

Dictator's Shadow

Chinese Elite Politics Under Xi Jinping

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ABSTRACT: President Xi Jinping is arguably the most powerful Chinese leader since Chairman Mao. Recent constitutional revisions and a mid-term leadership reshuffle has only substantiated the fear that Xi, like Mao, has no intention of handing over power to a future successor. Does Xi's rise signal an end to collective leadership and does a stronger president translate into a weaker party? In this article, I review the methods by which Xi has come to consolidate power as well as the implications for Chinese elite politics in the future. Drawing insights from the comparative literature, I question the zero-sum relationship between executive and institutional strength. Although Xi has certainly amassed unprecedented personal power, it has not necessarily come at the expense of the Party. Instead, the dangers of Xi Jinping's power grab are more likely to result from a chilling effect on dissenting opinions and thinning out of the leadership pipeline, each of which is likely to undermine governing capacity over the medium to long-term.

KEYWORDS: China, Authoritarian Regimes, Elite Politics, Power Sharing, Collective Leadership, Institutions, Succession.

One-man rule is cited as a common source of regime breakdown—what Milan Svolik (2012) refers to as “failures in power-sharing.” The reason why power-sharing under authoritarian rule is so hard is self-evident: in the absence of democratic competition there is little to deter incumbent leaders from abusing their office at the expense of other elites. Against this backdrop, China's post-Mao period stands out as an example of relatively effective power-sharing, or what the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) refers to as “collective leadership.” During this 40-year period, we have observed between three and six peaceful transitions of power, from one incumbent to another. ⁽¹⁾

Rapid concentration of power in President Xi Jinping has raised serious questions about the efficacy and durability of Chinese power sharing institutions, leading some observers to conclude that “collective leadership [in China] is dead.” ⁽²⁾ In this article, I push back on such claims by reviewing China's leadership norms and institutions as well as how they are being challenged. Building on the work of Slater (2003), I start from the premise that personalisation and institutionalisation under autocracy are not a zero-sum game. In the case of China, ambiguous leadership institutions, coupled with elite complicity, have in fact facilitated Xi's power grab.

Instead, I argue that the dangers of personalisation are more likely to concern future governance challenges. First, departure from collective decision-making procedures, coupled with increasing censorship, is likely to discourage critical voices from participating in the political discourse. This chilling effect will make it harder for the regime to anticipate future challenges and avoid unnecessary policy blunders. Second, anti-corruption purges, combined with an apparent desire to seed loyalists, has either discouraged or prevented younger contenders from moving up through the ranks, effectively thinning out the pipeline of future leaders. This potential shortage of qualified contenders will affect the Party irrespective of whether Xi remains in office.

Chinese elite politics under Xi Jinping

In explaining the CCP's durability, scholars point to China-specific leadership institutions, norms, and procedures, which in theory facilitate stable power sharing. In particular, prior research points to: organisational fragmentation that prevents incumbents from monopolising power (Lampton and Lieberthal 1992; Xu 2011), age and term limits that prevent incumbents from entrenching themselves in office (Ma 2016; Nathan 2003; Shirk 2002; Manion 1993), along with procedures for collective decision-making that incorporate lower levels through reciprocal accountability (Shirk 1993; Hu 2014).

Recent consolidation and personalisation of power around Xi Jinping raises serious questions about each of the above. Over the last five years, Xi has resurrected the titles of “Core Leader” (Miller 2016), immortalised his ideological “thought” into the CCP constitution (Miller 2017), ⁽³⁾ and revised the national constitution to remove term limits for the office of the presidency. ⁽⁴⁾ How did Xi Jinping accumulate such an unprecedented amount of personal power and what does it mean for the future of elite politics in China?

I begin by outlining the boundaries of collective leadership and examine just how far Xi has pushed them. Like Slater, who examined packing, rigging, and circumventing of Malaysia's leadership institutions under Mohamad Mahathir, I focus on challenges posed by Xi Jinping towards the separation

1. Hua Guofeng briefly succeeded Mao Zedong before relinquishing control to Deng Xiaoping. Deng initially designated two successors, Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang. After helping bring both down, Deng fully handed the reigns to Jiang Zemin. Jiang relinquished power to Hu Jintao in 2002, who then handed it to Xi Jinping in 2012.
2. For example, see: Jeremy Page and Chun Han Wong, “Xi Jinping Is Alone at the Top and Collective Leadership ‘Is Dead,’” *The Wall Street Journal*, 25 October 2017, www.wsj.com/articles/chinas-xi-elevated-to-mao-status-1508825969 (accessed on 15 November 2017).
3. The CCP added Deng's name and thought to the constitution after he died in 1997.
4. “China's National Legislature Adopts Constitutional Amendment,” *Xinhua*, 13 March 2018, www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-03/11/c_137031606.htm (accessed on 15 March 2018).

Table 1 – Leadership Positions Held by Xi Jinping

Leadership body	Title	Tenure since	Precedent
Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party	Gen. Secretary	2012.11	Y
Central Military Commission of the CCP	Chair	2012.11	Y
Central Leading Group for Taiwan Affairs	Head	2012.11	Y
Presidency of the People's Republic of China	President	2013.03	Y
Central Military Commission of the PRC	Chair	2013.03	Y
Central Leading Group for Foreign Affairs, National Security	Head	2013.03	Y
Central Leading Group for Financial and Economic Work	Head	2013.03	Y
PRC National Security Committee	Chair	2013.11	new
Central Leading Group for Comprehensively Deepening Reforms	Chair	2013.11	new
Central Leading Group for Network Security and Information Technology	Head	2014.02	new
Leading Group for Deepening Reform of National Defense and Military	Head	2014.02	new
PLA Joint Operations Command Center	Cmdr. in Chief	2016.04	new

Note: Based on Li (2016) and expanded upon records from *China Vitae* Research Library.

of powers, norms surrounding succession, and procedures for collective decision-making in China. Although each of these features are aimed at constraining despotic rule, each is also subordinate to the primary goal of political domination by the CCP. As such, we should allow for the possibility that personalisation of power can occur even if a ruling party's key institutions are still intact (Slater 2003).

