

6

Behind Xi Jinping's Resurrection of Ideological Orthodoxy

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So far, the consequences of Xi Jinping's massive shift to the left have been detrimental to China's rise, as manifested in the accelerated economic slowdown and comprehensive deterioration of the country's relationship with many of the world's great powers, especially the United States. Why did Xi make such a drastic turn to the left and where has it led him and China? This article examines two contexts that have shaped Xi's left turn: Leninist party rule and China's rise on the global stage.

The Context of Leninist Party Rule

As the vanguard of the proletariat, a Leninist party thinks of itself as having a superior mastery of the laws of history based on the Marxist scientific theory of socialism, facilitating the historical progress towards the ideal society of communism. The vanguard party is not subject to popular election because the Party knows better than the general population which is backward. Without periodic elections, the discipline within a Leninist party rests on the faith in the official ideology of every party member. The condition of the official ideology therefore has direct consequences for the integrity of the party and the efficacy of its rule.

Mao Zedong pushed the role of ideology for the Communist Party much further than Lenin and Stalin had ever done before. For Mao the "proletarian" revolution was a matter of political consciousness irrespective of the objective class position of the proletariat or the peasantry. During the Cultural Revolution Mao went even further, making revolution in pursuit of his ideals even against

the Party and its leading elite themselves, whom he believed were turning into a new bourgeoisie.

The weakening of the official ideology in the reform era caused the degeneration of the CPC, prompting Xi to make restoring ideological faith the first priority of his massive effort at rebuilding the Party. Xi has been the first CPC general party secretary after the reforms who re-asserted that realising communism is the highest ideal and ultimate goal of the Party, reprimanding those who dismiss communism as unpractical or irrelevant (Xi 2019a).

According to Xi, faith in the communist ideal is the “calcium” in the spine of a communist party member, the deficit of which would cause “osteoporosis”, that is, political degeneration, economic avarice, moral decay and decadence (Xi 2014b). The restoration of faith is the key factor that would allow a communist to stand upright politically in the face of all the temptations of a capitalist market economy.

Xi is fighting hard against the centrifugal forces that come with market-oriented reforms and the disintegration of central authority experienced by his predecessors. The CPC has a sprawling establishment of 4.86 million party organisations at the grassroots level, reaching every corner of society and economy in addition to the state. The linchpin holding them together is the official ideology, which furnishes the common identity to the 95 million plus party members in all walks of life (Xi 2016). Several times he has led the Politburo Standing Committee in a public ritual repeating the oath that every CPC member has to pledge when joining the Party. On his “southern tour” in late 2012, he posed the question: “Why wasn’t there a single man brave enough to stand out when the Soviet Union broke up?” Xi’s answer was the collapse of the communist faith among the party members (Xi 2019b).

Faith and discipline are the two strengths that, Xi believes, the CPC relied on for past successes, and also the key to its future. In the Leninist tradition of “democratic centralism”, Xi incessantly emphasises the party constitution’s exhortation of “upholding centralised and unified leadership of the Party Centre”, and “individuals obeying the organisation, the minority obeying the majority, the subordinates obeying the superiors, and the whole party obeying the party centre” (Communist Party of China 2017). Ideology is also vital in cementing the bond between the Party and the masses. Instead of electoral success, a communist regime gains legitimacy through a strategy of winning people’s hearts but not their votes. In addition to the promise of a future ideal society, the ideology also prescribes an exemplary role for each party member as vanguard or role model. On this Xi has said: “Why do some folks curse the Communist Party? Because some party members betrayed the communist faith. They are not real

communists. They harm the masses in the name of our Party and hence smear our Party. They joined the Party for private gain and are hollowing out the Party” (Xi 2014a).

Xi emphasises that “the greatest politics is (winning) the people’s heart, and (ideological) consensus is the energy source of our struggle” (Yang 2019). Xi’s rehabilitation of Mao invokes the CPC’s legacy of “serving the people” and its spirit of sacrifice for national liberation. Xi further builds on Mao by asserting that “political power consists of the people and the people constitute political power. The CPC fought to gain political power but to retain political power is to retain the hearts and minds of the people” (*Renmin ribao* 2021).

The greatest challenge to the CPC in the reform era is perhaps the much greater diversity of Chinese society that comes with marketisation of the economy. Today, party members hail from diverse class backgrounds, often with conflicting material interests. Jiang Zemin grappled with this reality by broadening the social basis of the party with the “three represents”, while Hu Jintao advocated a “harmonious society”. Both are inclusive approaches. Xi Jinping, on the other hand, has taken the Maoist road of ideological re-indoctrination. He has repeatedly emphasised that the CPC is built on a shared ideology, not on aggregated material interests, and hence that the ideological faith of party members takes precedence over their material interests (Xi 2021).

