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Xi Jinping and Ideology

Joseph Torigian is an Assistant Professor at the School of International Service at American University and a 2021–22 Wilson China Fellow



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Abstract

Is Xi Jinping an ideological person? Not taking ideology seriously in China would be a mistake, but sweeping statements about ideology's decisive influence can obscure more than they illuminate. Treating the content of ideology as a variable that explains everything fails to appropriately account for politics and contingency. Linking ideology to specific actions faces serious methodological challenges, and outside observers have often gotten the role of ideology wrong in Leninist states. The life of Xi Jinping's own father Xi Zhongxun suggests the difficulty of placing Chinese leaders clearly on an ideological spectrum. In his own remarks on ideology, Xi Jinping has displayed two consistent "shticks" that might seem contradictory to outside observers: a distaste for radicalism and dogmatism and a preoccupation with conviction, values, and dedication.

Implications and Key Takeaways

- Ideology is a term with many meanings, and policymakers should be explicit about what they are talking about when they use the term. New evidence shows the extent to which outside analysts have incorrectly understood the role of ideology in Chinese elite politics.
- With regards to ideology, President Xi Jinping has consistently displayed two "shticks" that might seem contradictory to outside observers: a distaste for radicalism and dogmatism and a preoccupation with conviction, values, and dedication.
- Despite the return of some Mao-era rhetoric, Xi views struggle not in a "class" sense but rather as "forging" experiences that increase party members' devotion to the cause through hardship and challenge.
- Two factors may indicate a shift in Xi's approach to ideology: 1). Xi believes that the United States opposes Beijing for both ideological and power political reasons; that American efforts to undermine the CCP will only increase; and that Washington uses ideological infiltration to achieve that goal; and 2). As Xi's time as top leader continues and the

propaganda apparatus increasingly emphasizes his stature, the prospect of “leftist” 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.¹

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.² 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.³ 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. Xi Zhongxun’s career also reveals the surprising extent to which even a party of individuals who share a Bolshevik “operational code” can differ amongst themselves.

Second, I draw upon a wide variety of previously unused materials to describe an interesting tension that has persisted in Xi Jinping’s expressed views of ideology since he was a very young man. Xi has repeatedly and consistently mocked people who bring a dogmatic, extremist approach to policy and has advised caution about taking steps beyond what the situation allows. Yet, at the same time, Xi for decades has demonstrated a preoccupation with values and motivation: a loss of confidence in the CCP’s mission, in Xi’s mind, would mean the loss of the party’s “political spirit” and the “spiritual pillar for CCP members to withstand any test.”⁴

The Myriad Meanings of Ideology

The most common, “person-in-the-street” definition of ideology is an “oversimplifying view of the world—that to speak or judge ‘ideologically’ is to do so schematically, stereotypically, and perhaps with the faintest hint of fanaticism.” The use of ideology in this pejorative sense has a long pedigree. The sociologist Émile Durkheim wrote that ideology consisted of “the use of notions to govern the collation of facts rather than deriving notions from them.”⁵ Napoleon applied the term “ideologists” to those people who resisted him, by which he meant they were “doctrinaires” and not “the political men of action.”⁶ Talcott Parsons believed the “essential criteria of an ideology” were deviations from objectivity.⁷ Edward Shils characterized ideology as a belief that “must override every other consideration” and which justified a totalistic, aggressive expansion of power and reshaping of human society.⁸ Karl Marx, in *The German Ideology*, used the term “ideology” to criticize those with a “false” worldview (in that case, his target was the Hegelians who thought that it is ideas, not social factors, that shape human history). Yet Marx also famously meant it in the sense of a set of ideas that legitimated an unjust (capitalist) system.⁹

Ideology as something inherently aggressive and dangerous or as a tool used to justify an inequitable system is how it is most typically used with regard to China today. Yet it should be noted that this view does not have a patent on the claim that the CCP is dangerous—denying any role for ideology in Beijing implies the leadership is a cynical and power-hungry group unfazed by any norms of behavior. John Mearsheimer, for example, whose faith in the absolute explanatory power of realism mirrors those scholars who claim ideology explains everything, asserts that China is aggressive and sources such behavior in the nature of the international system, going so far as to write that “it would be a mistake to portray China as an ideological menace today.”¹⁰ Richard Pipes, a notorious hawk during the Cold War, decisively sourced Moscow’s expansionism not in ideology but in “its social base and its politics.”¹¹