Circumventing the separation of powers

The 17th Party Congress Communique from 2007 defines collective leadership as "a system with a division of responsibilities among individual leaders to prevent arbitrary decision-making by a single top leader."⁽⁵⁾ In stark contrast, the first PB meeting of the 19th Congress in October 2017 concluded that "centralised and unified leadership by the Party is the highest principle of the leadership." Most recently, Xi Jinping's outgoing anti-corruption czar, Wang Qishan, penned an essay in *People's Daily* outlining "problems with separating party and state," and explaining why future challenges would require doing away with this division.⁽⁶⁾

Anticipating Wang's thesis, Xi Jinping is actively blurring the divisions between politics, economics, and military affairs since stepping into office in 2012. This distortion of boundaries is clearly visible in the number and span of leadership positions currently held by Xi Jinping, referred to by some as the "chairman of everything."⁽⁷⁾ By Cheng Li's (2016) count, Xi now holds a total of 12 top posts in the country's most powerful leadership bodies (see Table 1).

With the exception of the core titles of General Party Secretary, President, and Chairman of the Central Military Commission, the remaining positions fall into the category of "leading groups," which are informal bodies of extreme power—often having more influence than respective ministries. The mere presence of so many leading groups seems itself a contradiction to collective leadership, separation of power, and constitutional authority more broadly. Yet, this is precisely what they are designed to do, i.e., overcome bureaucratic or organisational barriers, pool resources, and push through policy agendas (Miller 2008). Whether intended or not, CCP leaders, beginning with Mao,⁽⁸⁾ have routinely taken advantage of the leading groups to bypass opposition and assert control; Xi Jinping is just the latest.

What is perhaps different, however, is how Xi's leading groups cross-cut and overlap multiple policy arenas, some of which have traditionally fallen

under the purview of other Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC) members and State Council ministers. For instance, the vaguely named Central Leading Group for Comprehensively Deepening Reforms conceivably oversees anything from financial markets to environmental regulation. At the same time, however, Xi has not appropriated portfolios that were not his for the taking. As Table 1 summarises, seven of Xi's titles have precedents, insofar as they were previously held by Hu Jintao, and by Jiang Zemin before him. The remaining five offices were conjured up during Xi's first term in office, and there is nothing in formal or informal party guidelines that discourages such action. For instance, the National Security Commission gives Xi indirect control over both foreign and domestic security, without expressly taking over those portfolios. Similarly, Xi's most recent title, Commander-in-Chief of "PLA Joint Operations," lays claim to new political territory, as there were no formal "joint operations" under previous administrations.

In other words, rather than overtly breaking down fences, Xi Jinping appears to be re-drawing the bounds and meaning of institutional power-sharing. To be sure, the point here is not in any way to downplay Xi's political bravado, but rather to highlight the nuanced signalling game Xi is playing. Put differently, if Xi wanted to demonstrate his dominance and the end of collective leadership, he might simply appropriate the National Energy Commission (headed by Li Keqiang) or the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI, now run by Zhao Leji). He has not done so, at least not yet. Instead, Xi has circumvented collective leadership through the institution of informal leading groups, a practice that predates his tenure and collective leadership more broadly.

5. Hu Jintao, *以改革创新精神全面推进党的建设新的伟大工程* (*Yi gaige chuangxin jingshen quanmian tuijin dang de jianshe xin de weida gongcheng*, Promoting comprehensive Party building in the spirit of reform and innovation), 17th Chinese Communist Party Congress, 15 October 2007, cpc.people.com.cn/GB/104019/104098/6379184.html (accessed on 15 November 2017).
6. Wang Qishan, *开启新时代 踏上新征程* (*Kaiqi xin shidai ta shang xin zhengcheng*, Opening a new era, stepping out on a new path), *People's Daily*, 7 November 2017, paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2017-11/07/nw.D110000renmrb_20171107_1-02.htm (accessed on 15 November 2017).
7. For instance, see: Javier Hernandez, "China's 'Chairman of Everything': Behind Xi Jinping's Many Titles," *The New York Times*, 25 October 2017, www.nytimes.com/2017/10/25/world/asia/china-xi-jinping-titles-chairman.html (accessed on 15 November 2017).
8. In 1966, Mao Zedong installed loyalists to the Central Leading Small Group on the Cultural Revolution to oversee a mass youth uprising and a widespread purge of his rivals and CCP elite more broadly. During his tenure, Jiang Zemin repeatedly refashioned the Taiwan Affairs Leading Group, at times leaning on generals or diplomats, reflecting changes in his Cross-Straits strategy (Hsiao 2013).

Even if there is still some separation of power at the very top, Xi is dramatically reshaping the way power is organised just below. These effects are most vivid within the military. Though often seen as an arm of the CCP, the PLA has traditionally enjoyed a measure of autonomy from the political state, at times acting in violation of or even contradiction to the aims of the leadership (Cheung 2001). Since Xi took office, however, thousands of military personnel, including hundreds of senior officers, have been purged and the traditional system of regional command, a vestige of the PLA's land-based limitations, has been scrapped and replaced with five theatres under the direct oversight of the Central Military Commission (CMC), headed by Xi.⁽⁹⁾ The CMC itself was downsized from 11 members to seven,⁽¹⁰⁾ and in December 2017, the CCP Central Committee (CCOM) announced that the People's Armed Police Force (PAP), a force of more than 600,000 overseen by both the State Council and the CMC since 1982, would be put under the direct command of the CMC alone, beginning on 1 January 2018.

Consolidation within China's cabinet mirrors that of the military. As of March 2017, the State Council, chaired by Premier Li Keqiang, has been reduced from 35 members to 27. As in the case of the military, the merger of prominent ministries and the creation of new agencies and administrations is being touted on grounds of modernisation and efficiency.⁽¹¹⁾ This claim is not unwarranted. For instance, the recently proposed Banking and Insurance Regulatory Commission, a State Immigration Administration, and an International Development Cooperation Agency each address policy arenas that have only really emerged over the last decade.

At the same time, and just as in the case of military restructuring, it is hard to ignore how changes within the governing cabinet are blurring the boundary between state and party. The Financial Stability and Development Committee (announced in November 2017), for instance, combines economic oversight with policymaking powers, each of which has traditionally been housed in separate kitchens (Naughton 2017).⁽¹²⁾ Even more dramatically, a new National Supervision Commission (NSC) merges and absorbs the functions of the Ministry of Supervision (a state institution) within that of the CCDI (a party organ).⁽¹³⁾ This new branch of government not only cements Xi Jinping's signature anti-corruption crusade as permanent fixture of the party-state, its institutional rank—equal to that of the State Council and higher than the judicial organs—circumvents the most paramount division of power and rule of law.⁽¹⁴⁾

Rigging the transfer of power

The transfer of power in Chinese leadership politics has been guided in recent decades by three reinforcing norms, none of which are formally or legally outlined in the CCP's or the PRC's constitution (Wang and Vangeli 2016). The first, and arguably the most important, concerns age and term limits. The second and third are about the nomination and the grooming of future leaders, respectively. Below, I briefly review the origins of these succession norms and the degree to which they are being followed today.

