INTRODUCTION

Xi Jinping’s Ideology and Statecraft

Willy Lam

History Department and Center for China Studies, Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

Many of the traits of Xi Jinping’s ideology—especially his concept and use of power—can be discerned from the huge volume of speeches, edicts, and instructions that the fifth-generation leader has produced in the past three years. Xi, sixty-two, has published three books since he came to power at the Eighteenth Party Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in November 2012. These include *Xi Jinping: The Governance of China*, which contains seventy-nine of his speeches and writings from late 2012 to mid-2014; *Selected Compilations of Xi Jinping’s Discourse on Realizing the Chinese Dream of the Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation*; as well as the most recent *Be a Jiao Yulu-style County Party Secretary*. These are in addition to several books about his experience in Fujian and Zhejiang that came out before Xi’s ascendance to the top.

By contrast, Deng Xiaoping, the chief architect of reform, did not put out his first work—*The Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping (1975–1982)*—until 1983. The three-volume *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping* was released in 1994. In fact, Deng and his colleagues laid down an unwritten convention that subsequent top leaders should not publish their works until either the tail end of their tenure or after their retirement. Thus, *The Selected Works of Jiang Zemin* came out in 2006, four years after Jiang stepped down from the Politburo in 2002, while Hu Jintao’s *On the Construction of a Socialist Harmonious Society* appeared in bookstores in 2013, one year after the fourth-generation leader’s retirement.

Xi is also extraordinary in coining his signature slogan—and enshrining it in major official speeches and documents—very early on in his tenure as general secretary and state president. This again becomes clear if we compare the noted princeling (a reference to officials who are offspring of top leaders) to his predecessors. Ex-president Jiang’s foremost contribution to the Chinese Communist ideology—the “Theory of the Three Represents” (also known as the important thought of the “Three Represents”)—did not enjoy the status of “guiding principle of the party and state” until it was enshrined in the Chinese Communist Party Constitution in 2002. The same was true of Hu’s “Scientific Outlook on Development,” which made it into the CCP charter in 2012.

However, Xi’s *sige chuanmian* axiom—the “Four Comprehensives,” or the “Four-pronged Comprehensive Strategy”—attained the status of party and state dogma not long after it first appeared in the official media in October 2014. The Four Comprehensives means “Comprehensively build a moderately prosperous society; comprehensively deepen reform; comprehensively govern the country according to law; and comprehensively tighten party discipline.” The elevated status of the “Four Comprehensives” was evidenced by Xi’s address during the Beijing military parade in 2015 to mark the Seventieth Anniversary of Japan’s defeat in World War II. Xi pointed out that all Chinese “should take
Marxism-Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought, Deng Xiaoping Theory, the important thought of the ‘Three Represents,’ and the Scientific Outlook on Development as our guide to action.” He added: “we should follow the path of socialism with Chinese characteristics, pursue the four-pronged comprehensive strategy, promote patriotism and the great spirit of resisting aggression and forge ahead as one to reach our goals.”

The painstaking way in which the president and commander in chief has built up his image and status points to perhaps the most notable characteristic of Xi’s leadership: he regards himself as the equal of Deng Xiaoping and Mao Zedong and he will not rest until he has arrogated to himself powers over areas ranging from party affairs and foreign policy to finance and cyberspace. While Xi seemed to have assumed an exceedingly low profile when he served in Fujian (1985 to 2002) and Zhejiang (2002 to 2007), his overarching ambitions were made clear in his interview with the official journal China Profiles in 2000. The then Fujian governor noted that in the early 1980s, he and Liu Yuan (son of the late president Liu Shaoqi) were the only two princelings who decided to leave their comfortable jobs in Beijing to begin a career in the grassroots. Xi was as savvy as he was prescient. Ample experience in the grassroots has turned out to be a critical qualification for top jobs in the party.

Much has been written about how Xi has towered over his colleagues at the CCP Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC). For example, while former premiers such as Zhu Rongji and Wen Jiabao headed the Central Leading Group on Finance and Economics (CLGFE) and were the final arbiters of economic policies, Premier Li Keqiang plays second fiddle to Xi even in the portfolio that has traditionally been dominated by the head of the State Council. After being inducted to the PBSC at the Seventeenth Party Congress in 2007, Xi seems to have abandoned the virtuous quality of tuanjie (seeking “unity” or consensus within a work team) in his relations with fellow cadres. This is despite the fact that Xi often recalls how “my father used to talk to me about the rationale for tuanjie.” Xi added that “my siblings and I were asked to uphold tuanjie and to be good at practicing tuanjiexie (“the art of consensus building””) as a key factor in his ability to maintain camaraderie with his colleagues when he served in Fujian.

