

Awakening from the Chinese Dream

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Abstract

While Mao saw China throw off the yoke of foreign powers, and Deng's reforms increased economic growth, Xi finds new legitimacy in nationalism – emphasizing China's greatness. When the People's Republic of China turns one hundred years old in 2049, China will appear as a leading superpower in the world, if not the leading power – economically and politically as well as militarily and scientifically. Whether this Chinese Dream comes true depends not only upon China, but also on how the rest of the world responds and develops.

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The Olympic Games in Beijing in August 2008 were a glittering show. Many pollution-spewing factories in the neighborhood had been closed a few weeks before so the air was better than usual. The sun smiled. The whole world was taken aback by the impeccable arrangements. The Games were opened to the words of the *Analects* of Confucius: "It is a joy to have friends come from afar." Norway's national poet Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson had a similar saying: "You are foreign, you are welcome!" The maxim of the games, "One World, One Dream," was expressed thus: "In the Olympian spirit we shall together build a better future for mankind."

As the new General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) four years later, Xi Jinping laid out his own "Chinese Dream," a rejuvenation of the Middle Kingdom, thus juxtaposing Confucius and Mao.

At eight o'clock on the eighth day of the eighth month of 2008 the Olympic Games were opened. With eight being the luckiest number in Chinese culture, the hospitality of the host was destined to shine, and it did. China won the most gold medals even as the United States won the most medals.

Three generations of leaders seated at the tribune of honor had three glorious weeks to look forward to. Then top leader, Hu Jintao – President of China from 2003 to 2013 – was there, as well as Jiang Zemin, President 1993-2003. And so was Xi Jinping, recently appointed Vice President. Ready to take over from Hu Jintao as the country's President in 2013, for another ten years, Xi had taken the responsibility for the extensive preparations for the games.

Hu Jintao was not just China's President. He was also General Secretary of the CCP and Chairman of the Central Military Commission. More power resides in those two positions than in that as the President of the country. Deng Xiaoping – successor to Mao Zedong and China's undisputed leader from the late 1970s – had worn only one of those three hats, as Chairman of the Central Military Commission. In the early 1990s, when Jiang took over, Deng decided that the three positions should be occupied by the same person. Declared "core leader" of China, a designation that Deng gave him, Jiang was thus better placed to exercise the leadership expected of him, a tradition that China has steadfastly adhered to. Due to a power struggle within the CCP, it took Jiang two years to deliver the chairmanship of the Central Military Commission to his successor Hu after Hu took over as President of China and General Secretary of the CCP. Jiang's supporters considered him a better strategist vis-à-vis foreign states while viewing Hu as indifferent

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to the outside world. China is virtually unique in that its military is ruled by the party, not the state. Another tradition, namely, that the leader should step aside after two five-year terms at the top, seems, however, to have been whistled off. More about that later.

On the 24th of August 2008 – again at eight o’clock – the concluding ceremony of the Olympic Games took place. Three weeks later, on the 15th of September 2008, the third largest investment bank in the United States went bankrupt. The financial crisis had struck. As it turned out, the crisis was better handled by China than by the United States and Europe. With two solid victories – the Olympic Games in Beijing and its handling of a financial crisis “Made in America” – China had gained heft in the eyes of the world. Perhaps Deng Xiaoping’s mantra about keeping a low profile, working unobtrusively, and not aiming at leadership internationally was due for revision. Hu Jintao thought so, and even more so did Xi Jinping.

Who is Xi Jinping?

Xi was born in 1953. His father, Xi Zhongxun, had been Mao’s associate during the revolution and knew the chairman well. Xi Jinping was what was called a “red princeling” – a child of the first generation of revolutionaries. Old Xi got quite far. He became Vice Premier under Zhou Enlai. Then bad luck struck. In 1963, Xi Zhongxun was accused by Mao of conspiring against the CCP. The violent purge that culminated in the Cultural Revolution was underway. Xi’s father was beaten and forced to self-criticism at mass meetings, exiled, and jailed. Not until 1975 was he freed and, in 1979, rehabilitated by Deng. Xi had to denounce his father and was also subject to violence by the red guards. To survive, Xi had to show that he was a good “son of Mao,” more revolutionary than others. He immersed himself in Mao’s speeches.

