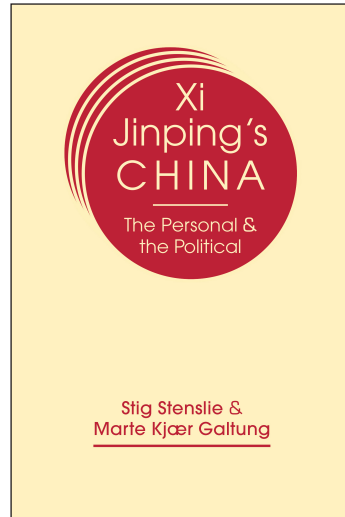


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Xi Jinping's China:
The Personal and
the Political

Stig Stenslie and
Marte Kjær Galtung

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1800 30th Street, Suite 314
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1

Leadership and Politics in China

TWO TRAITS CHARACTERIZE XI JINPING'S FIRST DECADE IN OFFICE. First, he has unleashed the tiger; under his leadership, China has demonstrated a will and an ability to challenge the United States as the dominant superpower. Second, and in parallel with this development, there has been a considerable concentration of power within China, leading many observers to claim that Xi is the country's strongest leader since Mao Zedong, who founded the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. Some even contend that he is more powerful than Mao.¹ What is certain is that Xi Jinping's China is far more powerful than Mao's. Because of his position and China's new role as a superpower in the international arena, Xi was featured as "the world's most powerful man" on the cover of *The Economist*.² His ambitions and visions, not to mention his will and ability to push through his policies, are what shape China. Xi is the key to understanding this new superpower.

Like Mao, Xi was born in the Year of the Snake. In Chinese tradition, each year in a twelve-year cycle belongs to an animal: rat, ox, tiger, hare, dragon, snake, horse, sheep, monkey, rooster, dog, and pig. Those born in the Year of the Snake are said to be charming, positive, and enterprising. They can be dangerous, however, so you would not want someone born in the Year of the Snake as your enemy. They tend to run their own race and can be headstrong and authoritarian.

They are also tough. Most of all, those born in the Year of the Snake are often thirsty for power and will do anything to quench this thirst.³

The Supreme Leader

In the West, China's supreme leader is often referred to as its "president." This is misleading, as such a title underplays the leader's real power.

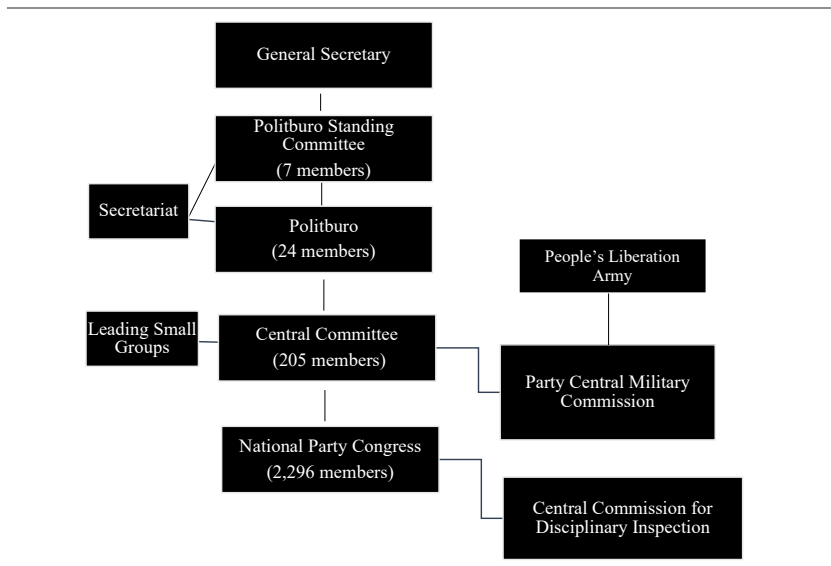
China's political system consists of three main components: the Communist Party, the government, and the military. In this system, the government and the military are subordinate to the party—even more so in Xi Jinping's China than in previous decades. The leader of the PRC is first and foremost the general secretary of the Communist Party of China (see Figure 1.1), the undisputed top position of the power pyramid. The leader also holds the title of president (see Figure 1.2) of the government and head of the military. It is in the highest party bodies—such as the Politburo and its Standing Committee, as well as the Central Committee—that the national political agenda is set and important decisions are made. The government and the military must obediently implement these decisions.

