GHOSTS OF MAO AND DENG

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AT THE COMMUNIST Party of China (CPC) Congress in October 2022, Xi Jinping 习近平 was confirmed for a third term as the party's general secretary. The party had already passed a historic resolution the year before — only the third in its 100-year history — establishing Xi as the 'core of the central committee and of the whole party' and Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for the New Era as the party's guiding ideology. The conspicuous absence of potential successors on the new Politburo Standing Committee suggests that Xi will remain the strongman ruler of the People's Republic of China (PRC) for at least another five years beyond his current term (2022–2027) and possibly for life. Since coming to power in 2012, Xi has systematically sidelined potential rivals, promoted loyalists, and taken charge of all key decision-making processes at the top of Chinese politics. His lieutenants have cultivated his personality cult, projecting the image of Xi as commander-in-chief of the New Era in which he will lead the party's historical mission to restore China's civilisational greatness and proper place in the world.

Given Xi's seemingly unassailable position at the apex of CPC power, students of Chinese politics have naturally been interested in his life and leanings. Much less attention has been given to the system that has enabled Xi to concentrate power in his own hands. How did Xi sidestep the protocols of powersharing and consensus decision-making that the post–Mao Zedong leadership — determined not to suffer a repeat of Mao's calamitous final years in power — intended to shape Chinese politics into the future? How did the party, with its supposedly established norms — such as those limiting its top leaders to two five-year terms and ensuring its members represented diverse ideas and interests — fail to constrain Xi from amassing such power? Leninist systems tend to produce strongman rule by virtue of their pyramid structure and because Leninist parties sit above the law. But the CPC was supposed to have solved this problem.

Paramount Leader Deng Xiaoping

The received wisdom, both in and beyond China, is that Deng Xiaoping 邓小平, China's paramount leader in the 1980s and early 1990s, promoted a collective leadership model and new powersharing conventions that provided the political stability underpinning China's meteoric rise. But conventional narratives arguably overstate the extent to which elite politics changed under Deng and successive CPC leaders.[1] After Mao's death, Deng manoeuvred his way to power by drawing on a network of alliances and his formidable authority as a revolutionary elder. Although Mao's successor as party chairman, Hua Guofeng 华国锋, remained in that role until 1981, Deng and his allies effectively sidelined him, and then abolished that position as well as those of vice-chairmen, at the Twelfth CPC Congress in 1982, after Hua's brief stint as vice-chairman. The party would henceforth be formally led by a general secretary. Deng emerged as paramount leader, acquiring and consolidating this power without ever becoming the formal leader of the CPC (he was vice-chairman from 1977 to 1982 and retained his equivalent position on the Politburo Standing Committee until the Thirteenth Congress in 1987), although he did chair the Central

Wang Jiaxiang, Mao Zedong, and Deng Xiaoping
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Military Commission, enabling him as commander-in-chief to keep a tight rein on the military, whose leaders deeply respected him for his military accomplishments.

If Deng practised a collective style of leadership, recent research by Joseph Torigian as well as a forthcoming book by Fred Teiwes and Warren Sun suggest his approach reflected the unique demands of the time (the need to unite the leadership after a period of intense and bitter division) and Deng's own proclivities rather than institutional change.[2] Biographers and party historians contend that Deng was more interested in the strategic picture than policy details, so he was content to delegate major responsibilities to others.[3] Deng arguably could have asserted more personal control over political and policy decisions if he had wanted, but he preferred others to thrash things out. Nevertheless, when he decided to intervene in a decision, people obeyed him, even when he held no formal position other than chairman of the Chinese Bridge Association. Deng made the fateful decision to send the army into Tiananmen Square in 1989. And it was Deng who mobilised the party to reignite economic reforms in the 1990s, without consulting General

Secretary Jiang Zemin, by touring southern China and making public statements about the country's future in 1992. At the time, many senior party leaders were arguing that the reforms had endangered socialism, but even they fell into line after Deng made his views known.

So, while Deng was collectivist when he needed to be, he remained the strongman of his era. He oversaw leadership appointments, including the appointment of Hu Yaobang 胡耀邦 as general secretary of the party in February 1980, and his successor, Zhao Ziyang 赵紫阳, in 1987. Deng orchestrated the removal of both general secretaries after their apparent reluctance to squash student protests in 1987 and 1989, respectively. Deng also greenlit Jiang Zemin's ascension to the position of CPC general secretary in 1989. In 1992, Deng handpicked Hu Jintao for appointment to the Politburo and anointed him as Jiang's successor-in-waiting. Deng did not oversee these leadership appointments by operating in accordance with newly established rules and party norms. He was able to anoint new generations of leaders because, like Mao before him, his personal revolutionary authority was beyond question.

The End of the Revolutionary Elders

By the time Hu Jintao 胡锦涛 — the last of Deng's appointees — stepped down in 2012, Deng and all the revolutionary elders were dead, and Jiang Zemin was in his late eighties. There was no person or mechanism that could prevent Xi Jinping's accumulation of power, which he began almost immediately, deftly using an anticorruption campaign to weaken potential networks of opposition within the party and instilling fear in others. Himself a 'princeling' son of Red nobility (his father, Xi Zhongxun, was a first-generation revolutionary and party leader), Xi was able to stuff the Politburo with allies at the Nineteenth Party Congress in 2017. At the congress in 2022, Xi secured a third term as CPC general secretary and eliminated the last vestiges of potential opposition from the party's highest levels. The humiliating exit from the 2022 congress of Xi's predecessor, Hu Jintao — officially due to health reasons — incited much discussion in China and among

outside analysts. Some saw it as an expression of Xi's now total grip on power. More broadly, it symbolised a curtain-close on the Dengist era in which the revolutionary party elders could influence leadership appointments, and thus maintain a modicum of powersharing.

