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Understanding the Xi Effect: Structure versus Agency

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Is there a Xi Jinping effect? And if there is, what is it? These seem like straightforward questions but this volume shows that they are not easily-answered. This is so because even if an unmistakable change in the wake of Xi's rise to preeminence can be identified in a sphere such as great power diplomacy,¹ a second set of questions immediately follows. Is the Xi effect apparent in many policy areas or just a few? If only in some areas, why in those? Do changes associated with Xi have deep roots in the past or can they be traced directly to his ascent and a break with the Hu Jintao era or perhaps the entire reform period ushered in by Deng Xiaoping? What about the future? Although it is difficult to make out the outlines of a post-Xi China, or even hazard a guess when it might begin, are the changes evident since Xi's rise likely to persist, or are reversals in the offing when he leaves the scene?

The editors have slyly forced the contributors to grapple with one of the knottiest problems in the social sciences: sorting out the consequences of structure and agency. How much is Xi a vessel or manifestation of larger changes, separate from him, taking place in China or in the international political-economic system, and how much is Xi a captain of the ship taking China in directions that could not be foreseen based on the exhaustion of export-led growth, technological change, problems in the West, the Thucydides trap, decades of economic

¹ See, Suisheng Zhao, "President Xi's Big Power Diplomacy: Advancing an Assertive Foreign Policy Agenda," in Axel Berkofsky and Giulia Sciorati (eds.), *Mapping China's Global Future: Playing Ball or Rocking the Boat?* (Milan, Italy: Ledizioni Publishing, 2020), pp. 24-36.

development and military modernization, efforts to cope with a more complex society, and whatever else Leninist state capitalism entails at this juncture in world history. Is Xi, as one of the participants at the Banff conference that inspired this book (Timothy Cheek) put it: a cause or an effect?

Starting with the first question: is there a Xi effect? The answer that emerges from this volume is a qualified “yes.” To be sure, there are notable and striking continuities that should not be downplayed, on issues such as limited attempts to address inequality, as Martin King Whyte demonstrates, or how migrants remain precarious participants in the urban public goods regime, as explained by Alexsia Chan. And there may be aspects of the pre-Xi past that were not fully appreciated in the Hu Jintao years, including the continuing importance of ideology (Cheek; Esarey and Han).² and the fragility of collective leadership,³ which have been carried through to the current era. But it is difficult to make the case that Xi has just been more of the same. If Li Keqiang had won the leadership race, as many expected in the late 2000s, it is not a big stretch to argue that China would be a materially different country today. Would we see growing tensions with the United States: probably. A larger Chinese presence in the South China Sea (Womack): quite likely. A vigorous anti-corruption campaign directed at “tigers” as well as “flies” (Wedeman), “total surveillance” of Uighurs and increasingly of Han Chinese (Musapir; Kai, Demes and Chen), One Belt One Road, the casting aside of leadership succession norms, a

² See also, Ivan Franceschini, Nicholas Loubere, and Christian Sorace (eds.), *Afterlives of Chinese Communism: Political Concepts from Mao to Xi* (Acton, Australia: ANU Press, 2019); Kerry Brown and Una Aleksandra Berzina-Cerenkova, “Ideology in the Era of Xi Jinping,” *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 23:3 (September 2018), pp. 323-39; Christian P. Sorace, *Shaken Authority: China’s Communist Party and the 2008 Earthquake* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017).

³ Cheng Li, *Chinese Politics in the Xi Jinping Era: Reassessing Collective Leadership* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2016).

remarkably hard crackdown on free speech and the rights protection movement (Esarey and Han): probably not. Elite politics, in other words, is back. What top leaders, especially Xi, want clearly matters. How Xi vanquished his opponents and concentrated power in his own hands so that he has a degree of discretion not seen since Deng Xiaoping⁴ is a topic that China scholars must strive to understand better, even if our ways of knowing what takes place in the halls of Zhongnanhai have not improved as much as would be ideal. We need to be reading leadership statements and public announcements closely and parsing them skillfully⁵ so that we can learn what Xi and others at the top seek. This is true because policy misimplementation and opposition by political rivals aside, a substantial portion of what Xi calls for is happening.

That is the case for change and agency, and against continuity and structure. In this volume, that leadership matters is most evident in Tony Liu's chapter on Xi stepping up pressure on Taiwan, his confidence that he knows Taiwan better than other top leaders, and his focus on resolving the Taiwan issue in the near future. But we also see Xi's hand at work in domestic politics, concerning the mistreatment of Uyghurs (Musapir), the scope of the anti-corruption campaign (Wedeman), and Xi's presiding over a centralization of power⁶ that has benefited Xi more than anyone else.

