

RICARDO SANTOS

REVIEW

What is Xi Jinping Thinking?

China's first paramount leader since Mao is, for all the ink spilled on him, a black box. But behind the speculation over his intent, Xi is a Party man at heart — and therein lies the danger.

KERRY BROWN — JANUARY 18, 2024

POLITICS



Who is Xi Jinping? The simplest answer is that he is the paramount leader of the People's Republic of China, where he is General Secretary of its Communist Party among other (less important) titles, including President, as well as Chairman of the Central Military Commission (commander in chief). According to writers at [Time](#) magazine, he is the most powerful person in the world. For plenty, including [Joe Biden](#), he is a dictator. One analyst I spoke to, at a think tank at London, stated categorically that he is evil.

In China, it is often the opposite. For Communist Party officials who serve under him, and some of the wider population — at least in publicly-expressed opinion — Xi is a visionary leader. The nickname Xi Dada (literally “Big Daddy Xi,” once used widely domestically but subsequently covertly [banned](#)) grants him an avuncular status as the Great Uncle, caring for the people. Yet as [protests](#) in December 2022 showed, there are also many in China for whom his policies, and his extended term of power, are far from popular.

These contradictory views are partly due to the fact that Chinese elite politics today is like a great defensive bastion, with its doors and windows firmly shut. We live in a world saturated with social media exposure, penetrative surveillance and indelible information trails. But Xi and his colleagues in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Politburo have, remarkably, acquired an aura of mystery, their inner world blocked from sight. Much like his predecessor

Hu Jintao, this is not because there is anything particularly striking about what we see of Xi's personality and actions today, or what we know of his past, but down to how much we think we *don't* know.

Two timely books make rivals cases for how we can best understand Xi. Willy Lam's *Xi Jinping: The Hidden Agenda of China's Ruler for Life* (Routledge, August 2023) and Chun Han Wong's *Party of One: The Rise of Xi Jinping and China's Superpower Future* (Avid Reader Press, May 2023) are both informed by a set of very different circumstances and viewpoints. Lam, in his relatively short monograph, draws on his experiences following Chinese top-level politics for over three decades. As a journalist in Hong Kong for the *South China Morning Post* and *CNN* in the 1990s, he was one of the very few in the Jiang Zemin era to get inside scoops on what was happening in the black box of Beijing politics. Since that time, as a commenter and a scholar at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, he has produced hugely useful studies of Jiang and his successor Hu — as well as a 2015 book on the early years of Xi's rule, *Chinese Politics in the Era of Xi Jinping*, with the agnostic subtitle “Renaissance, Reform, or Retrogression?”



