



XI JINPING THOUGHT

Xi's Struggle Against Political Decline

Charlotte Poirier

One of the latest extensions of Xi Jinping's influence on Chinese society is the incorporation of 'Xi Thought' into elementary and middle school curriculums. Like his predecessors, Xi is continuing the tradition of Chinese leaders defining their own ideology as guiding principles for the people and the Nation. He is already considered a standout leader in the history of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) like Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping before him. 'Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era' or 'Xi Thought' was added to the CCP's Constitution during its 19th Congress in 2018 and proclaims 14 guiding principles for the Chinese Nation, the Communist Party, and Xi himself as the leader. Xi sets out a plan to build a 'moderately prosperous society' by rebalancing the economy and tackling inequalities, and to carry out deep-going reforms of key institutions such as the corrupt judicial system. Xi Thought proposes a strategy to achieve the Chinese Dream of building a great socialist society and rejuvenating China and its role as a central global power. There is much speculation on Xi's intentions: Is the main objective to secure his own position of absolute power, to export the Chinese model internationally, or to restructure Chinese society? Whatever the driving force behind it, Xi Thought emanates from a fear of power decline and presents many contradictions that could weaken the CCP in the medium term.

Introduction

When he took power in 2012, Xi Jinping pledged to restore China to its rightful place at the center of global affairs.¹ His doctrine, "Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era" encapsulates his vision for a rejuvenated China and sets the tone for the next fifteen-year period.² Xi Thought has been introduced into elementary and middle schools' textbooks to promote patriotism and

loyalty to the Party and to Xi personally³ by featuring images of "Grandpa Xi", the achievements of China's civilization, and the CCP's role in addressing the COVID-19 pandemic and poverty alleviation. The objective is clear: Making "Xi Thought" a guiding principle in every aspect of Chinese life. His thinking adapts a pragmatic reading of Marxism to the Chinese context, unveiling a new era of socialist modernization and governance in China based on

strengthening the Party, reforming the Nation, and solidifying Xi's role as leader. The addition of Xi Thought to the Constitution highlights his personal significance as leader and raises domestic and international concerns about his centralization of power.

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Historical perspective: Xi Thought's background

Xi Jinping's worldview was shaped during the Cultural Revolution when he spent his formative years with first-generation families of Communist revolutionaries who suffered under Mao's iconoclastic rule.⁴ References to these events were sparse in the Party's official archives until recently when revised historic documents lumped together the cultural revolution period with the post-1949 era, defining it as a twenty-seven-year episode of daring socialist experimentation.⁵ This new historical narrative suggests a shift from Deng's modernization program, which was rooted in a very critical view of the Cultural Revolution. The "Guidelines for Action" of the CCP include Mao Thought, Deng Theory, Jiang Zemin's thinking of the "Three Represents" and Hu Jintao's scientific development concept, and finally Xi Thought. Xi is the only Chinese leader since Mao to be mentioned by name in the Party's Charter while still alive. By using the same elevated term for "thought" (思想 *sixiang*) as Mao, as opposed to

Deng who opted for the term "theory" (理论 *lilun*), Xi has placed himself at the same level of ideological authority as the paramount leader.⁶

The phrase "socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era" was first coined by Deng referring to market reforms and socialist policies for economic growth which drifted away from orthodox Maoist values.⁷ He advanced the idea of "early and common prosperity" which he defined as a few getting rich in the short term to achieve common prosperity for all in the long term. "It does not matter whether the cat is black or white, so long as it can catch mice." Deng's reforms opened up China, eliminated old dogmatism, and allowed for significant economic growth but also led to uneven development. Xi proposes an updated version of Deng's socialism with Chinese characteristics that promotes balanced economic growth⁸ and goes back to traditional Leninist methods where the Party enters into every aspect of society.

