A MATTER OF PERSPECTIVE: INSIDER ACCOUNTS OF XI JINPING AND THE TWENTIETH PARTY CONGRESS

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LAST AUTUMN SAW the return of every China watcher's favourite 'parlour game'.[1] The Communist Party of China (CPC) convened its Twentieth Party Congress, a quinquennial gathering of about 3,000 party representatives in Beijing, for a week of meetings that approved a report by General Secretary Xi Jinping 习近平, amended the party's constitution, and selected a new Central Committee (see Focus, 'The Twentieth Party Congress: A Primer, pp.41–46). The game is to guess which cadres win promotion to the elite Politburo and its top seven-member Politburo Standing Committee (PSC). Bonus questions in 2022 were whether Xi would secure a precedent-defying third five-year term as general secretary and even revive the title of party chairman once held by Mao Zedong 毛泽东.

The results showed that even professional analysts of the People's Republic of China (PRC) can struggle to pierce the black box of the party's backroom machinations. Xi won a third term, as was widely expected, but did not become party chairman, as some experts had postulated. But Xi surprised most analysts

by installing a PSC and Politburo packed exclusively with his allies and loyalists, cementing a personal hold over Chinese elite politics that is unprecedented in the post-Mao era. Most observers had assumed, based on his previous behaviour and mounting policy headwinds, that Xi would retain a handful of more moderate leaders from different factional backgrounds. Yet, such figures as Li Keqiang 李克强, Wang Yang 汪洋, and Hu Chunhua 胡春华 — all linked with former general secretary Hu Jintao's Communist Youth League faction — were retired or demoted. Xi ignored decades-old norms about incumbency, retirement, and powersharing.

The 2022 congress was hardly unique in defying expectations. Experts speculated before the Nineteenth Party Congress in 2017 that Xi would make Premier Li Keqiang 李克强 retire early and would exempt his old friend Wang Qishan 王岐山 from retirement norms — neither of which happened. Many wrongly forecast that both Xi's ally Chen Min'er 陈敏尔 and Li's ally Hu Chunhua 胡春华 would reach the PSC, but both had to settle for less-senior roles as ordinary Politburo members. Errant political forecasting is hardly unique to China, but the high levels of secrecy there make predicting outcomes like this even more difficult.

In 2017, right before the Nineteenth Party Congress, Jessica Batke and Oliver Melton asked in a commentary on *ChinaFile*, 'Why do we keep writing about Chinese politics as if we know more than we do?'. They argued that Western media and China pundits project an 'air of certainty' about Chinese politics that is unwarranted given the scarcity of facts:

> China's Party-state is extremely successful at controlling information. Even the most basic insights into policy deliberations and processes, leaders' intentions and views, and elite power dynamics are filtered through a sophisticated propaganda and censorship regime … [I]n most cases, [we] depend heavily upon assumptions that paper over information gaps, or are structured in ways that exclude policy considerations and important variables … [W]e all too often use what little we

> do know to make assumptions that form the bedrock of larger, more sweeping judgments.[2]

What we do know is mostly hard facts devoid of human context: the formal structure of political institutions, the officials who hold positions in these institutions, and the policies produced by these officials in these institutions. Propaganda trumpets policy outcomes as products of the scientific process of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics. Internal rules forbid members from questioning party decisions or publicising internal operations. We therefore know the what, but we usually can only speculate about the how and the why.

A major lacuna is insight from people working within the system. Typically, there are no media interviews with senior leaders, no leaks to the press about private meetings, no journalistic exposés from within or outside China about how decisions are made, and no tell-all memoirs by retired politicians. Secrecy is fundamental for a party devoted historically to revolutionary warfare and presently to authoritarian control. Party members and public servants are expected to speak with one voice: that of the party.

Seldom does a Chinese political insider turn against the regime and manage to tell their tale. Firsthand stories of intra-party politics, especially those published in English, generate an extraordinary buzz simply because they are so uncommon. That two such accounts emerged in the leadup to the Twentieth Party Congress is remarkable. They provided a window into a hidden world, but their reception also showed how the China-watching community had yet to fully heed Batke and Melton's warning.

