

# CPC Futures

*The New Era of  
Socialism with  
Chinese Characteristics*

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## **Canonising Xi Jinping Thought – Ideological Engineering and Its Real-world Relevance**

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Of the five leadership generations ruling the People’s Republic of China (PRC), none of the paramount party-state leaders saw such a swift and systematic elevation to the pantheon of Communist Party ideologists as that of Xi Jinping. It took decades for Mao Zedong Thought and Deng Xiaoping Theory to be included in the national and party constitutions. Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao were merely granted contributions to party theory that did not bear their name—the Important Thought of “Three Represents” and the Scientific Outlook on Development, respectively—after a decade in power. In the case of Xi Jinping, however, the process of canonisation of his Thought started immediately following his installation as the new secretary-general at the 18th Party Congress in late 2012.

This chapter delineates the canonisation process of what would come to be known as “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era” (a.k.a. Xi Jinping Thought). The objective is not only to illustrate the ever-growing importance of party ideology in contemporary China, but also to highlight the real-world implications of a process that might appear opaque and parochial, yet intersects closely with political, economic, social and cultural developments at home and abroad.

### **Elevating Xi Jinping’s Leadership Authority**

When Xi Jinping came to power in November 2012, the expectations for him were high after what was perceived inside and outside of the Party as a decade

of stagnation under Hu Jintao. Xi Jinping took on an aura of self-confidence, resolve and foresight that starkly contrasted with his predecessor, who had presented himself much more modestly as just first among equals of a collective leadership. Just three weeks into his first term, state media celebrated him as the harbinger of a better future when he announced the “Chinese Dream of Realising the Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation”, to be realised by the middle of the 21st century. The choreography of Xi Jinping’s appearance at an exhibition on “The Road to Rejuvenation” set the precedent for similar performances to come. Always centre-stage, standing slightly above and apart from his colleagues, or walking alone, Xi’s role as the “core” of the Party’s leadership has been enacted in ways not seen since the Mao era.

Within a year, Xi Jinping’s elevated authority had been enshrined in a new governing ideology. The “Decision on Some Major Issues Concerning Comprehensively Deepening the Reform”, adopted by the Third Plenum of the 18th Central Committee in November 2013, spelt out an ambitious reform programme to refurbish Socialism with Chinese Characteristics by enhancing the quality and efficiency of governance at all administrative levels of the party-state. In order to tackle the decentralisation and fragmentation of the bureaucracy and to target areas of reform that had been left untouched by previous leadership generations, Xi Jinping proposed a new “top-down design” of governance. Instead of Deng’s “crossing the river by groping for stones”, Xi put himself at the apex of a hierarchy of comprehensive and co-ordinated steering. His chairmanship over multiple newly established leadership groups and commissions reflected his significantly enhanced personal authority (see the chapter by Grünberg and Brussee in this book). In speeches and separate documents, Xi offered his personal explanations of top-level party documents, referring to himself as “I” instead of hiding behind the language of collective leadership. In official party language, Xi’s authority was put on a par with Mao Zedong’s during his first term with labels such as “core” or “great leader”.

### **Crafting the Canon**

Party theorists and propaganda workers intensified their efforts to cast Xi Jinping’s elevated authority into a new vocabulary. The formula of “Three Self-Confidences” (i.e. self-confidence in China’s own development path, theory and system of socialism with Chinese characteristics) was created in late 2012. In 2016, “cultural self-confidence” was added as a fourth element, in line with long-standing ambitions by propaganda czar Wang Huning to render China’s “excellent traditional culture” into a prominent ingredient of party ideology and

a powerful resource for theoretical innovation. Propaganda material showcased Xi's outstanding rhetorical talent, featuring a combination of historical statecraft adages and populist vernacular. In 2014, the state media praised as the "Xi-style hot phrase" of the year the concept of the "new normal", which had been introduced to prepare the nation for a lasting shift toward slower but higher-quality economic growth.

Another example of ideological engineering under Xi Jinping is the twelve "Socialist Core Values", an idiosyncratic mix of traditional Chinese and modern Western notions. Official definitions offered in May 2013 made clear how these values were supposed to be understood. The value of "democracy" interpreted as a national-level value, for example, emphasised national sovereignty vis-à-vis other nations. Similarly, "freedom", defined as a value not at the individual but at the societal level, was to denote the freedom of choice for Chinese society to follow its own development path. While the Socialist Core Values were not ascribed to Xi Jinping in person, a massive poster campaign launched in 2013 (and still being used during his second term) amalgamated the twelve values with Xi's Chinese Dream narrative, impersonated by a sweet little red-dressed girl, the "Chinese Dream Child".

The delegitimising of Western values also had a much sharper edge. Around the same time as the propagation of the Socialist Core Values, the Party Central Committee's leaked internal Document No. 9 of 2013 with the title "Communiqué on the Current State of the Ideological Sphere" forbade the use of notions such as "universal values", "constitutionalism", "civil society" or "media freedom" in public discourse (Central Committee 2013). Bans on foreign textbooks in schools and universities further signalled the leadership's claim to re-establishing party ideology as the locus of discourse hegemony inside and outside the Party.

Efforts to craft the canon culminated in the run-up to the 19th Party Congress in October 2017. In July of that year in a speech to ministers and provincial leaders, Xi Jinping had launched the idea of the "New Era". In his words, since the PRC's founding, the nation had experienced a historic rise from "standing up" (under Mao), "growing rich" (under Deng, Jiang and Hu) to "getting strong" (under Xi). While the country would remain in the Primary Stage of Socialism (a slogan coined under Deng to rationalise the continued existence of capitalist pockets in a socialist economy), the time had come to inaugurate a new era of socialist modernisation and to tackle the principal contradiction characterising this new era.

