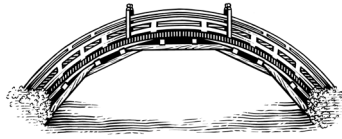


BOOK REVIEW ROUNDTABLE

Steve Tsang and Olivia Cheung's  
*The Political Thought of Xi Jinping*  
New York: Oxford University Press, 2024  
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*David M. Lampton*

*Kerry Brown*

*Jessica C. Teets*

*Yan C. Bennett*

*Steve Tsang and Olivia Cheung*

## Strong Man, Strong Party, Precarious System?

David M. Lampton

With *The Political Thought of Xi Jinping*, Steve Tsang and Olivia Cheung have written an important book. The book specifies the core ideological and institutional changes Xi Jinping has made since 2012 and the enormous departure those alterations represent from Mao Zedong's three successors—Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, and Hu Jintao. This book reminds analysts of the People's Republic of China (PRC), and the policymakers who deal with China, how essential it is to pay close attention to theoretical discourse and the flow of party documents. Because analysts' direct contact with PRC elites has declined since Xi took office, documentary analysis and focus on ideology have assumed progressively greater importance. Nonetheless, documents alone cannot substitute for the nuance and texture that dialogue and interviews can provide.

*The Political Thought of Xi Jinping* describes not only the strengths of the Xi system but also its vulnerabilities. One cannot read this book without seriously questioning how long the system's tectonic plates can remain stable, although the PRC has shown remarkable capacity to muddle through since Mao died (albeit at considerable cost).

As I reached the volume's concluding pages, I recalled Franz Schurmann's magisterial volume, first published in 1966, *Ideology and Organization in Communist China*. Its core aim was to understand how Mao (with enormous help from Liu Shaoqi) constructed a set of political ideas, organizational structures, and routine practices that had proven durable through the agonizing changes from 1949 to 1966. As Schurmann framed his central proposition: "Communist China is like a vast building made of different kinds of brick and stone. However it was put together, it stands. What holds it together is ideology and organization."<sup>1</sup>

No sooner was the ink dry on Schurmann's first edition of *Ideology and Organization in Communist China* than the system assumed to provide stability evaporated in what became a decade of chaos, violence, and

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<sup>1</sup> Franz Schurmann, *Ideology and Organization in Communist China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 1.

retrogression, ironically called the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. None other than Mao was the agent provocateur mobilizing the masses, a Saturn devouring his son, to assault the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) that he had done so much to build over the preceding decades. These developments shattered that era's idea that CCP ideology and organization were necessarily durable adhesives. That earlier experience should caution analysts to always keep systemic weaknesses in mind as well as apparent strengths.

Tsang and Cheung painstakingly and comprehensively document how, in today's new era, General Secretary Xi has exerted his theoretical and organizational control over the CCP and built a body of doctrine, organizations, and practices aimed at transforming China into a modern, secure, and sufficiently prosperous country to, above all, keep himself in power and achieve for the PRC first-rank status in the global power system. They describe Xi's "ambition for China" to be to "reclaim" its historic centrality, a righteous one good for all under heaven" (p. 191). Will this effort prove more successful than those of the 1950s and 1960s? Will the costs be fewer?

*The Political Thought of Xi Jinping* describes how Xi has revived old ideas of governance and married them to new technology able to monitor behaviors, shape thought, and limit the information universe available to Chinese people. Like Schurmann, Tsang and Cheung paint a portrait of a powerful and adaptable system. But, unlike Schurmann's work 58 years ago, they also prepare the reader for the possibility that Xi's house of cards could weaken, perhaps precipitously. The core challenge facing the regime today, as under Mao, is how to fashion a disciplined, leader-responsive organization that fosters innovation, makes China rich and powerful, and maintains popular support, all the while assuring that the party remains unquestionably responsive to the great leader who will brook no challenge to his authority, and who, above all, fears his own people and even the party he runs. It is a Mundell-Fleming-like trilemma—you can't simultaneously maximize single-leader power, innovative capacity/economic dynamism, and political/social stability.

Tsang and Cheung explain that, for Xi, the party is to "lead everything" and the great leader aims to singularly control the party. The much more collective decision-making processes characteristic of Xi's three predecessors are a dead letter. One of Xi's problems is that his seemingly successful efforts to concentrate power have "established many enemies in the Party" (p. 61) and, of course, any leader's actual span of effective control is limited. In the book's final pages the authors point to the pathologies of the seemingly strong-man system Xi has built, which

include: making the policy process an “echo chamber” that amplifies the leader’s voice and drowns out discordant information; killing pragmatism; demotivating subordinates with endless rectification efforts; implementing initiatives excessively; funneling resources toward economically dubious projects; and setting off security alarm bells along China’s enormous periphery and among other great and middle-sized powers. However, as Tsang and Cheung point out, “one important area where Xi Thought has been very successful is in shaping ‘one people’ out of the Chinese, at least among the Han majority...making the overwhelming majority of people in China subscribe to its party-centric nationalism” (p. 205).


Xi’s compulsion for control is a strong indicator that he remembers Mao’s injunction of 1930 that “a single spark can start a prairie fire.” And Xi attributes the fall of the Soviet Union to what he regards as the personal weakness of Mikhail Gorbachev. This perhaps helps account for why Russia’s Putin and Xi meet with striking frequency and for the fact that national security (internal and external) is conflated with party security and, above all, Xi’s personal security.

