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# 1

**IMMUNITY TO TEMPTATION —**

**'POWER' IN CHINESE LANGUAGE**

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**A gold sword hilt decorated with interlaced dragons, Eastern Zhou dynasty, 6th–5th century BCE**

Source: The British Museum



**ACCORDING TO PLATO**, only he who does not want power is fit to hold it. According to Laozi 老子, he ‘who overcomes others is strong 有力 and he who overcomes himself is mighty’ 彊.<sup>1</sup> The Han dynasty commentator Heshang Gong 河上公 (200–150 BCE) understood Laozi to mean that for overcoming others, the type of power one needed was military force or strength 威力, whereas the kind of strength derived from power over one’s own ‘lusts and desires’ was superior and even made a man invincible.



While Plato is concerned with limiting the excesses of power, Laozi, at least in the understanding of the Han commentator, defines the preconditions for absolute power as immunity to temptation. Laozi's formula became a central idea of kingly rule within Legalist thought — the philosophy embraced by the emperor Qin Shi Huang, founder of the Qin dynasty in 221 BCE.

The evolution of ideas and language around the notion of 'power' that led to today's most common term for power, *quanli* 權力 (权力 in simplified characters), is remarkable: and not only for the continuity between Laozi's ancient idea of absolute power and the political agenda of Xi Jinping.

## Early Terms and Ideas

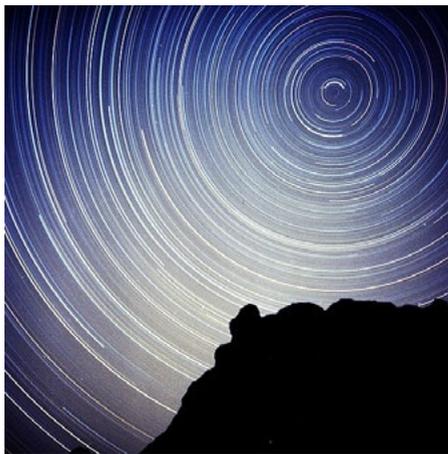
The character *li* 力 means 'strength' or 'force'. Popular etymology conceives the character as depicting a muscled arm. More recent archaeological finds and palaeographic comparisons indicate that the character more likely depicts a farm implement similar to a plough. The character has become part of the modern compound for 'physical force', 'strength' or 'ability' (*liliang* 力量), which is also a kind of power. The character *qiang* 強 (强 in simplified characters) means 'mighty', 'powerful', or 'to force'. Originally, it designated the larvae of the corn-weevil (*qiang* 疆), which was used as a homophone for 'strong'. Today, it appears in expressions such as 'brute force' 强力, a 'strong' or 'powerful' state 强国, and in formulas such as 'strengthen the state and enrich the people' 强国富民. This is an inversion of a proverb dating back to 81 BCE, recorded in the *Discourses on Salt and Iron* 鹽鐵論, which argued for taxation: 'In a state made rich the people become strong' 國富民強.<sup>2</sup>



The character 力 is a pictograph of a plough: the upper part, which curves at the bottom, is the wooden handle, and the lower part is its iron head

Source: chinesetimeschool.com

*Wei* 威, which, in combination with *li*, implies military strength or force, means ‘imposing’, ‘impressive’, or ‘majestic’. It appeared frequently in ancient Chinese texts to describe strong rulers or military leaders. The modern Chinese compound *weili* 威力 extends its meaning to ‘power’ or ‘might’ as embodied or executed by a person.