One of Deng Xiaoping's pivotal reform efforts was rejuvenating the CCP ranks by persuading revolutionary leaders into retirement (Manion 1993). Although Deng refrained from adopting a specific age threshold for top leaders, age restrictions for provincial and ministerial-level leadership positions, along with fixed term limits, were adopted into the constitution. These efforts gradually culminated into norms for retirement, with lower-level leaders facing mandatory retirement at 60 and mid-level leaders in the Central Committee at 65 (Nathan 2003). The norm for top leaders is not in-

scribed in any rule book, but precedent suggests that incumbents may continue to serve when they are still 67, but not if they have reached 68, a practice widely known as the "seven-up, eight-down (*qi shang, ba xia*)" rule.⁽¹⁵⁾ In practice, this norm, combined with the age demographics of upper-most leadership cohorts, has also constrained top leaders to two terms in office, which happens to coincide with the state positions.

Rather than violating the age-based retirement norm, Xi is taking full advantage of it. Although many expected 69-year-old Wang Qishan, a key Xi ally and principal agent of Xi's anti-corruption campaign, to stay in the PBSC, he officially retired from his party portfolio during the 19th Party Congress.⁽¹⁶⁾ This, of course, did not prevent Wang from taking over the vice-presidency, a position that carries no age restriction. Furthermore, all 16 members from the 18th PBSC who had passed the age threshold were retired, freeing up slots for Xi loyalists, including the elevation of 67-year-old Li Zhanshu to the PBSC.

Another, more ambiguous, set of norms concerns the selection and grooming of successors, a perennial source of friction and uncertainty in non-democratically constituted regimes. The CCP is thought to have made inroads into this problem by extending the succession process across overlapping generations, whereby leaders-in-waiting take on key roles within the PBSC in advance of their expected promotion (Ma 2016). This staggered approach has two important implications. First, it means that future leaders are well-socialised into the leadership structure before taking formal positions. Second, it implies that although incumbents are constrained from directly naming their own successors they have considerable influence in nominating contenders to succeed one generation later.

Importantly, therefore, adherence to the "seven-up, eight down" age norm implies that all members of the 19th PBSC, including Xi, are too old to carry on the mantle of General Party Secretary after 2022.⁽¹⁷⁾ Xi's predicament aside, the key takeaway of the 19th Party Congress was thus the curious absence of any leader-in-waiting. A surprise constitutional overhaul, conducted behind the scenes of the 2018 national legislative session, helped clear things up by removing term limits for the office of President (also held by Xi Jinping). As with the vice-presidency, the presidency carries no age re-

9. "China's Military Regrouped into Five PLA Theater Commands," *Xinhua*, 1 February 2016, www.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-02/01/c_135065429.htm (accessed on 15 November 2017).
10. Charlotte Gao, "Has Xi Fully Consolidated His Power Over the Military?" *The Diplomat*, 8 January 2018, thediplomat.com/2018/01/has-xi-fully-consolidated-his-power-over-the-military/ (accessed on 15 January 2018).
11. Government Overhaul Plan, mp.weixin.qq.com/s/_mG6KoJHKvXPpE6YE3zh9w (accessed on 15 March 2018).
12. "China Establishes Financial Stability and Development Committee," *Xinhua*, 8 November 2017, www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-11/08/c_136737949.htm (accessed on 15 November 2017).
13. There is no question as to the CCP's predominance within the NSC. At the national level 14 out of the 17 leadership members come with affiliations to either the Central or provincial Disciplinary Inspection Commissions (DIC). At the provincial level more than 170 of the roughly 300 provincial committee members have ties to provincial DICs. Author's calculations based on provincial reports.
14. See: Charlotte Gao, "China Plans to Amend Its Constitution," *The Diplomat*, 28 December 2017, thediplomat.com/2017/12/china-plans-to-amend-its-constitution/ (accessed on 18 January 2018).
15. Wang and Vangeli (2016) refer to this as the "Li Ruihuan Clause" because it was the uncomfortable task of retiring Li Ruihuan in 1997—then 68 years old—that encouraged members of the 15th Congress, with strong pressure from Jiang Zemin, to lower the formal retirement age of top leaders from 70 to 68.
16. See: Wang Xiangwei, "Despite Retirement, Xi's Right-Hand Man Wang Qishan is Still Within Arm's Reach," *South China Morning Post*, 2 December 2017, www.scmp.com/week-asia/opinion/article/2122250/despite-retirement-xis-right-hand-man-wang-qishan-still-within (accessed on 15 December 2017).
17. Zhao Leji, the youngest member, will be 65 in 2022 and can look forward to no longer than one more term in the PBSC, which ought to disqualify him from the top spot.

**Table 2 – 19th Party Congress Politburo
(Standing Committee Excluded)**

Member	Age	Jiang	Hu	Xi	CCOM entry
Hu Chunhua	54		✓		2007
Ding Xuexiang	55			✓	2017
Chen Min'er	57			✓	2012
Li Qiang	58			✓	2017
Huang Kunming	61			✓	2017
Li Hongzhong	61	–	–	–	2017
Li Xi	61			✓	2017
Cai Qi	62			✓	2017
Chen Quanguo	62		✓		2012
Guo Shengkun	63	✓			2012
Chen Xi	64			✓	2012
Yang Xiaodu	64			✓	2012
Liu He	65			✓	2012
Wang Chen	67	✓			2002
Xu Qiliang	67	✓			2002
Sun Chunlan	67		✓		2007
Yang Jiechi	67	–	–	–	2007
Zhang Youxia	67	–	–	–	2007

Note: I treat the incumbent leader during entry into the central committee as a key indicator for a possible factional tie. Then, I consider shared working experience and personal connections as confirmatory. In the absence of confirmatory links, I do not assign a factional tie. Based on records from *China Vitae* Research Library.

striction, meaning that Xi Jinping can comfortably and legally retain his position as head of state after 2022. A future accommodation for Xi to hold concurrent control of the Party's General Secretary position beyond 2022, despite his advanced age, will thus be easily defensible.

