



CHINESE POLITICS SINCE HU JINTAO AND THE ORIGIN OF XI JINPING'S STRONGMAN RULE: A NEW HYPOTHESIS

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What is the origin of Xi Jinping's strongman rule? A "victorious Xi" thesis argues that Xi simply won his fight to gain power. But this raises the question of where Xi found the political support to do so. A "collective support" thesis suggests that centralized power was willingly given to Xi by the Chinese Communist Party's collective leadership to overcome the interest groups that were resisting reform. However, this leaves unanswered why the party oligarchs — who represented these vested interests — would be working against themselves in this way. In addition, such theories fail to explain why Xi took China down a path of Maoist conservatism after briefly flirting with reformism early on. Historical evidence points to a new hypothesis: that there was a "two-line struggle" between China's conservatives and reformers that spanned Hu Jintao's two terms and lasted into Xi's early years. Xi's source of power was initially reformist, but it was later replaced by collective support from conservatives.

Everything changed in 2012, the fateful year when Xi Jinping became the leader of the Chinese Communist Party. Xi's throwback to Mao-style strongman rule is conventionally believed to be the driver of domestic change and a main source of tension internationally. However, our current understanding of Xi's autocratic rise itself remains incomplete. One central puzzle is that, although Xi consolidated power rapidly and early, it remains unclear where he found his political support, or what his source of power was. If Xi was initially given collective support to fix problems that had arisen under collective leadership, and the ruling oligarchs were themselves part of the problem, how or why would they be willing to work against their own interests? If Xi's strongman rule was truly consensus-based, why the bewildering policy contradictions during his early years in power? Finally, why did Xi's personalization of power have to go hand in hand with a conservative approach to governance?

This article puts forward a new hypothesis to answer these questions, one that is based on the idea that there has been a "line struggle" (路线斗争) — a competition for supremacy between political actors who claim that they alone follow the correct party line — between China's "conservatives" and its "reformers." The two-line struggle examined in this article

(2002–2017) is best viewed as a continuation of the left-right contestation in Chinese politics that started in the 1980s. This struggle did not end with Deng Xiaoping's departure from China's political stage in the late 1990s. It continued throughout Jiang Zemin's reign and entered into a new phase under Hu Jintao — the latter fact has so far eluded most China watchers.

In China, reformers include both those who seek to get rid of the Chinese Communist Party and make the country a liberal democracy, as well as those who believe in the necessity of economic marketization, opening up to the outside world, and allowing some limited political reform that falls short of challenging the party's supremacy. Conservatives oppose a market economy and political liberalization, usually in the name of safeguarding socialist orthodoxy, i.e., an economic system based on public ownership of property or economic assets, class struggle, and the party's absolute control. In this paper, China's conservatives are also interchangeably referred to as "leftists," whereas the reformers are usually regarded as being on the right side of China's ideological spectrum.

Xi took office in 2012 when China's reformist (rightist) and conservative (leftist) forces were competing for political domination as well as fighting over which developmental model China should adopt. The reformist coalition had just regained the upper hand

1 Frederick Teiwes warned us against any uncritical acceptance of the official two-line struggle narrative on the Mao-era politics. See Frederick C. Teiwes, "The Study of Elite Political Conflict in the PRC: Politics Inside the 'Black Box,'" in *Handbook of the Politics of China*, ed. David S.G. Goodman (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2015), 21–41, <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781782544371.00009>. In the spirit of critically going against official accounts, this study suggests that a two-line struggle is the main thread of China's post-Deng politics, which, according to the conventional wisdom, features a collective leadership and growing political institutionalization.

during the 18th Party Congress after years of rising conservatism that had gained momentum under Hu's 10 years of leadership. Progressive programs were introduced during Xi's early years in power (2013–2014), but the reformist comeback turned out to be ephemeral. The conservatives' final victory over the reformers occurred around 2015. Xi's successful personalization of power was part and parcel of this decade-long leftist vendetta. What is unclear is whether Xi picked the winning side, which then recast him in Mao's image, or whether he had been part of the leftist fight from early on, driven by his own leftist disposition and beliefs, despite having been endorsed by reformers in the very beginning.

In short, this new hypothesis recasts the collective-support explanation for Xi's rise as a struggle between the two major political groups in China. Xi's source of power was initially reformist, but it was later replaced by conservative support. This helps to explain the policy contradictions of Xi's early years, which reflected the unsettled left-right contestation. Once the conservatives finally won that battle, it was conservatism all the way for Xi.

This explanation is based on a revisionist interpretation of China's recent political history. In this paper, I carefully examine a series of left-right disputes and challenge many conventional understandings of the trajectory of Chinese politics. In particular, I argue that Hu's Scientific Outlook on Development (科学发展观) was more than a mere change in policy — it was a conservative political weapon for overriding Jiang's Three Represents (三个代表). The Harmonious Society concept (和谐社会), usually seen as a second major party line proposed by Hu, was actually a reformist initiative to repackage Jiang's theory in response to leftist critiques. The 17th Party Congress report witnessed an unmistakable leftist takeover: Jiang's Three Represents were demoted, and the "Theoretical System" of socialism with Chinese characteristics (中国特色社会主义理论体系) became Hu's *de facto* guiding ideology. The conservative force had become increasingly aggressive during Hu's second term (2008–2012), but Jiang reemerged and made a call for reform in mid-2012. The reformist comeback did manage to put in place a progressive agenda at the 18th Party Congress and the 3rd and 4th Plenums. The Chinese Dream (中国梦), introduced in late 2012, was initially launched as a reformist project in order to neutralize leftist conservatism by promoting a sense of patriotic developmentalism. However, the effort failed. The reformers were finally subdued by the victorious conservative camp that stood behind a strongman: Xi, who gained his core leader status in 2016.

This two-line-struggle narrative challenges the conventional periodization of Chinese politics. Rather

than three ten-year blocks — the Jiang era, the Hu era, and the Xi era — the Hu and Xi eras look more like a monolithic "long decade" that spanned Hu's two terms and lasted into the early years of Xi. It only came to an end when Xi finally emerged as a consolidated autocrat around 2016. The final part of my empirical analysis demonstrates how the official documents of the party's Central Discipline and Inspection Commission (中央纪律检查委员会) reveal the varying intensity of political tensions in Chinese politics over time.

This paper mainly relies on textual analyses of the Chinese Communist Party's political discourses. Competing partisan voices found in publicly available official and semi-official sources, which provide context for one another, reveal the left-right struggle that ran beneath a public facade of political unity. I introduce a "layered publicity" model to conceptualize this logic of "autocrats going public." It may be viewed as a social scientific foundation of the Kremlinology-style propaganda analysis. Theoretically, layered publicity enriches our understanding of the role of information in authoritarian politics.

The two-line-struggle hypothesis presented here opens up new space for rethinking some common assumptions about China's domestic politics and foreign policy. China's fateful change of course is conventionally believed to have its roots in Xi himself, but the reality may well be that the source is a "collective Xi," i.e., the conservative coalition that empowered Xi. China's domestic humanitarian crises and belligerent diplomacy will probably continue beyond Xi's time. Insofar as conservatism is based in ideology, China's all-around return to leftism is not so much about Xi's personal ambition as it is about collective faith in the correctness of Maoism. Insofar as conservatism is driven by a fear of losing power that haunts the party's ruling aristocrats, the demise of reformism under Xi invites us to seriously reassess some common-sense views in a counterintuitive way. It seems increasingly unconvincing to assume that Chinese rulers still regard performance-based legitimacy as necessary for regime survival. As opposed to the prevailing pessimism regarding the probability of peaceful and orderly transfers of power under authoritarianism, China's next political succession will probably go smoothly, provided that the ruling cabal stays unified based on a shared dynastic belief in their right to rule China as the Red Descendants. In addition, policymakers who hope to grasp the rationale behind China's foreign policy may want to consider to what extent China's international aggressiveness is actually staged drama for domestic consumption.

The paper proceeds as follows. In section two, I provide a critical review of the existing literature on Xi's rise to power. In section three, I discuss

this paper's methodological considerations and its theoretical contributions. Section four describes my analytical approach, the historical episodes that this paper considers, and the sources that I used. In section five, I present the episodes of left-right fighting. In section six, I briefly summarize the main findings and discuss the broad pattern of Chinese politics in light of the data extracted from the Central Discipline and Inspection Commission reports. The final section concludes with a methodological note on the study of Chinese elite politics.

The Rise of Xi Jinping

China observers have proposed two competing answers to the question of how Xi returned China to Mao-style strongman rule after years of collective leadership under Jiang and Hu: Xi simply defeated his opponents, in part because of an absence of sufficient constraints on his ambition, or he received collective support for his centralization of power. In this section, I critically review these explanations.

Existing Explanations

Some optimists once subscribed to the idea that Xi's accession to the top party office in 2012 actually testified to China's maturing political institutionalization.² For all the possible factional horse-trading, the final pick of Xi was acceptable to all sides. It was essentially a top-down decision in line with past practices. It was allegedly an institutionalized procedure. Indeed, there is strong evidence suggesting this continuity: The way in which Xi was groomed as heir seemed to have been directly modeled on the pathway that prepared Hu to succeed Jiang. Xi's political ascendance was celebrated as another peaceful leadership succession accomplished.

However, becoming the Chinese Communist Party's general secretary is one thing. Becoming an autocratic

strongman is quite another. While the former might have been the outcome of China's partially institutionalized political process that presumably was still functioning by late 2012, Xi's personalization of power was antithetical to the logic of institutionalization. Now that Xi has started his third term, anyone who tries to argue that his rule is just a strongman version of collective leadership will have many circles to square.³

The most straightforward explanation for Xi's success in centralizing power is that he won the fight and wiped out his rivals by leveraging his informal political resources, such as political connections and factional bases, and by utilizing institutional tools that came with his formal office, including launching a large-scale anti-corruption campaign and creating the Leading Small Groups.⁴

However, analysts tend to argue that a major precondition of Xi's victory was a lack of sufficient resistance. Without real political institutionalization that can enforce rules-based competition for power, the reemergence of Mao-style strongman rule should not be surprising.⁵ Xi also arguably took advantage of the power vacuum left behind after decades of unconstrained power politics that fortuitously sidelined all potential "princeling" rivals,⁶ descendants of China's first-generation prominent revolutionaries who, like Xi himself, believe that they were born with the political credentials to succeed their parents to rule the country. In addition, the capacity of China's political elders to oversee and influence the incumbent party leaders did look generally weaker under Hu than under Deng and Jiang.⁷ A window of opportunity was wide open to Xi.

This "victorious Xi" thesis raises one important question: Where did Xi find the political support for his strongman ambitions? It is puzzling that Xi didn't seem to have enough political strength to centralize power by himself, and yet it was done so early in his tenure and so rapidly, without any signs of intense

2 Alfred L. Chan, *Xi Jinping: Political Career, Governance, and Leadership, 1953–2018* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 222–53; Alice L. Miller, "Institutionalization and the Changing Dynamics of Chinese Leadership Politics," in *China's Changing Political Landscape: Prospects for Democracy*, ed. Cheng Li (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2008), 61–79; Alice L. Miller, "The New Party Politburo Leadership," *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 40 (2013), <https://www.hoover.org/research/new-party-politburo-leadership>; Zhengxu Wang and Anastas Vangelis, "The Rules and Norms of Leadership Succession in China: From Deng Xiaoping to Xi Jinping and Beyond," *The China Journal* 76, no. 1 (2016): 24–40, <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/686141>.

3 For example, see Young Nam Cho, "Continuity and Change in China's Elite Politics at the 19th Party Congress: Is Xi Jinping's 'One-Man Rule' Established?" *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 30, no. 1 (2018): 61–77, <https://www.dbpia.co.kr/Journal/articleDetail?nodeId=NODE08994021>.

4 Eun Kyong Choi, John Wagner Givens, and Andrew MacDonald, "From Power Balance to Dominant Faction in Xi Jinping's China," *The China Quarterly* 248, no. 1 (2021): 935–56, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741021000473>; Bruce J. Dickson, *The Party and the People: Chinese Politics in the 21st Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), 59–63; Joseph Fewsmith, *Rethinking Chinese Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 131–56; Joseph Fewsmith, "Balances, Norms, and Institutions: Why Elite Politics in the CCP Have Not Institutionalized," *The China Quarterly* 248, no. S1 (2021): 265–82, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741021000783>.

5 Fewsmith, *Rethinking Chinese Politics*, 1–18; Fewsmith, "Balances, Norms, and Institutions"; Joseph Torigian, *Prestige, Manipulation, and Coercion: Elite Power Struggles in the Soviet Union and China after Stalin and Mao* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022), 196–99.

6 Victor C. Shih, *Coalitions of the Weak: Elite Politics in China from Mao's Stratagem to the Rise of Xi* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 153–84.

7 Andrew Leber, Christopher Carothers, and Matthew Reichert, "When Can Dictators Go It Alone? Personalization and Oversight in Authoritarian Regimes," *Politics & Society* 51, no. 1 (March 2023): 66–107, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00323292221078661>.

In short, conservative and reformist policies coexisted in a confusing way. Such confusion raises the question of whether there was a unified collective patron who entrusted power to Xi.

power struggle or resistance.⁸ In fact, Xi's power grab surprised everyone. For all the assessments after the fact that Xi had a dominant faction backing him,⁹ the fact is that a Xi coalition, if any, was not visible before the 19th Party Congress. As Li Cheng observed, Xi's own basis of factional strength was weak during his early years.¹⁰ Without any revolutionary prestige or military credentials, Xi was once expected to be even weaker than Hu.¹¹ Moreover, the conventional view that Xi consolidated power by promoting his own men, purging rivals in the name of anti-corruption, establishing new governing institutions, or playing one faction against another¹² only further raises the question of how he was capable of doing so, no matter how weak the resistance was.

In response to this question of the source of Xi's power, a competing explanation contends that, from

the very beginning, Xi enjoyed collective support. According to this theory, Xi's centralization of power was a consensus-based plan. Power was willingly bestowed on him by the party leadership, in the hopes that he could use that power to save the party from the crises that Xi's predecessors appeared to be incapable of dealing with.¹³ In particular, the centrifugal force of the party's collective, or oligarchic, rule, unrestrained by Hu, produced a set of interconnected problems: fragmentation of authority, stagnation in policymaking, widespread corruption among party officials, and worsening socio-economic inequality. Therefore, centralized power was a necessary tool to break the deadlock and save the reform of China from being hijacked by powerful interest groups.¹⁴

The collective support thesis does help to locate the source of Xi's power, but it leads to a new series of questions: Why would the party oligarchs fight themselves for the regime's well-being as a whole?¹⁵ If collective leadership itself was the problem, what made these top oligarchs willingly sacrifice their own power? The goal was supposedly to remove the vested interests that were standing in the way of China's reform. Presumably, the party's ruling oligarchs were connected to these interest groups,¹⁶ so what made them willingly forsake their own interests? If all the top leaders were able to work together and sacrifice

8 Nimrod Baranovitch, "A Strong Leader for a Time of Crisis: Xi Jinping's Strongman Politics as a Collective Response to Regime Weakness," *Journal of Contemporary China* 30, no. 128 (2021): 249–65, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2020.1790901>; Alice L. Miller, "Xi Jinping and the Evolution of Chinese Leadership Politics," in *Fateful Decisions: Choices that Will Shape China's Future*, ed. Thomasingar and Jean C. Oi (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020), 33–50.

9 Joseph Fewsmith, "The 19th Party Congress: Ringing in Xi Jinping's New Age," *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 55 (2018), <https://www.hoover.org/research/19th-party-congress-ringing-xi-jinpings-new-age>; You Ji, "How Xi Jinping Dominates Elite Party Politics: A Case Study of Civil-Military Leadership Formation," *The China Journal*, no. 84 (2020): 1–28, <https://doi.org/10.1086/708647>.

10 Li Cheng, *Chinese Politics in the Xi Jinping Era: Reassessing Collective Leadership* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2016), 7–39.

11 Li Cheng, "The End of the CCP's Resilient Authoritarianism? A Tripartite Assessment of Shifting Power in China," *China Quarterly*, no. 211 (2012): 609, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741012000902>.

12 Chan, *Xi Jinping*, 274–95; Choi, Givens, and MacDonald, "From Power Balance," 6–7; Elizabeth Economy, *The Third Revolution: Xi Jinping and the New Chinese State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 20–54; Dimitar D. Gueorguiev, "Dictator's Shadow: Chinese Elite Politics Under Xi Jinping," *China Perspectives*, no. 1–2 (2018): 17–26, <https://doi.org/10.4000/chinaperspectives.7569>; Xuezhi Guo, *The Politics of the Core Leader in China: Culture, Institution, Legitimacy, and Power* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 358–63; Tony Saich, *From Rebel to Ruler: One Hundred Years of the Chinese Communist Party* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2021), 390–416; Zhengxu Wang and Jinghan Zeng, "Xi Jinping: The Game Changer of Chinese Elite Politics?" *Contemporary Politics* 22, no. 4 (2016): 469–86, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2016.1175098>.

13 Baranovitch, "A Strong Leader"; Guo, *The Politics of the Core Leader*; Miller, "Xi Jinping"; Wang and Zeng, "Xi Jinping"; Susan Shirk, *Overreach: How China Derailed Its Peaceful Rise* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 118.

14 David Shambaugh, *China's Leaders: From Mao to Now* (Cambridge and Medford: Polity, 2021), 246; Shirk, *Overreach*, 27–30.

15 It is also worth noting that there is a mid-way approach, trying to combine the Collective-Support thesis and the Victorious-Xi thesis and have the best of both worlds. According to this hypothesis, Xi was indeed granted centralized power first, but the support was only meant to be limited and temporary; unfortunately, Xi later went beyond what was agreed upon and took a personalization path at the cost of other party elites. To put it theoretically, the attempt to cure the malaise of stagnation under authoritarian collective leadership by means of power centralization intrinsically carries the risk of going back to strongman rule. Writing on the Soviet elite politics, T. H. Rigby once argued that stable oligarchic rule is hard to sustain. Genuine collective leadership under authoritarianism usually causes political immobilism, which then leads to either a rise of a powerful dictator, or to a diffusion of power into the wider political arena. The former threatens the regime stability and the latter, regime survival. See T. Harry Rigby, "The Soviet Leadership: Towards a Self-Stabilizing Oligarchy?" *Soviet Studies* 22, no. 2 (1970): 167–91, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668137008410748>. In the case of China, now the potential risk was actualized. However, this mid-way approach in itself does not identify Xi's power base; nor does it provide a way out of the fighting-oneself dilemma.

16 All the major vested interests identified by Shambaugh and Shirk are state organizations, including the state-owned enterprises, the Propaganda system, domestic security forces, and the military. See Shambaugh, *China's Leaders*, 246; Shirk, *Overreach*, 27–30.

their own parochial profits for the public interest, then any additional king-making efforts — establishing a strongman to serve as arbiter — would have been redundant.¹⁷ If the sacrifice necessary to save the regime was meant to be selective, who decided who would be the priests and who would be the burnt offerings placed on the altar?

Furthermore, the collective support theory has difficulty explaining some important empirical observations. First, if Xi was empowered by an elite consensus, what explains the policy contradictions during his early years in power? The party called for deepening marketization while further empowering the state-owned enterprises. It also advocated the rule of law while at the same time emphasizing the party's unrestrained leadership and tightening up political control. In short, conservative and reformist policies coexisted in a confusing way. Such confusion raises the question of whether there was a unified collective patron who entrusted power to Xi.

There are multiple ways to square the circle, but none seem satisfactory. First, Xi could have been purely seeking power and did not have any policy ambitions.¹⁸ This possibility can be ruled out, if one's starting point is the collective support thesis. Second, Xi might have been given executive discretion in policymaking: The collective support was mainly about granting political authority rather than micromanaging policymaking. In that case, any undesirable economic or social policies resulted from technical problems or difficulties and not political issues. Xi might have been balancing different interests in a rapidly changing situation.¹⁹ That he might have had to go through many trials and errors,²⁰ or simply have been finding his way under uncertain conditions,²¹ made confusion and contradictions in his policymaking unavoidable. Or maybe some policy issues did not have a simple answer, and the still imperfect decision-making mechanism exacerbated the situation.²²

However, reducing everything to the technical level

does not explain the fact that the contradiction in question was a highly ideological one concerning the *direction* in which the country was being steered — socialist or non-socialist — not just *which specific measures* were being used. Here, a third view seems to offer a quick fix: The party aspired to have its cake and eat it too.²³ The party wanted to uphold socialist principles while using the tools of reform. However, the rule of law and professionalism clash with the party's desire for unrestrained supremacy and absolute control. Maintaining state intervention in the economy means that the market could never play a “decisive” role in resource allocation — an ambitious goal that the party put forward at the 3rd Plenum of the 18th Party Central Committee.

But this argument also runs into a problem: The mixture of reformist plans and conservative practice only lasted during Xi's early years. After that, Xi's policies became conservative in a Maoist fashion. Was Xi initially given collective support to break the resistance from vested interests and push China's reform forward? This confusion poses a serious challenge to a fourth possible explanation: that policy contradictions existed because entrenched interest groups continued to defend their parochial interests against the central mandate. Top leaders who wanted reform were outnumbered by lower-level party cadres who were fighting every minor concession.²⁴ It is argued that, in order to overcome the lingering resistance to reform, Xi's power was further strengthened for the fight in 2017.²⁵ However, the reality is that Xi finally emerged as a strongman *and* a conservative. Wasn't his role as a strongman meant to push back against conservatism?

Here, let's turn to the second empirical puzzle that the collective support theory cannot handle: Why did Xi turn hard toward conservative policies after a brief flirtation with reform? Again, existing views offer only incomplete explanations. One theory is that it was mainly about Xi's own beliefs, ambitions, and

17 The logic is that confronted with truly severe crises, party leaders were convinced that they had no choice but to yield their power and interests, so that the party could be saved and they can continue to hang together and not hang separately.

18 Dickson, *The Party*, 59–63.

19 Li, *Chinese Politics*, 351–98.

20 Chan, *Xi Jinping*, 525–30.

21 Jeremy L. Wallace, *Seeking Truth and Hiding Facts: Information, Ideology, and Authoritarianism in China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 172–79.

22 Barry Naughton, "Two Trains Running: Supply-Side Reform, SOE Reform and the Authoritative Personage," *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 50 (2016), <https://www.hoover.org/research/two-trains-running-supply-side-reform-soe-reform-and-authoritative-personage>.

23 Carl Minzner, *End of an Era: How China's Authoritarian Revival Is Undermining Its Rise* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 103–9; Economy, *The Third Revolution*, 44–47, 112–18.

24 Barry Naughton, "After the Third Plenum: Economic Reform Revival Moves toward Implementation," *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 43 (2014), <https://www.hoover.org/research/after-third-plenum-economic-reform-revival-moves-toward-implementation>.

25 Miller, "Xi Jinping," 40.

choices.²⁶ One variant of this “Xi-thinks-so” theory is that Xi was a conservative in reformist clothing — a “Gorbachev in reverse,”²⁷ who fooled everybody in the beginning.²⁸ Another variant highlights the tendency of bureaucratic over-compliance in a dictatorship.²⁹ Once Xi was determined to embark down a conservative road, his followers over-did his bidding, thus making policy directives more conservative than intended. But this emphasis on Xi’s initiative and agency, plus the amplifying effect of sycophantic over-compliance, takes us back to the victorious-Xi question: What was the source of power that Xi relied on to become independent from the collective patron who gave him power in the first place? Another theory is that Xi’s conservative reorientation follows certain general logics of authoritarian governance rather than Xi’s personal decision. When reform began to erode political control, the party would not have hesitated to backpedal the process of political institutionalization and opening up.³⁰ When political decentralization generated growth at the cost of threatening regime stability, the party would have reflexively brought back centralized governance, increasing control over local cadres and hedging against crises with renewed political legitimation.³¹ In Carl Minzner’s words, it is a “one step forward and one step backward” pattern in which the party always cannibalizes its prior reform for fear of losing power. However, this explanation causes new questions to arise: Why this timing and what triggered the change? If Xi’s first term started with a collective consensus on further reform, what caused the U-turn? And why bother with the back-and-forth during Xi’s early years in power?