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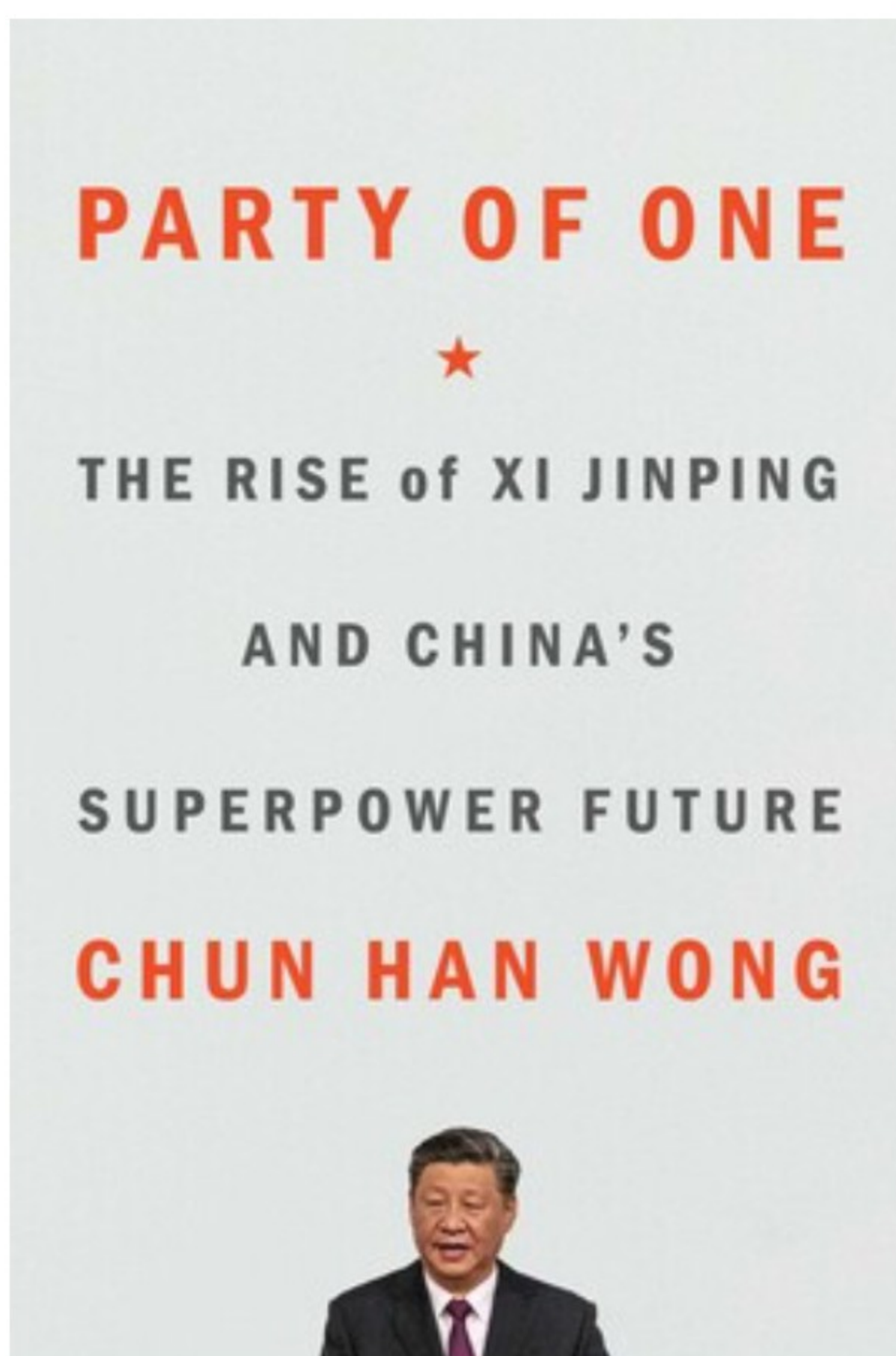
Chun Han Wong comes from a different context. Born and raised in Singapore and educated in Britain, Wong was a front-line reporter for the *Wall Street Journal*, based in China from 2014 until he was expelled in 2019 for [reporting](#) on Xi's relatives and their business dealings. Fresh, first-hand experience of the situation on the ground in pre-pandemic China illuminates his account, and he is good at illustrating the shifting personas that Xi has adopted in the last decade, from moralizer-in-chief to story-teller, state enforcer to anti-elitist populist, through how they manifest in the daily life of contemporary Chinese. Meanwhile a third book, *The Political Thought of Xi Jinping* (Oxford University Press, January 2024) by UK-based academics Steve Tsang and Olivia Cheung, delves in much greater detail to Xi's commitment to ideology as a tool for unity and control.

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The work of these writers neatly underlines one of the primary challenges of writing about Xi (as I found in my own 2022 book *Xi: A Study of Power*). Namely, an almost total lack of access. Xi has never granted an interview to any Western journalist, at least in person, in the last decade. Nor does he hold many press conferences, even for domestic media. This means that one has to assemble different kinds of sources, use various interpretations already available, then apply the necessary but treacherous component of

imagination. As such, the perspective or place where you write from matters. For Lam, his sources are predominantly official state documents in Chinese and English, as well as the input of Chinese and foreign academics, and Chinese domestic media. As with Tsang and Cheung, Lam is strong on ideology and political personnel, and the ways in which these can ruthlessly assert power. But he is far less effective in explaining the emotional side of Xi's politics, or its domestic priorities.

Wong had greater propinquity to the Xi era of governance through his time living in mainland China, attending media events and having occasional contact with Chinese officials. He knows Xi by his physical, not just his written, work — the great project of China's reconstruction over the last decade. Yet with the [expulsion](#) and exodus of many other journalists and China watchers over the last years, even these on-the-ground perspectives have dried up. The inner sanctum of the CCP has maintained an almost impressive level of disengagement, and witnesses to everyday life in China are almost as few [now](#) as they were at the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976.



