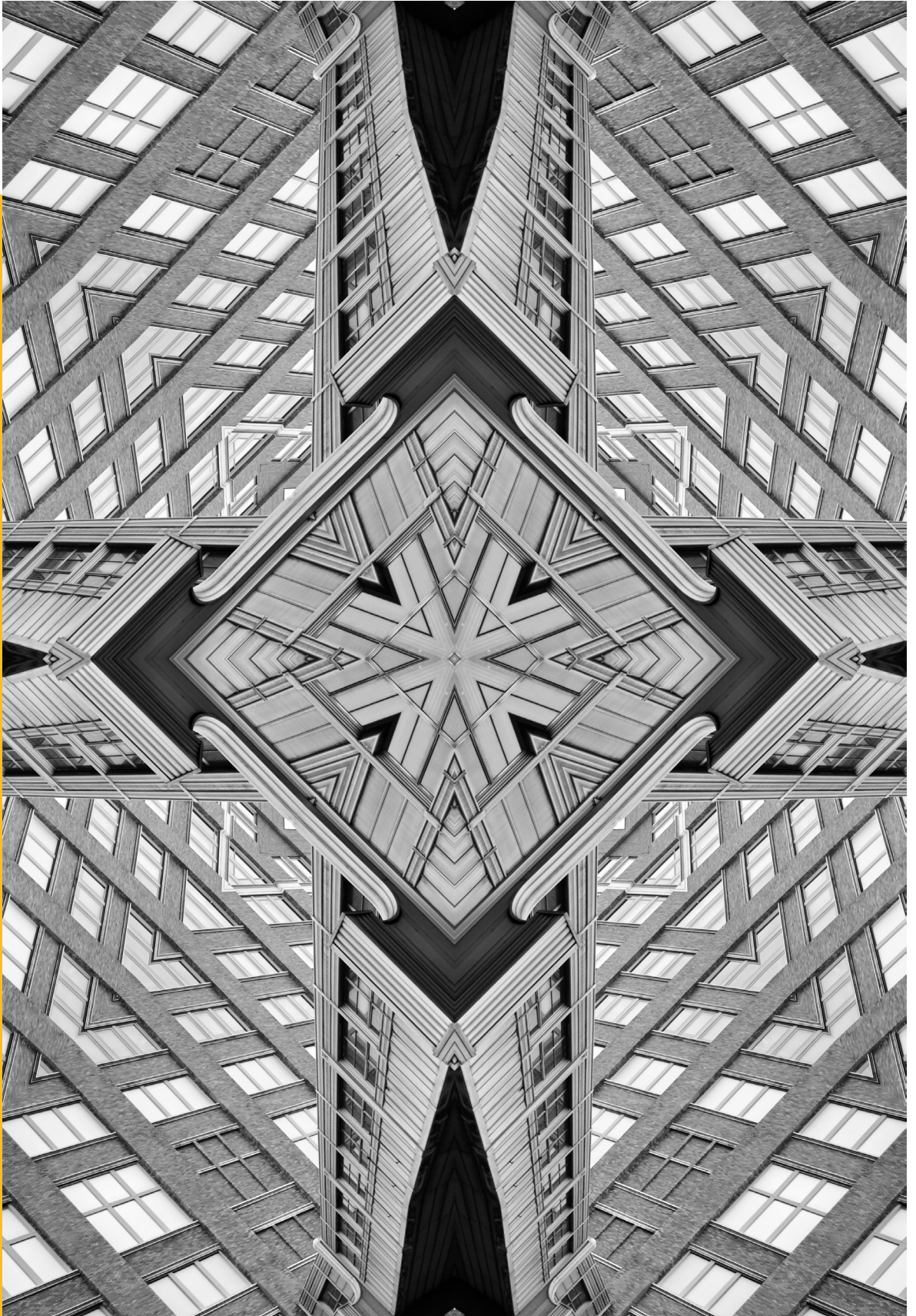


# Occasional Paper



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# Understanding the Rejuvenation of China's Revolutionary Impulse

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## **Abstract**

Various explanations have been proffered for Chinese President Xi Jinping's renewed emphasis on ideology. The popular narratives attribute it to either Xi's power ambitions, or a reaction rooted in his personal trauma during the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s. Meanwhile, an alternative discourse projects the rise of ideology politics as a response to a possible legitimacy crisis facing the Communist Party of China (CPC). This paper weighs in, and finds that in current Chinese ideology, the revolutionary impulse has regained its place alongside nationalism. The paper investigates this phenomenon—seen perhaps only during the Mao era—and attributes it to Xi's desire to repair the authority crisis at the apex leadership seen under the presidencies of those who preceded him.