Analyzing China’s Elite Politics: A Critique

There are two primary problems with existing theories of Xi’s rise. One has to do with the practice

of theorizing itself: Key assumptions are not sufficiently justified and factual inconsistencies are not addressed. The other problem is methodological. In this regard, there are three general analytical shortcomings of the existing approaches to China’s elite politics: how factions are identified, distinguishing formal from informal power, and connecting the analysis of policy to that of elite power struggles.

Identifying Factions

Finding out who’s whose man — or identifying factions — is the most widely used method to track the changing balance of power in China’s elite politics. Factionalism is arguably an innate characteristic of China’s authoritarian system under the Chinese Communist Party’s rule — it is a mechanism for managing differences among political elites where institutionalized procedures are either missing or act as mere window dressing.³² Factionalism can be driven by multiple factors: ideology, pursuit of power, bureaucratic interests, or a combination of all three.³³ Analysts usually identify factional links and networks using party leaders’ resumes and bios, under the assumption that certain factors — birth place, kinship, friendship, educational background, and, most importantly, work experience — may help to bind individuals together politically.³⁴

However, accurately discerning factional ties is a constant challenge. The observable indicators that suggest that factional ties exist do not necessarily reveal real ties, which are often unobservable.³⁵

Moreover, politicians often have multiple biographical facts that may place them into different factions. Worse, factional affiliations may change over time, as power within the top leadership is constantly realigned.³⁶

For these reasons, existing analyses yield mixed, sometimes conflicting, results. There are many contro-

26 Willy Wo-Lap Lam, *Chinese Politics in the Era of Xi Jinping: Renaissance, Reform, or Retrogression?* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), 88–89; Economy, *The Third Revolution*, 5.

27 Shambaugh, *China’s Leaders*, 281.

28 Shirk, *Overreach*, 42, 79.

29 Shirk, *Overreach*, 180–83.

30 Minzner, *End of an Era*, 73–79.

31 Wallace, *Seeking Truth*; Jeremy L. Wallace, “The New Normal: A Neopolitical Turn in China’s Reform Era,” in *Citizens and the State in Authoritarian Regimes: Comparing China and Russia*, ed. Karrie J. Koesel, Valerie J. Bunce, and Jessica Chen Weiss (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 31–58.

32 Huang Jing, *Factionalism in Chinese Communist Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

33 Alice L. Miller, “The Trouble with Factions,” *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 46 (2015), <https://www.hoover.org/research/trouble-factions>.

34 Victor C. Shih, Wei Shan, and Mingxing Liu, “Gauging the Elite Political Equilibrium in the CCP: A Quantitative Approach Using Biographical Data,” *The China Quarterly*, no. 201 (2010): 79–103, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741009991081>; Victor C. Shih, “Contentious Elites in China: New Evidence and Approaches,” *Journal of East Asian Studies* 16, no. 1 (2016): 1–15, <https://doi.org/10.1017/jea.2015.2>; Franziska Barbara Keller, “Moving Beyond Factions: Using Social Network Analysis to Uncover Patronage Networks Among Chinese Elites,” *Journal of East Asian Studies* 16, no. 1 (2016): 17–41, <https://doi.org/10.1017/jea.2015.3>.

35 Lowell Dittmer, “Modernizing Chinese Informal Politics,” in *The Nature of Chinese Politics: From Mao to Jiang*, ed. Jonathan Unger (Abingdon and New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2002), 3–37; Lucian W. Pye, “Factions and the Politics of Guanxi: Paradoxes in Chinese Administrative and Political Behavior,” in *The Nature of Chinese Politics: From Mao to Jiang*, ed. Jonathan Unger (Abingdon and New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2002), 38–57.

36 Bo Zhiyue, “Factional Politics in the Party-State Apparatus,” in *Routledge Handbook of the Chinese Communist Party*, ed. Willy Wo-Lap Lam (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2018), 122–34; Miller, “The Trouble with Factions.”

versal cases of scholars identifying certain party leaders as belonging to a particular faction. For instance, can we really count Wen Jiabao, Li Yuanchao, Liu Yunshan, and Wang Yang as Hu's men? Did Zeng Qinghong and Wang Huning shift their loyalty from Jiang to Hu? Did Zhou Yongkang and Li Changchun belong to Jiang's faction? Is it really possible for Wu Guanzheng and Yu Zhengsheng to stay neutral and have no factional affiliations? Most importantly, which faction did Xi belong to before he assumed the top office?

Diverse judgments in identifying faction membership have led to many different configurations of the distribution of power and factions within the central leadership (e.g., the Politburo). Key issues include whether Hu's Youth League Faction ever existed, whether Jiang's coalition, initially known as the Shanghai Gang, still held influence throughout Hu's entire reign and during Xi's early years, and, ultimately, who belonged to which camp. These questions lead to the third problem: whether China's political elders, such as former party secretaries, retired Politburo members, and even some first-generation communist revolutionaries who are centenarians, remain politically relevant. If so, how much power do they have? Relatedly, the party's general secretary may not necessarily serve as the head of a faction, because real power may be held by those who do not hold formal offices.

Formal and Informal Power

It has been a perennial challenge for scholars of authoritarian politics to tell how much of a political leader's power is based on his or her formal position and how much is based on informal sources of power. China scholars have not found an effective formula for doing the calculation accurately.³⁷ A common problem is that scholars sometimes arbitrarily or selectively point to certain leaders' reliance on formal

authority, when their informal sources of power, if there are any, are hard to identify. A good case in point is the various interpretations around Xi's source of power, as mentioned above.

The existing literature has correctly noted that formal and informal political power interact in a complex manner.³⁸ However, simply recognizing this interdependence is not enough. The ability to locate the source of real power is still wanting, not least because of the opaque nature of authoritarian politics that makes relevant information inaccessible.³⁹ For all of the advantages that may go with the formal office of the party general secretary — access to symbolic, bureaucratic, and material resources, and control over agenda-setting and personnel⁴⁰ — precise judgments regarding whether the party's top leader relies primarily on formal sources of power or informal ones remain elusive. For example, Jiang's successful consolidation of power is attributed to both his political skills in building up informal factional support and the authority of his formal office,⁴¹ but which force played a more decisive role? Moreover, the level of authority that a formal position carries may vary over time. If formal power prevailed over informal power under Jiang,⁴² it was obviously no longer the case for Hu, who is conventionally regarded as having been much weaker than Jiang.

Diverse judgments in identifying faction membership have led to many different configurations of the distribution of power and factions within the central leadership (e.g., the Politburo).

37 For example, without a specified function of formal versus informal power, Victor Shih's "coalition of the weak" model remains incomplete. If the formal offices occupied by the dictator's hand-picked weak allies were mere reflection of informal power, there is circularity in arguing that leadership reshuffling per se has strengthened the dictator's position, since the former is actually the effect of the latter in the first place. See Shih, *Coalitions of the Weak*.

38 Whereas informal power determines who get what formal titles, formal positions provide a "trellis" for informal power to operate, grow, and extend. Just as formal institutions may exert influence on how elite struggle is played out — e.g., timing, form, and intensity — the latter usually "works through" the former, not least by creating, remodeling, and manipulating formal structures. See Andrew J. Nathan, "A Factionalism Model for CCP Politics," *The China Quarterly*, no. 53 (1973): 34–66, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741000500022>; Lowell Dittmer, "Bases of Power in Chinese Politics: A Theory and an Analysis of the Fall of the 'Gang of Four,'" *World Politics* 31, no. 1 (1978): 26–60, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2009966>; Dittmer, "Modernizing Chinese"; Shih, "Contentious Elites"; Wu Guoqiang, *China's Party Congress: Power, Legitimacy, and Institutional Manipulation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

39 Considering that the degree of formal authority arguably goes hand in hand with that of political institutionalization — i.e., in the sense that there are meaningful constraints on power and rules are binding — the crux here is that we are unable to reliably gauge the level of political institutionalization in post-Deng China.

40 David Bachman, "The Paradox of Analysing Elite Politics under Jiang," *The China Journal*, no. 45 (2001): 95–100, <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.2307/3182370>; Dittmer, "Modernizing Chinese," 23–27; Shih, "Contentious Elites," 1–2.

41 Bachman, "The Paradox," 100; Frederick C. Teiwes, "Normal Politics with Chinese Characteristics," in *The Nature of Chinese Politics: From Mao to Jiang*, ed. Jonathan Unger (Abingdon and New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2022), 239–57.

42 Bo Zhiyue, *China's Elite Politics: Political Transition and Power Balancing* (Singapore: World Scientific, 2007), 6–7.



Politics Versus Policy

That policy and elite power struggles in authoritarian China are intertwined — that policy disputes can cause elite splits and that political struggles can clear the way for policy changes — has long been a leitmotif one encounters when reading about Chinese politics under Mao and Deng. Unfortunately, the study of China's elite politics has become increasingly detached from analyses of China's economic and social policies. Leadership succession and political appointments in post-Deng China seem to have nothing to do with how China is governed and seem to be all about infighting and quarreling among the political elites behind the scenes. Beneath this illusion lies a belief that was once widely shared until Xi's rise: that China would continue to walk the Dengist path of reform and that elite politics are only relevant insofar as they determine who would lead this effort.

The recognition that China's reform has, in effect, ended under Xi's conservative rule has nevertheless not brought back the analytical approach that emphasizes how deeply policy disputes can be embedded in elite power politics, and vice versa. After all, it is convenient to attribute all policy changes to Xi's personal beliefs and choices. It is also convenient to use the factionalism approach to explain how Xi defeated his rivals. This is usually done by coding Chinese leaders' bios and resumes, and proposing hypothetical factional configurations that support the theory that Xi won because he was more politically connected than his rivals. For such a network-based approach, policy issues are anything but analytically relevant. Veteran China analyst Alice L. Miller has lamented that the ongoing factional analyses of elite politics has produced little insight into China's policymaking.⁴³ Some claim that policy disputes can neither cause nor explain elite struggle in an authoritarianism system.⁴⁴ I argue just the opposite.

Policy disputes are closely connected to authoritarian elite politics in at least two ways. First, policy preferences reflect a person's judgment on which approach to governance (e.g., how the economy is managed or how resources are distributed) best serves that person's interests. Such judgment is often ideologically based. Thus, policy differences can easily develop into elite conflict, considering that policy can be intrinsically linked to one's short-term or

long-term interests.⁴⁵ Second, partisan statements on policy preferences can be used strategically as a public signal or rallying point for political mobilization.⁴⁶ To keep a public facade of elite unity when engaged in a power struggle, authoritarian rulers may want to use indirect means of political communication. Policy disputes are one such type of camouflage. It is not necessary for politicians to truly believe in the value of a policy or an idea in order to defend it in the political arena. Policy differences can be voiced purely for the sake of opposing political rivals.

Using Public Information to Decode Authoritarian Elite Politics

A new approach to studying elite politics should address the question of how to systemically track authoritarian elite politics, which is usually shrouded in deep secrecy, by examining public information. This section prepares the theoretical and methodological ground for doing so. I begin by setting up a theoretical framework for thinking about why and how authoritarian elites use public media under different scenarios depending on whether information is under state control and whether elites in a political struggle are trying to maintain the regime's control over society. Existing literature gives only a static picture of authoritarian elite politics and does not give due attention to the fact that public information may be a window through which we can understand politics under authoritarianism, something usually kept secret by the ruling elites. I propose a "layered publicity" concept as a theoretical foundation for the Kremlinology-style analysis of authoritarian propaganda and related official publications. This classical, interpretive method of studying authoritarian elite politics makes it possible to uncover the behind-the-scenes stories of political struggles by reading what autocrats circulate in public.

Public Information and Authoritarian Politics

Information interacts with autocratic politics in a number of ways, depending on with whom authoritarian rulers are dealing — society or political elites⁴⁷ — and the extent to which the authoritarian regime has control over the flow of information. Autocrats either consciously use publicity to consolidate their rule when the flow of information is under state

43 Miller, "The Trouble with Factions," 9.

44 Toriglian, *Prestige*, 7, 209.

45 Victor C. Shih, *Factions and Finance in China: Elite Conflict and Inflation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

46 For example, political mobilization may involve what is commonly known as "creating public opinion" (造舆论). This notion suggests that "there are networks that can be mobilized and potential allies who can be enlisted if they believe the political situation is trending in one direction or another." See Joseph Fewsmith, "What Zhao Ziyang Tells Us about Elite Politics in the 1980s," *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 30 (2009): 11.

47 Milan W. Svobik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 3–12.

control, or they passively react to the challenges brought by information that is beyond their control.

There are four different scenarios of how information and autocratic politics interact. When an authoritarian regime has lost control over public information, there are two possible outcomes: Political infighting becomes visible to the public (Scenario I), or anti-regime dissension can be heard from non-governmental political opposition in the public sphere that was once dominated by the authoritarian state (Scenario II). When the flow of information is still firmly under state control, the authoritarian regime manipulates public communication and mass media to govern, by producing propaganda and engaging in censorship (Scenario III). Unsurprisingly, the ruling elites use the same set of tools against their elite opponents during power struggles (Scenario IV).

Just as elite cohesion is necessary for autocratic stability, elite disunity — in the form of a split, defections, or political realignment — supplies favorable opportunities for popular revolt.

These scenarios are analytically distinct, but in reality the boundaries are not so clear-cut. Infighting among ruling elites often interacts with mass activism — high politics seldom stays detached from governance. In addition, in practice, there is no complete control of information. Moreover, the state can adapt and react quickly in order to harness an information flow that is temporarily out of control. State control over political publicity — the manipulation or use of public information for political purposes — is a function of regime strength and capacity.

The following subsections elaborate these four scenarios by situating each within relevant literature on authoritarian politics. We will see that the ways in which information and publicity influence autocratic politics follows the underlying logic of the Rebel's

Dilemma: Politics is basically about the struggle over solutions to the collective action problem.⁴⁸

Scenarios I and II: Loss of Control

Scenarios I and II describe situations in which political publicity is beyond state control or is unintended, in the sense that, from the state perspective, such uncensored and unrestricted flow of information poses serious threats to the regime's survival.

In Scenario II, unintended publicity can be the result of a temporary breach of the state's general authoritarian control of society. The state may renege on an earlier decision to open up society politically or economically, which required unrestrained information, and backpedal to tighten control when threatened. This could happen if the state feels that too much political security was traded for giving society the freedom necessary for socioeconomic development.⁴⁹ Also, new technologies, such as

social media or AI, usually cause a sudden breach of this kind. When new modes of communication become available, they offer new ways to circumvent the old information roadblocks that the authoritarian state has put in place to deter collective action. However, a strong autocratic state with learning and adaptive capacity can quickly catch up and harness these technologies. The internet initially carried much hope of fostering democratization in China, but ended up becoming an authoritarian tool that has arguably made the Orwellian world of 1984 come true.

"Unintended" publicity generally refers to the flow of information that is out of the state's control. Unlike when the state selectively promotes voices within society, here the independence of social forces is much more secured because the state is no longer strong enough to eradicate non-state forces and control information. Lacking sufficient state capacity,⁵⁰ a weak autocratic regime often seeks to co-opt political challengers through formal quasi-democratic institutions, e.g., legislatures.⁵¹ In this case, deal-making, negotiating, and bargaining is done behind the scenes without the public's knowledge. In effect, with such political institutionalization (i.e., establishing rules and regularizing political participation), a weak autocracy tries to exert limited control over information about politics to the best of its ability.

48 Mark I. Lichbach, *The Rebel's Dilemma* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1995).

49 Minzner, *End of an Era*.

50 Michael Mann, "The Autonomous Power of the State: Its Origins, Mechanisms, and Results," *European Journal of Sociology* 25, no. 2 (1984): 185–213, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23999270>.

51 Jennifer Gandhi, *Political Institutions under Dictatorship* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Jennifer Gandhi and Adam Przeworski, "Authoritarian Institutions and the Survival of Autocrats," *Comparative Political Studies* 40, no. 11 (2007): 1279–1301, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414007305817>.



Whereas autocratic elites still appear unified in Scenario II, they no longer are in Scenario I. In this scenario, political infighting within the leadership is laid bare for the public to see. Such political publicity is “unintended” in the sense that, from the perspective of the once unified state, elite disunity is something undesirable and detrimental to the regime’s survival. Warring elites are crippled by their irreconcilable differences and their inability to settle disputes behind the scenes, which is what leads to their fight coming out into the open.

During an open confrontation, the propaganda machine that previously targeted the populace is now being deployed by contesting factions against one another. Through the use of persuasion/denigration of opposing factions and the projection of power, factions fight to win over potential allies and deter them from joining their opponents by influencing their calculation of risks, cost, and benefits. The goal is to undermine an opponent’s capacity to organize, coordinate, and sustain collective action while enhancing one’s own political mobilization.

When a weak autocratic regime is plagued by either elite strife or opposition from society, or both, it’s possible for Scenarios I and II to overlap. Mass mobilization may exert substantial influence on the unity or disunity of the ruling autocrats. How political elites perceive the regime’s survivability factors into their calculus for deciding whether or not to defect, as their future spoils depend on the regime’s survival.⁵² Increasing the visibility of mass activism may help elites to cooperate and overcome the collective action problem that is caused by authoritarian elites receiving imperfect information.⁵³ By virtue of its signaling function, mass opposition has the potential

to create new political opportunities — i.e., it can deepen both popular and elite threats to the regime.⁵⁴

On the other hand, the degree of elite unity makes mass activism more or less likely. Intra-elite struggle influences potential rebels’ perceptions and assessment of the regime’s strength.⁵⁵ Just as elite cohesion is necessary for autocratic stability,⁵⁶ elite disunity — in the form of a split, defections, or political realignment — supplies favorable opportunities for popular revolt.⁵⁷

Scenario III: Using Information to Manipulate the Public

Existing literature is most developed regarding Scenario III, in which the state retains control of the flow of information and uses it to target society. Authoritarian governments are often not transparent, because they face little to no accountability. Nevertheless, autocrats do not seek to operate under total secrecy. Rather, certain types of publicity can contribute to the resilience of autocratic rule.

Propaganda is a common authoritarian tool for reducing the cost of ruling, given that coercion-based governance is not sustainable in the long run.⁵⁸ Propaganda usually works hand in hand with censorship. The latter removes “dangerous” information and diverts public attention, thus clearing the ground for “healthy” indoctrination via the former.⁵⁹

In addition, autocrats need to regularly showcase their power to remind their subjects that they would not have a chance in a revolt. Projecting an image of elite cohesion or demonstrating political strength and “invincibility” may help check expectations among the people that a rebellion could lead to any really change.⁶⁰ This psychological technique of deterrence makes anti-regime mobilization difficult by preventing the emergence of a public platform that could be

52 Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and Alastair Smith, *The Dictator's Handbook: Why Bad Behavior Is Almost Always Good Politics* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2011); Geddes, Wright, and Frantz, *How Dictatorships Work*.

53 Svobik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule*.

54 Schedler, *The Politics of Uncertainty*.

55 Geddes, Wright, and Frantz, *How Dictatorships Work*.

56 Jason Brownlee, *Authoritarianism in an Age of Democratization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Barbara Geddes, “What Do We Know About Democratization After Twenty Years?” *Annual Review of Political Science* 2, no. 1 (1999): 115–44, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.2.1.115>; Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe C. Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).

57 Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Sidney G. Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*, 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

58 Alexander Dukalskis, *The Authoritarian Public Sphere: Legitimation and Autocratic Power in North Korea, Burma, and China* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2017); Sergei Guriev and Daniel Treisman, *Spin Dictators: The Changing Face of Tyranny in the 21st Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022); Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts, “How the Chinese Government Fabricates Social Media Posts for Strategic Distraction, Not Engaged Argument,” *American Political Science Review* 111, no. 3 (2017): 484–501, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055417000144>.

59 Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts, “How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression,” *American Political Science Review* 107, no. 2 (2013): 326–43, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055413000014>; Margaret E. Roberts, *Censored: Distraction and Diversion Inside China's Great Firewall* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018).

60 Beatriz Magaloni, *Voting for Autocracy: Hegemonic Party Survival and its Demise in Mexico* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Andreas Schedler, *The Politics of Uncertainty: Sustaining and Subverting Electoral Authoritarianism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Andreas Schedler and Bert Hoffmann, “Communicating Authoritarian Elite Cohesion,” *Democratization* 23, no. 1 (2016): 93–117, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2015.1095181>.

used to rally and coordinate potential followers,⁶¹ and by intimidating potential rebels who are planning an organized uprising.⁶²

Public political rituals, such as mandatory attendance of state-organized ceremonies, are necessary and useful for keeping citizens with anti-regime attitudes from fully realizing how many political allies they might have. Even if the anti-regime attitude is widespread, it is not a real threat to a ruler so long as people don't know that they have potential allies who think like them.⁶³ When compliance is the only thing visible in public, as a result of propaganda and censorship, it destroys the basis for a shared expectation of collective action.⁶⁴

Autocrats also need to gauge the level of threat they face from society by allowing some non-governmental voices to be heard. The more powerful dictators become, the less information they have about negative views of the regime, because any sincere expression of discontent makes one a potential anti-regime revolutionary in the eyes of the ruler.⁶⁵ Furthermore, autocrats are hampered by the perennial principal-agent problem when it comes to holding their subordinates accountable. Local officials are systemically incentivized to manipulate information to only report good news and to hide their own failures.⁶⁶ To detect governance problems and monitor local agents, autocrats may strategically open up a controlled space in which people can voice complaints about policies, criticize bureaucratic dysfunction, or report on local officials' wrongdoing.⁶⁷

Finally, a minimum level of freely circulating information is necessary for economic development, which is the foundation of performance legitimacy. Dictators are thus faced with a trade-off between political security and economic growth. Relaxed authoritarian control brings wealth, but it also makes people more politically enlightened and empowered, capable of resisting the regime.⁶⁸

Scenario IV: The Role of Information in Elite Power Struggles

In contrast to Scenarios I, II, and III, Scenario IV — in which elite politics play out when the state has control of the flow of information — is relatively undertheorized in regard to how and why the dissemination of public information plays a role in elite power struggles. Obviously, authoritarian secrecy that keeps elite politics away from public knowledge is the biggest obstacle to a systematic understanding of elite politics.

One major analytical focus of existing literature is authoritarian institutions. Scholars have explored the ways in which institutions and institutionalization may help autocrats to solve the central structural problem of autocratic leadership: power sharing. When the most powerful individual among the ruling elites (usually the dictator) assures his colleagues that he would not try to concentrate power at their cost, how can they be sure that he will keep his word?

This problem of credible commitment exists in all forms of human politics,⁶⁹ but it is further compounded under autocracies, where there is no third-party referee to enforce any agreement, and violence always serves as the ultimate arbiter.⁷⁰ These two characteristics of authoritarianism make credibility a scarce commodity among the ruling elites. Furthermore, political secrecy is more than a mere manifestation of autocratic fetish for control. While it helps autocrats to guard against potential attacks from within, this tactical “blindness” cuts both ways: Secrecy simultaneously empowers and debilitates all players.