Some analysts have compared Xi Thought's comprehensive theoretical system to Mao Zedong Thought's, noting the fusion of Marxist precepts with a strong cult of personality. Pro-democracy activist Wang Tiancheng argues that Xi aims to equal Mao by overshadowing all the leaders in between.⁹ The late Roderick MacFarquhar speculates that Xi Jinping was specifically chosen by his peers, just like Mao was in 1935, to reinforce the Party and eliminate corruption, making him the most powerful leader since Deng.¹⁰ Xi's personality cult is manifested in every aspect of public life but also affects officials' behavior, creating a climate of insincerity and fear within the Party. For instance, Chinese officials and intellectuals must defer to and express reverence for

the leader's reflections and poetry attempts such as "green mountains and clear water are equal to mountains of gold and silver".¹¹ During CCP Central Committee meetings, officials who dare to criticize Xi have been severely 'dealt with'. Following the introduction of Xi Thought in school curriculums, parents have expressed concerns privately but speaking up is out of the question. Despite different historical contexts and objectives between Mao's and Xi's tactics, Xi is definitely attempting to revive a cult of personality that once existed under Mao.

But Xi is trying to achieve something neither Mao nor Deng accomplished. His vision of the "Chinese Dream" differs from Mao's utopian-egalitarian universalism and the emphasis on 'common prosperity' adjusts Deng's pro-market approach. Xi seeks political stability, as opposed to Mao's revolutionary impetus. But he also seeks Mao-style charismatic leadership in order to strengthen the Party. The sixth plenary session of the party's 19th Central Committee scheduled for November 2021 will deliberate on the third historical resolution on the major achievements and historical experience of the Party's 100 years of endeavors. Xi's approach to governance presents contradictions and the upcoming decades will show if his Thought has been successful at home and abroad.¹²

Three levels targeted: the Party, the Nation, and the Leader

Xi Thought sets out a long-term plan for China: the realization of socialist modernization from 2020 to 2035, and the development of a great modern socialist State from 2035 to 2050. His thinking is based on his "Four-Pronged Comprehensive Strategy":¹³ (i) building a moderately prosperous society, a goal set

out by Deng and replaced by "common prosperity" when in 2020 Xi proclaimed the elimination of absolute poverty in China,¹⁴ (ii) deepening reforms, (iii) governing the nation according to law, and (iv) tightening party discipline. Xi's ambition is to strengthen power at three levels: the Nation, the Party, and his position as leader.¹⁵

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Rejuvenating the Nation

In order to promote China's rise, Xi has implemented a number of reforms aimed at improving China's situation domestically and abroad and thus improving the CCP's legitimacy. China's economy is a main focus in Xi Thought and he pledged during the 19th CCP Congress report to improve the living standards of Chinese people through sustainable development. The goal is to correct the inequalities faced by Chinese society by providing for a transition towards a socialist market economy characterized by "innovation-driven development, rural vitalization, coordinated regional and sustainable development and the military-civilian integration strategy."¹⁶ Through the "Made in China 2025" plan, Xi is pushing for an increased indigenous innovative capacity capable of outcompeting other advanced economies, while reversing a slow growth rate. Moreover, he aims at reducing China's dependence

on foreign investment and export while increasing domestic consumption.

China is facing growing wealth disparities, analysts like the economist Thomas Piketty have identified the Chinese “new normal” as one of the most economically unequal and unjust (and thus potentially unsustainable) societies in the world¹⁷. Socialist law-based governance has become a tool for Xi to legitimize modernization and wealth-building through anti-corruption campaigns. Reform of the judicial system is presented as a way to strengthen the will of the people. However, the concept of “rule of law” clashes with the Party’s preferred “rule by law” doctrine. Rule of law places all people of all ranks equally under the law while rule by law places the governing authority above the law and gives it the right to shape the law as it sees fit¹⁸. Although judicial reforms in China would be an efficient way to tackle bureaucratic excesses such as corruption, inefficient policy implementation, and breach of rights at the lower levels, the Party as the final arbiter could restrain constitutional control in fear of diminishing the CCP’s ideological authority¹⁹. According to Xi, socialist rule of law relates to Han Fei’s (c. 280 – 233 BC) concept where the law is a disciplinary tool to ensure the loyalty of the subjects to the emperor.²⁰

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Finally, rejuvenating the Nation entails restoring

China’s position as a great power on the global scene, through implementing the “wolf warrior diplomacy” strategy, modernizing its military capabilities, and investing in international trade projects such as the Belt and Road initiative. Xi Thought is also seeking to reinforce China’s sovereignty by firmly re-asserting the ‘one country, two systems’ principle in Hong-Kong and Macau and the ‘One-China policy’ in Taiwan.

