

# Xi Dreams of 100 More Glorious Years for the Party: Might China Awake?

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# Introduction: Juggling China's Alternative Futures

*Both the name of our Party and our Marxist world outlook unequivocally point to ... a future of incomparable brightness and splendour ... No one can change this general trend of history ...*

— Mao Zedong (1945 and 1949)<sup>1</sup>

*China will surely have an even brighter future ... We will face all kinds of risks and challenges in the future ... [But] grasp clearly the grand trend that the East is rising while the West is declining. There is a vivid contrast between the order of China and the chaos of the West ...*

— Xi Jinping (October 1 2019 Tiananmen Square Beijing<sup>2</sup> and July 1 2021 Fudan University, Shanghai)<sup>3</sup>

*I feel thoroughly optimistic about the prospects of a free China in the future ...*

*a land of free expression, a country where political views that differ from those of the people in power will be fully respected and protected ... a nation of laws where human rights are paramount. I hope that I will be the last victim in China's long record of treating words as crimes.*

— Liu Xiaobo, 2010 Nobel Peace Laureate (words he planned to deliver – but was barred by the court from doing so – at his conviction, and later sentencing to 11 years, for “inciting subversion of state power”)

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is at the peak of its power as it enters its second century. It is the most powerful organisation in the world and its General Secretary Xi Jinping is the most powerful person in the world. Aged 68, he is now able to govern for life, unrestrained and unaccountable except for the underlying requirement to maintain the confidence of influential members of the Party.

Celebrating the CCP's centenary, in July 2021, in that elevated position has provided a sensational and unexpected vindication, Xi and his Party believe, of its faithfulness to Leninist-Maoist verities, of its adaptiveness to “Chinese characteristics,” and of the prophetic truths of Marxist historical determinism. It has outlived as a major force almost all its political party peers of a century ago, including its former Big Brother Soviet Communist Party. *Xinhua* described the two circles in the official centenary logo, representing Party and country, as “the wheels of history rolling, unstoppable, courageous” — reflecting Xi's own

words: “History always moves forward according to its own laws, and no force can hold back its rolling wheels.”

The Party's core source of legitimacy, apart from sheer incumbency during which in latter decades much of the population has worked hard to gain a measure of welcome prosperity, remains its victory in the civil war — especially bitter, as all such wars are — against China's Kuomintang (Nationalist) Government. Yet the CCP has never asked the Chinese people — as the Kuomintang (KMT) did — for their support through election.

The Party's victory in 1949 was at first dubbed its Revolution. But Mao Zedong increasingly viewed it as incomplete, later directing his fanatical Red Guards to attack the “Four Olds” — old customs, old culture, old habits, and old ideas — to complete the Revolution including by smashing the traditional tomb of Confucius, and even ordering “Bombard the headquarters” (of the Party). But today the CCP stands as the guardian of the status quo at home, of China's role as a ‘civilisation state’, including appropriating Confucius for the Party. Mao's class-warfare impetus has been abandoned and replaced by a war on ‘anti-Party’ elements.

As the first generation of Party heroes, those who undertook the Long March alongside Mao, faded away — taking with them the option of using their charisma to legitimise successors — one of them, Deng Xiaoping, instead sought to entrench meritocracy into Party rule, imposing age and term limits for high office. His successors Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao ruled principally through committee-style consensus.

But Xi Jinping, the son of a Vice Premier and Long March veteran, required the National People's Congress to abolish those limits for his own role as President, and turned the Party towards the most traditional and ancient form of legitimising leadership: the family line. For him, the CCP is essentially core family business. His personal ascendancy marks a vindication for his own family after being cast out by Mao from the Party leaders' Garden of Eden, the Zhongnanhai compound next to the Forbidden City, during the Cultural Revolution. A Central Party School academic, Su Jingzhuang, explained in the Party's theoretical journal *Qiushi* (Study Times):

Red genes have taken root in the body of our party and flow through the blood vessels of CCP cadres; they form the spiritual lineage of the Chinese races' coexistence and co-prosperity, and provide a core political advantage in realising the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.<sup>4</sup>

Leading Australian sinologist John Fitzgerald says that today, "China is run as a Cadre Nation" — by party officials who have mastered ideology, in whose formation ordinary folk do not participate. "Ideology separates this priesthood from the people" — as does their materially sheltered and privileged conditions, which persist despite the anti-corruption drives. Fitzgerald says: "When Xi uses the word 'we,' he is addressing the party, especially those faithful to the party's founding vision 100 years ago." Hence the omnipresent slogan "Don't forget the original intent, firmly remember the mission." These form "the inexhaustible driving force for us to take the Long March in the New Era."<sup>5</sup>

From revolution to ideological and even hereditary entrenchment in a couple of generations.

### What is the point of the Party?

Are Xi and the Party holding on to the reins of power chiefly for the sake of doing so?

Xi's keynote speech in Tiananmen Square at the great Party centenary rally chiefly looked to the Party's historic successes and to the glorious present. He failed to map out a meaningful program for the future. The main message to the 70,000 gathered leading cadres was to keep on keeping on. Stay strong. This is likely to prove steadily harder to achieve, as winds of change begin to blow unpredictably, and the fog of unquestioning compliance conceals hard and dangerous truths.

The Party has reverted to intense centralisation of decision-making, and to elevating leader Xi Jinping to personality cult status. This injects an added degree of vulnerability into the Party's future. How is Xi to be succeeded, as his role takes on ever greater weight and he shows no sign of stepping aside, perhaps for a decade at least? The answer matters, not only for China but also the world. While the destabilising impact of past power struggles had little impact on the outside world, the global fallout from a disorderly or contested succession in today's China could be huge.

The Party's tentacles are enfolding China, its history and culture and people, ever more tightly, with

the aim of making it impossible to prise Party and country apart. Its core goal is to control its own destiny. It already does so within China, where it rules unchallenged, removing all space, all oxygen, from any independent or variant thought, organisation, business, or individual. It is increasingly also set on making the wider world adapt to it, rather than having to adapt itself to international values, laws or trends.

But challenges presented by technology, demography, ecology, and those crucial animal spirits driving prosperity that comprise the private sector, are all likely to evade incrementally even the Party's most concerted efforts to tame them. And the more prosperous and better-educated China that is emerging may prove more ready to embrace diverse forms of spirituality, or simply to seek a comfortable lifestyle, than to support Party exaltations of endless struggle.

The Party-confected version of Chinese culture and history is currently ascendant, but is vulnerable to unravelling. For instance, the great sinologist Pierre Ryckmans, who wrote as Simon Leys, said in his introduction to his translation of the *Analects* of Confucius that Imperial Confucianism — the brand now on offer in China — conveniently ignores "more essential notions" such as "the precepts of social justice, political dissent, and the moral duty for intellectuals to criticise the ruler (even at the risk of their lives) when he was abusing his power, or when he oppressed the people."<sup>6</sup>

The contemporary philosopher Liu Xiaobo, cited above, died in execrable circumstances while still incarcerated in 2017. His hope of being "the last victim in China's long record of treating words as crimes" has long been overtaken by cruel events. But Liu's overall optimism "about the prospects of a free China in the future" may yet prove more prescient than Mao's or Xi's Chinese dreams for a further communist century, since his own dream may over time start to align more closely with those of this nation of singular and increasingly well-educated people. Much will depend on whether the Chinese people can start to envisage again a Chinese history, a Chinese nation, beyond or even without the Party.

# The First 100 Years: From a Century of Humiliation to a Celebration of Political Hegemony

"Use the past to serve the present".  
– Mao Zedong

The story of the CCP's century has been orchestrated by the Party itself; the role of every last character fully scripted, as a top priority set by Xi Jinping personally in 2021: "Know history, love the party. Know history, love the country."<sup>7</sup>

Xi has devoted considerable energy and resources to countering what he and his Party brand as "historical nihilism." More than two million allegedly 'historically nihilist' online posts were deleted by the Internet police and pre-emptively by the platforms' own internet service providers in the six months leading to the Party's centenary. The focus of Party history has been on the notion of China suffering, uniquely, "100 years of foreign humiliation" — which the Party alone could counter. Thus as Mao said in 1949 after the founding of the People's Republic: "The Chinese people have stood up ... Ours will no longer be a nation subject to insult and humiliation."<sup>8</sup>

Within 28 years of its July 1921 inaugural meeting in Shanghai of just 13 members and two Comintern delegates sent by Lenin, the Party had seized control of the whole country — thanks to the Japanese invasion exhausting the Kuomintang government whose forces bore the brunt of resistance, to massive and decisive military and logistics support from Joseph Stalin's USSR, to Western indifference to the outcome, and largely to China itself, including optimistic backing from the war-weary population. Mao's masterstroke lay in the key point of difference, which grew into a great row, with Stalin's Comintern advisors: their experience lay in the Soviet communists' core support from the urban industrial proletariat, while Mao developed the winning strategy of "surrounding the cities from the countryside."