Packing the balance of power

In addition to institutional divisions and succession norms, many point to the role of factional politics as providing a *de facto* balance of power (Cai and Treisman 2006). Factions revolve around CCP leaders, who play the role of patrons, leveraging their position of power to cultivate personal networks of clients (Nathan 1973). Importantly, CCP norms around the transfer of power facilitate factional competition by creating room for more than one patron at a time; namely, the incumbent leader and the predecessor. That is, by preventing incumbents from hand-picking their own successor but allowing them to appoint prospective leaders who might one day succeed their successor, CCP norms extend the shadow of the incumbent at least two generations ahead. In theory, this iterative process ought to ensure some balance of personal power within the top echelon of leaders (Ma 2016). Ironically, although Hu Chunhua is highly unlikely to be promoted in the future, his presence as one of only three PB members young enough to be named General Secretary in 2022 is at least a symbolic nod to the idea of staggered succession, insofar as he is widely seen as having been Hu Jintao's nominee from 2012.

The present PBSC features representatives from each of China's most powerful factions. Premier Li Keqiang and Vice Premier Wang Yang both hail from the Chinese Communist Youth League and are seen as having ties to former General Secretary Hu Jintao's "League faction" (*Tuanpai*

帮派). Han Zheng is most closely associated with former General Secretary Jiang Zemin's "Shanghai clique," while Zhao Leji and Li Zhanshu are both seen as part of Xi's emerging "New *Zhijiang* army." The seventh member, Wang Hu-ning, is a low-profile academic who has connections with each of the above groupings, having helped pen Jiang's "Three Represents," Hu's "Scientific Development," and Xi's "Socialist Evolution" theories, each of which is now enshrined in the CCP constitution.

Although the PBSC appears roughly balanced, as already noted, according to the "seven up, eight down" rule, practically the entire current PBSC will have to retire in 2022. The fulcrum of balance is therefore more likely to be found in the enlarged PB, which is heavily stacked in Xi's favour. Among the 18 current PB members who are not in the standing committee, only three could convincingly be described as members of either Hu's or Jiang's respective cliques, compared to nine who could be labelled as part of Team Xi (see Table 2).⁽¹⁸⁾ Such groupings are problematic, both conceptually and analytically. Specifically, identifying a factional affiliation often boils down to determining a person's expressed or perceived loyalty towards a patron (Shih 2008). The problem, of course, is deciding whether those expressing loyalty to an incumbent leader are genuine clients, since not demonstrating such allegiance is not much of an option.

Which individuals made it into the PB is also only half the story. The recent career jolts to three leaders tied to Hu Jintao is a case in point. Sun Zhengcai's removal just before the 19th Congress—at only 54 years old and an obvious Hu protégé—alongside the unceremonious early retirement of Li Yuanchao and the quiet demotion of Liu Qibao, two prominent *Tuanpai* kingpins, signal with very little ambiguity that Hu Jintao's remaining influence within the CCP leadership is token at best.⁽¹⁹⁾ In short, while the current PB reflects some semblance of balance, when we parse through the optics, it becomes quite clear that Xi Jinping has taken full advantage of his position to tip the scales sharply in his favour.

Dampening dissent

The relative ease with which Xi Jinping has refashioned and reconstituted the institutional infrastructure raises questions about the internal procedures underpinning collective leadership; namely that of Inner-Party Democracy (Lin 2002; Hu 2010). The concept, admittedly vague, rests in the belief that lower levels of power, despite being selected by the top leaders, exercise some influence over top leaders and decisions through a process referred to as "reciprocal accountability" (Shirk 1993). Although reciprocal accountability has not been directly demonstrated in China, the process by which the CCOM ratifies PB decisions and appointments is codified in the constitution.⁽²⁰⁾

18. There is no clear-cut way to measure factional alignments. While some look at home town and schooling experience, others prioritise common work experience. I treat the incumbent leader during entry into the central committee, widely seen as the inner circle of the CCP, as a key indicator for a possible factional tie. Then, I consider shared working experience and personal connections as confirmation. In the absence of confirmatory links, I do not assign a factional tie.

19. Both Li and Liu were prominent members of the Chinese Communist Youth League, the organisational base for Hu Jintao's *Tuanpai* faction. While Li has gone into early retirement, Liu and Zhang have been demoted from the PB positions in the 18th Congress to CCOM positions in the 19th, without much explanation.

20. Central Committee members have exercised institutional power vis-à-vis PB members in other communist systems such as the Soviet Union in 1957 and 1964, and by a no-confidence vote in Vietnam in 2014.

Whereas the 17th and 18th congresses were each preceded by an internal election,⁽²¹⁾ selection in the 19th Congress was conducted by “face-to-face” consultation, with Xi Jinping personally meeting with 59 senior and retired leaders to seek their “suggestions.” Other senior leaders also held one-on-one sessions with 290 ministerial cadres and senior military officers.⁽²²⁾ To understand what this means procedurally as well as politically, it is worth briefly digressing for a review of internal polls and consultation.

There are two aspects to internal CCP election procedures that set them far apart from elections typical in Western democratic contexts. First, they are secret, so the outcome can never be independently verified. Second, Chinese internal elections are not contests among competing candidates. Instead, they operate as straw polls, based on a menu drafted by the PBSC, from which voters can identify who they would *not* want to be promoted. In October 2017, for instance, roughly 8 percent of proposed candidates for the 19th CCOM were eliminated by negative selection.⁽²³⁾

This approach departs from positive selection in two important ways. First, it biases against the rise of popular candidates, a principle that is a mainstay of collective leadership (Gueorguiev and Schuler 2016). Second, negative voting allows voters to knock off multiple names at once, which makes it difficult for voters to coordinate on a preferred candidate. In practice, negative selection delivers a range of least bad options, thereby empowering the PBSC to mix and match rather than having to adopt a set meal.

Consultation is a different decision-making process but relies on roughly the same principles and leans even more sharply in the same top-heavy direction. As in negative voting, its key premise is that decision-makers set the agenda by defining the proposed list of candidates. Similarly, consultation also makes it difficult for the input providers to coordinate on preferred candidates because they are communicating vertically with the senior leaders but not horizontally among themselves. In effect, this provides senior leaders valuable information without the risk of bottom-up coordination.

There is a cost, however. Not only does the compartmentalisation of input undermine the institutional basis of reciprocal accountability, face-to-face consultation, as opposed to a ballot, is unlikely to yield much in the way of unfiltered information. This risk increases with the personalisation of power, as any disagreement with nominees or policy proposals could be interpreted as disagreement with Xi Jinping himself. In other words, the move towards consultation, in combination with personalisation, will discourage elites from revealing preferences and speaking out. This, in turn, will compound the regime's information problem, make it harder to anticipate opposition, and increase the chance of policy mistakes (Stromseth et al. 2017).