Among other ancient terms expressing the power of a person are *shen* 神 and *yan* 嚴, the first referring to a su-

pernatural or divinely sanctioned authority, the second to both the power that grows from authority and the reverence such authority deserves.<sup>3</sup> Another character, *de* 德, is commonly rendered as virtue. It denotes a toolset of qualities for successful government only certain rulers are imbued with. Yet one quotation from the Confucian *Analects* illustrates its relation to power: ‘The Master said, “Governing with virtue can be compared to being the Pole Star; it remains in its place yet receives the homage of the myriad lesser stars”’.<sup>4</sup>

Then there is *shi* 勢 (勢 in simplified characters), of which *li* 力 is the carrier of meaning. In military texts, *shi* may denote the strategic advantage one army has over another by occupying the high ground, or the ‘power of position’.<sup>5</sup> We accept persons of a certain social standing, education, or institutional affiliation are invested with this kind of power, yet it remains unclear what triggers our submission to their authority. For Legalist thinker Han Feizi 韓非子 (279–233 BCE) *shi* refers to the phenomenon by which some people can enforce their will on others because of the social role they occupy.<sup>6</sup> In his view, the power of position is distinct from

‘Governing with virtue can be compared to being the Pole Star: it remains in its place yet receives the homage of the myriad lesser stars’, *The Analects of Confucius*

Photo: Wikipedia

*de* (virtue), since without *shi* a ruler possessing only virtue lacks the ability to enforce his power.

A final ancient term that is relevant here is *quan* 權 (权 in simplified characters), which originally referred to weights. The traditional Chinese weighing device is a steelyard — a handheld balance beam, with a weighing dish at one end, and a sliding weight on a string that can be moved along it at the other. *Quan* thus implies 'leverage', and by extension, 'political leverage'. Another Daoist philosopher, Zhuangzi 莊子, referred to both senses of *quan* when he observed that 'whoever is partial to power will not share its handle with others' 親權者不能與人柄.<sup>7</sup>

## A New Term for an Old Idea?

The most common contemporary Chinese compound word for power, *quanli* 权力, has been used from the Han dynasty onwards, but appeared rather infrequently in ancient times.<sup>8</sup> It first occurred four times in an early Western Han work attributed to an advisor to Liu Bang 劉邦, the founding emperor of the Han dynasty (r. 202–195 BCE). This suggests that the political reset after the fall of the Qin dynasty created a need for a new or at least modified terminology of power. The advisor Jia Yi 賈誼 (200–168 BCE) warned the new emperor that his decree to entitle some of his former comrades in arms to their own land would alter their behaviour: it 'has furthered their weight *quan*, increased their strength *li*, and made them develop untamed minds that can hardly be made to follow'. Jia Yi is mainly concerned with the behaviour of these vassals:

When clothing [of higher ranks] is imitated, it is called contending for precedence; when generous favours [proper to superiors] are imitated, it is called contending for reward; when the weight and [executive] strength [of higher ranks] *quanli* are imitated this is called contending for might.<sup>9</sup>

A chestnut hawker uses a steelyard to weigh his goods  
Photo: Can Pac Swire, Flickr



In the view of the historian of early Chinese political thought, Charles Sanft, Jia Yi's point is that in a system imbued with hierarchical significance, to unduly claim the privileges of a higher rank is an act of aggression.<sup>10</sup> Such imitation can also indicate an imminent power struggle.

Comparing both of Jia Yi's admonishments shows that the one expression, *quanli*, denotes two different aspects of power: the weight a person gains by taking up a rank within a feudal hierarchy, and the executive reach or leverage his position entails.

An annotation in the influential commentary of the Song philosopher Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200 CE) to the Confucian *Analects* suggests a meaning for *quanli* that oscillates between physical strength, brute force, and power. Zhu refers to Yi 羿, the legendary archer, and Ao 奯, said to have the strength to tow boats. Both tried to usurp their rulers' positions, and were killed as a result. Zhu describes them as examples of 'those who possessed power *quanli* in that age' 當世有權力者.<sup>11</sup> Zhu Xi's use of *quanli* is decidedly negative.

The current meaning of *quanli* as power appears to be a creation of the nineteenth century. The German historian Reinhart Koselleck has named

the time between 1750 and 1850 the 'saddle period'; it was then that industrial development forced the rising nations of Europe to redefine their political vocabulary to suit the requirements of modernity. In China, the aftermath of two Opium Wars, including the forceful opening of coastal cities to foreign trade, spurred a comparable process of the modernisation of language, including of the vocabulary of power.

