

Xi Jinping's Fast Start

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In the few months since Xi Jinping 习近平 took over as party head, the new general secretary has set a frenetic pace, setting out populist and nationalistic themes while attacking corruption. The pace of his activity and his rapid adoption of new themes stand in contrast with the first months of Hu Jintao's leadership and suggest that Xi is, at least for the present, something more than "first among equals"—the usual way of characterizing China's leader. Xi's apparent dominance of the political situation in China and the nationalistic themes he has adopted suggest an urge to distance himself quickly from his predecessor and to play on themes that may help bolster the legitimacy of the party, which was badly damaged by the Bo Xilai 薄熙来 affair and other scandals.

If one may be allowed to paraphrase Hobbes' characterization of life, one can say that the politics preceding the 18th Party Congress were long, nasty, and brutish. The irony of this process is that in the end the political calculus worked out well for new party leader and now president (as of March 17) Xi Jinping 习近平. As far as one can tell from the outside, he is not entering a deeply divided Standing Committee or facing an incumbent head of the Central Military Commission (CMC) as Hu Jintao was forced to do a decade ago. Moreover, as a princeling whose revolutionary heritage is unquestioned, Xi has approached his job with a confidence unseen in his two predecessors, especially early in their terms.

The contrast is illustrated well by the early coverage of the Hu Jintao 胡锦涛 and Xi Jinping administrations in *People's Daily* 人民日报. Hu's first trip after his elevation to the top of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was to Xibaipo 西柏坡, the CCP's last revolutionary capital before entering Beijing (subsequently renamed Beijing) in 1949. It was a trip that tried to recapture revolutionary legitimacy (later summed up in the expression "don't forget your ancestors" [老祖宗不能丢]) while warning about corruption (an admonition that was not much heeded over the ensuing decade). The front-page picture carried in *People's Daily* on December 6 showed the new general secretary touring the Xibaipo memorial hall, with Zeng Qinghong 曾庆红—the party's fifth-ranked leader and a protégé of Jiang Zemin 江泽民—hovering over Hu's left shoulder. The message was clear: Hu was, at best, "first among equals."

Xi Jinping's first foray out of Zhongnanhai was to lead his Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC) colleagues through the Revolutionary History Museum on November 29. The exhibit, entitled "Road to Renaissance," revolved around China's past humiliation and the CCP's role in leading the nation to independence. The accompanying picture in *People's Daily* showed Xi in the center of the PBSC arranged in order of rank; there was no fifth-ranked member looking over his shoulder.

Xi's first trip out of Beijing was to Guangdong, including the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone (SEZ), where he channeled Deng Xiaoping's commitment to reform and opening up and, implicitly at least, paid respects to his reformist father, Xi Zhongxun 习近平, who was governor of Guangdong from 1979 to 1981. In reporting on his remarks in Guangdong, *People's Daily* depicts Xi as a very confident, relaxed leader who wants protocol kept to a minimum. The picture of him that appears on the front page of *People's Daily* on December 12 shows an open-collared party leader who appears very much in charge.

Although it can be argued that Hu Jintao was fairly fast out of the gate—especially after the SARS crisis exploded in the spring of 2003—the evidence suggests that he was constrained in his first few months (and then again later in his term). Jiang Zemin shared the front page with Hu on at least two occasions—which was technically correct because Jiang was still president—but Xi did not share the front page with Hu (Hu was given a front-page photo on December 7 when he was visiting Guizhou 贵州) until February 9, when separate photos depicted each leader attending spring festival festivities; Hu's picture is larger, but crowded with other figures, while Xi stands alone, delivering his New Year's address. And, famously, Jiang took center stage in a photo of top leaders planting trees on April 5, 2003, something that is difficult to explain in protocol terms since Jiang had already stepped down as president. When *People's Daily* reported on Arbor Day activities this year, Xi Jinping is front and center, helping a young pioneer water a new tree. Of the leadership, only Li Keqiang 李克强 is visible, though partially blocked by a tree. Hu Jintao is not even mentioned in the text.¹ It seems apparent that Xi is off to a faster start than Hu; he is also setting a very different tone.