Leading historian Frank Dikotter observes that many academic accounts during the Cold War used revolution as the key to historical change, "so that 'revolutionary China' and 'modern China' were synonymous." And the methodological primacy accorded revolution has remained in place. Dikotter writes in *The Age of Openness: China Before Mao*<sup>9</sup> how 'Opium Wars', 'Unequal Treaties' and 'Peasant Rebellions', seen from such a perspective, are portrayed as harbingers of decline in the 19th century, but that "the heart of darkness lies between the Sino-Japanese War of 1895 and the Civil War of 1946-1949," until redemption by the Red Army. This, the history written by the post-1949 victors, has remained surprisingly intact and supreme even within Western societies.

Dikotter elaborates that "because so much of the history of the 20th century seemed to have been about revolution," students have tended to look for the "causes", "roots", "stages" and "origins" of communism. Revolution thus provided a grid through which a unitary understanding of modern China could be created. However, "as in Russia under Stalin, China under Mao witnessed the disintegration of international links in economics, politics and culture, a gradual closure of minds which constituted a radical reversal in everyday experience rather than the continuation of a long tradition."

The first half of the 20th century had seen an unprecedented intensification of a trend towards openness in China, creating a cosmopolitan experience that the CCP worked hard to erode in order to ensure its own centrality in every sphere of life. And as distinguished Australian sinologist Geremie Barmé says: "The civil war continues through to today, over ideas and over policies" — as evidenced in the clash over the future of Taiwan: autonomous democracy or region ruled centrally, as the rest, by the Party?

The Party later presented the dispersal during that era of central government power — which had been hoarded by imperial dynasties, since 1200 comprising mostly foreign powers — as weak and divisive, denigrated as "warlordism." Federation is thus perceived by the Party as almost as threatening to its rule as democracy or the rule of law, even though China, with Beijing time imposed everywhere, is the only geographically large nation in the world that is not ruled federally.

## Mao's radical romanticism

A central motif in the Party's myth-making is that of the Long March, the umbrella title applied to a remarkable series of retreats across China conducted by the Party's Red Army in 1934-35, during which Mao seized his own opportunity to take the leadership and shrug off the Soviet advisors who had guided the Party thus far. In the lead-up to the centenary, despite Covid constraints, millions of Party members and others joined Red Tourism pilgrimages to "sacred revolutionary sites", especially themed around the Long March. Propaganda vice-minister Shen Haixiong praised Xi, frequently filmed among the pilgrims, for "leaving red footprints" all over China. "Each visit means spiritual enlightenment," Xi said.<sup>10</sup> Through such visits, devotees are deemed to be "baptised" more deeply into the Party's faith.<sup>11</sup>

Mao and his cohort were "radical romantics," says Barmé, who believed that they could create a new

society in quick order to transform the whole world. "When Stalin died [in 1953], they decided they could compete for leadership of the socialist world." Similar themes frequently recur in the Party's story. Mao in part launched the Cultural Revolution, Barmé says, in order to train a new generation in revolution-making. The cohort that came to adulthood in those years — led by Xi himself — retains much of that mindset. "You young people are like the morning sun; our hope is placed in you," said Mao. In his July 1 centenary speech, Xi declared that "our hopes also rest with the young people" following in the footsteps of generations of predecessors who "have devoted their youth to the cause of the Party." Barmé says: "Tempered by the Cultural Revolution and nurtured by the Reform Era, the nation now is in their heliotropic thrall."

China expert Linda Jaivin describes in her clever new book, *The Shortest History of China*,<sup>12</sup> how "having won the support of the peasantry, the CCP courted liberal intellectuals, members of minority democratic parties, professionals and businesspeople" alienated by the Kuomintang and drawn in by the Party's United Front strategy. The Hundred Flowers Campaign, launched in 1956, lured many to express openly their views — including criticisms and disappointments — of the Party as it transitioned into ruling China. This morphed into the Anti-Rightist Campaign in which many of those flowers were cut down. Mao had written presciently that the Party would "defeat the enemy in the Chinese revolution ... using the CCP's three 'magic weapons': the United Front, armed struggle, and Party building."<sup>13</sup>

Jaivin says that swiftly following their military victory, "the communists constructed a new system of government inspired by the Soviet Union," whose rituals and heraldry continue to dominate Party aesthetics. "They established parallel bureaucracies, one belonging to the CCP, the other to the state,"<sup>14</sup> with the former now fully dominating the latter which is relegated to mere implementation under Xi Jinping's rule.

The historian Rana Mitter, reviewing the first of Dikötter's trilogy of works on the Mao era (1949-1976),<sup>15</sup> says: "For many years, historians tended to argue that the first decade or so of the Chairman's rule was generally benevolent and productive, with the rot setting in during the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. Dikötter takes a significantly different stance: the state was from its foundation shaped by violence and used coercion, both psychological and physical, to exert its will on the population. This version of the PRC is not a paradise lost: it was always hell." Mitter cites Deng Xiaoping, concerning land reform among the peasant farmers of western Anhui province, as declaring about that period: "We kept on killing, and the masses kept on

feeling more and more insecure, taking fright and fleeing ... All the work we did in twelve villages was ruined." Hundreds of thousands newly branded as "landlords" or "bourgeois," and thus class enemies, were killed.

The Great Leap Forward of 1958-1962, intended by Mao to catapult China — especially by forcing most of the population into large rural communes — from an agrarian society into an economic powerhouse, created the greatest famine in human history, with the numbers of deaths ranging between 15 million and 55 million. In the wake of this disaster, the Party's leadership decided that he had become more problem than solution. The Cultural Revolution of 1966-1976 was then unleashed by Mao, using his own brilliantly-staged charisma, to appeal, especially to teenagers, beyond the CCP. In contrast, and despite his great admiration for Mao, Xi Jinping today insists that the Party's way is always best, elevating Party control and loyalty.

## The Old Era: Reform-and-opening

The Reform Era inaugurated in 1978 by Deng, following Mao's death, marked a return from the wild lunge towards dictatorship to Party rule. The CCP urgently needed to re-establish its legitimacy within the general population, and reform-and-opening proved a masterstroke: allowing markets to flutter around, though within the bird-cage of central planning, as leading economist Chen Yun insisted,<sup>16</sup> and inviting outsiders — led by Hong Kongers and Taiwanese, soon followed by Americans, Japanese and Koreans — to import their managerial and technological know-how, and their capital. The people of China responded with long-built-up energy and inventiveness, seizing their opportunity to restore family fortunes and to build prosperous lives. The Party steadied itself, evolving a consensus-style governance in which, especially during Hu Jintao's time as General Secretary (2002-2012), the country's core decision-makers — the then 9-member Politburo Standing Committee — effectively ruled as a committee, with Hu summarising the consensus and pursuing that as policy.<sup>17</sup>

The CCP doubled down on its economic reforms following the rude shock of the 1989 protests that culminated in the massacre in and around Tiananmen Square. This included corporatising state-owned enterprises and stepping away from the Mao-era *danwei* system in which almost everyone lived, worked, ate, received primary healthcare, and their younger children were educated, all within the same compound. To maintain ideological loyalty as this *danwei* control system was dissolved, the Party introduced more muscular patriotic education and boosted the prestige and powers of Party neighbourhood committees.

There was never any genuine likelihood that economic reform was going to lead to political liberalisation, even though this became a widespread understanding among Westerners who seized the new business opportunities, and their politicians who celebrated their success. James Mann wrote in his important 2007 book *The China Fantasy*: "They foster an elaborate set of illusions about China, centred on the belief that commerce will lead inevitably to political change and democracy."<sup>18</sup>

And despite the welcome advances in prosperity made by the Chinese people in recent decades, a number of neighbours remain well ahead. The Hong Kong-based writer Philip Bowring says in reviewing the Party's centenary that China could have been even richer and certainly freer: "Yes, China has made unprecedented strides in the past 30 years but the longer perspective is less exceptional in a world where almost all are vastly richer, longer-lived and better educated than in 1921 or 1949."<sup>19</sup> Still, as *The Economist* notes: "China did not turn into a straightforward kleptocracy in which wealth is sucked up exclusively by the well-connected. Corruption did become rampant, and the most powerful families are indeed super-rich. But many people felt their lives were improving too, and the party was astute enough to acknowledge their demands."<sup>20</sup>

### The New Era: Xi and Mao triumph in tandem

Xi Jinping was ushered in to the top job in 2012 by Party elders as a safe pair of hands in maintaining governance continuity — assured in part through his 'red genes', in part through his impressive administrative record in the provinces; while also committing himself to 'purifying' the Party from the ubiquitous corruption which was threatening its popular legitimacy. Xi fulfilled this with frightening zeal. Millions of cadres were purged, including all key commanders in the Party's military arm, the People's Liberation Army (PLA). Among them were more than 100 generals, which *Xinhua* said is "even greater

than the number who died in the battlefield during revolutionary times." En route internal factions were crushed and the Party's commanding heights occupied by Xi loyalists.