The end of collective leadership?

Does an ever stronger Xi Jinping translate into a weaker CCP? If we accept the idea that personalisation is antithetical to institutional survival, then Xi Jinping's affront on collective leadership represents a substantial liability for CCP survival. At the same time, the zero-sum relationship between personalisation and institutionalisation is not watertight. As Slater (2003) reminds us, highly institutionalised autocracies practice norms and procedures to constrain personal power, “but they are neither the sole nor the primary purposes of authoritarian institutions.” Ultimately, the *raison d'être* of authoritarian institutions is not to prevent one-man rule, but to “supply a regime with the ‘infrastructural power’ necessary to implement its command over potential [opponents]” (Slater 2003: 82).

Applied to the case of China, there are at least three reasons why Xi's consolidation of power might not have come at the direct expense of the Party. First, it is important to remember that the seeds of Xi's unprecedented rise were sown well in advance of his taking office. Specifically, in reducing the PBSC from nine to seven members, five of whom would be too old to stay on past the 19th Congress, CCP elites expressed a preference for centralising and consolidating power in one leader. Furthermore, Xi's ability to lead with a strong hand had everything to do with the fact that Hu Jintao handed over all key leadership positions in one clean transfer. As Joseph Fewsmith (2013) put it when commenting on the 18th Congress of 2012:

Ironically the apparent concentration of power in the hands of those with strong ties to Jiang Zemin may permit Xi Jinping to emerge as a significantly stronger leader than Hu Jintao in 2002 and later years, even as this sort of political game could threaten over time the norms that have provided political stability in the Party.

Surely, Xi Jinping has proven far more capable of personal aggrandisement than his peers may have ever anticipated, but it was a strongman they asked for.

Second, by the end of Hu Jintao's second term, elite politics in China had given way to a not-so-hidden competition between factional camps. Elite cohesion was so fraught that in the months leading up to the 18th Congress rumours floated of an armed coup.⁽²⁴⁾ In September of 2012, Xi Jinping himself went missing for more than two weeks, fuelling speculation of a power struggle. More generally, elites (not to mention average citizens) were openly bemoaning corruption, pollution, ballooning government debt, and widespread ideological apathy. In short, the CCP was in the grip of factional infighting, and at risk of losing its political compass. While many may have hoped for liberal reforms as the solution, the temptation of a strong leader proved highly attractive, even if it risked undermining collective leadership.

Third, many of the festering problems from the end of Hu's tenure have not been resolved. Today, China's debt-to-GDP ratio has edged up to anywhere between 260%, according to official statistics, to around 320, based on independent assessments (Shih 2017). Similarly, SOE and banking sector reforms, not to mention lofty promises about rule of law, have made disappointingly little progress over the last five years—something Xi Jinping and his cabinet have acknowledged and promised to double up on, during speeches at the 2018 annual legislative session. All this comes at a time of heightened international insecurity and economic exposure for the Chinese state. The prospect of a third term for Xi Jinping, if anything, promises some continuity in policy direction and commitments. In short, Xi's personalisation of power in China, as was the case with Mahathir in Malaysia, may have helped rather than undermined the Party's position.

21. Under the original system, senior leaders, including outgoing CCOM and CCDI members, could nominate and ultimately vote for new CCOM and CCDI members based on a menu of candidates vetted by the PBSC. In 2012, this procedure was extended to include allowing these voters to vote on the members of the Politburo Standing Committee as well. See: Wang Xiangwei, “Despite Retirement, Xi's Right-Hand Man Wang Qishan is Still Within Arm's Reach,” *op. cit.*
22. “How China's New Central Leadership are Elected,” *Xinhua*, 26 October 2017, www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-10/26/c_136707985.htm (accessed on 15 November 2017).
23. Elimination in previous congresses is reported to have ranged between 5 and 10 percent. See: “At Least 8 pct of CPC Central Committee Nominees Voted Off,” *Xinhua*, 23 October 2017, www.webcitation.org/6x9ue2EXG (accessed on 1 November 2017)
24. While it is impossible to independently verify any of the rumours, the 2015 conviction of Zhou Yongkang, then China's security chief, for the unprecedented crime of “non-organization political activities” lends credence to the notion that some form of extra-institutional contest for power likely occurred just prior to the 18th Congress.

The argument here is not that personalisation is fully compatible with institutionalisation, but that when it comes to non-democratic rule there are higher priorities. Using Slater's terminology, facilitating Xi's consolidation arguably contributed to the CCP's infrastructural power at a time when serious fissures were emerging. Whether the bet pays off in the long-term is an open question; but depicting Xi's rise as coming fully at the expense of the CCP is misleading.⁽²⁵⁾

As institutional theorists and scholars of comparative politics have long argued, third-party enforcement is a definitional trait of institutions (Streeck and Thelen 2005), and in a one-party state there is none. Instead, the bite of authoritarianism comes from the risk of violent power struggle that looms in the background (Boix and Svobik 2013). Xi's cautious and tedious approach to circumventing, rigging, and packing demonstrates that he is mindful of such risks. For example, amending the constitution to abolish term limits for the presidency, a ceremonial position relative to that of general secretary, did more to signal Xi's intentions than to facilitate them. Put simply, publicly floating and then having the entire legislature vote on rule change that could easily have been circumvented, and doing so five years in advance seems like a risky approach to committing what has been described as an institutional coup.⁽²⁶⁾

Finally, even though Xi's affront on executive constraint has undoubtedly eroded the credibility of collective leadership, we should be realistic about how much has really been lost. The expectation that top leaders resign after two terms, for instance, has been severely discredited, yet, as discussed earlier, these norms were never formally adopted. Indeed, norms on term limits remained very much in question up through 2002. Ironically, their apparent enforcement in 2012, by vesting full power in Xi Jinping, set the stage for their corrosion. Indeed, if we accept the proposition that institutions for collective leadership, e.g., age-based retirement and staggered grooming, are intended to prevent personalisation, we must also acknowledge that such a system also puts incumbents in the difficult position of either resigning themselves to lame-duck status or ruthlessly trying to cannibalise their successor (Herz 1952).⁽²⁷⁾ Whereas Hu Jintao's second term is illustrative of the former, Xi Jinping's is clearly opting for the latter.