[Buy the book >](#)

Unlike Lam and Wong, I had at least one, very brief, occasion where I met Xi Jinping. It was in 2007, when he was for a few months Party Secretary of Shanghai after the removal of the previous incumbent, Cheng Liangyu, for corruption. There was little inkling back then that he was due for a higher calling, although his name had started to figure, with others, in speculation about who might be anointed as Hu Jintao's successor at the Party Congress that autumn. All I can recall with clarity of that meeting is how unexceptional it felt. The plush chairs and beige wallpaper of the room it was held in, reached through a series of lawns and gardens in the middle of Shanghai. The total silence as the delegation I was part of trooped in, to be greeted by Xi and his colleagues. The courteous, largely content-free half-hour exchange that followed — all these

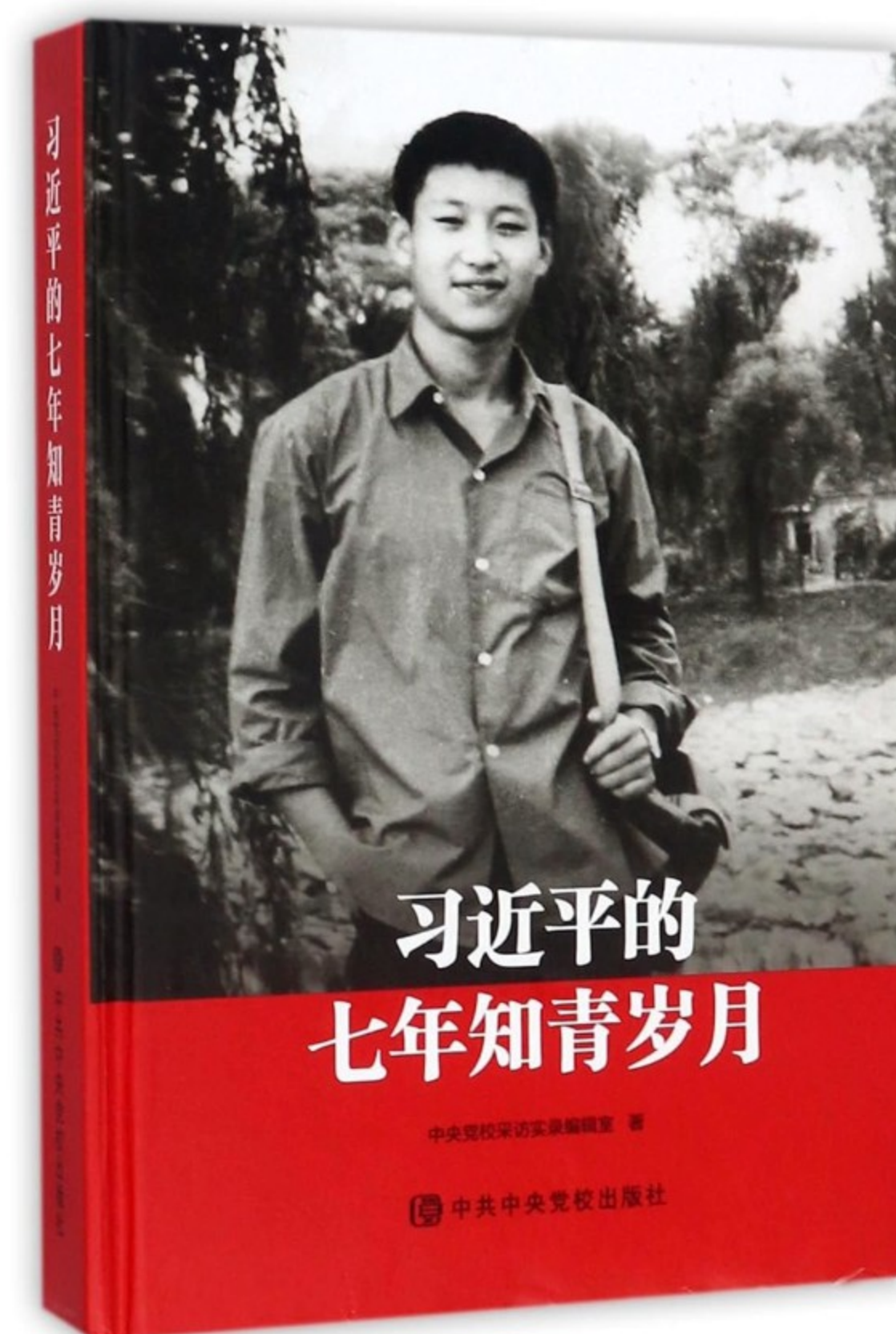
had a comforting, generic feel. Nothing gave the slightest clue that this figure who was talking in such formulaic, bland language was going to become one of the most powerful men in world.