⁴ Ezra Vogel, "The Leadership of Xi Jinping: A Dengist Perspective," *Journal of Contemporary China* 30:131 (September 2021), pp. 693-96.

⁵ See, for example, Joseph Fewsmith, "Mao's Shadow," *China Leadership Monitor* 43 (Winter 2013). On the almost-lost art of reading and interpreting leadership statements and other public announcements, see Alice L. Miller, "Valedictory: Analyzing the Chinese Leadership in in an Era of Sex, Money and Power," *China Leadership Monitor* 57 (Fall 2018); Frederick C. Teiwes, "The Study of Elite Political Conflict Inside the 'Black Box,'" in David S.G. Goodman (ed.), *Handbook of the Politics of China* (Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2015), pp. 21-41.

⁶ Sangkuk Lee, "An Institutional Analysis of Xi Jinping's Centralization of Power," *Journal of Contemporary China* 26:105 (May 2017), pp. 325-36; Elizabeth Economy, *China's Third Revolution: Xi Jinping and the New Chinese State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

Now, allow me to tack back against this line of thinking or at least complicate it and problematize the Xi effect. First, as seen in Gerda Wielander’s “fundamentalism with Chinese characteristics” there are many paradoxes and ironies in the Xi effect. Wielander shows that tighter control of faith-based activity and efforts to position the Communist Party as a sacralized object that subsumes all religions is both familiar and unfamiliar.⁷ Or in Timothy Cheek’s chapter on ideological governance and Xi’s “counter-reformation,” Xi’s use of ideology echoes the governing style of Liu Shaoqi and Mao Zedong, but is not merely a return to the Yan’an rectification model, as 21st century leaders continue to confront Qing Dynasty problems and play their usual pedagogical role, but have also developed new lessons to teach. The main content of the Party’s curriculum for Cheek lies in texts such as Liu’s “How to be a Good Communist” and the 1981 “Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party,” the Party’s “holy scripture” on the Maoist past, while a new resolution on Party history in 2021 elevated Xi’s thought and stature to Deng’s and Mao’s level. Again, a mixture of new and old. Familiar instruments of rule repurposed to achieve sometimes unfamiliar goals. One might also note the re-emergence of campaigns and work teams as routine means to carry out repression and policy implementation.⁸ Is this evidence of a Xi effect? It is perhaps more precisely thought of as a

⁷ For more on religion and “paradoxes and ironies” in a leader’s influence, see Sarah Lee and Kevin J. O’Brien, “Adapting in Difficult Circumstances: Protestant Pastors and the Xi Jinping Effect,” *Journal of Contemporary China*, 30:132 (November 2021), pp. 902-14. They offer “a reminder that there is a bottom-up element to the Xi effect and that the consequences of leadership change are mutually constituted by society and the state.”

⁸ Kristen E. Looney, *Mobilizing for Development: The Modernization of Rural East Asia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020); Elizabeth J. Perry, “From Mass Campaigns to Managed Campaigns: ‘Constructing a New Socialist Countryside,’” in Sebastian Heilmann and Elizabeth J. Perry (eds.) *Mao’s Invisible Hand: The Political Foundations of Adaptive Governance in China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), pp. 30-61; Kristen E. Looney, “China’s Campaign to Build a New Socialist Countryside: Village Modernization, Peasant Councils, and the Ganzhou Model of Rural Development,” *China Quarterly* 224 (December 2015), pp. 909-32; Kevin J. O’Brien and Yanhua Deng, “Preventing Protest One Person at a

governance technique that resonates or rhymes with the past, which in Cheek's words, is "being deployed strategically to deal with today's challenges."

Continuity, in other words, cannot be ignored, as lessons of history are re-applied and transformed, and also built upon and extended. For Whyte, government attention to poverty reduction dates to the 1980s and the biggest successes occurred before Xi's time in office.⁹ A new blueprint for combatting inequality appeared in 2013, but the plan has received little publicity since, and despite additional funding for rural "minimum livelihood payments" (*dibao*), "the main credit for developing and extending the program belongs to his predecessors." On healthcare, Xi built on earlier progress and deserves some credit for "pushing the process along" and improving the extent of coverage and reimbursement levels, as well as beginning to reduce administrative barriers that make it difficult for rural residents to use their medical insurance in cities. As for educational access, Whyte argues that Xi has continued Jiang Zemin's effort to increase college enrollment and Hu Jintao's to break through bottlenecks in rural schooling "but it is not clear that he has added much that is new or has increased the pace." Likewise for Chan: efforts to improve the quality of life for urban migrants have not received the resources or attention devoted to other signature policies, such as the anti-corruption campaign or the Belt and Road Initiative. Inequality continues to serve the state as local authorities use access to the urban public goods regime as a means of social control.¹⁰ For Chan, continuity trumps change and this "runs counter to the notion of a universal and sweeping Xi effect." (That former Premier Li

Time: Psychological Coercion and Relational Repression in China," *China Review* 17:2 (June 2017), pp. 179-201.