The general secretary has control over a party apparatus of about 96 million members and, through it, control over: the world's most populous state (with 1.4 billion people); the world's largest standing armed force (roughly 2 million); and an economy set to become the world's biggest. In addition, the party has absolute control over the legislative and judicial powers, the media, public opinion, and education. The United States is still militarily stronger and far richer than China as measured in gross national product per inhabitant, but the US separation-of-powers model means that the power of the office of the president is greatly limited compared to that of the Chinese general secretary.

The Legacies of Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping

The country's leaders have undoubtedly all left their mark on China, and the PRC's early history is synonymous with the history of Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping.

Figure 1.1 Leadership Organization Within the Chinese Communist Party

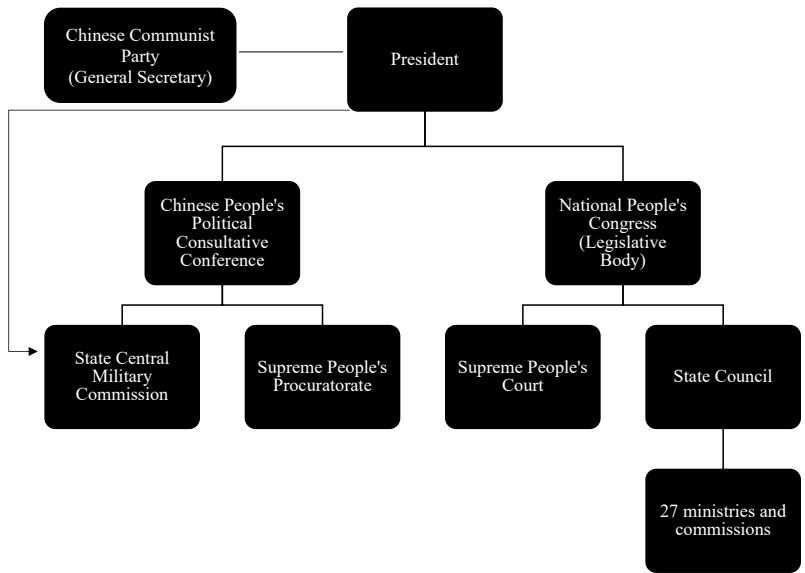


Source: “China’s 2017 Communist Party Leadership Structure & Transition,” US-China Business Council. June 2017, p. 2. <https://www.uschina.org/sites/default/files/LeadershipReport.pdf>.

Note: Chinese Communist Party groups are in shaded boxes.

It was Mao who led the Communists to victory against outer and inner enemies: the Japanese, who occupied large parts of China before and during World War II, and the Chinese Nationalist Party (Guomindang) under the leadership of Chiang Kai-shek, who fled to Taiwan after his defeat. On October 1, 1949, Mao proclaimed the new People’s Republic of China from a podium above the Gate of Heavenly Peace, the main entrance to the Forbidden City, from which the emperors had reigned. Now it was the Communists who would “rule over everything under the heavens.” These deeds secured an unrivaled position for Mao both within the party and among the Chinese people. He had united the country and rebuilt the people’s self-respect in the wake of what the Chinese call the “century of humiliation,” which began when the First Opium War (1839–1842) initiated an era of foreign invasion, civil war, and unimaginable suffering for the Chinese people.