Xi also took a different perspective from the preceding generation of Party leaders on the Mao Era, insisting it was as valuable for the CCP and thus for China as the Reform Era. He asked the Party's Central Committee members, rhetorically, a few days after becoming General Secretary, in 2012: "If at the time of reform, Comrade Mao had been completely repudiated, would our party still be standing? Would our country's system of socialism still be standing?"<sup>21</sup> This position is consistent with his take-out from the downfall of the USSR and the Soviet Communist Party: "Why did the communist party of the Soviet Union fall to pieces? Because in the ideological domain, competition is fierce! To completely repudiate the history of the party, to repudiate Lenin and Stalin, was to wreak chaos."<sup>22</sup>

Xi has confounded those who expected him to prove, in office, a competent administrator and mild economic reformer with no tolerance for corruption. Instead, as the sinologist Roderick MacFarquhar has explained:

Xi has transformed China at an amazing pace. Maoist institutions and values are being restored, though, in one respect, Xi's politics mark a sharp break from late Maoism. Whereas the Chairman deliberately unleashed the youth of China for revolution, in Xi's China, no vigilantism will be tolerated, even in the cause of fighting corruption. Whistle-blowers are likely to find themselves imprisoned. Nevertheless, Mao is the lodestone of the Xi regime, the ultimate legitimation of Xi's policies and personal role in state and society. So the Chairman's portrait will continue to hang in Tiananmen, and citizens will continue to be shepherded into his mausoleum. Mao does still matter.<sup>23</sup>

# The CCP at 100: The Party of Power

Three days before the CCP's centenary celebration on July 1, the 95 million members of the Party — led by their general secretary Xi Jinping live on TV from a spectacular show, 'The Great Journey', at the Bird's Nest Stadium in Beijing — were urged to reprise, raising their fists around the country in solidarity, the oath they made on joining:

It is my will to join the Communist Party of China, uphold the Party's program, observe the provisions of the Party Constitution, fulfill a Party member's duties, carry out the Party's decisions, strictly observe Party discipline, guard Party secrets, be loyal to the Party, work hard, fight for communism throughout my life, be ready at all times to sacrifice my all for the Party and the people, and never betray the Party.

This closing vow never to betray the Party has not always been included in its oath. The indefatigable CCP expert Willy Wo-Lap Lam has noted that Xi "has been busy quashing apparently growing dissent within the mid- to upper echelons of the Party" — but while rival factions "may disagree with Xi's policies or his overweening personal ambitions, there does not seem to be a unified movement against his iron rule."<sup>24</sup>

At the end of the centennial show, all stood and sang *Without the Communist Party There Would Be No New China* — underlining the primary point that Xi has hammered home ever since becoming the paramount leader of the PRC: that the Party has so intensely and ubiquitously wrapped its tentacles around China and everything and everyone Chinese, that the two can never be prised apart.

Xi's hour-long speech on July 1 to 70,000 specially invited guests — overwhelmingly Party members — in Tiananmen Square, shocked some international observers with its directness: "We will never allow anyone to bully, oppress or subjugate China. Anyone who dares try to do that will have their heads bashed bloody against the Great Wall of Steel forged by over 1.4 billion Chinese people."<sup>25</sup>

But it was essentially a rear-vision speech, providing few clues as to the future, as to Party plans or Chinese dreams, except to keep on keeping on. The most clearly articulated part of the program is the front page that features the leader's photo. Xi reiterated the Party nostrum that it has brought China into "the primary stage of socialism," while stressing that under his leadership this stage has "entered a new era." The Era of Xi. "The people of China are not only good at destroying the old world, they have also created a new world," he declared. This works, conceptually, as a kind of constant feedback-loop. Xi is best at

promoting "Chinese dreams" — his catchphrase he first used in November 2012 - that are really Party dreams.

Xi's New Era is intended to meld seamlessly with that of Mao, the predecessor he most reveres. "Staying true to our founding mission" is crucial, since "only socialism can save China." Also vital of course is "upholding the core position of the general secretary on the Party Central Committee and in the Party as a whole"; that is, himself. He claimed in his speech that "the Party has no special interests of its own; it has never represented any individual interest group, power group, or privileged stratum" — except of course for the stratum that owns and controls the Party itself, especially those like his personal cohort with demonstrable "red genes." "Long live our great, glorious and correct Party!" came Xi's climactic toast, with the last of those three adjectives far from the least. Political correctness is imperative. The Party is infallible, as are Roman Catholic popes.

Its core goal now, as its second century starts, is to stay and perpetuate itself in power, which requires staying strong within the People's Republic while preventing any disruption from beyond — fully aware that the last imperial dynasty, the Qing, was in part undermined by the assiduous opposition constructed within the international Chinese diaspora including by the widely-revered founder of modern China and the KMT, Sun Yat-sen. A United Front teaching manual says: "The unity of Chinese at home requires the unity of sons and daughters of Chinese abroad."<sup>26</sup> Thus, as Australian China consultant John Garnaut notes: "The party feels compelled to fill all available space, to make the world safe for itself. There are no jurisdictional borders to its ambitions."

## China's theocratic ruler

All must acknowledge the Party's absolute authority. This alone comprises the licence to operate required of everyone from business leaders to social media influencers.

Loyalty is required not only to the Party, but also to Xi personally. The former factions around which party players coalesced, such as the *tuangpai* (Youth League), the *taizidang* (princelings, including Xi himself) and the Shanghai Gang (a web centred around former party chief Jiang Zemin) have been made meaningless by the replacement of a large proportion of senior cadres by Xi loyalists. This dominant new Xi faction is entrenched, thanks to the anti-corruption campaign that has been institutionalised.

Xi has restructured, centralised and personalised governance, chairing 11 leading small groups and central commissions that now shape policy, and whose agendas, decisions and memberships remain more mysterious than the routinised rule through traditional party structures topped by the Politburo Standing Committee. *The Economist* says that such leading groups “have long been a secretive part of an opaque political system. They have become central to the way Mr Xi governs China.”<sup>27</sup> Xi is thus, as Geremie Barmé describes him, “Chairman of Everything.”

He is also ubiquitous at a more folksy level too: children are encouraged to sing “Grandpa Xi is Our Big Friend.” *People’s Daily* said of him during the centenary week that he is the People’s Leader “who has emerged from the people and always cares for the people and loves the people.” The People’s Leader himself added: “In such a big country, the responsibility is very heavy and the work is very arduous. I am willing to achieve a state of ‘no self’ and contribute myself to China’s development.” These “affectionate words,” said the Party’s flagship vehicle, “reflect the pure heart of the big party towards the people in the past century!”<sup>28</sup> A 6,000 character opening piece in a *People’s Daily* Q & A series on Xi Thought described the leader as the creator of “groundbreaking new concepts, ideas and strategies ... manifesting the essence of the Chinese spirit of the times.”<sup>29</sup> Thus is a full-blown personality cult being meticulously constructed in the lead-up to the crucial Party Congress in late 2022 which is expected to ‘elect’ Xi for a further five years as general secretary and thus China’s paramount leader.

Indeed, the tone set by accounts of Xi preparing for the centenary was more redolent of a theocratic ruler

than of a conventional political figure. Writer Tanner Greer, reviewing Xi’s speech at the 2017 19th Party congress, stressed “the language Xi Jinping invokes” including: that Party members must have ‘faith’ (*xinyǎng*), in the eventual victory of socialism; be ‘devout’ (*qiánchéng*) in their work; and be prepared to ‘sacrifice’ (*xīshēng*) everything, up to their own blood, for revolutionary ‘ideals that reach higher than heaven’ (*gémìng lǐxiǎng gāo yú tiān*). He concludes: “Behind this religiously charged language is a man deeply worried that the cadres of his generation are not prepared to make the sort of sacrifices their parents and grandparents did for China’s revolutionary cause.”<sup>30</sup>

In the lead-up to the Party centenary, members and others who felt the burden of guilt about a misdemeanour against the party-state, or wished to share a concern, could register their self-criticism or inquiry at one of many pods — like Catholic confessionals — installed in public places, with computer screens and video cameras.