It is easy to imagine that Xi, burned by the brutal and wrongful treatment that he and his family had experienced, would turn bitterly against the party. But he did not. Instead, he turned to Mao and studied his thoughts. Yu Jie, writer and champion of democracy, a Christian who emigrated to the United States after having been jailed and tortured in China, maintains that Xi Jinping did not want to end up like his father. “Mao Zedong became his role model,” says Yu in the 2018 French television documentary “The World

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According to Xi Jinping.”³ This is perhaps not surprising, however, in view of the CCP’s increased emphasis in recent decades on the lessons to be learned from China’s one hundred years of humiliation due to internal struggles triggered by foreign interference. The idea was and is that the CCP alone could provide China with the leadership needed to avert a repeat of the experience from colonial times. The lesson drawn by the CCP from the Cultural Revolution and Mao’s mistakes is not that authoritarianism went too far but rather that the CCP fell victim to internal strife and lack of discipline.

At age 15, Xi was banished to the countryside, like millions of other young, educated Chinese. The hardship he encountered was exacerbated by the fact that he was viewed as a member of the elite. For seven long years Xi shared his lot with poor farmers in their day-to-day struggles. They did as they were told. Their treatment was often brutal. Xi knows all there is to know about the living conditions of poor Chinese who till the land. His experience from this time grants Xi legitimacy. The concept of “Yellow Earth” has deep symbolic meaning in China. It is a notion that Xi can rightfully appeal to, as he often does in his speeches. Xi sums up his experience thus: “When I came to the “Yellow Earth” as a fifteen-year-old, I was scared and discouraged. When I returned as a twenty-two-year-old, my aim in life was clear and I was full of self-confidence.”⁴

At 22, he had an ambition: a political career. This ambition was fueled by a firm belief in Mao’s teachings as well as in the Party’s central role. To quote Xi’s biography by François Bougon, a journalist at *Le Monde*: “Xi deeply believes that the return to original Maoism is the only way to save China’s future.”⁵

Not that Mao didn’t make mistakes. “Seven parts good, three parts bad” was Deng’s retrospective verdict of Mao, who in his time had rendered a similar verdict of Stalin. Unspecific as it was, the verdict can be interpreted in different ways. To Xi, it is Mao’s teachings that count. His excesses during the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution are nothing to emulate. But the central role of the Party with the requirement that everyone must submit to the leadership of the Party is key.

³ “Le monde selon Xi Jinping,” by Sophie Lepault, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6hAZ9b_HVVA. See also Kerry Brown, *The World According to Xi*, I. B. Tauris, London, 2018.

⁴ Source: see note 3.

⁵ François Bougon, *Inside the Mind of Xi Jinping*, Hurst & Company, London, 2018, p. 62.

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This is how this thought was formulated at the conclusion of the CCP's 19th National Congress in October 2017: "Party, government, military, civilian, and academic; east, west, south, north, and center, the Party leads everything."⁶

Xi takes charge

It is said that in the fall of 2007 an advisory vote was held among the more than 200 permanent members of the Central Committee of the CCP. "It is said?" Yes, because the world community, including ordinary Chinese, does not know how the Party operates. It has been described as the world's largest secret society.⁷ The vote was about who should take over as General Secretary of the CCP when Hu Jintao's term would expire five years hence. The vote went in Xi's favor. His competitor, Li Keqiang, who came from the same party faction as the sitting president Hu Jintao, lost out. Two in a row from the same faction within the party was too much for the others. Xi had the perfect profile for the top job: he knew his Mao and his Marx, had dirtied his hands in the provinces, was a "red princeling," now viewed as a source of legitimacy. All this gave him a clear advantage. Further, he had a quiet presence, did not express strong views, a man whom the party elders saw as a safe pair of hands.

So, the choice was a simple one. The *New York Times* journalist Nicholas Kristof, a former Beijing correspondent, envisaged the new leader as a champion of further economic reform "... and probably some political easing as well." Kristof thought the release from prison of Nobel Peace Prize winner Liu Xiaobo might be in the cards. On both counts, Kristof proved wrong. He was not alone.

Richard McGregor of the Lowy Institute in Australia has described how easy it is to mistake what one thinks should happen in China for what the CCP plans to do.⁸ Many Chinese also thought they were about to have a reform-friendly leader. Was he not married to the charming folk singer from the People's Liberation Army, Peng Liyuan? – at the time more famous than he was. Was this not the portent of a popular and polished leader? Listen to Xia Ming, an erstwhile member of the CCP: "Xi cultivated a progressive,

⁶ <https://thediplomat.com/2019/07/xi-jinping-continues-his-quest-for-absolute-party-control/>

⁷ To quote Jean-Pierre Cabestan, *China Tomorrow. Democracy or Dictatorship*, Rowman & Littlefield, New York, 2019, p. 22: "... the CCP is the world's largest secret society, one that operates according to its own rules, placing itself outside, and often above, the law."

⁸ Richard McGregor, *Xi Jinping: The Backlash*, Lowy Institute, 2019, p. 14. Julius Caesar offered a more general formulation of the same idea: "Men freely believe that which they desire."

