



## Abstract

Is Xi Jinping an ideological person? Not taking ideology seriously in China

propaganda apparatus increasingly emphasizes his stature, the prospect of “le ist” adventures may become increasingly tempting.

## Introduction:

Is Xi Jinping an “ideological” leader? Western and Chinese observers often portray Xi as someone whose actions are more guided by Stalinist, Maoist, and communist ideas than his immediate predecessors. Sourcing Xi’s behavior in ideology, according to this view, is essential for understanding him. Analysts who believe China and the United States have entered a new Cold War similarly stress the ideological nature of Beijing’s agenda.<sup>1</sup>

Not taking ideology seriously in China would be a mistake. Yet sweeping statements about ideology’s decisive influence can obscure more than they illuminate. As a social science concept, the term “ideology” has been used to express an extraordinary number of meanings.<sup>2</sup> When debates remain on the level of whether a person or regime is “ideological” or “nonideological,” discussants necessarily talk past one another—addressing specific meanings of ideology separately is a more fruitful endeavor. Furthermore, treating ideology as a keystone variable that explains everything fails to appropriately place ideology in the context of politics and contingency. Such a perspective can both underrate the full repertoire of the Leninist toolkit and tactical flexibility, and, at least occasionally, also underestimate opportunities for compromise or cooperation. Moreover, political scientists have identified extensive methodological difficulties facing anyone who wants to directly link the content of an idea with a policy outcome. Especially in Leninist regimes such as China, a “black box” of authoritarian politics, outside observers have consistently misunderstood the nature of ideology or overargued its significance.

Because of the myriad meanings of ideology and the opacity of elite politics in Beijing, this paper does not attempt a dichotomous “yes” or “no” answer to the question of whether Xi Jinping is an ideological person. It does not address the role of ideology as a form of social control and legitimation or whether regular Chinese citizens have cohesive ideological views, two topics which other scholars have already researched in great depth.<sup>3</sup> Instead, it provides useful evidence on two manageable topics of interest to provide some traction for how we should think specifically about elite politics, ideology, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and Xi Jinping.

First, I use the life of Xi Zhongxun, the father of Xi Jinping, to show the surprising ways that ideology did, and did not, shape behavior in specific instances. Xi Zhongxun is an especially useful figure for this purpose, as he is

widely seen as the quintessential humane, practical, “reformist”-style CCP cadre. Despite that reputation, Xi Zhongxun often acted in ways that question the usefulness of the idea of cohesive ideological “factions” within the party.









methodological questions about how to actually “test” the explanatory power of the ideational element. As Yuen Foong Khong pointed out, even process tracing “seldom establishes a direct one-to-one relationship between a given belief and the specific option chosen.”<sup>20</sup>

Further complicating this endeavor is the challenge of separating ideological motivations from a useful excuse. Kenneth Shepsle did not see ideas as a motivating force but rather as a tool for legitimizing more power-political interests: “My own view on the force of ideas is to see them as one of the hooks on which politicians hang their objectives and by which they further their interests.” To illustrate this concept, Shepsle discussed how President Andrew Jackson justified vetoing the Maysville Road bill in 1830 by referring to the constitution and the national debt. Yet the road happened to be in the state of a top competitor: to defeat the bill, Jackson had in fact simply shopped around for ideas to justify his behavior.<sup>21</sup>

Addressing the challenges inherent to “measuring” the causal effect of an idea, Albert Yee warned that “ideation is generally only one of many probable and partial causes of policies.” Leaders still had 1 (m)MCID 153974eed tn-USo t (f ma)-3

Peter Hall's work on the effect of Keynesianism on economic policy also illustrated how ideas mattered but not in the sense that the content of ideas had homogeneous effects. Hall argued that "all too often ideas are treated as a purely exogenous variable in accounts of policy making, imported into such accounts to explain one outcome or another, without much attention to why those specific ideas mattered." He provided three reasons for why ideas needed to be investigated in a broader social and political context. First, ideas are only persuasive to policymakers to the extent that they related "to the economic and political problems of the day." Second, any set of ideas is "ambiguous and far from immediately comprehensible," so "interpretation is a necessary prerequisite to understanding." And third, how a leader is exposed to ideas is itself necessarily a political process.<sup>24</sup>

Ann Swidler, who looked at ideas on the level of culture, similarly moved away from using ideas as "causes." Her foil was Max Weber, who metaphorically argued: "Not ideas, but material and ideal interests, directly govern men's conduct. Yet very frequently the 'world images' that have been created by 'ideas' have, like switchmen, determined the tracks along which action has been pushed by the dynamic of interest." In other words, Weber believed that, although interests act to motivate people, ultimate goals and "the means for getting there" were based on ideas. Yet Swidler rejected this view,

