

A Challenge to the Dominant Portrait of Xi Jinping

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Last October, at the 19th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, Xi Jinping—General Secretary of the Communist Party of China, President of the nation, and Commander-in-Chief of the military—belled out a clear call to heed the momentous mission he has charted out for the Party (and, implicitly, for himself):

The Chinese nation (...) has stood up, grown rich, and become strong—and it now embraces the brilliant prospects of rejuvenation (...). It will be an era that sees China moving closer to centre stage and making greater contributions to mankind (...).

Thus, he continued:

(...) let us get behind the strong leadership of the Party and engage in a tenacious struggle.

He left no doubt that that strong leadership was to be directly under his own personal command.⁽¹⁾

It is too early at this point for Xi and his governance to have received in-depth scholarly attention, certainly too soon for research on what should be his especially consequential second term (and perhaps beyond), just now beginning as of this writing.⁽²⁾ But outstanding features of his rule during his first term have been apparent.

Xi has garnered such an outpouring of journalistic attention—aptly dubbed of late “Chairman of Everything”⁽³⁾—that he would seem to need no further scrutiny. Indeed, the man now holds a startling total of 12 top positions in leadership bodies, five of which were invented since his taking power in late 2012 (or, perhaps that were invented for him).⁽⁴⁾ He has placed himself (or has been placed?) in charge of the economy, in a move that eroded the authority of the Premier, the official who in the past managed this sphere of work; he has also reorganised both the military and—at the March 2018 session of the National People’s Congress—the cabinet. In the wake of that People’s Congress meeting, a number of aspects of Xi’s rule have become ubiquitous representations seen repeatedly by anyone who reads about China. These features are: an overweening reach for power and control; a now unquestioned capacity to legitimate his programs and policies by reference to an inchoate “China Dream”; and a near obsessive drive—distinguished by a high degree of repressiveness not seen in some 40 years in China—to keeping society quiescent.

Academic commentators, as well as those in the press, point to Xi’s achievements in undoing a slew of customary practices—norms, perhaps even institutions—laid into place some 35 years earlier by prominent statesman Deng Xiaoping in the interest of halting Mao-style rule: these include collective decision-making and rule at the top; division of realms of authority

within the leadership; the separation of party from state; standardised approaches to fostering the next generation of the political elite; limited terms of office and an end to lifetime tenure among senior officials.⁽⁵⁾ It would appear that he has had his way in foreign diplomatic, military, and external economic affairs, marked by forays into the militarisation of the South China Sea; the creation of the Belt and Road Initiative already spanning Asia and Central Asia and reaching into the Middle East and Europe; and his eye-grabbing conversations with North Korea’s leader, Kim Jong-un.

He has managed to get his name and his “thought,” “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era,” inserted into the Party Constitution last October during his lifetime, an honour previously bestowed only on Mao Zedong. A few months later, in March this year, the state Constitution as well had his name and thought inscribed as one of the first amendments to this document in 14 years, even as a new elimination of the norm of term limits for the Presidency threatened to saddle the nation with a chief in charge until the end of his days. Thus, Xi has now won the moniker in the Western press of “Emperor for Life.”⁽⁶⁾ Some writers have viewed parts of his behaviour as of a piece with Mao, in Xi’s cult of personality, his autocracy, and his willingness to rewrite established patterns and precepts.⁽⁷⁾ Overall, he has centralised and consolidated the power of the Communist Party even as he has seemingly tied up his own leadership for the very long term. But how novel are his modes of action, after all? This