Xi’s bid to concentrate all powers at the apex of the party also goes against his speeches about promoting dangnei minzhu or “democracy within the party.” First raised by ex-president Hu Jintao in 2007, dangnei minzhu means allowing mid- to senior-ranked cadres a bigger say in decision making and in the selection of top cadres such as members of the Central Committee. In Xi’s 2008 speech on the subject, the then vice-president noted that party leaders should “truly respect the primary and self-sufficient (zhuti) status of party members, perfect the party congress system, and reform the election system within the party.” As we shall see, however, Xi has revived Mao-style ideological campaigns to ensure party cadres’ total obeisance to instructions from on high.

Despite the fact that a cult of personality around Xi had by 2015 gone into high gear, Xi has at least rhetorically subsumed his power grab under the overarching theme of boosting the CCP’s authority. At the Third Central Committee Plenum of late 2013, the Politburo published The Decision on Major Issues Concerning Comprehensively Deepening Reforms, which was billed as the Xi administration’s blueprint for economic and social liberalization in the coming decade. While the document emphasized the growing role of the market, it noted that “the comprehensive deepening of reforms necessarily requires strengthening and improving party leadership.” “We must fully develop the core functions of the party taking charge of the whole situation and coordinating various [sectors],” it added.
And here we come upon perhaps the most quintessential aspect of Xi’s statecraft: the leadership must pull out all the stops to perpetuate the CCP’s status as “perennial ruling party.” When Hu Jintao was state vice-president and president of the Central Party School (CPS) (1998 to 2002), the fourth-generation leader asked scholars and specialists at the CPS and other think tanks to examine a plethora of evergreen parties in the world—and to see what the CCP could learn from them. From day one, however, Xi and his advisers have been full of confidence in the superiority of the CCP—and that it will sail from strength to strength. This is despite the recognition, as Xi put it in a 2008 speech, that “the party’s ruling status is not inherent to the party, nor does it hold good once and for all. Possessing something in the past does not mean possessing it today, and possessing something today does not mean possessing it forever.”

Xi has masterminded a series of campaigns to instill in party members “self-confidence in the theory, path and institutions” of Chinese-style socialism as interpreted by the CCP. On numerous occasions, Xi has expressed confidence that party dogma—socialism with Chinese characteristics and related precepts—is the only set of beliefs and policies suitable for China. In a 2013 article titled “The Road Is the Life of the Party,” Xi argued that the CCP, which he had earlier called “a Marxist learning-oriented political party,” was fully capable of boldly making explorations “so that it will ceaselessly make new discoveries, be creative, and be able to make advances.” The party, Xi summed up, would ceaselessly push forward innovations in theory, practice, and systems. In an earlier speech, he also referred to the party’s “ability to push forward innovation” in the following areas: organizational framework, the design of leading teams, work mechanisms, and education and management of party members.

In practical terms, Xi believes that since reform has entered the so-called deepwater zone, only the party leadership can provide the kind of dingcengshezhi or “top-level design” necessary for pushing reform to new heights. For the president and party chief, twenty-first-century reform is “a great enterprise never before attempted by our predecessors, a systemic engineering that is difficult and cumbersome.” Xi noted that “we must strengthen the concentrated and united leadership of the party zhongyang [central authorities]” so as to better design and implement reform. There is, however, a crucial political imperative underpinning Xi’s preference for “top-level design.” The party chief has warned that reformers “must not commit subversive errors,” a reference to blunders that could lead to the downfall of the party. And these “subversive errors” could presumably only be avoided if policies were directly approved by top party organs such as the PBSC.