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liberal image that fascinated the people, one which seduced the population.”⁹ Was there any reason to doubt that the road taken by Hu Jintao, his signature project being the development of a harmonious society in beautiful accordance with the teachings of Confucius, would continue to be travelled also under Xi? And, also, was there any reason to doubt that Hu’s assurances that no-one had anything to fear from China’s continued growth?

Other observers spoke glowingly of Xi Jinping. He was said to have a natural authority and to radiate incredible strengths, with ease and self-assurance possessed solely by “red princelings” from the elite. Xi does not need to raise his voice in meetings. He exudes natural charisma. He speaks informally, quite differently from the cold, bureaucratic speaking style of Hu Jintao.

Here is what Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore’s founding father, had to say after he met Xi in 2007, shortly after Xi was elected to the Politburo: “He has his own mind, he has experienced much, and gone through many a difficult period. He spent seven years in the countryside, then eighteen years in Fujian and Zhejiang provinces, before going to Shanghai. I would put him in Nelson Mandela’s class of people. A person with enormous emotional stability who does not allow his personal misfortunes or sufferings to affect his judgment.”¹⁰ Jean-Pierre Raffarin, foreign minister of France 2002-2005, agrees: “When Xi Jinping is at the United Nations, people notice. When he goes to Africa, everyone follows him. He has the appeal of a great leader.”¹¹

“Peaceful rise” was a maxim adopted by Hu, based on careful studies in China of what can happen when an emerging power appears as a threat against the prevailing superpower. This is a matter of avoiding the so-called Thucydides trap, named for the Greek general and historian Thucydides, who studied how the conflict between Sparta and Athens in the fifth century B.C. had developed – that is, to a war between the prevailing state and the emerging one.¹² After a while, Hu thought the expression

⁹ Source: see note 3.

¹⁰ François Bougon, *Inside the Mind of Xi Jinping*, Hurst & Company, London, 2018, pp. 16-17.

¹¹ Source: see note 3.

¹² Professor Graham Allison of Harvard University describes Thucydides’ insight thus: “ ... Thucydides identified two key drivers of this dynamic: the rising power’s growing entitlement, sense of its importance, and demand for greater say and sway, on the one hand, and the fear, insecurity, and determination to defend the status quo this engenders in the established power, on the other.” See Graham Allison, “The Thucydides Trap: Are the U.S. and China Headed for War?” *The Atlantic*, 24 September 2015. See

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“Peaceful rise” might be a bit provocative and adopted a more disarming formulation, “Peaceful development.”

But Xi wanted something else. Now it was time to stop fooling around with the West.¹³ Hu Jintao had been too weak and accommodating. Hu had permitted “internal democracy” in the party, but Xi put a stop to that. Consultative votes in the Central Committee were also put to an end. In lieu of secret voting, Xi installed a system he could control, namely, interviews and conversations with others when decisions need to be made.

Document No. 9

In July 2012, a few months before Xi Jinping took over as General Secretary of the CCP, what came to be known as “Document No. 9” began to circulate among the top echelon of the leadership in China. Its distribution was confined to the party leadership. But a courageous journalist arranged for it to be leaked out, for which he was promptly sentenced to seven years in jail. The document lays out Xi’s thought and plans for his China, including:¹⁴

- Infiltration by foreign powers must be stopped.
- China must learn from the disintegration of the Soviet Union.
- The ideological foundation of the Party must be significantly fortified.

Among the central themes laid out in the document, singled out as forbidden subjects in the media as well as in the research programs and curricula of universities and high schools, five can be mentioned:

1. Constitutional democracy, which Chinese dissidents have championed for, starting from China’s own constitution from 1982, but Xi wants nothing to do with it. Dispersion of power, a multiparty system, free elections, an independent judicial system, and the subservience of the military to the state rather than the party are to be “non-themes” in the media as well as in universities and high schools.

2. Universal values, namely, the idea that the western value system rises above time and space as well as above nations and social classes, must be rejected. There are clear

<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/09/united-states-china-war-thucydides-trap/406756>.

¹³ For more on this, see Minxin Pei (2018).

¹⁴ See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Document_Number_Nine.

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differences between those values and those which China adheres to. The United Nations Declaration of Human Rights cuts no ice in China. For the Middle Kingdom, as the story about Chinese values will be known, they will succeed in other countries.

3. The emergence of civil society requires individual rights, which is "... a proposition close to scandalous in the Party leader's eyes."¹⁵ Further, an organic civil society could constitute a threat to the Party. The Party's role as leader of the masses could then be taken over by others.

4. A free press cannot be permitted because media must be subject to Party discipline and their most important task is to support the political stance of the Party.

