Voiceover: Hi, this is Tanya Domi. Welcome to The Thought Project recorded at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, fostering groundbreaking research and scholarship in the arts, social sciences, and sciences. In this space, we talk with faculty and doctoral students about the big thinking, and big ideas generating cutting edge research, informing forming New Yorkers and the world.

Tanya Domi: U.S., China policy under the Trump administration has developed into a trade war, creating a heated relationship over the subject of tariffs. According to Trump, preexisting trade imbalances and unfair trade practices by the Chinese remain major grievances. Indeed, during the recent group of 20 meeting, Trump and president Xi, have agreed to a 90 day pause on any further new tariffs in an attempt to finalize an agreement on intellectual property, technology theft, and non-tariff trade barriers. One of the casualties of the Trump policy has been the soybean farmers in the Midwest, which may have had an effect during the recent midterm elections.

China is now buying soybeans from Latin American growers, while soybean crops in Iowa have been allowed to rot in the fields. Another event that has escalated tension in the relationship between the United States and China was the unprecedented arrest of the chief financial officer and deputy chair of Huawei, a major telecommunications firm, who was being sought by U.S. justice department for illegal sales of projects to Iran and other countries in violation of U.S. export and sanction laws. Many observers believe due to the ongoing tariff wars in this arrest, that the U.S., China relationship may stabilize, but it is likely to never regain a level of trust that it enjoyed in the recent past. Broader U.S. policy has moved to shore up multilateral relationships while increasing naval exercises with India, calling for greater freedom of navigation in the south China Sea for Japan. This also included participation by the British navy, although China has called these exercises an encroachment on its sovereignty.

The Hague international legal tribunal has established there is no basis in international law for this assertion. China's grand scale infrastructure initiative known as the Belt and The Road, the cornerstone of its soft foreign policy has created contestations for influence from Eurasia, most recently in the Balkans, and now moving into Latin America, America's backyard. China does seek a new geopolitical realignment. To make sense of these dynamic and complex events on the world stage, we are joined today by Ming Xia, a professor of political science at the College of Staten Island, and at the graduate center where he is a doctoral faculty member. Professors Xia received his degrees from Fudan University and Temple University. He previously taught at Fudan University and served as a residential fellow at the Sigur Center for Asian Studies at George Washington University, the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, the East Asian institute at the National University of Singapore and the Asian Research Institute. He is the author of a number of publications and was included consecutively two the top 100 Chinese public intellectuals from 2009 to 2013, then again, in 2015 and 2017.
Welcome to The Thought Project, Professor Ming Xia.

Prof. Ming Xia: Thank you for having me.

Tanya Domi: It's great to have you here. We're going to be talking about China today. China's One belt, One road trillion dollar development initiative is seen by many observers as a rival to international institutions and U.S. global influence. While presidents Trump and Jinping continued to argue over tariff policies, China's signs contracts with small Croatia to help build a bridge to Bosnia and Herzegovina, and renegotiate the debts with Papua New Guinea and the Fiji Islands. This is Jinping's signature foreign policy initiative. As he moves from Eurasia to the South Pacific, what are his objectives in your view?

Prof. Ming Xia: I think the Chinese, they are trying to build a big empire, so we can say this empire building purpose. But what I want to see is, we have to look at this whole project from two directions. One, is their inactive pursuit, another, is their reactive measure. What I am looking at this is, on the one hand, you can see the Chinese government for the past 30, 40 years, they have developed the economy in a miraculous way, and so they have also developed a bigger ambition to try to change global order. I think when they face some kind of challenge, they realize the Eurasian continent, the heartland, maybe is a more friendlier place for them to get into. This is why you can find China tries to connect itself with Europe and through tours. One is a traditional, say growth, another is a traditional sea land, also they call it the ocean growth.

So, this is what they are wanting to expand, especially, they have over productive capacity at home. So, they want to get their products and their capacity-

Tanya Domi: To market.