A flurry of glossaries and Chinese–English dictionaries appeared from the 1870s onwards.<sup>12</sup> The modernisation process of Japan preceded that of China, and provided Chinese intellectuals studying there with translations for new ideas conveniently rendered in Chinese characters, called *kanji*, that were re-imported into the Chinese lexicon.

The chart on the right provides a list of works in order of publication that address the notion of power by using the term *quan*.<sup>13</sup> Works from the nineteenth century show a wide variety of expressions for 'power' involving *quan* as well as combinations of characters mentioned above — yet the expression *quanli* is rarely used.<sup>14</sup> There is not enough information to determine the role, if any, that Japanese may have played in furthering the usage of *quanli*. In any case, *quanli* came into wider use beginning in the early twentieth century, and the newly introduced bilingual dictionaries translated it as power.

## The Language of 'Power' in China Today

The three-hour report delivered by Xi Jinping to the Nineteenth National Congress in October 2017 (for further details, see Chapter 1 'The Nineteenth Party Congress: Here Comes the Future', the *China Story Yearbook 2017: Prosperity*, pp.18–26) laid out a road map for the 'New Era' of China becoming a world power. In the words of Jiang Shigong 强世功, renowned legal scholar and professor at Peking University, Xi's address is the core text for understanding the Xi Jinping era and the CCP's mission over the next thirty years.<sup>15</sup> Xi's speech presents a variety of expressions of power

## LIST OF WORKS IN ORDER OF PUBLICATION THAT ADDRESS THE NOTION OF POWER BY USING THE TERM *QUAN*

- 1844 大權 power over major issues (y) *Haiguo tuzhi*
- 1852 政權 political power (y) *Zengguang Haiguo tuzhi*
- 1879 權力 power (y) *Lundun yu Bali riji*
- 1884 權勢 power (n) *Tetsugaku jii* (Japan)
- 1884 權威 power (n) *Tetsugaku jii* (Japan)
- 1894 權分 division of power (y) *Shengshi weiyuan*
- 1894 權利 power (y) *Shengshi weiyuan*
- 1893 政柄 political power (y) *Faguo zhengbing ji*
- 1895 權力 power (y) *Shengshi weiyuan*
- 1895 權勢 power and influence (y) *Zengguang haiguo tuzhi*
- 1895 權勢 power and influence (y) *Shengshi weiyuan*
- 1903 權力平均主義 balance of power doctrine (y) *Guoji sifa* (Japan)
- 1903 政權 political power (y) *Zhongguo zhuanzhi zhengti jinhuashi lun*
- 1905 大權 monarchical power (y) *Kaocha zhengzhi riji*
- 1905 權力 power (y) *Chushi jiuguo riji*
- 1907 權力 power (y) *Hanyi falü jingji cidian* (Japan)
- 1907 官制權 administrative power (y) *Hanyi falü jingji cidian* (Japan)
- 1909? 權力 power (y) *hengshi weiyuan houbian*
- 1911 大權 power (y) *Putong baiken da cidian*
- 1912 權力平衡 balance of power (n) *Tetsugaku jii* (Japan)
- 1912 權力平均 balance of power (n) *Ying Hua da cidian*
- 1913 權力 power (n) *Chinese New Terms and Expressions*
- 1913 權力 power (y) *Hanyi riben falü jingji*
- 1913 政權 political power (n) *Chinese New Terms and Expressions*
- 1916 政權 political power (n) *English-Chinese Dictionary of Standard Chinese*
- 1922 權力 power (n) *A Mandarin-Romanized Dictionary of Chinese*

\* (y) translation added by current author; (n) translation included in original publication

used in political speech today. In addition, it facilitates understanding of the signals some of these new terms send for China's current and future aspirations.

