

# Historical Legacies and Leaders' Worldviews

Communist Party History and Xi's Learned (and Unlearned) Lessons

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**ABSTRACT:** Political scientists have found that early life experiences powerfully affect future leaders. Drawing on a variety of sources, this article investigates the formative role of Xi Jinping's youth during a tumultuous time period in Chinese history. Xi's life before and during the Cultural Revolution help explain his toughness, idealism, pragmatism, and caution. However, the evidence on how Xi's childhood and young adulthood shaped his view on how to best handle political contradictions is ambiguous.

**KEYWORDS:** Leadership, Xi Jinping, Cultural Revolution, Red Guards, Sent-down Youth.

## Introduction

Debates about politics in today's China often revolve around one man—the mysterious Xi Jinping 习近平.<sup>(1)</sup> Unfortunately, given the nature of the regime, our ability to understand politics in Beijing at the very top faces serious limitations (Melton and Batke 2017; Teiwes 2015). Instead of attempting another foray into “Peking-ology,” this article tries a different approach—asking what we can learn about Xi by looking to his past. As political scientists have shown, the ideas leaders develop before coming to power as the result of specific experiences often have significant explanatory power for their later behaviour (Whitlark 2017; Fuhrmann and Horowitz 2015; Saunders 2009; Goldgeier 1994).

Leading scholars such as Kerry Brown and Willy Wo-Lap Lam have already provided important accounts of Xi's early life (Brown 2016; Lam 2015). In 1953, Xi was born in Beijing to Xi Zhongxun 习仲勋, a high-ranking party figure who had spent his early career in north-western Shaanxi Province and was removed from the central party leadership in 1962.<sup>(2)</sup> Jinping attended the August 1 Middle School, an elite academy populated mostly by the offspring of high-ranking military officials. For several years after the Cultural Revolution began in 1966, radicals harassed Jinping in Beijing on the basis of his father having been purged, until he became a sent-down youth, one of the many young men and women who left for the countryside to “learn from the peasants.” He spent most of this time in Liangjiahe 梁家河, a small village in the Yan'an 延安 region of poor Shaanxi Province. The conditions were severe, but by the time he returned to Beijing in 1975, he was a party member with a ticket to the elite Tsinghua University.

But what do these experiences tell us about how Xi thinks about the world? The intention here is not to provide a simple biography. Nor is it to engage in a psychoanalytic, Freudian approach as other researchers of leaders have done (Pye 1976; George and George 1964). Instead, I categorise and examine Xi's early experiences, both before and after the Cultural Revolution started, based on how they might have affected his character traits in specific ways. I then ask whether Xi's later behaviour fits our understand-

ing of what we would expect someone with such a background to learn.

The source material is not perfect. However, the issue is relevant enough, and the evidence available today interesting enough, to provide an interim account that, unlike previous scholarship, gives a focused account entirely on Xi's early life. Some of the more problematic sources, such as Xi's own numerous autobiographical statements and accounts of varying quality provided by friends and family, should be treated sceptically, as they fit a narrative of political legitimacy (Brown 2016: 50). However, they can be mined for biographical details, and some of the claims can be treated as possibilities. Crucially, these sources can be heavily supplemented by: memoir literature written by individuals who had life experiences similar to Xi's; reporting by Western journalists; and high-quality Chinese and Western secondary literature on what we know about Xi's generation more broadly.

A generally coherent picture emerges from this evidence. Xi's early life does help explain his toughness, idealism, pragmatism, and caution. However, the material is less clear on how Xi's youth might have affected his later behaviour towards potential enemies, both inside and outside the Party.

## Personal experiences and characteristics

Why do we care about Xi Jinping? Despite the significance many political scientists give to structural factors, they have also studied the importance of individual leaders (Jones and Olken 2009; Byman and Pollack 2001; Mahoney and Snyder 1999). Leaders matter for two reasons. First, as Richard

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1. Steven Lee Myers, “Behind Public Persona, The Real Xi Jinping Is A Guarded Secret,” *The New York Times*, 5 March 2018.
2. Xi Zhongxun was purged because of his half-hearted support for a novel that touched upon sensitive historical issues. The book had a powerful impact because, for complicated reasons, at the time Mao Zedong was increasingly worried about the broader direction of the Party. Jia Juchuan 贾巨川, “习仲勋冤案始末” (*Xi Zhongxun yuan'an shimo*, The beginning and end of the wrongful case of Xi Zhongxun), *炎黄春秋* (*Yanhuang Chunqiu*) 1(2011): 4-10.

Samuels has argued, people in positions of high authority often have significant freedom of manoeuvre (Samuels 2005). Second, leaders matter because they have their own ideas about how the world works (George 1969). One of the key ways in which leaders develop such ideas is through previous experiences (Kennedy 2012; Jervis 1976). Political scientists have also helped conceptualise what kinds of leadership traits are the most interesting (House and Baetz 1990; Hermann 1980).

The evidence is strong that Xi Jinping's youth had a role in developing four key traits that I have gleaned in drawing on my sources. The first is toughness, meaning self-confidence and a belief in personal efficacy. The second is idealism, defined as conviction, a sense of mission, and antipathy towards materialism. The third is pragmatism, as in flexibility when selecting means to achieve concrete goals. The fourth is cautiousness, which includes political prudence, self-discipline, and the careful avoidance of demonstrating any dangerous ambitions (because this last trait disappeared when Xi ascended to the top position, it will receive less attention). The evidence on a potential fifth characteristic—how Xi views the nature of political threats—is more ambiguous. Some material does suggest that Xi has an exclusionary policy towards potential enemies, but locating such an attitude entirely from his early experiences is not straightforward.