5. Historical nihilism, which refers to a critical accounting for China's own past, is forbidden. Criticism of Mao is not allowed. To weaken Mao is to undermine China. For Xi Jinping it is important that China's honorable history appear as a harmonic whole.

Let us elaborate a bit on the disintegration of the Soviet Union. It began with Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin at the Soviet Communist Party 20th congress in 1956. By thus criticizing the party's own history and exposing its leader for almost 30 years, Khrushchev weakened the party's legitimacy. A seed is sown when the country's top leader criticizes the foregoing one. Almost 30 years after Khrushchev was deposed, Mikhail Gorbachev became the General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party. The wheels started rolling. With new thinking centered on *glasnost* and *perestroika* Gorbachev wanted the Soviets to cast off the yoke of the oppressive communist system by moving the country toward the values and system of governance of the West. The experiment ended in a botched coup against Gorbachev in August 1991, where Boris Yeltsin, as President of the Soviet Republic Russia, emerged as savior. A few months later Russia withdrew from the Soviet Union, triggering the dissolution of the Union.

Xi Jinping has on many occasions referred to the demise of the Soviet Union and how unnecessary it was for the cradle of communism to be smashed. Unnecessary, he has said, because the Soviets had allowed western attitudes to creep into their country and conceded space to western propaganda. By signing the Helsinki Declaration in 1975, the Soviet regime had enabled dissidents to demonstrate that prevailing restrictions against the freedom of expression and the freedom to travel violated the principles that the Soviet government had accepted in Helsinki. This became the inspiration for dissident

¹⁵ François Bougon, *Inside the Mind of Xi Jinping*, Hurst & Company, London, 2018, p. 156.

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movements such as Charta 77.¹⁶ Unnecessary, Xi further argued, also because the Soviet Communist Party was larger than the CCP is today relative to population. The Soviet Party leadership charted the wrong path for the country's development and failed to cope with crisis that resulted. They lacked the strength to keep the lid on.

As for the last point, one of us remembers a seminar at Fudan University in Shanghai in the early 2000s. A group of businesspeople had the pleasure of hearing a Chinese professor give a talk on China's economy. The professor spent a good deal of time on the Great Leap Forward, Mao's extraordinary project to increase the production of industrial goods, especially steel, so that he could catch up with the rich countries of the world in a jiffy. The speaker's own research suggested that 22 million Chinese lost their lives. In addition, many children were born with deformities due to the malnourishment of their mothers.

In today's China, it is inconceivable that a professor would conduct such research, let alone present it to a Western audience. A critical assessment of China's past is not allowed under Xi. He understands better than his predecessors that having control over the past is important for those who want control over the future.

But a global leadership based on untruths about its own past, how robust can it be? The openness on display in China in the first decade of the 21st century, through conversations, seminars, and teaching, has now disappeared, having given way to increasingly strict rules about what is appropriate to say and think. In short, the dangers Xi Jinping's China faces, in Xi Jinping's assessment, are universal values and liberal democracy.

Xi looks to the dissolution of the Soviet Union for a recipe for how not to deal with these challenges. While Khrushchev took Stalin down from his pedestal, Xi Jinping went the opposite way – rehabilitating Mao. “We thought we would get a Gorbachev, but we got a Putin,” it was said.

Confucius is back in full bloom in China. Why? Confucian values, deeply rooted as they are in Chinese culture, can be harnessed to promote the stability of a society where the individual cannot be counted on adapting to the whole. In Xi's China everything hangs together. For the current regime to base its existence on Confucius as well as on Mao provides fertile ground for pride in the long history of the Middle Kingdom.

¹⁶ See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charter_77.

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But for those who remember Mao's 1973 "Criticize Lin (Biao), Criticize Confucius" campaign, it all sounds familiar as well as contradictory. Francois Bougon writes: "The alliance between Confucianism and Marxism, which defies logic to an outside observer, is probably a means of compensating for the regime's weakness."¹⁷

The West is perceived as a threat facing China, a threat that China must stem. Xi Jinping does not appreciate the values we stand for and the management systems we have, which is why we must keep the dialogue with China going and continue the cooperation, says Professor Jean-Pierre Cabestan at Hong Kong Baptist University, even if China's ideological and imperial ambitions are becoming increasingly apparent. We must put pressure on China on political, economic, and military issues where appropriate. Cabestan further maintains that a friendly relationship with the Chinese state is simply not possible. Their values are too different from ours. When it comes to trust in the Chinese state, Jean-Pierre Cabestan writes: "Let us not seek "trust" from a partner that fundamentally distrusts us, as it sees in democracy a threat to its own system. Let us instead protect our interests."¹⁸ We must be more vigilant towards Chinese initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) – if the intention is to capture as many countries as possible into China's sphere – and set clear conditions for our economic relations with China. Not only to promote our own values, but also to better protect them. Precisely this vigilance that Professor Cabestan is calling for here is what we now see taking shape in the form of the EU's new directives from 2019 for relations with China, which has gone from being a strategic partner to a "systemic rival."¹⁹

All power to this man

Deng Xiaoping was fully aware that a reiteration of Mao's one-man rule had to be avoided. By allowing Jiang Zemin to take all three key positions as General Secretary of the Party, head of the Military Commission, and President of China, it became important

¹⁷ François Bougon, *Inside the Mind of Xi Jinping*, Hurst & Company, London, 2018, p. 139.

