

POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CONTROL IN CHINA

THE CONSOLIDATION OF SINGLE-PARTY RULE

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The reshaping of the Chinese party-state under Xi Jinping's rule: A strong state led by a political strongman

Chien-wen Kou

Xi Jinping (习近平) has been reshaping the party-state and state–society relations in China since 2012 at the height of a recentralisation of power. Why did he do so, how did he succeed and what has it done to the regime? Studies of China and authoritarian states must seek out the nature, cause and impact of these changes.

This chapter claims that political changes in the Xi era can be summarised by three intertwined but distinguishable trends: (1) a return to strongman rule, (2) an expansion of the authority of the Communist Party of China (CPC) and (3) a reinforcement of state control over society. Each of these involves changes that herald the revival of a strong state led by a political strongman.

This chapter further argues that while environmental factors have affected his efforts to grasp power, Xi Jinping's political personality has been pivotal in his alteration of the party-state, and the literature has yet to address the psychology behind his decisions. Xi came to power under increasingly complicated international and domestic challenges that called for a strong leader. These included tensions between the United States and China, sovereignty disputes in the South and East China seas, declining economic

growth, cadre corruption, social inequality and social unrest in Tibet and Xinjiang. The Wang Lijun (王立军) incident triggered an upheaval among the party's top leaders, while the waning influence of Jiang Zeming (江泽民) and Hu Jintao (胡锦涛) unbound Xi's structural constraints, all the more amplifying the influence of his political personality.

By conducting a text mining analysis of the use of the phrase *douzheng* (斗争, struggle) in his public statements, this chapter presents Xi's thinking on the conflictual nature of politics, his beliefs in his destiny in China's national rejuvenation and socialist construction, and his preference for strong leadership in the face of political challenges. His thinking and beliefs have driven him to violate power-sharing practices and to prefer political coercion over social co-optation, while the centralisation of power gives him the leverage to meet the nation's challenges and to crush his rivals. Naturally, this poses new risks to the regime.

This chapter is divided into seven sections. The first section 'China and comparative authoritarianism' summarises the most recent mainstream argument of the literature on comparative authoritarianism and argues for China's importance as a case. The second, third and fourth sections provide an overview of the political landscape in China under Xi's rule. The second section, 'A return to strongman rule', discusses the recentralisation of power under a single leader; the third section, 'The expansion of the CPC's authority', outlines how the CPC apparatus diminished the government's role in the political process; and the fourth section, 'The reinforcement of state control over society', focuses on state control over society. The fifth section, 'Xi's circumstances within and without the CPC', describes the context in which Xi came to power. The last two sections focus on psychological factors. The sixth section, 'Xi's world view, historic mission and leadership style', presents Xi's world view, perceived destiny and style of leadership, while the seventh section, 'The formation of Xi's political cognition and beliefs', explains how early life experiences have shaped his political thinking and beliefs.

China and comparative authoritarianism: From a typical to a deviant case

The recent literature on comparative authoritarianism claims that institutions serve to monitor the commitments of autocrats. Authoritarian regimes with greater political institutionalisation last longer and perform better economically (Boix & Svobik, 2013; de Mesquita et al., 2003; Gandhi,

2008; Magaloni, 2008; Slater & Fenner, 2011), challenging the idea that this can be done only with democratic institutions. Autocrats may arbitrarily withhold the personal freedoms and properties of the selectorate, those who participate in the selection of leaders, without institutional constraints. They may also do so to ordinary citizens, who are disenfranchised entirely from the process of selecting leaders. Nevertheless, autocrats are constantly threatened by rebellion among their allies and revolution among their citizens.

Some autocrats rely on power-sharing to avoid rebellion and social co-optation to avoid revolution (see figure 2.1). To acquire and retain power, they build a majority coalition in the selectorate by sharing power. Power-sharing institutions represent the commitment of autocrats to constrain their use of power, and the balance among various factions and bureaucracies makes for a non-zero-sum game between them and their allies. Autocrats can still employ coercion to punish selectorate members who oppose them or shape the atmosphere of severe external challenges to maintain coalition solidarity. Yet the over-centralisation of power in the hands of an autocrat will eventually break down these institutions, and elite politics will inevitably become those of a political strongman.

Autocrats also face the threat of revolution. Disenfranchised citizens might rise when resentment boils over from abuses of power and rampant corruption among political elites. In addition to coercing citizens, autocrats could win their support through social co-optation or collusion. This can be done by means of revenue allocation and personnel arrangements like fiscal subsidies, jobs, social welfare, investment from state-owned enterprises and political recruitments for all or specific social groups.

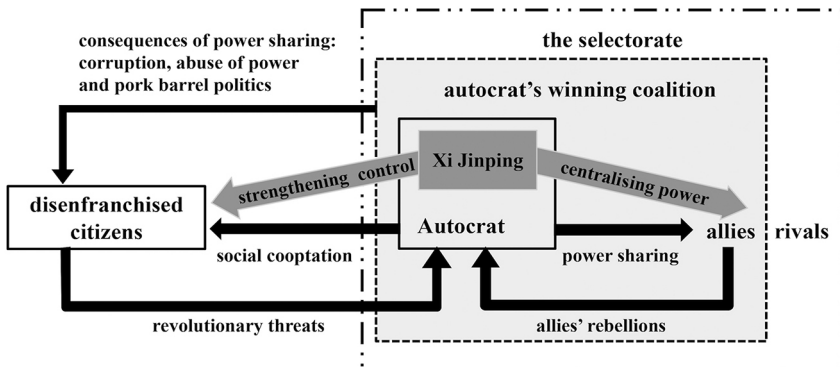


Figure 2.1: Xi's China and comparative authoritarianism: A deviant case

Source: Created by the author.

Owing to their limited resources, autocrats seldom fully implement both power-sharing and social co-optation for long. Some power-sharing practices like tolerating corruption and privileges among their cadres often result in strong social discontent. Accordingly, autocrats must still attend to their citizens to avoid revolution, sometimes at the expense of the selectorate. They must therefore constantly balance power-sharing and social co-optation to secure their rule.

The literature often treats post-1978 China as a successful case of power-sharing in single-party regimes (Gehlbach & Keefer, 2011; Svolik, 2012). Such practices within the CPC's top leadership—the Politburo and its Standing Committee (PBSC)—include collective leadership, age limits, term limits and term integrity, succession by echelon, step-by-step promotion and the exemption of serving and retired PBSC members from prosecution (Kou, 2010, pp. 267–357; Li, 2016, pp. 83–94). In the early 1980s, Deng and other veteran leaders upheld a combination of collective leadership and the division of labour with individual responsibility (集体领导与个人分工相结合, *jiti lingdao yu geren fengong xiangjiehe*) to prevent a return to the over-centralisation of power in the Mao Zedong (毛泽东) era. Power-sharing became institutionalised from Deng Xiaoping (邓小平) to Hu Jintao during a conversion from strongman to oligarchical rule that began in the 1980s.