Ever since the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) under the Communist Party of China (CPC), ideology has had two impulses: nationalism and revolution.<sup>a,1</sup> ‘Nationalism’ refers to a shared sense of belongingness based on ethnicity, and a community united by customs, traditions, history, or geography. For the CPC, the nationalistic worldview refers to the strong sense of identity and pride associated with Chinese society and culture and the acute desire to restore the glory of China. The revolutionary worldview, meanwhile, refers to allegiance to the core beliefs of Marxist-Leninist doctrine with Chinese adaptations which penetrates into the country’s social, political, and economic spheres. Central to this thought is identifying the principal contradictions of the times and the perpetual struggle to resolve those contradictions, and the ability to self-reform in the process. Most importantly, the defining feature of this element is the leadership of the CPC as the vanguard of the people. This worldview derives its legitimacy from the CPC’s revolutionary success in the pre-1949 period against the Nationalists<sup>2</sup> and the Japanese.

Since the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, both these ideological themes have shaped the politics in the country. Every leader since Mao Zedong to Deng Xiaoping and, lately, Xi Jinping has sought to play both depending upon the need and situation.

During Mao’s reign, China witnessed a strong imprint of both the nationalistic and revolutionary impulses. Later, in the succeeding three decades beginning in the late ‘70s, pragmatism guided by nationalistic impulse dominated the socialist-revolutionary strand of the Party’s ideology during the Reform and Opening Up era. Even as revolutionary ideology continued to be accorded a significant place in the official party narrative, incremental political and economic reforms became a priority in this period. This is not to say that the Party gave up its revolutionary legacy or identity. Indeed, Deng’s iteration of the Four Cardinal Principles emphasised upholding the socialist path, people’s democratic dictatorship, leadership of the

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a Ideology, in its broadest sense, refers to a set of ideas and beliefs that are regarded as true by a particular group, party, or nation. See: O.P. Guaba, “Concept of Ideology,” in *An Introduction to Political Theory* (Indirapuram: Mayur Paperbacks, 2014) pp 16.

# Introduction

CPC, and the Mao Zedong Thought and Marxist-Leninist doctrine. This trend would continue under Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, as will be discussed in succeeding sections of this paper.

However, since the ascendance of Xi Jinping as General Secretary of the CPC in 2012, the revolutionary impulse has regained its place alongside nationalism in the official Party narrative. Under Xi, there is an unprecedented resolve to inculcate and enforce revolutionary ideals from the top, reminiscent of the levels seen perhaps only during Mao's era. This paper seeks to investigate this change since 2012 and argues that it is a result of the "authority crisis" at the apex leadership position of the party—at the institution of General Secretary (GS) of the CPC—in the pre-Xi era. This paper defines "authority crisis" to mean the limitation on the exercise of power and jurisdiction of the GS as head of the Party with regard to control over institutions and policies owing to various arrangements that emerged post-Mao.

The paper examines the dilution of revolutionary ideology in the post-Mao period, and its eventual resurgence. It gives a historical account of the emergence of an authority crisis in the pre-Xi Jinping era, and attributes it to reforms instituted beginning in Deng's reign. The paper then correlates such authority crisis to Xi Jinping's ideology politics.

# Diluting the Red Gene

China under Mao was shaped by both revolutionary and nationalistic worldviews. The Party provoked nationalist sentiments through constant reminders of the people's humiliation at the hands of imperial powers. At the same time, they sought legitimacy for the Marxist-Leninist ideology, with Chinese adaptations, using the narrative of revolutionary success in correcting historical wrongs.

The ideological (revolutionary) stubbornness under Mao had two outcomes for China. One, a movement towards a centralising authority that eventually culminated into a personality cult around Mao, and second, the development of an anti-market sentiment that made it difficult to introduce economic reforms. Eventually, Mao's excesses during the anti-rightist campaign (1957-59), the Great Leap Forward (1958-61), and the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) would have deleterious consequences, the fallout of which would be felt by Deng Xiaoping. When Deng assumed the party leadership in 1980, he put in place two safeguards—i.e., the principle of collective leadership or collective responsibility,<sup>3</sup> and a two-term limit on the presidency.<sup>4</sup> The twin aims were to prevent the development of a personality cult like that which was built around Mao, and to arrest any potential dictatorial ambitions or tendencies and avoid a repeat of the social and economic disaster of that era. Therefore, the post-Mao era witnessed a turn away from its revolutionary identity towards a reformist one, while still retaining the nationalistic character.

At the Sixth Plenum of 11<sup>th</sup> Central Committee of CPC in 1981, Deng moved a resolution, 'Resolution on Certain Questions in History of our Party since the Founding of the People's Republic of China' and used Mao's own maxim, '*seeking truth from facts*'<sup>5</sup> to censure and criticise the latter's excesses during his reign. While acknowledging Mao's contribution to the Chinese revolution, the 1981 resolution admitted that "he [Mao] made gross mistakes during the cultural revolution" and that "the Great Leap Forward and the movement for rural people's communes were initiated without careful investigation

# Diluting the Red Gene

and study and without prior experimentation.” It further noted that “*Left errors* in principles guiding economic work were not only not eradicated, but actually grew in spheres of politics, ideology, and culture (emphasis added).” It notes that “quite a number of cadres at the grassroots level were unjustly dealt with in the latter half of 1964, and early in 1965” during the socialist education movement between 1963-65, itself an extension of the anti-rightist struggle of 1957.<sup>6</sup> It also stated that the Party had begun “to correct conscientiously and comprehensively the ‘Left’ errors of the ‘cultural revolution’ and earlier.”<sup>7</sup>

