe, rather than be limited to individual countries. This helps explain the historical antagonism between capitalist and communist nations — particularly the long Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union.

Source: <http://www.livescience.com/42980-what-is-communism.html>



The hammer and sickle



5-pointed star



Flag of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR; "Soviet Union"), 1922-1991



Flag of the People's Republic of China ("China")



Flag of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea ("North Korea")



Flag of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam ("Vietnam")



Flag of the People's Republic of Angola (became the Republic of Angola in 1992)

## Is China still communist?

by Zeeshan Aleem [zeeshan.aleem@vox.com](mailto:zeeshan.aleem@vox.com) Jan 19, 2017, 7:50am EST

Yes and no. Since the beginning of communist rule under Mao Zedong in 1949, China's economy has transformed far more than its style of governance.

Mao was a Leninist — he adopted a kind of Marxist doctrine that held that the state should be held under the tight control of a vanguard party that would oversee the course of communist revolution as it shifted to a centrally planned economy. He also conceived of China through an anti-imperialistic lens, and saw resisting powerful foreign countries as part of the Communist Party's major priorities. Mao probably wouldn't recognize the modern Chinese economy, but its closed political system and powerful central government still look much like what he called for decades ago.

"Today in China there isn't much left of the legacy of ideas of class struggle and the equalization of the relations between classes in China. It is a place with very rich people and very poor people and big business — things you have trouble squaring with Marx's idea of where things were going," Wasserstrom explains.

Since the 1980s, China's government has pared back tight control and regulation of the country's economic affairs. Today, it's a market economy with significant elements of state control and participation. China's 100-plus state-owned enterprises control trillions of dollars in assets and account for **about a third** of the country's industrial output. But the country is a member of the World Trade Organization, encourages private enterprise and entrepreneurship, and considers **reforming many of its state-owned enterprises to be a priority**.

The Communist Party still pervades Chinese life in a serious way. It has around **90 million members**, meaning most people in China know Communist Party members even if they aren't one. In a bid to maintain its status as the sole authority in the country, it restricts political liberties like freedom of speech and press heavily, though not completely. Small protests on local issues are tolerated, but demonstrations that tie people together from different geographical areas or social groups will face repression, Wasserstrom notes.

Over the years there have been ebbs and flows in what is permissible in civil society, but under President Xi Jinping, political freedom has been on the wane — he has overseen a crackdown on human rights advocates and NGOs and a tightening on political discussion.



People holding flags during a parade to commemorate the 123rd anniversary of Chairman Mao Zedong's birthday on December 26, 2016, in Huaxian County, China. Getty Images

Public Opinion Polls Chinese Communist Party Dictatorships Politics of China

Culture of China Democracy China

## In general, how popular are the Communist Party and the Chinese government to the ordinary citizen of China?

There is this simplistic perception that the Chinese are generally obedient to everything that the government does. I've seen several evidences that show that this isn't true at all, but I just wanted to know what you thought about it.

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### 5 Answers



Greg Burch, lawyer, "Old China Hand," amateur roboticist

Answered Apr 12, 2015

My perception, based on fairly constant communication over many, many years with many, many Chinese people in all kinds of jobs, and in many Chinese cities and in the countryside, is that the Party and the government are not only "popular," but that the opinion of both the Party and the government is better now than it ever has been. This is true across all ages, locations and education levels. Chinese citizens broadly give the Party credit for the country's rapid economic rise, and for protecting the country from "internal chaos" and "foreign threats."

The **overwhelming** majority of Chinese people will acknowledge privately that the Party **does** limit what are called "human rights" in the West, but simply put a much higher value on the things that are felt to be the positive benefits delivered by the Party's unquestioned rule. Note that Chinese people know that corruption in the Party and government is a problem, but the opinion of, again, an overwhelming majority is that instances of corruption reflect moral failings of individuals, and not systemic problems with the Party or the state.

Ideas contrary to these very common opinions have almost zero impact in China. Western media gives great attention to Chinese political dissidents. In China, these people have basically no impact on popular consciousness at all.

These are difficult things for Westerners to accept -- but they are true.

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When will the Chinese be more relevantly, "When by the Chinese Communist Party?"

Why does everyone call the Communist Party, but not a better form of government?

What are some stories (Dang)? Does that mean anything?

What benefits do non-Chinese Communist Party members available outside China?

Why shouldn't Chinese be really happy with the Communist Party?

What can I, as a Chinese Communist Party member, do to help the Party?

Will the Chinese Communist Party win the next election in China?

Is the Chinese Communist Party really happy?

Can you join the Communist Party if your parents is not a Communist Party member and your grandparents is not a Communist Party member?

How do you think of the government officials have democracy while many people are not happy?