The CPC oligarchy in Jiang's and Hu's eras was structured with the general secretary as a consensus builder and the first among equals. The vote of each leader carries equal weight when they cast votes to settle controversial issues (Lam, 2015, pp. xii–xiii). Consultation, negotiation and compromise are thereby necessary before a major decision is made, and any move on the part of the general secretary to monopolise power will run up against these structural constraints.¹ This explains how their rule was marked by new rules and precedents of power-sharing while cadre corruption, pork-barrel politics and the abuse of power became rampant at the same time. In this way, oligarchical rule maintains collective leadership as a power-sharing institution, and an increase in a single leader's power threatens the stability of collective leadership.

1 Jiang and Hu could not promote enough trustees to the PBSC and the Politburo to form a majority when they held the office of general secretary. One example of these limitations was Jiang's failed attempt in 1997 to establish a National Security Committee that was modelled after the National Security Council of the United States. When this was opposed by his colleagues in the top leadership, he instead established a National Security SLG (Takungpao, 2013a).

In the early 1980s Deng also called for a distinction between the responsibilities of the party and those of the government (党政分开, *dang zheng fen kai*). He held that the CPC should focus on long-range goals and planning, personnel recommendations, ideological indoctrination work and supervision while day-to-day governance should be left to professional administrators in the State Council and local governments. Its relationship with the judicial system, state-owned enterprises and mass organisations would follow a similar pattern. While the CPC stopped promoting this concept after the Tiananmen tragedy of 1989, its role continued to be one of political, ideological and organisational leadership. The State Council was instrumental in the socioeconomic policies of the 1990s and 2000s. Day-to-day decisions on these issues were made and implemented by the premier while the general secretary had the final say, as in the case of both Zhu Rongji (朱镕基) and Wen Jiabao (温家宝).

Political institutionalisation is a process whereby political actors come to accept the rules, norms and procedures of the allocation and transfer of power. The power structures might or might not reinforce the stability of these political institutions. A dramatic change in the distribution of power among major political actors can render enforcement ineffective and threaten institutions. Since 2012, Xi has begun to break down many of the aforementioned power-sharing practices and strengthen state control over society.

It should be noted that the CPC has been maintaining control through both repression and many forms of social co-optation, one of which is his policy of targeted poverty alleviation (精准扶贫, *jingzhun fupin*). Nevertheless, his relative preference for coercion differs significantly from Hu Jintao.² With this stark deviation from precedent, China has turned from a typical case like those described in the literature into a deviant one that stands in contrast to it.

2 The author would like to thank a reviewer for the suggestion that the CPC often takes advantage of self-censorship through fear to achieve political stability. In this case, the use of threats may be more effective than brutal coercion.

A return to strongman rule

Since 2012, Xi has taken three measures to concentrate power either in his own hands or in the office of the top leader, a trinity of party, state and military leadership.³ His first measure was a series of large-scale personnel reshufflings by which his rivals were purged and his trustees rapidly came to occupy key positions. Although both Jiang and Hu had adopted similar strategies in moves such as the purge of Chen Xitong (陈希同) and Chen Liangyu (陈良宇) and the promotion of the Shanghai clique and Youth League affiliates, the oligarchical power structure at work during their time in office prevented them from achieving the centralisation of power to the extent that Xi has.

From December 2012 to May 2021, 392 high-ranking cadres and officers who were either retired or in service at the deputy minister (副部长, *fubuji*) or deputy group army levels (副军级, *fujunji*) and above were taken down either for corruption or violations of discipline (Zhang, 2021). Eleven Party and state leaders have been toppled between 1992 and the present, eight of whom were ousted after 2012.⁴ The ousting of Sun Zhengcai, one of the two youngest 18th Politburo members and a frontrunner of post-Xi generation leaders, and Zhou Yongkang shows a lack of exemption from prosecution and succession by echelon, two common power-sharing practices in the PBSC.

After the 20th Party Congress in October 2022, four key Youth League affiliates were fully retired or transferred to less important posts. Li Keqiang (李克强) (premier) and Wang Yang (汪洋) (chairman of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, NPPCC) were both 19th PBSC members and retired at the age of 67. Vice Premier Hu Chunhua (胡春华), the youngest 19th Politburo member, and Zhou Qiang (周强), president of the Supreme People's Court, were reassigned to be powerless vice chairmen of the NPPCC at the ages of 60 and 63, respectively. Li, Hu and Zhou were former first secretaries

3 The office of the top leader should be distinguished from Xi as an individual because, while positional power can transfer from one to another, this is not the case with personal authority.

4 They are Chen Xitong (removed in 1995), Cheng Kejie (成克杰, removed in 2000), Chen Liangyu (removed in 2006), Bo Xilai (薄熙来, fell in 2012), Zhou Yongkang (周永康, removed in 2013), Xu Caihou (徐才厚, removed in 2014), Su Rong (苏荣, removed in 2014), Ling Jihua (令计划, removed in 2014), Guo Boxiong (郭伯雄, removed in 2015), Sun Zhengcai (孙政才, removed in 2017) and Yang Jie (杨晶, removed in 2018).

of the Communist Youth League of China. Youth League affiliates usually belonged to Hu Jintao's faction because Hu served as head of the league in the early 1980s.

Meanwhile, several elite groups that had close ties with Xi at various stages in his life have been promoted to important posts. These connections include revolutionary family backgrounds and ties to a school, home province or organisation.⁵ Within the 25-member 19th Politburo, two PBSC members and 12 Politburo members belong to one of these elite groups.⁶ These 14 individuals include the party secretaries of Beijing, Shanghai, Chongqing and Guangdong; the heads of the Central Discipline Inspection Commission (CDIC), the Central Organisation Department, the Central Propaganda Department and the Central General Office; and the two vice chairmen of the Central Military Commission (CMC). Within the seven-member 20th PBSC, all of the four new members who were promoted in the 20th Party Congress had strong connections with Xi. They are Li Qiang (premier), Cai Qi (director of the Central General Office), Ding Xuexiang (executive vice premier) and Li Xi (secretary of the CDIC).

The career paths of Cai Qi and Wang Qishan (王岐山) indicate a weakening of power-sharing practices. Cai Qi received six appointments between November 2013 and October 2017, rapidly advancing from the deputy minister level to the deputy party and state leader level in violation of the common practice of step-by-step promotions. Cai is the third Politburo member after Tan Shaowen (谭绍文) and Ceng Qinghong (曾庆红) since 1978 who did not hold a Central Committee (CC) full or alternate membership for at least one term before obtaining the seat. His promotion to be a PBSC member in 2022 and appointment to head the Central General Office in 2023 made him rank higher than the heads of other functional departments of the CPC. He is likely to be the no. 2 person after Xi in handling party affairs. Wang Qishan's election as vice president of the PRC in March 2018 at the age of 69 weakened the practice of age restrictions whereby party and state leaders do not seek another term after reaching 68 years of age.