The book is organized in straightforward fashion, beginning with a long exegesis on the “Political Thought of Xi Jinping.” Revealingly, Mao had five volumes in his *Selected Works* and Xi, whose leadership has thus far been of much shorter duration, is nearing that number—the party’s theoretical journal, *Qiushi* (Seeking Truth) is a primary vehicle by which Xi’s evolving thinking is promoted. After covering theory and thought, Tsang and Cheung successively address: reinvigorating the party and constructing new institutions, not least the proliferation of commissions and leading small groups that Xi chairs; writing an upgraded social contract superseding the post-1989 contract that gave citizens prosperity in return for political quiescence; Xi’s economic goals; party-centric nationalism; and implications for foreign policy. *The Political Thought of Xi Jinping* could be used to great benefit in both domestic politics and foreign policy courses, being most appropriate for graduate-level work.

One interesting question, only lightly addressed in the book, concerns Wang Huning, seemingly Xi’s alter ego and idea man. Wang started out as an academic at Fudan University, spent some time in the United States (including at the Universities of Michigan, California, and Iowa), hitched his horse to Jiang Zemin’s chariot, moved into Hu Jintao’s entourage, and later still transitioned to become a Xi acolyte and confidante, ascending to the Standing Committee of the Politburo in 2017. All this raises the question of how much of Xi Thought is actually Wang Thought. Is Wang just a glib propagandist that

can sense Xi's underlying impulses and articulate them in a systematic way? Or does this evaluation underestimate his separable importance?

The final portion of the book examines Xi's ruminations and actions in the realm of foreign policy. Given Xi's domestic governance proclivities, and his ambitions for China's global role now and in the years ahead, it is little wonder that major powers and most of China's smaller neighbors feel anxious, with deterrence playing a large role in both China's foreign policy and that of many of those dealing with Beijing. The authors' core foreign policy argument is that Xi abandoned Deng Xiaoping's "hide and bide policy" early on in favor of a more assertive, aggressive role on the global stage, with such behavior grounded in visions of an eventual Sinocentric world order (*tianxia*). Key features of Xi Thought on foreign affairs, evidenced from his early days in power, have been: emphasizing the "patriotic obligations," not only of PRC citizens but also of the global Chinese diaspora; enlisting Russia in the effort to offset U.S. dominance and undermine Western cohesiveness; and undertaking progressively more muscular efforts to bring Taiwan into the PRC's embrace, an essential step in cementing Xi's and the party's legitimacy and reinforcing the "civilizational greatness" and "Chinese patriot" narratives. The authors conclude that Beijing's current calls for "win-win cooperation" and for a "democratic global order"—in which all nations, small and large, are equal—are interim tactical feints obscuring a more ambitious *tianxia* strategic objective.

Tsang and Cheung's realistic portrait of Xi and Xi Thought leaves me with five overarching policy questions against the backdrop of a diffusion of power across nations in tandem with the United States' own large domestic problems. First, has the United States managed the cultural nationalism of the Xi regime effectively? Or instead has Washington fed destructive Chinese nationalism unnecessarily, failing to make appropriate "room" for China in the international system and driving Beijing and Moscow into a tight mutual embrace? Second, how strong is Xi's system? Third, despite the bleak picture of China's antagonistic relations with the West, can we find areas of global importance in which to cooperate? Fourth, if the United States and China move toward higher levels of friction or conflict, how many in the global system will effectively align with Washington? And, lastly, how can the United States and like-minded nations singularly and collectively deter the PRC without provoking that culturally nationalistic system that has nothing to do with Marxism and everything to do with Leninism? 

## How to Be a Good Cadre in Contemporary China

*Kerry Brown*

Around 2008, I was invited to give a speech at the Heilongjiang Academy of Social Sciences' Marxism-Leninism department in Harbin, northeast China. After the talk, I went to a bar with the director, who looked relieved that I had said nothing too incomprehensible or inane about the theme I was told to address—Marx and the environment. That Marx wrote very little about the environment, as I found when researching the talk, may have been the saving grace.

As the director lifted his drink to his lips, clearly relaxing a bit, an odd notion jumped into my head. Out of nowhere, I asked, “Do you really believe in Marxism-Leninism?” The poor man froze, the beer suspended in his hand. He looked at me seemingly overwhelmed by what I had just asked him, a note of panic in his eyes. “Well,” he finally said, but he never completed the sentence, letting it trail off as he slaked his thirst. It was in this way that I appreciated how asking a Chinese official a question like this was unlikely to be the best route to an answer.

Even so, the problem of what Chinese people believe, and in particular what Chinese leaders subscribe to, has never lost its fascination. As academics Steve Tsang and Olivia Cheung demonstrate in their clearly written, crisply executed study of the latest official ideology in China, *The Political Thought of Xi Jinping*, the amount of effort that Xi Jinping’s administration has put into forging a common worldview shows it must matter.

This timely study appears at a moment when, in the democratic West, claims of China spreading its influence and ideas are rife. Since 2012, Confucius Institutes, Chinese investments and partnerships, and Chinese academic organizations have all been accused of being carriers of nefarious ideas and viewpoints that they wish to propagate and infiltrate to the outside world. But the one thing that this book makes clear is that whatever Xi Jinping Thought is, it is clearly not accessible and immediately attractive to non-party members within China, let alone those outside it. In view of that, it is curious why so many impute it with potency and effectiveness.