⁹ See also, Shujie Yao, "Economic Development and Poverty Reduction in China Over 20 Years of Reforms," *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 48:3 (April 2000), pp. 447-74.

¹⁰ Alexsia Chan and Kevin J. O'Brien, "Phantom Services: Deflecting Migrants in China," *China Journal* 81 (January 2019), pp. 103-22.

Keqiang was more prominent than Xi in defining and promoting China's urbanization strategy also raises questions about Xi's participation in this area). The chapters on social policy highlight continuities and variation in the Xi effect by sector, depending on whether Xi and other top leaders believe that a policy is working well enough (Chan). Allowing a policy to persist and incremental fine-tuning to occur is a leadership decision of sorts (Chan), but it is not evidence of a significant Xi effect.

Structural factors also limit the impact of any one person, however powerful. Some recent developments are not due to Xi per se, but are instead coterminous with his time in office. Although "total surveillance" is unquestionably a leadership initiative, and is likely related to Xi's personal ambition and his preference for strongman rule, it is also the result of a long process of institutionalization and the creation of laws, regulations and agencies that facilitate societal monitoring (Deng, Demes and Chen). Furthermore, using smartphones for contact tracing during the coronavirus pandemic (Deng, Demes and Chen) and placing location apps on every smartphone in Xinjiang (Musapir) depend on increases in processing speed that have little to do with Xi and much to do with technological progress. Even the chapters on foreign policy highlight structural changes that have offered Xi new options.¹¹ For Womack, Xi's personal preferences and "assertiveness" are secondary. The size, connectivity and prospects of the Chinese economy are driving China's diplomatic relationship with Southeast Asian nations, and growing economic ties are causing the countries in the region to look for a positive relationship with their powerful neighbor. Xi's role is mainly to stabilize and institutionalize a mutually beneficial asymmetric relationship. The importance of causes other than Xi is also evident in the

¹¹ For an influential treatment of structure, which also makes room for agency, see William H. Sewell, Jr., "A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency, and Transformation," *American Journal of Sociology* 98:1 (July 1992), pp. 1-29.

hardening of China's Taiwan policy and military force becoming a more viable option to pursue reunification (Liu). This is partly a result of Xi coming to power and partly a result of Taiwan's Democratic Progressive Party returning to power.

Some of the chapters are less about the Xi Jinping effect than what has changed (or not) in the Xi era. Liu takes on this issue most directly by arguing that it is plausible to assume that because Xi has stripped many of his political opponents of their authority and concentrated power in his own hands (cf. Wedeman), "Xi Jinping has the dominant voice in shaping China's approach toward Taiwan relations." Chan also worries that intentions and "the discernible effect of an individual" are difficult to measure. Other authors artfully elide the issue of Xi's influence in a given policy realm and instead explain what is new, what is old, and what resonates to a greater or less extent with the past. Given the opaqueness of Chinese leadership politics, this is an entirely reasonable analytical move, even if it steers some distance away from the Xi effect and specifying what can be attributed to structure and what to agency. This reminds us that we can seldom pinpoint what even the strongest leaders in a secretive authoritarian system are personally responsible for and that rock-solid counterfactuals are never available in the social sciences.¹² Even Xi is sometimes an object rather than a subject, acted upon rather than acting, as the world situation, Chinese history, his rivals, the bureaucracy, and the society he rules over influence his choices. In this sense, Karl Marx was right when he wrote that "men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past."¹³

¹² On the use (and abuse) of counterfactuals in the study of world politics, see James D. Fearon, "Counterfactuals and Hypothesis Testing in Political Science," *World Politics* 43:2 (January 1991), pp. 169-95.

¹³ Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," in *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels: Selected Works, Vol. 1* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969), p. 398.

Even though Xi has considerable leeway to act independently, there are structures and long-standing practices that shape and limit the opportunities available to him.