Figure 1.2 Government of the People's Republic of China



Source: "China's 2017 Communist Party Leadership Structure & Transition," US-China Business Council. June 2017, p. 2. <https://www.uschina.org/sites/default/files/LeadershipReport.pdf>.

Mao used his power to transform Chinese society and economy after the Soviet model, launching, among other things, a large-scale program for industrialization and agricultural collectivization. The Chinese people were to pay a heavy price, however. Meant to turn China into an industrial and military great power, the Great Leap Forward (1958–1961) inflicted even more suffering and death. This was followed by the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), which reduced the country to chaos and was launched because Mao, who felt that his position had been weakened both within the party and among the people, attempted to restore his standing and power by putting into practice his theory of “permanent revolution.” The result was anarchy, during which the Red Guards wreaked havoc on traditions and culture to achieve a Communist nirvana. Estimates of how many died directly or indirectly because of Mao’s policies range from 40 million to 70 million.⁴

Mao's successor, Deng Xiaoping, charted a new course for China when he came to power in 1978. While Mao was described as a populist tyrant, one who mobilized the masses to hold onto his absolute power, Deng was seen as a pragmatist—someone concerned with practical results. Deng shifted the focus from ideology and mass mobilization to economic growth, as illustrated by two of his best known and most significant political slogans.⁵ The first, “Let some become rich first,” meant that economic growth was now more important than the purely Marxist aim of economic equality.⁶ The second, “It does not matter whether the cat is black or white, if the cat can catch mice, it is a good cat,” reflected a change from an ideological to a more pragmatic approach to politics and social development.⁷ During Deng's term, the Chinese economy transformed from a closed, planned economy to a market economy with far greater contact with the rest of the world, a period the Chinese refer to as “reform and opening.”

Deng also made important reforms to the system of government to prevent power from landing again in the hands of an omnipotent ruler such as Mao. In 1982, he set a limit of two five-year terms for top leaders, laying the foundations for a functioning system of leadership change, the Achilles' heel of any authoritarian regime. Moreover, he took another step to avoid a future omnipotent leader by introducing collective leadership at the top of the party, which meant that members of the Politburo's Standing Committee would now enjoy a considerable degree of autonomy and could make decisions collectively on important matters. Despite these reforms, Deng did not shy away from ensuring the party's survival. Ultimately, he was the one who gave the order to crush the students' protests at Tiananmen Square in 1989—and with it hopes for democracy in China at the time.

The thoughts and decisions of Mao and Deng shaped the lives of generations of Chinese for better or worse. But leadership has its limitations. As Karl Marx remarked, “Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they will. They do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, created, and passed on by the past.”⁸ Despite the considerable powers of the general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, not

all leaders have been as strong as Mao and Deng. Hu Jintao, Xi's immediate predecessor, who ruled from 2002 to 2012, was far weaker than both Mao and Deng. He was a technocrat and party man above all, and his power as party leader was hampered by a number of factors, including his personality, his ambitions, and the strength of other party leaders. Within the Communist Party, Hu's term was spoken of as "the lost decade," a decade of lost opportunities, while Western observers asked sarcastically, "Who's Hu?"

In contrast, Xi Jinping is without doubt an extraordinarily strong leader, a modern Chinese emperor.⁹ *Xi's Thoughts* are now included in the constitutions of both the party and the state, and the law has been changed so that, in principle, he can remain in power for the rest of his life. Moreover, a personality cult has developed around Xi, the like of which has not been seen since Mao.

Xi Jinping's Path

Xi is four years younger than the People's Republic of China, and his life and road to power mirror the PRC's history. He was born in 1953 into the power elite as the son of Mao's vice premier, Xi Zhongxun. His father was a hero of the Communist revolution who had helped Mao rise to power. Xi's family lived in safe and sheltered, but not extravagant, circumstances, a privileged existence that would come to a brutal end four years before the Cultural Revolution, when his father was expelled as a counterrevolutionary. Xi's family was humiliated during Mao's brutal campaign. Like so many urban youths, Xi was sent to the countryside to be "reeducated," an overwhelming experience for him and a whole generation of Chinese. Toward the end of the Cultural Revolution, things changed for the better, and Xi was eventually allowed into the Communist Party.

