

**Steve Tsang and Olivia Cheung**, *The Political Thought of Xi Jinping*. New York: Oxford University Press 2024. 280 pp. ISBN: 9780197689363

The book examines the evolution of Xi Jinping Thought, its key tenets, and its developments. The authors have read all available speeches by Xi since he came to power in 2012. They analysed the content of the speeches through both qualitative and quantitative methods, employing software to identify high-frequency words in his texts. Chapter 1 describes Xi Thought as an evolving ideology that currently has the status of a proto-ideology not yet on par with Mao Zedong Thought, although this is the ultimate aim. The book provides a much needed road map for understanding key concepts in Xi's political thinking.

Chapter 2 discusses how Xi, through a sustained anti-corruption campaign launched in 2012, aims to reinvigorate the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as a Leninist instrument while enhancing his own power as China's strongman. The chapter also introduces the underlying thesis of the book: the evolution of the Chinese political system from 'consultative Leninism' to 'Sino-centric consultative Leninism'. It means that consultative elements have been incorporated into the Chinese political system but as a Sino-centric style of consultative Leninism with a number of defining features, including the supremacy of the Chinese Communist Party, strong nationalism, and a China-first approach to economic development.

Chapter 3 is more about Party organisation than Xi Jinping ideology. It outlines Xi's efforts to establish and consolidate Leninist organisational mechanisms and structures to strengthen the CCP and his own position as the core leader. These efforts involve merging Party departments with overlapping portfolios, subsuming state organs under the Party, and strengthening Party-building in non-party organisations.

Chapter 4 conceptualises the Party's relationship with the people in the form of a de facto social contract. The contract is about meeting the public demand for social and economic progress more

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effectively in exchange for the people's acquiescence to the Party's monopoly of power and increased political and social control.

Chapter 5 focuses on the economy and Xi's three goals for developing a socialist market economy. These are economic strength, economic security and order, and wealth distribution—in this order. Economic strength involves catching up with the West in science and technology. Economic security and order involve deleveraging the state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and the real estate sector, enforcing government regulations in the private tech sector, and implementing a dual circulation strategy of combining attention to internal economic development and consumption with continued focus on exports. Wealth distribution aims to prevent or redress excessive social polarisation.

Chapter 6 is about Xi's attempt to create and unite a singular patriotic people out of China's diverse population. The centrepiece of his efforts to strengthen his brand of Party-centric nationalism is the 'China Dream' or 'the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation'. Achieving the rejuvenation of China is a core element of this thought and a key argument for remaining in power, as this project requires strong leadership.

Chapter 7 investigates Xi's approach to the world and China's role in it. Tsang and Cheung claim that Xi's foreign policy goal is to recreate the *tianxia* system of the old empire, striving for a hierarchical international system with China at the top. For the time being, Xi is content with a multipolar world order, but the ultimate goal is a unipolar world where a reinvigorated China has replaced the USA.

Finally, the conclusion discusses China's direction of development under Xi and what this means for China and the world. It revisits consultative Leninism, arguing that the notion is still a key to understanding the nature of the Chinese political system. However, due to Xi's pursuance of Party-centric nationalism and Sino-centrism, the authors suggest that Sino-centric consultative Leninism is a more fitting term.

The strength of the book is that it takes what Xi says and writes seriously. The authors claim they have read all available speeches and writings of Xi released during the period from the 18<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in late 2012 to the summer of 2022. This includes his speeches at high-level Party meetings, meetings of the central leading small groups and commissions and collective study sessions of the Politburo. In addition, the source material includes Xi's writings

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in the Party theory journal *Qiushi* and the daily newspaper *Renmin Ribao*, and speeches given at various international institutions and in meetings with foreign leaders. A particularly useful collection of material is the official collection of Xi's speeches and writings contained in the four volumes of Xi Jinping: The Governance of China published in 2014, 2017, 2020 and 2022. There are no interviews listed in the references. No reason is given for this omission, but it probably relates to the book's focus on Xi texts and Party documents.

My main issue with the book is the notion of consultative Leninism that constitutes the theoretical framework of the analysis, albeit in a modified form as Sino-centric consultative Leninism. The authors describe a political-economic landscape where Xi Jinping is omnipresent. Except for Wang Huning, none of China's current top leaders are mentioned. In short, the book does not portray a system where consultation plays any role. What is missing are examples of consultation in the political process and how it works in concrete terms.