Not all scholars impart ideology with negative connotations. Clifford Geertz complained about how “the term ‘ideology’ has itself become thoroughly ideologized. . . . Even in works that, in the name of science, profess to be using a neutral sense of the term, the effect of its employment tends nonetheless to be distinctly polemical.” Geertz pointed to how people would use “ideological” as an insult but never allow the term to be applied to themselves. In Geertz’s mind, such an approach was not useful: instead, ideology was necessary for any group to function—whether it was “accurate” or not was a separate question.¹² Based on the insight that the world is ambiguous, many political scientists and economists have stated that ideas are necessary to explain behavior.¹³

The pejorative and more value-neutral schools of ideology together provide a dizzying number of possible meanings. In his own review of the literature, John Gerring provided perhaps the most extensive definitional framework of ideology. He noted that, with regard to function, scholars have debated whether ideology is a tool used to explain, repress, integrate, motivate, or legitimate. They have also debated whether ideologies are essentially interest based or noninterest based. Gerring even listed *sixteen* typologies previously utilized to determine where a particular cognitive/affective structure fits on the “more or less” ideological spectrum: is it the coherence of their worldview, as Philip Converse famously argued? Is it the simplicity of their ideas? Is it the extent to which they distort how the world really works? Is it about the seriousness of their conviction, or the opposite: their lack of sincerity (meaning they are

motivated by “mere ideology”)? Is it about dogmatism? Gerring concluded that “it is not reasonable to try to construct a single, all-purpose definition of ideology, usable for all times, places and purposes. Doing so would deprive the concept of its utility precisely because its utility is (usually) context-specific... The task of definition we must leave to the writer, situated in a particular problem, region, time-period, and methodology.”¹⁴

Linking Ideology to Action

Ideology is a seductive idea for China watchers because a purely “ideological” leader is easily understood—all one has to do is read about the ideas to which the leader subscribes. Former Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, for example, believed that Stalin’s *Problems of Leninism* was “the present-day Communist bible...[that] gives us the same preview Hitler gave in *Mein Kampf*.” Dulles would even open the book “with surprising accuracy” to prove any point.¹⁵

At the beginning of the Cold War, Nathan Leites of the RAND Corporation tried to determine a Bolshevik “operational code.” He concluded that the leaders in Moscow were more motivated by a fear of latent homosexuality than any objective threats. According to Leites, “The Bolshevik insistence on, in effect, killing enemies and being killed by them is...an effort to ward off fear-laden and guilty wishes to embrace men and be embraced by them.” These psychological motivations underpinned an ideology of fanatical expansion and rejection of compromise. Leites did not find this code primarily by reading Bolshevik texts (after all, it was their subconscious doing the work) but by examining the alleged emotional motivations faced by the Russian intelligentsia from which the Bolsheviks descended. As Ron Robin explains, “Instead of seeking overt expressions of political faith, Leites preferred the analysis of ‘clues,’ chance gestures of speech that might uncover the real—mostly unconscious, psychopathological—motivation of the Bolshevik character.” Leites’s writings had a major impact on US negotiators at Panmunjom and the first generation of RAND nuclear strategists.¹⁶

Leites also strongly influenced Alexander L. George, one of the most important methodologists in the history of political science. In 1967, George tried to salvage Leites’s core insights while rejecting his “reference to psychoanalytic hypotheses.” Although George believed the concept of operational

code was useful, he never suggested that it was a panacea for understanding Soviet behavior. Instead, he described the operational code as a “prism that influences the actor’s perception of the flow of political events and his definition or estimate of particular situations.” Analysts still needed to consider the code in the context of “specific situations and assessment of institutional and other pressures on the political leader’s decisions.” George raised further questions about what the code might be able to explain when he noted that the code itself was inherently ambiguous:

It has been of considerable value on occasion to Western leaders to understand that their Soviet counterparts structure the problem of action with a set of beliefs and maxims that seem to contradict, or, rather, oppose one another. There is, as a result, what might be called a “tension of opposites” in their cognitive structuring of the problem of action. We saw this already in the beliefs held with respect to the first of the instrumental issues: attempt to optimize gains, but don’t engage in “adventures.” And we see it again here with the reference to the second instrumental issue: “push to the limit” and “pursue” a retreating opponent, but “know when to stop.”¹⁷