5 For more discussion of Xi's connections with his trustees, see Wu (2019).

6 They are Li Zhanshu (栗战书), Zhao Leji (赵乐际), Ding Xuexiang (丁薛祥), Wang Chen (王晨), Liu He (刘鹤), Xu Qiliang (许其亮), Li Xi (李希), Li Qiang (李强), Yang Xiaodu (杨晓渡), Zhang Youxia (张又侠), Chen Xi (陈希), Chen Min'er (陈敏尔), Huang Kunming (黄坤明) and Cai Qi (蔡奇).

Xi's second measure was to reinforce the power of the top leader by strengthening the office of the general secretary through 'rule by leading small groups' (LSGs) (小组治国, *xiaozu zhiguo*). Capable of cross-bureaucratic coordination among the CPC central organs and the ministries of the State Council, central LSGs determine policy guidance for subordinate bureaucratic systems and dominate in policy-making. The expansion in the role and number of central LSGs has been a profound change to institutions under Xi's rule. Xi headed three ongoing central LSGs and seven newly formed ones (see table 2.1), four of which were upgraded to commissions in March 2018. This strengthened their decision-making power and endowed them with the authority to issue official documents and orders to government agencies (Wu, 2018). According to the latest reforms of party and state institutions in March 2023, the CPC will establish two new central commissions: the Central Commission for Technology and the Central Commission for Finance.

Table 2.1: Major central LSGs and commissions headed or likely to be headed by Xi

LSGs/commissions	Year of establishment	Year upgraded to commission
Central LSG for Taiwan Affairs	July 1954	
Central Commission for Financial and Economic Affairs	March 1980	March 2018
Central Commission for Foreign Affairs	1981	March 2018
Central Commission for National Security	November 2013	
Central Commission for Deepening Overall Reform (全面深化改革, <i>quanmian shenhua gaige</i>)	December 2013	March 2018
Central Commission for Cyberspace Affairs	February 2014	March 2018
CMC LSG for Deepening National Defence and Military Reform	March 2014	
Central Commission for Military-Civil Fusion and Development (军民融合发展, <i>junmin ronghe fazhan</i>)	January 2017	
Central Commission for Comprehensive Law-based Governance (依法治国, <i>yifa zhiguo</i>)	March 2018	
Central Commission for Auditing	March 2018	
Central Commission for Technology	March 2023	

Source: Created by the author.

By establishing work report institutions, Xi placed the general secretary in authority over other PBSC members. In October 2017, the Politburo passed the CPC Politburo's Regulations on Strengthening and Maintaining the Centralised and Unified Leadership of the Party Centre (中共中央政治局关于加强和维护党中央集中统一领导的若干规定, *zhonggong zhongyang zhengzhiju guanyu jiaqiang he weihu dangzhongyang jizhong tongyi lingdao de ruogan guiding*). The regulations required that all top organs of the party-state submit work reports to the Politburo and the PBSC annually. Politburo and PBSC members were urged to 'proactively report major issues to the Party Centre for deliberation' and 'submit an annual written self-evaluation of their job performance to the Party Centre and the general secretary'. In March 2018, Politburo members vowed to uphold Xi's centrality as 'the supreme political principle' and 'the fundamental political protocol' in their first self-evaluations. Xi reviewed these evaluations and responded with his comments and requirements. In February 2019, the Politburo issued the Code on Seeking Instructions and Reporting on Important Matters (重大事项请示报告条例, *zhongda shixiang qingshi baogao tiaoli*), urging lower-level cadres and party organisations to consult the next higher-ranking party organisation before making key decisions. Owing to the broad definition of 'important matters', the code limited the discretion of lower-level cadres and party organisations (Pei, 2019, pp. 6–7).

The office of the CMC chairman has also been reinforced. In March 2014, Xi established and led the CMC LSG for National Defence and Military Reform. In late October 2014, the Chinese military's media began referring to the implementation of the CMC chairman responsibility system. In January 2016, the military command chain underwent a fundamental restructuring and stepped up checks and balances within the PLA, with 15 new CMC organs now under the direct command of the CMC.

In March 2018, Xi abolished the constitutional two-term limit on the state president. Although the president of the PRC is a titular head, it is the only post with a formal term limit among the top party, state and military positions. This amendment makes Xi eligible to serve a third term in 2022 and proves that he has been able to destroy formal power-sharing rules.

The third measure was to establish Xi's dominance in official ideology and political discourse. In communist systems, official ideology dictates the party line and acts as the arena for power competition. The insertion of Xi's ideas into official ideology has promoted his personal authority and helped to start a cult of personality. In October 2016, the CPC formally called on

all party members ‘to closely unite around Comrade Xi Jinping as the core of the CPC Central Committee’. While the CPC continues to mention collective leadership in official documents, Xi is more powerful than the other PBSC members because he is ‘the core of the Party in thought, politics and actions’ (Mingpao, 2016). Xi Jinping Thought was added to the Party Charter in October 2017 and the PRC Constitution in March 2018. Xi has become the third top leader of China to have his name written into official ideology and the second to achieve this while still in power.

The expansion of the CPC’s authority

Although the CPC’s dominion over political life is not a new development in China, it has been implemented under Xi’s rule in a way that has been unprecedented since the 1990s. In the name of party–government integration, Xi created a new governance system in which the CPC absorbs government bodies and their policy jurisdictions. He has given clout to the CPC central organs in several ways while weakening the State Council. The first method was ‘rule by LSGs’, addressed in the previous section. This expansion in the role and number of central LSGs has both boosted the office of the general secretary and empowered the CPC central organs to participate directly in decision-making in wider policy domains.

Xi also broke down the division of labour between the CPC and the State Council. When he came to power in 2012, it became unclear who had the say in economic affairs when Xi and Premier Li Keqiang (李克强) offered different directions for the country’s economic policies. For instance, ‘Likonomics’ (李克强经济学, *li keqiang jingji xue*) in 2013 seemed to run at odds with the ‘New Normal’ (新常态, *xin changtai*) in 2014. In May 2016, an article by a ‘person of authority’ again revealed contradictory judgements at the top leadership on economic conditions in China and the direction of its economic policies. All of these things indicated a weakening of the influence of Li and the State Council on economic issues (Naughton, 2016a, 2016b).

Meanwhile, Xi restressed the leadership of the CPC through legislation and organisational restructuring. In January 2016, the PBSC emphasised that ‘the party leads in everything’ (党是领导一切的, *dang shi lingdao yiqie de*), and the principle was inserted in the Party Charter in October 2017. Issued in October 2020, the Work Regulations of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (中国共产党中央委员会工作条例,

zhongguo gongchan dang zhongyang weiyuanhui gongzuo tiaoli) specified the status and functions of CPC leading bodies and emphasised the importance of firmly safeguarding the Central Committee's authority and centralised, unified leadership.