This resolution became the basis for engendering economic reforms in China. Beginning in Deng’s era, the Party’s commitment to revolutionary ideology was diluted in favour of new pathways: curbing dictatorial tendencies and reforming the economy. Yet, this transition was not smooth. After a brief consensus between Deng and Chen Yun, an influential economist and the only CPC leader who wielded influence within the Party at par with Deng, ideological differences with regard to economic policies emerged in the mid-1980s.<sup>8</sup>

While Deng rallied for market-oriented reforms, Chen favoured a planned economy based on orthodox Marxist-Leninist doctrine.<sup>9</sup> The Left ideologues and conservatives led by Chen criticised Deng for “surrendering” his leftist ideals and his plans for reforms and opening up as a “peaceful evolution” towards capitalism.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, Deng faced a dilemma with respect to the Marxist-Leninist doctrine: On one hand, it impeded his reform plans; on the other, it served as source from where the Party derived its legitimate claim to be the people’s vanguard.

Deng argued that such a “peaceful evolution” shall not be a threat so long as the country remains adherent to Marxism and the Party’s line was observed. He also said the Left presents a greater threat to China given its deep entrenchment within the Party, and that socialism can adopt certain capitalist elements.<sup>11</sup>

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Realising the futility of engaging in an ideological debate with the conservatives—who had the momentum in their favour in the aftermath of the Tiananmen square incident (1989) and Soviet collapse (1991)—<sup>12</sup> Deng undertook the Southern tour to mobilise support for his economic reforms.<sup>b</sup> He would prevail over the conservatives within the Party and shift the narrative in favour of the reforms.

The trend continued through Jiang Zemin’s and Hu Jintao’s tenures as well. Jiang’s flagship theory of ‘The Three Represents’ expanded the Party’s peasant and proletariat base to include private entrepreneurs and capitalists<sup>13</sup> as the advanced forces of the economy. The ‘Three Represents’ opened the doors of the Party’s Central Committee membership for the entrepreneurs. It altered the loyal support base of the party away from peasants and workers to businessmen, the middle class, and educated youths.<sup>14</sup> Seasoned observer of CPC elite politics, Cheng Li notes that the CPC membership of peasants and farmers which was at 63 percent at the start of the reform era in 1981, had fallen to 39 percent in 2011. At the same time, a new class comprising the private entrepreneurs (or Red Capitalists as Cheng Li describes them), managerial professionals, technocrats, independent professionals, and self-employed, emerged as the second largest group within the central party committee with a share of 24 percent.<sup>15</sup>

Building on this pattern, Hu’s administration adopted the ‘Decision on the Enhancement of the Party’s Governance Capability’ at the fourth plenum of the 16<sup>th</sup> CPC Central Committee in 2004. The document observed, “The Party’s governing status is not congenital, nor is it something settled once and for all,”<sup>16</sup> indicating that there are other governance challenges that the party needs to resolve to stay relevant.<sup>17</sup> Political scientist Bruce Gilley, who teaches at Portland State University, noted: “For the first time, the CCP admitted that the 1949 revolution was no longer a sufficient basis on which the party could claim to be the legitimate rule of China.”<sup>18</sup>

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b The Southern tour refers to the trip Deng made to the southern regions of China covering Shenzhen, Zhuhai, Zhongshan and Shanghai beginning 17 January 1992, before returning to Beijing on 20 February 1992. The purpose of the tour was to boast the successes of the economic reforms program by bringing attention to the prosperity it had brought in the coastal areas and Special Economic Zones (SEZs) that embraced the reforms. This trip managed to win the narrative in favour of reforms by overcoming the opposition within the party.

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The Party's history was no longer the sole forbearer of its political fortune as performance legitimacy replaced it.<sup>19</sup> This confirmed the party's confidence in its reformist identity that it assumed in 1978. Consequently, the period spanning the three decades (1978-2012) can be referred to as the 'reform era' as it was the time when the Party opened up the economy, leading to prosperity. The period since the 18<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in 2012 is now referred to as the 'New Era', although reform continues to be on the political agenda of CPC under Xi Jinping.

While the party occasionally continued to refer to its pre-1949 contributions, its reformist identity remained the mainstay of its legitimacy. Meanwhile, there was a dilution, albeit partial, of the Party's revolutionary identity. There were three motivations: to curb dictatorial tendencies, overcome the aversion to economic reforms, and find other sources of legitimacy for the Party.