The fact that Xi leadership's was unexpected and went in the opposite direction to predications about it — an infamous *New York Times* [op-ed](#) by Nicholas Kristof in 2013 hopefully pegged him as a political reformer — is an important point to remember. Lam credits the surprising hubris of Xi's rule to a deliberate earlier strategy to hide his light under a bushel and not show the extent of his ambition, and claims this tactic was inspired by the 3rd century BC legalist philosopher Han Fei. This speculation may well be partially true, though — barring the unlikely event of Xi stating it himself — we can never know for sure. But trying to figure out how Xi did end up where he is, and how much has been luck and circumstance, is a work many are engaged in.

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As both books make clear, Xi did not have an easy path to power, despite being a princeling, son of the Chinese communist revolutionary Xi Zhongxun. His father fell from grace in 1962, after two decades as a senior military and then government leader. Xi's experience being [sent down](#) to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution from 1969-1975 have become useful in conveying, at least in domestic propaganda, his grassroots credentials and socialist authenticity. The late Singaporean leader, Lee Kuan Yew, went so far as to [claim](#) that these harsh years made Xi the Nelson Mandela of Asia. Some Chinese language accounts (such as a 2017 book published by the CCP Central Committee Party School Press, *Xi Jinping's Seven Years of Educated Youth*) state that Xi read widely and voraciously during that time, including works by Henry Kissinger and the Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz. Lam is dismissive of Xi's pretense to learning, mocks his Mandarin Chinese levels and raises questions about Xi's claim to have read Marx's *Das Kapital* three times. Most interesting is how invested Xi Jinping, who did not have much formal education from the age of 16 to 24, is in allowing his image builders to stake a claim that, despite this, he is a man of culture and scholarship.

At the heart of whatever guides Xi as a politician is his relationship to the Communist Party of China. Here, the books offer different interpretations. Wong's grants a far clearer role for the Party in Xi's career and service to it. "A deified Mao [Zedong]," he writes, "could transcend the party, but a mortal Xi is nothing without it." Lam, however, is more sympathetic to an understanding of Xi — particularly after his being granted a [third term](#) as General Secretary, over the usual two — as an individual driven by the "satisfaction of his ego." Lam's colorful language presses this view home. Xi is "stubborn and self-righteous," someone with a "larger than life status," an "emperor" surrounded by cronies, who has created a factional network over the last decade that is totally loyal to him. At the Party Congress in October 2022, when Xi was anointed for his third term, these figures were [placed](#) in key positions. It is now Xi's Party and Xi's China that we are dealing with, Lam contends, and the Communist Party has become a tool for that.



Xi Jinping's Seven Years of Educated Youth, published by the CCP Party School in 2017

There is an elegant simplicity to Lam's analysis. But in considering what role Xi's predilection for power and personal ambition play in his leadership, there are some key points that need to be kept in mind. One is an acknowledgement of the relentless training that any Chinese official has to undergo in order to become a top-level provincial and then national leader. The English novelist Lawrence Durrell once described working as a diplomat as a Jesuitical training in the elimination of any sense of selfhood. The Communist Party has

been [compared](#) to the Catholic Church, not least because of the importance both grant to ideological orthodoxy. As institutions, they each rely on a painstakingly trained clergy: in one these are called priests, in the other cadres. Xi would have endured thousands of hours of ideological lecturing, study and assessment since the 1980s. We must decide whether we see him as a true defender of the Party, whose ego has been tamed and controlled, or as a reshaper of it who disproves the institution can annihilate the personality of those who rise up its ranks.

