

Book Review

David Shambaugh. *China's Leaders: From Mao to Now*. New York: Polity Press, 2021. 416 pages. \$29.95. ISBN 978-1-5095-4651-0.

In this timely and masterful study of Chinese elite politics, David Shambaugh provides us with a most up-to-date and an authoritative account of the five most influential political leaders and their capability to exercise leadership and handle crises from 1949 to the present.

The book consists of seven concise chapters. In the introduction, Shambaugh argues that the system of elite politics in the People's Republic is not a monolithic Leninist entity, but is characterized by “a repetitive pattern of oscillation back and forth between periods of relative relaxation followed by periods of tightening and repression” (p.2). The successive chapters draw on in-depth biographical studies of Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping to illustrate the resilience of elite politics and autocratic governance in each case.

After the founding of the People's Republic in 1949, the Chinese Revolution proceeded a different trajectory in the socialist camp. Mao Zedong, an uncrowned monarch and a “populist tyrant,” ran the country's state of affairs by mobilising the masses in numerous campaigns against his rivals within the Party-state (chapter 2). Mass mobilisation characterised his decades-long unrivalled dictatorship. Undoubtedly, Mao created a wide range of institutional mechanisms to control all spheres of society, and launched nationwide campaigns to politicise everyday life. Unlike Stalin, Mao encouraged popular criticisms of government officials and Party leaders through the Cultural Revolution, but the hostile criticisms and discontents almost brought down the Party-state. Then, Mao suppressed the very popular outpourings that he had encouraged. Since then, Communist ideology as a belief system collapsed, and Mao's successors implemented reforms to distract people's attention from class struggles.

Chinese pragmatism—despite the rhetoric of Marxism, Leninism and Mao Zedong thought—prevailed under Deng Xiaoping's “open door policy” (chapter 3). From the 1980s onwards, economic growth, rather than Mao's revolutionary ideology, has become people's desire, and thus the road to

the Communist Party's legitimacy. Although Deng's four modernisations improved the livelihoods of hundreds of millions of people, the Party-state never gave up its monopoly of political power. When people challenged the legitimacy of the Party-state, Deng did not hesitate to call in the troops to restore control. This is exactly what happened during the violent suppression of the 1987–1989 Tibetan protests and the 1989 deadly crackdown on the Tiananmen Square pro-democracy movement. The ongoing tension between state and society remains an integral part of Chinese politics. The Tiananmen massacre was the darkest strain in Deng's otherwise extraordinary political career, and a handful of Leninists almost derailed his economic legacy. Deng eventually neutralized his opponents and rescued the reform programs through a highly orchestrated, quasi-imperial "southern tour" of coastal economic zones in 1992.

Deng's appointee, Jiang Zemin (chapter 4) was widely seen as a transitional figure but he stabilized Sino-American relationship, ensured a steady period of economic recovery, and continued to operate behind the scenes after handing over the authority to Hu Jintao in 2002. Furthermore, Jiang implemented Deng's vision of "one country, two systems" in postcolonial Hong Kong and Macao, and this marked the beginning of rising Chinese patriotism in domestic politics.

Compared with Deng and Jiang, Hu Jintao (chapter 5) is a technocrat and lacks charisma. Despite his failure to command total dominance in the Party-state's leadership, Hu did fairly well in governance and diplomacy. On the economic front, Hu carried out effective policies to attract foreign capital to support China's transformation and industrial growth. The Hu administration enabled China to speed up the pace of modernization and win support from the world.

However, before Xi Jinping (chapter 6) took reins of the power in 2012, the Communist Party-state, in 2009–2010, had tightened control over domestic dissent. Xi distinguishes himself from his predecessors in many respects. "Like other nationalist/populist autocratic leaders, Xi absolutely and unapologetically rejects the linkage of progress with liberalism." He is "a hard-core Leninist and in some ways a throwback to the Stalinist era. He may preach Marx, but he practices Lenin and Stalin" (p.283). His obsession with "the absolute hegemonic power of—and control by—the Communist Party" (p.284) signals an ideological turn to the Maoist era. Worse still, he runs the Party-state like "a military organizing by giving orders to be

followed, rather than as a collective organization with collegiality, feedback mechanisms, and procedures to curtail dictatorial practices” (p.285).

Xi’s confidence resonates with Indian political scientist B. M. Jain’s analytical concept of geopsychology in politics, in which China’s pursuit of hyper-nationalism is rooted in its past national humiliation suffered at the hands of foreign imperialists and in its Middle Kingdom mind-set that perceive neighbouring countries as tributary states, not sovereign equals (B. M. Jain’s *The Geopsychology Theory of International Relations in the 21st Century: Escaping the Ignorance Trap* [Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2021]). Ever since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Wuhan in late 2019, Xi has been keen to demonstrate the superiority of China’s authoritarian governance in crisis management against liberal democracies. Unfortunately, at the time of writing in 2022, Xi is still adhering to his zero-COVID policy and has closed many of China’s doors to the outside world. Shambaugh concludes, “Opening a system and a country shows confidence—closing up and cracking down reveals lack of it” (p.287). As with Mao’s dictatorial control, the single-person rule of Xi Jinping risks overlooking organizational vulnerabilities in the gigantic Chinese bureaucracy. In times of peace and stability, this vertical structure guarantees an efficient control of bureaucratic decision-making and projects an image of commanding leadership. However, at the horizontal level, when everything starts to fall apart, this top-down mode of governance fails to ensure the steady flow of reliable information from a wide range of departmental agencies (chapter 7).

Overall, *China’s Political Leaders* purveys a highly critical, comprehensive and insightful coverage of Chinese elite politics. Moreover, Shambaugh’s well-written style makes reading the account more enjoyable and rewardable. This book is patently useful for the new generation of political leaders to learn the art of governance, albeit with caution and in a critical fashion, and is a must study for journalists, policy analysts, scholars and students of contemporary Chinese history, politics and diplomacy.

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