Years later, George went further and presented two specific methods for determining the explanatory power of an operational code. As George himself admitted, both were far from perfect. The “congruence” procedure looked for consistency “between the content of given beliefs and the content of the decision.” In other words, if a leader apparently held certain beliefs and their actions made sense according to such beliefs, then an “operational code” explanation for behavior had some validity. Yet the problem with such a method is obvious: correlation may imply causation but it far from proves it. George, therefore, also suggested “process-tracing” as a more persuasive method, which traced “in some detail the steps in the process by means of which given operational code beliefs influence the assessment of incoming information, help to shape the individual’s definition of the situation, and influence his identification and evaluation of options.”¹⁸ Yet process-tracing came with its own problems.¹⁹ Researchers still faced the extraordinary evidentiary challenges to fully explaining a decision (especially in authoritarian regimes) and unresolved

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.”²⁰

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.²¹

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 to take “geopolitical factors” and “domestic considerations” into account. Given that reality, Yee argued that thinking about an “idea” as one of a set of alternative hypotheses for an outcome was inappropriate—the world was too complicated for such differentiation. Instead, Yee proposed thinking about ideas as “capacities, powers, or mechanisms.” Yee was essentially arguing that it made more sense conceptualizing the different ways that ideas might work than seeking a direct “cause-effect” relationship between the content of an idea and an action.²²

In a chapter on the role of ideas in foreign policy, Judith Goldstein and Robert Keohane engaged in exactly this kind of intellectual legwork by rejecting both rationalist approaches that denied any role for ideas and reflectivists that “have been slow to articulate or test hypotheses.” Goldstein and Keohane stated that ideas and interests could not be divorced from one another. Instead, they identified three mechanisms for how ideas actually mattered: “Our argument is that ideas influence policy when the principled or causal beliefs they embody provide road maps that increase actors’ clarity about goals or ends-means relationships, when they affect outcomes of strategic situations in which there is no unique equilibrium, and when they become embedded in political institutions.”²³

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 *homogenous* 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.²⁴

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, arguing that "what people want...is of little help in explaining their action." Instead, she proposed culture as a "toolkit" or "repertoire" for "constructing 'strategies of action,' rather than as a switchman directing an engine propelled by interests." This "toolkit" perspective suggested that the most a scholar could achieve by looking at a culture was identifying a possible available range of actions.²⁵

These attempts to save ideas as a useful social science concept clearly have one strong element in common: such methods can show how ideas "shape," "constrain," "orient," and "guide," but they do not unambiguously draw a line of cause and effect between an idea and a concrete policy outcome.²⁶ Therefore, when this literature on the role of ideas in political science is considered as a whole, the message is that, while ideas are a useful concept, they have to be understood in a broader political and social context. The content of ideas is not determinative for an outcome.

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.²⁷ Not everyone was convinced, however. Theda 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.”²⁸ Meanwhile, the “revisionist” school of Soviet history rejected the “totalitarian” model and focused on writing social history.²⁹ 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 much more than the “aspirations of leaders.” These social historians rejected the “recipe book” view of ideology who “made a simple deduction from text to intention and action.”³⁰

Since the end of the Cold War, Soviet studies saw a “return of ideology.” Martin Malia’s book, published in 1994, sought to “reassert the primary of ideology and politics over social and economic forces.”³¹ Malia thought ideology was the cornerstone that could elucidate all of Soviet history. However, most of these scholars rejected the absolutist position shared by the totalitarian school and Malia. They noted that declassified materials from Moscow showed that Soviet leaders did indeed “talk Bolshevik” behind closed doors. Yet while these scholars were sensitive to the numerous ways that ideology functioned, they did not presume that the content of ideology could unproblematically interpret behavior. Jochen Hellbeck, one of the leaders of this trend, argued, “Rather than a given, fixed, and monologic textual corpus, in the sense of ‘Communist party ideology,’ ideology may be better understood as a ferment working in individuals and producing a great deal of variation as it interacts with the subjective life of a particular person.”³² Reviewing this literature, Steven Smith wrote that “ideology does not provide a master key that unlocks the complexities of Soviet development. The fact that meaning is constitutive of human action, that people act upon the world in terms of their beliefs about the world, does not entail that the intentions of human actors provide a privileged source of explanation of their actions.” After all, reality “had a nasty habit of sneaking up on the Bolsheviks from behind and

throwing into confusion their best-laid plans.”³³ Michael David-Fox, similarly to Gerring, proposed that the most fruitful way forward would be to separate the multiple potential meanings of ideology in Soviet history and address them separately: “Much is to be gained by asking how it was understood and defined by different actors throughout the course of Soviet history.”³⁴ These scholars commonly believed that separating ideology from other explanations was inappropriate. For example, Suny wrote, “It seems to me that it is not very useful to position ideology at one pole and realism, *Realpolitik*, pragmatism, or objectivity at the other, juxtaposed opposite one another like passion and reason, religion and science, state socialism and market capitalism.”³⁵