In March 2018, the National People's Congress (NPC) approved the Plan to Deepen the Reform of Party and State Institutions (深化党和国家机构改革方案, *Shenhua dang he guojia jigou gaige fang'an*), which required increasing the CPC's control over major initiatives. It aimed to strengthen the leadership of CPC committees over other organisations at the same administrative level, task CPC functional departments with coordinating with other institutions in the same sector and even merge or work together as one office (合署办公, *heshu bangong*) while keeping separate identities. A major difference between the institutional reforms of 2018 and the previous seven from 1982 to 2013 has been the functional integration of governmental agencies into CPC departments, empowering the latter with a broader policy jurisdiction, bigger budgets and more personnel. The expansion of the CPC apparatus has further empowered the general secretary and weakened the premier.

For example, the jurisdictions of the CPC functional departments in charge of united front work, personnel and propaganda were all expanded after 2018. The Overseas Chinese Affairs Office and the State Bureau for Religious Affairs were merged into the CPC Central United Front Work Department and the State Ethnic Affairs Commission was placed under its leadership. The State Bureau of Civil Service was merged into the CPC Central Organisation Department. The State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television was reorganised into the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television while its jurisdiction in publication and film was transferred to the CPC Central Propaganda Department. As China's highest anti-corruption agency, the National Supervisory Commission has worked together with the CDIC as one office since its establishment in March 2018, giving the latter a legal channel to investigate officials without CPC membership.

The expansion of the CPC's authority continued after the 20th Party Congress in 2022. It appeared that the CPC under Xi's leadership treated the centralisation of power as a necessary instrument to face future international and domestic challenges. According to the Plan of the Reform of Party and State Institutions (党和国家机构改革方案, *Dang he guojia jigou gaige fang'an*) in March 2023, the CPC will establish two new central commissions

for technology and finance, the Central Social Work Department, and the Central Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office. In the meanwhile, the jurisdiction of Hong Kong and Macau affairs will be transferred from the State Council to the party. The CPC Central Social Work Department has a ‘unified leadership’ over the National Public Complaints and Proposals Administration of the State Council.

In the same month, the State Council issued a revised version of its working rules. The new version further consolidated decision-making power in the party apparatus while leaving execution and implementation primarily to the State Council (Zheng, 2023). The new working rules request the State Council to safeguard the authority of the party’s leadership led by Xi, to implement the work laid out at the 20th Party Congress, to report and seek instructions from the party regarding major decisions, and to arrange special learning sessions to review Xi’s latest speeches, instructions and requirements.

The reinforcement of state control over society

Xi has also sought to crush social collective action by removing its coordination networks, funding and information flows and content. This is because the principle that ‘the party leads in everything’ is challenged by the very existence of a civil society. The Xi era has seen much tighter state control over NGOs, the internet, mass media, education, ethnic minorities, religion and social protest than the Hu era.⁷ The 709 crackdown begun on 9 July 2015 was a planned use of state violence to crush civil society. Since human rights lawyers are tasked with fighting arbitrary power for the protection of individual rights, they naturally turned to leaders of socio-legal activism and were perceived by the party-state as potential threats (Fu, 2018, pp. 554–5; Fu & Zhu, 2018).

The sinicisation of religion is another example. The CPC has rigorously constrained religious activities to ensure that they are patriotic and adaptive to socialist society (Madsen, 2019; Yang, 2021) The imperative of religious sinicisation and greater state supervision was formally presented in Xi’s

7 Grassroots officials in the Hu era often made material concessions to pacify aggrieved people in labour, rights and property disputes by providing cash payments or urgent services and utilities (C.K. Lee & Zhang, 2013, pp. 1485–95).

speech at the CPC National Conference on Religious Work in April 2016. In April 2017, the State Council revised the Religious Affairs Regulations (宗教事务条例, *zongjiao shiwu tiaoli*) to exercise more sophisticated control. In February 2021, the State Religion Bureau issued the Measures on the Management of Religious Professionals (宗教教职人员管理办法, *zongjiao jiaozhi renyuan guanli banfa*), prohibiting religious preaching and teaching that endangers national security and the promotion of extremism and separatism. They have also required that clergy resist the infiltration of foreign forces through their religions.

The CPC has gone further to block overseas support to Chinese NGOs and social activists. The PRC's Law on the Management of the Activities of Overseas NGOs within the Territory of China (中华人民共和国境外非政府组织境内活动管理法, *zhonghua renmin gongheguo jingwai feizhengfu zuzhi jingnei huodong guanli fa*) of January 2017 required overseas NGOs to register with the Ministry of Public Security and disclose their sources of funding for activities in China. Several overseas NGOs stopped operating inside China as a result, and many local NGOs and activists lost their overseas financial support (Kojima, 2020, p. 9, fn. 7).

The control of the flow and content of information is another instrument to prevent the growth of civil society. The CPC began to attack Western democratic values and uphold socialism soon after Xi took power. In April 2013, a confidential document issued by the CPC Central General Office indicated seven political dangers in the ideological sphere and urged that the news media had to be controlled by those who closely sided with the CPC under Xi's leadership (Buckley, 2013).⁸ Xi emphasised in the National Propaganda and Ideology Work Conference of August 2013 that ideological propaganda work was vital for the CPC and its goal was to secure the guidance of Marxism. Since then, the party has constricted the freedom of expression on the internet and elsewhere through a variety of legal and technological means.

For example, the Supreme People's Court released an official interpretation in September 2013 that any libellous posts or messages would be considered severe crimes if they were clicked on or browsed more than 5,000 times or forwarded more than 500 times. The Cyber Security Law (网络安全

8 The seven dangers were Western constitutional democracy, universal values of human rights, civil society, pro-market neo-liberalism, media independence, historical nihilism and scepticism towards the nature of socialism with Chinese characteristics.

法, *wanglu anquan fa*) of June 2017 legalised the CPC's call to defend its sovereignty in cyberspace by defining the security obligations of internet product and service providers, establishing a security system for key information infrastructure, regulating the transnational transmission of data from critical information infrastructures and establishing a real-name system for the internet. From 2017 to 2018, the government sequentially enacted the Internet News Information Service Management Regulations (互联网新闻信息服务管理规定, *hulianwang xinwen xinxi fuwu guanli guiding*), the Internet Comment Service Management Regulations (互联网跟帖评论服务管理规定, *hulianwang gentie pinglun fuwu guanli guiding*) and the Microblog Information Service Management Regulations (微博客信息服务管理规定, *weiboke xinxi fuwu guanli guiding*). The CPC has built up a complex and hierarchical management system with sophisticated procedures to censor cyber public opinion online (Tsai, 2016). It has also engaged in a participatory form of propaganda through a digital revamping of official media, the expansion of governmental Weibo and the official promotion of patriotic bloggers (Repnikova & Fang, 2018).