Scholars have argued that information and publicity may alleviate this credible commitment problem by means of authoritarian institutionalization. Regularized interaction among political insiders and formal rules, such as establishing a legislature or term limits, facilitates information sharing and brings about more transparency. Unnecessary misunderstandings can be avoided, negotiations made, transaction costs

61 Jeremy L. Wallace, "Juking the Stats? Authoritarian Information Problems in China," *British Journal of Political Science* 46, no. 1 (2016): 11–29, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123414000106>.

62 Huang Haifeng, "Propaganda as Signaling," *Comparative Politics* 47, no. 4 (2015): 419–44, <https://doi.org/10.5129/001041515816103220>.

63 Timur Kuran, "Now Out of Never: The Element of Surprise in the East European Revolution of 1989," *World Politics* 44, no. 1 (1991): 7–48, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2010422>.

64 Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999); Michael Suk-Young Chwe, *Rational Ritual: Culture, Coordination, and Common Knowledge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

65 Ronald Wintrobe, *The Political Economy of Dictatorship* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

66 Wallace, *Seeking Truth*.

67 Peter Lorentzen, "China's Strategic Censorship," *American Journal of Political Science* 58, no. 2 (2014): 402–14, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12065>; Peter Lorentzen, "Designing Contentious Politics in Post-1989 China," *Modern China* 43, no. 5 (2017): 459–493, <https://doi.org/10.1177/009770041668889>; Barbara Geddes, Joseph Wright, and Erica Frantz, *How Dictatorships Work: Power, Personalization, and Collapse* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

68 Ya-wen Lei, *The Contentious Public Sphere: Law, Media, and Authoritarian Rule in China* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018).

69 Roger B. Myerson, "The Autocrat's Credibility Problem and Foundations of the Constitutional State," *American Political Science Review* 102, no. 1 (2008): 125–39, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055408080076>.

70 Svobik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule*.



reduced, conflicts mediated, individual ambition bridled, and everybody's cost-benefit calculation directed toward long-term cooperation.⁷¹ Furthermore, formal rules stand as publicly observable signals. They act as monitoring devices that help detect deviation from and noncompliance with the power-sharing pact.⁷²

However, it is the balance of power, rather than informational devices, that ultimately make a power-sharing pact sustainable.⁷³ There must be a credible threat of removing the dictator.⁷⁴ Such credible constraints exist only when institutionalization changes the distribution of power.⁷⁵ Credibility has to rely on successful collective action by a unified coalition of ruling elites, which in reality is hard to come by due to factionalism, dictators' divide-and-rule strategy, and a general risk-averse attitude among politicians under conditions of uncertainty.⁷⁶

While some formal rules inevitably have to be formally written down and enshrined, not all rules regulating political interaction at the top have to be made known to the public.

The institutional approach to authoritarian elite politics is limited in two aspects. First, it is silent as to how political struggles between autocrats play out. While a struggle for power is presumably a dynamic process, the institutional approach paints a static picture. It theorizes under what conditions (balance of power) a power-sharing commitment can truly be credible, but it has nothing to say about the trajectory of the struggle. How can we possibly track the process of political infighting if it is a moving target?

Second, unsurprisingly, the institutional approach by definition focuses on how information *generated by certain political institutions* can be useful for managing elite politics. But it pays little attention to a more common sensical type of information — *what autocrats say and write* — thus leaving unexplored the possibility that authoritarian elites do make use of *public media* in power struggles. This analytical negligence is most likely a result of a conventional assumption that autocrats try to avoid any publicity that showcases internal disunity, except when the regime is so weak that the situation is out of control. Information, as the institutional approach suggests, does not have to be public or publicized when it plays a role in structuring political expectations. While some formal rules inevitably have to be formally written down and enshrined, not all rules regulating political interaction at the top have to be made known to the public.

Layered Publicity

I argue that autocrats leverage public channels of information when engaged in political infighting.⁷⁷ By following these public clues, we may be able to garner a more complete understanding of the trajectory of intra-elite power struggles. To theoretically demonstrate how autocrats “go public,” I introduce a model of “layered publicity.”

Layered publicity presumes that there is a *public sphere* under autocracies. However, it is an expanded notion of the public sphere, in which there is a neutral space for public information and there is not an intrinsic association with democracy.⁷⁸ Instead, an authoritarian public sphere presumes state control over information, to varying degrees.

An authoritarian public sphere is layered in the sense that not everyone has equal access to all parts of the public space. Certain parts of the public arena are reserved for specific purposes and only open to political insiders. This autocratic public space is also hierarchical, insofar as power is hierarchically distributed under authoritarianism. The more authoritative

71 Brownlee, *Authoritarianism*; Gandhi and Przeworski, “Authoritarian Institutions”; Gandhi, *Political Institutions*.

72 Carles Boix and Milan W. Svobik, “The Foundations of Limited Authoritarian Government: Institutions, Commitment, and Power-sharing in Dictatorships,” *Journal of Politics* 75, no. 2 (2013): 300–16, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0022381613000029>.

73 Boix and Svobik, “The Foundations.”

74 Beatriz Magaloni, “Credible Power-sharing and the Longevity of Authoritarian Rule,” *Comparative Political Studies* 41, no. 4–5 (2008): 715–41, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414007313124>.

75 Anne Meng, *Constraining Dictatorship: From Personalized Rule to Institutionalized Regimes* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

76 Geddes, Wright, and Frantz, *How Dictatorships Work*; Svobik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule*.

77 China scholars are generally familiar with the common-sensical notion that media is part of politics. Recent works on this topic include Victor Chung-Hon Shih, “‘Nauseating’ Displays of Loyalty: Monitoring the Factional Bargain through Ideological Campaigns in China,” *The Journal of Politics* 70, no. 4 (2008): 1177–92, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022381608081139>; Kyle Jaros and Jennifer Pan, “China’s Newsmakers: Official Media Coverage and Political Shifts in the Xi Jinping Era,” *The China Quarterly* 233 (2018): 111–36, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741017001679>.

78 Dukalskis, *The Authoritarian Public Sphere*.



that one particular layer is (i.e., the closer it is to the pinnacle of power), the more restricted the access.

There are two important things to note about layered publicity. First, not everyone has the right to publish at every level in this space. Making one's political voice heard through a certain type of media outlet (e.g., central-level party mouthpieces) requires a politician to have a certain amount of political strength. Second, communication at higher levels often involves the use of an encrypted language that is shared exclusively among political actors.

The question inevitably arises of why autocrats do not simply use internal information channels for political signaling. Why do they have to make it publicized — yet encoded — so that ordinary citizens are kept ignorant of what is really going on?

The answer is that the authoritarian public sphere is intrinsically a field of power. To use it requires political strength. Access is available to the powerful only. Getting one's voice heard in public is a demonstration of power. Silence itself signals weakness. This logic is commonsensical when applied through a state-society perspective. Here, this logic is still applicable as public information now targets political elites rather than the public. When internal channels no longer provide sufficient leverage for projecting power, political elites have to go public.

A few caveats are in order. First, the typical pattern of layered publicity under a closed authoritarian system, such as the Chinese party-state that maintains a near totalitarian control over the society, should be expected to differ from layered publicity under an electoral authoritarian state in which autonomous political opposition exists. How political infighting spills over into the public view and how political elites consciously leverage publicity to win power struggles should take drastically different forms. Key factors include the effectiveness of autocratic control and the role of elections. Second, elite politics is a multi-dimensional activity. Political struggle involves much more than just public polemics and signaling. Third, layered publicity does not suggest that we can know everything that is going on behind the scenes by analyzing publicly available data. A large part of autocratic politics remains hidden.

Interpreting Political Texts

If intra-elite power struggle is a multi-dimensional phenomenon, layered publicity allows us to examine one aspect of it that is observable: the ideological/discursive contestation that goes public via state media and semi-official channels.

“Propaganda analysis,”⁷⁹ or what is commonly known as “Kremlinology” — or “Pekingology” in

79 Alice L. Miller, “Valedictory: Analyzing the Chinese Leadership in an Era of Sex, Money, and Power,” *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 57 (2018): 6, <https://www.hoover.org/research/valedictory-analyzing-chinese-leadership-era-sex-money-and-power>.

the case of Chinese politics — is ideal for examining Chinese elite political elites for two reasons. First, the regime uses state media for political purposes. Second, official channels of information are under state control. Because of these two facts, the content of official state publications and propaganda can be viewed as truly reflecting what is politically significant. For this approach to be fruitful, researchers must be very familiar with relevant political discourses of both the past and present — i.e., their knowledge should be “comprehensive” and firmly based on “long memories.”⁸⁰

Another major methodological concern with the Pekingology approach has to do with who has the correct interpretation of the texts in question. Analyzing propaganda is, by its nature, subjective. Nevertheless, it can still shed light on elite power struggles for a few reasons.

First, interpretation is inevitable in all social sciences. Even quantitative techniques do not guarantee objectivity. For example, counting is based on categorizing.⁸¹ One makes a qualitative judgement when assigning similarity or significance to things.⁸² To be sure, the quantitative approach to textual data is mainly justified on the ground that it is beyond human capacity to read all the texts in the age of information overload. It is never intended to replace human understanding.⁸³

Second, if interpretation is unavoidable, we must then determine how to distinguish the bad interpretations from the good ones. Words and phrases in political texts provide the empirical bedrock and set up the boundaries for how far astray interpretations can go.⁸⁴ Competing interpretations are evaluated by how coherently they organize facts into a whole without inconsistencies. An interpretation can be “falsified” by a new narrative that introduces new facts and provides a better way of relating facts to one another.⁸⁵

Third, Pekingology has been successful in the past.⁸⁶ For example, it captured the political dynamics of the Soviet-China split and tracked the twists and turns of China’s Cultural Revolution.

In short, when conducting Kremlinology-style textual analysis, context matters. Context may refer to the macro-level political landscape, or to a limited universe of relevant texts. When it comes to layered publicity, one general pattern we will see is mutual contextualization: Without being familiar with the discourses circulating in the lower layers, it is impossible to make sense of the most authoritative discourses in the top layers. Conversely, without the big picture, it is impossible to identify what is politically significant in the swirl of information.

Research Design

A Discursive Approach

In this paper, I conducted an interpretive textual analysis of relevant political texts in order to identify elite disagreements and policy changes in China since 2002. I did so by tracing the variations or deviations in the use of certain key words and phrases and discursive patterns in official narratives. I measured the power balance by making context-based qualitative judgements — such as determining which camp dominates the agenda setting, which camp controls the *de facto* framing of political ideologies, whether political elites’ intended goals are fulfilled or thwarted, or how antagonistic their initiative is and how forceful is their rivals’ counteraction.

I do not attempt to determine particular leaders’ political affiliation by assessing what they said or what was published *under their names*. The true relationship between a leader as a nominal author and a political text is sometimes hard to know. It is possible that top leaders sometimes do not have full control over official texts, especially when he or she is a mere figurehead. Therefore, the analytical focus is on the texts themselves. The identification of political fault lines is mainly based on the detection of competing discourses. For example, both Hu and Xi were found to have nominally authored and endorsed both re-

80 Miller, “Valedictory,” 10.

81 Deborah Stone, “Quantitative Analysis as Narrative,” in *Routledge Handbook of Interpretive Political Science*, ed. Mark Bevir and R.A.W. Rhodes (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2016), 169–82.

82 Lindsay Prior, “Content Analysis,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. Patricia Leavy (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 359–79. This ontological premise is vividly manifested in the problem of manifest versus latent content in quantitative content analysis. When coding texts, quantitative analysts often have to go beyond the *literal* description of facts and events they can see directly from words and phrases (i.e., manifest content) to categorize the content according to its *meaning* (i.e., latent content). The latter is usually based on interpretation and may vary considerably insofar as it is not self-evident, or latent. See Kimberly A. Neuendorf, *The Content Analysis Guidebook*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2017).

83 Justin Grimmer and Brandon M. Stewart, “Text as Data: The Promise and Pitfalls of Automatic Content Analysis Methods for Political Texts,” *Political Analysis* 21, no. 3 (2013): 267–97, <https://doi.org/10.1093/pan/mps028>.

84 Corresponding to the manifest-latent content distinction, there are minimal and maximal interpretations. The former refers to “facts” whose truth claims are less controversial, while the latter has more “theory-ladenness.” See Isaac A. Reed, *Interpretation and Social Knowledge: On the Use of Theory in the Human Sciences* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 15–38.

85 Mark Bevir and Rod A.W. Rhodes, “Interpretive Political Science: Mapping the Field,” in *Routledge Handbook of Interpretive Political Science*, ed. Mark Bevir and R.A.W. Rhodes (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2016), 3–27; Jens Zimmermann, *Hermeneutics: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

86 Miller, “Valedictory.”

formist and conservative messages. It is hard to judge their sincerity in each case, but what matters here is that the mixed signals sent under their names point to the ongoing political contestation, or the absence of political domination by one camp. While there are many reasons to believe that Hu and Xi *actually* sided with the conservative camp, this fact is *analytically* secondary in this line struggle narrative.

Conversely, without the big picture, it is impossible to identify what is politically significant in the swirl of information.

By delinking the analysis of power from political offices, this discursive approach makes it possible to avoid the formal-informal problem described above. We can simply look at the power distribution at a certain time as reflected in political texts. There is no longer any need to figure out the exact combination and interaction of informal and formal authority that produced the final outcome.

This discursive approach naturally highlights the non-trivial role that policy plays in politics. Polemics usually center on policy and governance issues, either because they are the actual issue at hand, or because they are discursive tools that are being used for political signaling. By studying elite politics, we can learn about policymaking, and vice versa.

The Episodes

I focus on six major “battles” of this “war” between left and right that spanned Hu’s two terms and lasted into Xi’s early years.

1. The debate on “human-centeredness” and the struggle over the political status of the Scientific Development concept;
2. The struggle over the meaning of the Harmonious Society concept;

3. The struggle over the political discourses of the 17th Party Congress report;
4. A conservative shift in the discourse on the “Soviet lessons”;
5. Jiang’s rallying call before the 18th Party Congress; and
6. Competing framings of the Chinese Dream during Xi’s early years.

Each episode reveals the status of the left-right struggle and the relative power balance at that time. By looking at these cases all together, a trajectory emerges. To be sure, these episodes are not “cases” in a social scientific sense, i.e., a small number of units selected for the purpose of understanding a larger class of similar units.⁸⁷ Instead, they are historical snippets selected to piece together a large historical picture, by virtue of the political and historical significance of the events covered by each episode. In particular, episodes 1, 2, 3, and 6 center on the major party lines/ideological projects that were underway during Hu’s and Xi’s times in power. Episodes 4 and 5 focus on two political initiatives adopted by the two contesting camps, which marked two watershed moments during this power struggle.

These narratives are complemented by a content analysis that tracks the varying intensity of political tension over time. The original data used here is generated by coding the *textual positions* of the term “political discipline” (政治纪律), which appears in all of the official reports of the Chinese Communist Party’s Central Discipline and Inspection Commission, and the *types* of issues that “political discipline” refers to in each case. Together, these analyses enable us to identify important trends and milestones in the trajectory of Chinese politics.

The Texts

In accordance with the idea of layered publicity, I only analyzed publicly available sources, and I selected political texts from different “layers.” Below is a list of sources used:

- Publicly available texts of party congress reports and plenum resolutions;
- The officially compiled anthologies of party documents;⁸⁸

87 John Gerring, “What Is a Case Study and What Is It Good For?” *American Political Science Review* 98, no. 2 (2004): 342, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055404001182>.

88 Central Office of the Communist Party of China for Document Management and Research (中共中央文献研究室, hereafter ZGZYWXYJS), ed., *Selected Important Documents Since the 16th Party Congress* (十六大以来重要文献选编, hereafter *SID16PC*), vol. 1 (Beijing: Zhongyang Wenxian Chubanshe 中央文献出版社, 2004); ZGZYWXYJS, ed., *SID16PC*, vol. 2 (Beijing: Zhongyang Wenxian Chubanshe, 2006); ZGZYWXYJS, ed., *SID16PC*, vol. 3 (Beijing: Zhongyang Wenxian Chubanshe, 2007); ZGZYWXYJS, ed., *Selected Important Documents Since the 17th Party Congress* (十七大以来重要文献选编, hereafter *SID17PC*), vol. 1 (Beijing: Zhongyang Wenxian Chubanshe, 2009); ZGZYWXYJS, ed., *SID17PC*, vol. 2 (Beijing: Zhongyang Wenxian Chubanshe, 2011); ZGZYWXYJS, ed., *SID17PC*, vol. 3 (Beijing: Zhongyang Wenxian Chubanshe, 2013); ZGZYWXYJS, ed., *Selected Important Documents Since the 18th Party Congress* (十八大以来重要文献选编, hereafter *SID18PC*), vol. 1 (Beijing: Zhongyang Wenxian Chubanshe, 2014); ZGZYWXYJS, ed., *SID18PC*, vol. 2 (Beijing: Zhongyang Wenxian Chubanshe, 2016); ZGZYWXYJS, ed., *SID18PC*, vol. 3 (Beijing: Zhongyang Wenxian Chubanshe, 2018).



- The selected works of top party leaders;⁸⁹
- Articles published by top party mouthpieces;
- Propaganda materials published by major party-affiliated publishing houses;
- Works published by leading party theoreticians via semi-official channels.

Data from three particular sources are worth a more detailed introduction. They are not only records of politics, but also *part* of politics. First is the Qiu Shi (秋石) article series, which was published by the top party journal *Qiushi* (求是). Qiu Shi is a pseudonym, or a literal transmutation that phonetically corresponds to the name of the journal itself, indicating the authoritativeness of its voice. The Qiu Shi articles were created in 2002 for the purpose of promoting Jiang's new ideological program.⁹⁰

Articles were also analyzed from the *Red Flag Manuscript* (RFM 红旗文稿), which was sponsored and managed by *Qiushi*.⁹¹ Previously called *Internal Manuscript* (内部文稿), the *Red Flag Manuscript* obtained its new name in 2003. The new name naturally evoked the *Red Flag* (*Hongqi* 红旗), the top party journal under Mao which later became today's *Qiushi*. In 2009, the *Red Flag Manuscript* went through a "total remodeling" (全面改版).⁹² Since then, it has become the flagship mouthpiece for conservative voices in China. Some *Red Flag Manuscript* articles directly influenced the formulation of major party lines and policies under Xi. For instance, Xi's "cultural confidence" (文化自信) was originally proposed and elaborated in three *Red Flag Manuscript* articles in 2010.⁹³ Foreshadowing what Xi would be doing down the road, another *Red Flag Manuscript* article made a belligerent call for "the People's Democratic Dictatorship" (人民民主专政) in 2014 as a conservative response to the reformist agenda on the rule of law put forward at the 4th Plenum of the 18th Chinese Communist Party Central Committee.⁹⁴

The *Red Flag Manuscript* editors also published a book series called *Analyzing the Theoretical Hot Issues: Selected Articles of the Red Flag Manuscript* (理论热点辨析:《红旗文稿》文选). The series published one book every year from 2009 to 2017. Each was a collection of *Red Flag Manuscript* articles picked by the journal's editors. This was a way to signal to people which were the most important articles.

The Marxism Project stopped publishing such official materials in 2008. The most reasonable explanation is that the *Red Flag Manuscript* became the conservative headquarters in 2009.

The third notable source is the print materials produced by "The Marxism Project" (马工程), an abbreviation for "The Marxism Project for Theoretical Study and Theory-building" (马克思主义理论研究和建设工程) launched in 2004.⁹⁵ According to Li Changchun (李长春), who was then a Politburo Standing Committee member in charge of ideological work, the Marxism Project was important for "consolidating the leading position of Marxism in the ideological field."⁹⁶ Li warned against "capitalist liberalization" (资产阶级自由化), the political crime that Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang were charged with in the 1980s.⁹⁷ The message was clear.

From 2004 to 2007, the Marxism Project officially produced seven books split into two series. The first series was called *The Marxism Project for Theoretical Study and Theory-building: Selected Reference Materials*, mainly a collection of academic writings by

89 E.g., Hu Jintao, *Selected Works of Hu Jintao* (SWHJ) 胡锦涛文选, vol. 1-3 (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe 人民出版社, 2016); Xi Jinping, *The Governance of China* 习近平治国理政, vol. 1 (Beijing: Waiwen Chubanshe 外文出版社, 2014); Xi Jinping, *The Governance of China* 习近平治国理政, vol. 2 (Beijing: Waiwen Chubanshe, 2017); Xi Jinping, *The Governance of China* 习近平治国理政, vol. 3 (Beijing: Waiwen Chubanshe 外文出版社, 2020).

90 Qiu Shi (秋石), "迎接思想解放的新高潮," *Qiushi*, no. 2 (2002): 3.

91 See the official description of the *Red Flag Manuscript* at the website of *Qiushi* journal (bottom left corner), <http://www.qstheory.cn/hqwg/>.

92 RFM Editorial Office (本刊编辑部), "抓住事物的根本 阐扬彻底的理论," *RFM*, no. 1 (2009): 1.

93 Yun Shan (云杉), "文化自觉 文化自信 文化自强: 对繁荣发展中国特色社会主义文化的思考(上)," *RFM*, no. 15 (2010): 4-8; Yun Shan, "文化自觉 文化自信 文化自强: 对繁荣发展中国特色社会主义文化的思考(中)," *RFM*, no. 16 (2010): 4-8; Yun Shan, "文化自觉 文化自信 文化自强: 对繁荣发展中国特色社会主义文化的思考(下)," *RFM*, no. 17 (2010): 4-9.

94 Wang Weiguan (王伟光), "坚持人民民主专政并不输理," *RFM*, no. 18 (2014): 4-8.

95 Nominally, the Marxism Project was part of a larger project called "Making Philosophy and Social Sciences Prosper and Thrive." See "中共中央关于进一步繁荣发展哲学社会科学的意见," in *SID16PC*, vol. 1, 684-93.

96 Li Changchun (李长春), "在中央实施马克思主义理论研究和建设工程工作会议上的讲话," in *SID16PC*, vol. 2, 49.

97 Li Changchun, "在中央实施马克思主义," 57.

party theoreticians.⁹⁸ The second series was called *The Marxism Project for Theoretical Study and Theory-building: Selected Research Reports*, which collected original short reports written by research teams on assigned topics.⁹⁹ The Marxism Project stopped publishing such official materials in 2008. The most reasonable explanation is that the *Red Flag Manuscript* became the conservative headquarters in 2009. Launched by the party center, the Marxism Project was not a platform that could be exclusively used to promote leftism. Indeed, it contained a mixture of both leftist and reformist voices. The following analyses will draw heavily on the articles from both of the Marxism Project series.