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To help us answer this question, we have at least some helpful clues. Most of them indicate that Xi is obedient to the Party's interests, rather than a revisionist figure who has sought to dominate and annex it for personal gain, as Putin arguably did in Russia. Right from the beginning, he showed high levels of ardor for the Party cause. It took ten attempts before he was allowed to join the organization in 1973, being rebuffed nine times before finally accepted. In the early 1980s, he decided to shift from a promising elite Beijing career in the military, working alongside Geng Biao, a member of the Politburo, to a far less glamorous one in civilian administration, in Zhengding village in Hebei province.

The sense of Xi being a devotee to a higher cause is backed up by his speeches in his next official roles in Fujian province, where he became governor in 1999, and more latterly in Zhejiang province when he was Provincial Party Secretary from 2002-2007. These speeches, such as those collected in the book [Xi Jinping in Zhejiang](#) (published in 2021 by the same Party School Press), were full of sermonizing on the sacred duty of the Party, and its almost holy mission to be the vehicle by which China could find redemption from its bitter modern history.



Xi leads the pack at the 20th Party Congress in October 2022, announcing his third term as General Secretary

Xi always struck me as having the zeal of a convert: a Born Again Communist, saved by the grace of Mao in the 1970s, spared when others were cast into the fires (his father may have been incarcerated, but at least he survived) and driven by gratitude ever since. In this reading, it is not ego that brought Xi to power, but ideological conviction. That makes him a far more potent and trickier figure to dismiss than just a despot in it for self reward. In the 1980s to the 2000s, it was not rare to find a Chinese official getting rich, but it was rare to find one that truly believed in the Party's ideals. This may well be the secret to why Xi ended up getting to the top in 2012, instead of his more visibly ambitious rival Bo Xilai.

This is not to deny that ambition and drive have played a role in the rise of Xi. Those diplomats I spoke to who met him were all struck by his self-confidence, with one noting (off the record) how he was one of the very few elite Chinese leaders who occasionally spoke off the cuff, not slavishly following speaking notes. Yet he clearly believes in a greater cause: namely, the right for China to have a major role in global affairs, and to be accorded a seat at the top table, along with its destiny to achieve reunification with Taiwan. We are dealing with something far more systematic and deeper than just the grandiose notions of one man.

Perhaps this is why many of those observing China feel shock over what the nation has become. In past decades, from the 1980s to the 2010s, the issue was dealing with a country whose leaders were suffering a crisis of faith in their state ideology, rather than the opposite. The scholar Joseph Fewsmith — and, even more trenchantly, the late Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Liu Xiaobo — offered [critiques](#) of China as nihilistic, where cadres and the senior leaders above them were empty husks with no core beliefs. Today, the halls of Chinese power at Zhongnanhai have become a palace for believers, even if it is only their system that they believe in. This transformation emerged not only from what was happening within China, but outside it: the impact of the financial crisis of 2008, and then the Arab Spring a couple of years later. In China these seem to have created even greater skepticism about not just the good intentions, but the competence, of the outside world.

Wang Huning, Xi's top political theorist, has been central in the last three decades of Chinese politics, and plays a big role as architect of a Chinese identity politics based on cultural confidence — and on rising disdain for the divisions and collapse of confidence in the West. Lam is dismissive of Wang, describing him as merely a bellwether. Oddly, Lam also marks a shift in Chinese foreign policy, around 2017, towards what some analysts have [dubbed](#)  “defensive offensiveness,” without also noting that at this precise moment the election of Donald Trump in the U.S. sent shockwaves through the world. Wong is more sensitive to the broader context of Xi's rule, and to factors that came not only from outside the CCP, but from outside the country. In many ways, the West — with its political divisions, electoral unpredictability and generally weaker economic performance — has been as much the driver of Xi's trajectory than internal politics or his personality. This has made Chinese leaders more cautious, self-protective and truculent.

“ The irony is that, for a country which claims not to have political prisoners, perhaps Xi himself is one. ”

The 100th anniversary of the foundation of the CCP, in 2021, saw the issuing of a new official [historical resolution](#) — only the third since 1945. Praise was rained down on the Party and its heroic history. Events were held to mark this portentous event. But the pandemic, raging at the time, and then mass protests at the end of 2022 leading to a sudden lifting of draconian zero Covid policies, have ushered in a far more worrying new era. As Lam alludes to, China's endless investment in infrastructure, its spiralling local government debt and deep distortions in the domestic housing market, paired with little real rise in consumption, have created what one critical Chinese economist writing in 2017 [called](#) a “giant Ponzi scheme.” For a politician so wedded to the conviction that ideology above all else is necessary to carry China forward, Xi and his chosen colleagues are now facing more prosaic, but profoundly challenging, economic issues. Their vast project in the last decade to remodel Chinese as nationalist communists will come to naught if the material base on which it is built — the country's prosperity — falls apart.