¹⁸ Cabestan (2019, p. 182). He also writes (p. 181): "Above all, we should avoid using the word "friendship" ... any expression including the idea (friends, friendly relations) is meant to disarm foreign partners facing Chinese government's demands. Once such relations have been established, all negotiations become arduous, caught up in a web of obligations unfavorable to us and that we don't need." See Jean-Pierre Cabestan, *China Tomorrow. Democracy or Dictatorship*, Rowman & Littlefield, New York, 2019.

¹⁹ See <https://isdpeu/publication/china-and-the-eu-strategic-partners-no-more/>.

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that the latter job had a fixed limit of two five-year terms. This meant that the first two jobs would also be subject to the same restriction if the same man was to occupy all three positions. Hu Jintao had in mind the idea of introducing into the statutes of the CCP a restriction of two five-year terms here as well. But that did not happen. Precedent or custom was so firmly established that it was probably considered unnecessary.

At the Party congress in October 2017, “Xi Jinping Thought of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics in the New Era” was inserted into the Constitution of the CCP. Thus, Xi joined Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping, his sole predecessors to have had their thoughts and visions incorporated into the constitution of the Party while still active leaders. This has great symbolic value in China. For Xi, this means that his vision gains more heft and that he himself earns increased prestige. With his thoughts enshrined in the constitution, how easy is it then to take him on?

China Daily wrote approvingly about the change in the Party’s constitution,²⁰ “... Xi’s thought reflects the high degree of consensus the Party has built around its leadership core ... Given Xi’s – and now officially the Party’s – aspiration for a community of shared future for all mankind, there is no reason for the country to be “assertive” on the global stage as some in the West are speculating.”

The phrase “aspiration for a community of shared future for all mankind” sounds reassuring and disarming, especially when followed by the statement that the West’s fears that China will become “assertive” on the global stage are completely unfounded. But what is the reality on the ground? President Obama is promised by Xi that “cyber-theft” from the Chinese side will be stopped. Yet it continues. China promises that military installations in the South China Sea are not in the cards. Yet they are being built like never before. China promises to open up its own markets for EU countries’ investments but fails to do so. China has signed an agreement with the EU on reciprocal foreign investment but the European Parliament has not yet approved the deal, which is mired in controversy.

In the vote in China’s National Assembly in March 2018, the rule that the country’s President can only be re-elected once as was rescinded. This means that Xi Jinping, who according to custom was to resign as General Secretary of the Party in the fall of 2022, and, by law, as President of China in the spring of 2023, can continue as China’s

²⁰ See http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/2017-10/24/content_33660431.htm.

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undisputed leader indefinitely, President for Life. Deng's scheme of collective leadership with democratic characteristics, in the sense that an orderly system for changing leaders was established, had suddenly disappeared. This came as a shock to many. What will the future bring with a new Mao as leader of the Middle Kingdom?

Not everyone was happy. At the end of February 2018, Li Datong, a renowned Chinese journalist living in Beijing, posted a letter on WeChat. It was addressed to the delegates from Beijing to the Chinese National Assembly, who a week later would vote on the proposal to remove the rule that the country's President can only serve for two terms.²¹ It was a brave thing to do. But, as Li said on the phone to the BBC, I'm too old (born 1952) to be afraid of the authorities.²²

His letter was quickly removed, but it has become known anyway. One method was to post it upside down on the internet.²³

In the letter, Li Datong writes:

"As I understand it, the stipulation in the 1982 Constitution that the national leaders of China may not serve for more than two terms in office was political reform measure taken by the Chinese Communist Party and the people of China after the immense suffering wrought by the Cultural Revolution. This was the highest and most effective legal restriction preventing personal dictatorship and personal domination of the Party and the government, and it was a major point of progress in raising the level of political civilization in China, in line with historical trends. It was also one of the most important political legacies of Deng Xiaoping. China can only move forward on this foundation, and there is emphatically no reason to move in the reverse direction. Removing term limitations on national leaders will subject us to the ridicule of the civilized nations of the world. It means moving backward into history, and planting the seed once again of chaos in China, causing untold damage. I ask you please to take the greatest interests of the Chinese people into consideration first and foremost, earnestly considering our

²¹ 2,964 voted for. Two voted against. Three abstained. And one vote was invalid.