Chinese Politics since Hu Jintao: A Revisionist Sketch

The two-line struggle that I examine in this article did not actually start with Hu. It is a new chapter of the unfinished left-right struggle that dates back to the early reform period under Deng and which continued throughout the Jiang era. This part of the two-line struggle's history has been well documented.¹⁰⁰ In the post-Mao era, the main fault line has been whether China should stick to the path of socialism, or depart from it and embark on a road of development guided by a market economy and democracy, broadly defined.¹⁰¹ The leftists, who firmly champion socialism, usually call the reformers "rightists" (右派), which carries a strong derogatory connotation. The left-right labels go back to the communist and socialist movements in Europe beginning during the Industrial Revolution. The left has a strong association with class conflict. It is also a political-cultural

legacy of the Maoist past, featuring waves of struggles against the so-called counter-revolutionary rightists. Hence, the leftists generally feel more comfortable with being called leftists (左派). Defined in relation to the rightist enemies, the name "leftist" is traditionally associated with political correctness and a sense of mission to safeguard revolution and socialism, especially in the Mao era.¹⁰²

That the political legitimacy of leftism in China still stands unchallenged in the reform era, however, is evident from how official party documents describe radical Maoist leftism during the Cultural Revolution. Specifically, when they refer to "leftism" within quotation marks ("左"),¹⁰³ it is in order to denote something that should be denounced, i.e., Mao's mistakes, and distinguish it from what should be retained — the party's socialist foundation. Thanks to the political cover offered by putting leftism in quotation marks, the post-Mao leftist elites could appear to be walking a middle way, upholding the socialist orthodoxy against both Mao's radical anti-bureaucrat stance and anti-socialist rightists. But at its core, socialist orthodoxy is unmistakably leftist in terms of its constituting principles and elements, such as the worldview that capitalism is undesirable and class struggle is the foundational truth. The fact that there are now "two" leftisms, which allows party leaders to criticize the Maoist past while retaining socialist orthodoxy, is arguably the ideational foundation of a prudential rule in the Chinese Communist Party: "Better to stay on the left than to go to the right" (宁左勿右).

From a macro perspective, the trajectory of China's reform and opening-up looks like a linear progress in which the country has been moving steadily toward further political and economic liberalization. Looked

98 Theoretical Bureau of the Propaganda Department of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (中共中央宣传部理论局, hereafter TBPDCCP), ed., *The Marxism Project for Theoretical Study and Theory-building: Selected Reference Materials* (hereafter MPRM) 2004 马克思主义理论研究和建设工程参考资料选编 (Beijing: Xuexi Chubanshe 学习出版社, 2005); TBPDCCP, ed., MPRM 2005 (Beijing: Xuexi Chubanshe, 2006); TBPDCCP and the Office of the Marxism Project for Theoretical Study and Theory-building (马克思主义理论研究和建设工程办公室, hereafter OMPTT), ed., MPRM 2006 (Beijing: Xuexi Chubanshe, 2007); TBPDCCP and OMPTT, ed., MPRM 2007 (Beijing: Xuexi Chubanshe, 2008).

99 TBPDCCP ed., *The Marxism Project for Theoretical Study and Theory-building: Selected Research Reports 2005* (hereafter MPRR) 马克思主义理论研究和建设工程成果选编 (Beijing: Xuexi Chubanshe, 2006); TBPDCCP and OMPTT, ed., MPRR 2006 (Beijing: Xuexi Chubanshe, 2007); TBPDCCP and OMPTT, ed., MPRR 2007 (Beijing: Xuexi Chubanshe, 2008).

100 Joseph Fewsmith, *China Since Tiananmen: From Deng Xiaoping to Hu Jintao*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Willy Wo-Lap Lam, *China after Deng Xiaoping: The Power Struggle in Beijing since Tiananmen* (Singapore: J. Wiley & Sons, 1995). There is a closely related set of literature that discusses varieties of leftism (i.e., Old Left, New Left, Neo-Maoism) vis-a-vis other contemporary political thoughts in China. As opposed to this nuanced approach to leftist ideas from a perspective of intellectual history, a dichotomous framework (i.e., left vs right) is analytically adopted here not least because there is strong affinity between the variants of leftism politically. China's leading reformers once observed that there was a coalition between the Old Left and the New Left. See Ma Guochuan (马国川), "改革第三次争论: 标志性事件和代表性观点," *Yanhuang Chunqiu* (炎黄春秋), no. 12 (2006). For a more detailed account of this intellectual history, see Ma Licheng (马立诚), *Chinese Social Thought of the Past Four Decades* 最近四十年中国社会思潮 (Beijing: Oriental Press 东方出版社, 2015); He Li, *Political Thought and China's Transformation: Ideas Shaping Reform in Post-Mao China* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015).

101 Given that these principles are the cornerstones of Western societies, the left-right political struggle always has a nationalistic dimension.

102 One may note that while today's grassroots neo-Maoists readily call themselves leftists, the leftist political elites refrain from doing so openly. It is politically prudent to avoid the risk of being viewed as an anti-reform conservative and even a Cultural Revolution sympathizer. It would incur unnecessary political cost when continuing the Dengist reform is the dominant and "correct" discourse that defines the political-cultural context. Indeed, even leftists wanted to be viewed as "reformers." This hegemonic status of the Dengist reform was among those things the leftists tried to challenge and uproot.

103 See the Party's second "Historical Resolution" entitled "关于建国以来党的若干历史问题的决议."



at up close, however, there has been a constant struggle between the leftists and the reformers, with the latter somehow prevailing over the former every time, perhaps fortuitously.¹⁰⁴ When confronted with growing leftist aggression during the Hu era, some reformers seemed to believe that China's progress along this path of reform was unstoppable and that any leftist obstacles would be overcome.¹⁰⁵ But they were soon to be disillusioned by the revival of leftism in the Xi era. This time, the reformers didn't win.

Episode 1: Scientific Development

The "Scientific Outlook on Development" is conventionally regarded as Hu's signature party ideology. It was commonly regarded as a leftist critique that the market-oriented approach to development had caused worsening socio-economic inequality. However, the actual ideological battle that was being fought was far more intense than is known: It centered on how to define the phrase "human-centeredness" (以人为本),¹⁰⁶ officially dubbed the "core" of the Scientific Development.¹⁰⁷

On the issue of whether the Scientific Development was to be centered on "human" (人) or "people" (民), the initial closed-door discussion foreshadowed future acrimonious disputes. At the drafting meeting, a leading reformist establishment scholar, Gao Shangquan (高尚全), voted for using the term "people-centeredness." His reason was technical: It is always the word "people" that appears in contemporary talk of popular sovereignty. However, with prescience, a reform-minded official, Zheng Bijian (郑必坚), warned that "people" was susceptible to being hijacked by the class struggle logic. He pointed out that "people-centeredness" had "content with political implications" (带有政治的内容) because some people might be arbitrarily excluded from the "people" (有些不是"民").¹⁰⁸ Accordingly, the later

debate among party theoreticians centered on the issue of whether "human-centeredness" could be equated with "people-centeredness."¹⁰⁹

By using the term "human-centeredness," China's reformers were emphasizing the value of human rights, the protection and promotion of individual interests, and political equality.¹¹⁰ This tapped into the Marxist concept of "human's comprehensive development" (人的全面发展).¹¹¹ An implicit message in choosing "human" was that the class struggle logic, which divides society into unequal groups, pitting one against the other for the sake of an abstract collective interest, was actually un-Marxist and should be discarded. Echoing Jiang's call for inviting capitalists to join the Chinese Communist Party, one reformist voice remarked that "the 'human' of the 'human-centeredness' refers to all those who contribute to the cause of developing Socialism with Chinese Characteristics."¹¹² These reformist elements were all captured by Wen Jiabao's definition, in which he mentions the "multi-dimensional needs" of humans, "respecting and protecting human rights," and "creating a social environment in which there are equal [opportunities for] development and people can live up to their potentials."¹¹³

Although "human" was adopted as the official term, the leftists tried hard to fight against this *fait accompli* by arguing that "human" referred to "people." Behind the leftist conceptualization of "human-centeredness" was an essentially anti-Western and anti-capitalism worldview. The conservatives argued that any talk of "human" must be distinguished from similar, but qualitatively different, Western ideas such as "humanism" (人本主义) and "humanitarianism" (人道主义).¹¹⁴ The term was also not to be confused with "self-interest-centric" (个人利益至上) and "individual-centered" (以个人为本). Therefore, "mass-centered" (以人民群众为本) or "people-centered" (以

104 As Fewsmith noted, Zhao Ziyang's memoir reveals to us a very conservative party leadership in general, and "Deng's dominance and stubbornness were critical to the continuing deepening of reform and opening up throughout the 1980s." See Fewsmith, "What Zhao Ziyang Tells Us," 16.

105 See Ma Guochuan (马国川), "广东新一轮思想解放意味着什么—中国经济体制改革研究会会长高尚全访谈录," *Yanhuang Chunqiu* (炎黄春秋), no. 3 (2008): 1–5.

106 Indeed, just as this dispute centered on the key word "human" (人), it strongly resonated with the early 1980s debate over "humanism" (人道主义). At that time, Chinese liberals affirmed and embraced the intrinsic value of human dignity and individual freedom, posing a serious challenge to the Party's political correctness based on the leftist logic of class struggle. This time, the left-right contestation featured the same argumentation. See Richard Baum, *Burying Mao: Chinese Politics in the Age of Deng Xiaoping* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 153–61.

107 See the 17th Party Congress report.

108 Propaganda Department of the Chongqing Municipal Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (中共重庆市委宣传部), ed., *Collection of Speeches at the 2008 Open Forum 2008开放论坛演讲集* (Chongqing: Chongqing Chubanshe 重庆出版社, 2008), 63.

109 Xu Huan (徐焕), "科学发展观研究综述," in *MPRM 2004*, 284–89.

110 "关于始终坚持以人为本的价值取向的研究成果" in *MPRR 2006*, 100–3.

111 Editorial Team (本书编写组), ed., *Reader for Studying the Scientific Outlook on Development 科学发展观学习读本* (Beijing: Zhongyang Wenxian Chubanshe 中央文献出版社, 2004), 155–58, 165–66; Qiu Shi (秋石), "人的自由全面发展论," *Qishi*, no. 19 (2003): 13–16.

112 Guangdong Research Center for Deng Xiaoping Theory and the Important Thought of Three Represents (广东省邓小平理论和三个代表重要思想研究中心), "科学发展观是对马克思主义发展观的继承与创新," in *MPRM 2004*, 291.

113 Wen Jiabao (温家宝), "提高认识, 统一思想, 牢固树立和认真落实科学发展观," in *SID16PC*, vol. 1, 768.

114 "关于人道主义与马克思主义、社会主义的研究成果," in *MPRR 2006*, 13–16.

人民为本) were more accurate terms.¹¹⁵ Using the language of Marxist historical materialism against the reformist talk of “universal values,” conservative party theoreticians often emphasized in the Marxism Project publications that “human” referred only to “concrete rather than abstract ‘human’ (不是抽象, 而是具体的人).”¹¹⁶ Taken together, these charges all pointed to the political logic of class-based antagonism. For instance, “human-centeredness” was by nature Marxist and socialist,¹¹⁷ while everything was “capital-centered” under capitalism.¹¹⁸ “Human’s comprehensive development” was impossible under capitalism,¹¹⁹ because it must be preceded by the liberation of the proletariat.¹²⁰ Relating the ideological dispute to policy, the conservative faction stressed that the ultimate realization of “human-centeredness” in every aspect of the human life is only possible with an economic system based on public ownership, since private ownership has no place in a socialist society.¹²¹

There was a conscious effort from above to stop this dispute. A reform-minded party theoretician, Xing Benshi (邢贲思), asked both sides to refrain from playing word games and reading too much into the differences between “human” and “people.”¹²² Then came an authoritative response from the Propaganda

Department,¹²³ which formulated a new definition of “human-centeredness.”¹²⁴ This definition tempered both the leftist and reformist views and reduced the term to an abstract slogan of “serving the people.” It was a compromise that would soon break down. The disagreement over human-centeredness made a comeback immediately after the 17th Party Congress.¹²⁵

To understand this dispute over human-centeredness it’s important to understand the broader purpose of the Scientific Development: It was a leftist attempt to subvert Jiang’s reformist party line. Given that Jiang’s Three Represents had recently been consecrated as the party’s new guiding ideology, it was highly unusual for Hu to rush to put forward his own ideology. Leftist aggression was evident. But the conservative faction never seemed to have full control in defining the concept. For instance, there was a failed attempt to make the Scientific Development immediately sacrosanct. A symbolic statement claimed that, with the Scientific Development, “the fundamental theoretical question of ‘what is socialism, and how to build socialism’ has been deepened and become one of ‘what is socialist market economy, and how to develop socialism under socialist market economy’” (什么是社会主义市场经济, 怎么在市场经济条件下搞社会主义).¹²⁶

115 Research Center for Deng Xiaoping Theory and the Important Thought of Three Represents at the Chinese Academy of Social Science (中国社会科学院邓小平理论和三个代表重要思想研究中心), “唯物史观: 科学发展观的理论基础,” in *MPRR* 2006, 278–82; “关于科学发展观的研究成果,” in *MPRR* 2005, 90–91; Shanghai Research Center for Deng Xiaoping Theory and the Important Thought of Three Represents (上海市邓小平理论和三个代表重要思想研究中心), “论以人为本,” in *MPRM* 2005, 198–202; Shanghai Research Center for Deng Xiaoping Theory and the Important Thought of Three Represents, “以人为本的实质是‘以人民群众为本,’” in *MPRM* 2005, 203–8; Hou Shudong (侯树栋), “科学发展观是一个哲学问题,” in *MPRM* 2006, 276–77; “关于以人为本与科学发展观的研究成果” in *MPRR* 2006, 97–99.

116 “关于科学理解‘以人为本’的研究成果,” in *MPRR* 2005, 97; “关于科学发展观与历史唯物主义的研究成果,” in *MPRR* 2006, 89.

117 Qiu Shi (秋石), “全面准确地理解以人为本的科学涵义,” *Qiushi*, no. 7 (2005): 20; “关于在‘以人为本’问题上划清马克思主义与非马克思主义的界限的研究成果,” in *MPRR* 2006, 104–8.

118 Zhang Qinde (张勤德), *Establishing the Scientific Outlook on Development* 树立科学发展观 (Beijing: Hongqi Chubanshe 红旗出版社, 2004), 65.

119 “关于科学发展观对唯物史观的丰富和发展的研究成果,” in *MPRR* 2006, 91.

120 “关于如何理解‘以人为本’中的‘人’的研究成果,” in *MPRR* 2006, 109–11.

121 “关于以人为本与社会主义价值目标的统一性的研究成果,” in *MPRR* 2005, 98–99.


122 The original Chinese text is “不能字面上纠缠不清, 望文生义, 非要在人和民两字做文章.” See Xing Benshi (邢贲思), “以人为本和科学、民主、依法执政,” in *MPRM* 2005, 211.

123 TBPDCPP ed., *Reader for Studying the Scientific Outlook on Development* 科学发展观学习读本 (Beijing: Xuexi Chubanshe, 2006).

124 TBPDCPP, ed., *Reader for Studying the Scientific, 2*, 18–20.

125 For the leftist arguments, see Wang Weiguang (王伟光), ed., *The Banner, Path, and Theoretical System of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics: Experts from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Interpret the 17th National Congress Report* 中国特色社会主义旗帜、道路和理论体系: 中国社会科学院专家学者解读十七大报告 (Beijing: Zhongguo Shehui Kexue Chubanshe 中国社会科学出版社, 2008). For the reformist voices, see the following two books: Liu Ji (刘吉), ed., *Three Decades of Collision: A Record of Ten Ideological Debates during the Reform and Opening-up* 碰撞三十年: 改革开放十次思想观念交锋实录 (Nanjing: Jiangsu Renmin Chubanshe 江苏人民出版社, 2008), and Zhong Sheng (钟生), *The Great Ideological Debates Since the Reform and Opening-up* 改革开放以来思想大论战 (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe 人民出版社, 2008). Both were written in a literary genre carrying unique political symbolism in Chinese politics: a historical account of China’s reform from a perspective of major ideological debates. This peculiar genre of political history seems to originate from a 1997 book entitled *Crossing Swords* (交锋) by Ma Licheng and Ling Zhijun, though arguably it has a long pedigree in the official party historiography where politics is portrayed as a two-line struggle. *Crossing Swords* was crafted and published in a similar situation of leftist resistance to reform. While the co-authors apparently were writing contemporary history from a position of observers, the book was undoubtedly part of the ongoing politics and was written deliberately to support the reformist camp. By presenting a detailed account of how the reformers, who stood on the right side of the history, succeeded again and again in overcoming conservative opposition and finally pushing forward the reform, the book aimed not only at persuasion but also discrediting the leftist force. The two books mentioned here arguably sought to accomplish the same goal. It was no coincidence that Liu Ji played a decisive role in publishing *Crossing Swords* in the 1990s. This time Liu apparently tried to use the same discursive strategy once again.

126 Leng Rong (冷溶), “科学发展观与社会主义市场经济,” in *MPRM* 2006, 356. In the formal Chinese Communist Party political language system, there are certain syntaxes of fixed forms that are used to convey certain fixed political meanings, often as a way to indicate a political status. This is the case here in regard to the question of determining the main “contributions” of a party ideology. According to authoritative party documents, Deng Xiaoping Theory (邓小平理论) earned its guiding status by having effectively answered the question of “what is socialism, and how to build socialism?” (什么是社会主义, 怎样建设社会主义), and Jiang’s Three Represents became one of the party’s ideological pantheon by having offered an innovative answer to the question of “what kind of party shall be built, and how to build it?” (建设什么样的党、怎样建设党), respectively.

The background features a central white rectangular area containing text. This area is framed by a dark grey border. Outside this border, the background is composed of large, overlapping, rounded rectangular and circular shapes in red, blue, and dark grey. The text is centered within the white area and reads:

CHINESE POLITICS IN HU'S
EARLY YEARS IN POWER WERE
ANYTHING BUT A BANAL
CONTINUATION OF THE
REFORMIST EFFORT TO LEAD
CHINA INTO A NEW STAGE
OF ECONOMIC AND EVEN
POLITICAL LIBERALIZATION.

But this effort to foreground socialism ultimately failed. In the official version, the Scientific Development answers the question: "What kind of development shall be realized, and how to do it?" (实现什么样的发展、怎样发展).¹²⁷ The framing was de-politicized by the reformers. Likewise, there were other leftist "wrong views" about the Scientific Development that the reformers took pains to combat. For example, the conservatives pitted the Scientific Development against (对立起来) Deng's and Jiang's party lines. The concept was thus meant as a corrective to the "wrong outlooks on development in the past" (过去错误的发展观).¹²⁸ The reformist view stressed that Hu's theory grew out of Jiang's.¹²⁹

In short, the Scientific Development concept was not just a simple policy readjustment, which is conventionally attributable to Hu's personal policy preference to prioritize social equity and redistribution over GDP growth. It was put forward as a political weapon. Indeed, signs of this left-right tension and the conservative challenge to the political *status quo* were visible during Hu's early days in power. The most widely known sign was Hu's re-interpretation of Jiang's theory in a speech,¹³⁰ in which the priority of the Three Represents was unambiguously shifted to the last "represent," i.e., the people, or "the fundamental interests of the overwhelming majority of the people of China."¹³¹ Jiang's original framing was meant to highlight the other two "represents" — that the party should represent "the development trends of advanced productive forces" and "the orientations of an advanced culture." It was no accident that Hu did this on July 1, 2003. Hu's speech was referred

to as the new "July 1st speech" (七一讲话).¹³² This was an attempt to override Jiang's "July 1st speech," delivered one year earlier, in which he officially introduced the Three Represents. In addition, it was unusual for a Chinese Communist Party leader to propose something new concerning party lines at a symposium.¹³³ Moreover, Hu made an awkward digression on cadre discipline and the Mass Line spirit at the party's 3rd Plenum held in 2003, which was dedicated to economic planning. There, Hu underlined his "Three For-the-Peoples" (三个“为民”) slogan¹³⁴ — an act of subversion targeting Jiang's Three Represents.¹³⁵ From 2004 through 2006, the Qiu Shi article series unleashed a rhetorical blitz intended to promote Hu's leftist reinterpretation of Jiang's theory.¹³⁶

Even less known, but of no less political significance, is the hidden message in Hu's speech delivered at Xibaipo (西柏坡) in late 2002. The well-publicized part of the story is that Hu cited Mao's "Two Musts" (两个务必) to admonish party cadres to work hard for the people.¹³⁷ However, what is missing in this common understanding is an important nuance: that Hu exclusively focused on the *attitudinal* aspect of "working hard," — cadres' faith in socialism, sense of mission, and altruistic style of serving the people — and mentioned nothing about the *technocratic* aspect. In fact, in the same text where Mao raised the idea of the "Two Musts," he also talked about improving the party's governing capabilities in technocratic terms.¹³⁸ The lost message was supposed to have been delivered by Hu himself. However, because it wasn't, it had to be delivered in an official booklet dedicated to

127 The 17th Party Congress report.

128 Chen Xixi (陈锡喜), *Research on Jiang Zemin's Important Thought of Three Represents* 江泽民“三个代表”重要思想研究 (Shanghai: Shanghai Jiaotong Daxue Chubanshe 上海交通大学出版社, 2011), 284. The book was published in late 2011 by the official press affiliated with Shanghai Jiaotong University, i.e., Jiang's alma mater. It seems to be intended to promote Jiang's reformist party lines at a time of intense left-right struggle.

129 Chen Xixi, *Research on Jiang*, 276, 284.

130 Joseph Fewsmith, "Studying the Three Represents," *China Leadership Monitor* 8, no. 1 (2003), <https://www.hoover.org/research/studying-three-represents>.

131 Hu Jintao, "在三个代表重要思想研讨会上的讲话," in *SID16PC*, vol. 1, 359–78.

132 Qiu Shi (秋石), "干部作风论," *Qiushi*, no. 15 (2003): 13; Qiu Shi (秋石), "反腐倡廉论," *Qiushi*, no. 16 (2003): 1, 3–4.

133 Fewsmith, "Studying the Three Represents," 6.

134 I.e., "[cadres] should use their power for the people, make the people's need as their top concern, and work for the people's interests" (权为民所用, 情为民所系, 利为民所谋). See Hu Jintao, "为民、务实、清廉," in *SWHJ*, vol. 2 (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 2016), 106. This title was later chosen to name the major party rectification campaign launched during Xi's early years — i.e., The Party's Mass Line Education and Practice Campaign with the Main Focus on Serving the People, Being Pragmatic and Honest (以为民务实清廉为主要内容的党的群众路线教育实践活动).

135 So, it is not surprising that Hu's full speech was not published. Only included in *SID16PC* was the part where Hu talked about the Scientific Development. See Hu Jintao, "树立和落实科学发展观," in *SID16PC*, vol. 1, 483–84. Hu's populist talk, however, had to wait until 2016 to be published in his own anthology *SWHJ*.

136 This propaganda blitz had in total 15 articles. The first one is Qiu Shi (秋石), "生动的实践 深刻的启示——天津市实践‘立党为公 执政为民’的调查与思考," *Qiushi*, no. 1 (2004): 22–26.

137 The Two Musts refers to the idea that "The comrades must be taught to remain modest, prudent, and free from arrogance and rashness in their style of work. The comrades must be taught to preserve the style of plain living and hard struggle." See Mao Zedong (毛泽东), "在中国共产党第七届中央委员会第二次全体会议上的报告," March 5, 1949, *Selected Works of Mao Zedong* 毛泽东选集, vol. 4, <https://www.marxists.org/chinese/maozedong/marxist.org-chinese-mao-19490305.htm>.

138 The text is that "Our comrades must do their utmost to learn the techniques of production and the methods of managing production as well as other closely related work such as commerce and banking." See Mao, "在中国共产党第七届."



elaborating on Hu's Scientific Development concept in a reformist language,¹³⁹ and more formally in Zeng Qinghong's official speeches.¹⁴⁰ Later, the contention over whether a technocratic or revolutionary spirit is the key driver of development was the backdrop to the major "party building" campaigns launched in Hu's early years that were dedicated to enhancing the party's "governing capacity" (执政能力) and maintaining its "advanced nature" (先进性).