New technology has been adapted to control cyberspace and expanded to other parts of social control in such forms as the social credit system, DNA collection, the Skynet project, health codes and a grid-style social management system. Technological authoritarianism has gained the attention of China watchers. These projects are based on big data, cloud computing, artificial intelligence, biometrics and related technologies. While providing crime prevention and other public services, they also enhance the state's capacity to surveil society. Skynet, for instance, is an image surveillance system that incorporates GIS maps, image acquisition and other tools to perform real-time monitoring and information recording in a given region. The social credit system classifies citizens into various credit ratings, which offer them different treatment and restrictions.

Meanwhile, the CPC's penetration of organisations outside the government has been reinforced by requiring them to establish leading party groups (党组, *dangzu*) and party branches (党支部, *dangzhibu*). For example, the Plan to Deepen the Reform of Party and State Institutions in March 2018 called for strengthening CPC leadership over other organisations by writing the principle into their charters. The CPC passed a trial version of the Work Regulations on Leading Party Groups (中国共产党党组工作条例, *zhongguo gongchandang dangzu gongzuo tiaoli*) in June 2015 and revised them in April 2019. The regulations required that a leading party group

be established in central and local state institutions and economic, cultural and social organisations with more than three CPC members in their top echelons. The CPC's Work Regulations on Party Branches (Trial) (中国共产党支部工作条例(试行), *zhongguo gongchandang zhibu gongzuo tiaoli* [*shixing*]) of November 2018 required the establishment of party branches in enterprises where there were more than three CPC members working in any specific enterprise.

Xi's circumstances within and without the CPC

After describing these three political changes in the Xi era, this chapter now turns to their underlying causes. If power-sharing and social co-optation had once been self-reinforcing, why and how did their lock-in effects break down in the Xi era? Political leaders do not make decisions in a vacuum. The character, world view and personal style that comprise a leader's personality fit together, interacting with the power structure and national climate of expectations at the time the leader serves (Barber, 1992, pp. 4–7). Psychological factors are likely to be crucial to political outcomes (1) when institutional design or charismatic influence places power in the hands of political leaders; (2) when leaders have strong interests; or (3) when the nation is perceived to have become unstable so that past rules, practices and norms do not apply to its current circumstances (Greenstein, 1969, pp. 33–62).

Starting from the above studies, this chapter claims that an explanation of political changes in Xi's China should address three issues: first, whether China's past challenges created expectations for a strong leader; second, whether the power structure at the top leadership of the CPC had failed to constrain Xi's rise; and third, whether Xi's political thinking saw the recentralisation of power as the way to achieve his goals. The first two issues concern Xi's circumstances within and without the CPC while the last concerns his inner world. Xi's psyche has guided his choices while his circumstances have amplified his influence. This chapter shall begin with these circumstances and discuss his political personality in the sections to follow.

China faced more severe international and domestic challenges in 2012 than in 2002, and all emerged before the 18th Party Congress in October 2012. China experienced a structural transformation in US–China relations and the escalation of territorial disputes with Japan, the Philippines and Vietnam. The Obama administration began to announce a new strategy towards Asia in the fall of 2011, known as a ‘pivot to Asia’ or ‘rebalancing towards the Asia Pacific’ (Clinton, 2011; Obama, 2011). The United States made the shift in its strategy official in January 2012 (US Department of Defense, 2012). US–China relations have deteriorated throughout the Trump and Biden administrations and are now at the risk of falling into a Thucydides trap. The dispute over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands intensified after April 2012, and the Scarborough Shoal stand-off broke out in the same month. In June 2012, Vietnam repeated its sovereignty claims over the Paracel Islands and Spratly Islands by passing the Vietnam Maritime Law. While these territorial disputes have persisted for decades, it was uncharacteristic for these disputes to escalate almost at the same time as the CPC top leadership was undergoing a generational replacement.

China before the 18th Party Congress had also confronted domestic challenges like declining economic growth, social inequality, environmental pollution, food safety, cadre corruption and ethnic unrest in Tibet and Xinjiang. Many China watchers had noted these challenges in 2012 (Dyer, 2012; Naughton, 2012). These problems had triggered anti-rich (仇富, *choufu*) and anti-cadre (仇官, *chouguan*) sentiments in society (Aisixiang, 2011). Intellectuals were also divided over their causes and remedies (Chen, 2004; Shi, François & Galway, 2018). At the same time, the CPC’s collective leadership under Hu Jintao became uncoordinated during his second term in office (Li, 2016, p. 14; Miller, 2012). While the institutionalisation of power-sharing helped keep the regime stable, a fumbling in both the top leadership and the bureaucracy hindered any major reforms. For example, bureaucratic interests hindered the integration of the Ministry of Railways into the newly established Ministry of Transport in 2008 despite the State Council having set a tone of ‘giant department reforms’ (大部制改革, *dabuzhi gaige*). Some called for installing a new organisation to coordinate them, while others went so far as to label the Hu era the ‘lost decade’ (S. Lee, 2017, p. 328; Li, 2016, p. 24).

The fear of chaos is central in Chinese political culture. Both the citizenry and high-ranking party elites expect their leaders to sustain national unity, stability and the survival of the regime (Dickson, 2016, pp. 243–4; Guo,

2019, pp. 4, 179, 318–19; Lampton, 2014, p. 59). The political turmoil brought by these challenges gave shape to a political climate that called for a strong leader who could put the country back on course.

Xi also faced a new power structure in which factional politics and retired elders had largely ceased to intervene, and radical changes in the balance of power among the party's top leaders had released the structure's hold on him. When Hu took over as general secretary in 2002, Jiang remained chairman of the CMC, and his trustees held a majority in the 18th PBSC. Hu's status as head of the CPC remained unchallenged nevertheless for, as long as the oligarchy endured, so did power-sharing practices and norms. This oligarchy had been fatally wounded by a series of political events by the eve of Xi's coronation in October 2012. The first of these, the Wang Lijun incident, had broken out in February of that year. As a close associate of Chongqing Party Secretary Bo Xilai, Wang once served as a vice mayor and the police chief of the city. He was also instrumental in Bo's campaign against organised crime. Feeling threatened by his falling out with Bo after the involvement of Bo's wife in a murder of British citizen Neil Heywood, Wang fled to the US consulate in Chengdu. The incident set off a sensational political scandal that toppled Bo in March.

Days after Bo's fall, the son of Ling Jihua died in a mysterious Ferrari crash. Ling, a close associate of Hu, headed the party's Central General Office. In exchange for his assistance in covering up the death of his son, Ling chose to cooperate with Zhou Yongkang, Hu's political rival and the PBSC member in charge of the party's legal and political system. Ling was politically sidelined in early September and placed under investigation two months later. When Xi mysteriously disappeared from the public from 1 to 15 September, it was reported that he was working behind the scenes during this period of silence to bargain for personnel arrangements that would follow the 18th Party Congress (Lam, 2015, pp. 7–8).