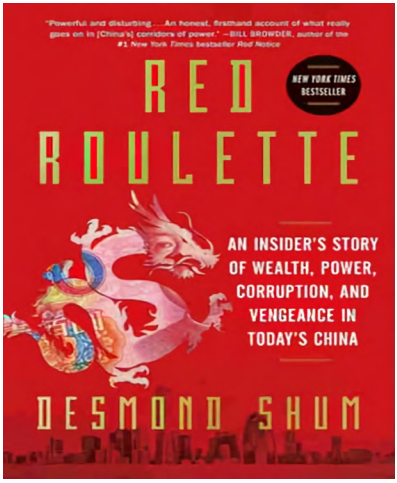
Insiders Out

Red Roulette by Desmond Shum 沈栋 became the most explosive book on Chinese politics for years when it hit the shelves in September 2021. Shum, mostly through the ambition and networking of his former wife Whitney Duan 段伟红 (whose looks he feels the need to disparage), made a fortune as an entrepreneur in Beijing at the height of China's 'gilded age' under General Secretary Hu Jintao 胡锦涛 in the 2000s and early 2010s.[3] His lucrative

ventures — which included helping the family of then premier Wen Jiabao 温家宝 profit from the float of Ping An Insurance, demolishing villages to build the Beijing Airport Cargo Terminal, and developing the Bulgari Hotel in Beijing — both required and enabled him to schmooze with senior CPC officials. The book details the extraordinary wealth accumulated by top leaders and their families and the grubby reality of doing business in China, with official permits requiring the endless wining, dining, and vulgar bribing of party cadres.

Shum also offers glimpses of the personality politics that rumble beneath the party's well-oiled exterior. We learn, through Wen's wife, Zhang Peili 张培莉, that it was Xi who convinced the PSC in February 2012 to purge Bo Xilai 薄熙来, a Politburo member and Xi's political rival, after Bo's wife murdered British businessman Neil Heywood. Wen and then Hu concurred with Xi, perhaps eyeing their own security after the leadership transition coming that November. The only objection came from security czar Zhou Yongkang 周永康. Zhou became the highest-profile casualty of a sweeping anticorruption campaign that Xi launched shortly after taking office. But Xi still made the Wens and other 'Red Families' 'donate' their ill-gotten wealth to the state, according to Zhang. Shum, disturbed by Xi's hardline politics, saw the writing on the wall for the freewheeling China in which he had thrived, and moved to the United Kingdom.

Still, the rewards of working with the party could be staggering. Shum intimates that he exited China and his marriage in 2015 with a significant chunk of the hundreds of millions of dollars that he and Duan made from what he calls 'influence peddling' with the party elite.[4] Duan was less fortunate. She was close to Sun Zhengcai 孙政才, a rising star on the Politburo and a potential successor to Xi. Sun had given land to the couple in Beijing's Shunyi district in exchange for political favours. Duan's starring role in the Wen family's moneymaking had already put her at risk and, after Xi purged Sun in July 2017, she disappeared — almost certainly detained by party agents. While Duan's extralegal detention is reprehensible, Shum's tales of rampant graft and dysfunction serve as a convincing, if unintentional,



***Red Roulette*: the most explosive book on Chinese politics for years when it hit the shelves in September 2021**
Source: Wikimedia

argument for why the party needed an anticorruption campaign, albeit one less politically selective than Xi's version.

For all his access, Shum was never a party cadre, although he held a seat on the Beijing branch of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, which is part of the party's united-front system to coopt non-party groups and individuals. A view from inside the system itself comes from Cai Xia 蔡霞, a liberal-leaning professor at the Central Party School (CPS) from 1998 until her retirement in 2012. Cai has lived in exile in the United States since her scathing critiques of Xi's 'mafia boss' mentality had her expelled from the party in 2020. She has become an outspoken Xi critic, authoring, among other articles, two essays in the influential foreign policy magazine *Foreign Affairs*, one each in 2021 and 2022.