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## Cultural Knowledge Quiz: Communism

- Communism has effects in many areas of society, but at its core, what kind of philosophy is communism?
  - A political philosophy (about how to run the government)
  - An economic philosophy (about how to run the economy)
  - An educational philosophy (about how to run the schools)
  - An ethical philosophy (about how to decide what's good and evil)
- What is the opposite of communism?
  - Democracy: where the people control the government
  - Capitalism: where business is controlled by private companies and individuals
  - Conservatism: a commitment to traditional ideas, and opposition to change
  - Liberalism: a commitment to individuals having the liberty (freedom) to do what they want, regardless of tradition
- What is the traditional communist view of rich and poor?
  - Economic inequality is an example of "institutional racism" because wealth and class status are passed from parents to children, so even if everyone is legally equal, we've never had equal chances to succeed
  - Corporations and wealthy are "job creators" who help the working people by paying them (in exchange for their labor)
  - If left to its own devices without government intervention or regulation, the "invisible hand" of the free market will create a fair society
  - The working classes are exploited by corporations and wealthy people, and they should revolt and take control over "the means of production" themselves
- What is the purpose/goal of communism?
  - To establish a new society with no private property, no rich, no poor, and no profit
  - For the government to control every aspect of everyone's lives
  - To eliminate freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, etc.
  - For the rich to get richer and the poor to get poorer
- Which is a slogan that describes and promotes communism?
  - "A rising tide lifts all boats" (meaning: when it comes to the economy, what's good for a few is good for everyone)
  - "In America, you can delete your browser history. In Soviet Russia, your browser history can delete you" (meaning: the government is watching what you do and will punish you severely if they don't like it)
  - "From each according to ability, to each according to need" (meaning: everyone works or contributes as much as they are able, and everyone receives as much as they need)
  - "If you're not paying for the product, then you are the product" (meaning: companies make money one way or another; if you're not paying them, then your attention or personal data is what they are selling)
- What is socialism?
  - Almost the same as communism, but focuses on changing existing laws instead of overthrowing governments
  - The opposite of communism, because socialism is not bad for society
  - The belief that the proper moral purpose of one's life is the pursuit of one's own happiness
  - The idea that there are two types of morality: "master morality" and "slave morality." In master morality, strength is a virtue; traditional Western morality (e.g., Christianity) values weakness
- What was the problem with modern society that the philosophy of communism was created to try to solve?
  - The government had too much power, so the people had too little freedom to make their own choices
  - The working classes had too much power, so wealthy people were oppressed by the poor
  - The government didn't control the corporations, so the rich had too much power over the poor
  - Everyone was the same, so there was not enough diversity

8. Under pure communism or socialism, who owns everything?
  - a. There is no private property; everything belongs to everyone (meaning: it belongs to the government)
  - b. Big, multinational corporations own everything (meaning: companies can freely decide how much pay their workers, even if it's almost nothing)
  - c. A few wealthy individuals own everything (meaning: they don't have to work for a living; everyone else does)
  - d. Religious leaders own everything (meaning: people like the Pope are the most powerful people in the world)
9. Does the United States have any socialist characteristics?
  - a. No, because we are a capitalist country and we hate socialism in all its forms
  - b. No, because we are a democracy and we elect our leaders
  - c. Yes, such as private schools, private prisons, private universities, and corporations
  - d. Yes, such as public schools, parks, libraries, roads, Medicaid, Medicare, Social Security, etc.
10. Historically, how many times have communist revolutions happened in the world, and how often have they succeeded at creating an equal society?
  - a. There has never been an attempted communist revolution in any country
  - b. There have only ever been about five communist countries in the world
  - c. There have been dozens of communist revolutions throughout history, and most have succeeded at creating a society where there is no poverty
  - d. There have been dozens of communist revolutions throughout history, but none have succeeded at creating a truly communal society
11. How many times in history has capitalism led to a society without poverty?
  - a. Never: capitalism naturally leads to widening the gap between wealth and poverty
  - b. Once: no one is truly poor in the United States due to policies such as food stamps
  - c. Several times: in Europe, there are many countries where there is no poverty, due to the success of free-market capitalism
  - d. Many times: every time pure capitalism has been tried, it has led to a drastic reduction in poverty
12. Which of the following is NOT currently a communist country?
  - a. The People's Republic of China ("mainland China")
  - b. The Socialist Republic of Vietnam ("Vietnam")
  - c. The Republic of Korea ("South Korea")
  - d. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea ("North Korea")
13. Is China communist?
  - a. Yes, because their "president" is really a dictator and there is no freedom
  - b. No, because the people hate communism and think of communism as the enemy
  - c. Kind of, because the people and the government believe in communism and say they are communist, even though they only sort of practice it
  - d. Kind of, because the government doesn't allow as much freedom as in Western democracies, but it's still not as bad as it used to be under Mao Zedong when the government rationed everything