These events revealed a deep involvement of high-ranking leaders in murders, corruption, violations of discipline, abuses of power and political conspiracies. It is also highly likely that the crimes of Zhou Yongkang, Bo Xilai, Ling Jihua, Xu Caihou and Guo Boxiong were seized as excuses to purge them from power, as they were a serious threat to Xi's succession.⁹ The weakening of the oligarchical power structure removed a major limitation

9 The CPC officially labelled them as arrivistes and conspirators (政治野心家·阴谋家, *zhengzhi yexinjia, yinmoujia*) in Wang Qishan's work report at the sixth plenum of the 18th CDIC in January 2016.

on the expansion of Xi's power. It also explains how he could so effectively remove threats to his power within the selectorate through a lasting anti-corruption campaign that began in December 2012. The campaign further boosted Xi's public support while he strengthened the party-state's political control to gain leverage in the suppression of his rivals.

Meanwhile, retired leaders interfered with Xi far less than with Hu. Hu did not intervene in Xi's decision-making after his full retirement in 2012. Jiang's physical strength was declining at the age of 86 in 2012, and his office in the CMC building was closed before the 18th Party Congress (BBC Chinese, 2012). Jiang requested the same rank as other retired leaders in the protocol ranking in January 2013 (Takungpao, 2013b). Both events point to the decline of his political influence in 2012.

Xi's world view, historic mission and leadership style: A textual analysis

Xi came to power at a moment when the political climate welcomed a strong leader and the CPC's oligarchy had become weakened. With this in mind, his political personality is crucial to understanding Chinese politics after 2012. The early experiences of political leaders shape a political psychology that affects their thinking and decisions in the later stages of their political careers, and understanding this psychology aids in explaining and predicting their behaviour (Barber, 1992, p. 4). Xi's moves to centralise power are strongly affected by three aspects of his political personality: his understanding of the nature of politics, his beliefs on the role of leaders and his preferred style of leadership. A leadership style is the habitual way in which political leaders perform their duties, while their understanding of the nature of politics relates to how they perceive their surroundings (Barber, 1992, p. 5).

Owing to the lack of direct access, this chapter instead examines Xi's political personality from a distance by analysing the use of the word *douzheng* (斗争) in his public statements.¹⁰ *Douzheng* is chosen because it demonstrates Xi's

10 Content analysis is a widely used technique for measuring personality at a distance. Although leaders often rely on aides to prepare their speeches and written work, the speechwriter effect and image-shaping are not in fact obstacles to understanding their preferences or predispositions about politics by analysing their aggregated statements. See Crichlow (1998, pp. 689–90) and Suefeld (2021, pp. 1677–9). For an overview of the literature, see Winter (2013, pp. 423–58).

unique characteristics and preferences. For example, he mentions *douzheng* 23 times in his report to the 19th CPC Party Congress whereas the word appears only four to nine times in any single report made by Jiang or Hu to the five preceding congresses.

There are two meanings of *douzheng* that are close but have certain notable differences. First, *douzheng* is often used in a conflict in which one attempts to triumph over rivals, often translated as 'to struggle'. Xi's frequent use of the word has caused public agitation owing to the negative legacy of class struggle and the Cultural Revolution. *Douzheng* can also be used to mean 'to strive', similarly to the word *fendou* (奋斗). Although there is less of a sense of rivalry in this usage, it does point to a leadership style defined by facing off risks and challenges rather than making concessions.

To gain more textual information through text mining, this chapter both calculates the total appearances of *douzheng* and examines its co-occurrence with other terms. The texts under analysis are three sources of public statements made from 15 November 2012 to 14 September 2021. They are (1) the Xi Jinping Xilie Zhongyao Jianghua Shujuku (习近平系列重要讲话数据库, Dataset of the Series of Xi Jinping's Important Speeches) in the *People's Daily* (jhsjk.people.cn); (2) *Xi Jinping Tan Zhiguo Lizheng* (习近平谈治国理政, Xi Jinping's talks regarding the governance of China), a three-volume book collecting Xi's important speeches (Xi, 2014, 2017, 2020); and (3) Xi's speeches cited in *Qiusbi* (求是, Seeking Truth), an official magazine published by the CPC.

This chapter establishes a corpus of 789 texts after excluding unimportant texts such as congratulatory telegrams to foreign figures, letters to individual citizens and short talks during visits and inspections. Among these, 206 include the word *douzheng* at least once for a total of 922 times. Of these, *douzheng* is mentioned more than 50 times in Xi's opening remarks at the CPC Central Party School on 3 September 2019. It is overwhelmingly clear that the word has a unique value to him.

This chapter uses *Quanteda*, an R package for the quantitative analysis of textual data, to filter out 582 sentences that contain *douzheng* from the 206 texts, after which they are parsed into tokens. After conducting

word segmentation, 10 tokens are extracted both before and after a single *douzheng* by making reference to the Standardised Terminology Database for Foreign Translation of Chinese Specialties and other similar corpora.¹¹

The terms that co-occur with *douzheng* are classified into four categories of ‘self’, ‘target’, ‘purpose’ and ‘significance’ (see table 2.2). Those that cannot fit into any category are dropped. The procedure was implemented independently by two trained individuals with the final decision made by a third when a disagreement arose. The ‘self’ category contains terms denoting the actors engaging in *douzheng* or groups that the actors belong to in different contexts such as ‘we’ (我们, *women*), ‘the Chinese people’ (中国人民, *zhongguo renmin*), ‘our party’ (我们党, *women dang*) or ‘the Chinese nation’ (中华民族, *zhonghua minzu*). The ‘target’ category consists of targets to be defeated or overcome through *douzheng*. These include ‘corruption’, ‘COVID-19’ and ‘risks and challenges’. Defeating corruption has obviously been Xi’s priority target because he has mentioned the term much more frequently than the other two.

Table 2.2: The targets, purposes and significance of *douzheng* in Xi’s statements

Category	Terms	Freq.
Self	we (我们)	85
	the Chinese people (中国人民)	54
	our party (我们党)	40
	the Chinese nation (中华民族)	30
	China (中国)	28
	the Party (党)	27
	cadres (干部)	26
	the CPC (中国共产党)	25
	the Party Central (党中央)	24
	leading cadres (领导干部)	16
Target	anti-corruption (反腐败)	125
	risk (风险)	35
	fighting the pandemic (抗疫)	34
	challenge (挑战)	29
	the Covid-19 pandemic (新冠肺炎疫情)	29

11 Zhongguo Tese Huayu Duiwai Fanyi Biaozhunhua Shuyuku (中国特色话语对外翻译标准化术语库; 210.72.20.108/index/index.jsp). This official terminology database is directed jointly by China Foreign Languages Publishing Administration (externally known as China International Communications Group) and China Academy of Translation.