1. For instance, see Jeremy Page and Chun Han Wong, “Xi Jinping Is Alone at the Top and Collective Leadership ‘Is Dead,’” *The Wall Street Journal*, 25 October 2017, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-xi-elevated-to-mao-status-1508825969> (accessed on 23 May 2018); “China’s national legislature adopts constitutional amendment,” *Xinhua*, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-03/11/c_137031606.htm (accessed on 23 May 2018).
2. Carl Minzner (2018) is the latest and most in-depth treatment of Xi and his policies. But this book was published early in the year, before the National People’s Congress meeting that showcased amendments to the State Constitution, including one that eliminated term limits on the offices of State President and Vice President.
3. Javier Hernandez, “China’s ‘Chairman of Everything’: Behind Xi Jinping’s Many Titles,” *The New York Times*, 25 October 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/25/world/asia/china-xi-jinping-titles-chairman.html> (accessed on 23 May 2018); Chris Buckley, “Xi Jinping Thought Explained: A New Ideology for a New Era,” *The New York Times*, 26 February 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/26/world/asia/xi-jinping-thought-explained-a-new-ideology-for-a-new-era.html> (accessed on 23 May 2018).
4. Dimitar Gueorguev’s paper in this issue makes this point.
5. Andrew Nathan, “Comments,” www.chinafile.com/conversation/China-2016 (accessed on 23 May 2018).
6. Gala Rizzi, “Xi Jinping: China’s Emperor for Life?” *Global Risk Insights*, 30 March 2018, <https://globalriskinsights.com/2018/03/xi-jinping-the-rise-of-chinas-emperor/> (accessed on 23 May 2018); see also Roderick MacFarquhar, “The Red Emperor,” *The New York Review of Books*, 18 January 2018, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2018/01/18/xi-jinping-red-emperor/> (accessed on 23 May 2018).
7. For instance, see Jeffrey Wasserstrom, “From the Little Red Book to the Big White one,” *TLS Online*, <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/public/little-red-book-big-white-one/> (accessed on 23 May 2018). In this commentary, Wasserstrom finds some similarities between Mao Zedong’s famous “Little Red Book” and a newly printed compilation, *The Governance of China* penned by Xi, though also a number of differences. The first volume of the set has been out for four years (Xi 2014).

special issue poses that query and arrives at some different interpretations from those we see everywhere in print.

For there has been little scholarship that has looked at the nuts and bolts of how these characterisations actually play out in daily affairs. Nor have either scholars or columnists scrutinised how or why other top Chinese leaders might have selected this person to govern the country; they have not probed the extent to which Xi's prominence really dominates daily matters in new ways or the degree to which his hold on power truly undermines Party conventions. In other words, there has been little that has questioned the platitudes or dug below what is apparent.⁽⁸⁾

The papers in this collection challenge this boilerplate delineation in several ways. In the first place, the pieces breathe life into what have become truisms for students and observers of today's China. They do so as they show how the several urges and objectives we encounter in writing about Xi have—or have not—become instantiated in some of the performances of officialdom. They look not at generalities but at specific areas of politics, and they document a few of the implications and the blowback (in religion) they have engendered. But secondly, and more critically, they interrogate the measure of Xi's capacity to innovate, as opposed to his ability to intensify. Readers will find that these essays provoke some reconsideration of the role this new "helmsman" (in the mode of Mao), as Xi has been termed, has in fact been able to chisel out in his five-plus years in power so far.⁽⁹⁾

The authors of the papers, all political scientists, are newly-minted scholars, recent recipients of the Ph.D. But while they are up-to-date in their analyses and conversant with methodologies and approaches of the present, each of them displays a firm grasp of the history of the field of Chinese politics and of politics in China as they have transpired over the decades. In the first paper here, Joseph Torigian has combed through much memoir literature penned by members of Xi's cohort and autobiographical accounts by Xi himself to fashion a portrait that showcases a set of his essential traits. The other three contributors investigate the manner in which Xi's administration is handling Party institutions, major state firms, and religious observance, respectively. Each of them alludes to perceived weaknesses and shortcomings in the rule of the previous Party leader and Premier, Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao, respectively, whose governance is now seen as having corroded the Party's authority through slackness, corruption, and internal disarray.

In the first of these other three studies, Dimitar Gueorguiev queries the claims that Xi has elevated himself at the expense of the Party, as he provides a compelling evaluation of Xi's moves and demonstrates that they amount to less of a shake-up than is commonly assumed. Next, Wendy Leutert shows how the new regime has borrowed old tools of the trade in managing its premier state-owned enterprises, if doing so with a stronger, more insistent hand. And third and last of this set, Kuei-min Chang surveys the content and effects of new regulations on religion. Taken together, these papers show Xi Jinping as a complex character who has been better at shaking up customs than he has been at creating novel or innovative modes of rule. In short, they paint this chief as tweaking but not undoing norms, building upon and intensifying the dominance of, but not destroying, institutions long in place. There are even hints that Xi may be cautious and perhaps, in some sense, conservative instead of a pathbreaker.⁽¹⁰⁾ One could note here that he is principally aiming to buttress the primacy of the Communist Party, surely nothing more than the number one aim of all the top leaders.