Xi’s obsession with prolonging the party’s mandate of heaven has raised questions about whether the strongman is more interested in preserving the prerogatives of the CCP—and its rulers—than in reform, which could inevitably curtail the party’s near monopoly on political if not economic resources. Xi’s determination to carry the mantle of revolutionary elders was demonstrated in the article “Carry Forward the Red Boat Spirit and Advance in the Forefront of Our Times.” The piece was inspired by Xi’s visit to the Red Boat, where the CCP held its first Party Congress in August 1921. Xi indicated that the party’s success was underpinned by members’ firm ideals and beliefs and an unshakable revolutionary spirit. During an inspection trip to the revolutionary base of Xibaipo, Hebei Province, Xi again stressed the imperative of preserving the political legacy of leaders from Mao to Deng. He vowed to ensure that “our party will never change its nature, [and] our red mountains and rivers must not be allowed to change color.”
Despite his apparent “self-confidence” in party dogma and institutions, Xi has highlighted the ideological imperative by resuscitating Maoist political campaigns. After the Cultural Revolution, the Deng Xiaoping leadership decided to do away with the Great Helmsman’s “politics in command” by declaring that “economic construction is the core of party work.” Deng also abolished *zhengzhi yundong* (political movements) of the 1960s and 1970s. In an August 2013 speech on the importance of promoting politically correct *yishixingtai* (ideology and thought), however, Xi noted that “[while] economic construction is the party’s central work, ideological work is extremely important work for the party.” Xi also revived the orthodox view that party members should subsume their human nature under *dangxing*—“party nature,” or the ideology and requirements of the CCP.

Not long after taking power, Xi kicked off a “mass-line education and practice campaign” in an attempt to fight “formalism, bureaucracy, hedonism, and extravagance.” In earthy language worthy of Mao, Xi urged party members to practice “looking in the mirror, grooming oneself, taking a bath, and curing sicknesses.” Part of this “mass-line campaign” consists of sessions of criticism and self-criticism—a Maoist practice that first gained notoriety during the Cultural Revolution—to be held initially within party committees that run different provinces and localities. “Criticism and self-criticism is an effective weapon to resolve contradictions within the party,” Xi said while personally supervising one such conclave among the leaders of Hebei Province in late 2013. Xi indicated that this Mao-era exercise was conducive to boosting *dangxing* among cadres. Xi added that party cadres must enhance “the political nature, principled nature and combative nature” of intra-party life.

It is therefore not surprising that Xi has turned out to be much more of a disciple of Mao than of Deng. As discussed earlier, Xi has abandoned or adulterated a host of Deng’s edicts and teachings. These include the idea of a “collective leadership”; the ban on personality cults; a focus on economic construction while downplaying ideology; and the abolition of Cultural Revolution-style political movements. This is despite the fact that the fifth-generation leader has often made himself out as a worthy successor of Deng. On his first provincial tour after becoming general secretary, he visited Shenzhen and laid flowers before a giant statue of the late patriarch. He also paid homage to Deng’s achievements at an August 2014 ceremony marking the second-generation leader’s 110th birthday. Xi particularly eulogized Deng’s zeal for ringing in the new. Deng Xiaoping put his emphasis on the fact that officials must be bolder in reform and the open door policy, Xi said, adding that “we must be bold in experiments.”

Yet Xi has also defended with gusto the track record of the Maoist period of Communist-Chinese history. According to Xi’s edict about *liangge buneng fouding* (the “theory of the two ‘cannot negates’”), the party should not differentiate [post-1949 CCP] history into the prereform period and the postreform period. “Socialism with Chinese characteristics was initiated in the new historical period of reform and opening up, but it was also initiated on the foundation of the basic socialist system already set up [in 1949]... and on which more than twenty years of construction had taken place,” he declared in a 2013 speech. Xi stressed that these two periods had “dialectical unity”: they should not be arbitrarily cut off from each other—and one period should not be used to negate the other.

What is of utmost importance to the Xi leadership and the country, of course, is not whether the president adopts a Maoist or Dengist persona but whether the princeling
can acquit himself of the task of pushing reform forward. Consider again his “Four Comprehensives” credo. Apart from the goal of creating a “moderately prosperous society,” the slogan urges the party to deepen reform, to promote rule of law, and to govern the party strictly. The strongman has earned plaudits for “strictly governing the party” mainly through an anticorruption campaign that is more thorough than those waged by his predecessors. In a speech barely two months after the Eighteenth Party Congress, Xi said “we must persevere in tackling both ‘tigers’ and ‘flies’ in the battle against corruption.” He also indicated that antigraft operations must be frequently implemented and they must be persistent and long-lasting. There are, however, clear limits to the tiger-ensnaring exercise. So far, not a single princeling has been investigated for allegedly corrupt business practices. This is despite extensive reports about the business exploits of the millionaire children of top leaders such as Jiang Zemin, Zeng Qinghong, Hu Jintao, and Wen Jiabao.