Conservative push-back did not only take place privately among elites. Leftists also succeeded in attracting public attention and stirring up public anger. Soon after the Chinese Academy of Social Science completed its assigned research on "neoliberalism" (新自由主义),¹⁴¹ the anti-reform voices that first surfaced within the elite circles were soon amplified and brought into the public space. There was a high-profile public debate on China's state-owned enterprise reform and the status of public ownership between 2004 and 2006.¹⁴² The leftist assertion that only the socialist way of economic production can lead to social justice found many supporters and sympathizers in Chinese society at the time. Shortly afterwards, the initial leftist criticism targeting specific economic policies went through further politicization — the problem was no longer about bad policies but the wrong model of development. This was later known as the "reflecting upon the reform" (反思改革) dispute or "the third debate on the reform" (第三次改革争论).¹⁴³

Chinese politics in Hu's early years in power were anything but a banal continuation of the reformist effort to lead China into a new stage of economic and even political liberalization. Beneath a seemingly festive political mood at the time, which was unmistakably marked by the widely acclaimed peaceful transition of power from Jiang to Hu, fierce political struggles were taking place.

Episode 2: Harmonious Society

The "Harmonious Society" (和谐社会) is conventionally regarded as Hu's second major ideological contribution. It was a positive vision for China, which at that time was plagued by negative socio-economic conditions, like inequality and social instability. It was commonly believed to be a follow up to the Scientific Development and to be going against the reformist approach to development: the so-called "elitist" pursuit of GDP growth through market-oriented reform at the cost of the welfare of those who were economically lagging behind. This section offers a revisionist view: The Harmonious Society was, in fact, initially a reformist response to conservative challenges. Jiang's Three Represents was repackaged with a new face of social harmony. The goal was to assure conservatives that further economic and political development in a reformist direction would not be fundamentally antithetical to the socialist ideal of social equity, and that the leftist concern over the negative impact of the market economy had been duly noted by the reformers. At the same time, the Harmonious Society was also meant to be a stern warning to the leftists that the class struggle mindset be abandoned. But this "harmonious" repackaging of Jiang's reformist blueprint met with strong resistance and was thwarted. The left-right battle centered on the political "positioning" of this newly proposed party line: Was it to be an *ideological* vision or merely a *technical* agenda for improving China's governance at a time of growing socioeconomic tension?

According to the reformist conception, the Harmonious Society had multiple purposes. As China's then-Vice President Zeng Qinghong put it, it was simultaneously "an ideal for governance" (治国理想), "a methodology of governance" (治国方略, 治国机制) and "a goal of governance" (治国结果).¹⁴⁴

In this reformist view, as the highest communist ideal, the Harmonious Society was equated with the perfect world that Marx and Engels envisioned in

139 The text stressed that the question of the Party's governing capacity should be approached from two directions: cadres' "work style" (作风) and "capabilities" (本领). See Editorial Team (本书编写组), ed., *Reader for Studying the Scientific Outlook on Development 科学发展观学习读本* (Beijing: Zhongyang Wenxian Chubanshe 中央文献出版社, 2004), 193.

140 For example, Zeng explicitly pointed to the dual aspects of the party's governing capacity. One is "not being qualified" (不适应), referring to the technocratic need of improvement, such as "insufficient theoretical preparation, little awareness of governing by law, and weak ability in handling complicated situations." The other is "not being devoted" (不符合), referring to cadres' attitudinal problems such as "a weak sense of responsibility and dedication, lacking in ethical uprightness, impractical work style and losing contact with the masses." See Zeng Qinghong (曾庆红), "加强党的执政能力建设的纲领性文献" in *SID16PC*, vol. 2, 379–80.

141 The report was entitled "Neo-liberalism and Its Nature" (新自由主义及其本质). See CASS Research Team for "Neoliberalism study" (中国社会科学院 "新自由主义研究" 课题组), "新自由主义研究," *Marxism Studies 马克思主义研究*, no. 6 (2003).

142 Specifically, there were three widely publicized debates in this regard. Each was stirred up by one leftist scholar. They are Larry Lang (郎咸平), Liu Guoguang (刘国光), and Gong Xiantian (巩献田).

143 "2004–2006中国第三次改革争论始末," *Southern Weekly 南方周末*, March 16, 2006, <http://www.reformdata.org/2006/0316/3973.shtml>.

144 Zeng Qinghong (曾庆红), "不断提高构建社会主义和谐社会的能力," in *SID16PC*, vol. 2, 727.

their theoretical blueprint.¹⁴⁵ It was “a harmonious social model based on the ‘free association of producers’” (自由人联合体).¹⁴⁶ It was no coincidence that this statement strongly resonated with the reformist conception of human-centeredness. By emphasizing the “harmonious” nature of the ideal Marxist society, the reformist goal was to steer away from the revolutionary conception of socialism that highlights class struggle.

The Harmonious Society seeks a harmonious way to deal with socioeconomic problems. To deter radical egalitarianism, Zeng employed the classic reformist rhetoric by referring to the “primary stage” of socialism, a term that was coined to pacify conservatives by reassuring them that the goal of socialism had not been abandoned, on the one hand, and to justify the adoption of capitalism on the ground that it was necessary at the “primary stage,” on the other. “As a goal,” the Harmonious Society was the contemporary equivalent to “the communist ideal proposed by the founders of scientific socialism,” but “as a process,” it was “concrete, historical, multi-stage and multi-level, which cannot be achieved in one fell swoop.”¹⁴⁷ Zeng also stressed that further economic development — not redistribution — was the key to reducing inequality. Additionally, Zeng underscored the importance of increasing the size of China’s middle class,¹⁴⁸ a concept that is opposed to the binary logic of class struggle.

Zeng’s official narrative was supplemented by bolder voices from reformist party theoreticians. The Harmonious Society was not only an end, but also an appropriate means — a kind of “non-antagonistic struggle” based on democracy and the rule of law,¹⁴⁹ and more importantly, a necessary antidote to the toxic influence of the class struggle mindset.¹⁵⁰ Relatedly, “equity and justice” should be distinguished from socialist “egalitarianism.”¹⁵¹ The

former envisioned the “appropriate coordination” of the interests of Chinese people from all social strata and recognized them all as equally legitimate, whereas the latter encouraged us-versus-them enmity.¹⁵² Echoing Zeng’s idea of building “an olive-shaped social structure,” the reform-minded party theoreticians extended the discussion of the middle class to the cultivation of civil society (公民社会).¹⁵³

The official definition put forward in Hu’s early 2005 speech provided additional support for a reformist understanding of the concept. A harmonious society was to be one based on “democracy and the rule of law, fairness and justice, moral integrity and friendliness, unlimited vitality, stability and orderliness, and the harmonious co-existence of humans and nature” (民主法治、公平正义、诚信友爱、充满活力、安定有序、人与自然和谐相处).¹⁵⁴ These defining concepts were exactly what the reformers championed as “universal values,” which later would become another focal point of the left-right fight. In particular, the phrase “unlimited vitality” (充满活力) was a conceptual vehicle for repackaging Jiang’s social inclusion policy. “Unlimited vitality” required that there should be equal opportunities for people from all backgrounds or classes.¹⁵⁵

In short, as a re-launched program modified to temper the initial “elitism” of the Three Represents, the Harmonious Society was originally a reformist response to leftist criticism. A new facade was set up with the core of Jiang’s theory retained. Further support for this new interpretation of these events can be found in the official resolution of the party’s 4th Plenum of the 16th Central Committee, where the Harmonious Society concept was first proposed.¹⁵⁶ A close reading of the official texts shows that the key message underlying the Harmonious Society was political inclusion. The commitment to motivating and mobilizing all of the “potential contributing forces”

145 Note that Hu’s early remarks on the Harmonious Society obviously followed a reformist script, which was heavily cited by Zeng. See Hu Jintao, “构建社会主义和谐社会,” in *SWHJ*, vol. 2, 273–99.

146 Pei Hua (裴华) and Wen Jun (文君), ed., *Reader on Constructing the Socialist Harmonious Society 构建社会主义和谐社会学习读本* (Beijing: Dangjian Duwu Chubanshe 党建读物出版社, 2005), 19.

147 Zeng Qinghong, “不断提高构建,” 727.

148 Zeng Qinghong, “不断提高构建,” 737.

149 Yan Shuhan (严书翰), “社会主义和谐社会研究还有很大空间,” in *MPRM 2006*, 548; “关于当前社会主义社会矛盾新特点的研究成果,” in *MPRM 2006*, 151–53.

150 Li Junru (李君如), “中国特色社会主义的新境界——学习十六届六中全会的几点体会,” in *MPRM 2006*, 458–59.

151 “关于构建社会主义和谐社会的研究成果,” in *MPRM 2006*, 113–14.

152 Pei and Wen, ed., *Reader on Constructing*, 65.

153 Pei and Wen, ed., *Reader on Constructing*, 12.

154 Hu Jintao, “构建社会主义和谐社会,” in *SWHJ*, vol. 2, 285.

155 The original text is that “all the innovative aspirations conducive to social progress should be respected, all the creative activities should be supported, all the creative talent should be used, and all the creative achievements should be recognized” (使一切有利于社会进步的创造愿望得到尊重, 创造活动得到支持, 创造才能得到发挥, 创造成果得到肯定). See Hu Jintao, “构建社会主义和谐社会,” 285.

156 It was listed as the fourth of the five major tasks for improving party’s governing capacities — i.e., “the ability to construct a socialist harmonious society” (构建社会主义和谐社会的能力).

(调动一切积极因素) was reiterated in section 7 of the plenum report.¹⁵⁷ Accordingly, at the top of the five detailed guidelines for the Harmonious Society was a call for “respecting work, knowledge, human talents, and innovation” (尊重劳动, 尊重知识, 尊重人才, 尊重创造). These “Four Respects” (四个尊重) were a reiteration of Jiang’s socio-political inclusion policy previously highlighted in the 16th Party Congress report: It was not only the working class that was welcome to contribute to China’s rejuvenation, but also those from “other social strata” (其他社会阶层).¹⁵⁸

Just as conservatives tried to make the Scientific Development the party’s latest guiding ideology, the reformers attempted the same with the Harmonious Society. Reformist party theoreticians were clearly mobilized to voice support for the initiative, trying to create momentum before the 6th Plenum of the 16th Central Committee. The Harmonious Society was said to be another “major theoretical innovation” (又一次重大理论创新).¹⁵⁹ By shedding new light on the question of “what Socialism with Chinese Characteristics should be and how to build it” (什么是中国特色社会主义, 怎么建设中国特色社会主义),¹⁶⁰ it signified a “great ideational leap” (重大认识飞跃) concerning “what is socialism, and how to build it.”¹⁶¹

The conservative rejoinders from left-leaning theoreticians were what one would expect: getting the “ism” right — i.e., socialism — should be the prerequisite of everything.¹⁶² Among the top party leadership, it was Hu who seemed to be leading the leftist efforts to sabotage the reformist plan. Speaking at a preparation meeting before the 6th Plenum, Hu raised a question about the “positioning” (定位) of the Harmonious Society. According to Hu, “society/social” (社会) can refer to multiple things: “social

systems, or social institutions” (社会形态/社会制度), social development (社会建设), or “the social sector and social management” (社会事业/社会管理).¹⁶³ At that meeting, Hu decided that the Harmonious Society was not synonymous with socialism. Instead, the former should be based on and qualified by the latter — social harmony is an “essential attribute” (本质属性) of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics.¹⁶⁴ This downgraded status was further confirmed as Hu also remarked that social harmony is a “natural part” (应有之义) of scientific socialism.¹⁶⁵ With the Harmonious Society purged of reformist ambition, Hu moved on to elaborate that the “Big Society” (大社会) was the goal — i.e., social development — and the “Small Society” (小社会) was the technical method that would be used — i.e., social governance.¹⁶⁶

The official text of the 6th Plenum resolution devoted much space to the Big and Small Societies, but the reformist talk of a Marxist ideal society embodied in social harmony was missing. Another unmistakable sign that there had been a conservative takeover at the plenum was the conspicuous demotion of Jiang’s Three Represents. Whereas it had always been put on the party building (党建) agenda, now it was now demoted to a United Front issue (统战).¹⁶⁷ The political agenda put forward by Jiang through this theory was no longer among the most important tasks that the party should prioritize. It was also an explicit veto of Jiang’s proposal that capitalists be allowed to join the party. Instead, the bourgeoisie would only be *coopted* but never *included*.

Episode 3: The 17th Party Congress

The conventional wisdom is that Hu’s second term was quiet, that no more new party lines came

157 In a Harmonious Society, “every one of the entire populace can find a career with which she can live up to her potentials” (全体人民各尽其能, 各得其所).

158 It was also reiterated by Zeng. See Zeng Qinghong, “不断提高构建,” 732–34.

159 Hunan Research Center for Deng Xiaoping Theory and the Important Thought of Three Represents (湖南省邓小平理论和三个代表重要思想研究中心), “一次重大的理论创新,” in *MPRM* 2005, 136.

160 Yan Shuhan, “社会主义和谐社会,” 546.

161 Pei and Wen, ed., *Reader on Constructing*, 49.

162 Beijing Research Center for Deng Xiaoping Theory and the Important Thought of Three Represents (北京市邓小平理论和三个代表重要思想研究中心), “深刻认识新形势下和谐社会建设的特点和规律,” in *MPRM* 2005, 248–55; Wang Xinyan (汪信砚), “构建社会主义和谐社会的价值诉求及其实现途径,” in *MPRM* 2005, 269–74; Yu Yunyao (虞云耀), “构建社会主义和谐社会需要处理好的若干重大关系,” in *MPRM* 2005, 262–68.

163 Hu Jintao, “关于构建社会主义和谐社会的几个问题,” in *SWHJ*, vol. 2, 424.

164 Other indicative statements include: 1) “the establishment of the basic socialist system (社会主义基本制度) in China is the prerequisite and guarantee of solving the problem of social harmony”; 2) “[The Harmonious Society] is fundamentally different from the harmonious ideals pursued by the societies under slavery, feudalism and capitalism.” See Hu Jintao, “关于构建社会主义和谐社会,” 425.

165 Hu Jintao, “社会和谐是中国特色社会主义的本质属性,” in *SWHJ*, vol. 2, 521.

166 The Big Society means “incorporating the Harmonious Society project into all other work of our Party and nation, including economic development, political development, cultural development, and party building.” The Small Society refers to “developing the social sector, fostering social fairness and justice, nurturing harmonious culture, improving social management and nourishing social creativity and vitality, in the spirit of prioritizing the tasks most pertinent to the people’s direct interests and practical needs.” See Hu Jintao, “社会和谐,” 523.

167 See section 7 of the 6th Plenum resolution. More precisely, this open assault on the reformist agenda had actually happened three months before the 6th Plenum. At the National Conference of the United Front (全国统战会议), Hu Jintao talked about the cooptation of “the new social strata” (新的社会阶层). An official document later formalized this downgrading. See Hu Jintao, “在全国统战工作会议上的讲话,” in *SID16PC*, vol. 3, 540–64; “中共中央关于巩固和壮大新世纪新阶段统一战线的意见,” in *SID16PC*, vol. 3, 565–83.

out. With the Harmonious Society sidelined at the 17th Party Congress at the end of his first term, Hu seemed to have settled on the Scientific Development, choosing the latter over the former as his unique contribution to Chinese socialism. However, I argue that Socialism with Chinese Characteristics (中国特色社会主义) was a *de facto*, unannounced new-generation party line put forward at the 17th Party Congress. Whereas in the past this familiar term was associated with China's departure from orthodox socialism, this time it was being used as a conservative initiative to *preserve* socialism.

The fight between the right and the left over the political agenda of the 17th Party Congress centered on the "direction" of China's reform: Should the reformist approach continue, or should the party return to its core socialist tenets?

China's reformers tried to defend their position. Soon after Wen Jiabao delivered a well-known speech calling for political reform and an embrace of universal values such as freedom and human rights,¹⁶⁸ Hu was reported to have made a "June 25th speech" (六·二五讲话). Just as Jiang's "May 29th speech" in 2002 (五·二九讲话) forcefully defended the Three Represents and set a reformist tone for the 16th Party Congress, Hu's speech was supposed to do something similar. The full text of the speech was never published, suggesting that something unusual was going on, although a Xinhua News Agency newsletter did provide a summary.¹⁶⁹ This was probably either due to conservative opposition or to something that Hu had talked about that the reformers wanted to cover up.

The core reformist message was the "Four Unswervinglys" (四个坚定不移), the top two of which called for continuing Mind Emancipation (解放思想) and Reform and Opening-up (改革开放).¹⁷⁰ Unsurprisingly, the argument that the Harmonious Society embodied the ideal Marxist community reemerged.¹⁷¹ Moreover, there was a reformist effort to override Hu's previous downgrading of the Harmonious Society — instead of an "essential attribute" of socialism, it should be regarded as a new development of socialism.¹⁷² Unfortunately, this reassertion of the reformist

agenda was shot down. The "Four Unswervinglys" soon disappeared from public sight and were not mentioned in the 17th Party Congress report.

Nevertheless, the reformers still managed to include language in the 17th Party Congress report that underlined the importance of sticking to the reformist path. For instance, the Dengist reform was described as "one magic weapon" (一大法宝), "a powerful force" (强大动力), a "decisive choice" (关键抉择), and "a path through which China must go" (必由之路).

In short, the Ten Combinations was a new rhetorical vehicle for the leftists to underline the importance of being faithful to Marxism and socialism.

However, it was the conservative side that dominated the framing of the political discourse of the 17th Party Congress. And its report was full of leftist surprises. First and foremost, a set of concepts was enshrined, the so-called "Banner" (旗帜), "Path" (道路), and "Theoretical system" (理论体系) of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics. They served to get the leftist message across: The direction of China's post-Mao reform must be socialist. Hu set the conservative tone at a party congress preparation meeting by posing a rhetorical question: "What banner [shall we] uphold, which road [shall we] walk, what attitudes [shall we] have, and what developmental goals [shall we] work toward?" (举什么旗, 走什么路, 什么样的精神状态, 朝着什么样的发展目标).¹⁷³ In the party congress report, Hu stressed that China's reform in general and political reform in particular must proceed along the "correct direction" (正确方向). The same message was reiterated by Hu with bold and belligerent wording shortly after the 17th

168 Wen Jiabao, "关于社会主义初级阶段的历史任务和我国对外政策的几个问题," in *SWHJ*, vol. 3, 906–13.

169 *Reader for Studying the Spirit of General Secretary Hu Jintao's "June 25" Speech* 胡锦涛总书记 "六二五" 重要讲话精神学习读本 (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 2007).

170 The other two are "[We shall] unswervingly implement [the policies of] the Scientific Development (科学发展) and Harmonious Society (社会和谐), and work hard to build a moderately prosperous society in a comprehensive way (全面建设小康社会)." See *Reader for Studying the Spirit*, 1–12.

171 *Reader for Studying the Spirit*, 194.

172 *Reader for Studying the Spirit*, 198–99.

173 Hu Jintao, "关于党的十七大的主题," in *SWHJ*, vol. 2, 576.



Party Congress.¹⁷⁴ At the 2nd Plenum of the 17th Central Committee, he warned that “the crux is not whether political reform is necessary or not; rather, it is a question of which direction.”¹⁷⁵

A second major sign of a leftist reorientation of the 17th Party Congress was the idea of “Ten Combinations” (十个结合). China’s reform must be “combined” with socialism. It appeared to be a deliberate attempt to override Jiang’s “Ten Lessons from the Past Experience” (十大经验), which, according to the party’s official narrative, provided the “practical foundation” for Jiang’s Three Represents.¹⁷⁶

At the 2nd Plenum, Hu explicitly asserted that the Ten Combinations “carries unusual political significance and rich theoretical meaning.”¹⁷⁷ On the same occasion, Hu reiterated the “correct direction” thesis, stating that China’s reform “never seeks to reform away the socialist system.”¹⁷⁸ Hu offered a more detailed elaboration on a special occasion commemorating the start of the Dengist reform. Particularly worth noting is Hu’s talk of “integrating” (统一) market-oriented reform with the Four Cardinal Principles,¹⁷⁹ which stressed the party’s political and ideological supremacy. The two were “interconnected and interdependent as a whole that is unbreakable.” Therefore, “never should one of them be over-emphasized over others” (不可偏废).¹⁸⁰

In short, the Ten Combinations was a new rhetorical vehicle for the leftists to underline the importance of being faithful to Marxism and socialism. Later, Hu’s statement on “integrating” would be cited by Xi when he stressed that “the goal of our reform and opening-up is to uphold and develop Socialism with Chinese Characteristics, rather than other isms” (不是要搞其他什么主义).¹⁸¹

A third major sign that leftists dominated the 17th Party Congress was the demotion of Jiang’s Three Represents. It was like an ideological *coup d’état* that deprived Jiang’s theory of its independent status. Together with Deng Xiaoping Theory and Hu’s Scientific

Development, Jiang’s signature theory was now subsumed under an umbrella concept, the “the Theoretical System of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics.”

Prior to this move, Mao Zedong Thought, Deng Xiaoping Theory, and Jiang’s Three Represents had built upon one another, according to the official narrative. Each new theory was a progressive development based on the previous theory, just as Jiang’s idea of “keeping up with the time” (与时俱进) would suggest. With Socialism with Chinese Characteristics now absorbing everything that came after Mao, it had in effect closed the space for moving further away from, or superseding, what the communist revolutionary forefathers had laid down. All of the major party lines and guiding ideologies since Deng — including what was, is, and is to come — now shared one single title. This was done so that the socialist lineage would never be lost, and no more fundamental breaks would occur. Although the reformers could still be discursively ambiguous in framing Chinese socialism for reformist purposes, the room for playing word games to help promote partisan ideas without explicitly violating the party’s fundamental principles had shrunk considerably.

While the congress report only indicates that there was a battle fought over the status of Jiang’s theory, the actual struggle centered on the issue of whether Jiang’s Three Represents should be officially granted the status of being the “third leap” of Marxist sinicization (马克思主义中国化的“第三次飞跃”). Obtaining this title would allow Jiang’s theory to join the party’s ideological pantheon as an equal to Mao Zedong Thought and Deng Xiaoping Theory, known as the first and second leaps, respectively.

This reformist ambition to make Jiang’s theory the third leap was first expressed via party mouthpieces in the early 2000s shortly after the Three Represents made its official debut.¹⁸² Some explicitly advocated for making it the third leap and some avoided the topic altogether. Others still took a middle path of cautious-

174 For example, “Whether political development proceeds along the correct direction or not has determinative implications for the fate of a country” (政治发展道路是否正确, 对一个国家的盛衰兴亡有决定性意义); “Political reform refers to the self-perfection and development of the socialist political system. ... While there are many opinions, [we] shall listen to the ones that make sense, but stand firm, be sober and stay alert to those that are either wrong or carry ulterior motives” (对正确的听取研究, 对错误的别有用心, 要心明眼亮站稳脚跟). See Hu Jintao, “深化政治体制改革, 发展社会主义民主政治,” in *SWHJ*, vol. 3, 73, 75.

175 The original text is “核心问题不是政治体制要不要改, 而是朝着什么方向改.” See Hu Jintao, “深化政治体制改革,” 75.

176 See the 16th Party Congress report.

177 The original text is “这是很有政治分量和理论内涵的.” See Hu Jintao, “在新进中央委员会的委员、候补委员学习贯彻党的十七大精神研讨班上的讲话,” in *SID17PC*, vol. 1, 101.

