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The power of Xi Jinping

A cult of personality is growing around China's president. What will he do with his political capital?

He pets calves, cups babies' cheeks and kicks footballs. He laughs and smiles in public. He holds his own umbrella, shuns a limousine, carries his own bowl of dumplings to a restaurant table and sits crossed-legged in a farmer's hut. His glamorous wife accompanies him on international tours; he stands tall and confident alongside world leaders.

Such behaviour is standard among modern politicians. But in China Xi Jinping's common touch and courting of public opinion are a striking departure. Since Deng Xiaoping came to power in the late 1970s, the party has been extolling the virtues of 'collective leadership' in which responsibilities are shared rather than concentrated in the hands of a capricious tyrant like Deng's predecessor, Mao Zedong. Collective leadership meant giving up Maoist flamboyance, such as appearances in Tiananmen Square in front of ecstatic crowds of admirers and swimming down the Yangzi, in favour of a studied greyness (though Jiang Zemin, who led the party from 1989 to 2002, liked to show some colour in private by breaking into song when meeting foreigners). Mr Xi is not only jettisoning long-established convention; he is dismantling the very system of collective rule.

Since becoming military chief and general secretary of the Communist Party in November 2012 and president in March 2013, Mr Xi has been sending a clear message that the country is not just ruled by a faceless party – it is ruled by a man. He has even acquired a nickname: 'Xi Dada', or Uncle Xi, as internet users and sometimes even the official media call him.

These changes in style hint at a profound shift in the nature of Chinese politics. Even as he plays to the public gallery, Mr Xi is tightening his grip on power among the elite. He has added a new layer of authority at the top, taken command of numerous committees, and now personally supervises overall government reform, finance, the overhaul of the armed forces and cyber-security. Always small, the number of decision-makers is shrinking further, says Odd Arne Westad of the London School of Economics. Under Mr Xi, membership of the Politburo's Standing Committee, the party's key decision-making body, has been cut from nine to seven, back where it stood a decade ago.

Notably removed from the seven is anyone exclusively responsible for domestic security. That is now Mr Xi's fief. He does not want anyone to threaten his power in the way his predecessor, Hu Jintao, was overshadowed by Zhou Yongkang, a member of the Standing Committee who was in charge of the entire law-enforcement apparatus, from the police and secret police to the judiciary. Mr Xi is trying to eliminate all vestiges of Mr Zhou's influence. Mr Zhou, who retired when Mr Xi took over, is now being investigated for corruption – the highest-ranking official to be targeted for such an offence since the party came to power in 1949. Dozens of people who worked closely with Mr Zhou have been rounded up. Mr Xi has discarded an unwritten party rule that former and serving members of the Standing Committee are immune from prosecution.

Mr Xi's change in political style was clear from the moment in November 2012 when he walked before live cameras into a room in the Great Hall of the People to greet the country as its new leader. He smiled at the throng of journalists and then apologised for keeping them waiting, a humility previously unheard of. He literally loomed large. At 1.80 metres (almost 6 feet), Mr Xi stands out as the tallest leader since Mao – a point well-noted by a height-obsessed nation.

The new Peking order

Image clearly matters to Mr Xi. Unlike previous presidents, he has a big team looking after it, says Cheng Li of the Brookings Institution, an American think-tank. State-controlled media have released a steady drip of personal information about him: he likes Hollywood movies, he swims and climbs mountains. A photo essay in December 2012 showed him riding a bike with his young daughter on the back and pushing his aged father in a wheelchair. The headline read: "Man of the people, statesman of vision".

At 61, Mr Xi is the first leader to be born after Mao seized power. He is a "princeling", the privileged child of a revolutionary figure (see next article). But in common with many Chinese, he suffered during Mao's Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s. He uses his experience of hardship as part of his political message. In June a ten-year-old video was re-released in which Mr Xi recalled being sent into internal exile in the countryside.

He has also been learning from the political culture of the West. Since Mao's wife, Jiang Qing, was arrested in 1976 as a member of the "Gang of Four", leaders have avoided showing off their wives in public. Mr Xi has no such qualms. His wife, Peng Liyuan, was famous long before he was as a singer with the People's Liberation Army. Now she models herself on an American First Lady. Ms Peng is known for her beauty, elegance and great clothes (she was on *Vanity Fair's* "best-dressed" list last year). Mr Xi wins praise for matching his ties to her outfits.

He has even laid himself open to being laughed at – though only very gently. In February a cartoon about Mr Xi's political engagements appeared on Qianlong.com, a government-backed website, toying (ever so cautiously) with a taboo on political lampooning. An animated history of Mr Xi's involvement in military affairs was released on Army Day in August.