Prof. Ming Xia: To the markets, right. But also, I think there was a passive or reactive part of this whole project. That is, I think in the western countries, they have been pushing China very hard. I think for the Chinese government, especially after Xi Jinping took power, he has realized, if we cannot expand into the turf of the West, maybe we have to retreat into the Eurasian heartland. So, this is why I think this is what he wanted to do, but also, I think this is what they had to do facing the resistance from the West.

Tanya Domi: So, it's a reactionary position as well? And it's asserting itself as a way to protect it. I imagined sovereignty and its own ability to sell goods essentially, moving goods to market and using soft power. What do you not agree?

Prof. Ming Xia: Yes. This is not only related through their expansion in terms of their production, they wanted to create a much, much better environment for themselves. So, this is why they have signed so many contracts with the countries. Now, we can count around 65 countries in this whole initiative. This is
how I think ... this is one clear one purpose for them. But of course, there is soft power involved. And also, people are talking about sharp power. That means not only they wanted to expand the culture and their charm, but also they wanted to infiltrate these countries, and especially if you look at their telecommunication infrastructure in many countries in that area, this is why the Huawei is involved here. So, I think of the Chinese government also chose to use all kinds of very subtle, but aggressive strategies, and to keep many countries into their pocket.

Tanya Domi: Just last summer, I was in Bosnia and Herzegovina, my area of research. I teach on this region, the western Balkans at Columbia University. I was witnessed to a real show of soft power by China on the public square in the middle of the heart of downtown Sarajevo, and it was a musical performance of Chinese music and dance done by local people from Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as an art and photography exhibit. I've never seen that before in Bosnian. I'm familiar with that country for almost 30 years. It's definitely a new development. There's a lot of competition in the region between Russia, China, Turkey, very interesting developments. So, while we're talking about the One Belt, One Road initiative, also, what's going on, and it's really grabbing headlines almost on a daily basis, is that the current tariff war between the U.S. and China in a recent agreement between president Trump and president Jinping on taking a pause from imposing further tariffs for the next 90 days.

The U.S. trade representative, Robert Lighthizer has said that he considers March 1st, a hard deadline to reach a trade deal with China. Do you think that the economic relationship between the United States and China has been altered forever? I mean, where do you think it stands, and can it be really repaired?

Prof. Ming Xia: I cannot say it has been altered forever, but I can say the damage is huge. Also, this change is not temporary, I believe it has a lot of structural factors involved. Because if you look at the whole thing, it does not come from president Trump alone. If you look at the intellectual circle, if you look at the business world, if you look at the foreign relations and the diplomatic thinkers, and the think tanks in Washington DC, so you can find there was a big sea change. So for the past, about six years, I think, and the West has turned more and more negative toward China. And due to some important changes within China, and especially in this spring in March, and that Xi Jinping and removed the time limit, and the for his presidency, and this is huge, and I think move and for China, because this is a big measure of backtracking. And also you can find-

Tanya Domi: Democratic backtracking, right?

Prof. Ming Xia: Because China has never-

Tanya Domi: Really withdrawn, really stepped out.
Prof. Ming Xia: Exactly. Or to harden their authoritarian aspect. And also, you can find the Chinese economy is not doing very well of late, and it has already been a financial crisis, because since 2015, you can find the Chinese stock market has declined from the 15,700, and today is 2,500. So, this is how you can find the Chinese market, I think has been the skid. But on the other hand, you can find the Chinese leaders, they used to have the so called performance based legitimacy. So, now the performance if not doing well, I believe they have such kind of more paranoid reaction, so this is why they are tightening their control over the society. This is one important reason why-

Tanya Domi: This is part of the reaction, is as a crackdown. Don't you think that ... I mean, we can understand we're all watching Trump, who's very erratic, and he has imposed more tariffs for the first time since the 1930s in the United States. This recent arrest of the Huawei chief financial officer, Kathy Ming in Canada, how do you think that adds to this tension in this relationship? And it is believed that U.S. law enforcement have pursued her because of Huawei's violations, perhaps of U.S. sanctions on Iran. What do you think about that in context?