The dictator's shadow

Even if the rise of a strongman was evident as early as 2012, it was not until March 2018 that the totality of Xi Jinping's personalisation of power came into sharp relief. Though it is now abundantly clear that Xi Jinping is intent on a third term, his ability to stay in office that long is not a foregone conclusion, nor is it obvious that he plans to stay on indefinitely. Interestingly, on 12 March 2018, shortly after the NPC voted almost unanimously to abolish term limits, the state press went on the defensive, arguing that "the decision does not mean the end of the retirement system for Party and State leaders, nor does it imply lifetime tenure for any leader."⁽²⁸⁾

While we can dismiss the comfort of the propaganda spin, it is worth considering: what are the circumstances under which leaders refuse to retire? The simple answer is *always*. An alternative explanation is that stepping down is inherently risky, as authoritarian leaders are far more likely to suffer violent ends than their democratic counterparts (Cox 2009). These risks do not subside when an incumbent retires. On the contrary, vulnerability increases as they are no longer in any position to protect themselves, or their friends. In short, there is good reason to suspect that authoritarian leaders

are deterred from stepping down by a lack of security for their lives and livelihood, and that of their friends and families (Albertus and Menaldo 2012; Debs 2016; Escriba-Folch 2013).⁽²⁹⁾

In the presence of an informal retirement age and fixed terms, such fears are clear and proximate from day one of an incumbent's tenure. For someone like Xi, who has laid ruin to countless "flies" and several "tigers" since taking office, these worries are compounded every day as new knives are secretly sharpened for revenge. As Susan Shirk put it, "Xi has a big target on his back."⁽³⁰⁾ Ironically, Xi might have been spared future retribution had he abided by party precedent and shielded former and current PB members from his anti-corruption campaign. By going after the likes of Zhou Yongkang and Sun Zhengcai, Xi has opened the floodgates and raised the prospect that his own associates, or perhaps even he himself, could one day be treated the same way.

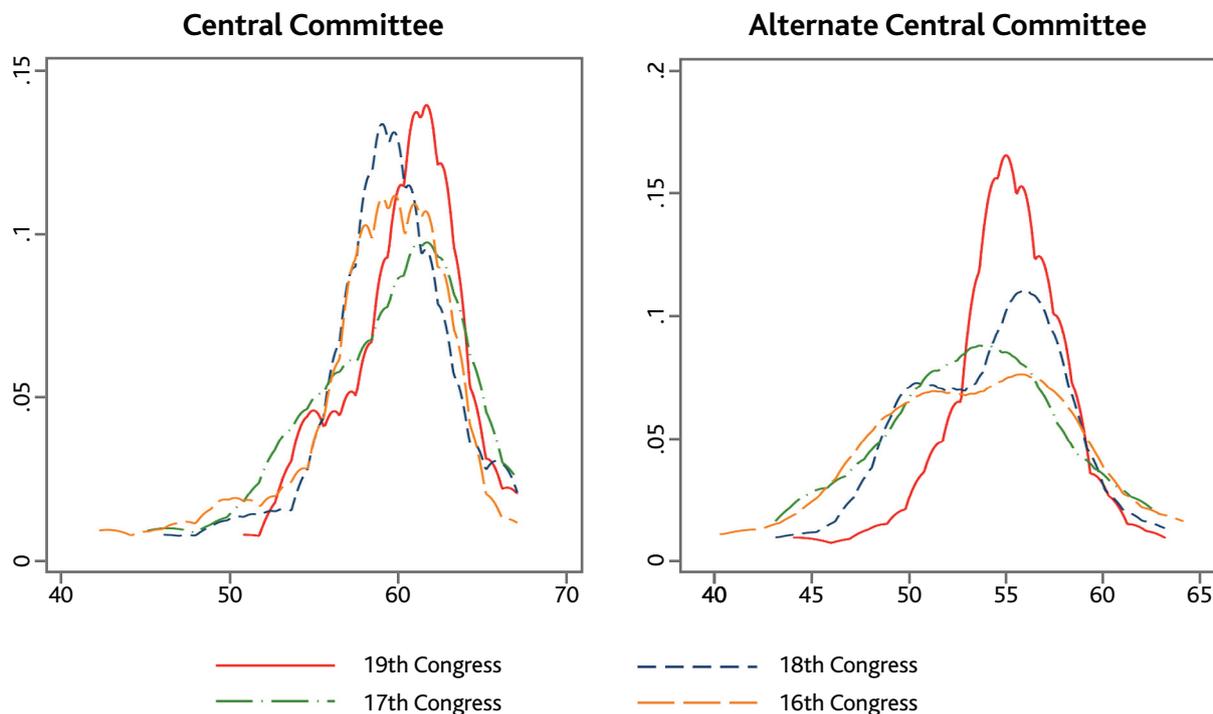
Seen in this light, Xi Jinping's eponymous inscription in the CCP constitution is probably the closest one could get to an iron-clad guarantee for peaceful retirement. Put simply, from the perspective of late 2017, it would seem that Xi Jinping is untouchable, even if he steps down. This, ironically, may be the strongest justification for thinking that Xi might eventually retire voluntarily.

However, even if Xi has secured his place in the sun, the same is not true for his family, friends, or policies, each of which will become vulnerable the moment Xi is no longer in charge. To protect the people and policies he holds dear, Xi will have to cast a long shadow that extends well beyond his eventual departure. Seeing the effects of what such a strategy could bring requires digging deeper into the party pipeline to examine the leadership cohorts of tomorrow.

Seeding the pipeline

As discussed earlier, Chinese leadership norms operate by front-loading the future into the present. For instance, allowing incumbents to groom their successor's successor while discouraging them from hand-picking immediate successors gives incumbents a stake in the perpetuity of the regime without allowing them to dominate the present or the immediate future (Nathan 2003). By the same token, Xi Jinping's power grab is just as consequential for downstream leadership cohorts, irrespective of his own current intentions.