That Xi Thought is often hard to understand and engage with by outsiders is partly because of the ways in which it is meant to be comprehensive and reach across almost all areas of governance, society,

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and the economy. It is, in a word, complex. The seven chapters of the book make this vividly clear. They start with answering why ideological unity within the party is considered so crucial. This is due to the ways in which, in good Leninist fashion, forging a collective, agreed line on contentious issues prevents arguments and fissures from forming that would otherwise divide the party if not clearly guided and prescribed. Other chapters address specific areas of policy and administration. One deals with how Xi Thought handles social issues, targeting deep income and wealth imbalances in society that grew rife over the Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao eras from 1989 to 2012. Another looks at the setting out of macroeconomic goals. There is also a chapter showing how Xi's ideology supports a form of populist nationalism that guides China's foreign policy and its relations with the outside world.

As some indication of just how ambitiously wide Xi Thought ranges, the discussion of technology in chapter 5 (on the economy) is a good example. A national goal of creating greater indigenous capacity in producing robots, aerospace equipment, railway technology, biomedicine, and high-end devices has placed at the heart of the "Made in China 2025" policy first announced around 2015. The reason for this was clear enough and is spelled out in the book—China's increasing awareness of its vulnerability in sourcing high-quality technology from the outside world and its need to take some kind of control over these supply chains rather than have them interrupted by political disagreements.

This proved a reasonably prescient attitude, at least strategically. Within eighteen months of the policy being announced, the Trump administration started its "trade war." President Joe Biden has continued this, with sanctions being placed on companies such as Huawei and a new law signed in late April 2024 demanding that the popular app TikTok be divested from its Chinese owner ByteDance and sold to a U.S. government-approved buyer within the next year. This single example shows the ways in which ideology in China is not so much about ideas but about how ideas can influence practice, and, in particular, how ideas can structure a strategic response across the vast body of Chinese government and its internal policymaking components.

*The Political Thought of Xi Jinping* is particularly good at outlining not just the content and aims of Xi Thought but also the practicalities of how it is made. It describes the process from the various entities in the party that devise and then promote ideology to their members via study days and training campaigns through to Xi Thought's final impact on specific areas of activity.

How is Xi Thought meant to appeal to Chinese people themselves? Tsang and Cheung state at one point that the party under Xi has been seeking a new social contract, one that makes clear the importance of national goals and the need for cohesiveness in society to achieve them. Interestingly, despite his crucial role as the core thinker for Xi and for his two predecessors Jiang and Hu, Wang Huning merits only two mentions in the book. And yet, he probably more than any other has promoted the notion so relevant here of not just a “materialist” Marxism for China, where the primary stage of socialism is being built infrastructure project by infrastructure project, but one where “spiritual goals” are also embraced. These goals involve the idea that China, unlike the outside world, has resisted being vexed by internal divisions and fragmentation by subscribing to a unified Chinese national identity and that all people need to belong to this under the guidance of the party.

This populist nationalism helps to reveal the hybridity of Xi era thinking. Tsang and Cheung rightly pay attention to the ways in which both Sinified Marxism and what is called “traditional Chinese thinking” from the classical past have enjoyed a renaissance under Xi. The themes in traditional Chinese philosophies of making people the key and promoting respect for harmony and order are traceable to the works of the Warring States philosophers of almost two and half millennia ago. Although he does not get a mention in the book, the legalism of Han Fei has been particularly important—the assertion of law and the use of law as a means of control rather than being controlled. That notion as deployed by the party (rule by law, not rule of law) has been particularly confusing for the outside world because in commercial law and some areas of criminal law (e.g., more scrutiny for death sentences and far clearer regulations for civil society organizations) things have changed. In the recent past it was about there being laws but no one taking notice of them. These days, under Xi, the laws are implemented with something approaching rigor.

This aspect aside, it is unlikely that the Chinese public pays any more attention to its government’s belief system than citizens elsewhere. In many ways, Xi’s domestic political approach before the pandemic had elements where the results were popularly supported rather than any specific set of ideas. The anticorruption campaign is an example, garnering wide applause from society (though Tsang and Cheung mention the ways in which this ranged beyond just cleaning up the party to targeting Xi’s potential enemies). The nationalist elements noted above have also served the government well in winning it popular support.



Since the pandemic in 2020, however, things have grown rockier. The insistence well-described in this book of the party as the be-all and end-all—in Xi’s words (quoting Mao Zedong), the “east, west, south, north, and center”—has worked as long as its economic, social, and diplomatic outcomes were positive and showed improvement. With the onset of deeper divisions between China and the United States since the pandemic, and with rising frustration in the country itself at the impact of anti-Covid-19 measures on the economy and life in general, things have become a lot less harmonious. The urban-living, service-sector-working middle class, so important for China’s growth and development, needs more than political mantras and ideological lectures these days. That is definitely a big difference from the period of Mao, which Xi’s era is so often, and so misleadingly, compared to.