## Xi's formative life experiences

### Toughness

Xi's early life was not easy. His father was almost unbelievably strict; he attended a school known for its macho relations among students; he was harassed in Beijing during the early years of the Cultural Revolution; and his time as a sent-down youth was particularly brutal in terms of both physical and emotional hardship.

Xi Zhongxun's strictness toward his family members was so serious that even those close to him believed it bordered on the inhuman (Zhang 2013: 230). In 1993, Jinping said that when he was young he was most afraid of his father waking him up to bathe him in the water just used for Zhongxun's own bath (Hao 2013: 763). According to one friend of Xi's family, Zhongxun was "happiest" talking about instances of his son behaving "full of mettle."<sup>(3)</sup> Apparently this behaviour was not unique—another princeling similarly recalls a brutally disciplinarian father (Kong 2013: 25).

The August 1 Middle School, known as the "CCP military aristocracy school," was also uncompromising. According to one graduate, "softness and delicateness were especially despised." Brawls were common.<sup>(4)</sup> Although after the Cultural Revolution started the school was depicted as an "aristocracy school" corrupted by special privileges, which undoubtedly had at least some truth, former educators and students deny this characterisation. The school was organised according to military discipline, and during the Great Leap Forward students were forced to eat old rice contaminated by rat faeces (Li 2007: 53, 97-98).

The situation was especially difficult for Xi. The students from top families were not allowed to become student cadres.<sup>(5)</sup> Nor were these children allowed to bully the offspring of lower ranking cadres, although the reverse was apparently surprisingly common.<sup>(6)</sup> But after 1962, when Xi was only nine years old, he was not just the son of a top leader—he was the son of a fallen leader. At least one student was not permitted to enter the Communist Youth League simply because his father had had a connection with Xi Zhongxun.<sup>(7)</sup> Given that some accounts suggest that August 1 students

carefully about the rank of their fathers, the status of Zhongxun must have affected his son (Li 2007: 97; Kong 2013).

However difficult the middle school might have been, life got even harder with the onset of the Cultural Revolution. In 1996, Xi's former teacher Chen Qiuying 陈秋影 wrote, "Because of the irregular political life of his father and mother during the Cultural Revolution, he suffered extremely unfair treatment, and Xi Jinping was also seen by some as a 'one of the five black elements, a bastard,' and a 'reactionary student.'" According to Chen, Xi "always believed that the clouds would disperse; under any circumstance he always was very confident of the future." (Li 2007: 232)

Although Jinping did not participate directly in the Red Guard movement because of his father's status, he was close to many of the offspring of top officials who dominated the movement's early phases (Nie and Wang 2011: 109). These individuals believed that their "Red genes" made them the true heirs of the revolution, rendering them unpopular among other students (Walder 2012). Xi would have known about how many of these students formed the Liandong 联动 (United Action) Red Guard faction in the hope of protecting their parents. This group ultimately suffered terribly when it was overcome by other groups supported by the central authorities (Mi 2011: 233-49). On January 25, 1967, the August 1 Middle School was assaulted by leftist forces and more than 30 students were detained, although according to some sources its student population was largely apolitical (Li 2007: 312-47). Shortly after, the school was closed down and turned into an exhibition showcasing the alleged special privileges of its students (Chunlei 1967).

Xi later recalled that the "leftist rebels" accused him of many crimes, allegedly believing he was a leader (*tou* 头) because he bucked them and refused to be bullied.<sup>(8)</sup> According to a family friend, Xi's own mother participated in a struggle session against Jinping after he was incarcerated at the central party school for criticising the Cultural Revolution. When a hungry Jinping fled home one night from the party school, his mother not only refused to feed him but even reported him to the authorities.<sup>(9)</sup> In 1968, Xi and his friends Nie Weiping 聂卫平 and Liu Weiping 刘卫平 ran away when hundreds of students with clubs ran out to physically attack participants of a meeting they were attending. Xi and Nie escaped, but Liu, who was too slow, was beaten severely (Nie and Wang 2011: 109).

The sent-down youth period was also gruelling. Xi was not only one of the youngest of these individuals; in addition, he spent a much longer time in the countryside than most others. By 1975, when Xi finally left, only 3.7% of the original sent-down youth were still in the Yan'an region in Shaanxi Province, where Xi lived, and those who had remained mostly did so because they had married peasants (Zhongyang dangxiao caifang shilu bianji shi 2017: 438). Moreover, the region was particularly poor and isolated. One sent-down youth in the same area as Xi recalls the shock he felt when he

3. Yang Bing 杨屏, "习仲勋与习近平的父子情" (*Xi Zhongxun Yu Jinping de fuzi qing*, The father-son relationship of Xi Zhongxun and Jinping), 爱思想 (*Ai Sixiang*), 27 February 2013, <http://www.aisixiang.com/data/61575.html> (accessed on 3 May 2018).

4. Liu Huixuan 刘辉宣, "当年年少曾经狂" (*Dangshi nianshao ceng qingkuang*, Frivolous when young), in Mi 2015: 17-18; Mi 2016.

5. *Ibid.*, 8-12.

