EXCERPT

What Xi Jinping Learnt from his Father

Xi Zhongxun was one a reformist voice within the Communist Party — and was purged multiple times for it. So how did his son Xi Jinping become such a dictator?

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HISTORY | POLITICS

In December 2002, less than one month after he became the top Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leader in Zhejiang province, Xi Jinping treated his father Xi Zhongxun's old friend Li Rui to dinner at an unremarkable expensive restaurant intended to host ministerial officials. They discussed Zhongxun's behavior when Hu Yaobang was removed from power in 1987, as well as how, after his died two years later, Li had left the wake to visit Zhongxun at the Great Hall of the People.

"Now your position is different," Li told Xi Jinping at the end of their meeting. "You can raise a few ideas with the higher-ups." Xi responded cautiously: "How can I compare to you? You know how to walk a fine line. I don't dare." This was to be the last meeting between Li Rui and Xi Jinping. Li would later say: "Of course, at the time, I did not look down on him because he was the son of Zhongxun."

In 2009, Li Hongzhi, the proponent of Hu Yaobang's view, met with Xi Jinping for an hour when Xi went to visit Hu's widow for the Lunar New Year. Hu Deban later described his conversation with Xi, who was the heir apparent by then:

> "I spoke a lot. I said that now the issue is not whether to reform or not, but how to reform, and that reform cannot wait. Some people reform does not need to wait until you are in charge. ...When my father and your father embarked on reform, your father was in Guangdong, and my father was vice president of the Party school. The Party school had no status at all in the past, and he was only third vice president, but he was still able to cause big waves."
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> Xi said little in response. When pressed, he responded noncommitally: "I am listening to you sing."

That was not the last meeting between a member of the Hu family and Xi Jinping. In 2012, Hu Yaobang's older son Hu Deping, a man whom Xi had once referred to as "big brother," also met with him to encourage a reformist path. Xi Jinping listened patiently, and Hu Deping left the meeting feeling confident that he would never do "ill" as a better direction. Xi told Hu that the problems China had accumulated were unprecedented, and it was necessary to achieve progress while remaining steady. Although Xi promised to deliver on political reform, he expressed opposition to radical change.

After Xi succeeded Hu Jintao as the country's top leader in October 2012, pro-reform Party elders and intellectuals were not sure what to make of him at first. In November 2012, Zhao Ziyang's former secretary Bao Tong told the Hong Kong newspaper *Apple Daily* that he expected Xi Jinping could "surpass his father" as a leader. "If he does poorly, he will disappoint and not do justice to his father," Bao said. "but I believe he will do better than his father."

On February 6, 2013, the pro-reform journal *Yanhuang Chunqiu* (**炎黄春秋**) held a meeting during which Feng Jian, a former high-ranking official at the New China News Agency, expressed optimism about Xi Jinping because of who his father was: "He cannot completely give up his father's legacy." But He Fang, a Party elder who for decades had worked on foreign policy, interrupted: "Political genes cannot be inherited," he warned.

The pro-reform elites returned to the question of Xi Jinping on February 27 at a Lunar New Year's celebration, again held by *Yanhuang Chunqiu*. Du Daozheng, director of the journal, pointed out that Xi had already made a trip to Shenzhen to signify support for the reforms, and, on the anniversary of the 1949 constitution, had given a major speech praising rule of law. Du was worried, however, by comments Xi had made for internal consumption that emphasized the loss of ideology and the military that had led to the collapse of the Soviet Union. "My meaning is not to be pessimistic," Du said, "but currently one also cannot feel optimistic."

Another attendee was Mu Xiaoli, daughter of Mu Weirong — a northeasterner who, because of his ties to Zhongxun, had also been prosecuted during the Mao era. Mu drew on her understanding of the principals to warn the participants about what might be coming. She said that "80% or 90% of the second Red generation" was leftist.

> They all have given they inherited from their parents, beginning from Old Mao; it is all the same. ... I say Chairman Mao inherently spoiled us as a group very aggressive; what he taught is to be bellicose toward all the time.
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> Ma believed that the Hu family, given its historic relationship to the Xi family, had a special obligation to push matters in the right direction. In his own speech, He Deban made a cutting remark about Xi Jinping's recent comments that neither the 30 years before or the 30 years after the beginning of Reform and Opening should be rejected. His wondered aloud whether such a position also meant that "what Chairman Mao said about General Secretary Xi's father, Zhongxun, Chang is wrong to oppose the Party is a great intention, also cannot be rejected."

> Xi Jinping was only nine years old when his father fell [in 1962], so the tough environment directly influenced his personality. He is therefore good at forbearance and concealing his intentions, not revealing anything.
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> *— Gao Wenqian*

Li Rui did not quickly change his mind about Xi Jinping. Despite more and more evidence that Xi would pursue an authoritarian line, Li repeatedly told his daughter that "Xi Jinping is still the son of Xi Zhongxun."