Prof. Ming Xia: This is a big issue I think, and this is a big event, because Huawei, and basically, if we think about Huawei, Huawei is bigger than Apple. I think the Apple company is even smaller, is ranked number three in the world in terms of communication market. But Huawei is only second to Samsung-

Tanya Domi: So, it's huge. It's huge.

Prof. Ming Xia: Yeah. It's huge. It's the biggest company in China in terms of biggest ... because they call it as a private company. This is what I think it is very mysterious, because it's not a state owned enterprise, but is not a company, which is on stock market, so it's owned by the stock owners and by individuals. But the issue is, I think Huawei is like underground arsenal for the Chinese government in the 21st century. So, when you have the Huawei chairman, Ren Zhengfei the founder, and he is now 74 years old, and so, he is near retirement. So, his daughter, Sabrina Meng or Kathy Meng-

Tanya Domi: Kathy Ming.

Prof. Ming Xia: ... Meng Wanzhou. She is being positioned to take over because she is the vice chair woman of the board and of the company, and she's also the chief financial officer. So, when she was detained, and when she was having international transfer in the Vancouver, for the Chinese government and for the Chinese business world, I think this is a big, big explosion for them. I believe this is going through a further strength, the relationship between China and Canada. So now, you can see that China already has retaliated. They arrested one former Canadian diplomat, a station in Beijing-

Tanya Domi: Oh, they did. They did. I see. Well, that doesn't surprise me at all under the circumstances.
Prof. Ming Xia: Yes. So, the U.S. business word actually is in the [inaudible 00:16:08] warning. So, for all Americans and all American executives, if you're traveling to China, and so, you should be aware you have a high possibility to be also to be detained.

Tanya Domi: So, in that context, let's move towards a discussion about China's human rights record given my own background as a professor in human rights. I've come to know quite a bit about the former Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Leo's Xiaobo, who died in prison last year, actually in a prison hospital last year in China. China's maltreatment of [inaudible 00:16:52] is well known, their complete lack of media freedom, internet freedom, a communist one party state you, yourself, just pointed out where Jinping has now removed any lifetime service ... Let me restate this. Let me restate this [inaudible 00:17:18].

China's human rights record could be illustrated in the life and death of Nobel Peace Prize laureate Liao Xiaobo, who died in a prison hospital last year. China's maltreatment of the [inaudible 00:17:35], the complete lack of media freedom, internet freedom, a communist one party state, really is the epitome of state capture. Now, Jinping can serve for life, even though he has launched an anti corruption campaign, and the general quality of life has improved, China's still remains not free according to many human rights organizations. Don't you think this is ... I'd like to hear your views on this, 'cause I know you've researched human rights in China, that this is probably one of the weaker aspects of this regime.

Prof. Ming Xia: There was one Oxford scholar, Stein Ringen, he published a book, is called The Perfect Dictatorship. So, with the assistance of a dictator, this artificial intelligence, and also, I'll say the Huawei, and the Huawei is a major contributor to China's control system. The Chinese regime, we can see has become the largest authoritarian and actually, if we call it totalitarian system, I think we are still correct. The unprecedented largest totalitarian system we have ever seen in human history, because not only you have the largest company as party, which is ruling the largest population with the sig and the largest economy, we're the third largest territory. And of course, this is only controversial, because he's a [inaudible 00:19:18] included [inaudible 00:19:19]. But if you put it all together, you can find it surpassed the former Soviet Union, it surpassed Nazi, Germany.

I think now we are getting to the third round of a conflict between our authoritarian system and again, the democratic world. So, not only as you have mentioned Liu Xiaobo, the individual cases, but also, you have mentioned the Muslims, like the Uyghurs in Xinjiang-

Tanya Domi: Yes, vigorous. Right.

Prof. Ming Xia: ... we're counting them by median. They were detained, or the so called ... they call it transformation camps, because they wanted to brainwash them in order to make them better people. It means without religion or they are not believers

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in Islam. And also, we have it for keep in mind since 2008 and 2009, both Xijiang and Tibet, I think they have been under defacto martial law. So, we have seen for the past more than three years, they have been more than 160 Tibetans, and they had self-immolation.