6. "成长篇 (一)" (*Chengzhang pian (1)*, Piece on growing up (1)), n.d., 八一学校 66届网络空间论坛 (*Bayi xuexiao 66 jie wangluo kongjian luntan*, 66th cyberspace forum of the August 1 school), [http://bayixuexiao.blog.hexun.com/61727513\\_d.html](http://bayixuexiao.blog.hexun.com/61727513_d.html) (accessed on 3 May 2018).

7. Liu Huixuan, "Frivolous when young," *op cit.*, 23.

8. Yang Xiaohuai, "习近平: 我是如何跨入政界的" (*Xi Jinping: wo shi ruhe kuaru zhengjie de*, Xi Jinping: How I entered the political world), *Zhonghua Ernu* no. 7 (2000): 43.

9. Yang Bing, "The father-son relationship of Xi Zhongxun and Jinping," *op cit.*

saw three of the six children of a brigade leader (*duizhang* 队长) playing in the dirt with no clothes. <sup>(10)</sup> More than 70 of the rusticated young people died in this region, 32 during labour and 40-plus from "irregular deaths" or disease. <sup>(11)</sup>

The physical labour was especially difficult for the particularly young Xi (*Zhongyang dangxiao caifang shilu bianji shi* 2017: 94). Because of his family's situation, Xi could not hope to leave the countryside by either joining the People's Liberation Army or finding work in a city (*Zhongyang dangxiao caifang shilu bianji shi* 2017: 143). The situation was so tough that after only about three months Xi fled back to Beijing, where he was placed in a "study group." <sup>(12)</sup>

Many years later, Xi told an interviewer, "Nothing could be as hard as that. This has a very strong effect on a person." <sup>(13)</sup> He also stated, "With that kind of experience, whatever difficulties I would encounter in the future, I am fully charged with the courage to take on any challenge, to believe in the impossible and to conquer obstacles without panic." <sup>(14)</sup> Xi continued to emphasise these macho qualities after becoming head of the Party. At the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, Xi stated, "History looks kindly on those with resolve, with drive and ambition, and with plenty of guts; it won't wait for the hesitant, the apathetic, or those shy of a challenge." <sup>(15)</sup> Xi has also blamed the collapse of the Soviet Union on no one being "man enough" to fight to save it. <sup>(16)</sup>

## Idealism

Xi Jinping not only developed a strong sense of self-confidence; the evidence indicates he also became highly idealistic. One can find three likely roots of this trait: the first was that Xi's father was a revolutionary fanatically devoted to the party's historical mission; secondly, Jinping's middle school heavily indoctrinated students in the importance of sacrifice; and thirdly, Jinping developed a sense of affection and duty towards the peasants with whom he lived in Shaanxi. Throughout his life, Xi has demonstrated a fascination with the importance of conviction.

Many offspring of revolutionary figures came to see themselves as the inheritors of the revolution and as future leaders of China (Mi 2016: 127). Xi Jinping appears to have been among them. According to Jinping, as a child:

[he heard his father talk] about how he joined the revolution, and he'd say, 'You will certainly make revolution in the future.' (...) He'd explain what revolution is. We heard so much of this that our ears got calluses. <sup>(17)</sup>

In a birthday letter written to his father, Jinping described Zhongxun's idealism as one of the five traits he most wanted to study. <sup>(18)</sup>

Besides the influence from his father, China's education system during Jinping's youth focused on ideals and conviction (Mi 2016). The atmosphere at the August 1 Middle School was electric. The students there "were full of resolution to give their lives the desire to struggle, the will to serve, the collective spirit, sincere belief and traditional pursuits, and at the same time were full to the brim with the special confidence and pride of victors." <sup>(19)</sup> The August 1 Middle School's special status often gave its students a sense of superiority (Li 2007).

Hagiographic treatments of Xi portray his stint among peasants while in the countryside as crucial for understanding his devotion to the nation. One may naturally wonder how much of this type of talk is simply propaganda, as some scholars have emphasised that the Cultural Revolution was in fact

powerfully disillusioning for many young people (Yang 2017; Chan 1985).

But if the hagiographic stories are basically correct, why was it that his own rural experience did not lead Xi to despondency? First, Xi was no regular sent-down youth. He was the son of a high-ranking official, and as the Chinese historian Gao Wenqian 高文谦 notes, although some of these individuals did indeed lose their idealism during the Cultural Revolution, for most of them the sense of historical mission they developed as children generally proved resilient (Gao 2016: 415).

But we also have reason to believe that the sent-down youth experience actually increased Xi's devotion. According to numerous accounts, many young people cried when their trains left Beijing for the countryside (Bonnin 2013: 231; Luo 1999: 238-39). Others, like the princeling Kong Dan 孔丹, hoped that the countryside would be a new start after the traumatic experiences in Beijing (Kong 2013: 111). Xi recalls:

On the special train to Yan'an, I remember very clearly, that was January 1969, everyone was crying; on the whole special train there was no one who was not crying, except for me who was laughing. At the time my family standing outside the car all said, how could you be laughing? I said if I was staying I would be crying, if I did not go I don't even know if I would live or die here, so isn't leaving a good thing? <sup>(20)</sup>

The evidence is not clear as to how long it took Xi to develop an affection for the villagers, and life there was certainly not easy. But ultimately Xi tied gratefulness to the peasants for taking care of him to his own political idealism and sense of mission. On the night before he left, he told the entire village: "Our masses in Liangjiahe selflessly accepted me, helped me, made me enter society, enter the Communist Youth League, enter the Party, become party village head (...). For my entire life, I will not forget what Liangjiahe gave me." (*Zhongyang dangxiao caifang shilu bianji shi* 2017: 197). In 2004, Xi told an interviewer, "At the time of my life when I most needed all kinds of help, the people of Yan'an gave me a selfless helping hand." <sup>(21)</sup> If Xi was like Kong Dan, who was in the same region, he might have been struck by the "inequality in life and inequality in fate" the peasants faced and developed a sense of responsibility to improve their lives (Kong 2013: 127).