Nigel Gould-Davies’s article on the role of ideology in Soviet foreign policy powerfully reveals why treating ideology and *Realpolitik* as competing forms of explanation is so problematic. Gould-Davies notes that realists discount the role of ideology by arguing that, if ideologues really existed, they “must have a master plan,” “must be inflexible,” “must be unremittingly aggressive,” and “cannot cooperate with adversaries.” Realists then point to evidence suggesting Moscow’s leaders were not such inveterate ideologues. But does that really mean ideology did not matter? As Gould-Davies writes, “There is no necessary connection between the radicalism of ultimate objectives and the choice of means to achieve them.” In other words, even if the Soviets could hope for a world in which everyone was communist, that “ideology” would still not explain much of their behavior on any given day. Gould-Davies notes something George saw too—part of the Bolshevik code was distaste for leftist, radical, self-destructive behavior: “Compromise, retreat, flexibility, avoidance of war, protection of the Soviet state—none of these was alien to Lenin.”³⁶

Such characteristics were not alien to Stalin either. In his magisterial new book on the beginning of the Cold War in Europe, Norman Naimark writes that, sooner or later, Stalin wanted a communist Europe, and he saw enemies of a class nature everywhere. Yet the Soviet leader had no clear plan to get there, did not support revolutions, and tried to avoid antagonizing Washington and London. In that sense, according to Naimark, “Stalin was by all accounts the ultimate realist.” For Stalin, “excessive ideological enthusiasm, frequently known derogatorily in party circles as ‘sectarianism,’ was for naïfs.”³⁷

Meanwhile, with regards to China, new evidence has increasingly revealed the extent to which outside observers have misjudged the role of ideology in

elite politics. As Frederick Teiwes, the leading figure in this new historiography, has written, most scholarly works on elite politics, “have been either dramatically wrong, or a very mixed bag, or in critical respects speculation that cannot be verified on existing evidence.”³⁸ Two findings stand out in particular with regard to ideology: the competing tendencies within Mao himself and his relationship with others in the elite.

“Maoism” is often synonymous with radicalism. Yet, as Teiwes writes, with regard to Mao, “Two broad tendencies can be identified: the ‘revolutionary romantic’ and the pragmatic...with pragmatism dominating for the majority of his career.” Before 1949, Mao stood out for his “rightist (as in practical and cautious)” mindset toward both ideology and policy—an approach that ultimately led to victory over the Kuomintang. The notorious “Rescue the Fallen” campaign in Yan’an, during which thousands were placed under suspicion, was an exception that proved the rule—Mao apologized and promised the party would not make such mistakes again (an oath he largely held until the Cultural Revolution). Mao even allowed former enemies to remain within the top leadership. After 1956, Mao of course became increasingly radical and erratic, but the pragmatic and extremist sides of his nature still at least occasionally competed with one another.³⁹

The Mao era is also often described as a history of two competing ideological lines—a contest between Mao the revolutionary modernizer and Liu Shaoqi the managerial modernizer.⁴⁰ That characterization has not survived the new evidence that has subsequently become available. Certainly, Liu at least occasionally made “rightist” comments, which chagrined Mao.⁴¹ Yet Liu’s most outstanding characteristic was his habit of veering wildly from “left” to “right,” and, when he was on the left, he was *extremely* left. As scholars such as Song Yongyi and Xiao Donglian point out, Liu Shaoqi’s leadership of the Socialist Education Movement that preceded the Cultural Revolution was extraordinarily brutal. Liu’s extremism often went even further than Mao’s, and Mao sometimes even inferred his own “core thinking” from Liu’s comments. Liu clearly “considered it as a Cultural Revolution style political campaign.”⁴² As Qian Xiangli put it, “Liu was not an opponent [反对派] of Mao Zedong.”⁴³

In my own research on Soviet and Chinese politics after Stalin and Mao, I argue that scholars have consistently overestimated the extent of real ideo-