*The Political Thought of Xi Jinping* is an excellent study. It sets out accessibly, clearly, and authoritatively an answer to the question of what at least the top-most leaders and the leader right at the heart of this group, Xi Jinping, want the world to think they believe. What they really believe is neither here nor there. These are the ideas, the manifesto as it were, that their political fortunes rely on. And because of the importance of China to the world, it is crucial the outside world has some understanding of this worldview, even if it has little empathy or sympathy with it. ♦

## China's New Social Contract: Common Prosperity and Responsive Government

*Jessica C. Teets*

In *The Political Thought of Xi Jinping*, Steve Tsang and Olivia Cheung critically examine the key tenets of “Xi Thought” as a political ideology and conclude that it should be understood as a proto-ideology since it has not yet fully developed into a coherent body of ideas. Despite its nascent development, the authors find that Xi Thought has changed China’s political system in some significant ways that are important to examine to understand Chinese domestic and foreign policies.

Using critical analysis of the statements and actions of Chinese president Xi Jinping that lead to recognizable patterns, Tsang and Cheung find that Xi Thought is “committed to forging one strong country, one patriotic people, guided by one ideology and led by one party with one leader at the top” (p. 4). Xi Thought has three pillars: “punishing the disloyal, ideological indoctrination, and centralizing the disciplinary regime” (p. 41). The authors argue that these tenets are in response to perceived “intense and severe threats” facing the Chinese Communist Party, including “lack of drive, incompetence, divorce from the masses, and corruption” (p. 41). Based on his statements, it appears Xi believes that institutions will eradicate corruption, that “power must be trapped in the cage of institutions” (p. 55), but that these institutions should discipline the regime under him rather than function autonomously (p. 68).

According to the authors, Xi Thought is an effort to shore up party discipline and vertical hierarchy as the political foundation for authoritarian consultation and good governance. Xi first eradicated factionalism and corruption (at least the more visible forms) before introducing structural changes to improve governance efficacy, and he revitalized party-centric nationalism as a unifying glue (p. 198). However, the authors contend that fundamental changes, in contrast to minor modifications, have not been made to the formal structure and institutions of the party or the Chinese government. Instead, they find that the consultative Leninist framework created under Jiang Zemin still applies and that the basic political system (the “hardware”) has remained

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essentially unchanged (p. 2). What has changed is how it operates, or the “software” (p. 4). For example, based on analysis of party political thought since the founding of the People’s Republic of China, the authors conclude that Xi Thought combines Liu Shaoqi’s Leninist approach with Mao Zedong’s ambition, leading to the deinstitutionalization of collective leadership (p. 198). Despite needing elite support, at least from the Politburo, the authors argue that “the ‘software upgrade’ has turned the Party from a vehicle that restrains [Xi Jinping’s] power to one that perpetuates it...in the foreseeable future” (p. 8). Illustrative of this, the rectification and anticorruption campaigns strengthen the party hierarchy and consolidate Xi’s power simultaneously (p. 9).

In chapter 4 the authors examine how Xi Thought contributes to designing a new social contract, by which the party promises “to meet public demands more effectively” (p. 10). In response, it requires citizens “to profess loyalty to the Party, to be willing to endure hardship for the nation, and to internalize a Party-serving narrative of history” (p. 10). The authors write, “Xi styles himself a consultative leader who gives the people what they want.... This shows that the de facto social contract under Xi strengthens the consultative and Leninist features of consultative Leninism simultaneously” (p. 92).

This new social contract is based on resolving poverty and inequality to transform the country into a moderately well-off society, or in the parlance of Xi Thought, the “common prosperity” framework. In addition to the ideology of Xi Thought, the common prosperity-based social contract offers both performance and procedural legitimacy. Performance legitimacy is delivered via daily governance results felt by local people, such as the ease in applying for government services via smartphone applications. Procedural legitimacy is based on standardization of governance (rule by law) and also on the idea of “responsive government” (*huiying xing zhengfu*) where “local grievances should be resolved, if not preempted, locally in the interest of de-escalation” (p. 100). It should be noted that this corresponds with Xi’s idea of a “true democracy” being one that is responsive to the needs of its citizens. In his “whole-process democracy” concept, the legitimacy of a democracy should be measured not by electoral process but by results felt by average citizens (p. 189).

As an example of common prosperity effectiveness, the book points to Zhejiang Province as the test site. To achieve common prosperity, Zhejiang is piloting a three-tier distribution system: (1) the first distribution “aims to increase and diversify the income of the poor,” (2) the second distribution

“aims to protect government revenue and strengthen the existing social safety net without a major overhaul,” and (3) the third distribution “aims to mobilize corporate philanthropy by increasing state extraction of the private sector but not [state-owned enterprises]” (p. 118). For the third or tertiary distribution, Tsang and Cheung contend that the vision of common prosperity is that large private businesses will take the lead by raising salaries, providing training, and reducing executive compensation; however, Xi does not see this as pushing government duties onto businesses, but rather “creating positive synergies between business and government based on the Party’s leadership” (p. 140). Although tertiary distribution is voluntary, the party strongly recommends that businesses implement it over time. Currently most companies have complied by making charitable donations but not by investing in upskilling employees or raising their wages. Thus, common prosperity focuses on direct redistribution between rich and poor and not on increasing government welfare by creating new taxes. As Xi stated, “We must resolutely avoid falling into the ‘welfarism’ trap of raising lazy people” (p. 142).

The authors’ understanding of common prosperity corresponds with my own analysis.<sup>1</sup> For example, the revised Charity Law was passed in December 2023 (and took effect in September 2024), and that legislation focused on new forms of corporate philanthropy like creating charitable trusts, implementing preferential tax policies to encourage donations, and tightly regulating online donation platforms to prevent fraud and control funding. In addition to legal changes, the party publicizes philanthropy by private businesses to create exemplar campaigns to show others how they should also be “voluntarily” donating to aid common prosperity.