# Cultivating the Red-Generation

Since the 18<sup>th</sup> Party Congress of the CPC in 2012, there has been a massive uptick in references to the party’s pre-1949 contribution. There appears an unprecedented emphasis on the Party’s revolutionary identity rooted in Marxist-Leninist ideology in the state and Party narrative. This includes reference to what is called the “century of humiliation”, the role played by the party in reviving the Chinese nation, and the unfinished agenda of great rejuvenation. The following is an excerpt from what is considered perhaps the most authoritative document in Xi Jinping’s tenure so far, formally referred to as the ‘Resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on the Major Achievements and Historical Experience of the Party over the Past Century’ (hereinafter the third Historical Resolution).<sup>c</sup> The document was presented at the sixth Plenum of the 19<sup>th</sup> Central Committee of Communist Party of China in November 2021. It said in part:

“After the Opium War of 1840, China was gradually reduced to a semicolonial, semi-feudal society and suffered greater ravages than ever before. The country endured intense humiliation, the people were subjected to great pain, and the Chinese civilization was plunged into darkness...national rejuvenation has been the greatest dream of the Chinese people and the nation. To save the nation from peril...the Communist Party of China was born. The founding of a communist party in China was an epoch-making event, which profoundly changed the course of Chinese history in modern times, transformed the future of Chinese people and nation, and altered the landscape of world development.”<sup>20</sup>

The party’s revolutionary past and success finds recurring mention in documents, speeches, and commentaries related to Party-building. These references are aimed at reviving the revolutionary spirit among the party cadres and the general population including children, students, and PLA soldiers. Since taking over in 2012, Xi

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c This resolution was the third historical resolution by the Party since its foundation in 1921. These resolutions aim to examine key events in the Party’s history and its performance and achievements. The previous two historical resolutions were presented under Mao (Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party, 1945) and Deng (Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party since the Founding of the People’s Republic of China, 1981).

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has made regular trips to ‘revolutionary base areas’ such as Yimeng, Yan’an, Jinggangshan, and Xibaipo that hold particular significance in the party’s revolutionary history. In addition to paying tribute to these “red lands”, Xi has repeatedly encouraged people to keep the spirit of these places alive and to preserve the legacy, from generation to generation, of “red resources”, “inheriting the red genes”, and “transmission of red rivers and mountains.”<sup>21</sup>

Speaking in 2015, Xi reminded the people that their identity is rooted in these revolutionary bases and that they should never forget where they came from and “must always draw wisdom and strength from the revolutionary history.”<sup>22</sup> In another speech, this time on the eve of Spring Festival in the same year, he called for more research on the party’s revolutionary history and its historical experience to ensure the furtherance of revolutionary spirit.<sup>23</sup> Emphasising the need for ideological and political training of every Chinese citizen, Xi said in one of his speeches, “The revolutionary traditional education should start from the baby... so that the red gene can penetrate into the blood and heart, and guide the majority of young people to establish a correct world outlook, outlook on life, and values.”<sup>24</sup>

He reiterated this point at another occasion in 2016, instructing the nation to “bear in mind the revolutionary history, inherit the revolutionary tradition, and use it to educate the cadres and the masses and educate young people from generation to generation.”<sup>25</sup> A year later in 2017, at an event held to celebrate the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the PLA, Xi called on the people to remember their “glorious” history and “inherit the red genes, and continue to advance the great cause created by our revolutionary ancestors from a new starting point, and inspire the cadres, the masses, and the military officers and fighters.”<sup>26</sup>

These statements provide a snapshot of the emphasis that Xi has laid on preserving, inculcating, and renewing the ‘red gene.’ In 2017, at the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, the ‘Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese characteristics in the New Era’ was added to the Party

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Constitution. It has since become the guiding ideology to lead China along the path of national rejuvenation. In that Congress, the party also talked about “keeping in mind the original mission, inheriting the red gene, and carrying forward the revolutionary spirit” and being mindful of “where the red regime came from and how new China was established.” The Xi Jinping Thought enjoins upon the people and the party “to maintain a high degree of revolutionary consciousness.” Following Xi Jinping’s cue, the Central Committee and State Council in October 2021 issued an ‘Overall Plan for Deepening Educational Evaluation Reform in the New Era’ that emphasised the need for ideological and political training of a socialist and revolutionary nature in schools, colleges, and universities.<sup>27</sup>

Xi’s emphasis on reviving and inculcating the revolutionary spirit would seem unparalleled. Moreover, his calls carry no references to class wars or initiating an anti-tradition movement of the sorts that were seen during the time of Mao. To understand Xi’s motivations behind his unprecedented emphasis on the CPC’s revolutionary history, this paper looks back to the emergence of what could be called the “authority crisis” within the CPC in the post-Mao/pre-Xi period.

# The Authority Crisis in the Pre-Xi Era

To ensure that the Party does not succumb to dictatorial tendencies, Deng instituted incremental political reforms discussed in the previous section of this paper. This was accompanied by the partial dilution of revolutionary impulses within the Party to make way for both economic and political reforms. The CPC succeeded in achieving its desired end: there has been relative stability within the party leadership and the country has recorded a phenomenal economic rise. However, the process led to certain unintended consequences, particularly the undermining of the institution of the General Secretary (GS) of the party during the 1980s.