In preparation for Xi's third-term coronation in October 2022, the CPC passed a historic resolution — only the third in its history (Mao oversaw the first resolution in 1945 and Deng the second in 1981).[4] The official purpose of the resolution was to articulate (and update or revise where necessary) the official narrative of the party's historical experience and major achievements, as well as to locate new policy and governance directions in a grand narrative that begins with the party's founding in 1921 and ends (in the future) with the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation and civilisation. A more practical purpose of the resolution was to cement Xi's control of the party by emphasising the importance of his leadership in steering China through the next chapter of its development, just as previous resolutions cemented Mao's and Deng's domination of the party. Despite covering all periods of party history, two-thirds of the text of the resolution was devoted to discussing the party's achievements during Xi's then nine years in power; Xi was mentioned more times than Mao or Deng.[5]

The resolution presents Xi as the leadership 'core' for the New Era and affirms Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era as the party's guiding ideology. According to the resolution, in the New Era, Xi will lead the party towards the centennial goals outlined at the start of his tenure: China became a moderately prosperous society by 2021, which was the one hundredth anniversary of the founding of the CPC; and will become a rich and powerful nation by 2049, which is the one hundredth anniversary of the founding of the PRC. The historic resolution contends that only Xi Jinping can steer the nation to its destiny, navigating an external environment characterised by 'acute national security challenges, as evidenced by unprecedented external pressure, intertwined traditional and non-traditional security threats, and frequent "black swan" and "grey rhino" events'.

The resolution purposefully explains why Xi's era must be considered a new one, without mentioning what most distinguishes it from the previous era — the return to strongman rule — even if Xi is a different strongman to Mao and Deng (Xi's power stems from his ability to dominate party institutions and processes and not from revolutionary prestige). The resolution does, however, emphasise the need to 'uphold the Party core' (Xi), 'the Central Committee's centralised, unified leadership' (under Xi), and 'adhere to democratic centralism'. Herein lies the secret to Xi's power. Written into the party constitution since its founding, 'democratic centralism' permits differences of opinion within party ranks while a subject is still under discussion, but once a decision is made, all party members must fall into line and resolutely implement the decision whether they agree with it or not. Xi has been able to harness this fundamental organisational principle to make himself the ultimate arbiter in a way none of his predecessors since Deng has been able.

Although Deng recognised the need to restrain one-man rule, he failed both to institutionalise the checks and balances that would prevent the return of an all-powerful party boss and to de-Maoify the party. Deng rejected a personality cult for himself, but he did not repudiate Mao's. The party's second historic resolution, of 1981, which Deng oversaw, condemned the excesses of the Cultural Revolution, for example, but largely exonerated the Great Helmsman himself, blaming the chaos and destruction on the Gang of Four. Mao's mistakes were 'the errors of a great proletarian revolutionary'. That resolution stated that Mao's 'contributions to the Chinese revolution far outweigh his mistakes' and affirmed that Mao Zedong Thought would continue to be the party's guiding ideology.

Under Deng, the party thus continued to embrace Mao as the lead protagonist in its grand historical narrative. As a figure of reverence, Mao's portrait still towers over Tiananmen Square, just as it hangs on many living room walls across the country — most notably, in rural areas. In Mao's final decade, that of the Cultural Revolution, his Little Red Book took

on a mythical — even magical — status, as official media reported that the mere recitation of it could bring about miracles, including the ability to undergo surgery without anaesthetic. (Later, in the Reform period, there was a time when taxi drivers adopted Mao as a kind of god of traffic safety, dangling charms with his portrait from their rearview mirrors.)

After the Twentieth Party Congress in October 2022, Xi took members of the newly appointed Politburo Standing Committee — the seven most powerful people in China — to Yan'an, which is a site of great symbolism for the CPC. It was there that Mao established himself as the undisputed leader of the party and the party adopted Mao Zedong Thought as its guiding ideology. Xi's choice of pilgrimage communicated the message that he was the unrivalled party leader of his generation. Airbrushed portraits of Xi Jinping increasingly portray a similar aura to those of the ubiquitous portraits of Mao at the peak of his personality cult — one of godly benevolence. Xi's personality cult has not reached the giddy heights of Mao's (and likely never will; Mao, after all, was a founding member of the party and led the party to victory in civil war, establishing the PRC). However, Xi does appear to seek to *zhanguang* 沾光, or borrow, some of Mao's 'shine' as national saviour.

Xi's strongman rule is arguably a continuation of the Leninist tradition in Chinese politics — a natural tendency that was tempered for some years by the outsized influence of the revolutionary elders — most notably, Deng Xiaoping. It is time to revisit commonly held assumptions about the extent of institutionalisation of Chinese politics in the post-Mao period. Deng reined in the excesses of Mao's calamitous final years in power and promoted powersharing in accordance with the perceived needs of the times and his personal proclivities. But Deng did not institutionalise leadership succession or powersharing. Once Deng's handpicked leaders had departed the scene, the ambiguous 'rules' and expectations passed down from his era were insufficient to constrain an ambitious politician armed with the powers of high office.

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