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-party democracy, leading to a victory of “reformers” over “conservatives” or “radicals.” Yet newly available evidence suggests that the post-cult-of-personality power struggles were instead shaped by the politics of personal prestige, historical antagonisms, backhanded political maneuvering, and violence. For example, Molotov was no neo-Stalinist—that was a useful label Khrushchev used to push out the old guard. Mao’s successor Hua Guofeng, famously associated with the “two whatevers” (an allegedly dogmatic, Maoist ideology), was actually a powerful supporter of reform and opening. Certainly, neither Molotov nor Hua led their own ideological factions.⁴⁴

Xi Zhongxun and Ideology

Communist political language identifies a “spectrum” across the left and right to characterize problematic tendencies. “Leftism” generally refers to overly aggressive and impractical policy implementation; it is also associated with persecution and purges that punish people who have committed no crime. “Rightism,” on the other hand, means a lack of the political willpower necessary to push the party’s agenda forward when opportunities present themselves or insufficient attention to ideological proprieties; “rightists” are also often accused of inappropriate friendliness toward individuals with questionable loyalties to party rule. Official histories of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the Chinese Communist Party tend to define their past as a series of “line struggles” in which rightists or leftists are defeated.

The common narrative about Xi Jinping’s father Zhongxun is that he was the definitive anti-“leftist”—a practical, flexible, and non-ideological figure. Xi Zhongxun himself once remarked: “With regard to me at least, my whole life I never persecuted anyone, my whole life I never made a leftist mistake.”⁴⁵ Even after Xi Jinping started demonstrating tendencies widely viewed as leftist, Wu Jiaxiang, who previously worked in both the CCP Secretariat and General Office, argued that Xi would never betray his father’s legacy as a reformer: “He is his father’s son; he was born into the family of the most pro-reform faction; according to the inheritance of CCP and Chinese history, he

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 the greatest reformer; if you use color to categorize, and the reformists were blue, then he was deep blue.⁴⁶

There is certainly some truth to that characterization of Xi Zhongxun. Xi played a key role in the launching of the Special Economic Zones—the most powerful symbol of China’s reform and opening up. After the Mao era, Xi believed in the possibility of more institutionalization within the party and protection for different opinions. He often revealed a “softer” side with regard to Beijing’s policies toward ethnic minorities.⁴⁷ Xi joined the CCP as a teenager with only a vague understanding of what the party represented and received little formal education; he was encouraged by Mao to read more. Yet absolutizing Xi as a “reformer” or anti-ideologue does not do justice to the intricacies and tensions of his character. That is not because he was a “worse” person than people think, but because he was a member of a particular political organization—the Chinese Communist Party. The broader context in which Xi lived helps us see both the power and limitations of ideology as an explanation in specific ways.

First, despite common political science theories of authoritarian regimes that emphasize the weakness of the top leader and a ubiquitous desire within the elite to replace them, most of the time Leninist regimes are extraordinarily disciplined organizations.⁴⁸ The top leader does not cater for support—the deputies seek to please the top leaders. Power flows down, not up. Mobilizing a “faction” with any ideological cohesion is taboo. In such a situation, although deputies have some leeway, they usually care more about discipline and party stability than pushing for their own policies.

Therefore, despite his reputation as an ideological “reformer,” party discipline more often than not restrained whatever policy inclinations Xi might have held. In fact, Mao Zedong himself pithily identified Xi’s attentiveness to organizational discipline as a core attribute. The Chairman even wrote on a white cloth the words “The Party’s interests come first” and gave it as a gift to Xi, which became one of his most treasured possessions. In each case where Xi allegedly acted heroically in the midst of one of the party’s historic campaigns that went “too far,” we have little to no evidence that he spoke out against them when they began; his areas of responsibility did not escape significant

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 areas that make sense in conjunction with each other? History has shown that the position a CCP member holds on one issue is often a poor prediction for how they might react in other situations. Several reasons may explain why this is the case. First, whatever their ideological inclinations, members of the CCP still need to address the concrete challenges of any particular goal. Second, cadres can learn from experiences and shift their views over time. Third, CCP leaders often pursue multiple goals simultaneously, and such objectives may conflict with one another. Fourth, when someone holds political views that seem incohesive from a rational perspective, emotions sometimes help reveal why they are present in one individual.

Over the course of his decades-long career running giant regional bailiwicks or serving as right-hand man to Zhou Enlai on the State Council or Hu Yaobang on the secretariat, Xi had to manage an extraordinary set of different challenges. He often displayed a wide variety of approaches that together do not fit well on a "rightist-leftist" spectrum. Although he supported the Special Economic Zones in Guangdong, he opposed the household responsibility system, which gave more rights to peasants and was an even more important step in China's economic restructuring. During the 1980s, he prioritized co-optation and economic development to settle challenges in Xinjiang. Yet, with regard to Catholics, whom he considered were generally loyal to the Vatican, he displayed much tougher behavior.