Given these factors in Xi's childhood and adolescence, we do have some reason to believe that he may not have been untruthful when he stated:

10. 陕北插队的回忆 (*Shaanbei chadui de huiyi*, Memory as a sent-down youth in Northern Shaanxi), n.d., 八一学校 66届网络空间论坛 (*Bayi xuexiao 66 jie wangluo kongjian luntan*), [http://bayixuexiao.blog.hexun.com/58931923\\_d.html](http://bayixuexiao.blog.hexun.com/58931923_d.html) (accessed on 3 May 2018).
11. He Zhongzhou 何忠洲, "留在北京的延安回忆" (*Liu zai Beijing de Yan'an huiyi*, Yan'an memories in Beijing), *南方周末* (*Nanfang Zhoumo*), 11 November 2010.
12. Yang Xiaohuai, "Xi Jinping: How I entered the political world," *op cit*.
13. *Ibid.*, 44.
14. Edward Wong, "Tracing the Myth of a Chinese Leader to Its Roots," *The New York Times*, 16 February 2011.
15. Roderick MacFarquhar, "The Red Emperor," *The New York Review of Books*, 18 January 2018.
16. Chris Buckley, "Vows of Change in China Belie Private Warning," *The New York Times*, 14 February 2013.
17. Evan Osnos, "Born Red," *The New Yorker*, 90, No. 7, 6 April 2015.
18. Xi Jinping 习近平, "给爸爸八十八岁生日的贺信" (*Gei baba bashiba zhou sui sheng ri de hexin*, Congratulatory letter to father on his 88th birthday), in 习仲勋纪念文集 (*Xi Zhongxun jinin wenji*, Commemorative Articles on Xi Zhongxun), ed. 中共中央党史研究室 *zhonggong zhongyang dangshi yanjiu shi*. Beijing: Zhonggong dangshi chubanshe, 2013, 806-7.
19. Liu Huixuan, "Frivolous when young," *op cit.*, 15.
20. "我是延安人," (*Wo shi Yan'an ren*, I Am from Yan'an) (Documentary), 2004, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=syRbVXlqyU0> (accessed on 3 May 2018).
21. *Ibid.*

Now some authors in their works write about sent-down youths in a very brutal way. My feeling was not entirely like that. <sup>(22)</sup>

Kong Dan (2013: 113) also later recalled, "I actually really appreciated that time period, it was very innocent." Another sent-down youth wrote:

When our lives were at their lowest point, when we were at our most helpless, the Northern Shaanxi people opened their minds to accept us. Just as when our fathers' generation was nourished by the yellow soil in the Yan'an era, today the yellow soil opened its great bosom to accept their offspring. I'm afraid the great kindness that brought bounties to two generations is very difficult to pay back in this lifetime. <sup>(23)</sup>

Added together, these features of Xi's background contribute to an understanding of why he has repeatedly exhibited a preoccupation with ideals over his life. He was close friends with the late author Jia Dashan 贾大山, whose works showed scepticism towards the new materialistic values that appeared with Deng Xiaoping's 邓小平 reforms. <sup>(24)</sup> In one of Jia's most famous works, *The Flower Market*, a young peasant woman refuses to sell an expensive flower to a bossy, rich cadre who offers a high price, selling it instead to a poor old man struck only by the flower's beauty. <sup>(25)</sup> Xi is also a fan of *The One-Dimensional Man* by the Marxist German philosopher Herbert Marcuse. He has praised the book for criticising the tendency of industrial society to turn people into "one-dimensional technical animals" who have no human spirit. <sup>(26)</sup> In December 1989, Xi complained about how the "value system of capitalist extreme egoism" was still "poisoning people's souls" and warned about the persistence of "commodity fetishism." <sup>(27)</sup>

Xi has even used these ideas to explain the collapse of the USSR, as in the following quotation:

Why did the Soviet Union disintegrate? Why did the Soviet Communist Party collapse? An important reason was that their ideals and convictions wavered (...). In the end nobody was a real man, nobody came out to resist. <sup>(28)</sup>

He has applied this concern directly to China, arguing, "Facts have repeatedly proved that the most dangerous moment is when one wavers in or begins to show doubt about one's ideals and convictions." <sup>(29)</sup> This sense of mission is a significant difference between Xi and his predecessors Hu Jintao 胡锦涛 and Wen Jiabao 温家宝, two leaders whom former general-secretary Zhao Ziyang 赵紫阳 once described as "lacking ideals, lacking historical responsibility, and lacking vision." (Zong 2007: 348).

## Pragmatism

Although Xi prides himself on his toughness and sense of conviction, interestingly these traits have not translated either into an absence of flexibility as to means or into dangerously ambitious policies (except perhaps in the war on corruption). Again the past may provide clues why. The early Cultural Revolution in Beijing and his sent-down youth experiences again played a part in his character formation. These events seem to have inculcated in Xi a powerful sense of pragmatism because they clearly demonstrated the failure of radical leftist politics. Moreover, as a rusticated young person Xi was exposed at an early age to the reality of local politics in the complicated environment of a Chinese village.