## The Study of Ideology in Leninist Regimes

Carl Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski famously wrote that the first characteristic of a totalitarian regime was an “elaborate ideology” bent on societal transformation and world domination.<sup>27</sup> Not everyone was convinced, however. Ewa Skocpol, who focused on power relations more than intentions, believed that “it cannot be argued...that the cognitive content of ideologies in any sense provides a predictive key to either the outcome of the Revolutions or the activities of the revolutionaries who built the state organizations that consolidated the revolutions.”<sup>28</sup> Meanwhile, the “revisionist” school of Soviet history rejected the “totalitarian” model and focused on writing social history.<sup>29</sup> This generation, according to Ronald Suny, did not think that “deductions from Marx’s *Capital* or Lenin’s *What Is to Be Done?* could explain





logical fault lines in domestic elite politics after those two leaders as well. The political successions in the Soviet Union and China after Stalin and Mao are often explained as triumphs of inner

cannot betray the faction that includes his father...He is the egg laid by his father, the egg of reform...[Xi Zhongxun] was not a typical reformer; he was

levels of violence, persecution, and wrongful verdicts; and he did not criticize those policies brazenly until he had a clear sense of which way the wind was blowing. He did not always push for particularly aggressive policies, he worked hard to address mistakes once they were identified, and he certainly understood how campaigns could easily lose control. But the idea that he completely escaped the party's "leftist" mistakes is misleading.

Second, one potential definition of ideology is whether someone's political views are cohesive—in other words, is there a pattern of viewpoints across issue



peasants had good reasons to flee to the capitalist British colony, Xi was furious and accused them of lacking faith in communist ideals. Yet he gradually came to understand that the problem was indeed economic and that the PRC needed to provide more concrete benefits to convince peasants to stay.

Occasionally, different inclinations competed with one another. For example, he believed that quasi-dissident grassroots intellectuals in Guangdong during the early reform era could be managed with “talking.” Yet, at the same time, during conversations he held with those individuals, he showed a profound phobia of chaos. The Cultural Revolution, in Xi’s mind, had demonstrated the tragedy of political

class struggle as the solution to China's problems, those policies were rejected, and Xi was seen as one of those individuals whose behavior allowed those non-CCP forces to "wag their tail" too much. In the 1980s, when Xi worked on the secretariat in Beijing, he often referred to that earlier time as a golden era. He rebuilt relations with the ethnic minority "prominent personages" that he saw as powerful go-betweens for the party. Non-CCP parties were again provided more voice in how the country was managed. These policies were controversial throughout the 1980s; by the end of the decade, most of them were condemned as failures and the party returned to more hardline tactics.

## Xi Jinping and Ideology

For several important reasons, accurately guessing what Xi Jinping really thinks is a difficult enterprise. First, during his rise to power, Xi was exceptionally guarded even for a member of a political organization that prizes discipline.<sup>49</sup> Second, as an ambitious individual with connections in Beijing, he would have been able to identify what kind of talk was most useful for his career progression. Third, since coming to power, Xi Jinping likely often phrases ideas in a way that suits some political purpose and may not precisely reflect his own individual views. Fourth, as discussed earlier, westerners have historically gotten Chinese elite politics wrong, and, especially over the last few years given COVID-19 and the political situation in China, it is even harder to gain insight into Zhongnanhai.

Yet we should not assume every word that comes out of Xi Jinping's mouth is a lie. Although decisive answers are impossible to achieve for now, we can still ask certain questions to gain leverage. First, does it make sense for Xi Jinping to actually believe certain things he says? Second, has Xi displayed certain ideas consistently over time, and, within the limited political space rising leaders do have, did he emphasize certain themes more than others? And third, to what extent do his actions since coming to power "congrue" with those themes? For reasons discussed above, these are imperfect methods, but they allow for initial hypotheses.

A review of Xi Jinping's speeches and articles both before and after coming to power reveal two persistent "shticks." First, Xi has constantly emphasized the need to avoid extremes. For decades, he has condemned the dogmatism

and chaos of the Cultural Revolution, but also, often in strikingly pragmatic terms, he has identified both the benefits and challenges brought by marketization of the Chinese economy. Second, Xi has always displayed a belief in the importance of ideals and motivation. Xi's experiences as a sent-down youth in the poor Shaanxi countryside during the Cultural Revolution and his time working in a conservative Hebei county in the early reform era suggest it would not be surprising if he sincerely held both such positions.