Cai was a self-confessed 'true believer' in Marxism and in the party's ability to embrace economic and political reform to improve the lives of Chinese people. Her confidence in the party faded when Hu Jintao began reining in civil society, and then vanished completely in Xi's New Era. In her essays, titled 'The Party That Failed' and 'The Weakness of Xi Jinping', as well as other reports and interviews, Cai argues that Xi's 'one-man show' of political crackdowns, personality cult, and centralised power is leading the party and the country towards disaster.[5] She offers a rare window into such experiences as the hollow tedium of drafting party documents (in the early 2000s) and shares revealing anecdotes like how Xi's well-connected mother helped advance his career by writing to his early bosses.

Lessons from the Twentieth Party Congress

Shum and Cai suggested somewhat different takes on Xi's standing ahead of the Twentieth Party Congress. *Red Roulette*'s tales of bigwigs and businesspeople felled by the new regime emphasised how Xi had 'grabbed so much power' that he was the 'chairman of everything' and could become 'emperor for life'.[6] The party's capabilities were growing not only to 'maximize its control inside China', but also to 'export China's repressive system overseas'.[7] Cai was more pessimistic about Xi's prospects. Her more recent *Foreign Affairs* essay, published the month before the congress, claimed that Xi's authority 'is being questioned as never before' because 'resentment among CPC elites is rising' due to political restrictions and policy mistakes that potentially threaten China's social stability, economic growth, and international relations.[8]

Cai had argued in 2021 that '60–70 percent of the CPC's high-level officials' favour constitutional democracy, human rights, and positive US–China relations, citing her 'thirty years of contact' with senior cadres.[9] She said that Washington should 'support liberal elements within the party' to advance political reform. Her pre-congress article asserted a 'row' among top leaders that was 'breaking out into public view' because then premier Li Keqiang opposed Xi's zero-COVID policy, echoing a prominent claim made earlier that year in the pages of the *Wall Street Journal*.[10] Li 'may soon reach a breaking point' and 'stealth infighting' will intensify before the congress, Cai argued, because Xi 'may not have locked up a third term'.[11]

Both authors show how the informal politics of patronage, rivalry, and control pervade Zhongnanhai, exposing party propaganda as the shiny skin of a rotten fruit. But the outcomes of such intrigue do manifest in the formal structures of political authority and the party does tell us who is promoted, who is purged, and which ideas become policy. And the months leading up to the Twentieth Party Congress saw the continuation of pro-Xi political trends, with Xi promoting more allies, sidelining more associates of Li, and further embedding his personal leadership and policy

agenda into official ideology. Li's economic stimulus measures were not a rebellion against Xi (as some observers claimed) but rather the implementation of his instructions to 'balance epidemic prevention and control with economic and social development'. Li was at best a dissembling Zhou Enlai 周恩来 to Xi's domineering Mao.

Shum's emphasis on Xi's power was ultimately more accurate than Cai's stress on his vulnerability. Her views that Xi wants 'a China-centric world order' and 'the planned economy of the Maoist era', and that a 'vicious cycle' of intensifying factional competition could push Xi to attack Taiwan, are also debatable. However, her observations that Xi wanted to 'tighten his grip' domestically and 'raise his ambitions internationally' have proved on target. Even Cai, for all her doubts, conceded that Xi would probably win a third term, although her analysis was a far cry from forecasting Xi's incredible consolidation of power.

