

## Oct. 27. Session 5, Paramount Leaders and Chinese Foreign Policy

众星捧月 *zhòngxīng pěngyuè* all stars twinkle around the moon (Confucian Analects) // ‘Over-concentration of power is becoming more and more incompatible with the development of our socialist cause’ (Deng Xiaoping, *On the reform of the system of party and state leadership*, Aug 18, 1980)

To the four dominant tendencies Lampton identified as transformative of China’s foreign policy making structure under Deng’s Opening Up reforms (改革开放) - professionalisation, corporate pluralisation, decentralisation and growing complexity of coordination and policy transmission under globalisation - the authors this week argue that a fifth key tendency - personality - must also be accounted for. In *The Politics of the Core Leader in China: Culture, Institution, Legitimacy and Power*, Xuezhi Guo argues that the desire for the “paramount leader” has been embedded in the ruling philosophy of the CCP because the Chinese political system fears chaos and strives for a stable and unified leadership led by a capable and powerful paramount leader. In this capacity to what extent Xi’s ‘reversion to personalistic rule’ is a response to perceived chaos is one cultural-historical line of inquiry. Since the founding of the PRC, differences in the concentration of power under China’s different paramount leaders has formed a key methodological lens on the shape and direction of Chinese foreign policy making. As Hu notes, a focus on ‘leaders’ worldviews, personality, bounded rationality, social milieu, individual characteristics, operational code, and perception and image’ entered the mainstream with the pioneering 1965 work of Harold and Margaret Sprout’s *The Ecological Perspective on Human Affairs with Special Reference to International Politics*. This focus on the politics of the core leader adjoins a longer lineage of studies in Chinese elite politics by the likes of Tang Tsuo, Frederick C. Teiwes, Lowell Dittmer, Joseph Fewsmith, Cheng Li.

Lu Ning documents powerfully the shift initiated by Deng Xiaoping away from Mao’s personalistic rule toward a re-institutionalised collective form of decision-making within the leading nuclear circle. For Deng, Mao’s personalistic rule and the over-concentration of power had put the nation at risk through irrational schemes. Lu Ning for one documents the artillery shelling of Quemoy in August 1958 which, orchestrated by Mao without consultation of the ‘rubberstamp’ Politburo or diplomatic channels with Moscow took everyone by surprise<sup>1</sup>. A curious element in the detail of Lu Ning’s account is that Lin Biao like many senior figures under Mao held a ‘disinterest in foreign affairs’ which were vice-gripped by Mao and Zhou Enlai, to the extent that Deng’s drive after Mao’s death to de-personalise and re-institutionalise Chinese foreign policy-making had to grapple with an extremely rudimentary institutional, financial but also psychological structure where inexperience in economic foreign policy and diplomacy was endemic. In this capacity, a curious question from Lu Ning’s reading might be to what extent Deng’s *tao guang yang hui* strategy was defensive in nature, biding time to re-build the institutional structures of Chinese foreign-policy decisionmaking that Mao had dismantled in favour of personalistic rule.

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<sup>1</sup> “as his frontline commanders waited anxiously for his [Mao’s] order to launch an amphibious assault on the islands, Mao, to the surprise of almost everyone suddenly ordered a halt to artillery bombardment.” Likewise in the 1962 Sino-Soviet Split, with Mao growingly paranoid that there were ‘Chinese Khrushchevs’ within the CCP leadership conspiring against him, the Politburo and foreign policy establishment were short-circuited: ‘though Lin Biao [the decorated PLA Marshal] one of the seven Standing Committee members, privately believed that Mao’s decision to break with the Russians was extreme and excessive’, dissenting opinions in the Politburo were not heeded. Lin Biao would die in a plane crash in Öndörkhaan in Mongolia in 1971 in what was described that the Chinese government’s explanation was that Lin and his family attempted to flee following a ‘botched coup’ against Mao. Others have argued that they fled out of fear they would be purged, as Lin’s relationship with other Communist Party leaders had soured in the final few years of his life.

