

What 'Xi Jinping Thought' stands for

Xi Jinping is universally regarded as China's most powerful leader since Deng Xiaoping, and perhaps since Mao Zedong. Both Deng and Mao left their marks in the charter of the Communist Party of China, and the rumor is that Xi will be their first successor to do the same. Mao's "mass line" and Deng's "seeking truth from facts" have become official tenets of Communist Party dogma. Xi's "socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era" may soon join these august concepts as official truth.

But just what does "Xi Jinping Thought" really consist of? To answer that question, it helps to compare Xi's governing principles to those of the four preceding "paramount leaders" of China's Communist Party.

Xi versus Mao

Xi Jinping is most often compared to Mao Zedong, China's revolutionary leader, red emperor and communist theologian. Mao's political maxims were collected in the Little Red Book once read by leftist college students and Latin American guerillas. Mao Zedong thought is not all that bad, if you happen to be planning a people's revolution to overthrow your government. Unlike Lenin and most European Marxists, Mao taught that revolutions had to come from below. And unlike most revolutionaries, he still fought to overthrow the government even when he was the government. The infamous Cultural Revolution that rocked Chinese society from 1966-1976 was the result.

Xi is no revolutionary, and he is certainly no Mao. Xi's Chinese Dream is a "moderately prosperous society," not a communist utopia. Xi does talk a lot about "national rejuvenation," but that's really just a way to avoid using the Western word for what he really means: renaissance. Xi's Chinese renaissance is all about China's space program, high speed rail network and high technology parks.

But a real Chinese renaissance requires the reversal of China's long-term brain drain to the United States and other English-speaking countries. The problem? Most Chinese scientists are unwilling to give up their tenured positions overseas to take a chance on a permanent return to China.

Barring a reversal of epic proportions, in 2021 Xi will preside over the centenary of the Chinese Communist Party. That will be as good a time as any to finally lay Mao Zedong Thought to rest for good. If Xi has his way, they may just take the opportunity to bury Mao along with it. He's been waiting long enough.

Xi versus Deng

Soon after the death of Mao, his long-time frenemy Deng Xiaoping put paid to the Cultural Revolution and started China on the path to opening and reform that it has followed for the last 40 years. Famous for saying that it was OK for some people to get rich before others, Deng was repeatedly condemned by Mao as a "capitalist roader" — which, as soon as Mao died, is exactly what he turned out to be.

To facilitate his economic reform agenda, Deng urged that China should "keep a low profile" in international affairs, biding its time while building its strength. Xi's strive for achievement strategy couldn't be more different. In his landmark Communist Party Congress speech, Xi pledged that China would have a "world class" military by 2050, in line with his policy of relentless maritime expansion in the South China Sea.

Xi has departed radically from Deng's advice on foreign policy, but what Xi shares with Deng is a staunchly conservative preference for order over chaos. Deng ruthlessly suppressed the Tiananmen Square democracy movement in order to preserve the rule of the Communist Party. Xi has much more subtly turned the screws on political dissent using the more discriminating but perhaps more effective tools of online surveillance and selective imprisonment.

As the ever-quotable Deng said himself, "it doesn't matter whether the cat is black or white, as long as it catches mice."

Xi versus Jiang

Deng Xiaoping's successor Jiang Zemin is perhaps best remembered for the fact that everything done under his leadership was done "with Chinese

characteristics.” Deng may have coined the phrase “socialism with Chinese characteristics” to justify his introduction of the market into China’s planned economy, but under Jiang the phrase became a standing joke. Jiang Zemin codified these Chinese characteristics into the “Three Represents”: the idea that in addition to the poor, the Communist Party of China would also represent China’s business and cultural elites.

Under Xi, this has evolved into the Two Represents, and if China’s new rich get their way it may soon degenerate back into a novel kind of One Represent.

Xi versus Hu

Hu Jintao’s major contribution to the intellectual life of the Communist Party was to bring Confucius back into the fold. Long prescribed under Mao as the reactionary idol of the pre-revolutionary patriarchy, today Confucius is back in China, with no small thanks to Hu, who rehabilitated Confucian thought, reopened Confucian temples, and chartered the Confucius Institutes to become China’s cultural ambassadors to the world.

Hu’s trademark slogan was the “harmonious society” — i.e., trust the government and don’t complain and everyone can live in harmony. No word on what the notoriously cranky sage, who got himself successively kicked out of ten different countries for criticizing their poor leadership, might have thought of this. Hu later extended the harmonious society to the harmonious world (i.e., trust China and don’t complain and the world can live in harmony).

With his One Belt, One Road expansionism and South China Sea island building, Xi seems keen to continue Hu’s expansive foreign policy program, only with even less emphasis on the “harmonious” part of the equation.

“Party First”

Xi Jinping Thought, in a nutshell, seems to boil down to something resembling “America First, with Chinese Characteristics.” By all accounts, Xi and U.S. President Donald Trump got along surprisingly well at their first meeting in April, perhaps because at a level deeper than mere speech they spoke the same language.

If Xi’s political philosophy isn’t exactly China First, it is something close to it but at the same time distinctively Chinese: something like “Party First.”

And putting the interests of the Communist Party first is one thing he shares with all of his predecessors.

Like Deng, Xi is a pragmatist who will stay on the capitalist road so long as it leads to much greater wealth than any other. Like Jiang, he is very happy to lead a ruling party dominated by his country's business elite. Like his immediate predecessor Hu, he is crafty enough to use patriotism and ethnic pride as tools to keep ordinary Chinese (if not necessarily China's minority groups) on his side. And like Mao, Xi seems to be ruthless enough to succeed in making his own Chinese Dream a reality.

As long as he continues to put the Party first, Xi is likely to maintain his grip on power — and the Party's loyalty. And as long as the Party puts Xi first, he is likely to have no cause to complain. Xi Jinping Thought may not sell as many books as Mao's did, but come 2021 it will be Xi who sets the course for the next 100 years of the Communist Party of China.

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