Xi started his political career in the early 1980s, at the same time that Deng Xiaoping opened China's economy. At first, the east coast particularly benefitted from the market reforms, which laid the foundations for several decades of amazing growth, and it was in the coastal provinces of Fujian and Zhejiang that Xi held his first impor-

tant political posts. In 2007, Xi was brought back to Beijing as a member of the Politburo's Standing Committee. He had reached the top echelon of the party and was well positioned to take over power in the nascent superpower five years later.

In 2012, many China observers thought Xi would turn out to be a weak leader. The Hong Kong-based journalist and writer Willy Wo-Lap Lam believed Xi would be the weakest Chinese leader for several decades because he had come to power in the wake of the divisive political scandals that led up to the eighteenth party congress, leaving the party weakened by power struggles and stripped of popular support. An important political event that draws the attention of experts on China, known as "China Hands," the National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, or simply the party congress, is in theory China's highest political body or institution. Since the death of Mao Zedong, the congress has been held predictably every five autumns, gathering party delegates from all over China for one week in the Great Hall of the People in the heart of Beijing. Overarching ideological guidelines and leadership roles for the coming term are established during the congress, most importantly those of the Politburo and the Politburo's Standing Committee.

Some also expected that Xi would be weak because the Politburo was dominated by people appointed by his predecessors (Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao) and Xi lacked a power base within the party.¹⁰ Sinologist Cheng Li from the Brookings Institution in Washington wrote, "At the start of their tenure, the upcoming generation of leaders, led by the dual-successor pair Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang, are likely even weaker than their predecessors due to their lack of previous achievements, their need to share power and the growing competitive pressure among their peers."¹¹

As for Xi's political orientation, several took him to be a "reformist" who would weaken the party state's control over the economy in favor of private businesses. Nicholas Kristof, a *New York Times* journalist, remarked that Xi's father had been among the more liberal advisors to Deng Xiaoping, the man who opened the Chinese economy, and therefore reform was in Xi's genes.¹² Kristof suggested that Xi would even permit a certain opening in politics.

It was also a common perception that because of Xi's personal experiences under Mao's regime of terror, he more than anyone understood the dangers of despotism.

Xi would prove that these predictions were well off the mark.

Understanding Chinese Leadership and Politics

Given the regime's closed character, understanding politics in China is a baffling activity.¹³ Access to reliable information about what goes on inside Zhongnanhai, Beijing's equivalent to the Kremlin, where Xi and the other members of the top political elite live, is highly limited. This fires up rumors and speculation among diplomats stationed in China, journalists in Hong Kong, and Chinese dissidents in exile. But almost all stories about what is going on are pure fantasy. As the Chinese philosopher Laozi observed as early as 600 BC, "Those who talk, do not know; those who know, do not talk."¹⁴ Furthermore, Western observers tend to read Chinese politics through their own normative spectacles, and many of the predictions that were put forward when Xi came to power would appear to be wishful thinking ten years later.

"Beijingology," the study of politics in China, has, if anything, become even more difficult under Xi, who by nature is cautious and hides his true intentions. Many who have previously worked with Xi will say that these are his dominant personality traits.¹⁵ Almost a decade into Xi Jinping's tenure, China expert Jeffrey Wasserstrom raised the question of why there is not a single good biography of China's leader.¹⁶ On the shelves of bookshops you can find biographies of other leaders, such as Russia's Vladimir Putin, the Philippines' Rodrigo Duterte, Hungary's Viktor Orbán, and North Korea's Kim Jong-un, but you will be hard-pressed to find one decent biography of Xi Jinping.¹⁷ This is strange, given that Xi has been China's strongest leader for several decades and is arguably one of the world's most powerful men. But few, if any, who know him will talk about him. Maybe this is out of loyalty as much as out of fear of reprisals, should they fall into disfavor with the leader. Xi keeps his cards close to his chest. If you stand outside his inner circle, it is virtually impos-