²² Here is a short summary of what Li Datong said to the BBC: "As a Chinese citizen, I have to fulfill my responsibility and tell the delegates my opinion. I don't care what these delegates will do ... I am a voter and I write a letter to the delegates representing me. I express my opinion on the amendments. It is very safe legally. Even if the amendment is passed, it doesn't matter. History is often like this - we make two steps forward and one step back. But this is against the tide of civilisation and won't stand the test of time. It will be considered a farce in Chinese history in the future." See <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-43212839>.

²³ <http://chinamediaproject.org/2018/02/28/li-datongs-open-letter/>.

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request and submitting your dissenting vote – for the long-term peace and stability of China, and for the preservation of political civilization in China.”

Deng Xiaoping wanted the Government to have clearly demarcated tasks, separate from the Party. The formulation of policy belonged mainly to the Party – above all the seven members that make up the Politburo's standing committee.²⁴ But the implementation of the policy requires a lot of decisions to be made along the way. And here it is important that the government apparatus is filled with highly skilled people. President Jiang Zemin (1992-2002) had a very skilled Prime Minister, Zhu Rongji. He was central to the work of streamlining the state-owned enterprises – within a few years, their work force was reduced by more than 30 million. He also managed the state's finances and played a key role in getting China into the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001.

Hu Jintao (2002-2012) had Wen Jiabao as Prime Minister. Wen appeared to be a caring person whom people could trust. This became clear after a major earthquake in Sichuan in May 2008. Just a few hours after the quake, the Prime Minister jumped on a plane to this province to take part in the rescue operation and to comfort people. But Wen had another side as well. He was corrupt. During his time as Prime Minister, he amassed a fortune of at least \$ 2.7 billion for himself and his family as thoroughly documented in the *New York Times* in October 2012 by David Barboza.²⁵

The point here is that while each of the two previous administrations in China consisted of doubles – Jiang/Zhu 1992-2002 and Hu/Wen 2002-2012 – today's China is largely governed by one man. Xi has replaced this established system of governance in China by creating so-called “Leading Small Groups,” which, without it being fully known of who is involved in them or when they meet, have the task of coordinating and developing policies covering broad themes. By establishing LSGs in key areas, ensuring that they have a clear mandate, and ensuring that people close to himself go along, Xi meets less resistance to his policies. The most important is the LSG for Comprehensive Deepening Reform. This group has a permanent secretariat, writes speeches for Xi, and drafts party documents. It has its own network of subgroups in all 31 provinces.

²⁴ Usually seven, mostly between five and eleven, always an odd number to avoid deadlock.

²⁵ Wen's mother had an investment in a Chinese financial services firm valued in 2007 at USD 120 million. How she made all this money is not known, nor is “... even if she was aware of the holdings in her name.” See <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/26/business/global/family-of-wen-jiabao-holds-a-hidden-fortune-in-china.html>.

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Through this LSG, Xi can promote policies that bypass the bureaucrats in the state apparatus. Another important LSGs, the National Security Commission, focuses on both external and internal security. A third, the Central Commission for Politics and the Judiciary, closely monitors what happens in the judiciary. Xi Jinping is himself the chairman of all three Leading Small Groups. In sum, Xi has amassed more power than any previous leader of China, except Mao.

To repeat, he has done this in three main ways. First and foremost, he has removed the presidential term limit. This is the most serious change that underpins the other two. As Li Datong writes, this rule was a great gain for China as a guarantee against personal dictatorship. Second, Xi does not have to accommodate any Vice President in line to take power after him, when his second term expires in the spring of 2023. Third, by establishing Leading Small Groups in key areas, Xi has usurped power that was previously held by the Government and other bodies.

Media to serve the Party

Ren Zhiqiang is a couple of years older than Xi Jinping. Like Xi, Ren is a “red princeling:” the son of a leading revolutionary from Mao’s era. His father was persecuted during the Cultural Revolution.

Ren has had a remarkable career as a loyal Party member, who nonetheless was strongly critical at times. Quite outspoken, he is popular in many circles. Seen as “a loose cannon,” he has all the same made a shining career in business.

Liu He, who is Xi’s chief negotiator in the trade relations with the United States, was in his time an assistant to Ren. Yu Zhengsheng, who was a member of the Politburo’s standing committee 2012-2017, had great respect for Ren’s arguments, even though he did not always agree. In the introduction to a book Ren published in 2002, Yu writes that Ren’s “... candid remarks and philosophical argument left a deep impression on me.” Obviously, Ren had the best interests of the country in mind. As he himself has put it, “Dissent is the highest form of patriotism.”²⁶ The two have kept in touch.