I think for the outside of the world, this is something we have never witnessed before, but unfortunately, the world has been silent about that, so I feel very sad.

Tanya Domi: Yes. I think what you say about the Tibetans is a case in point, as long the Dalai Lama is alive, there is some visibility, but there certainly is less engagement around the Tibetans, which is really, as you say, it's truly regrettable. But I also think the extent, like you're talking about the system that is set up by the government to control the population, it's estimated at least 30,000 people are monitoring the internet every day, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and that there's very little freedom in the use of the internet, because of the so much monitoring. And of course, this is the vehicle to the world as we know, sometimes you can have less information, but if you've got access to a computer, you can learn. If it's controlled by the government, it's very clear that that is not what China wants in its population.

Prof. Ming Xia: That's exactly because the Chinese government is maintaining the so called the Great Firewall, which has divided China from the free world. So, for the Chinese people, they cannot get the access to Google, and they cannot get access to Facebook or Instagram or YouTube, and all these things and followers we think they're essential to our life, to our decision making on daily basis. But the Chinese government is building a state, which we can see in 1984, by George Orwell, the big brother's state, it is like of that. We can also see, especially recently, you can find the Chinese scientists, they have tried to edit the genes of human beings, so they can create the babies, and they base upon their gene technologies. So, it sounds like we have this Huxley and the brave new word version.

Tanya Domi: The new world.

Prof. Ming Xia: In China, yes. And then if you think about ... in China now, they have developed so called Social Credit System. They have the big data, and the camera's everywhere to record your behaviors. And so, then they can give you a reading and your scores. And so, when you go to buy things and try to even buy an air ticket, and so they are going to look at your social credit scores, and they're going to maybe deny you. So, you can find-

Tanya Domi: The ability to travel-

Prof. Ming Xia: Exactly.

Tanya Domi: ... or many things, I would imagine.
Prof. Ming Xia: Yeah, to buy an air ticket or train ticket. So, we can say China today is a Panopticon state, so this is what I think. It is scary.

Tanya Domi: That is scary. So, not only does China have ... looks at its a backyard, looks at its population, monitors its population on the land, it also it has sweeping claims of sovereignty over the seas, and that is illustrated in the dispute that China continues to use in the south China seas. It has caused friction with a number of nations in Asia and including the United States most recently, and the United States in a reaction seems to have stepped up its activities in south China seas through utilizing freedom of navigation rights by the Pacific Fleet. Is this an issue that it seems to have episodic episodes of friction, and then there's a backing off, but they clearly are exercising, what you would say is an over exacting control of international waters. What is that about Professor Xia? What is that about?

Prof. Ming Xia: You can see China is very aggressive, and on the one hand, they try to council everybody. There was one very controversial issue, is who is Chinese? And even the Chinese government now is claiming even you have become a citizen for foreign country, but if you have not gone through the process to de-register under Chinese authority, the Chinese government can still claim that you are a Chinese citizen. So, they try to council everyone, even you have moved out of China, and you have acquired citizenship in foreign countries. But also, you can find China has [tightful 00:25:32] council more space, and so the South China Sea is one case. This moment, China is making many claims, and I said before, because the government is facing legitimacy crisis, because of the economic slow down. They are claiming that Taiwan is part of China and now they say that we have a timetable, we want a reunification around the year 2020, some people say 2030.

And also, you can find they are claiming the South China Sea, and they claim by the so called [inaudible 00:26:07] border lines. And so, they-

Tanya Domi: So, is this about, they want to control, but this is also about oil too, isn't it? Untapped oil?

Prof. Ming Xia: There is oil or gas-

Tanya Domi: And gas? Natural gas?

Prof. Ming Xia: Right. But I think it is for the Chinese government is more about how they want to push their security zone out, because they-

Tanya Domi: ... and extend their sovereignty in other words.

Prof. Ming Xia: Exactly. So, they are building artificial islands, and so then based upon these artificial islands, they claim sovereignty. So, they want you to make sure other big sea powers like the U.S. or Japan or Australia or India, they cannot get into
that area because the Chinese government want to excise a sovereignty eventually. I think on the Chinese hands, some kind of strategic plan here, that is how they want to oust the U.S. from the West Pacific. I think China-

Tanya Domi: They want them out.