Xi also learned from his experiences. After violence in Muslim regions erupted when he was running the Northwest Bureau in the early years of the People's Republic of China (PRC), he concluded that CCP policies were largely to blame, and he carried those lessons with him for decades. After sixteen years in the political wilderness, Xi was sent to run Guangdong Province on the border with Hong Kong. When local leaders explained to him that

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 instability, and their actions threatened the improving situation after Mao’s death. Ultimately, the fear of chaos triumphed, and, when push came to shove, Xi was willing to use force if “talking” did not work.

Emotional elements also threatened strong ideological “cohesion.” Xi unambiguously thought that the Cultural Revolution was an absolute disaster, and, in the 1980s, he often spoke about the need to overcome Mao-style strongman rule. Yet, at the same time, Xi was deeply devoted to the Chairman’s memory. As an old man, Xi continued to sing songs about Mao and was deeply upset when people criticized the late Chinese leader. Part of Xi’s attitude was likely political—he understood that rejecting Mao would be destabilizing for the party. But the emotional connection is undeniable. He thought that Mao had saved his life in 1935 during a purge led by other communists, and Mao led the CCP to victory after decades of struggle in which Xi personally, as well as his friends and family, suffered terribly.

Moreover, even when any given position on the policy spectrum might be “rightist,” such an approach must be considered relatively. Ultimately, Xi believed that only the CCP could save China. Co-optation and “talking” were simply other forms of control. Even after the Tiananmen Square crackdown and the collapse of communist regimes in Eastern Europe, Xi repeatedly and publicly restated his faith in the ultimate victory of communism.

Xi Zhongxun’s life raises questions about the explanatory power of ideology for another reason as well—over the course of his life, the party zig-zagged multiple times across a whole host of different areas in ways that raise doubts about a single “Bolshevik code.” During much of the 1950s, the party took a gradualist approach and provided limited avenues for participation by non-CCP figures through the so-called united front. When Mao increasingly saw

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.⁴⁹ 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 of the Cultural Revolution could not be realized, it proved an illusion." The next year, Xi reflected on how he and other sent-down youth criticized villagers for not sufficiently punishing a former rich peasant: "It was dogmatic; it was a result of not having seen the real world." A hagiographic set of interviews about Xi claim that he "gradually began to doubt the long-term incessant severe class struggle." Sociologists have noticed similar reactions in many other sent-down youth.⁵⁰

When Xi Jinping began work at the county level in Hebei in March 1982, he was moving to a province notorious for its leftism, factionalism, and conservatism—all legacies of the Cultural Revolution. More Chinese citizens were complaining to Beijing about local problems there than in any province. In January 1982, CCP cadres in Feixiang County used drinking bouts, vote soliciting, anonymous big character posters, and even threats to engineer a campaign that defeated the proreform county secretary and pick a more conservative, factional figure. Feixiang was not the only dangerous place to work—before starting in Zhengding, Xi Jinping had said he was also willing to work in Pingshan County, but he was told not to go there because factions were throwing explosives (literally) at each other.⁵¹

In an April 1983 speech in Zhengding, Xi blamed the "ten years of disaster," meaning the Cultural Revolution, for poor "party member conduct" (党风). He also warned that the "capitalist corrupt thought and feudal thought" would more easily enter China as it opened up and stimulated the economy.⁵² In March 1985, he complained that "some comrades are not proactive about reform, are not sensitive; they lack a sense of responsibility for reform." These individuals, according to Xi, often said, "I would prefer not to reform rather

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.⁵³

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 whose main focus was practicality and results, not reform for reform’s sake: “He is a reformer who does not wear western-style clothes, and he forges ahead without acting aggressively. While persuading people to accept the historical necessity of reform, he can still leisurely have a drink of alcohol. This is a reformer who makes progress with a smile on his face.” The article also quoted Xi making remarks emphasizing stability in the context of change: “Reform is the wish of the Chinese people; it is the ‘great trend’ of Chinese society, so individuals don’t need to do anything deliberately shocking...In the process of reform, it is necessary to study national characteristics, grasp the thinking of the masses, avoid any destructive shocks; otherwise, blind reform is just a romantic lyrical poem; in the worst case, it could even damage the endeavor.”⁵⁴