After the surge of idealism early in the Cultural Revolution, many of those young people later became disillusioned, especially after they were exiled to the countryside as "sent-down youths." In 2003, Xi said that "when the ideals

than risk making a mistake.” Yet Xi also noted that, in some cases, reform suffered from “an overeager desire for quick success” and poor follow-through.<sup>53</sup>

In January 1985, *China Youth* published a flattering report on Xi. Jiang Feng, the article’s author, described Xi’s “rustic style” and praised his ability to manage older cadres with lower levels of education. The most interesting content, however, was the quotes Jiang included attributed to Jia Dashan, a local author. In Jia’s words, “here, you don’t hear everyone shouting reform, but reform is everywhere.” Jia described Xi Jinping as a man without sharp elbows

-

mission and not personal interests could another Cultural Revolution be



the government still had a role to play. For example, the pursuit of “interests” could affect “the ideological, organizational, and style construction of the ruling party,” and the market sometimes led to suboptimal economic outcomes. Crucially, Xi said that such problems were not about “the socialist system” or “the market economy system”—instead, these challenges needed concrete, not ideological solutions.<sup>60</sup>

The next year, Xi wrote a hagiographic article about Deng for *Qiushi* (this time for its regular run) on the twentieth anniversary of the famous 1978 Third Plenum. Xi savaged those individuals who turn Marxism into “dogma” or “only pay attention to reciting individual conclusions or make lopsided arguments.” For Xi, theory was “grey, while the tree of life was always green.” Those people who could apply “theoretical understanding” to “concrete issues” were the ones who would hold the “guiding initiative” in the theory world. Deng’s brilliance, according to Xi, was that in his works there was “no empty or abstract theory or jargon.”<sup>61</sup>

In 2000, Xi claimed that the key characteristic of the CCP was that it pursued the interests of “the people,” not any special interest groups. Marketization increased the speed of development but, “like everything else, has two sides”—the negative aspects threatened the ability of the party to represent everyone. The market created uneven economic development among regions and some individuals were only seeing a slow improvement in living conditions. Moreover, marketization “could seduce people to place too much emphasis on personal interests,” thus damaging the “collective interest,” and it divorced some cadres from their status as representatives of the people. Xi’s solution, however, was curiously “nonideological.” Xi emphasized the importance of “seeking truth from facts,” “proceeding from the concrete situation,” and “escaping closed and conservative ways of thinking.” Yet he warned that since reform was “essentially” a “process of reorganizing interests,” some of the masses would need “sacrifice.” Therefore, “if reform policies are too numerous or steps are too big, it might go beyond what the masses can bear.”<sup>62</sup>

The same year, Xi published an article in *People’s Daily* that again positioned himself as the consummate pragmatist. He stated emphatically that the government should no longer “manage everything” like in the past and criticized those individuals who still had an attitude that “the government commands everything.” On the other hand, “service” should be “limitless”—

government officials should still be actively involved in helping people. Xi wrote, “Managing the relationship between ‘limited’ management and ‘limitless’ service means issues that should be managed must be managed and issues that should not be managed must not be managed; spare no efforts to resolve difficulties for the masses; and seek benefit for all the people.”<sup>63</sup> Just two months later, *People’s Daily* published an interview that highlighted Xi’s other side: his attention to political work. Any government that only paid attention to economic work and ignored ideological political work, Xi said, is a “government without a long-term perspective, they do not deserve the title of government.” Xi credited Fujian’s development to the government never forgetting the importance of ideological political work.<sup>64</sup> But that was not a call to radical politics: another *People’s Daily* article four months later quoted Xi saying, “The gratefulness of the masses shames us; if not for the ten years of chaos [the Cultural Revolution], the issue of the Fuzhou boat people [ ǒ E / ǒ ] would have been resolved much earlier. We, members of the CCP, absolutely must not owe the masses a debt!”<sup>65</sup>

Xi’s dissertation, written for a Doctor of Law degree in Marxist Theory and Education in Ideology and Politics at Tsinghua University in 2001, was a rather forthright and practical investigation into economic problems in China’s countryside. Xi’s answer to these challenges was more marketization, arguing that the market “should be relied on to solve the problems in the structural adjustment of agricultural industry and the increase of the farmers’ income.” Xi warned that government macroeconomic control was needed to overcome for deficiencies in the market, but the big picture was that China’s rural areas needed reform and marketization. In Xi’s words, the market was simply a method for improving the organization of resources and was not itself more “capitalist” or “socialist.”<sup>66</sup>