Strengthening the Party

Xi Thought raises the issue of Party discipline and the necessity to “strengthen Party leadership and Party building [and a] commitment to examining ourselves in the mirror, tidying our attire, taking a bath, and treating our ailments.”²¹ Since taking office in 2012, anti-corruption campaigns have been on Xi’s agenda, targeting “flies”, that is bureaucrats at lower ranks, but also “tigers”, senior officials.²² Xi is aware that the Party’s authority is declining. His Thought emphasizes the importance of a strong communist party in control in order to achieve the goal of a powerful unified China while eliminating the influence of opposing forces.²³ To support socialism with Chinese characteristics and deepen economic reforms, Xi emphasizes the “rule of law” under the CCP, meaning upholding justice, curbing local protectionism, and reducing endemic corruption in the court system. To enhance the role of the Party, he has tightened the CCP’s grip on all areas of public life: business, media, culture, internet, and education. Xi Thought adheres to Leninist principles, meaning an elitist vanguard Party adopting “democratic centralism” and promoting discipline, centralization, commitment to Marxism, and a monopoly on power.²⁴

Xi Jinping: The National Patriarch

In Xi's eyes, China's political situation when he acceded to power in 2012 was deteriorating and a strong leader was needed to maintain and reinforce the role of the CCP.²⁵ To do so, a ten-year presidential mandate was not enough, and so Xi proposed a controversial constitutional amendment in 2018 removing the term limit.²⁶ To become a strong leader like Mao or Deng before him, he developed a strong cult of personality and accumulated more titles than any recent CCP leader.²⁷ Xi Thought reveres Mao's teachings but also draws from traditional Confucian values. Xi is portrayed as a Confucian patriarch running China as a family with the Chinese people as his filially loyal children. The theoretical framework of Xi Thought combines the Confucian governance model of family and loyalty with the Leninist principle of centralized one-party rule. Thus, Xi Thought is principally a tool to ensure the authority of the core leader over the Party and Chinese society.

Xi Thought on Human rights

With his growing hold on the CCP and Chinese society, Xi has effectively restricted opposing voices, civil society developments, and human rights and freedoms. “[China has] earnestly applied the universality¹ of human rights in the Chinese context.” These are the words proclaimed by Xi

1 He consciously chose the Chinese word *pubian* 普遍 for “universality” instead of the banned term *pushi* 普世 which refers to supra-national, supra-religious universal values. Xi insists that human rights’ universality should be applied to the nations’ conditions, thus, according to him there is no universal path to human rights developments and China does not need lessons on Human rights from other countries that themselves do not respect these principles. In the 2013 Document 9 issued by the CCP, the term *pushi* is used to describe the western values undermining the CCP’s leadership as one of the seven perils of the Party.

during the conference marking the 50th anniversary of the restoration of the seat of the PRC in the UN.²⁸ The rhetorical inclusion of “the Chinese context” highlights Xi’s implicit critique of universalist values such as ‘freedom,’ ‘democracy,’ and ‘human rights’ as a political tool of a hegemonic “modern western bourgeoisie”. According to this logic, shaped by the Marxist dialectical theory of history, liberal values have become a tool to maintain the rule of capital used by the United States and other Western countries. Xi attributes the fall of the Soviet Union, the color revolutions in Eastern Europe, and the Arab Spring to a global agenda to propagate American dominance.²⁹ The now infamous Document No. 9, an internal memo circulated to CCP leaders in 2013, warns of seven dangerous Western values such as freedom of the press, judicial independence, and neoliberalism, and calls for political reforms to prevent the expansion of the liberal way of thinking.³⁰

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In order to safeguard Xi Thought as the prevailing ideology in China, Xi has adopted a hardline vision for the control of religion.³¹ He has called for the ‘Sinicization’ of religious practices to guide the people to love the Nation, the CCP, and socialism. He also requires party members to be atheists, which conveniently creates an opening for faith in Xi Thought. Unlike his predecessor Hu Jintao who targeted localized groups, Xi has embarked on a

larger effort to suppress faith systems challenging the CCP's ideological monopoly³². This offensive aims at Christian, Buddhist, Muslim, and other groups, as well as their places of worship, and has contributed to repressive policies in places like Xinjiang and Tibet, raising serious concerns over human rights violations internationally. Xi has also targeted civil society groups, mentioned in Document no. 9 among the seven perils challenging the ruling Party and promoting western-style theories of governance. In 2015, the government launched a roundup against Human Rights lawyers and civil society actors accused of subverting state power.³³ In short, Xi Thought sees no place for political experimentation or liberal values.³⁴

The now infamous Document No. 9, an internal memo circulated to CCP leaders in 2013, warns of seven dangerous Western values.”

