

CHINA'S IDEOLOGICAL ORIENTATION UNDER PRESIDENT XI JINPING



Recasting Statecraft for the New Era

It would seem that a different set of analytical lenses is required to combat the continuous cycle of sterile stereotypes and huge perception gaps about China in the West.

By Garth le Pere

There appears to be much consternation in the Western media, often bordering on hysteria, about the momentous decision on 4 March 2018 by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to change the constitution of China to allow President Xi Jinping to stay in power beyond his scheduled exit from the political stage in 2022. This type of hysteria is well represented by the *New York Times* which asserts that Xi's rise is "part of a global trend of strong men leaders casting aside constitutional checks" (22 February 2018). This change would abolish the established two term limit put in place by Deng Xiaoping in 1982 soon after the passing of Mao Zedong in order to institutionalise the rotation of new leadership. This consternation was preceded by another concern

following the 19th National Congress of the CCP in October 2017. This is when 2300 party delegates voted unanimously to enshrine Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for the New Era into the CCP constitution as an official component of state doctrine.

Taken together, these events are seen, especially in the West, through a conspiratorial prism, namely, as President Xi's attempt to build a legacy that would establish him in the same pantheon of the great CCP legends and 'helmsmen', Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping; that China under Xi is heading towards a more authoritarian, repressive, and militarised regime; and that Xi has Napoleonic ambitions to be emperor for life.

The preoccupation with seeing

China through distorted Western lenses, fuelled by the typical raw deliverances of sensation, lends itself to find better meaning and understanding through hermeneutics. The challenge is to establish an interpretative framework that attempts to impose order on the significance of Xi's dramatic emergence since 2012 in terms of his actions, utterances, behaviour, style, convictions, and belief. In short, we seek to examine Xi's discursive orientation as part of a general meta-narrative about what constitutes 'Socialism with Chinese Characteristics' as expressed in his more than three hour speech at the 19th CCP Congress. What actually animates Xi's speech to the Congress is his cogent intellectual effort to develop a new ethical system for the rejuvenation of Chinese society

and a different kind of world order that reconciles a register of competing and often antithetical impulses, essentially based on a redefinition of the locus of power in domestic and international affairs.

The ability to manage the unity of opposites has underpinned Chinese history and has really been made possible by a Party and a political culture that is steeped in dialectics, and which draws its lineage from as far back as the Shang Dynasty (16th to 11th century BC). However, under President Xi Jinping since 2012, the dialectical battle and China's ideological predispositions have been contained within two main axes. The first is the production of new institutions and the overhaul of old ones which are considered strategic to maintaining the hegemony of the Party, the stability of the state, and the socio-political allegiance of a very diverse population. This has been accompanied by a consistent regime of rule-making and a continuous preoccupation with order. The second relates to the reinforcement of political and ideological ties and putting in place the appropriate support mechanisms among certain groups within and outside the party who are engaged in political debate in the media domain and in the widening Sino-phone public sphere.

Managing the tensions that exist within these two axes takes on added significance since the primary contradiction facing the CCP and the Chinese state is the need for synthesis and synergy among China's divergent ideological discourses and factions. We can discern certain characteristics of Xi's ideological disposition and his use of power in a prolific outpouring of thought expressions over the past four years since his rise at the 18th Party Congress in November 2012.

By way of contrast, Deng Xiaoping, who was the chief architect of reform from 1975-1982, did not publish his one volume of selected works until after his retirement in 1983 and an expanded version of three volumes only appeared one year later. Similarly, Jiang Zemin's selected works only appeared in 2006, four years after

he left the Politburo in 2002; while Hu Jintao's body of thinking about constructing a harmonious society and world was only published in 2013, a year after his retirement. What all Chinese leaders share in common, however, is their effort to leave a mark on a vanguardist-style of ideological discourse and policy leadership. These are typically expressed as Simple epigram and conceptual constructs.

In the time of Deng Xiaoping's rule (1978-1989), this found expression in his 'four modernisations' based on the invigoration of China in terms of making it powerful and wealthy at

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home and abroad; making the CCP a strong presence at national level; and giving all Chinese citizens a better standard of living. For Jiang Zemin (1989-2002), the essence of CCP leadership was to instil a new patriotism through his 'Three Represents' campaign: the party's role was to represent "the advanced productive forces, and advanced Chinese culture, and the fundamental interests of the majority." During his tenure Hu Jintao (2002-2012) continued this national rejuvenation narrative in terms of his Confucian concept of building a 'harmonious society' at home and

contributing to a 'harmonious world' in foreign relations. As an operational construct Hu introduced the 'scientific development concept' to guide his narrative.

As part of this genetic cycle, Xi has authored the idea of the 'China Dream' to create the synthetic and synergistic linkages with his predecessors although it is more far-reaching in its meaning and impact. The 'China Dream' can be seen as a new expression of 'Socialism with Chinese Characteristics', conceived as having a different political ontology and vision but with its roots firmly anchored in Marxism-Leninism. With Xi at the helm of crafting the expressions of the 'China Dream', it is in many ways the Party's way of rejecting the Western idiom of political liberalisation, constitutionalism, separation of powers, civil society, and checks-and-balances.