2. THE RESHAPING OF THE CHINESE PARTY-STATE UNDER XI JINPING'S RULE

Category	Terms	Freq.
Purpose	the party's style of work and the construction of clean government (党风廉政建设)	46
	military (军事)	41
	victory (胜利)	39
	great cause (伟大事业)	37
	great dream (伟大梦想)	31
	socialism with Chinese characteristics (中国特色社会主义)	28
	great project (伟大工程)	26
	pandemic prevention and control (疫情防控)	24
	great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation (中华民族伟大复兴)	23
	national liberation (民族解放)	16
	Significance	great (伟大)
dare to (敢于)		74
conduct (进行)		71
spirit (精神)		70
persist (坚持)		67
propel (推进)		54
resolve to (坚决)		46
prepare (准备)		44
good at (善于)		41
capability (本领)		38
with many new historical features (具有许多新的历史特点的)		37
strive for (争取)		31
improve (提高)		29
strengthen (增强)		28
firmly (坚定)		27
promote (发扬)		25
put into practice (实践)		22
unwavering (坚定不移)		21
seize (夺取)		20
endeavour (努力)		18
continuously (不断)		16
revolution (革命)		16
overwhelmingly (压倒性)		16
determination (决心)		15
resist (抗击)		15

Note: Only terms with frequencies of 15 or greater are included. 'Great', 'great project', 'great cause' and 'great dream' are treated as four independent terms.

Source: Created by the author.

Terms regarding the purposes of *douzheng* are classified into the ‘purpose’ category. Some of these terms concern major CPC historic missions such as ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’ (中国特色社会主义, *zhongguo tese shehui zhuyi*), ‘the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation’ (中华民族伟大复兴, *zhonghua minzu weida fuxing*) and ‘national liberation’ (民族解放, *minzu jiefang*). Others, such as ‘great project’ (伟大工程, *weida gongcheng*), ‘great cause’ (伟大事业, *weida shiye*) and ‘great dream’ (伟大梦想, *weida mengxiang*), emphasise the greatness of related goals. These three sometimes co-occur with *weida douzheng* (伟大斗争) as ‘the four greats’. The remainder are more specified goals such as the ‘construction of clean government’ (党风廉政建设, *dangfeng lianzheng jianshe*) and ‘pandemic prevention and control’ (疫情防控, *yiqing fangkong*). Clearly, the purposes of *douzheng* are all collective values. They reveal Xi’s belief in his historic role as the top leader on the road towards national rejuvenation and socialist construction.

The most interesting finding here is the practical significance of *douzheng*. Xi highly praises its importance and value. Some examples include ‘great’ (伟大, *weida*), ‘dare to’ (敢于, *ganyu*), ‘conduct’ (进行, *jinxing*), ‘spirit’ (精神, *jingshen*), ‘insist’ (坚持, *jianchi*), ‘propel’ (推进, *tuijin*), ‘resolutely’ (坚决, *jianjue*), ‘prepare’ (准备, *zhunbei*), ‘good at’ (善于, *shanyu*) and ‘capability’ (本领, *benling*). However indirectly, these findings strongly reveal that Xi’s cognition of politics is defined by conflict and that his preference is to face off risks and challenges. This is because *douzheng* denotes either a struggle for victory over rivals in a conflict or achieving a goal in difficult circumstances.

Moving further, this chapter also offers an examination of Xi’s affective states towards *douzheng*. A sentiment analysis was conducted to create a sentiment lexicon via the aforementioned text data and procedures by referring to the Chinese Sentiment Analysis Library established by Dalian University of Technology (大连理工大学情感词汇本体库, Dalian Ligong Daxue Qinggan Cihui Benti Ku; ir.dlut.edu.cn/zyxz/qgbtk.htm). As table 2.3 shows, positive terms predominate (88.1 per cent) whereas negative ones hold only a small share (11.7 per cent). Most importantly, ‘praise’, ‘happiness’ and ‘trust’ jointly consist of 80.1 per cent of the total 2,171 terms. The results clearly show Xi’s strong positive affection towards *douzheng* and his confidence and determination in overcoming difficulties.

Table 2.3: A sentiment analysis of *douzheng* in Xi's statements

Positive sentiment	Frequency (%)	Negative sentiment	Frequency (%)
happiness 快乐	242 (11.1%)	anger 愤怒	5 (0.2%)
love 喜爱	32 (1.5%)	sadness 悲伤	25 (1.2%)
surprise 惊奇	0 (0.0%)	fear 恐惧	31 (1.4%)
respect 尊敬	87 (4.0%)	hate 憎恶	22 (1.0%)
comfort 安心	38 (1.8%)	boredom 烦闷	33 (1.5%)
yearnings 思	1 (0.0%)	shyness 羞	0 (0.0%)
trust 相信	181 (8.3%)	guilt 疚	5 (0.2%)
praise 赞扬	1,318 (60.7%)	panic 惧、慌	24 (1.1%)
wishes 祝愿	15 (0.7%)	disappointment 失望	3 (0.1%)
		jealousy 忌妒	0 (0.0%)
		suspicion 怀疑	13 (0.6%)
		derogation 贬责	96 (4.4%)
Subtotal	1,914 (88.1%)	Subtotal	257 (11.7%)
Total			2,171 (99.8%)

Note: Due to rounding, the total percentage is not equal to 100.

Source: Created by the author.

The formation of Xi's political cognition and beliefs: Early life experiences

On the basis of findings derived from the text analysis, this section discusses the influence of early life experiences on Xi Jinping's political personality. First, Xi's political thinking is defined by conflict. This world view further affects his beliefs on interpersonal relationships, which can be described as being 'harsh to enemies and warm to friends',¹² and his all-or-nothing mentality regarding political power. Xi grew up in an environment of difficult living conditions and hostility in the 1960s and early 1970s (Phoenix, n.d.; Reminwang, 2015a). These experiences taught him to survive on his own in an insecure environment. The Cultural Revolution through school and daily life also taught Xi and other young people of his generation that they had to weed out and eliminate the bourgeoisie enemy among their relatives, friends and neighbours (Mi, 2011, pp. 63–4, 328). This imprinted upon him the notion that politics is fraught with danger and that one should not

¹² This chapter borrowed this term from Mi (2016).

be too quick to trust. In this mindset, politics is seen as having the potential to become a game of life and death. As such, the absolute control of political power is the optimal survival strategy, and no reconciliation with a political enemy can endure long. At the same time, Xi has cherished old friendships and loyalties, treating friends warmly and courteously and enjoying the sense of security this provides. He is also motivated by a strong need for power and achievement.

Xi's psychology regarding politics, self–other relations and political power helps to explain several tendencies in his political moves after 2012. He has rapidly promoted his protégés and continued to verify their loyalty, launched large-scale personnel reshufflings and used his dictatorship to crush his enemies. Xi has also reinforced his official power with an institutional restructuring of the party-state and the insertion of his ideas into official ideology.

