

# Xi, Shaolin monk — and emperor

by Émilie Frenkie

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China's president sells himself as Mao's heir

Some US and European observers see China's president Xi Jinping as the new Red Emperor, a worthy heir to Mao Zedong. He changed his style after taking office in March 2013, becoming simpler, more open, more personal, and a personality cult seems to be growing up around "Xi Dada" (Uncle Xi).

Foreign analysts are more excited by the media hype around Xi than by his attempt to set aside the jargon and austerity of the collective leadership of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in favour of a less inhibited, more unified, incarnation of Party authority in himself. According to the University of Hong Kong's China Media Project, Xi's name appeared in the main section of the *People's Daily* (the CPC's main newspaper), more than twice as often as that of his predecessor Hu Jintao during the first two years of their respective mandates. (1). Photos of Xi (surrounded by adoring crowds) playing soccer, shooting a rifle, holding his own umbrella or eating at a steamed bun restaurant show that the son of Chinese revolutionary hero Xi Zhongxun is not averse to mobilising the masses as Mao did.

There have been strident denunciations in recent months of China's infiltration by "western values". Education minister Yuan Guiren has attacked imported textbooks that promote multiparty politics and undermine the credibility of socialism, saying that western values must never be allowed into China's classrooms. US companies, including Cisco, Apple, Microsoft, Google and Intel, have been called "outposts of the US government". Xi, like his predecessors and many Chinese thinkers, believes rapid and unconditional democratisation would be dangerous, and has set out an essentialist vision of "Chinese characteristics": China's history and society supposedly make it unsuited to democracy. Xi told students of the College of Europe in Bruges that China had experimented in the past with various political systems, including multiparty democracy, but none had worked, and warned that copying foreign political or development models could prove catastrophic (2).

Xi's overt control of military affairs worries analysts, as do his appointment of close associates to key defence posts and his aggressive foreign policy. His approach in the South China Sea contrasts sharply with the prudence of other presidents since Deng Xiaoping, who kept a low profile and never posed as leader.

During a visit to France last year, Xi explicitly mentioned China's rising power, referring to a saying attributed to Napoleon: "China is a sleeping lion. When it wakes, the world will tremble." Today, said Xi, "the lion has woken up, but it is peaceful, pleasant and civilised." He also said he aimed to make China's voice heard, with more Chinese input into international norms.

## Shades of Mao

Xi's simple style and his self-promotion as a strong leader recall the Mao era. Like Mao, he has an opinion on everything, even matters unrelated to politics: religion, education, sleep, the "overly sensual" trend in Chinese society. Last December he caused a stir by criticising the vulgarity of the art world and proposing that artists and filmmakers be sent to the countryside to "live among the masses [for at least 30 days] each year", so that they can "form a correct view on art" (3) and better serve socialist values. (During the Cultural Revolution educated young people were sent to do manual labour in the countryside.)

Xi frequently draws on Mao's Little Red Book for his policies, as his defeated rival Bo Xilai (currently in prison for corruption) did with great success in Chongqing. He has reintroduced the "mass line", a

system of popular participation developed by Mao, where CPC cadres gather ordinary people's ideas. His anti-corruption campaign aims to “cage the tigers and swat the flies” — high- and low-ranking bureaucrats. More than 200,000 have been brought before the courts: Zhou Yongkang, former head of China's security apparatus, the most senior official to be convicted since the Gang of Four (4) was sentenced to life imprisonment in June, and 400,000 others have been punished; nobody, not even the “princelings” (children of former CPC leaders), is immune.

At the same time, there is more repression. Last year nearly a thousand people from “civil society” (including lawyers, militant feminists and association leaders) were arrested according to Chinese Human Rights Defenders — a scale unseen since 1989. Internet access has deteriorated significantly in recent months, with even more limited access to Google and Gmail and sporadic blocking of VPNs (virtual private networks), the main lifeline for active Chinese Internet users and expatriates, who need unrestricted web access (social networks, mass media, scientific journals). There has been a noticeable tightening of censorship of ordinary web users as well as journalists, artists and academics.