Xi's philosophy of the 'China Dream' draws its rejuvenation logic from several contextual factors and considerations. Firstly, the 2008 global economic crisis depressed demand for Chinese products around the world and exposed serious cracks and improprieties in China's political economy that were masked by an environment of fast money, rapid wealth accumulation, huge fiscal liquidity, and high growth. Secondly, maintaining these high growth rates has proven to be unsustainable over the long term since wages will invariably rise and the fast pace and accelerated expansion of China's drive to modernisation will inevitably be exhausted one way or another. Thirdly and since its auspicious 'opening' to the world under Deng Xiaoping in 1978, China has lacked a culture of innovation to drive a fast-modernising economy in the absence of external involvement and access to foreign technology and intellectual property. This helps to explain China's vast recent investments in human capital and research and development. And finally, over the last two decades China has seen widening gaps and increasing differentiation between rich and poor; men and women; and urban and rural areas.

Drawing on the lineages of Chinese dynastic absolutism and the projection

of state power, the ‘China Dream’ is thus essentially instrumentalist and goal-fulfilling to address these challenges of its new normal: it is rooted in the pursuit of national rejuvenation, rising prosperity, a more advanced socialist society, and a stronger military. Its normative calculus in foreign policy is defined by cooperation, development, peace, harmony, and win-win gains. The ‘China Dream’ can thus be seen as a framing ideological discourse in thought innovation within a Marxist-Leninist canon in order to strengthen the Party and the state in managing many of the domestic and external vagaries that will arise in the new era under Xi’s leadership. It is steeped in a redemptive type of morality where factions must be brought to order; iconoclasts within the party must be purged or disciplined; and corruption, whether by ‘tigers or flies’ must be curtailed. This is important for maintaining the Party’s leading role over state and society and making it more effective as the primary tool of the state management and administration. But above all is the need to ensure that policies are implemented and have the necessary traction in purpose, results, and outcomes.

The ‘China Dream’ is therefore rooted in Xi’s axiom of the ‘Four Comprehensives’ which is to “comprehensively build a moderately prosperous society; comprehensively deepen reform; comprehensively govern the country according to law; and comprehensively tighten party discipline”. These comprehensives are complemented and buttressed by Xi’s ‘Three Self-Confidences’: in his exhortations to the Chinese people to “walk the Chinese road, develop the Chinese spirit, and jointly harness China’s strengths” he urges self-confidence in the path, theory, and institutions of ‘Socialism with Chinese Characteristics’.

In his body of thought, a quintessential driver of Xi’s statecraft is his absolute commitment and devotion to ensure that the CCP will be the perennial ruling party of China in order to carry out his goals and achieve his mission as articulated in the ‘Four Comprehensives’. Drawing very much on Mao’s rhetorical methodology,

in Xi’s view there is even more of an imperative for party cadres to cleanse their ideological interiors through “self-purification, self-improvement, self-innovation, and self-awareness.” This evocation of Mao’s continues with the proverbial injunction that every cadre must “take a good look in the mirror, comb your hair, take a bath, and try and fix yourself up.” This is especially important for achieving Xi’s ‘Two Hundreds’ of becoming moderately prosperous society by 2020; and as a major landmark of the Party’s centennial, becoming a fully developed country by 2049.

In his quest to establish party hegemony over state and society, it is very interesting how Xi has resuscitated the Maoist methods of mass-lines in education and practice which gained

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such notoriety during the Cultural Revolutions but nevertheless was a useful corrective device of criticism and self-criticism. Adopting a Maoist persona serves Xi’s purpose based on the above evocations and injunctions and is his attempt to counter “formalism, bureaucracy, hedonism, and extravagance.” In addition, Xi’s has tried to erase the historical and tendentious distinction often made in separating the post-1949 era of Mao from the post-1978 era of Deng. This is not only meant to challenge some of the revisionist orthodoxy which denigrates Mao and his putative accomplishments but to defend Mao’s legacy; and more crucially, to reinforce the legitimacy of CCP rule since the founding of the People Republic of

China in 1949 under Mao’s leadership.

In order to maximise the capacity and effectiveness of the CCP’s consultative style of Leninism, Xi has also pressed ahead with greater institutionalisation. So as to enhance levels and methods of consultation, Xi has created new institutions at the apex of decision-making such as the State Security Council and Leading Small Groups for Deepening Reform. Following the importance of judicial process and prosecutorial fairness in the corruption trial of former Politburo member, Bo Xilai, a corollary to governance changes has been enhancing the credibility and transparency of judicial reforms and the administration of justice for ordinary citizens.