25. It is perhaps worth noting that Mahathir, the personalising Malaysian dictator and protagonist of Slater's 2003 article, orchestrated a smooth handover to a successor that same year. Members of the ruling UMNO wept at his announcement, imploring him to stay on. See: John Roberts, "Malaysian Prime Minister's Sudden Resignation Points to Political Instability Ahead," *World Socialist Web Site*, 5 July 2002, www.wsws.org/en/articles/2002/07/mala-j05.html (accessed on 15 March 2018).
26. While the CCP has a two-thirds majority in the National People's Congress, it only holds a little over a third of the National People's Political Consultative Conference, which also met during the annual legislative session in March 2018. Even if we are deeply sceptical about the independent power of China's legislature, the national focal point of the meeting, combined with the presumed norms around tenure, means that this event was arguably the best opportunity for Xi's opponents to mount a coordinated institutional challenge to his personalisation.
27. Jiang Zemin did considerable damage to Hu Jintao's tenure by refusing to be a lame-duck leader prior to handing over power.
28. See: Zhang Jianfang, "Support for Amendments Belies Naysayers' Prejudice," *China Daily Comment*, *China Daily*, 12 March 2018, english.cctv.com/2018/03/12/ARTIBnPTQNsXajsS6wTr0e5180312.shtml?platform=hootsuite (accessed on 15 March 2018).
29. Consider the late Ahmadou Ahidjo of Cameroon, who voluntarily resigned from power in 1982, only to be tried (in absentia) and sentenced to death in 1984, or the numerous others like him who live or have died in exile after stepping down from power.
30. Cited in Chris Buckley, "Xi Jinping Unveils China's New Leaders but No Clear Successor," *The New York Times*, 24 October 2017, www.nytimes.com/2017/10/24/world/asia/xi-jinping-china.html (accessed on 15 November 2017).

Figure 1 – Central Committee Age Distribution

Note: Based on records from *China Vitae* Research Library.

Some potential downstream effects are visible if we look at the composition of the enlarged CCOM.⁽³¹⁾ Roughly 64% of the members of the 19th CCOM are newcomers. The comparable proportions from 2012 and 2007 were only 48 and 50%, respectively. Whereas much of the turnover in 2007 was the consequence of retirement, a substantial portion of change in 2017 has been forced through corruption-related ousting. In total, 35 members (18 full and 17 alternates) from the 18th CCOM were punished for corruption. Only four members suffered a similar fate during Hu Jintao’s entire tenure. It is worth noting that each of the 35 members punished over the last five years was young enough to conceivably stay in office past 2022.⁽³²⁾

Overall, only two of the 376 members in the 19th CCOM were born in the 1970s. Compare that to 25 members born in the 1960s in the 17th CCOM, a decade earlier. Similarly, of the 204 19th CCOM members with full voting rights, only 32 were born after 1960 and therefore eligible to stay on for two full terms in 2022, compared to 70, a decade earlier. By nearly every metric available, the current CCOM is the oldest since 1992, when the current leadership institutions were first constituted. As illustrated in Figure 1, the age distribution of the 19th CCOM is heavily skewed to the left, meaning far fewer younger cadres—especially among alternate members, who represent the pipeline for CCP leadership in 2032. Indeed, the “Alternates” panel of Figure 1 suggests there is an entire generation of future leaders missing from the CCOM.

The overall shift towards older cadres is partially offset by a small bump of “53-year-old and under” members, seen in the “Full” panel of Figure 1. In terms of continuity, these “bridging” cadres are interesting insofar as they have voting rights to determine the make-up of the PB during the 20th Congress in 2022 and are young enough to make it into the 22nd Congress in 2032. If Xi Jinping were worried about the post-retirement period, it is precisely this group of cadres that would concern him, since their influence bridges across not one but two prospective leadership cohorts.

Overall, there are only 10 “bridging” cadres in the 19th Congress. Although we still do not know enough about this group to assign them to any particular camp, we can examine their respective career tracks. Lu Hao, who also happens to be the youngest of the group, rose rapidly through the ranks, building experience in both local government and central organisations. Lu has also been in the CCOM since 2012 and governor of Heilongjiang since 2013. As of this writing, however, Lu has received no further promotions, signalling a potential stall in his career as a once rising star.⁽³³⁾ By contrast, Zhang Guoqing was parachuted in to serve as mayor of Chongqing from an industry position, with no other political or administrative experience to speak of.

The same distinction between stalled risers and powerful newcomers broadly applies to the rest of the bridging candidates, with veteran technocrats such as Li Ganjie, Ni Yuefeng, and Huang Shouhong finding themselves in roughly the same career grades they occupied a decade ago. By contrast, Liu Zhenli, Wu Zhenglong, Chen Jining, Jin Zhuanglong, and Meng Xiangfeng have all made swift entries into top leadership positions without the thick resumes that typically prop up the weighty portfolios they now hold. While it would be premature to say this latter set of bridging cadres are in Xi’s faction, they very likely owe their recent political fortunes to his patronage.

The advanced overall age of the 19th CCOM warrants a closer look at younger members. The two youngest—both in the alternates pool—are 43-year-old Cai Songtao and 47-year-old Zhou Qi. Cai heads the party committee of impoverished Lankao County in Henan, while Zhou is a prominent

31. The enlarged CCOM includes full and alternate members.

32. Four members—Wang Sanyun, Wu Aiyang, Wang Min, Tian Xiusi—would have to have gotten promoted to the PB in order to stay on.

33. Moreover, Lu’s background as CCYL leader and Hu Jintao protégé are unlikely to win him any favours within Xi Jinping’s growing network.

Table 3 – Bridging Candidates

CCOM Member	Age	Office	Patron	Background	Rising
Lu Hao	50	Governor, Heilongjiang Province	Hu	Localities	–
Liu Zhenli	53	Lt. Gen. of the PLA	Xi	Military	Y
Li Ganjie	53	Minister of Environmental Protection	N/A	Environment	–
Wu Zhenglong	53	Governor, Jiangsu Province	Xi	Localities	Y
Zhang Guoqing	53	Mayor, Chongqing Municipal Committee	Xi	Aerospace	Y
Chen Jining	53	Mayor, Beijing Municipality	Xi	Environment	Y
Jin Zhuanglong	53	Dep. Director Civil-Military Integration Comm.	Xi	Aerospace	Y
Meng Xiangfeng	53	Dep. Director of General Office of the CCOM.	Xi	Discipline	Y
Ni Yuefeng	53	General Administration of Customs	N/A	Discipline	–
Huang Shouhong	53	Director, State Council Research Office	N/A	Management	–

Note: I define "bridging candidates" as those who are young enough to enjoy the unique privilege of both influencing the make-up of the next congress in 2022 as well as making it into the 22nd Congress of 2032. A member is considered "rising" if he or she is consecutively promoted into new portfolios. Based on records from *China Vitae* Research Library.

stem cell biologist at the Chinese Academy of Sciences. Both promotions highlight some of Xi's top policy priorities for the next five years.⁽³⁴⁾