Hu Yaobang, one of Deng's protégés and his chosen successor, was appointed as the GS of the CPC in 1982. His ideas and policies soon came into conflict with the party elders, who regarded Hu's plans for economic and political reforms too radical.<sup>28</sup> He faced stiff opposition from the conservatives, eventually creating fissures within the party. Because of Deng's instituted principle of collective leadership, which required consensus among the Party's apex leadership, the GS could not override the opposition from the conservative faction. The factionalism would eventually result in the sacking of Hu Yaobang in 1986.<sup>29</sup> His successor, Zhao Ziyang, also a Deng protégé, met the same fate in 1989, similarly due to ideological differences with the conservative faction. Deng, who himself never held the position of the GS despite being the de-facto leader of the Party and the country throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, also fell victim to this arrangement of collective leadership, as discussed in the first section.

China witnessed some stability only with the arrival of Jiang Zemin in 1989. Nevertheless, even his appointment was not without obstacles and the party had to wait until 2002 for a succession that was nearly orderly.<sup>30</sup> Hu Jintao was admitted to the Politburo Standing Committee (PSC) in 1992 and was subsequently appointed successor to Jiang—the then serving GS of the party who was to complete his two-term rule in 2002. With Hu's ascent, a bi-factional party system emerged within the CPC. The two most dominant factions—the Shanghai faction and the Communist Youth League of China (CYL)—<sup>31</sup> agreed to a power-sharing arrangement to avoid succession battles, whereby

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the positions of President and Premier would be rotated between them.<sup>32</sup> This imparted a degree of stability in the party<sup>33</sup> that by then had yet to witness a peaceful and smooth succession since at least the establishment of the PRC in 1949. The following period saw PRC's first-ever peaceful transition of power when Hu Jintao succeeded Jiang in 2002.

There were still drawbacks in the system, however. For one, the factional politics resulted to an evolving power dynamic that allowed the outgoing PSC to appoint the members of the new PSC, effectively disallowing the incoming GS the prerogative to choose the members of the PSC whom he would be working with for the succeeding five years, and thus restricting the powers and independence of the incumbent GS. During Hu Jintao's ten-year rule, he could not break out of Jiang's influence in the PSC. In the nine-member PSC constituted in 2002 under Hu's leadership, at least five belonged to the Jiang-led Shanghai faction.<sup>34</sup>

Moreover, while Jiang resigned as GS of the Party in November 2002 and stepped down from the post of President in March 2003, he did not vacate the post of the Chair of the Central Military Commission (CMC). That Jiang continued to occupy perhaps the most powerful of the three top positions in China for almost two years,<sup>d</sup> was an indication of his influence over the party. Until the time Jiang held the Chair of the CMC, he expected to exercise control over foreign and military affairs, which he eventually did. This allegedly created friction between him and Hu.<sup>35</sup>

Furthermore, the principle of collective leadership and the factional party system legitimised open questioning and criticism of the GS, making his position susceptible to constant undermining. Hu's faction, the CYL<sup>36</sup> or the populist faction,<sup>e</sup> faced stiff resistance from the opposing Shanghai faction (or the elitist faction<sup>f</sup>)<sup>37</sup> while implementing welfare, housing, and environmental policies.<sup>38</sup> This became apparent when corporate real estate interest groups backed

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d The CMC is the top military body that oversees the PLA.

e This faction represented the interests of labourers and peasants, and populations in inland areas.

f This faction consisted of the princelings and represented the interests of the entrepreneurs, coastal cities.

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by the elitist faction opposed Hu's subsidised housing policy.<sup>39</sup> Hu could therefore not realise his vision.

It can be argued that policy contestations do not necessarily translate to the undermining of the position of the GS; these disagreements also continue even today. Generally, however, the legitimacy of a leader is intricately linked to the success or failure of his policies. In this context, opposition to a GS's programme or policy amounts to a direct challenge to his very authority. In the contemporary context, for example, any criticism of Xi Jinping's Dynamic Zero COVID Policy from within the Party, is being viewed as a challenge to his authority.<sup>40</sup> Xi's reaction to such criticisms—blaming local officials, underplaying the current difficulties in the larger context of China's resilience, and enforcing the policy with renewed vigour<sup>41</sup> – is aimed at salvaging his reputation and authority.

In Hu's time, the strongest attack on his leadership from within the party came from Bo Xilai and Chen Liangyu. Bo Xilai, a princeling who belonged to the Jiang-led Shanghai faction, was the son of great Chinese revolutionary Bo Yibo. He was appointed Party Secretary of Chongqing province and a member of the Politburo in 2007 at the 17<sup>th</sup> Party Congress. Although he belonged to the Jiang-led Shanghai faction, he gained popularity largely because of his Mao-style campaigns, crackdown on organised crime, and promotion of an ultra-egalitarian and ultra-nationalist development model, known as the Chongqing model.<sup>42</sup> This is the opposite of what the Shanghai faction promoted.