The authors conclude by addressing two important questions: will Xi Thought be effective in reforming Chinese governance, and will it be able to replace the economic performance legitimacy as the new social contract? It is important to remember that social contracts are a series of commitments and expectations between society and government, and those commitments and expectations must be shared for a social contract to be effective.

In evaluating if Xi Thought will be effective in reforming Chinese governance, the authors believe that it already has changed both how the political system functions in China and foreign policy by shifting it away from “hide and bide.” The changes promote a more centralized

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<sup>1</sup> Jessica C. Teets, “Evaluating the Impact of Xi’s ‘Responsive Government’ Reforms on Policy Deliberation,” Wilson Center, 2024.

system and hinder some of the elements undergirding China's "resilient authoritarianism" but also have standardized government policies across the country and reduced local corruption. However, Tsang and Cheung worry that these changes eliminate policy feedback and make major policy mistakes more likely, disincentivize policy experimentation, lead to "formalism" or superficial compliance, and reward overzealous implementation of policies causing negative consequences (pp. 202–3).

In my surveys of local officials, I have also seen these effects in that the safest strategy for local officials is to not take any action unless ordered, and when taking action, to over-comply even if it causes unnecessary harm.<sup>2</sup> For example, in the central environmental enforcement campaign beginning in 2016, local officials shut down entire industries to demonstrate compliance rather than differentiate between firms that pollute and those that are investing in pollution solutions. Many local businesses had infrastructure damaged by overzealous local officials, went bankrupt, and laid off workers. Although environmental regulations were enforced, it was at the expense of local jobs, economic development, and sustainable environmental enforcement. While this type of local response appears effective in meeting targets, it does not contribute to meeting the underlying policy goals.

To answer the question of whether Xi Thought will be effective as a new social contract, as the party moves away from relying on economic performance as part of its legitimacy and "by emphasizing the Party's extraordinary capacity to lead and deliver," the authors warn that "Xi has unwittingly encouraged ordinary people to think that they should expect more from the Party" (p. 204). If public discontent with high unemployment or other problems occurs, the party must persuade angry citizens to adopt its assessment of performance rather than their own experience. The protests around the zero-Covid policies show how challenging this can be, so the party must be vigilant to monitor the public mood at precisely the moment that they have dismantled the former institutions that delivered popular feedback.

While I agree with the authors, I have also observed that by creating hotlines for public complaints, monitoring local responsiveness to these complaints, and moving the "letters and visits" authority from the state to the party, the party hopes to become more aware of citizen discontent before it ends up on the streets. If the government can truly transform into

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<sup>2</sup> Jessica C. Teets, "Paralysis versus Obedience: China's Local Policymakers' Strategic Adaptation to Political Centralization," Foreign Policy Research Institute, March 27, 2024 ~ <https://www.fpri.org/article/2024/03/chinas-local-policymakers-strategic-adaptation-to-political-centralization>.

one that is responsive and that earnestly addresses citizen complaints and tries to improve overall welfare, especially that of citizens in rural areas like the “left-behind children,” I would anticipate that this would be a very successful social contract. To analyze how well these reforms are working, it will be important to study the systems created to monitor how local governments respond to citizen complaints as well as whether the problems are actually resolved.

Overall Tsang and Cheung clearly explain Xi Thought, relate this proto-ideology to different policy areas, and evaluate the changes in the Chinese political system. I found myself agreeing with most of their conclusions and believe that this book is the most effective analysis of Xi Thought and common prosperity yet published. In addition to scholars, policymakers and analysts who read this book will gain a better understanding of Xi Jinping’s conception of the world and his ultimate goals for China’s future. ◆

## Xi Jinping Unveiled: Decoding China's Paramount Leader

*Yan C. Bennett*

Since Xi Jinping Thought was officially incorporated into the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Constitution in 2017, Westerners have struggled to understand what appears to be state-sponsored dogma rather than legitimate ideological discourse. Using typical Western philosophical and political analytical lenses, they find “shameless, self-aggrandizing propaganda glorifying Xi and the CCP” (p. 12). As Steve Tsang and Olivia Cheung clearly and intelligently express in *The Political Thought of Xi Jinping*, however, this is a serious miscalculation. Xi’s public statements are extremely valuable in revealing his strategic ambitions for China and its international relations. By analyzing Xi’s public discourse, Tsang and Cheung have provided a comprehensive and critical analysis of the discursive framework that influences China’s domestic and foreign policies under his leadership, offering insights into the strategic vision of one of the world’s most powerful nations.

As I have written in my own work, Xi Jinping Thought is a totalizing paradigm “with the purpose of maintaining the current regime, making Party rule the center of gravity.”<sup>1</sup> This is the crux of Xi Thought; it is the Sinification of Marxist-Leninist principles in the modern era. Tsang and Cheung elegantly identify Xi Thought as a proto-ideology guiding the CCP’s actions and policies, reshaping reform and opening up “so that China can profit from it and strengthen regime security and party supremacy simultaneously” (p. 14). Furthermore, they see that the ultimate aim behind Xi Thought is to “transcend Mao Thought and become the contemporary rendition of Marxism-Leninism in China” (p. 15). Drawing from elements of Mao’s worldview and ancient Chinese governance philosophies like legalism and Confucianism, Xi attempts to cement the notion that everyone in China is a loyal follower and contributor to the

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<sup>1</sup> Yan C. Bennett, “Xi Jinping Thought: Political Philosophy or Totalizing Paradigm?” in *China under Xi Jinping: An Interdisciplinary Assessment*, ed. Michał Dahl, Maciej Szatkowski, and Hanna Kupś (Leiden: Brill, 2024).

fulfillment of the Chinese dream of national rejuvenation, adapting these “-isms” to strengthen regime security and party supremacy (pp. 19–20). This book offers a much-needed perspective that helps highlight the importance of this proto-ideology and what it entails for the future of the People’s Republic of China (PRC).