The scarcity of younger cadres within the CCOM implies that future leadership positions may be sourced from outside the traditional pipeline. We already have several examples. Beijing's new mayor, Chen Jining, is an environmental scientist who rose to prominence primarily within academic circles, with only a brief two-year stint as Minister of Environmental Protection (2015-2017). Similarly, both Zhang Guoqing, the new mayor of Chongqing, and Jin Zhuanglong, deputy director of Civil-Military Integration, come straight from the military-aerospace industry. Again, these promotions not only mean more handpicked loyalists in important leadership positions, they also reinforce key themes in Xi's policy rhetoric. For instance, Chen Jining's placement in Beijing—notorious for its air pollution—is unlikely to have been a coincidence.⁽³⁵⁾ Similarly, technology investment, particularly in aerospace, is a key pillar in Xi's military modernisation strategy.⁽³⁶⁾

More generally, the absence of young faces in the CCOM is disconcerting for the overall health of the CCP. First, it implies a dearth of eligible talent for filling future leadership positions. Second, it suggests we should expect more one-term leaders, who serve only five years in a top leadership position before retiring. This would shorten the political cycle and infuse more uncertainty into long-term policymaking. Furthermore, a dearth of younger officials means that even if talent were to be found, promotions would have to be fast-tracked through the system—implying thinner resumes and perhaps less appreciation for party etiquette in the top levels of leadership to come.

Discussion

Elite politics under the Xi Jinping administration has been anything but dull. Former and rising leaders within the Party have been convicted of corruption and the top echelons of power have been thoroughly reconstituted, all while Xi Jinping has doubled his portfolio, enshrined his name in the CCP charter, expanded his anti-corruption campaign to the state and public sector, and abolished any legal impediments to holding on to power indefinitely. How did Xi Jinping amass such unprecedented levels of personal power? What does this tell us about the future of the CCP under Xi Jinping and beyond? Is collective leadership dead, as some have suggested? Are we in store for a relapse into the strongman politics of the Mao era?

In this review, I have argued that Xi Jinping's rise was facilitated by CCP elites, who in 2012 invested full authority into Xi's office, even before he entered it. As in the case of Mahathir in Malaysia, we cannot ignore the possibility that Xi Jinping's consolidation of power has helped stabilise a fractured party, at least for the short term. Further, I have shown that the inherent malleability of Chinese leadership norms and institutions has allowed Xi Jinping to expand his influence and promote his loyalists without overtly violating them. Indeed, the painstaking manner by which Xi Jinping has gone about securing his position and policy priorities arguably says less about his hunger for power than it does about his concern about upsetting the semblance of institutional legitimacy.

Remember, ambiguous succession norms meant that Xi could have held on to power without amending the constitution, and he could have kept Wang Qishan without retiring him from the PBSC only to promote him to the vice-presidency three months later. Similarly, Xi's anti-corruption agents within the CCDI could have imposed their control over procuratorates relatively easily, given overlapping leadership roles. Instead, Xi initiated a complex institutionalisation process for the NSC and subordinated provincial commissions,⁽³⁷⁾ backed by a new National Supervision Law that even went through 30 days of public notice and comment.⁽³⁸⁾ Curiously enough, it is believed that this institutionalisation effort, not a grand scheme, set off the constitutional revision process that opened the door to the removal of term

34. In 2014, Xi personally adopted Lankao as a pet project for poverty alleviation (Stromseth et al. 2017: 21). More recently, Xi inaugurated an ambitious campaign to wipe out poverty by 2020, see: Xu Lei, "Xi Urges Stepped-up Efforts to Eradicate Poverty by 2020," *China Daily*, 23 February 2017, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2017-02/23/content_28310971.htm (accessed on 15 November 2017). In 2016, Xi identified research as one of the core national weaknesses, urging more innovation in the physical and biological sciences. See: "The Future of Chinese Research," *Nature* 534(7608): 435–435, 22 June 2016, www.nature.com/news/the-future-of-chinese-research-1.20123 (accessed on 15 November 2017).

35. It is worth noting that the air quality in Beijing has improved remarkably since November 2017, in large part thanks to the banning of coal burning in the city and surrounding provinces.

36. For a summary and links to the speech, see "7 Things You Need to Know About Xi Jinping's Vision of a 'New Era' for China," *South China Morning Post*, 18 October 2017, www.scmp.com/news/china/policies-politics/article/2115858/key-points-xis-speech-chinas-communist-party-congress (accessed on 15 November 2017). Relatedly, Shih (2017) identifies an entire cohort of aerospace engineers taking on high-profile leadership positions across China, including the governorship of Zhejiang, Guangdong, Hunan, and the party secretary's office in Heilongjiang.

37. "China to Set Up National Supervision Commission Next Year," *Xinhua*, 30 October 2017, www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-10/30/c_136713601.htm (accessed on 15 November 2017).

38. Charles Buckley, "In China, Fears That New Anticorruption Agency Will Be Above the Law," *The New York Times*, 29 November 2017, www.nytimes.com/2017/11/29/world/asia/china-xi-jinping-anticorruption.html (accessed on 15 December 2017).

limits.³⁹ In short, it appears that Xi Jinping is both circumventing existing institutions and cautiously setting up a base, albeit a flimsy one, for new institutions to follow.

To be clear, none of this is a silver lining for the future of democracy in China, but it does suggest that one-party rule has not been replaced by one-man rule. Indeed, Xi's achievements in consolidating power are just as consequential for his willingness to one day retire as they are for his ability to remain in office indefinitely. Put differently, every incumbent leader requires some assurance that neither family, friends, nor legacies will become a target for retribution once he or she leaves office. This is especially true in regimes operating under weak rule of law and for incumbents who have made enemies during their tenure—both of which apply to China and Xi to the utmost degree. In this light, getting one's name inscribed in the preamble of the party constitution is both a signal of supreme power and an insurance policy for peaceful retirement.

Even though we cannot predict Xi's intentions, we can observe the more subtle but systemic impact his power consolidation efforts have had on the Chinese political and administrative system. The impact is broad but concentrated in three areas. First, traditional divisions of power are being

blurred, with party and state functions becoming increasingly indistinguishable. Second, with regards to leadership selection and elite decision-making, we are seeing a departure from intra-party democracy in favour of more top-heavy modes of consultation. The third concerns future cohorts of power, where bottlenecks in the leadership pipeline reveal potential shortages in qualified contenders for future transitions. While these changes do not directly impinge on party norms, they pose challenges to the institutional structure of the party-state and its ability to govern.

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39. Charlotte Gao, "China Plans to Amend its Constitution," *op cit*.

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