No Proclivity for Change

An illuminating concordance between Shum and Cai is that neither foresaw Xi returning China to strongman rule. Cai was 'full of hope for China' in 2012. Like the US columnist Nicholas Kristof, who infamously predicted that Xi would 'spearhead a resurgence of economic reform, and probably some political easing as well', Cai thought the new leader 'had hinted at his proclivity for change'.[12] Shum also 'had initially been optimistic about Xi's rule', partly because he and Duan were close to Xi allies Wang Qishan and Chen Xi 陈希, a former Politburo member and head of the party's Organisation Department since 2017, and 'the general consensus in our social circle was that Xi would follow the established rules in China'.[13] Chen Xi reportedly believed that Xi would wind down the anticorruption campaign during his first term, while Wang anticipated 'large-scale privatization'.[14]

As we enter a second decade of Xi's leadership, such uncertainty about his thinking — even among his cronies — reflects a more fundamental truth about Chinese politics: even those near the top may not know what is going on.[15] The system can be opaque to insiders, too, and has been this way since the beginning. Robert

Loh, a 'patriotic national capitalist' who fled Shanghai in 1957 and produced the remarkable memoir *Escape from Red China*, describes officials whose lives depended on Mao's favour but who could still not read his intentions. *Prisoner of the State*, the posthumously published reminiscences of Zhao Ziyang 赵紫阳, the party general secretary purged for opposing military action to crush the Tiananmen protests in 1989, is permeated by uncertainty. In high office, Zhao was still constantly guessing what paramount leader Deng Xiaoping was thinking. Under house arrest, he never knew when he would next be allowed to receive visitors or take excursions. In the present, the more Xi controls the system, the less we will know about Chinese policymaking, and the harder it becomes to anticipate its direction.

Too often, facing this information vacuum, we in the West listen more to Chinese voices that say what we want to hear about China, including advocates for a more open economy, a shift to liberal democracy, or greater protections of human rights. Zhao's favourable comments about democracy were seen to 'offer hope' of political reform in China,[16] while Loh presciently identified the party's obsession with control. *Red Roulette* arrived during a rectification drive against big tech, reinforcing narratives about Xi's power over the private sector, while Cai's writing fed into horserace journalism about leadership splits ahead of the congress. We want to hear that everything Xi does is disastrous and that no-one likes it, because that resonates with the objections that many of us have to his policies, but it is hard even for those inside the system to know whether that is true. Yet, we can agree strongly with the moral criticisms levelled at the party by voices of conscience, and accept the factual accuracy of their personal testimony, while still engaging critically with their analytical conclusions about Chinese politics.

The Western media also at times struggle to understand the position of their interlocutors in the Chinese system. For example, *The Guardian* said Cai's words were 'potentially dangerous for the Chinese leadership',[17] *CNN* claimed her criticisms dealt the party an 'embarrassing blow',[18] and the Hoover Institution hailed her as 'an important figure from within the

Chinese Communist Party system'.[19] Cai may have had 'a front-row seat to the CPC's court intrigue', as she put it in her September 2022 article, but she was not a player on the elite political stage. Her position as one of more than 150 full professors at the Central Party School did not rank within the top few thousand or even the top tens of thousands of positions in the party hierarchy.

There is no question that firsthand accounts capture the brutal mechanics of party rule better than the sterile pages of the *People's Daily*. But insider accounts deserve the same analytical scrutiny that we ought to afford all work on Chinese politics. Otherwise, we risk making far-reaching claims based on a few anecdotal sources, which may overstate the importance of snippets of exposure to the very small number of people who call the shots in Beijing. We should at least compare these accounts with the evidence provided by the formal political system: promotions, purges, propaganda, and policies, for example. Opacity may make it unavoidable to, in Batke and Melton's words, 'use what little we do know' to make grand assumptions and 'sweeping judgments'.[20] But we must be vigilant about using as *much* of 'what little we do know' to inform our thinking.[21]

Speaking out against the party carries costs. Neither Shum nor Cai can ever return to China. Shum's son with Duan may never see his mother again. Cai lost her pension and she fears for her daughter and grandson, who still live in China. Dissenters to Xi's rule who did not leave, such as legal scholar Xu Zhangrun 许章润 and property tycoon Ren Zhiqiang 任志强, have suffered professional ruin and imprisonment, respectively. We owe them and others an enormous debt of gratitude for courageously sharing their stories with the world. We can only hope, for the sake of greater openness and freedom of expression in China, that the future breaks down the walls around the party's 'hall of the monologue' 一言堂.[22]

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