Through analysis of Chinese primary sources and Xi’s actions, Tsang and Cheung have astutely identified Xi’s consolidation of power driven by his relentless efforts to strengthen the CCP and his own authority. Xi Thought has reinvigorated the CCP as a “Leninist instrument for governance and control under his leadership” (p. 40). The authors provide a detailed analysis of party rectification and anticorruption campaigns, highlighting their dual purpose: consolidation of both party hierarchy and Xi’s authority. Xi’s reinforcement of the CCP’s status as the vanguard of the Chinese state is another example of this consolidation. The authors discuss the reorganization of party structures, the transfer of state powers to the party, and the ideological indoctrination aimed at banning Western political ideas. I would go further to assert that the party is the fulcrum of Xi’s authority; Xi is nothing without the party—it is integral and central to his leadership. He has been meticulous in maintaining his relationship with the party to strengthen his position. Examples that include the purging of rival factions, ideological indoctrination, and the centralization of the disciplinary regime have all contributed to his consolidation of power within the party.<sup>2</sup>

Another insight Tsang and Cheung provide is Xi’s use of ancient Chinese governance ideals to Sinify Marxism-Leninism, fostering national cultural self-confidence and reinforcing the party’s dominance (p. 87). Nationalism and patriotism are integral to Xi Thought, and the book explores Xi’s efforts to cultivate these sentiments among the Chinese populace. Western observers tend to be baffled by what seems to be a return to ancient cultural and philosophical roots, perhaps connoting a rejection of modern ideology. Instead, the authors show that this patriotic education campaign is aimed at fostering loyalty to the CCP and achieving the China Dream through reinforcement of Marxism-Leninism. They highlight Xi’s use of cultural and educational reforms to embed core socialist values in ways that help promote his Sinocentric vision of socialism. Ultimately, “Xi wants the people of China to embrace the idea that socialism with Chinese characteristics is rooted in China’s glorious civilization” (p. 86). Under Xi,

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<sup>2</sup> Bennett, “Xi Jinping Thought,” 43.



the party consciously attempts to tether itself to China's splendid past to create legitimacy as the bearer of the country's ancient civilization.

The book also offers a significant advancement in understanding Xi's domestic vision of an upgraded social contract between the CCP and the Chinese people. This vision is encapsulated in the campaign to eliminate absolute poverty in rural areas and build a "moderately well-off society," the definition of which Xi has substantially altered from Deng Xiaoping's conception that focused primarily on economic development (p. 93). A moderately well-off society under the current government aims to ensure a more equitable wealth distribution toward China's rural areas, which has not achieved the same level of economic development as urban ones. This is in line with Xi's other economic goal of "developing a socialist market economy" (p. 116). The authors examine his emphasis on independent innovation, market security, and wealth distribution to achieve "common prosperity." They argue that his economic strategy melds nationalism and socialism, prioritizing the former to ensure China's economic strength and security in a competitive global landscape. This is key to understanding Xi's economic strategy for the nation. While economists and financial analysts are confused by his stifling of certain industries, such as tech, finance, gaming, entertainment, and private education, the purpose behind his economic policy is to subdue the excesses of capitalism and return to more modest socialist economic values, rather than to grow the economy in ways that mimic the West or the United States.

Overall, *The Political Thought of Xi Jinping* is a meticulously researched and thought-provoking book that offers valuable insights into the ideological framework driving policies under Xi. Tsang and Cheung's analysis is both critical and objective, providing a nuanced understanding of Xi's strategic vision and its implications for China and the world. The authors effectively contextualize this proto-ideology within the broader historical and ideological landscape of China, highlighting its continuities and departures from previous leadership eras. A strength of the book is its detailed examination of Xi Thought's key tenets in a coherent and systematic manner. Tsang and Cheung's exploration of Xi's approach to party rectification, economic development, social stability, nationalism, and foreign policy provides a comprehensive understanding of his political ideology. The authors' use of historical analogies, such as comparing Xi's leadership to the operating systems of the CCP, adds depth and clarity to their analysis.

However, a minor omission in their examination is the effect of Xi Thought on the PRC's foreign policy. Tsang and Cheung argue that Xi's

foreign policy is driven by a combination of regime security, national pride, and a desire to assert China's influence globally, culminating in the rubric of "common destiny for humankind," which they assert is a contemporary rendition of the old *tianxia* ("all-under-heaven") concept. Chapter 7 is a wonderfully insightful examination of *tianxia*. However, Xi's ambition to restore China's ancient glory and reshape international relations is also a way to stand up to the bullies of the world and assert uncontested dominance, as Xi has asserted publicly.<sup>3</sup> Xi Thought is deeply authoritarian, as demonstrated by China's belligerent encroachment on other nations' sovereignty in the South China Sea and its bullying of nations like Australia and Lithuania through trade relations. This feature is another signature of Xi Thought that affects PRC foreign policy, highlighting that China's rise is far from benign.