Socialism with Chinese Characteristics

As just noted, Xi's first trip outside Beijing included the Shenzhen SEZ in Guangdong, where on the morning of December 8 he laid a wreath at a statue of Deng Xiaoping and declared, "China's reform has entered a critical period and a deep-water zone" in which the country must "dare to tackle tough issues and tread dangerous waters, dare to smash all inhibiting ideas and concepts, and dare to break free from the barriers of vested interests."² In associating himself with Deng, Xi seemed to be suggesting that he would take the same bold approach, revitalizing reform and confronting special interests as needed.

Xi again highlighted the idea that he would base his approach on Deng's reforms in a speech to new members of the Central Committee in early January. He declared that "Much has been said about the spirit of the 18th National Party Congress, but it all boils down to one point only, that is, to adhere to and develop socialism with Chinese characteristics." Hitting the same pragmatic note as Deng did in the early reform period, Xi put the emphasis on *developing* socialism. As he put it, "Marxism must keep developing in step with the development of the times, practice, and science. It cannot possibly stay the same without change. Socialism has always moved forward in the process of breaking new ground. Adhering to and developing socialism with Chinese characteristics is a big article." At the same time, he laid down a marker against those who might interpret this emphasis on development too loosely: "Socialism with Chinese

characteristics is socialism, not some other ism. We must not discard the cardinal principles of scientific socialism; if we did, it would not be socialism.”³

Balancing pragmatism with ideological adherence has proven difficult through the years, but it seems consistent with Xi’s approach of being very realistic in terms of economic reforms but also very clear that those and other reforms must not threaten the role of the party. If Xi has struck a note of pragmatism and put himself forward as a plain-talking leader who eschews jargon-laden speeches and slogans, he has also projected the sense of a leader who believes reform needs a new vision.

The China Dream

In contrast to Jiang Zemin’s “three represents” and Hu Jintao’s “Scientific Development Outlook”—both of which staked out relatively small themes—Xi has set out a populist agenda that strikes large, even grandiose, hopes. On the day the new Politburo Standing Committee was introduced to the world, Xi appealed to national pride saying, “Our people are a great people. . . . The Chinese people have opened up a good and beautiful home where all ethnic groups live in harmony and fostered an excellent culture that never fades.”⁴

Two weeks later, in his talk at the Revolutionary History Museum, Xi raised the banner of nationalism, declaring that China had finally found the “correct path” to realize “the Chinese nation’s great renaissance” (中华民族伟大复兴) and to achieve the “China dream” (中国梦). He declared that China would achieve the goal of building a “wealthy, powerful, democratic, civilized, and harmonious socialist modernized nation” by the 100th anniversary of the founding of the CCP, which will arrive in 2021, in Xi Jinping’s ninth year in office.⁵

Rather than look to the future, the new party leader rooted his vision in the miseries of the past. “In modern times,” Xi said, “the Chinese nation was subjected to untold miseries and sacrifices rarely seen in the world’s history.” This theme of national humiliation has been repeatedly stressed in the various *People’s Daily* Commentator articles that followed Xi’s November talk as well as his longer address closing the National People’s Congress on March 17. As one article put it, “The Chinese nation’s history of rejuvenation since contemporary times began from the depth of abject sufferings and hardships.”⁶ Another Commentator article declared, “Looking back over contemporary times, there was the danger of being partitioned, the dark shadows of extinction, the days of being discriminated against as the “Sick Man of East Asia.” Yet another Commentator article rooted the China Dream not only in the struggles of modern history but in all of Chinese history: “Looking back at history, we know that it was quite arduous to find this correct path and the path did not come easily. It was created through the great practices of reform and opening up in the past 30 years. It was created through sustained exploration after the founding of the People’s Republic of China 60 years ago. It was created after making in-depth summing up of the development process of the Chinese nation in the past 170 years. It was created through inheriting the ancient civilization of the Chinese nation over the past 5,000 years.”⁷

The point such articles have made repeatedly is, first, one of national pride. As one Commentator article put it, “The Chinese people have never surrendered and have put up fierce resistance, which eventually led them to master their own destiny and embark on the great journey to build their own nation; this fully shows the great national spirit with patriotism at its core.”⁸ Second, the struggle to overcome humiliation has been led by the CCP. As another Commentator article put it, “to realize the China dream, the political leadership that plays a leading role is extremely important . . . the key to running well things in China and realizing the China dream lies in the party.”⁹

The meme of the “China Dream” has been around for along time. As *People’s Daily* helpfully pointed out, Liang Qichao mentioned the “China Dream” in his 1902 essay, “The Future of New China,” in which he envisioned a rich and powerful country, and there are echoes of the China Dream narrative in Sun Yat-sen’s calls to “revive China” and in Chiang Kai-shek’s *China’s Destiny*. About a decade ago, there was a Chinese television show called “China Dream” that, perhaps ironically, depicted a young Chinese couple trying to make it in New York City. And more recently the idea of a China dream was given a more cosmopolitan twist in the Olympic slogan, “One World, one Dream.”