Torigian's⁽¹¹⁾ deeply researched inspection of Xi's formative childhood and teenage years focuses on his relations with, treatment by, and stigma lent him by Mao's ouster of his father, the latter-day reformer Xi Zhongxun, who

was purged from the Party in 1962, when Xi was just nine years old. Torigian also chronicles Xi's experiences in middle school, where he was bullied; his fond connections with peasants in the countryside when he served as a sent-down youth in the Cultural Revolution; and his difficulties with the Red Guards—who ostracised him for his father having been ousted by Mao—during that period. Torigian's objective in his historical quest is to interrogate and speculate about how key episodes and ordeals tested and shaped the future politician. His conclusion is that the various encounters he describes steered the young leader-to-be, moulding him into a person with conviction and a sense of mission and idealism, yet one still pragmatic about how to reach his goals and in some ways even cautious, some of which features of his personality have indeed come to the surface in his present position.

Moving along to the three papers that research and analyse how Xi's governance is influencing critical aspects of rule, they all share a view that Xi is set to rectify what now is roundly regarded as a time of stalemate, Party fragmentation, and lack of discipline, both within the Party and in society-at-large. Gueorguiev addresses Xi's response to these weaknesses, but he counters accounts that assert that Xi has shattered Party norms. In doing so, he draws upon theorising on authoritarian political regimes.⁽¹²⁾ Gueorguiev employs this literature to help him fathom the motives behind Xi's actions and to figure out what they may mean for the balance between this man and the Party. In the main, he directs his reasoning toward grappling with the issue of whether or not what many have presumed was an ongoing institutionalisation of politics at the summit in China has been interrupted or thrown aside. He decides that Xi has taken advantage of the rules in place to further his own power and install his own protégés more than he has disrupted them. As an aside, one might note here that Xi did resort to the use of both the Party and state constitutions to build his own prestige and to do away with the President's term limits, rather than just announcing these steps by means of personal fiat.

Gueorguiev contends that instead of ignoring the Party's age limits (which, incidentally, were put into place informally and extra-constitutionally, as new "institutions" by prior Party chiefs, who invented off-the-books regulations precisely to eliminate their rivals), Xi has used them to manipulate successions to come.⁽¹³⁾ For instance, he apparently acquiesced to the retirement of his ally, Wang Qishan (who at the age of 69 could no longer remain on the Party's Politburo Standing Committee according to the age norm), to appoint him Vice President, an ill-defined post whose duties could be fulfilled as Xi (or Wang) might wish. Observers have also commented for

8. Minzner's book (2018), cited above, does look on the ground at specific features and details of the Xi Jinping rule. But the story it tells is mainly about repression and not the story told in this issue.
9. Chris Buckley, "China's New 'Helmsman' Offers a Strident Nationalist Message," *The New York Times*, 20 March 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/20/world/asia/china-xi-jinping-helmsman-congress.html> (accessed on 23 May 2018).
10. Manfred Elfstrom, "Xi Jinping's Cautious Social Policy," unpublished manuscript, May 2018.
11. Two books on Xi by Lam (2015) and Brown (2016) do cover events in Xi's youth. But their authors did not—as Torigian does—ferret out his character traits from these events. See also Steven Lee Myers, "Behind Public Persona, the Real Xi Jinping Is a Guarded Secret," *The New York Times*, 6 March 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/05/world/asia/xi-jinping-china-leader.html> (accessed on 23 May 2018), who notes, "What is striking is how little is known about Mr. Xi's biography as a leader."
12. He especially refers to and concurs with the work of Dan Slater (2003) and Milan W. Svobik (2012), two prominent scholars who work on this type of political system.
13. Another insightful treatment of Xi's politics can be found in Jude Blanchette, "Leadership Succession in the PRC: What's Past is Prologue," <http://www.judeblanchette.com/blog/2017/2/14/leadership-succession-in-the-prc-whats-past-is-prologue> (accessed on 23 May 2018).

several years now that Xi arranged the last (2012) leadership line-up such that—if now standard practices on age and term limits are to be respected—there was no one positioned to serve as his successor.