### The gilded cage

While Xi’s ambitions for his Leninist Party are profound, he is determined to ensure that all else in China is constrained within those Party parameters. Just as Deng Xiaoping’s colleague, economist Chen Yun, insisted that central economic planning provide a birdcage within which the animal spirits of the market could flutter around, for Xi the cage comprises the Party itself, within which all else including the Chinese state itself can enjoy some freedoms — but within strict limits.<sup>31</sup> “Government, the military, society, and educational institutions, north, south, east, west and the centre — the Party leads all,” Xi says.<sup>32</sup>

## Box: Who Joins the Party, Why and How

On its centenary, the Party announced that the membership had grown rapidly recently, to 95 million — 6.7% or one in 15 of the entire 1.4 billion population. The reasons for wishing to join range from parental pressure to maintain a family tradition to genuine altruism — viewing the Party as providing China with its moral underpinning — to personal ambition, since being a member helps provide admission to prominent or well-paid jobs. The biggest segment — about 29% — in age, is over 60. White collar members eclipse the peasants-and-workers in whose name the Party was formed in 1921, and 52% now have degrees, more than four times the proportion outside the Party.<sup>33</sup>

Only 29% of members are women; no woman has been elevated during the Party's 100 years to its peak body, the Politburo Standing Committee. Sun Chunlan, the most senior woman in the hierarchy, is the only woman in the Politburo of 17. None of China's 26 Ministers is a woman. Mao might have said famously that "women hold up half the sky," but as MERICS analyst Valarie Tan says, "half the sky remains far from reach."<sup>34</sup>

The Party's hierarchy knows a great deal more about its own members than those members know about how the Party operates at the highest levels. Applicants must provide full disclosure about their friends, online connections, and family story including their parents' political backgrounds.

Every Party member, and others in managerial positions in China, must open every day the Xuexi Qiangguo app to answer multiple choice questions about Xi and his "Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era" that has been enshrined in both state and Party constitutions. This takes, on average, about an hour. The results are collated by party branches and published openly, with those required to participate ranked by score.

Inevitably, opportunists have discovered, even in this, a business opportunity. An entrepreneur only calling himself Wang offers for about \$A200 a year, a searchable data-set of 40,000 sample politically-correct answers not only for the app, but also for feared inspectors from the disciplinary commission, and for writing annual work reports.<sup>35</sup> Increasingly, businesses and other organisations including sports clubs and gyms wishing to ingratiate themselves with the Party establishment are also inviting or even requiring people to provide acceptable mini-essays on Xi Thought, for instance when they renew memberships — sometimes offering discounts for acceptable contributions.

The Party wishes to know everything about the behaviour of each individual in China, and about all that is in her or his mind, too. Its growing suite of tools to achieve this include facial recognition technology, the social credit system that evaluates both online and offline performance, and the grid management structure through which every unit of 200 households is observed closely. There are about 416 million CCTV cameras in China, about one for every 3.4 people, with the number expected to rise swiftly to about 540m or one for every 2.6 people by the end of 2022.<sup>36</sup>

And the Party is rapidly intensifying its scrutiny of China's businesspeople and their day-to-day activities. For instance, the Lujiazui financial sector in Shanghai contains within its 280 towers 40 'Party-building centres', with many more to come. *Xinhua* noted in late 2017 that Party branches had been established in 73% of private businesses and 95% of public institutions. Most foreign firms in China contain Party cells, as do Chinese companies operating overseas. A slogan says: "No matter where the project, that country will have a Party organisation."

Party members and increasingly all managers are required to attend ever more meetings — often with a purely political focus — in their working days, extending the time at work and adding to levels of exhaustion and burn-out. And the Party's takeover of many spheres formerly administered by government agencies intensifies questions about its mysterious and non-accountable budget, and the expanding burden it places on taxpayers. Former Central Party School professor Cai Xia explained how she saw trends towards disaffection playing out in that influential institution, one of about 3,000 such schools around the country: "Outwardly the party appears unified, but underneath there are turbulent undercurrents. Inside the party school, some have turned against their former liberal ideas to embrace Xi Jinping; some just say as little as possible." For the most part, she says, Party members are now "slaves of his will".<sup>37</sup> Adds political scientist Dali Yang: "With the anti-corruption fight and political indoctrination, Xi has successfully placed the entire party under his control, but that has also made everyone very cautious, too."

Thus compliance to the leadership is likely to trump initiative and hard truths.

# Xi Steps Out – New Directions for Nationalism, the Borderlands, and the Economy

It would be mistaken to claim that Xi's New Era marks a clean break from China's recent past. Much remains constant. Even his restructuring of Party decision-making, taking it deeper into a black box and away from the long-planned routines of committee-men, has been mainly a matter of degree, of emphasis, rather than of novelty.

But in three areas in particular, the PRC's paramount leader has pressed buttons that preceding Party leaders left untouched in the Zhongnanhai control room. He has pushed and pulled the Chinese Communist Party into international arenas, and in an evangelistic manner, as never before. He has pursued a "civilising mission" into the far-flung corners of the empire he inherited, insisting on the supremacy of a two-pronged culture — combining Han nationalism with the Party's born-again Xi-era ethos. And in an apparent rush starting in late 2020 he has subdued the animal spirits that principally had propelled China's rapid economic growth; insisting on Party dominance in the business world, and making an example of that world's greatest global success, its tech sector.

## Subduing the world

The worldview that drives China's newfound global mission, with its wolf-warrior diplomats heralding the way and summoning other nations to comply, derives substantially from the rapid elevation of a very particular understanding of 'China' and its history that Xi packages and presents relentlessly. This China does not seek to reset or repair international relations, it wishes to transform them.

China specialist Daniel Tobin from the US National Intelligence University says: "In the long term, national rejuvenation requires not simply that Beijing be left alone, but that the party's governance achievements be actively lauded around the globe. This means changing the prevalent norms away from those that identify people as individuals, whose rights to speech, political participation, and protection from arbitrary power take priority. Leninism instead prioritises collective ends."<sup>38</sup>

British sinologist Kerry Brown explains how, albeit derived and contrived, nationalism has become so important to the mix: The concept of 'China'," he says, has proven to be "potent and enduring ... Even if it is an invented notion, and even if Xi and his colleagues stand accused of manipulating and reinforcing it, the simple fact remains that they have chosen something that has deep appeal to the complex population that lives in the country today, and seems to speak to them in ways that go far beyond party propaganda."

Xi declared during the Party's centenary celebrations that it provides "a new model for human advancement." But the line in his speech that day that received the greatest applause was that anyone who crosses the PRC "will have their heads bashed bloody against a Great Wall of steel." This was naturally designed to trigger such a response from an audience educated to comprehend the world — especially the democratic world — as focused on continuing to inflict 'foreign humiliation' on China, against which the Party acts as the great defender and vindicator.

*The Economist* says that for the PRC today, "the outside world stands for chaos." This is an ancient theme. The Mercator Institute's Nis Grunberg says: "In the eyes of the Chinese leadership, the competition with the West has been won." Xi himself trumpets: "The East is rising, the West is declining."

This propels China's new role under Xi as a revisionist rather than a status quo power, seeking to reshape the world even while it rebuilds Mao-era communism and exalts ancient Chinese cultural nostrums at home. Asia policy chief in US President Biden's White House, Kurt Campbell, says of Xi's foreign policy: "I see little yield, and if anything a rising sense of nationalism and a sense of aggrievement and a determination to continue to prosecute a very assertive case internationally across the board."<sup>39</sup>

As one of these many fronts in which Xi has engaged China, he is pressing his country to lead what he describes as "the reform of the global governance system."<sup>40</sup> China's long march through the United Nations and other multilateral institutions, gaining key positions and great influence — enhanced by US withdrawals under Trump's presidency — has helped it to carve out space for itself in this new role as a can-do, big-picture, global-scale mover and shaker, while also providing massive development funding via the Belt & Road Initiative (BRI) and competing with Western nations as a provider of Covid vaccines.

The BRI updates the old tribute-state structure through which Chinese emperors received from regional rulers formal acknowledgment of their dominance, and were in return accorded trading rights and a degree of strategic shelter. Yang Jiechi, now China's top foreign affairs official, said in Hanoi a few years ago: "China is a big country and other countries are small countries, and that's just a fact." Lacking the soft power tools of attraction, China has focused hard on weaponising its sheer economic heft, with considerable success — but at the risk of seeing this source of international 'rejuvenation' retreat as its economy matures, slows, and likely also hits hurdles. And as author Jonathan Fenby points out, "there

is a considerable disconnect between the friendly reception China gets for its largesse and the degree of caution Asian countries feel about drawing too close to the Great Dragon.”

Xi has, through seizing reefs and islands and building military bases on them, gained control of the South China Sea that is twice the size of the Mediterranean and is now a Chinese lake. Cambodia, Laos and to a degree Thailand and Myanmar have become tribute states, ensuring that ASEAN, the Association of 10 South East Asian Nations that makes decisions by consensus, cannot counter China’s interests, just as China’s Security Council vote prevents any unwelcome United Nations action or words.