Sidney Rittenberg, an American who interpreted for Mao, describes Mr Xi as the most "defiant and challenging" leader since the late chairman. The president, wary of evoking Mao but keen to be seen a strongman, prefers to compare himself to Deng, who steered China away from Maoism in the late 1970s and helped to engineer spectacular economic growth. Party officials laid on numerous celebrations of the 110th anniversary of Deng's birth in August. The state news agency, Xinhua, spelled out the intended message: "To reignite a nation, Xi carries Deng's torch".

In his cultivation of charisma, Mr Xi may well have drawn lessons from the rise of Bo Xilai, a party chief in the south-western province of Chongqing with whom he had much in common: a good pedigree, suave manner and a common touch that made him hugely popular. Mr Bo was sentenced to life in prison last year for corruption and abuse of power, but some Chinese still mourn his downfall. Many believe that the real reason for it was that he had posed a challenge to Mr Xi and stolen a march in the pursuit of populism.

As Mr Bo once did, Mr Xi has been winning hearts with a ferocious assault on corruption. His biggest target has been Mr Zhou, the retired security chief. More than 200,000 others have been rounded up by party investigators (and some driven to suicide). At the same time, Mr Xi has

been playing up his disdain for the ostentation and extravagance that are common, and much-resented, accoutrements of power in China. President's visit causes no traffic jam was the headline of a television report in 2012 when Mr Xi swapped a motorcade for a minibus.

These are nothing like the days of fanatical Red Guards waving Mao's "Little Red Book", but party-backed adulation for Mr Xi has reached levels rarely experienced since the 1970s. In the first 18 months of Mr Xi's leadership, his name appeared in the *People's Daily*, the party's mouthpiece, more often than in the comparable period of any other leader's reign since Mao, according to a study by the University of Hong Kong. Mr Xi's head adorns plates and heart-shaped talismans on sale in Beijing.

The perils of power

Mr Xi's bid for popular acclaim, however, does not involve any attempt to shed the secrecy that surrounds the doings of the party elite. Since becoming leader, Mr Xi has not given any press conference about his domestic policies, nor granted any interviews. He has tightened controls on online social networks and launched a sustained campaign against political dissent, including the rounding up of dozens of activists. Even those calling for officials to be more open about their wealth are being targeted.

Mr Xi may enjoy unusual popularity, but there are many Chinese who want changes that he appears reluctant to make: not least a bigger say in the running of their local governments and the protection of their communities from environmental damage. In the years ahead, as the economy slows, China's new middle class is likely to get more restless. By painting himself as the main man, Mr Xi will have no one else to blame if things go wrong.

Mr Rittenberg, Mao's former interpreter, says that promoting a single popular figure may have been a deliberate strategy of the party elite, in the hope that such a politician could more effectively carry out the difficult economic and social reforms which Mr Xi says are needed. When the anti-corruption campaign eventually runs its course, this may prove correct. But at the moment the response to his display of power is a dreadfully familiar one: terrified local officials are lying low, afraid to take the initiative with reforms for fear their behaviour is misconstrued.

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Revolutionary history

Like father, like son?

The Chinese president's late father rises again

ASK a resident of Fuping county in rural Shaanxi province what the Chinese president has done for them, and they point to the smooth asphalt road beneath their feet. Since Xi Jinping came to power, the birthplace and burial site of his father has become a national tourist attraction. Xi Zhongxun was a revolutionary hero in his own right; since his son assumed power, he has been promoted further.



Xi Dada loves Daddy Xi

The late Xi was one of the first generation of Chinese Communist leaders. He was a guerrilla fighter in the 1930s. He became a deputy prime minister under Mao Zedong, but was purged in the 1960s and spent years under house arrest until he was rehabilitated in 1978. He is credited with having helped to launch the Shenzhen Economic Zone, a pioneering breeding-ground of capitalism. This helped to cement his enduring popularity among older Chinese.

A granite statue was erected to Xi senior in 2005, three years after he died. But only after his son took office did the tourists and school parties start pouring in. Visitors are required to bow three times to the imposing figure in front of an arrangement of cypress trees, security cameras and steely guards. A nearby museum tells his life story. It includes just one photo from his wilderness years.

The locals are enjoying a bounty. New buildings, cranes and construction sites are all around. Not far away, Xi Zhongxun Middle School has acquired bright new red-brick buildings. These days Fuping lives up to the *fù* meaning wealth in its name, one inhabitant remarks.

In 2013 what would have been Xi Senior's 100th birthday was celebrated with the publication of three books about him, a six-part television documentary, a symposium in Beijing and two commemorative stamps. Another photo-biography of him is due out soon. Thus a faithful son honours his father.