Propaganda accounts have emphasised this side of Xi. But sociologists and other experts on the Cultural Revolution have also seen Xi's generation as pragmatic (Xu 1999: 228). Their experiences in the countryside led many young Chinese of that era not only to question the wisdom of "class struggle," but also to challenge a number of "economic, societal, cultural, and other policy questions." The previously heavily indoctrinated students were shocked by the situation in the villages, which contributed to their reflections about which policies the country really ought to pursue (Yin 2009: 216, 286). These youths were also primed for such reflection by a number of local conditions: the countryside's less controlling atmosphere as compared with the cities; the complete lack of teachers who would have attempted to indoctrinate them; the obvious gap they discovered between communist theory and lived reality; and the pressing needs of the peasants (Mi 2011: 337-38). These takeaways played a significant role in the wide support for the reforms of the Deng era (Wang 2013: 77).

In the 1980s, high-ranking officials also noticed this practical bent among Xi's generation. One man who worked for the Organisation Department wrote a special report on the "three old classes" (*lao sanjie* 老三届, a term referring to those scheduled to graduate high school in 1966-1968): "They are proficient in their jobs, they have a lot of life experience, they do not reach beyond their grasp, they are not anxious for quick results, they come to work on time and leave on time, are steady in their work, and are reliable." (Cui 2003: 85). In 1980, Xi's own father said, "They are sensitive to reality, they dare to think and to do, and they are relatively strong in education and ability to understand." <sup>(30)</sup> In a February 1983 document, a high-ranking official involved in cadre promotion wrote that Xi was one of several young officials who deserved to be given more authority because, "Although they are college graduates, they all tumbled (*shuaida* 摔打) at the local level for seven or eight years" and understood how to work with the masses (He 2016: 56).

Xi himself has often expressed a distaste for the utopian politics of the Mao era. In 2003, Xi recalled that "when the ideals of the Cultural Revolution could not be realised, it proved an illusion." <sup>(31)</sup> In an interview in 2004, he reflected on the dangers of radical impractical thinking and recalled how his fellow city-bred youth once criticised the villagers they were living with for not being cruel enough to a former rich peasant: "It was dogmatic; it was a result of not having seen the real world." <sup>(32)</sup> On a trip to Peking University in May 2018, Xi described his coming to believe in Marxism during this time period as a result of independently, critically, and slowly studying

22. Yang Xiaohuai, "Xi Jinping: How I entered the political world," *op cit.*, 43.

23. "Memory as a sent-down youth in Northern Shaanxi," *op cit.*

24. Xi Jinping 习近平, "忆大山" (*Yi Dashan*, Remembering Dashan), in Jia 2014, vol. 1, 4.

25. Jia Dashan 贾大山, "花市" (*Huashi*, Flower market), in Jia 2014, vol. 2, 369-74.

26. Chen Zhenkai 陈振凯, "国家主席习近平读过哪些书? 怎么看待读书?" (*Guojia Zhuxi Xi Jinping duguo na xie shu? Zenme kandai dushu?* What books has national chairman Xi Jinping read? What does he think about reading?), *人民日报海外版* (*Renmin Ribao Haiwai Ban*), 14 February 2014.

27. Xi Jinping 习近平, "建设好贫困地区的精神文明" (*Jianshe hao pinkun diqu de jingshen wenming*, Construct a spiritual civilisation in poor areas), in Xi 1992, 115.

28. Chris Buckley, "Vows of Change in China Belie Private Warning," *op cit.*

29. See "Uphold and Develop Socialism with Chinese Characteristics," (Xi 2014: 464).

30. Xi Zhongxun 习仲勋, "关于加强和改善部队政治工作的几点意见" (*Guanyu jiaqiang he gaishan budui zhengzhi gongzuo de ji dian yijian*, A few opinions on strengthening and improving political work in the army), in Xi, "Congratulatory letter to father on his 88th birthday," *op. cit.*, 629).

31. Jonathan Watts, "Most Corrupt Officials Are From Poor Families But Chinese Royals Have A Spirit That Is Not Dominated By Money," *The Guardian*, 26 October 2007.

32. "I Am from Yan'an," *op cit.*

Marxist texts, and he emphasised that studying should always include a practical mind-set.<sup>(33)</sup>

This experience of rural life and the ideals that were incorrectly applied to it was important for Xi not only because it demonstrated problems with utopian thinking. As a school of politics, the northern Shaanxi countryside had its own special characteristics.<sup>(34)</sup> The region was a complicated mixture of families, clans, villages, and production teams (Zhongyang dangxiao caifang shilu bianji shi 2017: 26). In 2003, when Xi listed the two most important results of his time as a sent-down youth, the first one he mentioned was understanding “the meaning of actual practice, the meaning of seeking truth from facts, the meaning of the masses. This is something that was valuable for my entire life.” (“Fujian boshi fengcai” congshu bianwei hui 2003: 2). Kong Dan (2013: 127) similarly argues that when he arrived in the countryside he was “a bit of nerd” (*xuesheng qiang* 学生腔) but that the interaction with peasants left in him a more practical sensibility. Interestingly, this transformation was probably Mao’s intention—the Chairman had repeatedly voiced concerns that, “The offspring of our cadres are really worrying; they do not have life or societal experience.” (Beijing shi jiaoyu geming lianluo weiyuan hui 1967: 1)

Likely because of these reasons, despite Xi’s praise for Marxism as an ideal and motivating force, he has not interpreted it as encompassing a set of inflexible rules. In 1983, an investigation team from the Organisation Department was impressed by Xi’s commitment to reform and his sense of the problems with collectivism in agriculture (Yan 2017: 217). In the early 1990s, Xi wrote:

Actually Marxism is not abstruse. Marxism is a very matter-of-fact thing, a very matter-of-fact logic.<sup>(35)</sup>

Another theme in the works of Jia Dashan, the author cherished by Xi, is the absurdity of arbitrary “leftist” political standards set by leaders without practical skills.<sup>(36)</sup>

Later as an official in Fujian, Xi criticised cadres with book-learning but no real world experiences who rushed to achieve half-baked projects.<sup>(37)</sup> Since taking up national-level power, Xi has proven to be extremely practical in terms of reforms, not relying entirely on either the state or the market and emphasising stability over radical change.<sup>(38)</sup> One American embassy contact described Xi as “supremely pragmatic and a realist, driven not by ideology.”<sup>(39)</sup>

### Political caution

As with his pragmatism, Xi’s caution and professed lack of ambition—at least up until he assumed the top position—contrasted with his toughness and idealism. Indeed, the historical record is full of examples of such facets of his nature. Like the characteristics discussed above, Xi’s caution was likely rooted in earlier experiences—in this case, his prolonged vulnerability. Xi’s ability to hide certain parts of his personality suggests that his rougher edges were tempered by cunning and a keen sensitivity to how to best protect himself and move up the ranks. Xi’s behaviour in this regard strongly differs from that of another member of his generational cohort who was also a son of a former high-ranking official, the now infamous Bo Xilai 薄熙来.

The timing of Xi Zhongxun’s purge was of crucial importance to the development of caution in his son. As Chinese historian Gao Wenqian notes, Zhongxun was purged four years before the Cultural Revolution. At that

time, Jinping was very young, and the fathers of his friends would still have been untouched. Gao (2016: 414) writes:

Xi Jinping was only nine years old when his father fell, so the tough environment directly influenced his personality. He is therefore good at forbearance and concealing his intentions, not revealing anything.

Zhang Lifan 章立凡, another historian, similarly argues:

I think [Xi] has learned how to survive. In his childhood, Xi Jinping suffered a lot. All of this experience greatly affected him.

One more such analysis comes from Li Datong 李大同, a former editor of a news journal:

Xi Jinping is very low-profile and cautious, which might have some connection with his past experience in the 1960s when his father was kicked out of the power centre. He actually did not enjoy many benefits assumed to be extended to the ‘princelings’ in those times.<sup>(40)</sup>

Xi’s reticence persisted throughout most of his life. One individual who knew him shortly before the Cultural Revolution described Xi as “not talking a lot, very discreet” and claimed he was not an individual who sought fame or power.<sup>(41)</sup> The official collection of interviews on the sent-down youth period provides further examples of what could well have been caution on Xi’s part. At one large struggle session, some cadres were attacked for not sufficiently emphasising women’s issues. Xi and a friend believed that such a mistake was at most a contradiction among the people. But when Xi’s friend said he wanted to jump on stage and stop the proceedings, Xi calmed him down (Zhongyang dangxiao caifang shilu bianji shi 2017: 70).

Another instance occurred when Xi finally left the countryside and entered university. In 1976, he counselled his fellow classmates against participating in the Tiananmen protests against the Gang of Four, even though he claimed to support their position (Zhongyang dangxiao caifang shilu bianji shi, 2017: 76). According to a family friend, when Xi, who apparently did go to the Square anyway just to look around, saw his younger brother there, he forced the brother to leave so that no pictures of them could be taken.<sup>(42)</sup>

33. “习近平视察北大：国家一流学术才能一流” (*Xi Jinping shicha Beida: guojia yiliu, xueshu caineng yiliu*, Xi Jinping inspects Peking University: only when the nation can be first rate can academics be first rate), *Xinhua*, 2 May 2018.

34. For a classic fictional account of north Shaanxi, see Lu (1986). Xi was friends with the author.

35. Xi Jinping 习近平, “跋” (*Ba*, Postscript), in Xi 1992, 158–60.

36. See especially Jia Dashan 贾大山, “取经” (*Qijing*, Learning from the experiences of others), in Jia 2014, 534–42.

37. Xi Jinping 习近平, “从政杂谈” (*Congzheng zatan*, Varied comments on politics), in Xi 1992, 24–35.

38. Chris Buckley and Keith Bradsher, “Xi Jinping’s Failed Promises Dim Hopes for Economic Change in 2nd Term,” *The New York Times*, 4 March 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/04/world/asia/china-xi-jinping-economic-reform.html> (accessed on 3 May 2018).

39. “Portrait of Vice President Xi Jinping: ‘Ambitious Survivor’ of the Cultural Revolution,” *Wikileaks*, 16 November 2009.

40. Keith Richburg, “Rising Leader Xi Jinping’s Family Suffered in Chinese Power Struggles,” *The Washington Post*, 24 October 2010.

41. Interview notes.

42. Yang Bing, “The Father-Son Relationship of Xi Zhongxun and Jinping,” *op cit*.

Throughout his career, Xi made few enemies, again perhaps a sign of his caution. In 1983, Organisation Department investigators were struck by Xi's modest and assuming nature, although some local officials were jealous of Xi's rapid advancement given his youth (Yan 2017: 217). Evan Osnos writes that Xi was "an unremarkable provincial administrator" who was "selected mainly because he had alienated fewer peers than his competitors."<sup>(43)</sup> Xi also never took dangerous initiatives or displayed ambition. When he was party chief of Zhejiang 浙江, liberal party elder Li Rui 李锐 told him, "Now your position is different; you can raise a few ideas with the higher-ups." Xi said, "How could I be like you? You know how to walk a fine line." (Li 2013: 459). According to Willy Wo-Lap Lam (2015: 41): "Xi was always anxious to project the image of a humble student of his elders—and a team player."