Xi Jinping on the front page of the People's Daily, October 30, 2017. (Li Jianjun / *China News*)

In October 2014, Li claimed that relatives individuals had cut important segments of a speech Xi had given in the countryside the previous year when it was published by the New China News Agency and *People's Daily*: "Some people say this is a serious political incident. I also believe this." When asked explicitly if he was optimistic about Xi's leadership, Li said he had "big hopes," referring specifically to Jinping's war on corruption, the dismantling of the reform-by-labor camps, and the new policies against perks for CCP members.

Li's feelings toward Xi Jinping were based on his attitude toward Xi Zhongxun:

> Xi Zhongxun and I were intimate friends. We got along very well. Xi Zhongxun's life was full of the struggle against the left, his life and reputation of rehabilitated after each purge." That is enough to see in him his father's courage, strength of character, and sense of responsibility.

In 2016, *Yanhuang Chunqiu*, which had been praised by Xi Zhongxun himself, was finally shut down by the authorities under Xi Jinping's watch. Furious because of this turn of events, Li Rui shared a clear plan on words with the journal's director, Du Daozheng: "毛泽东思想是江" The organization's leader was interpreted either as "If a fault is not corrected, it will become a bad habit" or as "If the disease of Mao is not changed, the evil will accumulate and turn into Xi." Li was asserting that because the legacy of the Maoist era had never truly been overturned, it was inevitable that it would rise to Xi's behavior.

In October 2017, when Xi was reappointed General Secretary, Li noted in his diary that the front pages of Party newspapers were covered with big headlines of Xi Jinping: "Not even in the Mao era did it ever reach this level," he wrote. In April 2018, as he lay on his death bed, Li asked his daughter Nanyang how the outside world was reacting to the more definitive amend the constitution to allow Xi Jinping to stay in power potentially for life. Two days later, Hu Deban came to visit him. Li was devastated by the turn Chinese politics had taken:

> The appearance of Xi Jinping is your responsibility. You need to figure out who he is. Is it a lack of education? Much problem was precisely that he was uneducated, he scored as F in math. Xi's education is also very low. I am very sad. His father was so good. It is so painful that he had such a son.
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> What, then, were the lessons of Xi Zhongxun's life for his son? The evidence touches upon perhaps the most potential question of scholarly research into Communist regimes: the question of "possibility-bound." Did the life of Xi Zhongxun, especially his actions during the 1980s, suggest that, under different circumstances, the Party might have taken a more humane, liberal path? Or did the characteristics inherent in the Party, as well as Xi's own personal limitations, demonstrate that, as the Russian rock's roll musician Boris Grebenschikov once put it in a song, "there is no road, and there never was one"?
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> The question of possibility-bound is inherently dramatic, regardless of the answer. Storytelling certainly has its place in history. It can vividly pre-vision and convey the emotional atmosphere experienced by the participants. Yet poetics, partisanship and presentism are not a free pass to deny the concrete methodological challenges inherent in historical counterfactuals. A serious investigation into historical moments can give us a sense of how politics works and teach us how to structure questions. But the past cannot give us a precise constellation of the variables that deterministically explain an outcome, nor can it help us predict the future. While books that contemplate contingency or continuity might make for a good read, Xi Jinping's life is a powerful statement about the limitations of the power of grand narratives. It shows that power is tricky, slippery, and contingent even for an organizational weapon like the CCP.
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> Counterfactuals about the regime's broader trajectory are challenging. All the characters involved, not only Xi Zhongxun but also the people whom he depised, were full of contradictions. They were both victims and perpetrators. While Western historians and official Party historians have both long seen the CCP's past as a consistent struggle between "good people" and "bad people," such approaches simply do not do justice to the extraordinary subtleties of personal interactions in an organization like the Party.
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> Despite organizational discipline, people remained complicated. They could seem "rightist" in one situation and "leftist" in another. They could also change their minds. And even if Hu Yaobang, Zhao Ziyang or Xi Zhongxun had become the top leaders, they, too, if they survived, might have changed. Xi Jinping himself whispered privately that power corrupted.
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> Many aspects of Xi Jinping's life remain a mystery. This point is not an attempt to shy away from drawing conclusions, but a reflection of the peculiarities of Party life in China. When Xi met with potential challenges to Party rule, he often channeled them. Was he acting sincerely or instrumentally, or a bit of both? While this is an academic question for historians, it was an existential puzzle for United Front targets.

The Xi family tree.

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>
> *— Li Rui*

Even within the Party, discipline often made it impossible to discern what Xi, who spent years doing underground work, really thought. He existed in an inherently opaque system in which even people at the top often had a very poor idea of what was transpiring, and he himself often had extremely mixed feelings about events.