sible to gain access to him. He rarely gives interviews, never takes questions after his speeches, and tightly controls the narrative and presentation of his and China's history. Previous Chinese leaders were more open; Jiang Zemin, who led the PRC between 1989 and 2002, gave an interview to *60 Minutes*, a US news broadcast. There are few biographies of Hu Jintao, not because he was impossible to get ahold of, but because, according to Wasserstrom, he was too boring a character to be the subject of a book. Xi, however, is far from boring. He is just inaccessible.¹⁸

Despite the difficulty of studying politics in China under Xi Jinping, and the enigmatic nature of Xi himself, it is more important than ever to put the pieces of available information together to understand the man who has so much say for the development of China and, thereby, the world. There is a gap to bridge between the "art" and "science" of reading Chinese elite politics, or between traditional Beijingology and purely academically relevant research. On the far "art" end of the spectrum, one finds the rumor mill among Beijing diplomats and, until recently, the speculations in the Hong Kong press.¹⁹ Among methodological pitfalls are the risks of reading too much into minute changes in newspaper vocabularies or becoming carried away with reading tea leaves and listening to rumors about intraparty strife, which the larger picture of relative stability in the Chinese political elite passes over.²⁰ Along the outer reaches of the "science" end of the spectrum, quantitative elite studies are systematic and analytically stringent, but they often share the weaknesses common to quantitative studies: either being based on general theories of social science too disconnected from the specific political realities of China, or providing answers to questions too long-term or too theoretical in nature to be of immediate relevance to those seeking to divine the political decisionmaking in Zhongnanhai. While China Hands tend to focus too narrowly on China as an idiosyncratic case, quantitatively oriented social scientists tend to focus too broadly to fully account for the specificities of the Chinese political system. In short, there is a pressing need for a new Beijingology, combining the traditional art of China watching with the most innovative methods and tools derived from social science research into elite studies and textual analyses.²¹

About the Book

This book is not meant to be a biography of Xi but rather of the contemporary history of China. We make use of Xi to investigate today's China, looking for answers to several vital questions: Who is Xi Jinping? Why and how did he and not someone else rise to the top as the Chinese Communist Party's general secretary and the president of China? How did he become such a dominating leader? Why has a personality cult developed around him, and how is this perceived by the Chinese? What is his political project for China and his vision for China in the world? And, the inevitable comparison, is Xi a new Mao?

We begin to address these questions in Chapter 2, "Xi's Climb Through the Ranks," which examines how and why Xi rose to become the most powerful man in China. Xi started his political career at the bottom of the organizational hierarchy that is the Communist Party of China and showed his political and managerial skills while climbing the ranks. He was, however, far from alone in doing this. We argue that his personal traits and survival skills, flexibility, ambitiousness, and keen understanding of when to openly take sides on controversial issues were among the decisive factors in securing his success in reaching the top of the party.

Chapter 3, "Concentrating Power," explores how Xi secured for himself an all-powerful position not seen in China since Deng, or perhaps even Mao. We ask whether this power concentration under Xi has been a collective answer to governance challenges or a result of his personal hunger for power. This is an important question to raise, as the answer is key to understanding the dynamics at the top of the political system and whether they are marked by despotism, power struggles, and fear, or by more open debates about the challenges facing the Communist Party, consensus around the rules of political games, and cooperation among key political leaders and networks.

Chapter 4, "Extolling the Leader," discusses the cult of personality that has risen around Xi. The party elite, assessing that a strong leader is essential in handling the problems facing China and maintaining the legitimacy of the Communist Party, have arguably permitted and encouraged a personal focus and worship of Xi paralleled

only by Mao and the leaders of North Korea. Importantly, the chapter explores the limits to which a cult of personality can be pushed before the cult loses all credibility and looks for signs that it has gone too far and backfires on Xi and the party.