This evidence raises an important question—why did another famous member of Xi's generational cohort, Bo Xilai, not share Xi's cautious political style? Bo, the former party boss of Chongqing, was expelled from the party for corruption shortly before Xi came to power. Like Xi, Bo also believed his early life had had a toughening effect, remarking at one press conference that:

I was locked up in prison because of my father [the famous revolutionary Bo Yibo]. The experience toughened my will and taught me how to think.<sup>(44)</sup>

Bo's war on corruption and resurrection of leftist imagery and symbols when he served as party secretary in Chongqing are so similar to the policies Xi has adopted as leader that some analysts have called Xi's policies "the Bo Xilai line without Bo Xilai."<sup>(45)</sup> In 2010, on a trip to Chongqing, Xi told Bo the "singing red" campaign had "gone deeply into the hearts of the people and was worthy of praise" (Garnaut 2013: 64). Despite these broad similarities, however, Bo was a cocky, incredibly ambitious man who had a dangerous habit of creating enemies.<sup>(46)</sup>

Although it is impossible to say for sure why Xi and Bo displayed such different behaviour, Bo's early life can be distinguished in crucial ways from Xi's. Bo was about four years older than Xi when the Cultural Revolution started, and Bo's father was purged several years later than Xi's. Therefore, as historian Gao Wenqian remarks, Bo faced serious setbacks in life "when he was in high school and his personality had already been formed, so although when he was [treated like] a bastard, he also had to rely on forbearance to survive, as soon as the situation changed, his previous impudent personality reappeared." (Gao 2016: 414). As will be discussed in the next section, it was much later before Xi clearly displayed a ruthless side.

### View of friends and enemies

Xi's early experiences help explain why he has often displayed toughness, idealism, pragmatism, and caution. Regarding the question of how Xi's early life affected his understanding of the nature of political contradictions, however, the evidence is mixed. On the one hand, the Cultural Revolution was a time period in which many young men and women engaged in unrestricted political warfare. The Mao era showed the dangers of political weakness in the face of enemies, as well as the threat of chaos in the absence of strong political order. On the other hand, many in Xi's generation believed that the brutality of the Mao era demonstrated a need for a more institutionalised kind of politics that prevented uncontrolled power struggles and allowed more freedoms in society. Given these two seemingly incompatible

beliefs, it is not clear what lessons Xi drew from this period, nor is it obvious how exactly to classify his views on this matter.

Certainly, we have at least some reason to believe that Xi's experiences were conducive to becoming obsessed with domination and control. Xi spent years in an education system that emphasised class struggle, which taught that the fight against enemies was eternal and ubiquitous, that enemies could be behind any problem, that anyone could be an enemy, and that enemies should be treated viciously (Mi 2011: 63-64). Then, the Cultural Revolution ushered in a period of political struggle with few limits. Chinese sociologist and historian Xu Youyu 徐友渔 (1999: 234) argues, the Cultural Revolution created a "moral crisis and moral vacuum":

For some people, any conventions are false and damaging, and any restrictions should be smashed. Sticking to rules became a manifestation of pedantry and ossification, and some basic norms of behaviour, like maintaining promises, obeying laws [zunfa shouji 尊法守纪] [like in work fulfilling one's duties, not taking advantage of state property] were completely cast away. These people simply do not care about integrity and guarding against temptation. If doing a bad thing is not discovered, or if it is discovered but there is no punishment, then they will do anything they want.

Xu (1999: 236) concludes that the Red Guards learned:

In order to get benefit, it is necessary to have power. The desire for power in this generation, the sensitivity to how power is divided, is definitely beyond that of others.

Literary historian Qian Liqun 钱理群 worries that Xi's generation learned in the struggles of the Cultural Revolution that "in order to gain one's objective, any method is appropriate."<sup>(47)</sup> Kong Dan (2013: 126) similarly suggests that Nie Weiping's style of playing Go—"You come according to the rules, he operates in violation of the rules, fights chaotically"—was a result of the Cultural Revolution.

Some evidence suggests that Xi did develop a suspicious, aggressive attitude towards enemies and a fear of chaos. In 2000, he told an interviewer:

People who have little experience with power, those who have been far away from it, tend to regard these things as mysterious and novel. But I look past the superficial things: the power and the flowers and the glory and the applause. I see the detention houses, the fickleness of human relationships.<sup>(48)</sup>

Xi (1992: 62) very revealingly referred to the Cultural Revolution in a

43. Evan Osnos, "Born Red," *The New Yorker* 90(7), 6 April 2015.
44. Pin Ho and Wenguang Huang, *A Death in the Lucky Holiday Hotel: Murder, Money and an Epic Power Struggle in China*, New York: PublicAffairs, 2013, 85.
45. "焦点对话：薄熙来倒台五周年·阴影依然笼罩中国?" (*Jiaodian duihua: Bo Xilai daotai wu zhou nian, yinying yiran longzhao Zhongguo?* Conversation on a hot topic: On the five year anniversary of the fall of Bo Xilai, does the shadow still cover China?), *Voice of America Chinese*, 10 March 2017.
46. Michael Wines, "In Rise and Fall of China's Bo Xilai, an Arc of Ruthlessness," *The New York Times*, 6 May 2012.
47. Qian Liqun 钱理群, "老红卫兵当政的担忧" (*Lao hongwei bing dangzheng de danyou*, Worrying about old red guards leading), 文摘 (*Wenzhai*), 19 February 2012.
48. Evan Osnos, "Born Red," *op cit*.