Expressions that appear in the official translation of Xi's speech as some variant of the English word 'power' (as well as 'strength', 'ability', 'energy', 'influence', and other related terms) include a range of compounds involving four characters for strength, *li* 力; might, *qiang* 强; weight or power, *quan* 权, and a few others. The people, for instance, are the 'fundamental force' 根本力量 that determine the Party's and the country's future. This is a Party that 'always remains a powerful leadership core' 始终成为坚强领导核心, 'exercises power in the interest of the people' 执政为民, increases 'China's economic power' 经济实力 and 'composite national strength' 综合国力 with its 'ability to innovate' 创造力, its 'power to unite' 凝聚力, and its 'energy to fight' 战斗力. While China still dreams of 'building a stronger military dream' 强军梦, it has increased its 'international influence' 国际影响力, its 'ability to inspire' 感召力, and its 'power to shape' 塑造力. By 2035, China's 'soft power' 软实力 will have grown much stronger, Chinese culture will have 'greater appeal' 影响力, and China, grounded in twenty-first century Marxism, will emanate 'a more compelling power of truth' 有说服力的真理力量.

Compound expressions that contain *quan* 权 often leave out *li* 力 for the sake of brevity. They share a strong emphasis on executive powers or agency: China's 'sovereignty' 主权 shall be safeguarded but Cold War mentality and 'power politics' 强权政治 — Xi's reference to Donald Trump — shall be rejected. The principle of 'one country, two systems' shall be unwaveringly upheld through overall 'jurisdiction' 管治权 over Hong Kong and Macao while granting a high degree of 'autonomy' 自治权 to both regions. The development of crime prevention and control systems shall be accelerated to protect 'personal rights' 人身权, 'property rights' 财产权, and the 'right to dignity' 人格权. To expand orderly political participation, legal protection for 'human rights' 人权 shall be strengthened and institutions of democracy at the primary level — actually a policy to crush the

impact large clans have on local village governments — will improve the people’s ‘right to be informed’ 知情权, ‘to participate’ 参与权, ‘to be heard’ 表达权, and ‘to oversee’ 监督权.<sup>16</sup>

Setting aside the paradoxical nature of some of the above pairings, such as upholding ‘jurisdiction’ to grant autonomy, or protecting personal rights through accelerated development of control systems, most expressions in Xi’s speech bespeak two related agendas: the increase of power in the sense of global influence, and the increase of control within and beyond the mainland.

The attempt to control is most evident in Xi Jinping’s anti-corruption campaign — one of his key agendas since coming to power in 2012. This agenda is evident from the large number of cadres at all levels that have been persecuted, and also in the recent expansion of the campaign to oversee all public servants through the establishment of the State Supervisory Commission in March 2018 (see Chapter 1 Forum ‘Power Surge: China’s New National Supervisory Commission’, pp.31–33), the introduction of new legislation including the State Supervision Law 国家监察法 also in March, the issuing of revised Regulations for Disciplinary Measures 纪律处分条例 in August, and the Central Committee’s eleventh study session of the Institutional Reform of State Supervision in December 2018.

The debate whether Xi is genuinely convinced of the need to eradicate corruption or whether this campaign essentially serves the consolidation of his power by purging possible opponents continues. While those convinced of Xi’s genuine motives point out that prosecution did not exclude members associated with the camp of Xi’s mentor, Jiang Zemin,<sup>17</sup> their opponents see the establishment of parallel organisations including the State Supervisory Commission that act above the law and are equipped with more powers than the Supreme Court as clear indicators of Xi’s efforts to consolidate power.<sup>18</sup> Cases of trumped up corruption charges or reports of the attempts by six high-ranking Party members to overthrow Xi suggest that the President does not act entirely from conviction.<sup>19</sup> Whatever Xi’s ulterior motives are, it is evident that widespread corruption within



**China's most powerful men**  
Photo: news.cn

the Party has not only undermined the credibility of the CCP but has also undermined the Party's control on all levels of politics, administration, and economy. If we conceive Xi's anti-corruption campaign to be at least partly founded on this awareness, his continuous efforts to erase what Laozi called 'lusts and desires' — that is, corruptive behaviour among CCP members and, since March 2018, among the entire administration — have two aims: to render cadres and officials immune to temptation, and, as a consequence, to further consolidate the power of the CCP and its present leader. It is here where the conceptions of absolute power of the ancient thinker Laozi and Xi Jinping converge.

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