The Mao era of class struggle had been characterised by the contradiction between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, while ensuing leadership generations

had tackled the contradiction “between the ever-growing material and cultural needs of the people versus backward social production”. Now, the new principal contradiction identified by Xi Jinping was the one “between unbalanced and inadequate development and the people’s ever-growing needs for a better life”, including, in Xi’s words, demands for democracy, rule of law, fairness and justice, etc. Hailed as the latest achievement in the Sinification of Marxism at the Party Congress in October 2017, this key insight into the necessities and opportunities of a “New Era of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics” became the core of Xi Jinping Thought.

### **Cultivating True Belief**

To complete the process of canonisation, Xi Jinping Thought had to be anchored in the national constitution. This time, the new leader’s legacy was not only inserted in the Preamble as in previous rounds. Rather, the constitutional architecture was thoroughly modified to accommodate the spirit of the New Era by integrating the principle of party leadership into the constitution’s main body for the first time. While state organs had been treated as normatively separate from the Party, the 2018 constitutional amendment cemented the Party’s supremacy. With the Party formally morphing into the state, it appeared as a logical next step to remove the term limits for the state presidency to concur with the unlimited post of the Party’s secretary-general, thereby allowing Xi Jinping to remain in power for life. As if to seal the canonisation of Xi Jinping Thought, all public servants would from now on have to swear an oath of loyalty (an act previously reserved for party members) to the national constitution and, implied in this act, to the “sacrosanct” nature of party supremacy in the New Era.

The mass dissemination of the canon was launched in October 2018 by the publication in the *People’s Daily* smartphone app of an authoritative mind map which colourfully visualised Xi Jinping Thought in its myriad ramifications (Needham 2018). The same technology was used in January 2019 for the launch of a propaganda app called “Study to Strengthen the Country” (which can also be read as “Study Xi to Strengthen the Country”). The app functions not only as a platform for textual and visual materials expounding Xi Jinping Thought in theory, but also actively as a means to test and train the user’s knowledge with interactive tools, quizzes, study and bonus point systems. While the app is mandatory for party members, it also appears to be used widely among other groups. Already in April 2019, the download numbers surpassed those of the country’s most popular messaging, social media and e-payment apps.

Also in 2018, the party centre launched a full-fledged campaign against disloyal party and state cadres. In the past, party cadres' rhetoric had to be in line with party ideology, but what they said and believed privately was conventionally regarded as being another matter. The campaign against so-called "two-faced individuals" sought to eradicate this long-standing practice of tacitly acknowledged hypocrisy. By handing out severe sanctions against a number of high-ranking cadres accused of such "two-faced" behaviour, the Party sent a strong signal that personal loyalty, integrity and a sincere belief in party ideology were obligatory for party members in the New Era both in their official and their private capacities.

In November 2021, the indisputable authority of Xi Jinping Thought was finally ratified in the resolution on party history, only the third of its kind since 1945. This watershed document streamlined the achievements of the first four leadership generations to form a teleological narrative culminating in the dawn of the New Era in 2012, thereby legitimising party rule under Xi Jinping far into the 21st century. With the phrase of the "Two Establishments", the document declared that the Party "has established Comrade Xi Jinping's core position on the Party Central Committee and in the Party as a whole, and the guiding position of Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era". In language reminiscent of the Cultural Revolution, the document called for the whole party to undergo "self-purification, self-perfection, self-renovation and self-improvement" and for all party members to undergo "self-revolution", "criticism and self-criticism" in line with the new guiding thought. Knowing the canon "by heart" and demonstrating one's true belief has become not just a pragmatic exercise, but a necessity to survive as a party cadre and to promote one's professional career.

## **Real-world Implications**

As this brief analysis of the process of canonisation of Xi Jinping Thought has shown, the importance of party ideology has significantly grown inside the Communist Party, shaping discourses, practices and claiming to win the hearts and minds of party members across the country. However, its impact does not stop here. While the real-world relevance is obvious in the field of governance, Xi Jinping Thought has also been normatively and institutionally integrated into the economy, society and cultural sphere.

The New Normal for example is part of the forward-looking goal to maintain "high-quality economic development" in the future. As such, it supports the Party's ambition of more environmentally friendly growth as well as the promise

of “common prosperity”. The latter was introduced in 2021 to justify a set of new regulations aimed at private businesses and tech giants. In the name of restoring the Party’s original mission of serving the masses, the party leadership appears to aim for a long-term redistribution of wealth accumulated by the country’s socioeconomic elites (see the chapter by Hofman in this volume).

Other examples abound of the real-world relevance of party ideology in education and culture. The banning of “Western universal values”, foreign textbooks or, most recently, private tutoring classes seems to have met with some resentment by middle class families. Xi Jinping’s motto of “cultural confidence” seems to be more popular and has translated into the streamlining of China’s “excellent” traditional culture in the mass media and recent restrictions of young people’s video gaming and fandom culture.

Beyond its domestic reach, the Party has also stepped up its external propaganda. It remains to be seen to what extent the dissemination of slogans such as “Community of Destiny for Humankind” or the recent set of “Common Values of the Whole of Humanity” (i.e. peace, development, equity and justice, democracy and freedom) will strike a chord with audiences outside China. The global ambition behind the canon, however, is clear: to contest what is perceived as the United States’ discursive and political hegemony and to test to what extent China’s own discourses resonate in a world increasingly torn by Manichaeian ideologies.

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