US international relations scholar Hal Brands says that “historically, revisionist powers often become most aggressive when they start to worry that their window of geopolitical opportunity has opened but won’t remain open forever. That’s the position Xi’s China occupies today.”<sup>41</sup> *The Australian’s* foreign editor Greg Sheridan says that Beijing, lacking its former contestation on policy, now “believes its hard power is so great that it no longer cares if its soft power is destroyed ... It is in fierce dispute with many nations at once.”<sup>42</sup>

The Party’s own report-card, published during the centenary celebrations, said it provided an internationally-relevant model “for party building and state governance.”<sup>43</sup> This evangelical program appears near the top of Party priorities for the second century. Already a substantial program of party-to-party support, and often in parallel party-army to party-army training and resourcing, is well entrenched in Africa, including in Ethiopia, Sudan, Tanzania, Zimbabwe and South Africa. Xi has described the CCP as offering for the world’s edification and example, “a new type of political party system.”<sup>44</sup>

But the prime target for the new global thrust is not overseas. It is China’s own population, for whom the civil war victory of 1949 feels remote and the rise of prosperity is increasingly taken for granted. Xi’s Party thus needs new forms of legitimacy to ensure its continued unchallengeable and unaccountable rule. However Xi is not running this new all-fronts-simultaneously foreign strategy through focus groups. He is no pragmatist; he is a true believer, which makes his performances all the more compelling for the Party he leads since he sincerely holds that the Party, the nation, and of course he personally, are destined to global greatness.

### Subduing the borderlands

Bill Hayton notes in his shibboleth-smashing book *The Invention of China* that while “Xi’s version of history is the one taught in Chinese schools, and also one that many people outside China have come to accept ... almost every aspect of it has been challenged by recent research.” Xi’s view of China “is not some

timeless expression of ‘Chineseness’ dating back to ‘ancient times’ but a modern invention. Modern China’s ethnic identity, its boundaries and even the idea of a ‘nation-state’ are all innovations from the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.”

In a process intensified under Xi, the concept of ‘Chineseness’ has become increasingly conflated with ‘Han’, viewed as the dominant and highest ethnic identity within ‘Chinese’ lands, and associated also with devotion to the mythical ‘Yellow Emperor’— ideas hinged off concepts of biological race developed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Based on this conceit, the Party is pursuing a ‘civilising’ mission to bring the outlying regions of the PRC, from Xinjiang to Hong Kong — much of them geographically taken into ‘China’ when it was ruled by the foreign, invading Manchus — fully into its ethno-national template. In dealing with the 55 non-‘Han’ ethnic groups identified by the Party as ‘minorities’, Mao usually chose to work with their elites, to usher them into Party membership and mores, and to use their authority to achieve the goals of the central government. But in Xi’s New Era, the Party now enjoys the resources, time and capacity to police effectively vast areas and to drive an ambitious re-engineering project that comprises what sinologist James Leibold calls the “smelting of the state race.”<sup>45</sup>

In the lead-up to the Party’s centenary, Xi completed much of this task of subjugating often troublesome borderlands, which crucially involves preferencing the dominant ‘Han’ culture including its language, Mandarin, over China’s many other diverse cultures and languages. After Party secretary Chen Quanguo did such a good job of ‘sinicising’ Buddhist Tibet, Xi sent him to Xinjiang to do the same to the Muslim Uyghurs, including incarcerating a million of them for ‘re-education’. Massive effort has been invested in refuting international concerns about this subjugation, including a musical, *The Wings of Song*, which *Global Times* says was inspired by Hollywood films like *La La Land*. It features a clean-shaven Uyghur toasting with a beer. Mongolians are also now feeling the cultural heat to conform, with their ancient unique traditions handily rebadged as “Chinese grassland culture.”

A widespread contemporary Beijing view holds that ‘remote’ ethnic cultures are ‘backwards’, with historical determinism guaranteeing that they will lose their identity in the face of prosperity and progress, and that their residual value lies solely in their aesthetic practices since these can be monetised for tourism — much as settler societies in North America and Australasia viewed indigenes 120 years ago. Marxist theory naturally fosters this perception that materialism is the key to ethnic unity or even uniformity, now adapted to elevate ‘Han’ culture as the most successful and thus superior.

Meanwhile in Hong Kong, the arrangement of ‘one country two systems’ agreed between Deng Xiaoping and Margaret Thatcher, which never appealed to

Xi, has been abandoned after Beijing successfully imposed its new National Security Law on 1 July 2020. Books deemed politically incorrect are being hauled off library shelves. Pro-democracy politicians are being banned from running for office. A man was arrested for allegedly booing the PRC's national anthem, played in Tokyo after a Hong Kong fencer won Olympics Gold. Two women who are speech therapists were recently remanded in custody for publishing three children's picture-books the authorities claimed to be 'seditious'. Hong Kong is now being 'rectified' in a celebration of Party hegemony over what was once Asia's — if not one of the world's — most cosmopolitan cities.

The still-troublesome borderland exception is democratic Taiwan, whose challenge will test the Party sorely in its new century. Xi has said that "the issue of the political divide ... cannot be passed on from generation to generation."<sup>46</sup>

The challenges that these places and peoples pose for the party-state are compounded by their very existence, by their palpable different identities and sometimes multiple loyalties. Sinologist Tony Saich has written: "The CCP has developed its own narrative about its right to rule, its legitimacy, and is threatened by credible alternative narratives, including those from Xinjiang, Tibet, Inner Mongolia and Hong Kong, whose inhabitants have points of reference outside Han China, and alternative histories."<sup>47</sup>

## Subduing business

Early in his first term as leader, Xi — perhaps distracted by the immense personal and political dramas and risks as he launched his purge of rivals and of "corrupt" or disloyal cadres — presided over a Party plenum that said the market would "play a decisive role in allocating resources."<sup>48</sup> And while Xi focused on reordering the power structure, disassembling nearly 40 years of collective leadership, many analysts both inside and outside China concluded that he would largely leave the economy alone, or even drive, or tolerate, further freeing-up reforms. For China's economy had just delivered the party-state a prestigious victory by largely sailing through the financial crisis that laid low the West in 2006-2008, and which provided the key fuel for the Party's domestic legitimacy within the broad population.

However, during Xi's second term that perception was undermined as the General Secretary sought to bring China's business sector — the key driver of its innovations and growth — to heel.

First, a previously rather passive approach to the establishment of Party cells in private firms — if they employ three or more members — was transformed into a drive, with those branches now expected to require that owners and/or managements give them a say, preferably involving a veto power, over

broad business plans and over important personnel appointments. Today more than 70% of the almost two million major companies in China, including most of those that are foreign-owned, contain Party branches, a rise of more than 40% since Xi became leader.<sup>49</sup> This marked an important, innovative step towards focusing not as Karl Marx advocated, on the Party controlling the ownership of the means of production, but on achieving a similar result through Party members monitoring, guiding and preferably ultimately directing corporate decision-making.

It had appeared initially that Xi was allowing, even encouraging, China's new giant tech firms led by TenCent and Alibaba, to drive overdue finance sector reform, especially in the retail area that had been held back by stuffy state-owned corporations that dominated traditional banking. Then he began to lean on increasingly globally famous tech entrepreneurs like Jack Ma and Pony Ma to start subsidising faltering state companies. And in late 2020 Xi turned his attention fully to the economy, and started to bring the private sector to heel — beginning with the biggest. Jack Ma — perhaps the best-known Chinese person in the world, over a longer period than Xi — had to eat humble pie, his offering of \$A46 billion ANT Finance shares halted by government diktat just two days ahead of its float, and his university for business stars reduced by order to a "research centre."

Chairing an economic planning meeting a month later, Xi vowed to rein in the "disorderly expansion of capital" in general. In April 2021 the anti-monopoly regulator fined Alibaba almost \$A4 billion. In July the regulator ordered all TenCent's exclusive music copyright agreements to be terminated, and blocked its merger of China's top two videogame streaming sites. Didi, China's version of Uber, was removed by order from China's app stores. And the State Council hammered the burgeoning private education sector, banning it from floats and from raising foreign capital. Stephen Roach, the influential former chairman of Morgan Stanley Asia, who has described himself as a "congenital optimist" on China, now expresses concern about the Party's "disturbing actions," saying: "China is going after the core of its new entrepreneurial driven economy, and it's going after their business models."<sup>50</sup>

Xi's moves may further dampen the already declining animal spirits in the Chinese economy. But they also attract support from Chinese 'battlers' content to see the ultra-wealthy tech elite taken down a few notches, aligning with an ancient strand of imperial rule that subdued the merchant class whilst holding the tech billionaires at a safe distance from the ruling Party elite. In 2021, Xi has repeatedly stressed the importance of "common prosperity", and a new plan aims to "clean up unreasonable incomes."<sup>51</sup> The context of the 2022 Party Congress is crucial here, when Xi will seek a free hand to promote a fresh cohort of personal loyalists to the top Party positions.

The business world is thus now being co-opted into the increasingly unitary party-state. Nis Grunberg of Merics writes: "In its systemic competition with liberal capitalism, Beijing sees China's Party-led state capitalist system winning. Party-state capitalism ... accepts inefficiency as the price for control."<sup>52</sup> The Congress in 2022 will most likely see Xi gain even more power, and with that deepen the organic integration of the economy under political suzerainty — which leading US sinologist Jude Blanchette describes as a shift from "China Inc" to "CCP Inc."<sup>53</sup>

Billionaire philanthropist and investor — including, formerly, substantially in China — George Soros

concludes from these developments: "Mr Xi doesn't know how the financial markets operate, but he has a clear idea of what he has to do [at the Congress] in 2022 to stay in power. Because many of the political class and business elite are liable to oppose Mr Xi, he must prevent them from uniting against him. Thus, his first task is to bring to heel anyone who is rich enough to exercise independent power. This creates a perverse incentive not to innovate but to await instructions from higher authorities."<sup>54</sup> Echoing such concerns, *The Economist* asks whether China "can combine thuggish, autocratic politics with the predictable rules and property rights that entrepreneurs and capital markets need to thrive."