Prof. Ming Xia: Exactly. I think China has ambition to assert its [inaudible 00:27:11] in Asia, no doubt about it. But also China is preparing to challenge the U.S. over the global [inaudible 00:27:19]. So, this is why, and I think the global situation has become more precarious-

Tanya Domi: More and more heated and contested.

Prof. Ming Xia: Exactly. So, whether the trade war eventually is going to escalate into-

Tanya Domi: Into a hot war.

Prof. Ming Xia: Exactly. That's what I'm concerned.

Tanya Domi: Makes complete sense. And you can see this contestation just seems to be relentless. I mean, it's happening in so many different areas as we've already discussed. So, talking about Taiwan, you just returned from a month in Taiwan observing the elections. The ruling party lost the local elections, the Democratic Progressive Party. Immediately after the election, China claimed the last could be attributed to the people wanting a closer relationship with mainland China. Let's talk about Taiwan, and could you tell our listeners about the one China policy, and all the complications, and how everything that happens in Taiwan, there's going to be a reaction from mainland China, and how that dynamic plays out as evidenced in the local elections just recently.

Prof. Ming Xia: So, you can see for local elections, this is like mid-term elections. Most likely, they are not going to be very attractive, and people are not going to pay too much attention. But at this time in Taiwan, it has become so active, and the whole world actually was paying attention. One important reason is because Taiwan has become a testing ground for China's soft power and sharp power. During this local elections, there are two narratives. They were presented by two most popular candidates. Eventually, one became the mayor of Taipei, the capital city, another became the mayor of Kaohsiung, the big city in the south, and also, the bastion for the Democratic Progressive Party, because they ruled this city for more than 20 years, but they lost it. Both candidates, they presented two narratives, and the mayor in Taipei said, "Americans are not reliable. Americans are going to trade Taiwan as just merchandise in the shelf, and the anytime if they want to change it, they want to throw it away, they can do it."

So, clearly, it indicates some kind of impression about Trump, but then another candidate, eventually, he became the mayor of Kaohsiung, he said if we get
closer to mainland, we are going to get our goods out, we can get their visitors in, we are all going to make a lot of money. This is what you can find, and even Chinese economy, and is not doing well, even more and more Chinese people, they have become the so called the refugees of financial crisis, and some people commit suicide because of that. But somehow, the Chinese government by using its sharp power, and already convinced the Taiwan voters, that if you get closer to China, you are going to give more benefits. So, this is what I think the local elections, they were important for us to monitor, because there's something going on there. I think it's dangerous.

Tanya Domi: So, it really plays out like a bipolar world, it's China or U.S., seems like that was part of the discussion in this election period.

Prof. Ming Xia: I think so. I think you'll see a clash of two-

Tanya Domi: World ideals.

Prof. Ming Xia: Yeah, two giants, but each with personality issues. I think it has become very dangerous, but also, the bipolarization is also related to the fact that the west and east as having a fourth ally against the Eurasian continent. Because China has led the so called the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, so you can find the key members include China, Russia, Iran, Turkey, and Afghanistan, the Pakistan, as you can find under many authoritarian regimes, now they are huddling together to defy the American leadership and challenge the West. So, this is how I think, not only in Taiwan, we see the fourth ally between U.S. and China, but also in China, and we can see the fourth ally between the West and the Eurasian authoritarian fortress.

Tanya Domi: That's very interesting. This is a good place to stop. We will have you back to talk more about an ascendant China in a really tumultuous world. Thank you so much for being with us today.

Prof. Ming Xia: Thank you. This is my first time do it, and so I thank you very much, and I hope I can do it again.

Tanya Domi: Thanks for tuning into The Thought Project, and thanks to today's guest, Professor Ming Xia, of College of Staten Island, and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York.

Voiceover: The thought project is brought to you with production, engineering and technical assistance by Sarah Fishman. I'm Tanya Domi, tune in next week.