His rise could also be partly attributed to the patron-client relationship within the Jiang faction. While the faction itself had reservations regarding Bo's actions and policies, it supported him in his criticism of the Hu administration to further its own factional interests.<sup>43</sup> Bo championed his Chongqing model as the political model for China and even got his supporters to promote himself as the alternative as well as successor to Hu, thus directly challenging Hu's leadership. Chen Liangyu, former Party Secretary of Shanghai, had also been a staunch and open critic of Hu's economic policies. Although Hu managed to assert his authority eventually by sacking

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both of them, the latter did manage to undermine Hu's leadership and the institution of the GS: the duo, especially Bo, managed to carry out a sustained campaign against Hu till the very end of the latter's term. Further, that Hu had to seek Jiang's support to finally get rid of Bo<sup>44</sup> despite being the supreme leader of the Party and the country, exhibits the constraints he experienced as the GS of the CPC.

Jiang's influence did not wane even as Hu prepared to retire as he got six of his protégés on the PSC in 2012.<sup>45</sup> Hu, as the outgoing GS, could not exercise significant control over the appointment of members to the succeeding PSC as Jiang had managed to do. Hu could not get any new member from his camp in the PSC at the 18<sup>th</sup> Party Congress as only Li Keqiang from his faction retained his seat in the PSC. Hu also faced criticisms from outside party circles. For example, academics and journalists at one point even ventured into the issues of constitutionalism.<sup>46</sup> Such criticism was a result of a "two-fold accommodating response" of the political leadership in the wake of rising social tensions: first, party leader's vocal support to campaigns condemning local party officials and second, loosening of censorship.<sup>47</sup>

All this culminated in observers describing Hu Jintao as the weakest CPC leader in PRC's recent past.<sup>48</sup> These analysts argue that unlike Jiang and Xi, Hu was never designated as the 'core' of the Party. Despite having successfully navigated China through the 2008 financial crisis, hosting the Beijing Olympics in 2008, and catapulting China to the rank of second largest economy behind only the United States, Hu's reign was regarded as "the lost decade".<sup>49</sup> Some analysts theorise that Hu's inaction was possibly a result of the collective leadership and factional politics and policy deadlock caused by Hu's rivals in the PSC.<sup>50</sup>

Therefore, the period beginning in Deng's reign until Xi's accession, witnessed recurrent crises at the apex leadership position within the CPC that exposed the limitation of the institution of the GS. This authority crisis that became prevalent at the office of GS in the pre-Xi era, was an unintended consequence of the incremental political reforms and factional politics. It is in light of this authority crisis that Xi sought refuge in revolutionary ideology, using it to strengthen party discipline and to establish the authority of the GS.

# Xi's Course Correction

**X**i Jinping, who served as Vice President of the PRC and Vice Chairman of the CMC during Hu Jintao's second term (2008-2012), was witness to the repeated undermining of the apex leadership including the office of GS. The abolition of the two-term limit on presidency, and the reiteration of unified leadership as opposed to collective leadership, and dismantling of factional politics to create a faction of his own,<sup>51</sup> suggested that Xi recognised that the incremental reforms had severely restricted the exercise of power by the GS. Even though Xi's rise could be partly attributed to his association with the Shanghai faction,<sup>52</sup> his actions suggested that he was determined to bring an end to the bi-factional power-sharing arrangement. There seems to be a definite assessment that factional politics played a substantial role in the unfolding of two major political crises in the history of CPC-ruled PRC—the Tiananmen Square incident of 1989<sup>53</sup> and the Bo Xilai incident in 2012.<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, factionalism thrived under the guise of collective responsibility, which in turn led to a weakened leadership and loosening authority at the top.

The existing reforms and conventions had created a system of checks and balances within the party that inhibited any exercise of absolute power. Xi assessed that these reforms had not only constrained the possibility of accumulating power but had also contributed to a weak leadership. Weak leadership projected the Party as weak, making it susceptible to attacks on multiple fronts from both within and without, as witnessed under Hu's administration. The third historical resolution, which marks the evolution and culmination of Xi's thinking over nine years of his rule, is worth reading in this regard.<sup>55</sup> It states that while the party made efforts towards strengthening leadership during the period of reforms, there "remained many problems within the party with respect to upholding its leadership." It refers to the "weak, ineffective, diluted and marginalized efforts in implementation" during the period, possibly alluding to Hu's years. The document specifically notes that "the Central Committee's major decisions and plans were not properly executed as some officials selectively implemented the Party's policies or even feigned



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agreement or compliance and did things their own way.”<sup>56</sup> Xi believed that certain vices had crept in within the party in the absence of a strong leadership. The following passage from the third historical resolution attests to this claim:

“...previously lax and weak governance has enabled inaction and corruption to spread within the Party and led to serious problems in its political environment, which has harmed relations between the Party and the people and between officials and the public, weakened the Party’s creativity, cohesiveness, and ability, and posed a serious test to its exercise of national governance.”<sup>57</sup>

This paper contends that in Xi’s assessment, the developments emanating from the institutional weakness of the office of GS and lack of discipline within the party in the period predating his accession, could threaten to wreck the party from within and compromise its overall leadership. The possibility of continued and unhindered disregard of the position of GS during his leadership, perhaps explains Xi’s recourse in revolutionary ideals.