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## Tomorrow Belongs to Xi: But What Then?

The next important event for the Party following its centenary is its 2022 Congress, which by confirming Xi's leadership as general secretary would accord him a further decade in power, since the Party system requires a successor to be foreshadowed at least five years ahead and none eligible has emerged. Xi is preventing anyone from even starting to play China's game of thrones. This is looming as a major threat — even, potentially, an existential one — to the Party's continued second-century governance.

Aged 68, Xi has provided no clues as to when, by whom or how he will be succeeded. China has throughout its history had trouble with this. Harvard University's Wang Yuhua says that about half of the 282 emperors ruling across 49 dynasties in China were deposed by "being murdered, overthrown, forced to abdicate, or forced to commit suicide." The Communist Party dynasty's own 100-year history only contains a single straightforward succession — of Hu Jintao from Jiang Zemin in 1997. Xi's restructuring, centralisation and personalisation of the Party's power structure since then have added further weight to the issue of succession.

His abolition of term limits remains the greatest point of contention for his critics, including those within the Party itself, since it marked a clear step back from a key set of meritocratic reforms introduced by Deng Xiaoping to prevent the re-emergence of another dictatorial figure like Mao. Increasingly, however, Xi looks as if he is preparing for a very long stay, establishing himself as a leader whom the Party must weigh equally with Mao. In July the 18th Xi Jinping Thought Research Centre was opened, and a new Student Reader on Xi Jinping Thought was announced for all educational levels in China. Not the kind of steps taken by a leader preparing to step aside.

### A troubled transition looms

Leading CCP experts Jude Blanchette and Richard McGregor recently canvassed the options for succession post-Xi.<sup>55</sup> They write: "There is a conspicuous absence of official commentary about his political future ... Only a small handful of senior party officials are likely to have any idea of Xi's longer-term plans." And he won't be receiving a lot of cool objective suggestions. Even emperors, especially in the great cosmopolitan Tang dynasty, employed an admonisher — named the Jianguan — to point out or correct their mistakes and to obviate bad decisions. But as former Australian prime minister Kevin Rudd has said: "Most of Xi's senior officials are terrified of him. They are highly unlikely therefore to be providing frank and fearless advice."<sup>56</sup>

Thus Xi finds it hard to fathom the inevitable results for Chinese governance of his own highly-directive leadership style. He lamented in a book published in June (*Xi Jinping's Selected Remarks On Comprehensively Governing the Party Strictly*) that "some officials only get moving when they receive written edicts ... If I didn't hand out instructions, would these officials do any work?" But Xi's own reliance on written instructions and his tight grip on the bureaucracy has naturally led Chinese officials to become less inclined to take risks — or even merely decisions. The new book also revealed that Xi had described proposals from Party members that the next focus should be about promoting democracy within the organisation as "weird comments made by people who are either confused, have ill intentions, or are dirty [corrupt]."<sup>57</sup>

Blanchette and McGregor posit four options for transition from this tough yet brittle communist emperor.

Xi could retire at the 20th Party Congress in late 2022. But they rate this option as unlikely since there's no-one clearly eligible for such a rapid transition. Another option would be for Xi to retire at the 21st Party Congress in 2027, when Xi would be 74, or the ensuing one in 2032 when he would be 79. They point out that Xi's predecessors Hu and Jiang have enjoyed safe retirements "and have kept their immediate families out of jail," adding that "just as Xi has insisted on protecting the legacy of Mao Zedong, his successors might be bound to him, lest they unravel the foundations of the CCP's power."

They rate the chances of a leadership challenge or coup as "exceedingly small ... absent a systemic crisis." The tech capabilities of the Party security services, which Xi controls, are extraordinary. Plotting is "fraught with the risk of detection" even though "Xi has a host of enemies in the Party." Xi, as chairman of the Central Military Commission that controls the People's Liberation Army, oversees personnel rotations within the military to favour officers whose backgrounds almost preclude getting caught up in plots. A leadership challenge "would require several officials to trigger a cascade of disapproval [but] ... [u]ntil a colleague raises their hand to register their dissent, it is impossible to know how many are willing to join the effort."

Their final option is sudden death or incapacitation. Xi is overweight, has smoked, and state media say he "finds joy in exhaustion". If Xi were incapacitated, the Vice President, Party veteran Wang Qishan — one of Xi's closest allies — would assume his powers. But party infighting would certainly ensue.

Blanchette and McGregor's inevitable and accurate conclusion: "China's political path is shrouded in great uncertainty." Geremie Barmé says that this is potentially "creating a huge crisis for the world in Xi's very being." *The Financial Times'* China writer Jamil Anderlini warns: "Xi has reversed all the innovations that Deng introduced ... including meritocratic succession, collective leadership, and mechanisms for intraparty democracy. In doing so, he may well extend his own rule but he is likely to have shortened the life of the party."<sup>58</sup>

The succession issue thus presents itself as a puzzle with no clear answer, except that at some stage mortality must determine the next step. Steve Tsang, the distinguished director of the SOAS China Institute at London University, has said that Xi's apparent victory in the "People's War" against Covid has demonstrated to the Party and any remaining critics that "even the pandemic couldn't affect him", despite Western claims that Covid would prove the Party's Chernobyl. Xi said during a visit to Xi'an Jiaotong University: "Great historical progress always happens after major disasters. Our nation was steeled and grew up through hardship and suffering."<sup>59</sup>

## The Party's risk profile

Any number of serial risks or hypothetical events could start to trouble the Party elite as Xi stays on over the next decade and possibly beyond.

Xi's dice-throws include his ambitious "dual circulation" strategy for the economy, which aims to reduce China's dependence on foreign markets by increasing domestic consumption, and its dependence on foreign tech by developing its own. The British China expert George Magnus says that dual circulation is "first and foremost a strategy for Chinese decoupling and the continued advance of power," with some leaders referring to it as "self-reliance."<sup>60</sup>

Plans for self-reliance under the "Made in China 2025" program in core technologies are being extended now to include the finance sector, including by blocking overseas IPOs, with the party-state betting that the sheer gravity created by the size of the Chinese economy will pull in capital via its own sharemarkets. Daniel Rosen, founding partner of the Rhodium Group, says: "If investors, businesses, and other governments believe that Xi has spurned reform but that China can deliver growth without it, then they will endorse and invest in Beijing's model. But if they understand that Xi has in fact attempted to liberalise but retreated to a low-productivity command-and-control economy, then they will hesitate, if not withdraw, and insist that Beijing do the hard work of policy reform."<sup>61</sup>

Xi also appears confident about making China independent of foreign tech goods and services, while the rest of the world maintains its dependence on China as a manufacturer and market — although as eloquent China-watcher Jonathan Fenby points out, its more pushy global presence has opened it up to greater scrutiny. And as he says, "it remains a dependent power, constrained by its reliance on imports of minerals, oil, gas and in the event of a bad harvest, food or animal feed — in striking contrast to the US in its era of expansion."<sup>62</sup>

Demographics — sometimes described as a nation's destiny — also fuel unease about the medium- to longer-term prognosis. Ren Zeping, chief economist with Evergrande Group, estimates that by 2100, China's population will drop to fewer than 800 million people from about 1.4 billion today. At present, the US population is about 23% of China's. If Ren is right, by 2100 it will be 54% of China's. Ren said in a research note: "China's population crisis is approaching, and the economic and social problems brought about by it will become increasingly severe."<sup>63</sup> It appears that despite the CCP's reputation for long-term planning, the consequences of the one-child policy have caught it somewhat by surprise. Allowing most couples to have two children has failed to arrest the decline in the population rate, so now three children are widely permitted, while the government works to cut costs associated with raising families and to raise the

retirement age from 50 or 55 for women and 60 for men.

New rules are being introduced everywhere, including to reduce the risk of the Party losing spiritual hegemony. Measures for the Administration of Religious Personnel for clergy in China's five approved religions — Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Catholicism and Christianity (meaning Protestantism) — came into effect in May 2021. They were thereby required, under Xi's "sinicisation of religion" program, to embrace the leadership of the Party and the supreme status of socialism. They must complete a detailed registration process and reject clearly all foreign influence.<sup>64</sup> The steady tightening of such controls is informed by a longstanding existential Party fear that religious adherence could act as a counterweight to Party ideology and, among some people, provide a replacement for it. The rise of Christianity, with adherents inexorably overtaking the number of Party members, especially worries the Party whose own core stricture, like the first of the Ten Commandments, is: "You shall have no other gods before me." Party members must commit to atheism. Christianity thus presents a challenge of an entirely different order to that which the PRC took on in crushing the Falun

Gong movement. Marxist materialism, with its implicit expectation that prosperity and consumption can satisfy the 'masses', is struggling to maintain the focus of the rising generation.

