

Party Man

Xi Jinping's Quest to Dominate China

By Richard McGregor

When Joe Biden met Xi Jinping in 2011, China's leader in waiting hit the U.S. vice president with a volley of questions about U.S. politics. How did the system work? What was the relationship between the White House and Congress? How should Beijing interpret the political signals coming out of Washington? For Biden and his advisers, these were welcome questions after nearly a decade of frustration in dealing with Xi's predecessor, the colorless, impenetrable Hu Jintao.

But over meetings and meals in Beijing and Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan Province, the American visitors were struck by Xi's animation on another topic. Chinese leaders are generally cautious about straying too deeply into their own biographies. Recounting their personal stories in front of Chinese officials, let alone foreigners, involves traversing recent Chinese political history, a minefield of purges, betrayals, and ideological about-faces.

Xi, however, talked unprompted about his father, Xi Zhongxun, a revolutionary from the early days of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and about Mao Zedong, the founder of modern China, who had turned the country upside down to keep his rivals at bay. Xi's father, once seen as a loyal party member, had risen to be vice premier in the late 1950s but was purged from the leadership by Mao in 1962, after he backed leadership rivals. Soon thereafter, he was jailed and left to suffer public humiliation at the hands of the Red Guards in the Cultural Revolution. Radicals harassed his son and banished him to the countryside. The father was not rehabilitated until the late 1970s, after Mao had died. But as Xi made clear to his visitors, he would not repudiate Mao. He revered him.

Biden and his advisers left China with the impression that Xi would be tougher to deal with than Hu, more ambitious on behalf of his country and more assertive about prosecuting its interests. They were right, but even so, they probably underestimated him. In the years since he took power, Xi has harshly suppressed internal dissent, executed a sweeping anticorruption campaign, and adopted a bold, expansive foreign policy that has directly challenged the United States. Few foresaw the extent of Xi's ambition before he took over as leader.

There has been much handwringing in the West in recent years about how so many got China, and Xi, so wrong. Foreign analysts have habitually confused Western beliefs about how China should reform with the party's convictions about how to govern the country. But as misguided as many foreigners might have been, even Xi's colleagues don't appear to have known what they were getting when, in 2007, they tapped him to take over from Hu in five years' time.

Xi has always been a true believer in the party's right to rule China. For him, the centrality of the party, of Mao, and of the communist canon are all of a piece. To deny one part of the CCP's history is to deny all of it. In Xi's eyes, a Chinese leader must be above all Red, meaning loyal to the Communist Party, its leader, and its ideological roots, in good times and bad.

By the time he took office, Xi seemed possessed by a deep fear that the pillars of party rule—the military, the state-owned enterprises, the security apparatus, and the propaganda machine—were corrupt and crumbling. So he set out on a rescue mission. He would be the Reddest leader of his generation. And he expected all party members to follow in his footsteps, or else.

BORN RED

Xi's early years tracked both the privilege afforded to the families of top leaders and the perils they faced once the political winds changed direction. As a boy, Xi attended an elite school in Beijing and would visit his father in Zhongnanhai, the sprawling compound next to the Forbidden City where top leaders lived and worked. Once Mao unleashed the Cultural Revolution, in the mid-1960s, Xi's world turned upside down. He was detained by Red Guards and forced to go through a ritual denunciation of his father. When he was dispatched to the countryside along with other elite city dwellers, the 17-year-old Xi struggled with the harsh conditions.

The time he spent in Liangjiahe, an impoverished village in northwestern China, scarred him but also readied him for the battles ahead. "People who have limited experience with power, those who have been far away from it, tend to regard these things as mysterious and novel," he said in an interview published in 2000. "But I look past the superficial things: the power, the flowers, the glory and the applause. I see the detention houses and the fickleness of human nature. That gave me an understanding of politics on a deeper level." Xi was only accepted as a full member of the CCP in 1974. But once he was in, he began a steady climb to the top.

These days, only China's best and brightest qualify to enter the prestigious Tsinghua University, in Beijing, but Xi was admitted in 1975, before the university revived formal entrance exams, as part of the "worker, soldier, peasant" intake. (Much of the Chinese intelligentsia still looks down on Xi as poorly educated.) After graduating, Xi donned a soldier's uniform to work as an assistant to one of his father's closest comrades, Geng Biao, at the Central Military Commission, an experience that gave him an important bond with the armed forces. Xi was setting out on the classic career path of an up-and-coming apparatchik. After leaving the military commission, he served as deputy party secretary in Hebei, near Beijing, and in Fujian, on the coast across from Taiwan, eventually rising to become governor of the province in 2000. In 2002, he became governor and then party secretary of Zhejiang, a province near Shanghai.