## Conclusion

Setting aside the question of whether Xi Jinping is actually rolling back “Deng”-style reforms (a term I have argued elsewhere is problematic<sup>67</sup>) with a new “leftist” approach, we at least have reason to believe that, in his own mind, he is walking both a sort of middle path and new path. The history reso-



our steps to the rigidity and isolation of the past, nor take a wrong turn by changing our nature and abandoning our system.” The document concluded that “Marxist theory is not a dogma but a guide to action” and that China’s victories were not the result of “a mechanical application of the templates designed by authors of the Marxist classics.” At the same time, the resolution warned of “money worship, hedonism, ultraindividualism, and historical nihilism; online discourse has been rife with disorder; and certain leading officials have demonstrated ambiguity in their political stance and a lack of fighting spirit.”<sup>68</sup> Xi combined his 2022 New Year Address with soaring language about the CCP’s historic mission but also warned, “To realize the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation will be no easy task like a walk in the park; it will not happen overnight, or through sheer fanfare. We must always keep a long-term perspective, remain mindful of potential risks, maintain strategic focus and determination, and ‘attain to the broad and great while addressing the delicate and minute.’”<sup>69</sup>

How exactly those tensions will play out remains to be seen. Propaganda themes increasingly place emphasis on an old focus of Mao at his most radical: the importance of “struggle.” In 2014, Wang Weiguang, the President of the Academy of Social Sciences, wrote an article titled, “It Is Not Unreasonable to Maintain the People’s Democratic Dictatorship,” in which





- 8 Edward Shils, "Ideology and Civility: On the Politics of the Intellectual," *The Sewanee Review* 66:3 (Summer 1958), 450–80.
- 9 Siniša Malešević, *Ideology, Legitimacy, and the New State: Yugoslavia, Serbia, and Croatia* (London: Routledge, 2002), 12–13.
- 10 John J. Mearsheimer, "The Inevitable Rivalry: America, China, and the Tragedy of Great Power Politics," *Foreign Affairs* 100:6 (November/December 2021), 48–58, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2021-10-19/inevitable-rivalry>.<sup>10</sup>



- (February 2016): 1–9; and Xiao Donglian, *Wenge qian shinian shi 1956–1966*, xia [The Ten Years before the Cultural Revolution 1956–1966, Volume 2] (Hong Kong: Heping tushu youxian gongsi, 2013).
- 39 Frederick Teiwes, “Mao Zedong in Power (1949–1976),” in *Politics in China: An Introduction* ed. William A. Joseph, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 73.
  - 40 Byung-joon Ahn, *Chinese Politics and the Cultural Revolution: Dynamics of Policy Processes* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1976).
  - 41 Lin, Chongkao Gao Gang, Rao Shushi “fandang” shijian.
  - 42 Song Yongyi, *Mao Zedong he wenhua da geming: zhengzhi xinli yu wenhua jiyin de xin chanshi* [Mao Zedong and the Cultural Revolution: A New Interpretation of Political Psychology and Cultural Gene] (Xinbei: Lianjing, 2021), 89–133; and Xiao, *Wenge qian shinian shi 1956–1966* 1054–1102.
  - 43 Qian Xiangli, *Lishi de bianju: cong wanju wei ji dao fanxiu fangxiu, 1962–1965* pr 2-716 4(n64 32 14 J-

in Xi Jinping zai Zhengding [Xi Jinping in Zhengding], ed. Zhongyang dangxiao caifang shilu bianji shi (Beijing: Zhonggong zhongyang dangxiao chubanshe, 2019), 161; Luo Xu, Searching for Life's Meaning: Changes and Tensions in the Worldviews of Chinese Youth in the 1980s (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 49–71; and Lu Ying and Zhou Weisi, "Er li zhi nian" [Independent at Age thirty], Hebei qingnian 7 (1984).

56 Lu and Zhou, "Er li zhi nian."

57 Xi Jinping, "A Chat about Entering Public Service," in Up and Out of Poverty (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2019), 33–54.

58 Xi Jinping, ed., "Xu yi" [First Foreword], in Kexue yu aiguo: Yan Fu sixiang xintan [Science and Patriotism: A New Exploration of Yan Fu Thought] (Beijing: Qinghua daxue chubanshe, 2001), I–II.

59es-EX7 443.7007 443.7001 0 0 8 2 E]7 12 (f P)-]7 442.9 (11.4 (E)-15016.257719.4 (CID 16602 i38.9 (11.4 (E)-15.8 (r l

70 Wang Weiguang, "Jianchi renmin minzhu zhuanzheng, bing bu shuli" [It Is Not Unreasonable to Maintain the People's Democratic Dictatorship], Hongqi wengao