Xi's vow that resolving the PRC's ambition to annex Taiwan "cannot be passed from generation to generation" presents another potential turning-point. Either failure in an attempted blockade or amphibious landing, or becoming bogged down in ugly guerrilla warfare there against a population perceived as mostly Han Chinese, would create immense problems back home.

Blanchette concludes his contribution to *Foreign Affairs* magazine's special CCP centenary edition by noting that

... it would be ironic, and tragic, if Xi, a leader with a mission to save the Party and the country, instead imperilled both. His current course threatens to undo the great progress China has made over the past four decades. In the end, Xi may be correct that the next decade will determine China's long-term success. What he does not understand is that he himself may be the biggest obstacle.<sup>65</sup>

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## Party Prospects Approaching the Next Great Centenary: 2049

Will the Party, post Xi, adopt elements of federalism or democracy, or appear even more mercilessly totalitarian as it looks towards a century in power in 2049 — the 100th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic — when it hopes to become not only a "strong, democratic, civilised, harmonious, and *modern socialist country*"<sup>66</sup> but also world leader?

Just as the key overseas template, in terms of relating to the PRC, has been "engagement," so the keyword for the Party's apparent resilience has been "adaptation." One of the great American sinologists, David Shambaugh, wrote an important book in 2008 titled *China's Communist Party: Atrophy and Adaptation*.<sup>67</sup> The Party has proven adept at looking and learning, he says, while at that time suffering also from a degree of atrophy. For instance, "one of the principal lessons that the party leadership seems to have drawn from the uprisings in Eastern Europe in 1989 was that enfranchising labour unions, autonomous churches, and other civic organisations is a slippery slope to enfranchising a political opposition." While warning appropriately that "the sinological

landscape is littered with predictive casualties," Shambaugh proved correct in anticipating that the non-formalised factionalism that developed during the Dengist Reform Era would not ultimately prove amenable to a Leninist party. He "deeply doubts that Western style democracy is going to come to China" (see Box below).

British sinologist Holly Snape has argued that despite this key Party attribute, its recent adaptations under Xi have helped it to "work to confound attempts from within to invert its illiberal trends."<sup>68</sup> It has been actively "re-revolutionising" itself, Snape wrote, citing Xi: "Some people say our party has transformed from a 'revolutionary party' to a 'governing party.'" This way of putting it is incorrect. Our Party's formal formulation does not differentiate between 'revolutionary party' and 'governing party.'" It aims to make the civil service more rapidly responsive to top-down CCP demands. Xi has stressed that the debate between Party or law as supreme "is a political trap, a false proposition." The rule of law now clearly rests under the Party's control.

Under Xi, it is China — including especially its non-Han regions and its unwelcome cosmopolitan outliers like Hong Kong — that is required to adapt more speedily and thoroughly to the Party, rather than the reverse. The Party is also increasingly set on making the wider world adapt to it, rather than having to adapt itself to international values, norms or laws.

Control of discourse is thus being accorded an ever-greater priority. Xi Jinping says in his November 2020 book *On the Party's Propaganda and Thought Work*<sup>69</sup> that

... international discourse power is an important part of national cultural soft power ... For a long time, our Party has led the people to solve the three major problems of 'being beaten,' 'starving,' and 'being scolded'. After generations of unremitting effort, the first two problems have been basically solved, but the problem of 'being scolded' has not been fundamentally solved. Striving for the right to speak internationally is a major issue that we must solve.

Yuan Peng, the head of the Security Ministry's Chinese Institute of Contemporary International Relations, amplified: "It is no longer important whether it is the

truth or a lie, what matters is who holds the discourse power." This reaches far and wide — from the museum in Nantes, France, which while creating an exhibition about Genghis Khan's Mongolian empire was instructed by its Chinese partner museum to remove the words 'Genghis Khan', 'empire' and 'Mongolian' as politically unacceptable, to the gallery at the ANU in Canberra that deferred to Chinese "discourse power" by removing artworks involving graffitied Chinese bank notes, including a Batman mask drawn on a Mao Zedong image.

The CCP has skewered myriad threats over its century, from the free market to the free flow of information over the Internet. Rupert Murdoch predicted erroneously in 1993 that satellite TV posed an "unambiguous threat to totalitarian regimes."<sup>70</sup> Since then, Beijing has decided, writes American culture expert Martha Bayles, that "rather than try to be Hollywood's global competitor, it would strive to become its global censor," and has largely succeeded — thus "pulling off a trick never dreamed of by the Soviets: It has forced Hollywood into a cramped Orwellian space."<sup>71</sup> In such ways, the Party is exporting its censorship and ideological red lines around the world.

### **Box: Might the CCP take the KMT route towards democratic legitimacy?**

Speculation emerged during the Party's Dengist Reform Era that it might ponder lessons from the evolution of the Kuomintang (KMT) on Taiwan. The KMT, founded by the universally-revered founder of modern China, Sun Yat-sen, governed China from 1927. It later ruled Taiwan with an iron rod, largely through martial law, for decades following its mainland defeat to the CCP's Red Army in 1949. Chiang Ching-kuo, the son of Sun's successor Chiang Kai-shek, agreed tentative steps towards democracy, with Taiwanese people in 1996 voting for their president for the first time. Then and twice since, the KMT have won power through elections. It remains the major opposition party, holds some key cities, and could return to government via election.

This is an intriguing prospect for China, where no popular vote has taken place since 1948. Xi Jinping met then Taiwan President, and KMT leader, Ma Ying-jeou, in Singapore in 2015. Xi's own CCP initially comprised a secretive ginger-group within the umbrella of the KMT. The two are as close, yet also as bitterly opposed, as two parties can be. Might senior CCP figures at some time consider inviting Chinese people to vote — trusting that, knowing no alternative, they might well confirm the Party in power, as the KMT achieved in Taiwan in 1996? This would overnight imbue the Party with a clear legitimacy that has ebbed as the decades tick past from its civil war victory.

But Xi will leave behind, when he departs the leadership in whatever way, a Party that has never been more Leninist, and that glorifies more earnestly than ever the People's Liberation Army which remains its own army. The democratic path might over time steer the Party towards true sustainability. But it is not a route it will choose. Its 21st century fate will rather comprise death or glory.

# Why Party Futures Matter

Xi Jinping insists that “the Chinese people will never allow any individual or any force to separate the CCP and Chinese people, and to pitch them against each other.”<sup>72</sup> The Party has immensely intensified this stance since its all-encompassing review of the failure of the Soviet Communist Party led it to strengthen its programs of ideological education and leadership, and to underline the heroism of all of its own founding fathers. In China, the Party believes that its “sinification” program for every religion, for every non-Han ethnic group, for every artist, for every social group, every business, is also steadily cementing that desired indivisibility of the Party and China itself.

The Party is like an epiphyte, a plant — like a strangler fig — that grows on and through another plant, and gradually takes it over so that the original plant’s identity eventually disappears altogether. This is Xi’s true ‘Chinese dream’ of a single shared pulse between Party and nation. In this vision the Party becomes China, which loses its capacity for separate existence or consciousness beyond its parasitical possessor. The Party’s ideological and propaganda outputs keep overflowing to fill every available crevice in the country, watering the cognitive soil but also sometimes drowning whole cities and their people. It has suppressed as much as it has harnessed the natural vitality and inventiveness of Chinese people. Despite the Party’s pride in “bringing China out of poverty,” the population remains considerably less prosperous than its counterparts in Hong Kong and most of its East Asian neighbours, including in Japan, South Korea and Taiwan.

Xi’s recessive cultural thrust intensified in the months after the centenary, with schoolchildren banned from accessing video games during weekdays, “fan culture” branded as capitalist and “universal values” (by Xi himself) as bourgeois and hegemonic, the “irrational expansion of capital” lambasted, and with some TV reality talent shows being banned along with “abnormal aesthetics” including “sissy men.”<sup>73</sup> The tone was encapsulated by a WeChat blog from Li Gangman (“Everyone Can Sense That a Profound Transformation is Under Way!”) that was re-published, significantly, by almost every major party and state media platform including *People’s Daily* and *Xinhua*, within which he said: “It is necessary not only to destroy the decadent forces but also to scrape the bones and heal the wounds. A revolution is taking place in economic, financial, cultural and political fields. This change will wash away all dust, the market will no longer become a paradise for capitalists to get rich overnight. The cultural market will no longer be a paradise for effeminate stars... The red has returned, the heroes have returned, and grit and valour have returned.”<sup>74</sup>

This triggered a response from leading propagandist Hu Xijin, editor in chief of *Global Times*, who called Li’s blog “seriously misjudged and misleading.” While not disputing Li’s factual argument, he asked why a successful country like China needed “revolution” and “overthrow of the current order” when Xi’s reform program was already transforming it in the correct direction.<sup>75</sup> Neither Li’s nor Hu’s posts were taken down, indicating that Xi’s inner circle is prepared for a degree of debate among those deemed Xi loyalists. But the debate is confined to what used to be seen as the radical “left” of the Party, demonstrating that their stance has become the central ideological ground on which the Party now stands.