178 Hu Jintao, “在新进中央委员会,” 101.

179 The original text is “坚持把以经济建设为中心同四项基本原则、改革开放这两个基本点统一于发展中国特色社会主义的伟大实践.” See Hu Jintao, “在纪念党的十一届三中全会召开三十周年大会上的讲话,” in *SID17PC*, vol. 1, 797.

180 Hu Jintao, “在纪念党的十一届三中,” 798.

181 Xi Jinping, “在学习《胡锦涛文选》报告上的讲话,” in *SID18PC*, vol. 3, 387.

182 Ji Fangping (吉方平), “将‘三个代表’写在党的旗帜上,” *Liberation Daily* 解放日报, Nov. 10, 2002, <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2002-11-10/1105802368.html>; Liu Shengdong (刘声东), “高举‘三个代表’伟大旗帜 兴起学习‘三个代表’重要思想新热潮,” *PLA Daily* 解放军报, Nov. 11, 2002, CNKI Database; “深化对‘三个代表’重要思想科学内涵的认识,” *Guangming Daily* 光明日报, June 27, 2003, CNKI Database.

ly implying the third leap status without explicitly arguing for it. For example, in lieu of referring to a “leap,” party theoreticians referred to a “milestone,”¹⁸³ or a “new stage.”¹⁸⁴ Relatedly, it was unclear whether theoretician and state media praise for Jiang’s Three Represents as a “theoretical achievement” (理论成果) was the same as granting it “leap” status.¹⁸⁵

The reformist effort to promote Jiang’s theory as a “third leap” continued until the 17th Party Congress, where it was finally thwarted. Zeng explicitly referred to Mao Zedong Thought, Deng Xiaoping Theory, and the Three Represents as the “three major theoretical achievements.”¹⁸⁶ The propaganda booklet dedicated to Hu’s “June 25th speech” offered the most straightforward endorsement, referring to Mao, Deng, and Jiang as “three major theoretical achievements” and “three historic leaps” in modernizing and sinicizing Marxism.¹⁸⁷

While the 17th Party Congress report didn’t address the “leap” status of the Three Represents, the official decision was announced elsewhere. According to Xi, the umbrella term, i.e., the Theoretical System of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics, which included Deng’s, Jiang’s, and Hu’s party lines, collectively marked the “second historic leap.”¹⁸⁸ In short, there would be no “third leap,” at least for the time being. It would later be Xi Jinping Thought that would claim that title. As for Jiang’s Three Represents, it was now depicted as having played a crucial transitional role (承上启下) for moving from Deng Xiaoping Theory to the “Theoretical System of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics” put forward under Hu.¹⁸⁹

To summarize, the 17th Party Congress was the scene of a forceful comeback of leftism, although the reformers still held their ground. The congress resulted in some compromises being made, but other things were left ambiguous. Scientific Development became the public face of Hu, rather than Socialism with Chinese Characteristics. However, the latter theory remained

open to reformist interpretation. The same ambiguity was evident elsewhere. Take, for example, Hu’s statement that “[we shall] never walk an old, rigid path of isolation, nor take the wrong turn to change the nature or abandon the system [of socialism],”¹⁹⁰ or his talk of *bu zhe teng* (不折腾) or “avoiding self-inflicted setbacks.”¹⁹¹ The conventional view is that Hu tried not to take a side. But Hu’s ambiguity might well have been a reflection of an ongoing and unsettled tug-of-war between Chinese reformers and conservatives fighting over the party’s political agenda.

Episode 4: The Soviet Lessons

As opposed to the conventional belief that China’s conservative turn occurred only after Xi came to power, China expert David Shambaugh is among a few observers who have pointed out that this change of course in China’s domestic politics can be dated back to 2009. Shambaugh claims that he witnessed China’s overall political retrenchment first-hand when living in Beijing on sabbatical.¹⁹² This section presents new evidence in support of this hypothesis.

A review of selected articles from *Red Flag Manuscript* shows that in 2009 there was a clear conservative shift in the discourse on the lessons China should learn from the Soviet Union. During the early years of the Dengist reform, the Soviet lessons emphasized the importance of overcoming ideological dogmatism and restructuring the socialist system. After the 2009 conservative turn, ideological erosion was identified as the root cause of the Soviet collapse.

The party-led research on the Soviet Union never came to a close, nor were any definitive conclusions drawn.¹⁹³ Instead, analyses about what lessons China can glean from the Soviet Union seem to be a rhetorical vehicle for various purposes. Thus, there are both reformist and conservative interpretations of the collapse of the Soviet Union.

183 Qiu Shi (秋石), “论中国化的马克思主义,” *Qiushi*, no. 4 (2002): 12.

184 Qiu Shi (秋石), “历史性的决策和贡献,” *Qiushi*, no. 2 (2003): 5.

185 “关于马克思主义中国化与中国化的马克思主义的研究成果,” in *MPPR 2005*, 46–48; Wang Xiuzhi (王修智), “全面系统地研究马克思主义,” in *MPPR*, 23–29; *People’s Daily* (人民日报), “马克思主义中国化和当代化问题——访龚育之教授,” in *MPPR 2005*, 61–66.

186 Zeng Qinghong, “在中央保持共产党员先进性教育活动工作会议上的讲话,” in *SID16PC*, vol. 2, 561; Zeng Qinghong, “认真研究实践经验, 深入探索基本规律,” in *SID16PC*, vol. 3, 456.

187 *Reader for Studying the Spirit*, 61–62.

188 Xi Jinping, “关于中国特色社会主义理论体系的几点学习体会和认识,” in *SID17PC*, vol. 1, 241.

189 Xi Jinping, “关于中国特色社会主义理论体系,” 244.

190 The original text is “决不走封闭僵化的老路, 也决不走改旗易帜的邪路.” See Hu Jintao, “在纪念党的十一届三中全会,” 798.

191 Hu Jintao, “在纪念党的十一届三中全会,” 810. For the reformers, the peculiar term “*bu zhe teng*” referred to no return to the Maoist past, while for the leftists, it meant upholding the socialist path as opposed to the capitalist one. For details of the latter view, see Leng Zhaosong (冷兆松), “邓小平关于‘不折腾’的主要文献和基本思想,” *Mao Zedong Thought Study* 毛泽东思想研究 31, no. 4 (2014): 25–28; Hong Qi (洪淇), “论‘不折腾,’” *RFM*, no. 2 (2009): 1.

192 Shambaugh, *China’s Leaders*, 245.

193 According to Shambaugh, the official research project went through multiple phases. It was under systemic study during 1993–2004 and came to conclusion around 2004–2005, when the Chinese Communist Party launched a party-wide rectification campaign, i.e., “To maintain the Party’s advanced nature” (保持先进性). See David Shambaugh, *China’s Communist Party: Atrophy and Adaptation* (Washington, DC, and Berkeley: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and University of California Press, 2008), 58–59.



For this analysis, I selected all of the *Red Flag Manuscript* articles published between 1994 and 2018 that contained one of the following key words in their titles: “Soviet Union” (苏联), “the Soviet communist party” (苏共), “Soviet Union and the Eastern European regimes,” (苏东) or “Eastern Europe” (东欧). Nine articles were later excluded because they do not explain the Soviet collapse, leaving 51 articles. Despite the relatively small sample size, these *Red Flag Manuscript* articles provide a unique perspective, thanks to a critical juncture that occurred in the journal’s own historical trajectory: In 2009, the *Red Flag Manuscript* went through an editorial overhaul, becoming the leftists’ flagship mouthpiece. Consequently, there is a sharp contrast in the journal’s views before and after its political reorientation.

From a reformist perspective, the lost faith in socialism was only a minor factor in the Soviet collapse, which was, according to reformers, principally due to institutional breakdown. In contrast, a conservative interpretation regarded such ideological erosion as the root cause.

In these *Red Flag Manuscript* articles, party scholars identified seven reasons for the downfall of the Soviet bloc: failure to reform, economic crisis, institutional deficiency, ideological erosion, problems in party building, foreign power, and bad leaders.

The failure-to-reform criticism echoed the Dengist repudiation of the Maoist past. Rather than a lesson learned from a collapsed Soviet Union, it sounded more like self-justification of China’s own reform choices with the socialist “Big Brother” serving as a foil. The main argument here is that the root cause

of the Soviet collapse was an ossified understanding and application of Marxism.¹⁹⁴ Dogmatism resulted in misjudgment, triggering a cascade of problems in all areas, such as political arrangements and socio-economic policies.¹⁹⁵ Dogmatism also gave rise to a crisis of faith in Marxism and socialism,¹⁹⁶ which in turn stoked radicalism among political insiders who had become disillusioned and believed that the only way out was abandoning the socialist path altogether.¹⁹⁷ The Soviet Union’s failure was due to developing socialism in a dogmatic way, but had nothing to do with socialism itself.¹⁹⁸ According to this critique, equating the “Stalinist model” with “scientific socialism” is problematic.¹⁹⁹ Moreover, it was not just Joseph Stalin but also his successors who were to blame for a lack of timely reform.²⁰⁰ Due to their inaction, the Soviet Union missed the opportunity to be saved and revived.²⁰¹

The economic crisis factor can be viewed as a corollary effect of a lack of reform.

According to this theory of the Soviet collapse, pure public ownership in the Soviet economy caused developmental stagnation and slowed progress in technological innovation.²⁰² Poor economic conditions drastically undermined the Soviet Union’s political legitimacy.²⁰³

The third factor identified as a cause of the Soviet collapse is institutional deficiency. While the one-party system contributed to Soviet political success early on, it was by no means the best or most desirable model for economic development.²⁰⁴ Seeking to set up a theoretical ground for justifying further relaxation of the party’s tight control over society, the reformist view suggests that ruling China under a one-party political system was by no means conceptually synonymous with the idea of governing the country “under the party leadership.” The two concepts are related, but confusing the two was misleading and harmful — that the Chinese Communist Party is the one who “leads” the country does not necessarily mean that

194 Cao Jiaming (曹佳鸣), “理论思维的成熟是党成熟的重要标志—原苏东国家共产党历史演变的启示,” *RFM*, no. 19 (1994): 28, 31–33.

195 Xiao Feng (肖枫), “执政党陷入危机是苏联剧变的根本原因,” *RFM*, no. 8 (2000): 6–8.

196 Yang Huang (杨煌), “苏共瓦解的教训再反思,” *RFM*, no. 4 (2000): 9–12.

197 An Qinian (安启念), “苏联剧变的三个重要原因,” *RFM*, no. 9 (2000): 9–10; Zhao Yao (赵耀), “苏联剧变和解体的根本原因是内部出了问题—苏共亡党、苏联解体20年后的思考,” *RFM*, no. 11 (2011): 28–32; Wang Rui (王锐), “深刻认识苏联社会主义制度优势丧失的教训,” *RFM*, no. 19 (2016): 35–37.

198 Guo Zhijun (郭志军), “如何认识东欧中亚地区左翼力量的重新崛起,” *RFM*, no. 16 (1996): 24–26.

199 Shen Bilian (沈碧莲), “东欧共产党党建中的四大失误,” *RFM*, no. 2 (2002): 22.

200 Hebei Research Group on the Law of Historical Cycles (河北省历史周期率课题组, hereafter HRGLHC), “对苏共失权的民主反思,” *RFM*, no. 8 (1998): 19.

201 Chen Zhihua (陈之骅), “对苏联演变深层次原因的思考” *RFM*, no. 9 (2000): 6–9.

202 Hu Yanxin (胡延新), “对东欧剧变原因的再思考” *RFM*, no. 24 (1999): 29–31; An Qinian, “苏联剧变,” 9–10.

203 Wu Enyuan (吴恩远), “邓小平论总结苏联社会主义革命和建设的经验教训” *RFM*, no. 24 (1998): 21–25; Wang Rui, “深刻认识苏联,” 35–37.

204 Li Qi (李琪), “对苏东剧变的客观概述及其教训的深刻总结,” *RFM*, no. 5 (1995).

the party's leadership must be based on a totalitarian one-party system through which the party controls everything.²⁰⁵ The most serious challenge brought by the one-party rule was a dysfunctional mechanism for regulating intra-party decision-making and power distribution — so-called “democratic centralism.” The first major problem was a lack of democratic constraints on power, which was concentrated in the hands of party leaders at all levels.²⁰⁶ Unchecked power then bred other problems, such as bureaucratism, factionalism, and arbitrary decisions.²⁰⁷ A second problem was the radical response to this lack of democratic constraints — a shock therapy of political reform that was believed to be the only corrective to the party's unchecked centralization of power, which, however, also dealt a death blow to the party at the same time.²⁰⁸

The fourth factor is ideological erosion. From a reformist perspective, the lost faith in socialism was only a minor factor in the Soviet collapse, which was, according to reformers, principally due to institutional breakdown.²⁰⁹ In contrast, a conservative interpretation regarded such ideological erosion as the root cause.²¹⁰ While Mikhail Gorbachev was commonly regarded as the person to blame for introducing toxic ideas, the erosion arguably began much earlier, when Nikita Khrushchev delivered his de-Stalinization speech.²¹¹ Another *Red Flag Manuscript* article even argued that, despite all sorts of problems under Leonid Brezhnev, the Soviet regime survived because its leaders did not abandon the communist faith and the

socialist system.²¹² Western “hostile forces” were also blamed for bringing the Soviet regime down, through cultural “exports” and ideological “infiltration.”²¹³ One cunning strategy of Western capitalists, according to a veteran conservative critic, was to persuade people to reject the socialist system in the name of “reform.”²¹⁴ Therefore, the Chinese Communist Party must have firm control over people's minds by censoring media,²¹⁵ monitoring history-writing,²¹⁶ and making propaganda more persuasive.²¹⁷

Problems in party building is the fifth reason pointed to for explaining the Soviet collapse. Corruption among Soviet party officials posed a serious threat to the party's legitimacy. The people's “servants” had turned into “a class of power and wealth” (权贵阶层) and “lost contact with the masses.” Bureaucratism was rampant,²¹⁸ giving rise to anti-socialist sentiments.²¹⁹ Given this corruption in the Soviet Union, leftist theoreticians argued that China's anticorruption efforts were necessary.²²⁰ Another party building problem concerned party cohesion and capacity. The long-term submissiveness nurtured by a hierarchical system had rendered party members politically weak and incapable of acting in times of emergency.²²¹ Career opportunism weakened the party's organizational strength,²²² not least in regard to control of the military.²²³

The sixth reason is due to foreign power. Blaming the West has long been a cliché among leftist theoreticians in their diagnosis of the Soviet demise. The West, led by the United States, was said to have engaged in a

205 Xiao Feng (肖枫), “对原苏联东欧国家政体体制上严重问题和深刻教训的探讨,” *RFM*, no. 1 (1994): 23.

206 Li Yan (李燕), “男儿为何不抗争—苏联解体前苏共基层党组织与党员思想状况分析,” *RFM*, no. 18 (2015): 33–37; Zhao Yao, “苏联剧变,” 28–32.

207 Shen Bilian, “东欧共产党,” 24–25.

208 HRGLHC, “对苏共失权,” 18–23; Fan Yinghua (范印华), “苏联解体的深刻教训与我党性三讲”教育的创造性探索,” *RFM*, no. 9 (2001): 8–10; Wu Renzhang (吴仁彰), “关于坚持和健全民主集中制的历史经验—联系原苏东国家剧变的几点思考,” *RFM*, no. 24 (1994): 6–7.

209 Xiao Feng, “执政党陷入危机,” 6–8.

210 Li Shenming (李慎明), “反思原苏共的意识形态工作,” *RFM*, no. 18 (2006): 25–27; Sun Ming (孙铭), “瓦解苏共的思想杀手—雅科夫列夫,” *RFM*, no. 11 (2014): 35–36.

211 Ma Xiaoming (马晓明), “苏联学者论苏共二十大与六十年代人,” *RFM*, no. 19 (2012): 32–35.

212 Li Yan (李燕), “勃列日涅夫时期苏共官员的腐败及影响,” *RFM*, no. 7 (2013): 31–34.

213 Jing Xianghui (景向辉), “美国在苏联解体政治进程中发挥了什么作用—对布热津斯基观点的解析,” *RFM*, no. 23 (2013): 35–36; Lin Yanhu (林彦虎), “对苏联解体教训的再认识,” *RFM*, no. 17 (2016): 35–35; Jiang Hong (蒋红), “对苏联解体的另一种探索与求证,” *RFM*, no. 8 (2015): 35–37.

214 Zhou Xincheng (周新城), “必须重视意识形态工作—苏联演变的教训之一,” *RFM*, no. 8 (2000): 1–6.

215 Li Hong (李宏), “苏共亡党的传媒因素,” *RFM*, no. 8 (2011): 14–16; Li Shenming (李慎明), “苏共亡党亡国反思: ‘公开性’与指导思想‘多元化,’” *RFM*, no. 5 (2012): 16–20; Zhu Jidong (朱继东), “新闻宣传战线在苏共亡党中的迷失及警示,” *RFM*, no. 8 (2013): 34–37.

216 Wu Enyuan (吴恩远), “再谈俄罗斯反思苏联历史—重评斯大林思潮,” *RFM*, no. 15 (2006): 30–32; Wu Enyuan (吴恩远), “历史虚无主义的破产—俄罗斯对苏联历史从全盘否定到公正评价,” *RFM*, no. 7 (2009): 23–26.

217 Jiang Hong (蒋红), “苏共意识形态工作的深刻教训,” *RFM*, no. 15 (2016): 34–36.

218 Ji Zhengju (季正矩), “权贵阶层与苏共的腐败及垮台,” *RFM*, no. 2 (2002): 26–28; Zhao Yao, “苏联剧变,” 28–32; Guo Yanlin (郭彦林), “苏共垮台中特权阶层的‘自我蜕变’及其警示,” *RFM*, no. 11 (2016): 33–36.

219 Li Ruiqin (李瑞琴), “腐败对原苏共的毁灭性影响,” *RFM*, no. 11 (2009): 33–36; Li Yan, “勃列日涅夫,” 31–34.

220 Yao Yongming (姚永明), “汲取苏联教训—科学有效地推进反腐败斗争,” *RFM*, no. 24 (2016): 32–34.

221 An Qinian, “苏联剧变,” 10.

222 Li Yan (李燕), “男儿为何不抗争,” 34.

223 Li Qiaoming (李桥铭), “苏联军队‘非党化’的历史悲剧,” *RFM*, no. 13 (2013): 34–37.

long-term conspiracy against the Soviet bloc during the Cold War, ultimately leading to its collapse.²²⁴

The final reason why the Soviet Union collapsed was due to bad leaders. Conservatives tended to blame Gorbachev himself. Whereas it was democratization that brought down the regime, it was Gorbachev who brought democratization.²²⁵ The reformist view also held the view that Soviet leaders were accountable. However, it emphasized that

We can see a dramatic discursive shift after 2009. There were many more articles produced on the topic of the Soviet lessons after 2009 than between 1994 and 2002 and 2003 and 2008 (Table 1.1). Ideological erosion was identified by the post-2009 articles as the most important factor that caused the Soviet collapse. Blaming “hostile” Western forces and “unfaithful” Soviet leaders also became more prevalent after 2009 (Tables 1.2 and 1.3).

	1994–2002	2003–2008	2009–2018
Red Flag Manuscript Articles on the Soviet Lessons	16	3	32

Table 1.1 Total Count for Each Period

	Lack of Reform	Economic Crisis	Institutional Crisis	Ideological Erosion	Foreign Power	Party Building	Bad Leaders
1994–2008	9	4	9	9	2	6	4
2009–2018	4	2	6	27	10	16	15

Table 1.2 The Causes of Soviet Failure

	Lack of Reform	Economic Crisis	Institutional Crisis	Ideological Erosion	Foreign Power	Party Building	Bad Leaders
1994–2008	5	0	3	3	0	1	1
2009–2018	0	0	0	13	1	5	2

Table 1.3 The Principal Causes of Soviet Failures

Source: Red Flag Manuscript (Total articles n = 60; articles not dedicated to explaining failure n = 9)

“an individual’s influence in history should not be exaggerated.”²²⁶ In contrast, the conservative version of leader-centered criticism placed the personal “betrayal” (背叛) of Soviet leaders at the center.²²⁷ It was not only a betrayal of the regime, but also of Marxism, socialism, and the people’s interests.²²⁸

I counted the number of times each of these reasons appeared in the articles selected for analysis (see Table 1.2). Articles sometimes contained multiple reasons, other times just one. If the author(s) explicitly designated one out of many reasons as the root cause, or if the author(s) devoted an entire article to elaborating one important reason for the Soviet collapse, it is marked as a “principal” cause (see Table 1.3).

Episode 5: Toward the 18th Party Congress

For all the leftist assertiveness that had gained increasing momentum after the 17th Party Congress, it was met with resistance from the reformist camp. This section brings to light an event of extraordinary political significance that has remained unnoticed by China watchers: Jiang made a rallying call for pushing forward the Dengist reform right before the 18th Party Congress.

Chinese politics during Hu’s second term witnessed an unmistakable change in the political climate. Leftism was on the rise. Probably as a direct rejoinder to the reformist call for “mind emancipation,” the conservatives fired back with a fusillade of the “Six Whys”

224 Zhang Shuhua (张树华), “英国前首相撒切尔夫人谈瓦解苏联,” *RFM*, no. 11 (2010): 36–37; Zhang Shuhua, “俄罗斯科学院资深院士谈对苏联改革及赫鲁晓夫等人的政治评价,” *RFM*, no. 16 (2016): 31–33; Li Shenming (李慎明), “苏共的蜕化变质是苏联解体的根本原因,” *RFM*, no. 6 (2011): 8–11.

225 HRGLHC, “对苏共失权,” 20–22; Wu Enyuan (吴恩远), “俄罗斯新历史教师参考书关于苏联历史的新观点,” *RFM*, no. 18 (2008): 38.

226 An Qinian, “苏联剧变,” 10.

227 Zhang Shuhua, “俄罗斯科学院,” 33; Zhao Yao, “苏联剧变,” 30–32.

228 Li Shenming, “苏共的蜕化,” 8–11.

(六个为什么).²²⁹ It was a batch of six articles originally published as Qiu Shi articles in *Qiushi*. Each one raised a rhetorical “why” question to justify the commitment to socialism under the party leadership.²³⁰ Conservatives also launched the “Four Major Demarcations” (“四个重大界限”). This was formally put forward in the 4th Plenum of the 17th Central Committee resolution and was further elaborated elsewhere.²³¹

Leftist assertiveness arguably culminated with Bo Xilai's Chongqing Model, which featured a revival of Mao-style mass political mobilization. The core of Bo's political program, however, was “common prosperity” (共同富裕), which was a direct challenge to the Dengist reform that “let some people get rich first.” Ironically, the leftist discourse heavily cited the “late” Deng Xiaoping's remarks on the inequality problem. Leftist party theoreticians openly discussed common prosperity around 2008, talking about dividing the “cake” fairly (把“蛋糕”分好) as opposed to making the “cake” bigger (把“蛋糕”做大).²³² This cake metaphor foreshadowed the high-profile open dispute in 2011 between Bo and Wang Yang, arguably a left-right proxy war fought at the local level. To be sure, common prosperity appeared in many top-level party documents as rhetorical window dressing — it had always been framed as an ultimate goal that would only be realized when China finally reached the final stage of socialist development — communism — in the unforeseeable future. But now it was put on the agenda as a substantive project and a “very urgent” task to be worked on.²³³

The most unambiguous sign of reformist resistance was Jiang's reappearance in public after his retirement. A few months before the 18th Party Congress, on July 9, 2012, Jiang organized a symposium in the name of commemorating the 20th anniversary

of the establishment of the “socialist market economy” in China. The event and related talks were documented in a book published in December 2012 by an authoritative party-affiliated press.²³⁴ The book attributed the origin of the market economy in China to a series of seminars that Jiang personally organized and chaired between October and December 1991. As the book claimed, it was these seminars that “contributed to the formation of the preferred formulation (倾向性提法) ‘socialist market economy’ and thus laid the theoretical foundation for the 14th Party Congress.” This highlighted Jiang as being the political symbol of reform. This narrative legerdemain naturally raises the question of whether Jiang could still have taken the reformist path without Deng's forceful intervention in the early 1990s when Deng demonstrated his power and crushed the conservative resistance to reform.²³⁵ But what really mattered here was the immediate political message: that Jiang represented reform.