Deng Xiaoping's principle of collective leadership is under threat — he created a division of labour within the Politburo that encouraged competition between factions and the formation of coalitions within the Party, to prevent the emergence of a new strongman. Xi is accumulating roles: general secretary of the CPC, chairman of the Central Military Commission, director of organisations responsible for national security and cyber-security. He seems the most authoritarian leader since Mao.

Though Xi often refers to the “Great Helmsman”, he steers well clear of some elements of Maoism. His policies do not include the use of peasant farmers as a political power base, isolationism, rejection of global institutions and private property, iconoclasm, or rejection of Chinese traditions, including Confucian thought. When Xi invokes Mao, he is seeking to increase his popularity by revitalising the moral legitimacy of the CPC and building on the respect that Mao still commands. Though westerners associate Mao with famine, disastrous economic policies, persecution and destructive ideological voluntarism, in China he more often evokes national power and dignity, integrity, socioeconomic and gender equality, and industrial progress. A 2013 survey for the *Global Times* (a paper with close links to the CPC) found that 85% of Chinese felt Mao's successes outweighed his failures.

## Powerful righter of wrongs

Xi's strongman stance makes sense in the context of the current crisis and urgent need for modernisation facing the leadership. When Xi presents himself as the saviour of China, he is responding to the calls of neoconservatives such as Xiao Gongqin (historian at Shanghai Normal University) since the early 1990s. He uses US and European PR techniques based on charisma and personalisation of power, as well as a Soviet-style personality cult, and presents himself as strong and determined enough to clean up the CPC at a time when many Chinese are angry at inequality and the opulent lifestyles of Party cadres. (There have been 150,000 protests in a year, and debates on the Chinese web.) Xi portrays himself as a “Shaolin monk”, a powerful righter of wrongs, who has come along just when the People's Republic and the CPC were in danger of succumbing to — among other perils — corruption, pollution, terrorism, a slump in economic growth and instability in Tibet, Xinjiang and Hong Kong.

Xi wants to be seen as a messiah, like Mao, come to guide China through difficult times. He emphasises that China is facing an unprecedented crisis, and told the Politburo last October: “The tasks our Party faces in reform, development and stability are more onerous than ever, and the conflicts, dangers and challenges are more numerous than ever” (5).

He harnesses elements of the Maoist repertoire, while asserting himself as a modern leader. There was media amusement at the recent online publication of a “little red app”, a collection of Xi's speeches and writings (6). Some see it as a portent of a new Cultural Revolution, but users rate it 3.5 out of 5, and it is one of the five most downloaded educational apps in China, where half the population has a smartphone. A Pew Research Centre survey in 2014 found 92% of Chinese trusted Xi, 10% more than trusted Hu Jintao (7).

The results of this survey should be treated with caution, but they underline the gap between how the Chinese see their leaders, and how external observers do. Xi is popular across much of Chinese society because of his efforts to make China's voice heard internationally, which please many young people, and his impressive fight against corruption, which gives the impression of bringing China's leaders and citizens closer together. Economist Jean-François Huchet believes the middle and upper classes are more impressed by his will to pursue economic reform, provided that slower growth does not lose them their gains.

Xi has not questioned the radically anti-Maoist practice of co-opting capitalist entrepreneurs into the CPC, formalised by Jiang Zemin in his "Three Represents" theory (8). But he is keen to promote his own ideas rather than those of his predecessors, and make his mark on history, with slogans such as "the Chinese dream" and his "comprehensive objectives" — building a moderately prosperous society, deepening reform, advancing the rule of law and strengthening discipline within the Party.

This is intended to put him above Jiang Zemin (1989-2002) and Hu Jintao (2002-12), and on a par with Mao or Deng. The headline 2013 reform of the one-child policy (couples will be allowed to have a second child if one parent is an only child) and the abolition of re-education labour camps have not yet produced the radical effects expected. But Xi's reforms point towards greater market opening and competition, not a return to Maoist planning.