Fujian and Zhejiang stand out in China as bastions of thriving private enterprise. Fujian was an important gateway for investors from nearby Taiwan. Zhejiang is home to a number of China's most successful private companies, including the e-commerce giant Alibaba and the automaker Geely. When Xi became China's paramount leader, in 2012, the Western media latched on to his provincial pedigree to talk up his appreciation for markets. Zhejiang's capitalist spirit had rubbed off on Xi, Bloomberg News reported, quoting Lu Guanqiu, a businessman who owned and ran Wanxiang Group, a car parts manufacturer. "When Xi becomes general secretary, he'll be even more open and will pay even more attention to private enterprise and the people's livelihood," Lu said. But digging deeper into Xi's statements and writings on the economy during his time in Fujian and Zhejiang reveals a dogged supporter of party orthodoxy. Xi has always talked about balancing development between the state and the entrepreneurial economy. In practice, however, that has meant propping up the state sector to ensure it didn't get eaten up by entrepreneurs.

It wasn't until early 2007, when the party leadership abruptly moved him to Shanghai to be party secretary of China's second city, that Xi came firmly into the frame as a possible successor to

Hu. According to convention, the party congress in late 2007 would pick someone to take over five years later, when Hu was due to step down after two terms as president. Xi emerged as a compromise candidate. His chief rivals, Li Keqiang and Li Yuanchao, were both from the Communist Youth League, as was Hu. For party elders, the idea that a candidate from the youth league would take the reins for another decade was unacceptable, as that would have entrenched the power of a single faction at the expense of the others.

Xi had a lot going for him. He was a seasoned official who was acceptable to the dominant cliques and to most of the powerful political families and party elders. He had an impeccable CCP pedigree that extended beyond his father. He had emerged politically unscathed from the Cultural Revolution, with his father rehabilitated and no black marks on his record. He was unsullied by the brutal 1989 military crackdown in Tiananmen Square. He was largely untainted by corruption (even though he had been governor of Fujian in the late 1990s, when many provincial officials were caught up in a billion-dollar fraud scheme). Xi had been divorced, but his second wife, Peng Liyuan, was a star in her own right, a nationally known singer attached to the military arts troupe. Xi carried himself confidently and spoke clearly in informal settings, without the stifling jargon that smothers most official communication. Most important, perhaps, the party bigwigs thought they could control him. According to a report from Reuters, they settled on Xi because he was pliable and “lacked a power base.”

As leader in waiting, Xi seems to have been given the nod to recentralize authority in Beijing after a period in which the leadership had dispersed power among far-flung fiefdoms, allowing corruption and cronyism to flourish. But if that was Xi’s initial mandate, he would end up going far beyond it. There was no sense in 2007 that party leaders had deliberately chosen a new strongman to whip the country into shape. The compromise candidate would turn out to be a most uncompromising leader.

Xi’s metamorphosis stemmed from several factors. The maneuvering of two of Xi’s rivals, Bo Xilai, the Chongqing party secretary, and Zhou Yongkang, the head of internal security, alarmed top leaders. Under Hu, they had been cautious on many fronts. Now, with Xi’s support, the leadership set out to bring Bo and Zhou down. The pair was toppled after lengthy investigations, largely on charges of corruption and abuse of power. Their fall amounted to an earthquake in Chinese politics. Bo was the charismatic son of a revolutionary hero making a noisy public run for a spot in the leadership’s inner circle. Zhou, a member of the Politburo Standing Committee until the end of 2012, wielded enormous power through his sway over the secret police and the energy sector. The arrests of the two men, in 2012 and 2013, respectively, put on display their alleged crimes and amoral womanizing. Later, state media, quoting senior officials, said that the pair had been conspiring to mount an internal coup to prevent Xi from ascending to the top party post. Within the party, such political misdeeds were worse than mere corruption.

Xi was also alarmed at the ideological decay of the party itself, symbolized by rampant graft and the emergence of leaders’ personal fiefdoms in both public and private companies. Abroad, he had watched as “color revolutions” in Europe and street protests in the Middle East had toppled seemingly invincible governments. But Xi took his greatest warning from the fall of the Soviet Union and was horrified at how the Soviet Communist Party had evaporated almost overnight. “A big party was gone, just like that,” he said in a 2012 speech. “Proportionally, the Soviet Communist Party had more members than we do, but nobody was man enough to stand up and resist.” China had studied the collapse of the Soviet Union intensely in its immediate aftermath. Nearly a quarter of a century later, Xi was worried enough about the state of the party to make

everyone from senior leaders to rank-and-file officials go back to class and learn the lessons of the Soviet collapse again. “To dismiss the history of the Soviet Union and the Soviet Communist Party, to dismiss Lenin and Stalin, and to dismiss everything else is to engage in historic nihilism,” he said in another 2012 speech. “It confuses our thoughts and undermines the party’s organizations on all levels.”

Leadership rivals and ideological rot spurred Xi into a frenzy of action. During his first 200 days in office, he covered an extraordinary breadth of policy areas and implemented changes at an astonishing pace. Within weeks, he had attached a brand—“the Chinese dream”—to his administration, established strict new rules governing the behavior of officials, and laid down markers on what ideas could and couldn’t be discussed, cracking down on a liberal newspaper in southern China over its promotion of “constitutionalism,” a dirty word in a single-party state. He also started locking up the party’s critics. Activist lawyers who had carved out a small space to protect citizens’ rights were rounded up, one by one, by state security. Officials questioned or detained about 250 of them in a methodical campaign. The accused languished in jail without trials, sometimes for years. The last of the prominent human rights lawyers, Wang Quanzhang, was not formally sentenced until January of this year, after four years in detention.