Jiang invited six participants who had attended the seminars in 1991. As the editors of the book noted, “[The participants] agreed in unanimity that commemorating this particular part of history helps to consolidate [the confidence] in socialist market economy as the direction for reform.”²³⁶ According

But what really mattered here was the immediate political message: that Jiang represented reform.

229 Later, the Central Propaganda Department compiled them up in a propaganda booklet. See TBPDCPP (中共中央宣传部理论局), ed., *Six “Whys”: Answers to Some Important Questions* 六个“为什么”——对几个重大问题的回答 (Beijing: Xuexi Chubanshe, 2009).

230 Note that while the first five “whys” targeted the reformist political agenda, the last “why” was an act of hedging against the leftist radicalism championed by many grassroots neo-Maoists who wanted another Maoist Cultural Revolution.

231 The Central Propaganda Department again published a booklet to promote this leftist formulation, indicating its political significance. See TBPDCPP, ed., *Reader for Studying How to Draw the ‘Four Major Demarcations’* 划清“四个重大界限”学习读本 (Beijing: Xuexi Chubanshe, 2010).

232 Wang Weiguang (王伟光) and Zhao Jianying (赵剑英), “科学发展观为什么、是什么、怎么办,” in *Report on the Frontier Research of Marxism in China: 2008* 中国马克思主义研究前沿2008卷, ed. Zhao Jianying, Wu Bo, and Zheng Xiangfu (Beijing: Zhongguo Shehui Kexue Chubanshe, 2009), 27; Ke Tizu (柯提祖), “确立民生优先发展方针 调整国民收入分配格局——从“中等收入陷阱”谈起,” *RFM*, no. 18 (2011): 5. To be sure, books on redistribution and poverty reduction that have “common property” in their titles have existed before the term became politicized during Hu's second term.

233 Wang Weiguang (王伟光), “走共同富裕之路是发展中国特色社会主义的战略选择,” *RFM*, no. 1 (2012): 6. It was worth noting that Bo's downfall in early 2012 didn't restrain the leftists from continuing the talk of common prosperity, suggesting that it was something beyond Bo's individual strategy. See Huang Shudong (黄树东), “公平与中国的命运,” *RFM*, no. 24 (2012): 4–7. It seems more likely that rather than the leftist force hitchhiking on Bo's campaign, it was Bo who chose to ride the coat-tails of the former.

234 Chen Jun (陈君) and Hong Nan (洪南) ed., *Jiang Zemin and the Origin of Socialist Market Economy System: A Review of Socialist Market Economy in the Past Two Decades* 江泽民与社会主义市场经济体制的提出——社会主义市场经济20年回顾 (Beijing: Zhongyang Wenxian Chubanshe, 2012).

235 Strictly speaking, the official document that formally legitimized market economy in China was only issued in 1993 at the 3rd Plenum of the 14th Party Congress. To trace further back, one may arguably view the year 1992 as the beginning, when Deng made his Southern Tour and set the reformist tone for China's development, which shortly afterwards received official endorsement at the 14th Party Congress.

236 Chen and Hong, *Jiang Zemin and the Origin*, 7.



to Jiang, “[We shall] never walk the old path” (绝不能走老路).²³⁷ His full message then was condensed into four four-character phrases: “Emancipate the mind, Open the mind to all opinions, Review the past for new understandings, Plan for the future” (解放思想, 集思广益, 温故知新, 谋划未来).²³⁸ Indeed, this was a preview of the reformist agenda that would be revealed at the upcoming 18th Party Congress.

This informal meeting convened on the eve of the 18th Party Congress and the upcoming leadership transition was not simply dedicated to commemorating the past but was intended to influence current politics. As one participant noted, “some of the policy targets put forward at [the 3rd Plenum of the 14th Party Central Committee] still have not been fulfilled, of which the state-owned enterprise reform is the outstanding one, especially the goal of establishing a modern enterprise system. Therefore, this document is still relevant today.”²³⁹ Nostalgia for the past usually indicates that things are not good enough at the present, or that some historical lessons learned have to be underscored once again so that past errors will not be repeated.

Episode 6: The Chinese Dream

The Chinese Dream as a party line made its official debut shortly after Xi assumed the top office. According to conventional wisdom, the Chinese Dream was a developmental blueprint that was nationalistic at its core, signifying Chinese exceptionalism and the Chinese Communist Party’s political legitimacy based on its past achievements. I argue instead that the Chinese Dream was initially launched as a reformist project that was intended to replace leftist conservatism with nationalism. The goal was to provide a non-ideological and de-politicized source of motivation for concentrating efforts on development. In response, the conservatives resisted by stressing that the party’s unquestionable political legitimacy based on historical success and the ideological supremacy of Marxism were defining elements of the Chinese Dream. The “correct” understanding of the Chinese Dream was a major ideological battlefield of the left-right struggle during Xi’s early years.

The core logic of the reformist view of the Chinese

Dream is threefold. First, China’s “hundred years of national humiliation” taught that development should always be a priority (as opposed to socialist egalitarianism). Second, the party was just a means to an end — the well-being of the Chinese nation. Third, the interests and rights of each individual Chinese person matter, as opposed to the national interest in a collective sense.

Implicit signaling of the reformist agenda can be found in Xi’s own speeches about the Chinese Dream during his early years, which were later included in the first volume of Xi’s *The Governance of China*.²⁴⁰ The Chinese Dream, featuring a spirit of patriotic aspiration for development, was meant to mobilize the whole country for further reform. The core logic was that “backwardness left us vulnerable to attack, whereas only development makes us strong” (落后就要挨打, 发展才能自强).²⁴¹ The Chinese spirit (中国精神) consisted of a patriotism that “binds the Chinese nation together” and the zeitgeist of “reform and innovation.”²⁴² The agenda also emphasized that the Chinese nation is more important than the party.

Surprisingly, in Xi’s early speeches about the Chinese Dream, instead of highlighting the party’s heroism with phrases like “without the Chinese Communist Party there would be no such thing as a New China,” Xi maintained an agnostic silence on the party’s historical contributions. Instead, the party was depicted as merely an incumbent trustee that was intended to “rally all the sons and daughters of the Chinese nation around us in a common effort” toward the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, which was a goal of the Chinese people.²⁴³

Moreover, “Socialism with Chinese Characteristics” as the “correct path” was de-politicized in the sense that the concept was mentioned without referring to Marxism or anti-capitalism. Rather, it was simply the most recent episode of the Chinese nation’s 5000-plus year history and continuous progress.²⁴⁴ In addition, every individual’s “ambition,” “pursuit,” and “dream” matter.²⁴⁵ Xi’s statement that “one can do well only when one’s country and nation do well” was not so much about putting collectivism first as it was about stressing the importance of solidarity-based determination. As Xi further noted, “Only

237 Chen and Hong, *Jiang Zemin and the Origin*, 7.

238 Chen and Hong, *Jiang Zemin and the Origin*, frontispiece.

239 Chen and Hong, *Jiang Zemin and the Origin*, 107.

240 Xi Jinping, *The Governance of China*, vol. 1, 35-64.

241 Xi Jinping, “实现中华民族伟大复兴是中国民族近代以来最伟大的梦想,” in *The Governance of China*, vol. 1 (Beijing: Waiwen Chubanshe, 2014), 36.

242 Xi Jinping, “在第十二届全国人民代表大会第一次会议上的讲话,” in *The Governance of China*, vol. 1, 40.

243 Xi Jinping, “实现中华民族,” 36.

244 Xi Jinping, “在第十二届全国,” 39.

245 Xi Jinping, “实现中华民族,” 36.

if everyone strives for a better tomorrow can our efforts be aggregated into a powerful force to realize the Chinese Dream."²⁴⁶ Symbolically significant was the resurfacing of advocacy for social de-classification and political inclusion associated with Jiang's Three Represents. "All the people working in the non-public sector of the economy and from new social strata" should contribute to the rejuvenation cause.²⁴⁷ "Work, knowledge, talent and creation" must be respected (that is, the "Four Respects").²⁴⁸

More explicit elaborations on the meaning of the Chinese Dream usually are to be found outside of top-level official documents and leaders' speeches. This is often the case when a power struggle is so intense that the wording of an authoritative political text must be ambiguous and vague enough to be acceptable to all parties. At such times, party theoreticians are usually tasked with not only echoing the official discourse, but, more importantly, saying what has been left unsaid.²⁴⁹

The term "Chinese Dream" appeared in the title of a 2011 book authored by Zhou Tianyong (周天勇), a Central Party School professor.²⁵⁰ Zhou's book is arguably the first that elaborates the Chinese Dream from a perspective of domestic governance.²⁵¹ Li Junru (李君如), a leading reformist party theoretician, penned the book's preface, describing the Chinese Dream as an endeavor to achieve modernization "with civilized ideas, by civilized means, and in a civilized manner."²⁵² Zhou's definition of the Chinese Dream was essentially a reformist proposal that Chi-

na's socioeconomic development should be based on individualism. It should be de-politicized and not ideological, free from the influence of a class-struggle mindset. According to Zhou, the Chinese Dream would come true when "every individual Chinese person" can enjoy a happy life in a China where freedom, democracy, equality, justice, equity, and order are vibrantly present.²⁵³

The reformist voices generally stressed the necessity of continuing to reform. Driven by the tribulation-based aspiration for national rejuvenation,²⁵⁴ China had achieved unprecedented growth mainly because all of the Mao-era restrictions by which the party ruled the country had been relaxed and society's potential for development has been released (放开, 搞活). Consequently, sufficient social space and economic opportunities opened up for individuals.²⁵⁵ Socialism with Chinese Characteristics was equated with reform and opening up,²⁵⁶ of which "emancipating and developing productive capacity" was the core task.²⁵⁷ Now political reform was equally urgent: The basic principle of checks and balances (权力制衡) should be "combined with China's reality," or tailored to fit into the Chinese system to tackle the problem of unrestrained power.²⁵⁸ China's rejuvenation required hard work rather than "useless dispute[s] over whether the country should follow socialism or capitalism."²⁵⁹

In contrast, according to the leftist framing of the Chinese Dream, the purpose of history was ultimately to legitimize the party. First and foremost, the history

246 Xi Jinping, "在实现中国梦的生动实践中放飞青春梦想," in *The Governance of China*, vol. 1, 49.

247 Xi Jinping, "在第十二届全国," 42.

248 Xi Jinping, "实干才能梦想成真," in *The Governance of China*, vol. 1, 46.

249 Much of the textual evidence cited below comes from two party propaganda anthologies on the Chinese Dream, both published by the Central Propaganda Department. The 2013 booklet was a compilation of commentaries originally published in major party newspapers. See TBPDCPP (中共中央宣传部理论局), ed., *The Chinese Dream: Selected Articles on Interpreting the "Chinese Dream" 中国梦: 阐释"中国梦"文章选编* (Beijing: Xuexi Chubanshe, 2013). Their tone was largely reformist. The 2014 anthology was a collection of journal articles penned by party theoreticians, in which leftist voices became more visible. See TBPDCPP, ed., *In-depth Interpretation of the Chinese Dream 深度解读中国梦* (Beijing: Xuexi Chubanshe, 2014). Articles are cited by referring to their original source.

250 Zhou Tianyong (周天勇), *The Chinese Dream and the Chinese Path 中国梦与中国道路* (Beijing: Shehui Kexue Wenxian Chubanshe, 2011).

251 An earlier book entitled "The Chinese Dream" authored by a hawkish Chinese military official, which attracted much attention from the West at the time, is mainly about foreign policy and U.S.-Chinese competition in particular. Li Junru also briefly mentioned this shifting of focus in Chinese literature related to the Chinese Dream concept. See Liu Mingfu (刘明福), *The Chinese Dream: Great Power Logic and Strategic Positioning in the Post-U.S. Era 中国梦: 后美国时代的大国思维与战略定位* (Beijing: Zhongguo Youyi Chubanshe Gongsi 中国友谊出版公司, 2009). Another book also published in 2011 approached the Chinese Dream from a perspective of political propaganda. See Li Xiguang (李希光), *Soft Power and the Chinese Dream 软实力与中国梦* (Beijing: Falü Chubanshe 法律出版社, 2011).

252 Zhou Tianyong, *The Chinese Dream*, preface.

253 Zhou Tianyong, *The Chinese Dream*, 1.

254 People's Daily Commentator (人民日报评论员), "道路决定命运, 发展才能自强: 复兴之路启示之二," *People's Daily*, Dec. 2, 2012; Qiu Shi (秋石), "中国梦汇聚磅礴正能量," *Qiushi*, no. 7 (2013): 3.

255 Qiu Shi (秋石), "用梦想、机会和奋斗创造美好," *Qiushi*, no. 8 (2013): 11.

256 Li Junru (李君如), "中国梦的意义, 内涵及辩证逻辑," *Theoretical Studies of Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping 毛泽东邓小平理论研究*, no. 7 (2013): 14-17, 91.

257 Central Party School Research Center for the Theoretical System of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics (中共中央党校中国特色社会主义理论体系研究中心), "实现中国梦必须走中国特色社会主义道路," *People's Daily*, Oct. 31, 2013.

258 National Defense University Research Center for the Theoretical System of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics (国防大学中国特色社会主义理论体系研究中心), "实现中国梦的顶层设计和重大战略部署: 深刻领会党的十八届三中全会的重大意义," *Guangming Daily*, Nov. 24, 2013.

259 People's Daily Commentator (人民日报评论员), "空谈误国, 实干兴邦: 复兴之路启示之四," *People's Daily*, Dec. 4, 2012.

Whereas the reformers emphasized pragmatism against empty talk, the leftists emphasized the willpower of the revolutionary spirit in making the dream come true.

of modern China was essentially about how the party had saved the Chinese nation, under the guidance of Marxism. That the party played a central role and made huge contributions was the overarching framework for understanding China's past. There was no hope until the Chinese Communist Party was established.²⁶⁰ Its creation pointed China in the "correct direction."²⁶¹ In short, the key to realizing the Chinese Dream is the party.²⁶² A rhetorical trick frequently used was to lionize the inevitability of the party's success compared to other political forces that had failed to achieve what the party finally accomplished.²⁶³ Relatedly, a heroic party thus has a duty to lead the nation. The Chinese nation would not automatically emerge as a unified political entity and gain a sense of mission until a conscious effort is made. The Chinese Communist Party as a "leading party" (领导党) should continue to actively fulfill this duty.²⁶⁴

Unsurprisingly, ideological faith was foregrounded in this conservative narrative of legitimation, not least because the party's political history had been deeply intertwined with its ideology — Marxism, communism, and socialism. Defending the party's

ideological correctness is tantamount to legitimizing the party's right to rule. Socialism with Chinese Characteristics highlighted the Marxist origin of the Dengist reform, which was essentially anti-capitalist. Accordingly, the Chinese Dream closely concerned "the consolidation of the leading position of Marxism in the field of ideology."²⁶⁵ The "Chinese path" was fundamentally in opposition to any "superstitious belief in privatization and liberalization."²⁶⁶ Whereas the reformers emphasized pragmatism against empty talk,

the leftists emphasized the willpower of the revolutionary spirit in making the dream come true. For instance, some stylized terms and concepts that the leftists often referred to include "the revolutionary ideals rising above all else" (革命理想高于天),²⁶⁷ the party's "political true nature and fine work style,"²⁶⁸ and a Mass Line style party-people connection.²⁶⁹

In short, there is a strong division between reformers and conservatives on what is the "correct" way to understand the Chinese Dream. This stark difference is best illustrated by listening to the most straightforward voices from both the left and right. For instance, in a *Xinhua* article, the reformist view showed us a Chinese Dream with a liberal heart.²⁷⁰ It was not about restoring the "Empire of Heaven." It was something that the party had inherited and would pass down. The Chinese Dream for reformists embraced universal values and would enrich them. In contrast, conservative view as expressed through a military-affiliated party mouthpiece presented a Chinese Dream of ideological antagonism — a class struggle that creates an us-versus-them mentality.²⁷¹ It was "a faith in the truth of scientific socialism, and the fact that socialism is better than capitalism." Socialism with Chinese Characteristics is "socialism

260 Song Weiqiang (宋维强), "实现民族复兴的'中国梦': 中国共产党的历史使命与责任担当," *Guangming Daily*, Feb. 4, 2013.

261 Qiu Shi (秋石), "奋勇担当起振兴中华的历史使命: 学习习近平总书记参观《复兴之路》展览时的重要讲话," *Qiushi*, no. 24 (2012).

262 Heilongjiang Research Center for the Theoretical System of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics (黑龙江中国特色社会主义理论体系研究中心), "中国梦: 中国特色社会主义的新境界," *RFM*, no.1 (2014): 24–26.

263 Li Jie (李捷), "百年追梦与民族自强," *Guangming Daily*, Jan. 4, 2013.

264 It was a term newly coined here as a leftist counterpart to "governing party" (执政党), a concept the reformers had been advocating as a substitute for the party's longstanding identity of "revolutionary party" (革命党). See Cao Jinqing (曹锦清) and Ma Ya (玛雅), "百年复兴: 关于中国共产党的'天命的对话'," *RFM*, no. 13 (2013): 5.

265 Tianjin Research Center for the Theoretical System of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics (天津市中国特色社会主义理论体系研究中心), "在认同中凝聚共识和力量," *RFM*, no. 6 (2014): 18–19.

266 Shanghai Research Center for the Theoretical System of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics (上海中国特色社会主义理论体系研究中心), "危机反思、道路自信与中国梦," *People's Daily*, Jan. 14, 2014.

267 Qiu Shi (秋石), "中国梦为中国特色社会主义注入新能量," *Qiushi*, no. 8 (2013): 16.

268 Li Jie, "百年追梦."

269 Xiao Mingjiang (肖明江), "人民性: 中国梦战略思想的本质属性," *Guangming Daily*, Oct. 30, 2013; Fujian Research Center for the Theoretical System of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics (福建省中国特色社会主义理论体系研究中心), "保持党群血肉联系是实现中国梦的重要保证," *People's Daily*, Feb. 20, 2014.

270 Kong Genhong (孔根红), "中国梦的对外解读," *Xinhua*, June 19, 2013, <http://www.scio.gov.cn/zhzc/10/Document/1331449/1331449.htm>.

271 Sun Linping (孙临平), "中国梦的自信在哪里," *PLA Daily*, May 22, 2013, <http://theory.people.com.cn/n/2013/0522/c40531-21571944.html>.

rather than other isms” — a message that Xi himself highlighted in his formal speeches and one that leftist intellectuals often repeated.

As the conservative forces gradually gained the upper hand in Chinese politics toward the end of Xi's first term, the Chinese Dream was being marginalized accordingly. A quick look at the contents of Xi's three-volume *The Governance of China* illustrates this trend. In the first volume (November 2012–June 2014), an entire section was dedicated to the Chinese Dream. In the second volume (August 2014–September 2017), the Chinese Dream was subsumed under the topic of socialism. In the third volume (October 2017–January 2020), the Chinese Dream disappeared altogether.

Traces of this ongoing political reorientation toward conservatism can be detected by looking at how Li Junrun, a leading reformist party theoretician, responded to the situation at the time. In early 2014, Li published a book on the Chinese Dream.²⁷² It not only promoted the reformist understanding of the Chinese Dream, but more importantly, it contained principled refutations of the major conservative political agenda. First, Li distinguished the Chinese Dream from the China Model, warning against the anti-reform tendencies of the latter.²⁷³ The China Model had been a popular idea promoted by many leftists that China's developmental mode was not inferior to Western models — and was perhaps even superior — considering that China had achieved decades of economic prosperity and political stability under the one-party system. According to Li, the China Model was dangerous because it “tends to lure people into self-complacency and being recklessly optimistic” and, more importantly, it carries the risk of “derailing reform” in the name of “reforming” reform, or leading Dengist reform back onto a conservative track.²⁷⁴

Next, Li reiterated the three core elements of the reformist Chinese Dream. First, the Chinese Dream,

based on China's historical victimization, was meant to “rally and mobilize the people by a common aspiration,”²⁷⁵ an aspiration for further reform and modernization. Second, the Chinese Communist Party was but a servant to the Chinese nation. The Chinese Dream “was proposed by the Chinese communists.” However, it was not created to serve the party's self-interests. Rather, it is about “the Party assuming its responsibility for the country, the nation and the people.”²⁷⁶ Third, commenting on Xi's claim that “The Chinese dream, after all, is the dream of the people,”²⁷⁷ Li underscored that “the ‘people’ mentioned here, refer to not only the ‘people’ as a collective body, but also the ‘people’ in their individual form.” Echoing Zhou and referring to Xi's “May Fourth” speech in 2013, Li pointed out that it was “not only a dream about national prosperity, but also a dream that connects all the individual dreams about residence, career, social welfare and good living environment.”²⁷⁸

Finally, the most politically significant message in Li's book was his rebuttal to the “two thirty-years” (两个三十年) thesis that Xi would later subscribe to.²⁷⁹ This concept was crafted by conservative theoreticians to subvert the Dengist foundation of Chinese reform and instead spread the idea that Mao was, in fact, the origin of reform in China. Li made it clear that Socialism with Chinese Characteristics was Deng's creation — it had nothing to do with Mao.²⁸⁰

A Qiu Shi article in 2017 further confirmed the changing winds: The Chinese Dream was but a means to an end — socialism. The Chinese Dream was “a goal specific to the current stage (阶段性目标).” That is, “the process of realizing the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation is generally identical to the process of China moving beyond the primary stage of socialism.”²⁸¹

With this nuanced understanding of the Chinese Dream, we can better make sense of Xi's strong language in his speech marking the 75th anniversary of

272 Li Junru (李君如), *The Chinese Path and the Chinese Dream* 中国道路与中国梦 (Beijing: Waiwen Chubanshe, 2014).

273 Both the Chinese Dream and the China Model emphasized “Socialism with Chinese Characteristics” and the “Chinese path.” This inherent discursive amphibiousness made it possible for a stealthy conceptual displacement. The China Model was a purely conservative project. For example, see Zhang Weiwei (张维为), ed., *The Chinese Path and the Chinese Dream from An International Perspective* 国际视野下的中国道路和中国梦 (Beijing: Xuexi Chubanshe, 2015).

274 Li Junru, *The Chinese Path*, preface.

275 Li Junru, *The Chinese Path*, 11.

276 Li Junru, *The Chinese Path*, 16.

277 Xi Jinping, “在第十二届全国,” 40.

278 Li Junru, *The Chinese Path*, 17.

279 Joseph Fewsmith, “Mao's Shadow,” *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 43 (2014), <https://www.hoover.org/research/maos-shadow>.