The Xi Jinping Thought that has emerged as the guiding ideology to lead China down the path of national rejuvenation exemplifies the ideology-authority relationship. It is touted as the ideological succession and a ‘great leap’ in the process of ‘Sinicization of Marxist ideology’ so as to suit local Chinese requirements.<sup>58</sup> Its propagation assumes immense significance towards securing Xi’s central position and unquestionable authority within the party. It does so by making the accomplishment of the China dream contingent upon the adherence to the original aspirations. Xi Jinping Thought, while explaining the essence of the original mission, i.e., concentrated embodiment of the party’s nature, purpose, beliefs, and goals that in turn refers to the welfare of the Chinese people—equates it with inheriting the ‘red gene’ and carrying forward the ‘revolutionary spirit’ as losing commitment to the original aspiration would change party’s “nature and colour, and lose the people and its future.”

# Xi's Course Correction

Alluding to the above sentiment, the 2021 *People's Daily* Q&A series on Xi Jinping Thought, argues that with time, impurities in ideology, politics, organisation and style have crept in. These need to be resolved and a return to the roots—the original aspiration—is necessary. It suggests that at a time when China is on the cusp of realising its great dream, it is confronted by both, external challenges and difficulties in governance. And that these obstacles could only be hurdled if the party stays true to its original mission. It suggests that a weak leadership runs counter to the original mission.<sup>59</sup>

A closer examination of Xi's speeches<sup>g</sup> further reveals that his thinking with respect to “carrying forward of the red gene and revolutionary ideals” are aimed at safeguarding the position of the Party and preserving its primacy, overall, and the centrality of his leadership in particular which logically also includes strengthening the institution of GS. For instance, addressing the people on the CPC's 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary in July 2021, he remarked, “the leadership of the party is the defining feature of the socialism with Chinese characteristics and constitutes the greatest strength of this system.”<sup>60</sup> He continued, “we must uphold the Party's overall leadership and continue to enhance its leadership...follow the leadership core, and keep in alignment with the central Party leadership.” Finally, referring to the position of the GS, he said, “We must uphold the core position of the General Secretary on the Party Central committee and in the Party as a whole, and uphold the Central Committee's authority and its centralized, unified leadership.”<sup>61</sup> While these principles are propagated as the core of the Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism, it is important to note that strengthening the position of GS does not appear to be the end goal but only a means to strengthen Xi's own position within the party.

The third historical resolution of November 2021 also designates the centralised and unified leadership of the Central Committee as the “highest principle of Party's leadership” and upholds “Comrade

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g This author read the English version of Xi's speeches released by the Party.

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Xi Jinping's core position on the Party Central Committee and in the Party as a whole.”<sup>62</sup> Thus, in order to tackle the issues related to the party's 'leadership' and 'governance', which the third historical resolution identifies as the twin historical challenge, the party claims that since the 18<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, it has “tightened political oversight and inspection” and “investigated and handled cases of deviation from the Party's line, principles, and policies.” These include instances where “Party's centralized and unified leadership has been undermined” and got rid of the party officials and members who acted “dupliciously”. This exercise has allegedly ensured a “high degree of unity with the Central Committee in terms of political stance, political orientation, political principles, and political path”. It says:

“Since the 18th National Congress, the Party Central Committee's authority and its centralized, unified leadership have remained robust, the Party's leadership systems have improved, and the way in which the Party exercises its leadership has become more refined. There is greater unity among all Party members in terms of thinking, political resolve, and action, and the Party has significantly boosted its capacity to provide political leadership.”<sup>63</sup>

With regards to the institution of the GS, Xi has strengthened its role in the appointment process to the central leadership bodies such as the Politburo, Standing Committee (PSC), Central Committee, State Council, and the central legislative bodies. In contrast to the voting process adopted at the two preceding Party Congress in 2007 and 2012 for the appointment to these leadership bodies, Xi has replaced it with a system of individual interviews and investigations along with consultations with former and current party leaders at various levels—provincial, central, and military—to deliberate upon the candidates and finalise the appointments to the 19<sup>th</sup> Central leading bodies.<sup>64</sup> Xi also presided over the PSC to discuss and approve a personnel policy called “Arrangement Plan for the Discussion and Research on the Preparation of Candidates for the 19<sup>th</sup> Central Leading Body” which lists the eligibility criteria for the candidates to these leadership

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positions, among them: adherence to party discipline, resolute commitment to implement Xi Jinping Thought, and upholding Xi Jinping's core position within the Central Committee of the Party.<sup>65</sup>

Through the above measures, particularly in the scrapping of voting practice in certain leadership decisions, Xi has not only attacked factionalism within the party but also made the principle of collective leadership/responsibility redundant, along with curbing the influence of technocrats and professional bureaucrats who became influential within the Central Committee since Jiang's period; the aim was to eventually strengthen his position as the core.