Wang Qishan, another member of the Politburo’s standing committee during 2012-2017, is a friend of Ren’s since their school days. Wang is perhaps Xi’s closest and most

²⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/31/business/china-ren-zhiqiang-censorship.html>.

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trusted comrade in arms.²⁷ It was hardly a coincidence that Xi Jinping put him in charge of the fight against corruption during 2012-2017.

As custom dictates that one should not be reappointed to top jobs in CCP after the age of 68, and Wang was 69 years old when the new appointment to the Politburo's standing committee took place in 2017, there were tense concerns about whether Xi would break this rule as well. He did not. Instead, he appointed Wang Vice President of China. In this capacity, Wang makes good use of himself – especially in the field of foreign policy.

Early in 2016, Xi Jinping stated that he wanted to tame the media: “All news media run by the party must work to speak for the party's will and its propositions and protect the party's authority and unity.”²⁸

This is not in line with Ren Zhiqiang's thinking. The younger generation must be trained to think independently, he says. In his autobiography,²⁹ Ren, who is influenced by Western thinkers such as Milton Friedman and Friedrich Hayek, writes that state power must be subject to popular control. CCTV journalists took him up on this. “CCTV's surname is the Party,” they wrote on a banner they proudly displayed when Xi visited them in 2016, adding: “We are absolutely loyal.” This probably confirmed to Ren what he had said about this TV station in 2014: “the dumbest pig on earth.” Ren Zhiqiang responded on Weibo, China's Twitter: “When does the people's government turn into the party's government? [Are the media] funded by party membership dues? Don't waste taxpayers' money on things that do not provide them with services.”³⁰ His 37 million followers did not get much time to read his tweet as the post was quickly removed. A few days later, Ren was accused of wanting to overthrow the Party. Having friends like Liu and Yu, and not least Wang, probably helped. So, his punishment was confined to blocking his Weibo account because he spread “illegal information” as well as to deprive him of his Party membership for one year.

Ren's claim that the (tax-financed) media should serve the people and not the Party – in which case the people would suffer – received a clear confirmation at the outbreak of the coronavirus in Wuhan at the end of 2019. Doctors who wanted to warn of the danger were gagged by the authorities. When the media cannot inform the public about the

²⁷ See <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/31/business/china-ren-zhiqiang-censorship.html>.

²⁸ <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/23/world/asia/china-media-policy-xi-jinping.html>.

²⁹ Ren Zhiqiang, *Elegant Ambition: Ren Memoirs* (Chinese Edition), 2013.

³⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ren_Zhiqiang <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/08/critic-xi-jinping-clown-ren-zhiqiang-covid-19-outbreak-investigated-china>

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actual events, people's lives are ruined two ways: by the catastrophe itself and also by the lack of freedom of the press. In an essay with limited distribution, Ren Zhiqiang wrote just that. But it came out anyway.³¹ And Ren, who in the essay suggested that the country's supreme leader is a clown, disappeared on the 12th of March as did his son and his assistant. In September 2020, Ren was sentenced to 18 years in prison.³²

The Chinese dream

On the 18th of March 1839, British warships stormed the port of Canton. All resistance was struck down with armed force. China was forced to surrender. The "first opium war" was followed by the second, and then by brutal invasions, internal riots, civil war, and war with Japan before the Chinese themselves became masters of their own house. On the 1st of October 1949, Mao, in Tiananmen Square, was able to declare the founding of the People's Republic of China. The period that later became known as the "Hundred Years of Humiliation" was over.

They left deep footprints.

"The Chinese dream has its roots in Western aggression," Liu Mingfu, a former colonel and author, has said.³³ He went on: "We want to make China a great power again. Xi Jinping asked the people to put all objections aside on the road to the Chinese dream, and follow him blindly, like a prophet, to world domination."

Francois Bougon points out that Xi must find new legitimacy for the one-party government in China. While Mao saw China throw off the yoke of foreign powers, and Deng's reforms increased economic growth, Xi finds new legitimacy in nationalism – emphasizing China's greatness. In 2013, Xi Jinping introduced two new days of national unity and patriotism. September 30 was called Martyr Day to mark the monument to the Heroes of the People in Tiananmen Square, and December 13 commemorates the Nanking massacres committed by the Japanese, which cost 300,000 Chinese lives, according to the Chinese authorities' calculations. This follows Mao's well-known method, Francois Bougon maintains.³⁴

³¹ <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/020/03/translation-essay-by-missing-property-tycoon-ren-zhiqiang/>

³² <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/22/world/asia/china-ren-zhiqiang-tycoon.html>.