The Context of China’s Rise

China’s rise is one of a civilisational state on a truly global stage. In order for the country to be accepted as a rising superpower, the CPC believes that China must compete with the long-established Western civilisation and have something different to offer to the world.

Xi’s core diagnosis of China’s problems, as well as his prescription for its future, is that the country has a missing soul and sagging spirit. Reform and opening up have created enormous material wealth. However, public morality, social trust and personal integrity have sunk to new lows; corruption is like a cancer penetrating the bone marrow of the party-state. In Xi’s mind, a nation without a soul cannot really rise, no matter how wealthy it becomes (Xi 2019c).

The consequences of the breakdown of ideological faith among party members include corruption, extreme individualism, immorality, hedonism, money worship, superstition, fearing and respecting nothing, mocking Marxist orthodoxy and the communist ideal, embracing fortune-telling, seeking help from God, deities and *qigong* masters, moving family members and assets abroad to prepare for “jumping ship” at any moment, etc. (Central Committee 2013).

A nation ruled by a party in such a condition is hardly a source of inspiration for the world.

Reviving the soul and elevating the spirit of the nation is a precondition for national rejuvenation. Here, Xi draws on two major sources. The first is the CPC's revolutionary legacy. Why were millions of party members and their allies willing to lay down their lives to bring China where it is now? Xi believes that it was their faith in the Party's cause. According to Xi, faith in "revolutionary ideals is loftier than the sky" (Xi 2013b).

The second source of national rejuvenation is the revival of China's five thousand years of cultural, philosophical and ideological history. Here Xi runs into the problem of integrating two fundamentally incompatible traditions. Marxism is revolutionary and forward-looking, while China's cultural traditions are inherently conservative and look to the past. Xi has to improvise to marry the two.

First, he claims that Marxism activated China's cultural tradition, breathing life into an ancient civilisation on its last legs. Secondly, he claims substantial overlap between the ideal of communist society in Marxism and the Confucian ideal of a world of universal harmony of all under heaven, where benevolence, justice and virtue prevail. Third, he also claims that the roots of the Maoist ideal "serving the people wholeheartedly" lie in the Confucian people-oriented philosophy, for instance in the saying of Mencius that "the people are the most important, the state comes second, and the ruler is least important of the three".

Last but not the least, Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism and other cultural traditions of China are a remedy for the unwanted militancy of Marxism-Leninism and Maoism in times of peace. Whilst Marxism discriminates along class lines, the thrust of Chinese traditional philosophy is inclusive, which is expressed in some of the central policy themes of the Xi regime, such as harmony between people, humans and nature, state and state, a masses-centred administration, moral integrity as first principle of governance and selection of officials, as well as his effort to revive traditional family values.

Xi rose to power at a time when he believed there was an acute crisis of liberal democracies and capitalism, one to which he alludes as presenting changes unseen in a century. To him, the West has lost both the moral high ground and systemic superiority, especially after the 2008 financial meltdown on Wall Street and other Western financial centres. Right after assuming power on the 1st of January of 2013, Xi claimed that "the scenery is ever more beautiful on our side", full of anticipation of a resurgence of socialism worldwide (Xi 2013a).

Xi sees this moment as an opportunity for China to seek a leading role in world history. Upon the shoulders of the CPC rests the historical responsibility to

prove the vitality, viability and superiority of socialism, and hence lead mankind to its manifest destination: communism.

Prognosis

With the crisis of neo-liberalism in the early 21st century, China appears as the only major alternative still standing. That alone gives China the confidence to forge ahead and open up a new path for mankind. Xi-ism, while inheriting Marxist teleology, is characterised not by theoretical innovation but by instrumentality.

On the flip side, Xi-ism is in many ways misguided. It is Maoist in form but not in content: its goals are fundamentally different from what Mao attempted but failed to achieve. Xi's crude understanding of Marxism tends to make him blind to other options in policy and institutional solutions. As a result, his resurrection of orthodoxy also brings back some of the problems of 20th century communism: dictatorial rule, ideological intolerance and repression. It is questionable whether his ideological reformulation and institutional building, in his zeal to restore the integrity to the Leninist party, have made enough allowances for the diversity and dynamism that come with a market economy.

Xi also misconstrues the success of reform and opening up. The things he puts at the top of his agenda—restoring the Marxist faith, strengthening party discipline, recentralising power, fighting corruption, beefing up state-owned enterprises, tightening information control, purging Western influence, restraining freedom of speech, cracking down on dissent and so on—played no positive role in China's developmental success. They may indeed strengthen the CPC's rule, but at the cost of social vitality and economic dynamism.

Finally, Xi's turn to the left has placed the CPC in an ideological position that makes it hard to fend off forces from even farther to the left. It has created a political environment that is nurturing radical forces incompatible with much of what the reform era has accomplished, eroding or even reversing those achievements. It has also set China on a collision course with Western liberal democracies at a time when China is still ill-prepared for such a confrontation.

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