While in Hebei, Xi was also attentive to broader debates among young people about the meaning of life, as the end of the Cultural Revolution and beginning of the reform era led to profound doubts about societal values. Those discussions were sparked in 1980 by the letter “Why Is Life’s Road Getting Narrower and Narrower?” published in *China Youth*. The letter reflected the ennui many young Chinese felt in the 1980s: “I am twenty-three this year. I should say that I am just beginning life, but already all of life’s mystery and charm are gone for me. I feel as if I have reached the end.” In 1984, Xi supported publication of an article in *Hebei Youth* that depicted his devotion to the party and nation as the source of meaning in his life, and Xi explicitly said that the article was his response to the 1980 *China Youth* letter. While that letter had described how the disillusion caused by the trauma of the Cultural Revolution led people to focus on their personal interests to make up for lost time, Xi Jinping was portraying himself as someone “forged” and rededicated to the people by the experience. Xi told his interviewer that only if people like him devoted his life to the party’s

mission and not personal interests could another Cultural Revolution be avoided: “that is one of the reasons I have chosen this life.”⁵⁵

According to that same article, Xi Jinping repeatedly told a story that mocked old dogmatists who visited Guangdong (where his father used to work) and saw peasants wearing suits and ties and “even blue jeans and bright-colored blouses.” They also heard “music they did not understand” in coffee shops and saw neon lights everywhere. These old red comrades “were dazzled, felt dizzy; they could not help but grab their heads and sob: ‘we worked so hard for socialism for so many years; who could have expected that capitalism would be restored so quickly.’” Xi’s story allegedly always led his listeners and himself to guffaws of laughter.⁵⁶

As party boss of Ningde in Fujian Province, Xi returned to these themes. In March 1990, he criticized recent graduates from high school or college: “While they may have gained considerable knowledge from books, they are still inexperienced and untested. . . . To look down on historical experience is to look down on the people.” The belief that someone can get to the “truth” in one try, Xi argued, “leads to dogmatic errors.” At the same time, Xi went into great detail about the personal moral characteristics necessary for good CCP members. He apparently recognized the possible tension in this dual focus on practicality and belief. He said:

I believe that moral courage is a quality every leader must have. Without it, leaders have no backbone. When talking about moral courage, we should be aware not to become dogmatic. A discipline of Confucius had the tassel of his helmet sliced off by his enemy while on the battlefield in the midst of a desperate fight. Believing this was an affront to his moral courage, the man lay down his arms to pick up the tassel. In that moment, he put more value on affixing the tassel, which symbolized his position as an official, than on fending off a fatal attack from the enemy. This is an example of dogmatism.⁵⁷

Xi also demonstrated an interest in non-Marxist Chinese thinkers. In both 1993 and 2001, he wrote an introduction to books on Yan Fu, the Fujianese Qing dynasty thinker who emphasized science and patriotism as the key to China’s salvation in the face of encroachments by imperialism. Yan’s message

was about reform while maintaining China's national characteristics, not class struggle.⁵⁸

Throughout the 1990s, Xi repeatedly spoke to ongoing discussions about the nature of socialism. His writings are remarkable for their emphasis on practical solutions to concrete problems. In 1997, in a review of Marx's preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, he stated that debates about whether something was "capitalist" or "socialist" or whether labor was a commodity were the result of confusion. However, Xi was forthcoming about the problems that reform had introduced. While the "primary mission" of socialism was to "develop the productive forces," it was also necessary to "establish and perfect" the socialist market economy. Socialism was the goal and the market was the method, and China's objective was to integrate a market economy with the socialist state-owned system. Although the market was not inherently antithetical to the socialism system, Xi noted that "after all, the market economy developed and became mature in the environment of capitalist society; therefore, it must include some factors that are not commensurate with socialism." In particular, the market economy's focus on profits and its exclusionary character conflicted with the "selfless sacrifice and collective spirit" of the public economy. Xi called for a middle ground that rejected claims the market was a "capitalist thing" incompatible with socialism while also avoiding the "simple development of the market economy" without acknowledging its drawbacks.⁵⁹