Zhang's comparative analysis of Mao and Deng's personalities is particularly illuminating and holds a curious cross-current with Torigian's brief comparison of the relative trajectories of Bo Xilai and Xi Jinping in 2012. As Torigian notes, leadership and the personality of the paramount leader is an important dimension of foreign policy analysis because 'people in positions of high authority often have significant freedom of manoeuvre [and] because they have their own ideas about how the world works (George 1969) [which are often formed] through previous experiences (Kennedy 2012; Jervis 1976). Zhang argues that Mao had a personality that was 'closed to information', ideological, achievement-driven and held a paranoid, 'inside looking outward' perspective, in contrast to Deng's openness to new information, grassroots pragmatism, relationship-focused motivation and outward looking inward perspective to how technological and policy innovations he observed abroad might be energised toward China's economic modernisation.<sup>2</sup> Zhang draws on some remarkable sources<sup>3</sup> of off-the-record, verbatim conversations between Mao and foreign politicians, widening the evidentiary plane of foreign policy analysis and the importance of Chinese language analysts to framing what insights into personality might be drawn - or misconstrued - from such sources. It would be interesting in this capacity to explore what sources form a part of a current research project, 2020-2022, at SOAS by Professor Steve Tsang on *The Political Thought of Xi Jinping*<sup>4</sup> which seeks to 'take Xi's political thought as a prism of Xi's personality and preferences.' A curious counter-point on methodology might ask to what extent are the differences between China's paramount leaders - Mao closed, Deng opened; Hu weak, Xi strong- exaggerated or post-rationalised after the fact?

Zhang also draws a focus to limitations and deviations from the expectations of personality type theories such as Margaret Hermann's framework in predicting foreign policy behaviour. Noting Mao's thawing of relations with the U.S. in the 1970s, Zhang argues that 'the formation of leaders' personality is an evolving social process and politics is always dynamic, while the framework of leadership types is always static'<sup>5</sup>. Weixang Hu, a scholar at the University of Hong Kong whose broader work concerns Xi's major country diplomacy, and the structural realities of US-China-Indo-Pacific relations joins Zhang in a scepticism of the rational actor assumption that often frames 'Chinese leaders as calculating the international situation correctly and making foreign policy choices rationally.' Hu argues that a focus on personality and the paramount leader should 'go beyond examining the effect of personal traits and cognition on specific decisions' to more on 'how national leaders reshape the political and institutional environment to transform foreign policy objectives and its implementation.' I gain the sense that Hu here is calling alongside Zhang for a more integrated theory of personality and institutions in dynamic co-evolution and feedback, a sort of long game of foreign policy analysis against the recent upsurge of interest in IR with behavioural hot cognition, emotion studies and single decision trees.

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<sup>2</sup> Indeed, it was after visiting Japan and the United States in 1978 that Deng drove a radical break in Chinese foreign policy toward an economic realism where 'the main engine of China's modernisation would not be the state enterprises, built by the Soviet Union in the 1950s, but instead the "free economic zones" in China's coastal areas, open to foreign capitalist investments and Western technologies.'

<sup>3</sup> a poem written by Mao in 1936, a conversation between Mao and a former British Prime Minister, and Mao and the President of Zambia in 1974, Zhang also draws on two primary sources: *Mao on Diplomacy* and the *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping 1982-1992, vol. 3* noting that in contrast to 'most political speeches in China today, which are prepared in advance, [these sources] are the verbatim record of Mao and Deng's impromptu or extemporaneous comments' which in revealing their inner world, off the record, might form ideal primary materials with which to study personality. Such sources Zhang notes have not been systematically examined to date.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.soas.ac.uk/china-institute/research/the-political-thought-of-xi-jinping/>

<sup>5</sup> In this capacity, Zhang's integrated theory moves an account of structural or neo-realist balance closer toward a classical realism in the work of Machiavelli, Morgenthau and Waltz's 'first image' of the individual in his three dimensional schematic of the man, the state and the international system, in foreign policy decision-making. Zhang notes in this capacity that 'the traditional Chinese explanation of foreign policy is that Chinese leaders calculate the international situation correctly and make foreign policy choices rationally.'

A curious question might be to what extent this integrated theory is a theoretical invention with uniquely Chinese characteristics adapted to the unique temporalities and structurations of Chinese foreign policy-making. Indeed, foreign policy and economic policy is far more closely aligned and state-led than in other countries. The unique institutional set up and dynamism of the Central Leading Groups furthermore, against Xi's attempt to re-centralise foreign policy making in a US-style National Security Council, would suggest that the mechanics of Xi's purported 'return to personalistic rule' are much more complex than Western scholarship - framed with a certain sensibility to the concept of the 'paramount leader' and the optimal concentration of powers between foreign and domestic policy institutions - theorises.<sup>6</sup> An interesting question might further explore whether the re-concentration of foreign-policy making powers under personality is a more general dynamic emergent in a number of other economies where rising inequalities, deep technological changes and perceived threats of terrorism, multipolarisation and resource competition drive a return to populist leadership, or paramount leaders mobilising concentrated modes of foreign policy decision-making.<sup>7</sup>