It is intriguing that Tsang and Cheung only once mention the concept of 'whole-process people's democracy'. They write that Xi claims that 'whole-process people's democracy' means that 'the legitimacy and superiority of "democracy" should not be measured by the electoral process but by results' (p. 189). However, Xi's definition of the term is not limited to results. In fact, he highlights four paired aspects of 'whole-process people's democracy', including 1) process democracy and result-oriented democracy, 2) procedural democracy and substantive democracy, 3) direct democracy and indirect democracy, and 4) people democracy and the will of the state. In short, according to Xi, 'whole-process people's democracy' is not primarily about results, e.g., elections, but much more about process - and consultation (Xi Jinping, "Regarding the Standards of Democracy, Xi Jinping Profoundly Elaborates," *Qiushi*, 15 October 2021).

Xi Jinping first referred to the concept in November 2019, and it was incorporated into law when the National People's Congress in March 2021 passed the 'Decision on Amending the Organic Law of the National People's Congress'. On 1 July, on the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the CCP, Xi Jinping again highlighted the concept of 'whole-process people's democracy', linking it to social fairness and justice and 'common prosperity'. In sum, this concept was an important part of Xi thought before the authors finalised their manuscript in the fall of 2022.

Another intriguing aspect is the absence of a discussion of how ideology—or proto-ideology as the authors call Xi Thought—is being made in China. For instance, the role of Wang Huning, often cited as China's chief formulator of ideological terms, is only briefly mentioned as a 'professor-turned party apparatchik who plays a key role in writing up treatises that form Xi Thought' (p. 149). Readers would be interested in a more in-depth exploration of this topic in order to cast light on the provenience and originality of Xi's thinking.

Related to this omission, the book also does not address the forms in which Xi Thought is presented. Is it conveyed through speeches, remarks or reports at meetings, or longer articles? This is interesting when comparing Mao Zedong Thought and Xi Jinping Thought (which is actually still officially called 'Xi Jinping's Thought on Socialism with Chinese characteristics in a new era'). Mao authored and published longer articles of theoretical significance and depth that garnered recognition outside of China, in particular among European leftwing circles. For example, Mao's article 'On Contradictions' significantly influenced the French structuralist Louis Althusser's writings on the social formation and the role of ideology. Why is it that Xi Jinping's writings are less ambitious, contributing little to Marxist theory?

In chapter 5 on the economy, Tsang and Cheung assert that economic strength and economic security and order are top priorities for Xi. Despite much talk about demand-side reform in the Chinese media, 'the Leninist approach of Xi Thought' (p. 116) ensures a continuous focus on supply-side driven economic development. The authors note that 'Xi cannot afford to let the economy perform too poorly lest the people turn against the Party' (p. 117). However, since Xi took over as China's leader, the growth rate has gradually declined without any indication of widespread unrest. This underscores the difficulty in predicting the effect of economic slowdown on regime stability in authoritarian systems.

Finally, the authors might want to reconsider Chapter 7 on foreign policy, where they state that Xi 'intends leadership of the world' (p. 191) and 'Xi works to change the rules-based international order' (p. 189). Current developments clearly indicate that China continues to support international organisations such as the WHO and the UN as well as international climate agreements. China explicitly advocates upholding the current rules-based international order, whereas the US administration under Trump aims to change it.

In sum, the book provides a good introduction to Xi Jinping's thinking, but the theoretical construct could be strengthened by incorporating more recent concepts and notions such as 'whole-process people's democracy'. Although, the authors may be correct in concluding that 'further modifications of Xi Thought will almost certainly be in line with existing tenets', it does not render recent ideological contributions unimportant.

The Political Thought of Xi Jinping does not contain any information on Xi Jinping's personal background and political career, nor does it discuss the context surrounding Xi's governance. For this, interested readers may consult other works, such as Alfred L. Chan's *Xi Jinping* or Kerry Brown's *CEO, China – The Rise of Xi Jinping*.

*Kjeld Erik Brødsgaard*

*Department of International Economics, Government and Business  
The Copenhagen Business School*