Chapter 5, “An Ideological Renaissance,” dives into Xi’s political agenda. All predictions of Xi as a reform-oriented market liberalist who would initiate an opening up in China, economically as well as politically, proved wrong. Rather, Xi has reversed the political trends of pragmatism and watering down ideology, which have characterized Chinese society and politics since Deng. Marxist ideology and indeed Mao himself are undergoing a renaissance in politics as well as in society in general.

Chapter 6, “Stepping onto the World Stage,” turns the focus outward to Xi’s impact on China’s relations with the world. China’s foreign policy from the 1980s to the 2000s was guided by Deng’s mantra of “laying low and hiding one’s capabilities,” prioritizing domestic development over international influence. Under Xi, Beijing has bid a final farewell to the cautiousness of the last thirty years. China has come out as a great power state and demands to be treated as such. More than anything, this is visible in China’s diplomatic corps, labeled the “wolf warriors,” unconventional, uncompromising, offensive, assertive, and undiplomatic as they are. However, the new style has engendered backlash, as other countries find common ground in their anxieties over China and take steps to handle, and even prevent, its further rise.

Finally, Chapter 7 concludes the book and takes as its point of departure the conspicuous similarities between Xi and Mao. Xi resembles the old chairman with his charisma, dominant role within the party, and hard line toward political opponents. The cult of personality around Xi is also a blast from the past, bringing up the question, “Is Xi a new Mao?”

* * *

Throughout the book, we make a point of introducing the reader to some key words, expressions, and proper nouns that occur in modern Chinese. We have tried to be consistent in our use of the Pinyin system.

For instance, this means we write “Mao Zedong” instead of “Mao Tse-tung,” “Beijing” instead of “Peking,” and “Guomintang” instead of “Kuomintang,” which were standard under the Wades-Giles system. We have left out indication of tones.

However, we made exceptions for some proper nouns. This is the case when there are already well-established spellings in English so that a Pinyin transcription would only confuse the reader. We do not, therefore, correct the spellings of Sun Tzu, Mencius, Chiang Kai-shek, Taoism, Tsinghua University, or Peking University. For the same reason, for some Chinese scholars who are well known outside China, we have used the Western ordering of their names rather than the correct Chinese order. We refer to Li Cheng as Cheng Li and Pei Minxin as Minxin Pei.

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8. Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (Mondial, 2015; first published 1852).

9. For the terms used in this chapter to describe the men who ruled the People’s Republic of China, see David Shambaugh, *China’s Leaders: From Mao to Now* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2021).

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13. Several authors have pointed out that understanding of Chinese politics has been flawed ever since the founding of the People’s Republic. See, for instance, Frederick C. Teiwes, “The Study of Elite Politics in PRC: Politics Inside the ‘Black Box,’” in David S. G. Goodman (ed.), *Handbook of Politics of China* (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2015), 21–41.

14. Laozi, 道德經 [Daodejing, or the book about the road and its virtue], verse 62, chapter 56.

15. See, for example, Joseph Torigian, “Historical Legacies and Leaders’ Worldviews: Communist Party History and Xi’s Learned (and Unlearned) Lessons,” *China Perspectives*, June 2018, 11, <https://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/7548>; Frederick Teiwes in Graeme Smith and Louisa Lim, “Xi Dada and Daddy: Power, the Party and the President,” *The Little Red Podcast*, November 2, 2020, <https://omny.fm/shows/the-little-red-podcast/xi-dada-and-daddy-power-the-party-and-the-president>.

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17. Two recently published exceptions are Stefan Aust and Adrian Geiges, *Xi Jinping: The Most Powerful Man in the World* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2022); Alfred Chan, *Xi Jinping: Political Career, Governance, and Leadership, 1953–2018* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

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