Gueorguiev has a fresh reply to the charge that Xi has dispensed with precedent to build his own power. This is that Xi's appointments, retirements, and corruption-related purges have enabled him to clear openings for his own followers and loyalists now and in the years to come. Moreover, Gueorguiev argues that as of fall 2017 Xi had already manoeuvred years in advance to ensure that his own faction would dominate both the Politburo and the Standing Committee at the 19th Party Congress. He also surmises that Xi's centralisation and consolidation of power may well have been undertaken in consultation with (or even at the initiative of) his peers, who could consensually have agreed that internecine competition among leadership groups was interfering with steady rule, and that an especially strong arm would be needed to handle such ongoing obstacles to governance as pervasive bribery and malfeasance, pollution, and government debt. This account of Xi's bending of the norms begs a rethinking of the measure of what have been seen as his reversals.

Wendy Leutert's paper on core central-level state-sector firms offers a telling, fine-grained scrutiny of the mechanisms that Xi's regime has employed to reclaim and enhance the Party's hold over the economy. She reached her findings through the use of policy documents and an original dataset that details the careers and treatment of central state-owned enterprise leaders, and she employs both recent scholarship on the state's management of the state sector and older research on bureaucratic politics to situate her study.⁽¹⁴⁾ Her bottom line is that, rather than inventing new modes of bringing major firms and their management to heel, the present power system has simply strengthened techniques long in use: leading small groups; cadre control (in particular, joint appointments and frequent rotation of managers); stronger Party committees within enterprises; and campaign-style control (especially Xi's battle against corruption). Leutert directs her findings to the now vast literature that asks how the communist regime in China has persisted through trials, i.e., the work on "authoritarian resilience." Her answer is to show how what she labels "institutional flexibility" has enabled current leaders to diminish the clout of bureaucratic actors that prevailed under the previous regime even while bolstering arrangements borrowed from the past.

The last piece in the set, by Kuei-min Chang, also notes what Xi (and other leaders) have tagged as inadequacies in the domestic state of affairs under Hu and Wen, in her case with regard to potential foreign influences, Western ideas, and religious subversion. Her work draws on studies of China's "united

front" program (Groot 2016; Van Slyke 1967), of which religion is a part, on other work on current religious policy in China (Palmer 2009), and on a range of Chinese studies of religion under Xi.

Like Gueorguiev and Leutert, she points to what has been identified among top leaders as slack guidance in this realm under Hu Jintao, resulting in what they worry spells danger for the country's national security, and perhaps for regime survival. Chang mentions Xi's line in his speech at the October 2017 Party Congress about "fine traditional Chinese culture," reliance on which he deemed necessary to China's rise. But his tack in rectifying the neglect of this culture, Chang shows, has been just to issue new "Regulations on Religious Affairs" that took effect early in 2018 and which, she explains, merely "preserved [if] intensified extant bureaucratic oversight." Under Xi, the Party's general reaction to the spiritual challenge has been increased intervention into religious observance and its effort, on Xi's command, to "sinicise" religion (meaning to promote indigenous or indigenised religions) in the hope of removing the commercialisation, extremism, and Western values that Xi thought to be corroding Chinese ideological and social control. Contrary to his intentions, in the absence of a fundamental overhaul, Xi has merely forced undesirable practices underground or incited clashes between religious adherents and the police, some of them violent.

These four studies, then, amount to a brand new perspective, a package of revisionist insights, as to how Xi and his government are operating in China today. What they accomplish is to speak back to the stereotyped account that presents his reign as something novel in the nation, or at least as a performance the country has not confronted since the days of Mao Zedong. Instead, these authors say, respectively, that Xi's personality and the modes of governance under his rule are more complex than as usually sketched and that his styles of rule could be less an attack on institutional patterns and procedures than people have heretofore believed.

Rather, what is happening is that Xi is engaged in an exploitation of these tried approaches for his own purposes (or, perhaps, for the purposes of the current Party elite as a whole). Moreover, his treatment of the nub of the economy and of the rituals of belief amount to nothing more than a harder, beefed-up turn to tools of the recent past. We hope that this introduction to examples of this viewpoint will inspire further close looks at particular policies and programs to test it out.

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14. For instance, see Heilmann (2017); Hsueh (2011); Lieberthal and Oksenberg (1988).

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