280 Li Junru, *The Chinese Path*, 73–74.

281 Qiu Shi (秋石), “中国梦是不忘初心继续前进的一面时代旗帜,” *Qishi*, no. 2 (2017), http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/qs/2017-01/13/c_1120305347.htm.



World War II.²⁸² There was an unmistakable shift in the discourse with regard to the implication of China's past for the current political agenda. In previous speeches commemorating World War II,²⁸³ Chinese leaders had used the phrase "backwardness leaves us vulnerable to attack." However, in Xi's speech, this symbolic phrase was missing. According to Xi, the lesson to be learned from China's past was not that China's bright future required a grievance-based motivation for development, but that China's quest for national rejuvenation should be powered by a pride-based ambition. As Xi stated, "[W]e must carry forward the great spirit of anti-invasion resistance" (伟大抗战精神). To realize the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, "[we] must uphold the Chinese Communist Party's leadership" and "persist with a spirit of struggle" (斗争精神).

When the Chinese Dream was first proposed shortly after Xi took power, it was far from the monolithic concept that people today commonly associate with Xi's nationalistic ambition of making China great again. Rather, the competing interpretations of the Chinese Dream reveal the trajectory of the left-right power struggle that was carefully hidden behind a public facade of elite unity. Now, we can see the uncertainty that permeated China's political atmosphere during Xi's early years and see the paths not taken.

The Turning Point During Xi's Early Years

The book series of selected articles that the *Red Flag Manuscript* published allows us to get a broad overview of the journal's thematic landscape during the 2009–2017 period, and, in doing so, helps to shed more light on the shift that took place during Xi's early years in power. I identified the topic or section names that the *Red Flag Manuscript* editors used in the table of contents to categorize the selected articles from the series. I listed these topical names in the order of how many articles appeared under each heading. There are two broad types of topical names. The first type is names that refer to specific topics. For example, "Democracy" or "International Financial Crisis." The second type is names of general categories, such as "Politics," "Economy," or "Culture." An analytical presumption here is that specific

names signify a *higher* level of importance than the general ones. The editors singled out certain topics because of their importance at the time. Otherwise, they could have grouped them under the general categories, which often overall with the specific topics. Relatedly, when two categories contained the same number of articles, I give precedence to the one with a specific name and list it higher.²⁸⁴

This analysis of the *Red Flag Manuscript's* thematic landscape offers some clues to the watershed moment that took place around 2015, when the left-right contestation that had been going on throughout Hu's decade in power was finally coming to an end with the conservatives emerging as the winning camp. First, conservative attention to the ideological debate on "democracy/political reform," which had been a constant focal point of left-right discursive battles since Hu assumed office, began to drop in 2015. So did "international" issues, which are often used as a rhetorical tool for criticizing domestic opponents. Second, "party building" emerged as a new priority on the leftist discursive agenda in 2016, implying that the power struggle was over and a settlement had been reached: Now that the left's political enemies had been subdued, it was the time for the victor to assert authority as the new ruler by putting the whole party through a new round of discipline and reorganization.

Measuring Political Tension in Chinese High Politics

A quick look at China's political trajectory further corroborates the revisionist narratives presented above. A bird's-eye view that tracks the ups and downs of political tension since Hu is made possible by an original analysis of all the Central Discipline and Inspection Commission conference/plenum reports released in the post-Mao era.²⁸⁵ I mapped out the textual position of the term "political discipline" (政治纪律) in these official texts and coded the types of issues that the term refers to in each case, which ranges from the most politically antagonistic to the least. The rhetorical use of "political discipline" serves as a key proxy for measuring the varying intensity of political contention within the party's top leadership. Specifically, higher textu-

282 Xi Jinping, "在纪念中国人民抗日战争暨世界反法西斯战争胜利75周年座谈会上的讲话," *Xinhua*, Sept. 3, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/leaders/2020-09/03/c_1126449917.htm. Xi's short speech at the 70th Anniversary of the Victory of the World War Against Fascism was a general anti-war advocacy. See Xi Jinping, "在纪念中国人民抗日战争暨世界反法西斯战争胜利70周年大会上的讲话," *People's Daily*, Sept. 4, 2015, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n/2015/0904/c64094-27544268.html>.

283 I.e. Hu Jintao at the 60th anniversary and Li Changchun at the 65th anniversary. See Hu Jintao, "在纪念中国人民抗日战争暨世界反法西斯战争胜利60周年大会上的讲话," *Xinhua*, Sept. 4, 2005, http://www.gov.cn/ldhd/2005-09/04/content_28944.htm; Li Changchun, "在纪念中国人民抗日战争胜利65周年座谈会上的讲话," *People's Daily*, Sept. 4, 2010, http://www.npc.gov.cn/zgrdw/npc/zt/qt/jnkrzz65zn/2010-09/04/content_1594713.htm.

284 A table that visualizes the results of the analysis here can be found in the online appendix <https://sites.google.com/view/le2023tnsr64>.

285 These reports are available at the Central Discipline and Inspection Commission's official website (<https://www.ccdi.gov.cn/xgkn/hyzt/>) and an official anthology. See Central Discipline and Inspection Commission Administration Office (中央纪委办公厅) and Central Discipline and Inspection Commission Research Bureau (中央纪委研究室), ed., *Compilation of All CDIC Plenum Work Reports since the 14th Party Congress* 党的十四大以来中共中央纪律检查委员会历次全会工作报告汇编 (Beijing: Fangzheng Chubanshe 方正出版社, 2017).

al positions and more antagonistic issues indicate higher political intensity. An analysis of all of the “political discipline” cases in the Central Discipline and Inspection Commission’s political texts systematically released over the past three decades thus reveals how Chinese politics has evolved since Hu succeeded Jiang.²⁸⁶

The measurement of each case of “political discipline” proceeded in three steps. First, I determined where the term is positioned in the Central Discipline and Inspection Commission documents. Various positions fall into four categories,²⁸⁷ ranked in descending order as follows according to the level of political significance: in the very beginning of the report, i.e., in the introduction of the entire text, or in the section title (Category 1); in the subsection title, i.e., a bullet-point sentence (Category 2); in the introduction or conclusion of a section (Category 3); or in the body of a subsection (Category 4).

Second, I did another round of ranking for cases belonging to Categories 2 and 4. I determined how the subsections that contain the key term “political discipline” rank compared to other subsections. When a Central Discipline and Inspection Commission report dedicates a section to discussing multiple tasks or issues grouped under one theme, the layout of the subsections usually takes a well-structured form in which each task or issue is addressed or elaborated one by one in one subsection. Sometimes these subsections are numbered or marked with bullet points. The order in which these subsections are listed is taken here to be a proxy for the political significance attached to them. The one that is discussed first carries the most political significance, and so on.

Third, I identified three types of issues that “political discipline” refers to, ranging from the most politically significant to the least. The most serious issue (Type 1) has to do with antagonistic behavior, such as political opposition to the party’s leaders or leadership, or ideological challenges to major party lines and policies.²⁸⁸ The next type (Type 2) is less confrontational than the first type. It points to the problem of bureaucratic non-compliance rather than direct defiance. Specifically, it refers to party sub-

ordinates’ nonconformity with mandates from the party center or leadership, not least in regard to policy implementation.²⁸⁹ The least political type of issue (Type 3) mainly concerns corruption problems, broadly defined, among the party cadre. Whereas Type 2 is about central authority and control over subordinates, Type 3 emphasizes personnel-level supervision and management. The type of each case is qualitatively determined through a close reading of the context in which the term “political discipline” appears.

The several months surrounding the 17th Party Congress, convened in late 2007, saw further intensification in political tension that had been simmering at a medium-high level.

The key findings from this analysis are summarized as follows:

Between late 2002 and early 2008, political tension was clearly on the rise. The two years following Hu’s succession to Jiang were relatively quiet, probably because Jiang still held the position of China’s top military commander, even though he was no longer the party’s general secretary. The 4th Plenum of the 16th Central Committee held in fall 2004 marked a turning point after which political tension considerably increased. Unsurprisingly, this was when Jiang finally let go of his control over the military and went into retirement in a more real sense. The several months surrounding the 17th Party Congress, convened in late 2007, saw further intensification in political tension that had been simmering at a medium-high level.

Political tension jumped to a very high level in early 2009 and remained there until late 2014, when the party held its 4th Plenum of the 18th Central Committee. This time of extremely high political tension overshadowed almost all of Hu’s second term (2009–2012) and lasted into Xi’s early years. If we follow this picture

286 A corresponding figure depicting these results is available online at <https://sites.google.com/view/le2023tnsr64>.

287 See the online appendix at <https://sites.google.com/view/le2023tnsr64>.

288 Some recurring indicators include “干扰改革开放的‘左’的错误,” “否定社会主义制度, 主张资本主义制度的资产阶级自由化,” “公开发表反对党的基本路线,” “编造传播政治谣言及丑化党和国家形象言论,” “参与各种非法组织和非法活动,” “敌对势力对我国实施西化, 分化的战略图谋,” “错误言论和倾向,” “否定党的领导和社会主义制度的言论,” “搞团团伙伙, 拉帮结派,” “党内形成利益集团攫取政治权力, 改变党的性质,” and “山头主义和宗派主义危害党的团结, 破坏党的集中统一.” In addition, certain unique events were mentioned as serious challenge to the party’s authority and regime security, such as the Tiananmen protest of 1989, the Falun Gong elimination campaign of 1999, and separatism associated with Lee Teng-hui and the Dalai Lama.

289 Some recurring indicators include “维护党中央的权威,” “保证党的路线方针政策的切实贯彻执行,” “与中央保持一致,” “保证政令畅通,” and “维护党的集中统一.”



to periodize Chinese politics, Xi's formal accession to power in late 2012 did not mark the beginning of his era. It does not appear to have been a significant moment in Chinese politics. There was fierce political infighting before he took power and it simply continued regardless of Xi emerging as the new boss.

Xi's "New Era" eventually arrived sometime around early 2015, when political tension dropped sharply, indicating that the intraparty political struggle was close to an end, probably because one political coalition (i.e., the leftists) had just dealt a fatal blow to its rivals (i.e., the reformers). Xi officially obtained his "core leader" status in 2016.

However, political tension in the post-2015 period did not fall back to pre-2009 levels. It was conspicuously higher than in late 2007. One possible reason is that, although the reformers were defeated, they had not totally lost their strength. This meant that the leftists had to keep fighting a bit longer before they could be completely rid of the reformist influence. In fact, there was an uptick in political tension around the 19th Party Congress held in late 2017, suggesting that the reformers tried to fight back on that important occasion. But the reformist effort, if there was any, was spent in vain. Xi further consolidated his power. Political tension remained at a medium-high level throughout 2018 and 2019, suggesting that some internal crackdown was going on. The tension finally went back to a low level when the world as a whole became overwhelmed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Summary and Discussion

The evidence presented above reveals that Chinese high politics since Hu revolved around a left-right political contestation between the conservative and reformist camps. This "two-line-struggle" perspective brings a refreshed understanding of China's recent political landscape and trajectory, and more importantly, provides a better explanation for the origin of Xi's strongman rule. Behind Xi's personalization of power, there was indispensable collective political support: some probably came from the reformist camp but lasted for only a short time during his early years in power, while he definitely had support from the conservatives with whom he decided to side for the rest of his reign. This new hypothesis helps answer the question of where Xi found sufficient power to wipe out his rivals. The two-line-struggle story also helps solve the flaw in the collective-support explanation: How is it possible that Xi was given

power by the party's collective leadership to push forward reform, when, in reality, he shifted China onto a Maoist track after a brief flirtation with reformism in his early days?

Deng pushed for reform in 1992, although he was not able or willing to uproot the conservative forces within the Chinese Communist Party. While the party's 16th Party Congress held in 2002 officially put forward a blueprint with significant progressive potentials — Jiang's Three Represents — the year also marked the beginning of a decade-long leftist, anti-reform push led by Hu. During Hu's first term (2002–2007), the reformers still dominated the political field in general and political discourses in particular, but the leftists were unmistakably on the rise. During Hu's second term, leftism's rise culminated with Bo's revival of Maoism in Chongqing. Unsurprisingly, this conservative momentum met strong resistance from the reformist camp. This left-right battle lasted into the early years of the Xi era (2012–2015). The turning point came around 2015, as is shown in my analysis above of the thematic landscape of the *Red Flag Manuscript*. The "New Era" (2016 – ?) officially began with Xi crowned as the "core" leader of the party. The shutdown of the reformist flagship journal *Yan Huang Chun Qiu* in 2016 was a public sign that announced the end of China's reform era.

Xi's initial political straddling and other mixed signals reflected the ongoing two-line struggle that remained unsettled during his early years. One well-known example is Xi's 2013 visit to Shenzhen, a place carrying strong political symbolism of the Dengist reform. And yet, while there, he called for strengthening socialist piety and political loyalty. The reformers seemed to still have the political upper hand in Xi's early days. But intensified repression on the ground starkly contrasted with the progressive agenda laid down on paper at the 18th Party Congress and following party plenums. The conservative force was strong at the time, and the tide turned against the reformists in 2015.²⁹⁰

It is hard to tell whether Xi simply picked the winning side or played a crucial role in assisting the leftist camp, presumably motivated by his own ideological beliefs. However, existing evidence seems to point to the latter explanation. Also unknown is how the conservatives dealt the reformers a fatal blow. Limited evidence suggests that there might have been a one-time political mobilization among the so-called children of China's first-generation revolutionary. This group sees China as their own personal asset bequeathed to them by their revolutionary fathers

290 Chris Buckley, "Vows of Change in China Belie Private Warning," *New York Times*, Feb. 14, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/15/world/asia/vowing-reform-chinas-leader-xi-jinping-airs-other-message-in-private.html?hpw>. Xi's conservative statement that was not published immediately at the time later appeared in a Qiu Shi article. See Qiu Shi (秋石), "革命理想高于天——学习习近平总书记关于坚定理想信念的重要论述," *Qiushi*, no. 21 (2013): 7–9.

or grandfathers. They feared that further reform would threaten their privileges.²⁹¹

The “two-line struggle” hypothesis invites us to rethink the broad pattern of elite politics in China. A popular view is that the normal pattern of Chinese high politics features a delayed transition of power.²⁹² A new party leader is weak during his first term as the existing party head retains lingering influence after formally retiring. The new leader can grow strong in the second term and probably continue to project power over his successor, just as his predecessor did. This model captures the limited impact of China’s partial political institutionalization on regulating authoritarian leadership succession in the post-Deng period. More importantly, it reveals the gap and tension between normative rules and real-life practices. Power consolidation is never guaranteed by the formal transfer of power — it must be fought for.

Another view proposes a different cyclical model, in which the structure of the party’s top leadership repetitively moves back and forth between collective leadership and strongman rule.²⁹³ It is a political culture model: The Chinese political system has an intrinsic preference for a strongman, with collective leadership being a temporary transitional period. The fact that not all of China’s top leaders were designated as the party’s “core” seems to be the principal empirical puzzle that inspires the search for a model that can account for this variation.

A third, alternative theory is that there is a continuous oscillation between hard and soft versions of authoritarianism in China.²⁹⁴ Periods of liberalization made possible by socio-economic pressures or open-minded leaders are usually followed by a return to Leninist control, until the next historical moment when the pendulum swings back. An emerging view that traces the origin of China’s conservative turn under Xi to Hu’s second term fits well into this oscillation model.²⁹⁵

The periodization of Chinese high politics presented here fits best with this third model. I concur with Shambaugh’s and Shirk’s observation that an unmistakable conservative revival started earlier, long before it reached its culmination under Xi. However, I suggest an even earlier starting point: Hu’s first term. This latest swing from reformism back to totalitarian politics took much longer than previous swings to materialize, probably because it happened at a time when China does not have paramount leaders who

can rule with few to no limitations like Mao and, to a lesser extent, Deng. Nor are there left any political elders whose power is built on unchallengeable revolutionary prestige. Thus, a major change in elite politics required several years of struggle among elites of relatively equal weight.

Conclusion

This paper critically reviews the existing literature on Xi’s political rise and presents a revisionist sketch of Chinese high politics since Hu came into office. Based on this new telling of Chinese politics, I have proposed that the origin of Xi’s strongman rule can be traced to a decades-long left-right power struggle that entered a new stage during Hu’s first term (2002–2007). Xi would not have been able to defeat his opponents without collective political support. That Xi sided with the leftist camp explains why Chinese politics took a sharp conservative turn after his early years in power, during which Xi seemed to have support from the right to push forward China’s Dengist reform.

This paper also calls for renewed attention to what autocrats say and write. Having introduced the concept of layered publicity as a theoretical foundation for the Kremlinology-style analysis of political texts, I argue that the classical, interpretive approach to studying authoritarian elite politics may enable us to track political infighting behind the scenes with public information. Ironically, such decoding of authoritarian secrecy is possible only because authoritarian leaders themselves allow information to be made public during power struggles.

Ultimately, to achieve a more complete reconstruction of China’s political history through close reading of party documents requires a joint effort among China analysts. There are piles of political texts left to be discovered or analyzed. Future analysis of such resources would further contribute to a better understanding of Chinese politics and either corroborate or constructively revise the findings presented here. Moreover, this interpretive approach is meant to be a timely complement, rather than a corrective, to the factionalism approach. The added value of this approach is obvious, considering that publicly available information has been dwindling due to intensified censorship in China, thus requiring us to make better use of what remains accessible.

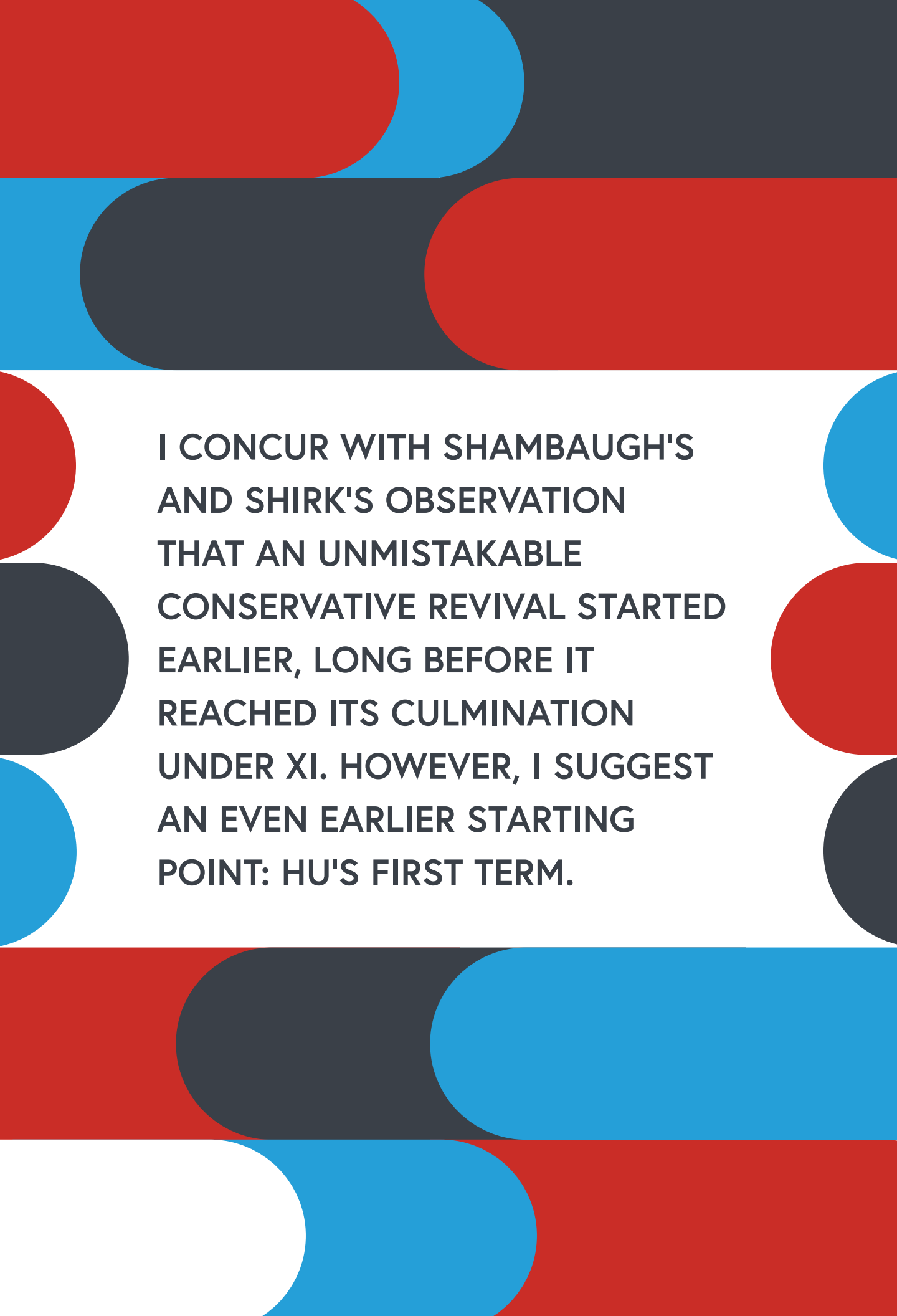
291 In Xi’s own words, it is an endeavor to defend the party’s rulership over China (守江山), which the communist ancestors fought for and won (打江山). See Du Shangze (杜尚泽), “习近平: 共产党打江山、守江山, 守的是人民的心,” *People.cn* (人民网), May 14, 2021, <http://politics.people.com.cn/n1/2021/0514/c1024-32103276.html>. The same notion was also publicly endorsed by other party princelings. For example, see “胡木英: 不能看着父辈流血牺牲打下的江山就这样和平演变地丢掉,” *Utopia* 乌有之乡, March 1, 2013, <http://m.wywxw.com/content.php?classid=29&id=300208>.

292 Fewsmith, *Rethinking Chinese Politics*, 19; Choi, Givens, and MacDonald, “From Power Balance,” 10.

293 Guo, *The Politics of the Core Leader*.

294 Shambaugh, *China’s Leaders*, 23–24.

295 Shambaugh, *China’s Leaders*, 245–46; Shirk, *Overreach*, 14–30.

The background features a white central area containing text, surrounded by abstract shapes in red, blue, and dark grey. These shapes include circles and rounded rectangles, some overlapping each other and the text area. The overall design is modern and graphic.

I CONCUR WITH SHAMBAUGH'S
AND SHIRK'S OBSERVATION
THAT AN UNMISTAKABLE
CONSERVATIVE REVIVAL STARTED
EARLIER, LONG BEFORE IT
REACHED ITS CULMINATION
UNDER XI. HOWEVER, I SUGGEST
AN EVEN EARLIER STARTING
POINT: HU'S FIRST TERM.

The mainstream method of determining a leader's faction has primarily relied on analyzing resumes and bios, which has offered valuable insights, despite its limitations. But no single method or approach is perfect. We need to leverage multiple approaches to get closer to the truth hidden in the authoritarian black box. The classical approach — analysis of political discourse — may provide rich contextual information that can place the identification of factional networks on a firmer footing. We can get a more complete political landscape by combining the mainstream factionalism approach, which helps to map out political actors' network linkages and career trajectories, *and* the classical, interpretive approach, which helps to capture the ups and downs of high politics by closely monitoring political polemics. ²⁹⁶

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Acknowledgements: The author would like to thank the editors of the *Texas National Security Review* and the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful and insightful comments.

Image: China News Service (CC BY 3.0)²⁹⁶

²⁹⁶ For the image, see https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:习近平_Xi_Jinping_20221023_01.jpg. For the license, see <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/deed.en>.