Xi’s rhetorical commitments to “rule of law with Chinese characteristics” notwithstanding, it is clear that the party continues to ride roughshod over legislative and judicial organs. For example, Xi indicated more than once that “party organizations of all levels should insist on acting within the parameters of the constitution and the laws.” Cadres, he added, should maintain “sentiments of respect and awe” in the face of the constitution and the law. At the same time, the CCP general secretary has upheld the party’s leadership over zhengfa (political-legal) organs such as the police, the courts, and prosecutors’ offices. Xi noted at a meeting of zhengfa cadres in early 2014 that cadres must “unswervingly uphold the party’s leadership over zhengfa work … [and] strengthen and improve the party’s leadership over zhengfa work.” The large-scale detention and incarceration of human rights lawyers in mid-2015 has testified to the Xi administration’s problematic attitudes toward rule of law and due process.

And what about political and economic reforms? Given Xi’s apparent obsession with concentrating powers at the apex of the party—and in his own hands—it is not surprising that political liberalization has been put on the back burner. Yet the Xi leadership’s commitment to economic reform has also been called into question in view of the State Council’s massive restitution of state fiats to defuse the stock market crisis of July and August 2015. In the three years that Xi has been in power, it is difficult to find evidence that he is committed to “comprehensively deepening reforms,” which was a pledge made at the Third Central Committee Plenum of late 2013. Relatively few of the new policies recommended by The Decision on Major Issues Concerning Comprehensively Deepening Reforms have been implemented. For example, the establishment of free trade zones along the coast—one of the boldest initiatives unveiled at the plenum—has proved to be a disappointment to Western businesses.

For a regime that lacks ballot-box legitimacy, there is one other pillar of support apart from economic and political reforms that could prolong its proverbial mandate of heaven. This consists of appeals to sentiments of nationalistic pride among the people, especially young men and women who have been raised in an education system that stresses patriotism and fealty to the party’s glorious traditions. It is not a coincidence that Xi’s other signature slogan—the “Chinese dream”—is essentially a paean to the CCP’s illustrious contributions to “the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.” To realize the Chinese dream, Xi indicated, all citizens must “walk down the Chinese road, develop the Chinese spirit, and jointly harness China’s strengths.” He also cited the so-called threefold self-confidence—self-confidence in the path, theory, and institutions of socialism with Chinese characteristics—as a prerequisite
for attaining the Chinese dream. The September 3, 2015, military parade demonstrated to both the domestic and foreign audiences that Xi’s position as a latter-day helmsman seems unassailable. At a time when gross domestic product growth is sliding even as disenchantment over the country’s glaring inequalities is becoming entrenched, however, Xi has yet to show that he is capable of initiating new policies that could reignite far-reaching reforms in economic and sociopolitical arenas.

Notes

1. See The Governance of China (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2014); Compilations of Xi Jinping’s Discourse on Realizing the Chinese Dream of the Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation (Beijing: Central Archives Press, 2003); and Be a Jiao Yulu-style County Party Secretary (Beijing: Central Archives Press, 2015).

2. Xi published at least six books before becoming party chief. They include Work on Substantive Issues; Be at the Frontline (Beijing: Central Party School Press, 2006) and New Views from Zhijiang (Hangzhou: Zhejiang People’s Press, 2007). Both books are about Xi’s experience as party secretary of Zhejiang from 2002 to 2007. Shaking Off Poverty (Fuzhou: Fujian People’s Press, 1992) collects Xi’s articles and speeches on developing the economy of Fujian Province.


34. So far, not a single princeling has been investigated or punished for illegal business activities. In early 2015, there was intense speculation that the millionaire daughter of former premier Li Peng, Li Xiaolin, was put under investigation. She appears to have emerged unscathed. For a discussion of Li Xiaolin’s business activities and her personal assets, see, for example, Betsy Tse, “How Times Have Changed for China’s ‘Power Queen,’” Ejinsight.com (Hong Kong), June 12, 2015, http://www.ejinsight.com/20150612-how-times-have-changed-for-chinas-power-queen/. See also Sneha Shankar, “Li Xiaolin, Former Chinese Premier Li Peng’s Daughter, Had Over $2M In HSBC Swiss Account,” International Business Times, February 10, 2015, http://www.ibtimes.com/li-xiaolin-former-chinese-premier-li-pengs-daughter-hid-over-2m-hsbc-swiss-account-1811000/.


36. Ibid.


38. For a discussion of the retreat of economic liberalization in the course of the stock market crisis, see, for example, Jamil Anderlini, “China: Credibility on the Line,” Financial Times, August 29,