While Xi Thought is significantly novel and different from Deng Xiaoping's era of economic reform, we should not forget that the PRC's fundamental nature as a socialist, one-party state has existed since its founding in 1949. As Tsang and Cheung have noted, Mao Thought is directly descended from Marxism-Leninism but altered to fit the peasant-based agrarian society of China. Similarly, Deng's economic modernization was not a repudiation of Marxism-Leninism but a pragmatic adaptation that paved the way for China's rapid economic growth within a socialist framework. At no point did Deng, Jiang Zemin, or Hu Jintao ever profess to embrace U.S.-style governance or democracy. Xi Thought builds upon these legacies by integrating traditional socialist values with new strategies to address China's entry into the modern era. This continuity reflects an evolving narrative that seeks to adapt and refine socialist principles to meet the challenges of the 21st century and allow the PRC to achieve China's ancient glory under *tianxia*.

*The Political Thought of Xi Jinping* is an essential read for anyone seeking to understand the ideological framework shaping China's policies under Xi Jinping. The book provides a comprehensive and critical analysis of Xi Thought, offering valuable insights into the strategic vision of one of the world's most influential leaders. Tsang and Cheung's meticulous research and balanced perspective make this book a significant contribution to the field of Chinese political studies. As China continues to assert its influence globally, understanding the political thought of Xi Jinping is crucial for policymakers, scholars, and anyone interested in the future of international relations. ◆

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<sup>3</sup> Bennett, "Xi Jinping Thought," 49.

## Authors' Response: Policy Implications of Xi Jinping Thought for China and the World

*Steve Tsang and Olivia Cheung*

We are grateful to David Lampton, Kerry Brown, Jessica Teets, and Yan Bennett for their insightful reviews of our book. It is gratifying to see many of our research findings and conclusions confirmed by these colleagues' admirably well-grounded independent research. They have also raised interesting questions that we encountered in our research but excluded from the book for reasons of length or tightness of organization. We appreciate that they have raised them so we can engage on them here.

An obvious starting point regards the role that Wang Huning has played in putting together Xi Jinping Thought raised by Lampton and Brown. We would go further and expand this to consider Wang and his support staff in their contribution to the evolving contents of Xi Thought. While Wang is the lead contributor (other than Xi himself), he is not the only one.

Lampton and Brown are, of course, right that Xi Thought does in some ways represent a collective party consensus, particularly on basic notions like prioritizing regime security, party-centric nationalism, and developing stronger technological and economic self-reliance. This does not, however, mean all leaders, let alone the nearly 100 million members of the Chinese Communist Party, fully support it. The lack of opposition to Xi and Xi Thought within the party does not imply that there is no dissent or dissatisfaction. The existence of the latter has become unmissable as the economy has slowed down since the Covid-19 pandemic.

It is true that Wang and his staff have drafted documents released in Xi's name. As we explain (p. 33), every document issued in Xi's name has been approved by Xi and represents what he would like included in Xi Thought. Wang and the staff have drafted them on the basis of what Xi would approve, undoubtedly adding color to Xi's speeches. Introducing ideas that Xi disapproves of, however, would amount to committing career suicide. It is not something a scholar turned party apparatchik who rose spectacularly in career terms after serving two top leaders with different outlooks would do.

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Wang's record shows his contributions to Jiang Zemin's doctrine of "the three represents" and Hu Jintao's "scientific outlook" propelled his political career. With Xi Thought heading in nearly the opposite direction of "the three represents," the weight of evidence points to Wang being an expert in second-guessing what the top leaders want.

Brown has raised the important question of whether the people of China actually understand Xi Thought. He is right that in this book we have shown that Xi Thought is complex and thus perhaps not readily understandable to the average person. But its complexity does not make it impossible for people in China to embrace it as a proto-ideology. The key here is to make the distinction between understanding Xi Thought for all that it entails and its readiness for indoctrination. For mass indoctrination, Xi Thought can be and is reduced to catchphrases, like "east, west, south, north, and center—the party leads everything." Since Xi Thought is about the fulfillment of "the China dream of national rejuvenation," "upgrading" the de facto social contract, and upholding the leadership of Xi, its slogans are readily relatable to Chinese people. The mission of the party's powerful propaganda machinery is to guide people to embrace these slogans (see chapter 6). The complexity of Xi Thought does not negate its indoctrination potential.

As we show in chapter 7, Xi Thought can even appeal to foreigners, such as Xi's declaration that China is working for "the democratization of international relations" in his promotion of "the common destiny for humankind." The same applies to concepts like "state sovereignty, security, and development interest." And he makes these notions attractive both by using the Belt and Road Initiative to dish out development assistance that would be otherwise unavailable and by reassuring autocratic leaders in the global South via his Global Civilization Initiative that China supports them in retaining the right to govern however they wish. Xi makes it easier for leaders of countries in the global South to accept these ideas by avoiding describing them as tenets of Xi Thought, but they are.

This leads to the suite of important questions Lampton has raised about the implications of Xi Thought on engagement with China, focusing in particular on U.S.-China relations. We agree with his implication that the assertive or aggressive defense of sovereignty in Xi Thought does not bode well for this relationship.