As Xi’s back-to-the-future drive has intensified rapidly, many Chinese middle class families — including Party members — have continued quietly to invest heavily, both in material terms and in orienting their thinking and their careers and lifestyles, in facing outwards towards the world. They have learned through generations of hard-earned experience not to contest Party views or powers, but simply to go with the flow while maintaining, very privately, different priorities and ways of seeing. Some relatives may have migrated and established lives outside China. Others may have been educated overseas, or saved to send their children to overseas universities. Many have managed to invest capital offshore as a safety precaution. Some may have made and kept foreign friends. They may have worked hard to learn a foreign language, and enjoy products like Samsung devices or Disney movies. They may use VPNs so they can access foreign online platforms like Google, Facebook or YouTube. The Party’s withdrawal into itself, into its own version of history and of China — and its increasingly routine suspicion of those who appear well-connected internationally, or well-disposed to foreign thoughts or tastes — therefore discomforts them.

Some may simply feel that it is well past the time when Chinese people should be cut some slack to pace their own lives, that having studied, worked and saved hard, they should be allowed to chill a little rather than be roused constantly to further struggles which they may not feel are truly theirs. In a single speech in 2019, Xi used the word for struggle, *douzhen*, 60 times. Just recently, he told cadres at the Central Party School that “challenges are conspicuously increasing ... It’s unrealistic to always expect easy days and not want to struggle.”<sup>76</sup> Young people are facing demands — such as in some cases working 996, from 9am to 9pm six days a week — that they are beginning to reject publicly. One of young China’s 2021 online phenomena has been, in response, simply to “*tang ping*” or “lie flat.” A “netizen” posted on the Weibo social media platform

simply: "I'm tired to death. I won't have any time of my own ... This [Party] centenary is so troublesome."

But there is no ready route for such sentiments, for popular unease, to reach the hierarchy. Although the Party constantly polls the public, the results are not published, so it is difficult to know whether inconvenient facts are being gathered, or are being relayed to those at the top even if so. Xi has barred the political doors against public discussion, against the resumption of factions within the Party, and against serious conversations even between other

senior leaders. In the Reform Era, large numbers of "mass incidents" were reported, often involving rural people protesting local corruption. Today, far fewer such events are generated or tolerated. Party security officials control the movements of leaders right up to Xi himself. They arrange schedules to prevent physical meetings between top cadres, and deploy devices to watch and hear conversations by mobile phones or via laptops. Cai Xia, a former Central Party School professor expelled from the Party in 2020 for criticising Xi, has written: "Everyone feels unsafe."<sup>77</sup>

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## Conclusion: How long can the era of Peak Party persist?

Have Xi and the Party peaked already? What, beyond control and thus survival, do they look to do next? As China enters the era of Peak Party, its fast-ageing population is being primed to look up at the stars as Beijing invests seriously in a new Space Race against America. It wants not only to impose itself pervasively on the world but also to make the universe safe for itself. This means shaping others' destinies around the world too.

The great contest during the Party's first 100 years was fought within China itself. The battle for the Party's capacity to control and survive the next century will be fought not only within that vast country but also globally. Xi's boldness in pushing out the Party's controlling boundaries is a risky manoeuvre, however. It places the Party's future in play across many extra fronts. So far, Xi has won virtually every hand he has played. But such existential risk also raises Party and PLA anxiety levels. Going for glory — and of course for the history books — will make this second Party century as dramatic as the first, while also potentially cutting it short.

China today comprises broadly a no-sibling society, the result of the 36 years of its mostly one-child population policy. It is also a no-sibling state. Russia may understand it a little, and Soviet ritual remains dominant in Party liturgies, but the PRC has morphed into a very different animal from the old USSR. The confidence and determination with which Beijing continues to subjugate Hong Kong humiliatingly, under its catch-all xenophobic National Security Law, underlines how little it worries about what outsiders may think of it. It might appear paranoid from the way it is crushing independent thinking and speaking in Hong Kong, but the main message is targeted at its own cadres: see how successful we are at incarcerating those traitorous pretend-Chinese who

really wish they were Westerners. We can and shall do the same, even more swiftly and cruelly, to any who might feel tempted to harbour such liberal thoughts or to behave similarly in the mainland.

The days of 'engagement' as the prime template for relating to this PRC are over. Expelled Party member Cai Xia warns: "It is the CCP that has unilaterally ruined the engagement policy, because it believes engagement has served its purpose and is no longer useful."<sup>78</sup> Foreigners who reflect on or engage with China remain under suspicion unless and until they demonstrate an acceptance of the Party's way. Also over are the days of the old networks, China's once-famed '*guanxi*'. Xi's installation of a vast new permanent anti-corruption institution to discipline officials underlines that while he's in charge they won't return. Chinese people who seek to use their connections to support a worthy cause, organisation, company or individual — especially one with a foreign link — today place themselves at risk. Understandably, few are now prepared to do so. But efforts can be made to sustain contacts — even if in current circumstances these are reduced to formal acknowledgement — with Chinese people who have in the past placed high value on global connectedness and free exchange.

The Global Financial Crisis, the Party believes, revealed starkly the failure of the West and especially the US. Such decline is now inexorable. "The East is rising, the West is declining," as Xi says. The current evidence for this is actually stronger in the cultural than the economic sphere, as the intellectual class in the Western world pushes not only to critique but also to denigrate and discard that world's history, values and cultural heritage. American novelist and columnist Lionel Shriver notes: "The Chinese see the self-flagellating throes of the West as the certain bell-wether of terminal decline. In countries and

individuals both, a penchant for self-criticism is only healthy when balanced by some measure of self-belief.”<sup>79</sup>

But making presumptions about historical inevitability carries danger. Classically, Winston Churchill lost power directly after winning the seemingly lost war against Hitler’s Germany. That defeat, though, came through an election. However much Xi clearly relishes tossing the dice, his glorious moment at the Party’s centenary celebration in Tiananmen Square — when he was cheered for foreshadowing a bloody victory against unnamed foreigners — underlines that his and his Party’s power is not going to be gambled readily away. There will be no election. The status quo must be made to prevail. Yet the fact that almost no member of the Chinese public has been permitted — especially since 1989 — to view directly, let alone participate in, such major PRC events in the capital as the PRC’s 70th anniversary or the Party centenary, underlines that no-sibling loneliness, and that anxiety about vulnerability, of China’s power elite. It dares not trust even its own people.

American sinologist Andrew Nathan says that Xi’s “‘new Maoism’ reflects ‘a surprising sense of siege on the part of a government that has been so successful in sustaining public support. The Chinese political system has been evolving for more than a century, and that process is not over. When and how the system will change is impossible to predict. The only certainty is that repression alone cannot keep the Chinese people silent forever.’”<sup>80</sup>

Oxford professor Stein Ringen describes the PRC as a “controlocracy” in his 2016 book *The Perfect*

*Dictatorship*,<sup>81</sup> which he dedicates to “the Chinese people and to their freedom, happiness and prosperity.” He concludes that “if [the PRC] becomes dependent on ideology and embraces a narrative in which persons are subsumed in the nation, it will have made itself a totalitarian state of the most sinister kind. And an ideological strong state is by historical experience dangerous.”

For now, though, Xi holds the controls like a passenger jet captain. He wants to keep flying, he prefers the adrenalin of staying in the air to landing safely. He’s not sure in detailed terms where he’s taking the Party — or China — next, but as long as he grips those controls he will continue to enjoy the view from the heavens. The longer he’s up there, though, the greater the risk of the Party plane’s fuel — its own self-written history, Chinese people getting rich before they are old, replacing the US as the great global leader — starting to run out, or even of one of the other crew seizing the controls. His worst nightmare is that another plane altogether — flying the flag of, say, constitutional democracy — might eventually attract sufficient passengers and crew to take over the route.

These are gloriously red days for Chinese communism. But are they marking dawn or dusk, as this dangerous narrative unfurls? Xi is summoning all the Party’s mighty powers, all his personal ‘red genes’, to tell the Chinese people that it would not only be foolish but also impossible for them to conceive of a China without it. But if they can start to envisage again a China, a Chinese history, a Chinese nation, beyond or even without the Party, these might yet prove its sunset years.

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# About the Author



## Rowan Callick

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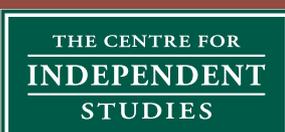
Rowan Callick is a veteran journalist and author who has worked as a China correspondent for both the *Australian Financial Review* and *The Australian*. He is the author of *Party Time: Who Runs China and How*, and has won two Walkley Awards for his coverage of China.

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