³³ Source: see note 3.

³⁴ Bougon (2019, 99-100) writes: "As soon as he came to power, Mao established the celebration of the spirit of sacrifice and ordered that 'narratives recalling the bitterness of the past and the happiness of the present' be disseminated, as well as testimonies of the deeds of both 'diabolic

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Among the first things Xi Jinping did as the newly appointed General Secretary of the CCP was to visit the National Museum in Beijing with the others in the Politburo's Standing Committee to hold his maiden speech there as China's new leader. Here he launched his dream for the Middle Kingdom, a dream he has held fast to. It gives us a good insight into Xi's wishes and goals for China. The youth must dare to dream and to work hard for a revitalization of the nation. A dream of progress, collective effort, and the nation's honor.³⁵ The emphasis on hard work and on "entrepreneurial spirit" Xi has naturally imported from the "American dream." Women and men, who migrate from the countryside to the cities, and by their own efforts improve their material conditions and experience a richer social life, are glorified in the dream.

But unlike the American dream that focuses on the individual, Xi dreams of the Chinese people as one. With the nation at the center, nationalism and a patriotic fervor become central to its realization. The dream envisages that China – on the occasion of the centenary of the Chinese Communist Party in 2021 – will be a "moderately prosperous society." Or as Confucius said, a "xiaokang society," a concept firmly rooted in Chinese culture and history: a society where people live relatively comfortably, albeit ordinarily. Embedded in Xi's dream is the goal of doubling gross domestic product from 2010 to 2020. The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic intruded inconveniently without thwarting this goal. China's GDP, measured in constant 2010 USD, more than doubled from 2009 to 2019 compared with a 25 percent increase in the United States.³⁶

To ensure that the new generation becomes familiar with The Chinese Dream, the head of the CCP's propaganda department and a member of the Politburo's Permanent Committee (2012-2017), Liu Yunshan, decided that this dream should be incorporated into textbooks. Not included in the dream, however, are thoughts on political reforms. The liberal weekly newspaper *Southern Weekly*, which tested the waters by publishing an article called "The Chinese dream: a dream of constitutionalism," unsurprisingly, was quickly subjected to censorship.³⁷

people' – the Japanese 'devils,' landowners, capitalists and so on – and 'good people,' the Communists. The aim of these frequently simplistic narratives was to keep alive the memory of past suffering, in order to rejoice over the better life now offered by the Party."

³⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese_Dream.

³⁶ Source: World Bank, *World Development Indicators* 2021.

³⁷ See <https://chinacopyrightandmedia.wordpress.com/2013/01/01/the-chinese-dream-the-dream-of-constitutional-governance/>. Here is a passage from the article: "Only by honoring the commitment of constitutional governance, limiting and dividing power, will citizens be able to loudly proclaim their criticism of public power ... Fulfilling dreams naturally requires the

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When the People's Republic of China turns one hundred years old in 2049, China will appear as a leading superpower in the world, if not the leading power – economically and politically as well as militarily and scientifically. Further, the Chinese must live in harmony with nature and with each other, in a rich culture with a high moral standard. China will rise again as the Middle Kingdom it once was, which is China's rightful place in the world. The humiliations China has been subjected to by Western powers and Japan since the First Opium War (1839-1842) have been overcome.

But if former Colonel Liu Mingfu's prediction comes true, the Chinese will follow Xi Jinping on his way to world domination.

Epilogue

We have cited only a few among the large number of recent books on China (Bougon 2019, Brown 2019, Cabestan 2019, and McGregor 2019). There are other works as well that we could have referred to, including those dealing with the intensifying commercial and also philosophical conflict between China and the United States (e.g., Bell 2015, Jacques 2009, and Mahbubani 2020). Bell (2015), in particular, is less critical of China's attitudes toward democracy and human rights. Fifteen years ago one of us predicted that India, because it is a democracy, might ultimately be able to offer its people a higher standard of life than China (Gylfason 2006), a prediction that has not materialized, at least not yet.

Democracy has weakened in America in recent years as documented by Freedom House³⁸ and others and, moreover, African Americans remain disadvantaged in terms of human rights. United States lecturing China on democracy, truth, and human rights rings hollow. America could strengthen its case by taking democracy and human rights more seriously at home.

Baum (2010), Chow (2004), and Isachsen (2012) provide accessible introductions to China for the general reader.

assimilation of foreign experiences. Therefore, we must earnestly examine Greek democracy and Roman rule of law, learn from Anglo-American constitutional governance, and pursue modern science, technology, and civilization ... The Chinese people ought to have been free people. The Chinese dream ought to have been constitutional governance."

³⁸ See <https://freedomhouse.org/country/united-states/freedom-world/2020>.

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