Torigian adds a bibliographic dimension to Hu and Zhang's integrated theory in a depth analysis of Xi's life, drawing out some stark elements: that Xi is a fan of *The One-Dimensional Man* by Herbert Marcuse, criticising the tendency of industrial society to turn people into "one-dimensional technical animals" who have no human spirit; that, from comments made by his father, Xi is a pragmatic idealist who experienced the failure first-hand of Mao's utopian Cultural Revolution; that to Xi, the Soviet Union disintegrated, because their ideals and convictions wavered. Torigian, a researcher based in Washington at the Wilson Center is perhaps able like Susan Shirk to explore the incumbent paramount leader's biography relative to contentious episodes in China's recent past with greater freedom of manoeuvre. In *China in Xi's "New Era": The Return to Personalistic Rule*, Shirk, a former Deputy Assistant Secretary of State under the Clinton administration in the Bureau of East Asia and Pacific Affairs, asks 'Why is the CCP heading back to personalistic rule after more than thirty years of institutionalized collective leadership? What has foiled Deng Xiaoping's plan to prevent the overconcentration of authority? Why are the rules governing leadership competition inadequate to constrain an ambitious leader such as Xi Jinping?'

Torigian also alludes more to the significance of critical junctures than Hu in assessing Xi's transformational or transactional leadership type when he writes: 'Whether Xi's historically-formed worldview will help or hurt regime resiliency over the long term today remains to be seen. A leader with another set of historical baggage might have settled on a different path to shore up the PRC, one that enhanced stability by unambiguously supporting collective leadership and inner-party democracy; fought corruption by employing the media and improving the rule of law; provided more rights to its citizens; and ambitiously pursued the reforms necessary for China's long-term economic vibrancy. Xi has bet China's future on a rather different set of policies.' The contingency of the personality of the core leader is perhaps an avenue for further analysis. Indeed as Lu Ning notes, Mao and Deng were 'from a generation of revolutionary politicians whose 'charisma and prestige established through decades of wars and construction, and by their respective small, narrowly confined power base.' Why then did Deng not continue Mao's tendency of personalistic

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<sup>6</sup> In this sense, Zhang and Hu's integrated theory opens into a broader methodological terrain of how China-based and Western-scholars might collaborate in examining the relation of personalistic rule with dynamics of institutional fragmentation, consolidation and concentration. Xi's decision to re-centralise foreign policy making in a US-style National Security Council is one such. How the concept of the paramount leader is grounded by different geographic, institutional and national-cultural constraints is another

<sup>7</sup> To what extent is the concept of the 'paramount leader' grounded by different geographic, institutional and national-cultural constraints? To what extent does inequality explain the return to personalistic rule in a number of countries in the last decade?

rule? If he had what might China look like today? Was it temperament, experience, bureaucratic pressure, structural changes, domestic and foreign? A historical institutionalist critical juncture framework aligned with the political psychology of Robert Jervis might for one open out the priorities, perceptions, psychologies and alternatives that weren't taken in 1978 and to what effect.

In this sense an integrated theory of personality, the paramount leader and institutional change in Chinese foreign policy making must be sensitised to the critical junctures where polyvalent identities, interests, institutions and structural realities might shift. This seems particularly important under the re-pragmatisation and opportunism of Chinese foreign policy making under Xi. There are also limits to a personality analysis such as Torrigian's which observes Xi's toughness, idealism, pragmatism and caution as formed through his early life experiences and fails to account for his more recent experiences. Indeed, utilising a psychological framework on Xi must surely explore his experience of Bo Xilai's downfall, the war on terror, the United States in Iraq and Afghanistan, the global financial crisis, European sovereign debt crisis, U.S. pivot to Asia-Pacific, the evanescent threat of a nation growing old before growing rich, the pandemic. In this sense, just as the Cultural Revolution affects personality, so too does the present and perceived future international environment of institutions, international organisations, international law, foreign direct investment, foreign aid, international development, finance and monetary policy, global governance. Added to this are interpersonal dynamics the paramount leader may experience with other world leaders, internal supporters, factions or rivals. In this sense, an integrated theory of personality in foreign policy analysis works best as part of a theoretically pluralist methodology.

## **Questions**

- How might personality analysis be integrated into an understanding of the Belt and Road Initiative? With what sources and limitations?
- Should interpersonal dynamics between the Leading Central Groups, Politburo, military and bureaucracy be integrated into a personality theory of Chinese foreign policy under Xi? Should the personality of the President of the United States, or the Prime Minister of Japan also be included?
- To what extent might the pandemic affect Xi's concentration of power and the question of succession in the CCP?
- If Xi Jinping's reversion to personalistic rule suggests that the change from personalism to institutionalised collective leadership is cyclical, not evolutionary, how might Chinese foreign policy-making return to a form of institutionalised collective leadership? Who in the CCP currently might re-build Deng's imperative?

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