Xi has also promulgated two very specific principles that have reaffirmed that the only legal and legitimate faction in the party to which allegiance is acceptable and mandated is the 'central committee' loyal to Xi Jinping. These are the 'two safeguards' & the 'two establishes'. The two safeguards that was added to Article two of the Chinese Communist Party Disciplinary Regulations in 2018, enjoins upon the cadre "to resolutely safeguard General Secretary Xi Jinping's status as the core of the Party Central Committee and the Party" and "to resolutely safeguard(ing) the authority and unified leadership of the Party Central Committee."<sup>66</sup> The two establishes that were adopted in the Third Historical Resolution directs the party members to "establish Xi Jinping as the core of the Party's Central Committee and the party as a whole" and "establish Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics in New Era (hereinafter Xi Jinping Thought) as the guiding philosophy for the nation."<sup>67</sup>

Another measure that points to the strengthening of the institution of the GS under Xi is the proliferation of Party Leading Small Groups (LSGs) since 2013 with the GS as the Chair.<sup>h,68</sup> Among the LSGs, the Party LSGs are more powerful than the Central Government LSGs because of their permanent nature and broader mandate. At present,

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h LSGs are bodies that oversee important public policy matters. They offer policy advice to the Party and the State Council and aim to bring greater coordination among the relevant bodies by reducing frictions and driving consensus. LSGs could either be Party-led or State (Central Government)-led.


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Xi heads eight of the operational Party LSGs.<sup>69</sup> He succeeded Hu Jintao as Chair of LSG on Taiwan, Foreign Affairs, and National Security. The LSGs on Economy and Finance, which has not been headed by a GS since 1998,<sup>70</sup> was brought back under the chair of the GS by Xi Jinping in 2013.<sup>71</sup> Xi has also established five new Party LSGs, all of which he leads: Comprehensively Deepening Reform (2013), National Security Commission (2013), National Defence and Troop Reform (2014), Cybersecurity and Informatization (2014), and Central Military and Civilian Integration Commission (2017). The newly formed Party LSGs fortifies GS's position, and through it Xi Jinping's core status vis-à-vis the Party, in addition to strengthening the Party's central position. In the past, Mao had instituted LSGs to which he appointed his loyalists, to centralise power around him during the Cultural Revolution. The current efforts under Xi appears to be a repeat of the same.

The message thus being forced by Xi is that espousing the revolutionary ideals, inculcating, and carrying forward the red gene requires commitment and adherence to the original aspiration; and that the 'Socialism with Chinese characteristics' is key to giving expression to the original aspiration. Having established the primacy of the 'Socialism with Chinese characteristics', Xi and the Party reiterate a three-step argument. One, that the 'leadership of the Party' is the defining feature of Chinese Socialism. Two, the centralised and unified leadership of the Central Committee is the highest principle of 'party leadership'. Three, Xi Jinping is the core of the Central Committee. And lastly, resolutely upholding the position of Xi Jinping, the GS of the Party, as the core of the Party's Central Committee is the common political responsibility of all. The successive directions are meant for specific constituencies. The first is meant for the people, the second for the party officials, and third for the Central Committee members. The fourth is for all to adhere.

This paper attempted to investigate the relationship between the authority crisis in the pre-Xi Jinping era and the renewed emphasis on the revolutionary impulse of ideology. It found a causal relationship between the two.

The period prior to Xi Jinping’s rise, first during the 1980s and later during his immediate predecessor’s (Hu Jintao) reign (2002-2012), witnessed a sustained erosion of the authority of the General Secretary, owing to the combined effects of factional politics and the primacy given to the principle of collective responsibility. Xi Jinping, the chosen successor to lead the party, who also served as Vice President to Hu Jintao, closely observed these trends, especially the diminishing authority of his superior. Xi Jinping’s actions comprising abolition of the two-term limit on presidency, reiteration of unified leadership as against the principle of collective responsibility, dismantling of existing factions through his anti-corruption campaign and disciplinary actions—all suggest that he realised the pitfalls of the earlier structure that was put in place by Deng and his successors. It is in this respect that Xi Jinping has sought to regenerate the ideological saplings to uproot what he considers as the “impurities” and “vices” of disregard of the central leadership, including the institution of General Secretary. His emphasis on “inheriting the red gene”, “carrying forward the revolutionary spirit”, remembering the original aspirations, and adhering to the Xi Jinping Thought, are all ideological weapons to pull the party out of the chaos of the authority crisis and to restore the authority of the Central Committee within the party, and of himself within the Central Committee.

This analysis, however, does not suggest that the factor discussed above is the sole determinant of Xi Jinping’s ideology politics. Rather, it argues that among many other factors, the constant challenge to the apex leadership in the period preceding Xi, acted as a further driver of Xi’s ideology politics. In this regard, the politics of ideology has played a crucial role in restoring the authority of the apex leadership with an added safeguard of him being the core of the unified party leadership that is sacrosanct and is to be resolutely guarded. 

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