In 1998, Xi wrote an article for an internal-circulation-only edition of the party's top theoretical publication *Qiusbi*. Xi's article noted that "many debates" persisted, especially about "the fundamental matter of what is the socialist market economy." Some people believed that there was no connection between the market economy and socialist system, while others thought that the two could be easily combined. According to Xi, Deng Xiaoping had "fundamentally" solved this question when he said that "the planned economy is not socialism, capitalism also has planning; the market economy is not capitalism, socialism also has the market." Xi was emphatic that in the early stage of socialism, "or even the entire socialist phase," it would be impossible to depart from an "advanced commodity economy." At the same time, however, Xi argued that this did not mean that there were no contradictions between socialism and a market economy. In order to avoid "weak points,"

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.⁶⁰

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.”⁶¹

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.”⁶²

That 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.”⁶³ 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.⁶⁴ 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 [连家船民] would have been resolved much earlier. We, members of the CCP, absolutely must not owe the masses a debt!”⁶⁵

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.”⁶⁶

Conclusion

Setting aside the question of whether Xi Jinping is actually rolling back “Deng”-style reforms (a term I have argued elsewhere is problematic⁶⁷) 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 resolution passed in November 2021 states explicitly, “We must neither retrace

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.”⁶⁸ 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.’”⁶⁹

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 he criticized those people who “believe democracy is better than dictatorship.” Wang wrote, “The ruling class needs a force that appears to be above society to rule the ruled class and ease conflict, so that is why the state was born...When social development reaches a certain stage and classes and class antagonisms appear, the state was born in order to benefit the ruling class such that, during class conflict, it does not die along with the class that is ruled...The state is the product and manifestation of irreconcilable class contradictions.”⁷⁰ Shortly after, Han Gang, a professor of modern Chinese history at East China Normal University, published an apparent rebuttal in which he stated the most fundamental policy adopted in reaction to the disasters of the post-1957 Mao era was rejecting “class struggle.” Between that year and 1976, for twenty years Chinese society stagnated, Han argued, and China’s triumphs subsequently were primarily a rejection of that extremist philosophy.⁷¹

Since that time, the idea of struggle has continued and grown more prominent, but in interesting and somewhat new ways. One form is civilizational:

Jiang Shigong, a prominent CCP theorist, has claimed Xi's emphasis on returning to communist principles is about communism as "a kind of ideal faith or a spiritual belief. For this reason, communism will never again be like it was under Mao Zedong—something that was meant to take on a real social form in the here and now—but is instead the Party's highest ideal and faith." Therefore, Jiang sees China's "struggle" with the West as more civilizational than ideological.⁷²

Xi himself also regularly talks about struggle, but not in the "class" or "civilization" sense—more as a "forging" experience that increases party members' devotion to the cause through hardship and challenge. In September 2021, at a speech to the Central Party School, Xi warned that only "firm ideals" would equip party members with the ability to withstand "tests." Where did such devotion come from? Xi's answer was that "the formation of firm ideals and beliefs is neither achieved overnight nor once and for all, but must be constantly tempered and tested in concrete struggle." Yet even here Xi placed practicality and flexibility on a high pedestal, arguing that it was imperative to "always proceed from reality" and that "seeking truth from facts" was an issue of whether someone's "party nature" was strong.⁷³

Looking to the future, "ideology" will likely manifest in Xi Jinping's behavior in ways similar to his predecessors. He will carry ideological priors more strongly in some issue areas than others. When goals conflict with one another, he will shift among them flexibly. The party will continue massive efforts in ideological indoctrination, but the messaging will be more about the party's greatness than concrete "leftist" policies. The "real world" will force course corrections. China will pursue indigenous innovation and improve its military forces while still hoping to benefit from globalization and avoid war. In certain areas, especially with regard to ethnic minorities and dissidents, we have little reason to expect a change in hardline, extremist policies. Yet in other areas, his behavior will show a "pragmatic and adaptive side."⁷⁴ As Jude Blanchette put it, "All in all, if you were a thoroughgoing neo-Maoist in Xi Jinping's China, there would be a great deal to be dissatisfied with."⁷⁵

Two factors, however, may shift this balance of competing tendencies. First, Xi believes that the United States opposes Beijing for both ideological and power political reasons; that American efforts to undermine the CCP will only increase as China rises; and that Washington uses ideological infiltration

to achieve that goal. Second, as Xi's time as top leader continues and the propaganda apparatus increasingly emphasizes his stature, the prospect of "leftist" adventures may become increasingly tempting. The answer to how those competing forces will ultimately resolve, however, will not be found easily in the old Marxist-Leninist canon.

The views expressed are the author's alone, and do not represent the views of the U.S. Government or the Wilson Center.

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