Contradictions and Challenges ahead

The spread of Xi Thought and increasing restrictions in all aspects of Chinese public life have raised concerns about Xi's intentions both domestically and abroad; Is his main objective to secure his own position of absolute power, to export the Chinese model internationally, or to restructure Chinese society? In reality, Xi Thought overlaps all of these objectives. Xi seeks to bring back the Chinese Dream through economic reforms. He also seeks to return China to its central role in the world by replacing the Western centric system of governance with an alternative all the while exporting the Chinese

model to places like Sub-Saharan Africa.³⁵ His agenda embodies what powerful leaders like Mao or Deng sought to achieve: strengthening the Party's legitimacy and thus his own position. Nonetheless, all the emerging reforms emanate from Xi's realization that the CCP's influence is declining and his power as leader is threatened. Moreover, deepening market reforms and socio-economic transformations while strengthening the authoritarian leadership model presents a lot of challenges and is already leading to conflict with the private sector, Chinese society, and the outside world.

As Xi sees it, reinforcing the CCP's legitimacy entails eradicating corruption and returning to the party's ideological roots. However, controlling bureaucratic excesses in a rule by law system presents contradictions. Without the independence of the judiciary from the Communist Party, real political change is constrained. The author Li Chengpeng argues that the Chinese Dream set out by Xi does not address key issues. “We cannot mention universal values or an independent judiciary,” he said. “What we need is not a magical dream but good politicians.”³⁶

Xi is facing growing pressure and discontent. Disaffected CCP officials are subject to censorship designed to prevent them from expressing dissent and forming a broad group of political elites that could present a credible threat to Xi's leadership. The CCP is split into different rival cliques such as the Chinese Communist Youth League led by former President Hu Jintao; the Shanghai clique led by Jiang Zemin; and the red aristocracy composed of the princelings and second-generation reds.³⁷ Xi's anti-corruption campaign against the “tigers and flies” of the Chinese

system included many powerful and well-connected people who could rally against Xi.³⁸ In September 2021, more than 200 low-ranking demobilized PLA soldiers protested in Beijing to express dissatisfaction regarding military veterans' rights and insufficient retirement benefits, highlighting Xi's struggle to obtain complete loyalty within the military.³⁹ Moreover, Xi's personalization of power risks future peaceful succession. By emphasizing loyalty rather than competence, Xi is promoting a generation of weak unprepared leaders.⁴⁰

The hybrid economic model which Xi envisions as a way to both sustain growth and tighten the CCP's grip on society has frail edges. The old drivers of growth such as urbanization, heavy industry, and infrastructure are waning, even as Xi is battling the private sector, and the potential contraction of economic prosperity could threaten the party's legitimacy.⁴¹ If Xi fails to improve the economic situation of China, his CCP comrades could call for his resignation.⁴²

Political and economic reforms for modernization with Chinese characteristics as laid out in Xi Thought have been delayed by intensive repression and surveillance campaigns which "killed the party's organization".⁴³ China is experiencing similar contradictions that other autocracies have before, finding it difficult to simultaneously stimulate reforms and prevent liberalization. Dr. Larry Diamond from Stanford University believes that with higher levels of education and greater financial means, Chinese people will demand more autonomy and freedom.⁴⁴ Xi's crackdown on minorities such as the Uyghurs, and increasingly assertive stance on international issues have fostered a climate of distrust

towards China within the international community.

China's political power is under pressure. The outcome of the sixth plenary session held by the CCP from November 8th to 11th will be decisive for Xi Jinping to showcase his authority and demonstrate the viability of his vision for China's future.⁴⁵ Xi's actions to revive the Chinese Dream and legitimize China's position in the world threaten in the short and medium term to deepen conflicts and increase tension rather than promote cooperation and peaceful development. ■

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