But more recently, the China Dream has been associated with a nationalistic discourse embodied in such books as *China is Unhappy* (中国不高兴), *Currency Wars* (货币战争), and, of course, Colonel Liu Mingfu’s infamous *China’s Dream* (中国梦). Already three years ago, Wang Jisi, dean of Peking University’s School of International Relations, worried that such discourse, feeding off the global financial crisis and China’s increased confidence, was widening the gulf of perceptions between the U.S. and China and leading to conflict.¹⁰

Although Xi has said that the China dream is “the dream of every Chinese,” it is clearly a collective, not individual, dream. As one commentary put it, “Compared with the ‘American dream’ that emphasizes personal struggles, the ‘China dream’ is a dream built on the foundation of patriotism and collectivism.”¹¹ And as Xi Jinping said in his closing address to the NPC, “To realize the China dream, we must carry forward the Chinese spirit. This is the national spirit with patriotism as the core.”¹²

Corruption

A constant theme of Xi’s early days in office has been the fight against corruption. Starting with Xi’s inaugural press conference, in which he cited problems of corruption and discipline, he has led the charge against corruption. On November 18, Xi chaired the Politburo’s first collective study session under the new leadership and gave a talk about upholding the party’s constitution. He told his colleagues bluntly, “There have been serious breaches of discipline in the party in recent years. Some of these cases were very bad, and they have had a terrible, appalling political impact.” He went on to note that in other countries “corruption has played a big role in conflicts that grew over lengthy periods, and it has led to popular discontent, social unrest and the overthrow of political power.” Lest anyone might miss the point, Xi added, “A large number of facts show that corruption could kill the party and ruin the party.”¹³

This was not a one-time push, as Xi has come back to the theme of fighting corruption repeatedly. For instance, when speaking on December 4 on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the PRC Constitution, Xi warned that “some cadres abused their authority” and “put themselves above the law.” Later in December, when meeting with China’s “democratic” parties, Xi alluded to a famous conversation between Mao Zedong and educator Huang Yanpei in which Huang asked how the CCP could avoid the cyclical fate of previous dynasties that rose and fell. Mao famously answered “democracy”; if the CCP operated under the supervision of the people, it could avoid the decadence that led to the decline of previous dynasties. Xi invoked a Chinese saying: “Things must have gone rotten before insects can grow,” to suggest that party discipline was the way to avoid decline.¹⁴

At the Second Plenary Session of the CDIC in January, Xi strongly denounced corruption and the lack of discipline in the party. He said, “If we do not resolutely rectify unhealthy practices and allow them to develop unchecked, they will develop into an invisible wall separating our party from the masses and our party will lose its foundation, lifeline and strength.”¹⁵

The current campaign against corruption raises interesting questions about the role of the public. Beijing blogger Zhu Ruifeng released a video of Chongqing official Lei Zhengfu having sex with an 18-year-old girl, propelling an investigation that terminated the official’s career. Nevertheless, police detained Zhu for seven hours for questioning and officials harassed his wife, who is a military officer; the couple has since divorced. And the other salacious videos Zhu claims to possess have not been released to date.¹⁶ More recently Lou Changping, deputy editor of the popular online journal *Caijing*, successfully exposed the corrupt dealings of Liu Tienan, deputy head of the powerful National Reform and Development Commission, who is now under investigation by the CDIC.¹⁷ Such exposés suggest that the news media and social media could play expanded roles in supervising officials, but at the same time the questioning of Zhu Ruifeng points to official opposition to such uncontrolled investigations.