Xi kept up the breakneck pace through 2013. In September of that year, he unveiled the Belt and Road Initiative, which made concrete Beijing’s plan to develop and dominate the land and sea routes connecting Eurasia and the Indian Ocean and thus make China the hub of business and technology all the way to Europe. Xi established the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, over U.S. objections. He set targets to eradicate poverty in China by end of 2020, the 100th anniversary of the founding of the CCP. He raised the temperature on Taiwan, calling it a “political issue that can’t be passed on for generations.” Soon after, China set about executing a long-held plan to build large military bases in the South China Sea.

Most important of all, Xi launched his anticorruption campaign, appointing as its head Wang Qishan, one of the toughest and most capable officials of his generation. The scale of the resulting purge is almost incomprehensible: since late 2012, when the campaign began, authorities have investigated more than 2.7 million officials and punished more than 1.5 million of them. They include seven members of the Politburo and the cabinet and about two dozen high-ranking generals. Two senior officials have been sentenced to death. The party has more than 90 million members, but after excluding the farmers, the elderly, and the retired, all of whom were largely spared, the purge amounts to a generational clear-out. The sheer numbers give the lie to the charge that the anticorruption campaign is merely a political purge in disguise. Certainly, the campaign has targeted some of Xi’s rivals, but it has gone far beyond his enemies list.

To illustrate the pitiless nature of the anticorruption drive, consider the case of Zhang Yang, who was one of China’s most senior generals and the head of the military’s Political Work Department, which polices ideological loyalty in the military. To the public, Zhang had been a colorless apparatchik, distinguished in official pictures only by his military uniform, moonish features, and jet-black comb-over. Within the system, however, he was a powerful player. In 2017, Zhang was found hanging from the ceiling at his mansion in Guangzhou, across the border from Hong Kong. The first sign that his suicide was related to corruption came in the press coverage of his death. Despite his decades of service and his seniority, Zhang received anything but a respectful sendoff. The military’s official newspaper called him a man “with no moral bottom” and said that his death was “a shameful way to end his life” and “a bad move to escape

punishment.” The party’s pursuit of Zhang did not end with his burial. Nearly a year later, in late 2018, he was expelled from the CCP—the party’s way of rendering an official guilty verdict.

Xi’s effort to concentrate power in his own hands peaked at the end of his first term, in 2017. According to the evolving conventions of top-level Chinese politics, this should have been the moment when Xi nominated a successor to take over in 2022. Instead, he abolished the rule limiting presidencies to two five-year terms, effectively making himself leader in perpetuity.

NOTHING LASTS FOREVER

Xi has chosen to govern China as a crisis manager. That might help him in China’s immediate rivalry with the United States. But along the way, his enemies at home and his critics abroad have piled up. Thousands of wealthy Chinese families and their associates who have seen their lives of luxury and privilege destroyed in the anticorruption campaign will carry their anger at Xi for generations. The technocratic elite feels betrayed by Xi’s across-the-board power grab, his trashing of emerging legal reforms, and his coddling of the state economy. Until recently, Xi rarely commented on the private sector, which is responsible for about 70 percent of the country’s economic output and an even greater proportion of its job creation. His rhetorical about-face on this issue late last year, when Xi invited a group of entrepreneurs to a morale-boosting meeting at the Great Hall of the People, was a rare sign of a course correction. In the short term, Xi has been lifted by a rally-round-the-flag mood prompted by the trade war with the United States and President Donald Trump’s erratic antagonism. But none of the problems that have festered on Xi’s watch are going away.

Overseas, the backlash to Xi’s China is gathering momentum. The United States is confronting China on everything from its trade practices to its military buildup. Germany, by contrast, is focused not on relative military might but on industrial competitiveness. Australia, like many countries in Asia, fears being left to fend for itself in a region no longer anchored by U.S. power. Japan worries that China wants to not only dominate the seas surrounding it but also settle historical scores. Taiwan, a self-governing island for decades, fears it will be gobbled up by the mainland. Southeast Asian nations already feel overshadowed. For Canada, the wake-up call came last December, when Vancouver police detained a senior executive from the telecommunications giant Huawei for extradition to the United States, only to see Chinese authorities arrest two Canadian citizens in China and hold them as virtual hostages. In Hong Kong, millions marched in June against a proposed law that would have permitted extradition to the mainland, testing Xi’s resolve and his willingness and ability to compromise.

Even Mao had leadership rivals. Xi has ensured for the moment that he has none. There is good reason to think, as many Chinese officials and scholars do, that Xi’s overreach will come back to haunt him before the next party congress, in late 2022, especially if the Chinese economy struggles. By then, potential rivals might be willing to risk making their ambitions public. Xi might follow the path that has served him well so far and try to take them out. He might be able to leverage the regime’s weakness at home and China’s battles abroad to justify his continued rule. Or perhaps he will finally admit that he, too, is mortal and lay out a timetable to step down.

Xi has displayed remarkable boldness and agility in bending the vast, sprawling party system to his will. Sooner or later, however, as recent Chinese history has shown, the system will catch up with him. It is only a question of when.