There are other dark clouds on the horizon. The hasty [removal](#) of Foreign Minister Qin Gang last May, followed by the [ousting](#) of Defense Minister Li Shunfu in September, reinforced the sense that Xi was becoming capricious. At the end of December, a further nine military officials were [removed](#) on corruption charges related to military expenditure. The supreme leader attended the BRICS summit in South Africa last August, but [did not speak](#) at it. For the G20 summit some weeks later, he did not bother to [show up](#) at all. Ever swirling rumors talk of his health, the solidity of public and factional support for his policies, and his ability to manage the sheer range of responsibilities that he holds, in administrative, military and political realms. Tight control over information might be what the Party and Xi want, but the side effect is a slurry of speculation.

The biggest question mark hovers over Taiwan. The goal of reunification with the island remains the [top priority](#) for Xi's administration. Since 2017, the Taipei government under the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) has pursued politics roundly condemned by China as separatist and destabilizing. The outcome of the 2024 presidential elections in Taiwan, on January 13, maintained the status quo of the previous eight years, with the DPP, albeit under new candidate William Lai, [securing](#) a reasonable victory. Beijing's response was frosty. But the election campaign underlined the complexity of attitudes in the island, including the fact that for the young (many of whom voted for the new Taiwan People's Party) politics are less important than economic hardship. The cultural gap across the straits has never been deeper, and it is hard to see how Xi's vision of an all-embracing Chinese nationalism can speak to Taiwanese. At the moment, it is unlikely that Xi will apply force to reunify Taiwan, but even if it is, China will have to deal with 23 million people whose values and mindsets are very different from their so-called compatriots in the mainland.



With the gang: Xi at the 2023 BRICS summit, with leaders (left to right) of Brazil, South Africa, India and Russia's foreign minister (*Ricardo Stuckert/PR*)

We all assume that Xi will be the paramount leader of China for a long time. 2032 at least, predicts Lam. It is hard to see how he might simply retire, even if he wanted to. For that to happen, there would need to be at least one, probably two, leaders in a position to replace him (just as he and Li Keqiang, China's Premier from 2012-2022, were groomed from 2007) and with enough credibility in the Party to prevent fragmentation. One of the wonders of the Xi era is the silence that has emanated from the inner halls of power, with not the slightest whisper of top-level argument. Hu Jintao had his run-ins with Wen Jiabao; Jiang Zemin contended with his Politburo colleague Qiao Shi. Even Mao Zedong had to see off pretenders to the throne, such as the ill-fated Lin Biao. But since 2013 Xi has not seen, or allowed, any major competitors. Perhaps the greatest problem in Xi's China is his long run of success. There is now no alternative, for him or the Party.

When I remember the figure I very briefly saw in 2007, I wonder if he ever has moments when he is on his own, and wonders how on earth he got into the situation he is in. His anti-corruption campaigns have created deadly enemies. He is surrounded by people whose loyalty is largely untested, not to mention the pressures of China's middle class, who care little for the ideology he holds by, but want constant material progress that is harder to provide. He saw what happened to toppled leaders during the Arab Spring.

The deeper irony is that, for a country which claims not to have political prisoners, perhaps Xi Jinping himself is one. As he learned early in his life: the Party always wins. Over the last decade, the path he forged has led to a national situation where it's the Party way, or no way. Xi is a servant of this, faithful to the last, but also a prisoner to its excesses of consolidated power, who may end up hoisted by his own petard. That is perhaps the scariest thing about China today. Like it or not, we are all beholden to the mind of Xi Jinping, and we will all be affected by the outcome of his story, good or bad. ■



Kerry Brown is Professor of Chinese Studies and Director of the Lau China Institute at King's College, London. He is author of over 20 books on China, including *Xi: A Study of Power* (Icon, 2022) and *China Incorporated* (Bloomsbury, 2023). *The Great Reversal: A History of Britain's Relations With China, 1570 to the Present* will be published by Yale University Press in 2024, along with a study of Taiwan for Penguin.