On Lampton's specific question of whether Washington has managed Xi's party-centric nationalism effectively, we take the view that it has not. The book is meant to help policymakers in Washington and elsewhere

understand and recognize what really underpins Xi's ambition and approach to the world as well as within China. Our research shows that Xi does not seek to replace the United States as the global hegemon in the existing liberal international order. Xi's ambition is to recreate the *tianxia* international order by transforming the liberal international order from within, a strategic goal to be completed by 2049–50. There is nothing other countries can do to change his ambition.

But there is scope to frustrate Xi in his quest. To achieve this transformation, Xi needs China to not only out-compete the United States but also gain support from the global South. China has already been highly successful in securing backing from countries in the global South to change how key institutions of the United Nations operate. To counter that, the United States should compete with China in the global South in the spirit of a beauty contest, making what it represents more attractive and preferable to what China offers. This is not insurmountable as Xi's approach is inherently a China-first one, and Washington can put the interests of the global community ahead and contrast them against Beijing's Sinocentric bias.

As for U.S.-China bilateral relations, Lampton is right to suggest Washington should engage in a way that does not aggravate destructive Chinese nationalism. Diplomacy and engagement are most needed when peer competitors are on a trajectory toward a direct confrontation. Washington must persist in engagement or war will become unavoidable. What our book has revealed is that ultimately what matters most to Xi is his hold on power, even ahead of fulfilling the China dream. This is critical, as it reveals the most effective way to get Xi to change his mind. Whether Xi opts for continued cooperation or war with the United States depends on his calculation of which will ensure his hold on power, followed by what will deliver China's rise to global preeminence. Since China's economy is still significantly behind that of the United States, Washington has plenty of cards to play. Xi is aware that he needs to engage with the United States until China is ready to make the China dream come true. What Washington needs to focus on is engaging China constructively without significantly or disproportionately enhancing Chinese might. Full decoupling puts the two countries on a trajectory of intensifying competition leading toward war.

On China's global approach, Bennett has helpfully reminded us that Xi's ambition to "restore China's ancient glory and reshape international relations" is not only driven by "a combination of regime security, national pride, and a desire to assert China's influence globally," but also is "a way to stand up to bullies of the world and assert uncontested dominance." The last

element is indeed an important part of Xi's thinking, as China's outreach to the global South is more effective when presented in such language. Poorer states that were former colonies of the West generally respond well to rhetoric of this kind, as do people in China already indoctrinated with the "century of humiliation" narrative. But the use of anti-bully rhetoric does not change the reality that China's overbearing approach to some of its neighbors is bullying from the perspective of those at the receiving end. All in all, contemporary China's global strategy remains driven primarily by Xi's ambition and Xi Thought.

Teets has highlighted the importance of the "upgraded" *de facto* social contract in Xi Thought (chapter 4). We are pleased to have her confirmation that "our understanding of common prosperity corresponds with [her] own analysis." While we share her astute observation that the "common prosperity" program is part of the upgraded social contract, we also take the view that Xi's approach reveals more of the limitation to what "common prosperity" really entails as socialism. The lack of significant government reform to revamp the social welfare system, when compared to the outpour of state investment in emerging technologies, and set in the context of how much Xi has enhanced the Chinese Communist Party's control over government institutions across the board, shows the limits of Xi's commitment to common prosperity. With its Leninist system revitalized, China is now in a strong position to implement socialist policies generally. Yet, it falls far short of doing so. Xi's common prosperity program is not about socialist redistribution or moving toward "from each according to ability...to each according to needs." What Xi has delivered are some tangible benefits that show his brand of consultative politics. We document some examples in chapters 4 and 6 and Teets mentioned others drawn from her fieldwork. These are reminders that despite the Leninist impulses of Xi Thought, the mass line, or using pseudo-consultation to rally people to the party, is still important. It underpins our thinking as to why it is appropriate to modify the "consultative Leninism" framing to "Sino-centric consultative Leninism" rather than replace it with a new analytical framework. The adaptability of the Xi regime should not be underestimated despite the move toward a more totalitarian direction.

Last but not least, Lampton has a crucial question about how strong or resilient the system Xi has put in place is. We previously addressed this point in an article published separately, as we preferred the book focus on

what Xi Thought is and what it is not.<sup>1</sup> We thought a long analysis of the resilience of the Xi approach may lead some readers to wonder if we have an agenda behind this project—a potential distraction we preferred to avert. But we did mention in the book’s concluding chapter that however much Xi has reinvigorated the Leninist system and guided China to develop in a totalitarian direction, he has also generated fault lines and created problems. One of them has been picked up by Teets, whose research confirms that Xi’s approach has backfired by creating incentives for officials to avoid taking initiative as making no mistake is the safer career bet. What our article shows is that by unrelentingly consolidating the party’s power and putting himself at the center of everything, Xi has strengthened the Chinese party-state’s capacity to act promptly and decisively to stamp out challenges in the short term, but this has weakened the party’s long-term durability. For what it is worth, the collective leadership and orderly succession arrangements put in place by Deng Xiaoping and upheld under Jiang and Hu enhanced regime resilience in the longer term. By replacing them with his strongman rule, Xi has weakened the party’s resilience when biology weakens his grip or when he finally passes away. ◆

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<sup>1</sup> Steve Tsang and Olivia Cheung, “Has Xi Jinping Made China’s Political System More Resilient and Enduring?” *Third World Quarterly* 43, no. 1 (2022): 225–43.