The articulation of Xi’s “China Dream” thus takes place in view of these factors and considerations. The challenge has been how to overcome the difficulty of expressing a single ideological meta-narrative and a single Chinese vision of the future. The “China Dream” is thus a dialectical response to the overall challenge of creating and sustaining a liminal discourse; embracing globalisation while rejecting the individualist tenets of capitalism; and claiming national exceptionalism while pursuing global integration in the form of Xi’s Belt-and-Road Initiative (see below). As an ideological composite, the “China Dream” reconciles these opposites by promoting Chinese wealth and power as the quintessential renaissance of the Chinese nation.

This, for example, can be compared and contrasted with Hu Jintao’s modes of Chinese exceptionalism and manifest destiny which were legitimised through the Confucian paradigm of a ‘harmonious society; and a ‘harmonious world’. However and under Xi’s recrudescing Maoism, his leadership has been embedded within a generalised narrative of the virtues and precepts of the ‘China Dream’. To repeat the point differently, this reflects a growing indifference to the modalities of Western democracy and liberalism. The ‘China Dream’ therefore prescribes an ideological path that is a mix of populist nationalism and Party-led statist management and hegemony.

Maintaining this ideological centre of gravity is critical for President Xi and his “China Dream” given the emergence of several different and contrasting strands which are all vying for a place in defining or influencing China’s meta-narrative.

- Firstly, there are the advocates of the China model of growth and development within the CCP, the Peoples Liberation Army, and the general state apparatus. All of these forces are united in advancing the shibboleths of “Socialism with Chinese Characteristics.
- Secondly, is the “Left” made up of those who retain a nostalgia for the Maoist era (the so-called “Old Left”); as well as academics, intellectuals, and state functionaries who are critical of the excesses of capitalism and who are proponents of a strong Chinese state (the so-called “New Left”).
- Thirdly, there are social democrats who represent a faction of the academic class and intelligentsia as well as inner Party reformers who feel emboldened to speak out more freely in favour of greater social justice and dealing with growing inequalities in Chinese society.
- Fourthly, there are the liberals who are over-represented in China’s metropolitan areas, its main universities, and the eastern establishment as well as in global media houses but which includes a vociferous and increasingly cosmopolitan youthful grouping of pro-democracy and human rights advocates and activists. They are savvy in penetrating the continuous news cycle, and using the internet and various cultural and information invasions.

In managing the centrifugal tendencies that flow from these positions, President Xi – under the ambit of the “China Dream – has implicitly and explicitly become the primary exponent of the China model. He has deftly done so in terms of his ‘Four Comprehensives’.

In international relations, current debate focuses on two competing arguments. The first is that China will disrupt the current balance of

power and this will increasingly result in political and economic tensions, especially with the United States. In this scenario, China’s foreign policy behaviour will become more aggressive while seeking to reap the benefits from globalised markets which have brought it unprecedented wealth and prosperity. The second is that growing interdependence will incrementally integrate China into the liberal international order and multilateral system based on cooperation and constructive engagement. Hence, China will become a more responsible global citizen, committed to burden sharing and providing global public goods.

In both arguments, rejuvenation must also be seen in global terms; which is all about how China regains its international stature and power-base

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as the historical “Middle Kingdom” that once stood at the centre of the universe. It is here where President Xi’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) takes on added significance.

Since its inauguration in September 2013 and at the level of ambition, the BRI represents a global framework for economic integration that could dramatically reduce the costs of moving goods, services, and people across borders while making possible multi-country production networks across its land and sea corridors. It brings into its purview a wide diversity of actors with China at the helm, with the objective of promoting its five strategic components: policy communication, land and maritime connectivity, trade facilitation, monetary circulation, and people-to-people exchanges. The

scale of China’s commitment to the BRI represents the scope of its global ambition: in November 2014, the BRI took off with the launch of ‘Silk Road Fund’, capitalised with \$40 billion. Since then, funding has increased such that by the end of 2016, \$296 billion was committed to BRI projects.

Moreover, the BRI has a strong normative emphasis, driven by three considerations. The first is as an endeavour in competitive liberalisation which offers opportunities of increased connectivity for otherwise marginalised regions and people across heterogeneous but contiguous geographies. The second is as a force for mobilising diverse actors such as international organisations, regions, countries, provinces, companies, and universities to use the BRI platform by developing their own fit-for-purpose projects in a permissive competitive space. The third concerns the BRI’s open-ended, flexible, and experimental nature which has been richly informed by the achievements and successes of China’s own modernisation drive since its auspicious ‘opening’ to the world in 1979.

By way of conclusion it would seem that a different set of analytical lenses is required to combat the continuous cycle of sterile stereotypes and huge perception gaps about China in the West, now greatly amplified since President Xi’s emergence since 2012 and his shaping of a new and different discursive narrative as embodied in the ‘China Dream’. The real meanings of change in China must be understood as originating in its historical consciousness, national experience, collective memory, and identity formation and any interpretive attempt has to take these into account as modal foundations in order to avoid simplification and obfuscation. Such a hermeneutic exercise would yield better benefits since we would come to better understand President Xi’s broader agenda with regard to reinforcing consultative Leninism; introducing a more balanced and comprehensive approach to reform; maintaining political and social stability; and making China a more assertive player on the global stage. ■