speech he gave in Ningde, Fujian Province, at a work conference on media issues in May 1989—shortly before the crackdown on protests in Beijing:

Wasn't the "Cultural Revolution" the manifestation of "big democracy"? This kind of "big democracy" is not in accord with science, not in accord with the rule of law, but is instead in accord with superstition, in accord with stupidity, and the result is major chaos. Anyone can organise a few people to go and ransack homes, anyone can pull together a struggle unit, today I knock you down, tomorrow you knock me down. Can these days be repeated? Without stability and unity, nothing is possible!

However, many individuals determined that the lesson of the Cultural Revolution was the need for *more* democracy, not less. Xi's own father was one of these individuals, having concluded that strengthening the institutions of inner-party democracy and guaranteeing more personal freedoms were necessary for preventing Mao era abuses from repeating.<sup>(49)</sup> Historian Wang Haiguang (2013: 77) has written that the most obvious lesson of the Cultural Revolution was that:

[China] could only conform to human civilisation's great road of universal values and concept of modern human rights, to walk the road of ruling the nation by law, a society of citizens, and democratic politics. It absolutely cannot again engage in populist revolutionary rebel campaigns.

When the Cultural Revolution started, Xi Jinping apparently was indeed thinking about the implications of what was happening around him. Then 13 years old, he asked his teacher Chen Qiuying how such violence could happen.<sup>(50)</sup> A few years later, as a sent-down youth, he saw more evidence of the disasters that could emerge from this kind of politics. According to an official collection of interviews on this period, as a sent-down youth "Jinping gradually began to doubt the long-term incessant severe class struggle." (Zhongyang dangxiao caifang shilu bianji shi 2017: 43). When he temporarily worked in the village of nearby Zhaojiahe 赵家和, he was unable to find any real "class enemies" or "capitalist tendencies," so he held no struggle sessions (Zhongyang dangxiao caifang shilu bianji shi 2017: 69).

How, then, should one explain instances of Xi's aggressive attitude towards potential threats inside and outside the Party since coming to power (Saich 2017; Caster 2017)? If Xi drew only one set of lessons, the need to crush enemies and prioritise stability above all else, and not another, the need to avoid a politics of struggle and exclusion, that would be enormously revealing of what kind of person Xi is. Another possibility is that his position as top leader changed him—his own father Zhongxun once said, "This thing power depraves people" (*quanli zhege dongxi fushi ren a 权力这个东西腐蚀人啊*). (Chen 2013: 423). As the work of John Garnaut reveals, princelings argue about whether Bo Xilai's youthful experience really had any effect on his "later excesses" (Garnaut 2013: 28). Xi himself may be struggling with the question of how to balance the duelling lessons of the Mao era.

## Conclusion

In 1984, the author Ke Yunlu 柯云路 published a novel, *New Star*, which included a character bearing such a strong resemblance to Xi Jinping that some wondered whether the character was in fact partly based on him (Ke

2016). In March 2017, Ke was asked what could be learned about the current generation of leadership from *New Star*. Ke answered:

They are comparatively strong. They dare to act. They have a consciousness of reform. In some areas they are not sticklers for the legacy of their predecessors. They have a strong consciousness of national revival. They have ample political experience. They are idealists as well as pragmatists, but everything depends on feasibility.<sup>(51)</sup>

As Ke's list and the evidence provided above suggest, a generally consistent mosaic of the characteristics of Xi and some others among his generation had already emerged many years ago. How the potentially contradictory impulses will play out remain to be seen. On the one hand, China is now led by a tough individual on a mission to save the PRC, a plan that includes restoring faith in the CCP's historic mission. However, within the broader context of Xi's belief in the importance of personal motivation and conviction, he has proven to be quite flexible with regard to means. Mao used to emphasise the difference between being principled in strategy and flexible in tactics—Xi has apparently inherited this concept.

Whether Xi's historically-formed worldview will help or hurt regime resiliency over the long term today remains to be seen. A leader with another set of historical baggage might have settled on a different path to shore up the PRC, one that enhanced stability by unambiguously supporting collective leadership and inner-party democracy; fought corruption by employing the media and improving the rule of law; provided more rights to its citizens; and ambitiously pursued the reforms necessary for China's long-term economic vibrancy. Xi has bet China's future on a rather different set of policies.

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49. Gao Kai 高锴, "习仲勋建议制定'不同意见保护法'" (*Xi Zhongxun jianyi zhiding 'butong yijian baohufa*), *Xi Zhongxun suggested establishing a 'Different Viewpoint Protection Law'*, *Yanhuang Chunqiu* (Chinese Annals) 12, 2013.

50. Wang Youqin 王友琴, "雾霾下的文革历史" (*Wumai xia de wenge lishi*, Cultural Revolution history in the smog), *华夏文摘增刊* (*Huaxia Wenzhai Zengkan*) 99, 7 December 2014.

51. Ian Johnson, "Liberating China's Past: An Interview with Ke Yunlu," *The New York Review of Books* (blog), 29 March 2017, <http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2017/03/29/liberating-china-past-ke-yunlu/> (accessed on 3 May 2018).

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