Fighting corruption has been a task the CCP has undertaken since its earliest days in power when Mao approved the execution of Liu Qingshan and Zhang Zishan in Tianjin. Nevertheless, corruption now seems too deeply embedded in the mechanisms of the party for current efforts to have more than an ephemeral effect on the situation.¹⁸

Implications

It is still early in Xi’s tenure, and the coming years will see new challenges and themes struck, but a few tentative conclusions might be put forward about Xi’s leadership. First, Xi has clearly been fast out of the gate, faster than either of his immediate predecessors. This quick start suggests that the makeup of the PBSC has not been a constraint on him, but more importantly it highlights Xi’s personality. Outside observers have become accustomed to calling the general secretary “first among equals” and emphasizing the role of consensus in decision-making. But Xi’s early days suggest that a confident leader with the right political conditions is still able to dominate politics. This seemed particularly true when Xi presided over the Politburo’s third collective study session on

January 29 and gave a speech warning, “Foreign countries should not expect that we will trade on our own core interests” for peace.¹⁹ Given the tense situation then prevailing in the East China Sea, it seemed that Xi was using the meeting to deliver a strong message. China may be governed by collective leadership, but the general secretary can still exert outsized influence.

Second, Xi’s frenetic pace of activity and setting out lofty themes underscores a sense of crisis in the party’s leadership. The perception that the administration of Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao marked a “lost decade” in which reform stalled and corruption grew out of control is the context in which Xi has tried to rekindle ideals and stoke populism and nationalism. It was precisely in this context that Chongqing party leader Bo Xilai had set out his populist program in a bid for his own leadership. Xi has not adopted Bo’s “New Left” agenda, but he has copied the latter’s populism. Bo’s leftist nationalism and Xi’s nationalist populism suggest that the two share a sense that the party was simply drifting and that it would not survive unless it could rekindle popular enthusiasm and generate internal discipline. These populist impulses have obvious implications for foreign policy, perhaps not driving China’s assertiveness but certainly making compromise more difficult.

Finally, both Xi’s public and private comments suggest strongly that there will be no significant political reform while he is in charge. Setting out visions of the China Dream, leading the charge against corruption, and appealing to “socialism with Chinese characteristics” all suggest efforts to shake up the party and bolster legitimacy through populism. Xi’s December internal speech to Guangdong leaders suggested his determination to maintain party control. Xi said that the Communist Party in the Soviet Union lost power because it lost its ideals, because the military did not defend the party, and because, “In the end, nobody was a real man, nobody came out to resist.”²⁰ Xi is obviously determined to resist those trends. Although Xi has spoken of confining “power within a cage of regulations,”²¹ the party has also warned against talking about “judicial independence,” leaving the party to be the judge of those regulations.²² Why that might work now when it has not worked in the past has not been addressed.

Notes

¹ *People’s Daily*, April 3, 2013.

² *People’s Daily*, December 12, 2012.

³ *People’s Daily*, January 14, 2013.

⁴ *People’s Daily*, November 16, 2012.

⁵ *People’s Daily*, November 30, 2012.

⁶ *People’s Daily*, December 1, 2012.

⁷ *People’s Daily*, March 19, 2013.

⁸ *People’s Daily*, November 30, 2012.

⁹ *People’s Daily*, April 20, 2013.

¹⁰ 王缉思 (Wang Jisi), “中美重大占路较量难以避免” (It is difficult to avoid a major strategic struggle between the U.S. and China), *国际先驱导报*, August 9, 2010.

¹¹ 辛鸣 (Xin Ming), “‘中国梦,’ 中国道路与中国特色社会主义” (The ‘China dream,’ the Chinese path, and socialism with Chinese characteristics), *学习时报 (Study Times)*, March 11, 2013.

¹² *People's Daily*, March 18, 2013.

¹³ *People's Daily*, November 17, 2012.

¹⁴ Hong Kong, *China Daily*, December 28, 2012.

¹⁵ *People's Daily*, January 23, 2013.

¹⁶ Andrew Jacobs, "Chinese Blogger Thrives as Muckracker," *New York Times*, February 5, 2013.

¹⁷ Choi Chi-Yuk, "Top Planning Official Investigated by Anti-Corruption Committee," *South China Morning Post*, May 13, 2013, available at <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1236076/senior-china-planner-investigated-new-corruption-crackdown>.

¹⁸ Joseph Fewsmith, *The Logic and Limits of Political Reform in China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 18–41.

¹⁹ *People's Daily*, January 30, 2013.

²⁰ Chris Buckley, "Vows of Change in China Belie Private Warning," *New York Times*, February 15, 2013.

²¹ *People's Daily*, January 24, 2013.

²² Chris Buckley, "China Warns Officials against 'Dangerous' Western Values," *New York Times*, May 14, 2013.