Second, Xi believes in his historic destiny as the supreme leader of the CPC at a time of great national rejuvenation and socialist construction. Both his idealism and his affinity for collectivism are rooted in his revolutionary family life, middle-school education and sent-down experience in Shaanxi (Xinjingbao, 2016; Torigian, 2018, p. 9). Influenced in some way by his father's example, Xi followed in his footsteps in the cause of the communist revolution.¹³ The generation of the Cultural Revolution had a passionate ambition to revitalise the Chinese nation (Mi, 2011, pp. 1, 82, 164). They were taught in school to uphold collectivist ideals over the individual by valuing the sacrifice of personal rights and interests for the greater good of the nation. Xi's studies in elite boarding schools also contributed to his collectivist thinking by emphasising discipline and team spirit (Mi, 2016). Many princelings were also ardent disciples of the bloodline theory (血统论, *xuetonglun*), believing it was their destiny to rule China because of their being born into the families of revolutionary veterans. This identity gave them a sense of superiority and a responsibility to further the revolution (Mi, 2011, pp. 82, 112, 121; Guo, 2019, pp. 4, 179, 318). This makes it highly unlikely that Xi is ever going to accept Western democracy. Rather he believes in reinforcing the leadership of the CPC as a necessary step to achieve his mission in history. He is also likely to sacrifice individual rights for the greater good.

13 In a TV interview in November 2003, Xi recalled that his father repeatedly told him and his siblings the stories about his part in the revolution and required that they join it in the future. Xi stated that the stories became imprinted on their minds (CCTV, 2003).

Third, Xi's self-assurance and reverence for strong leadership have been shaped by his early experiences. In 2002, Xi recalled his sent-down years (下乡, *xiexiang*) in which he overcame the challenges of living in poor environments full of fleas (跳蚤关, *tiaosao guan*), eating meagre and unwholesome diets (饮食关, *yinshiguan*), performing hard manual labour (劳动关, *laodong guan*) and identifying himself as no different from the ordinary rural villagers (思想关, *sixiang guan*) (Reminwang, 2015b). In 2003, Xi wrote of his sent-down experience: 'First, I understood what real life is, what "seeking truth from facts" is and who ordinary people are. Second, I built up my confidence. When I encounter challenges later in life, I always think, why can't I achieve something at present if I could in the past in spite of hardships?' (Takungpao, 2014) This statement reveals that Xi believes in his ability to maintain control in the face of difficulties.

Xi's obsession with strong leadership also has its roots in the Cultural Revolution where Mao's strongman leadership offered him a model for political domination.¹⁴ The generation of the Cultural Revolution worshipped authority but also dared to rebel (Mi, 2011, pp. 22, 38, 164, 329). They both followed and exercised authority as they organised the Red Guard movement to support Mao Zedong and persecute 'class enemies'. At the same time, they also enjoyed the upheaval of the existing order by challenging teachers, classmates and veteran cadres. Eventually, some questioned the political correctness of the Cultural Revolution itself.

Xi's self-confidence and the reverence for strong leadership in his psychology help to explain his leadership style and desire to weaken power-sharing practices and norms under his rule. He is both resilient and adaptable, keeping a low profile while seeking power to persevere in times of adversity. He also tends towards political domination in his exercise of power, being reluctant to reconcile with the opposition on major issues and insisting on his basic principles. As for the rules of the game that impede his destiny in history, Xi would rather rewrite them than adapt to them.

Conclusion

Xi has reshaped the Chinese party-state since assuming office in 2012. This chapter contributes to the field of China studies by explaining, through an examination of Xi's circumstances and political personality, why

14 For Mao's influence on Chinese political culture, see Qian (2012, pp. 13–21).

power-sharing institutions in China have become unsustainable. While structural factors have amplified his influence on these political changes, their direction has been guided by psychological ones. First, international and domestic challenges that had emerged before the 18th Party Congress created expectations among high-ranking CPC elites and citizens for a strong leader. Second, a series of political events before the Party Congress weakened the oligarchical power structure in the party's top leadership, an arrangement that had nurtured power-sharing institutions. This weakened the structural constraints on Xi's expansion of power. Third, Xi's choices in his bid to centralise power are shaped by his beliefs in the zero-sum nature of politics, his destiny in China's rejuvenation and socialist construction, and the necessity for strong leadership.

This chapter also contributes to comparative authoritarian studies in two ways. First, it reminds us that power-sharing institutions in single-party authoritarian regimes are sustainable only with a stable ruling oligarchy. Institutions and their environments influence one another, and, as a dynamic process rather than a static condition, institutionalisation can be reversed. While the literature has aptly noted that power-sharing institutions influence the economic performance and political stability of authoritarian regimes, they are also painfully vulnerable to dramatic changes in the external environment and balance of power among major political actors.

Second, both macro and micro factors should be taken into account when explaining the historical conjuncture of institutional changes. While structural factors are important to explain the collapse of power-sharing institutions in authoritarian regimes, the political personality and choices of a political leader are also crucial in the process. Xi's political personality was therefore pivotal in his reorienting of Chinese politics once two necessary conditions were met: the political climate welcomed a strong leader, and the CPC's oligarchy had become weakened. Xi would not have centralised power so dramatically had he believed in the virtues of collective leadership.

While the centralisation of power in Xi and the CPC has given him leverage to consolidate it as he deals with environmental challenges, it creates two political risks. The first is one of political succession: Xi's health and personal security have greatly preoccupied the party-state and a smooth transfer of power will be difficult after his personalistic leadership. If Xi were to become incapacitated, the return to a zero-sum game that would follow could create a severe power struggle in the CPC's leadership. With the practice of succession by echelon abolished, Xi's personalistic leadership

could also hinder the smooth rise of a successor and result in great political uncertainty. There might also be a return to gerontocracy if he retires in good health.

The centralisation of power poses a second risk to the quality of China's governance. While Xi's personalistic leadership has overcome the clumsiness of the Hu era, it could lead to a lack of mechanisms to rectify errors, as was the case in the Mao era when no individual or institution could correct him. Furthermore, personalistic leadership does not solve the principal-agent problem caused by information asymmetry and discrepant interests between the principal and agents. Several ranking officials who obtained key appointments under Xi's rule have been relieved of duty or arrested owing to violations of discipline, corruption or incompetence in fighting the COVID-19 epidemic.¹⁵ The centralisation of power might also discourage social forces and local officials from taking initiative in dealing with various governance issues as they are obliged to wait for Xi's personal instructions before taking action. The freedom of speech ensures that whistleblowers can give early warnings in a public crisis, but as the Li Wenliang (李文亮) incident shows,¹⁶ the party-state often treats these as voices to be silenced.

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¹⁵ Two examples are Lu Wei (鲁炜) and Jiang Chaoliang (蒋超良). The former was placed under investigation for corruption in November 2017. The latter stepped down as party secretary of Hubei for his inability to control the COVID-19 epidemic in February 2020.

¹⁶ Li Wenliang was an ophthalmologist who warned his colleagues early on about COVID-19 infections in Wuhan. Local police admonished him and other doctors for making false comments on the internet about an unconfirmed SARS outbreak. He died from the disease in February 2020.

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