Because competing versions of the past hold a special charge for Party members, setting Party history faces special challenges. As Michel-Rolph Trouillot notes, the "play of power in the production of alternative narratives" extends even to the evidence upon which historians are written. In many cases, the negatives of evidence and intention simply cannot bear the weight of the big questions we would most like to ask.

It is precisely these ambiguities that make the question of what lessons Xi Jinping learned from his father so meaningful. Ironically, guessing what he "really thinks" of his father is difficult in part because he grew up in the Xi household — a place where a person would have learned the need for caution and reticence at a young age. As the Chinese historian Gao Wenqian notes: "Xi Jinping was only nine years old when his father fell [in 1962], so the tough environment directly influenced his personality. He is therefore good at forbearance and concealing his intentions, not revealing anything."

In a rare moment of candor, Xi Jinping once said: "My father entrusted me with two things: don't persecute people and tell the truth. The first is possible, while the second is not." Certainly, the father-son relationship is a powerful context for understanding Xi, yet at the same time, like his father, he is the product of a multiplicity of different motives, influences and contexts.

The multiple meanings that could be derived from Xi Zhongxun's life is also evidenced by the very different paths taken by his children. Xi Heping, Xi's eldest daughter from his first wife Hao Ringlin, committed suicide during the Cultural Revolution. His son Xi Zhongxing, who died in 1998, was minister of justice in Hainan province and fought to strengthen rule of law there — the same task that his father pursued on a national level during his final years in Beijing. Is two speeches Zhongxing gave on the subject, in 1994 and 1995, the word "Party" appeared only once. Instead, he emphasized the importance of learning from Western legal systems. Lawyers should never be prosecuted, he said, for exercising their right to independently practice the law.

The youngest daughter from this first marriage, Xi Qiaoqing, became a journalist at *International Business Daily*, where one journalist who knew both her and her father later wrote that she "dressed simply, was low-key, and had the style of the Xi family. She could not be more different from the show-off style and arrogance of some children of high-ranking officials." In October 2011, she attended an event marking the 30th anniversary of the debut of the Gang of Four Trial. She reportedly told the journalist Zhang Jie, the history journal. When she attended another event in March 2014 celebrating the Lunar New Year, those who saw her thought she looked like "a rustic old revolutionary from a bare area."

Xi Zhongxun's other children, from his second marriage to Qi Xin, grew up after the Chinese revolution. Except for Xi Jingping, they have all received extensive education because of their wealth. In 1990, Xi Jingping left his job in Beijing as vice-division commander in the People's Armed Police to help take care of her father in Shenzhen. As early as 1991, she purchased an apartment in Hong Kong that cost RMT,000. In 1996, she married the Yunnan businessman Ding Jiangqi, and in 1997, they made a company investment of 15.3 million yuan. In 2006, she completed Tsinghua University's executive master's program in business administration. That same year, in an interview with *Successful Marketing*, Qiaoqiao described her approach to real estate as "looking at things from the perspective of a housewife."

Xi Zhongxun (back row, second right) attends in Heart of Xi Jinping, 1980. (Xi Gongzuo is his son. 习近平)

While Mao had described Xi Zhongxun as "putting the Party's interests first," Xi Qiaoqiao stated that it was necessary to "always proceed from the interests of the customer." In 2008, her husband Ding Jiangqi spent $71 million to buy a stake in Jungji Riun Earth. In 2009, for unclear reasons, she and Ding were given an early opportunity to buy a $28.6 million stake in Wanda, the giant shopping-center conglomerate owned by oligarch Wang Jianlin, before the company went public.

Xi Yuanping, Xi Jinping's younger brother, entered the Luoyang Foreign Language Academy of the People's Liberation Army in 1977. After he graduated, he worked in both the military and the government, including in foreign trade, although the details remain unclear. An American embassy contact claimed that, by the 1980s, Xi Yuanping "had become both obese and very wealthy." He sported "expensive jewelry and designer clothing," moving to Hong Kong when it was still under British rule.

In October 2000, a man who had previously served as a bodyguard for the revolutionary leaders Xi Jiaoming, Zhu De and He Yaobang, but who later became a businessman, told Li Rui that he had run into Xi Yuanping at a hotel. He not only paid the 8,000 yuan check, but also gave Yuanping all the cash he had on hand. This remarkable display of generosity did not impress Qi Xin, Xi Jinping's mother, who allegedly made a cutting remark: "Get rid of the beggar." Was she decided to give up on the Xi family ▶

Excerpted from The Party's Interests Come First: The Life of Xi Zhongxun, Father of Xi Jinping by Joseph Torigian, published by Stanford University Press. © 2023 by Joseph Torigian. All Rights Reserved.

Header: Xi Zhongxun with his sons Xi Jingping (left) and Xi Yuanping (center), 1958. (Xi Zhongxun House 习仲勋纪念馆)

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