

# CHINA'S NATIONALIST TURN UNDER XI JINPING

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*As a reporter for The Hindu and then India Today from 2009 to 2018, Ananth Krishnan travelled the length and breadth of China. His new book, India's China Challenge: A Journey through China's Rise and What It Means for India, provides an on-the-ground perspective of China's political, economic and social transformations over the past decade, and what they mean for India. An excerpt:*

Xi Jinping had to apply no less than eight times before getting into the Communist Youth League — an organisation for young Party members. He then had to again apply ten times before the Communist Party accepted him — all because of his family's history.

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Xi's father, Xi Zhongxun, was [Red royalty](#) — a hero of the Communist revolution. But he would later fall out with Mao Zedong, and had to endure humiliating public 'struggle sessions' at the hands of Mao's Red Guards.

'Where is the verdict against my father?' Xi once asked. 'When a fault is committed, there is a verdict. But where is the one against my father? What have I done? Have I written or chanted counter-revolutionary slogans? I am a young man who wants to build a career. What is the problem with that?'

Yet the lesson Xi seems to have learnt from his father's story may seem counterintuitive. Institutionalising the exercise of political power is not seen as the answer to curbing its excesses. Wielding it is.

Also read | [The road from Yan'an](#)

Since [taking over as the General Secretary of the Party in November 2012](#), Xi has proved far more adept and skilful than his predecessors, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, in exercising power. Within five years of taking over from Hu, [Xi established himself in the Party lexicon as its third great leader](#), after Mao and Deng Xiaoping. In a short span of time, he has dismantled the collective leadership system that restrained both Jiang and Hu.

Indeed, it was this model of collective leadership put in place by Deng that arguably allowed China to escape the fate of other authoritarian countries ruled by the whims and fancies of a single dictator.

Xi has dramatically restructured the Party-state apparatus, giving the Party a greater say in running the country, and breaking down the walls between the Party set-up and the state machinery that had, in the past, given China's bureaucrats a veneer of insulation in running government and policy.

Now, the Party is back. This has reversed a two-decade-long shift that saw a somewhat diminished role for Party bodies. Xi has centralised power by setting up a number of Leading Small Groups (LSGs) that now decide policy on everything from national security to economic reforms. Xi heads the LSG for comprehensively deepening reform, which is now the most important body in setting policy, as well as LSGs for national defence and internet security.

This extends to foreign policy as well. Xi even heads an LSG on matters related to the South China Sea, underlining how he is now dictating policy directly on matters previously handled by the bureaucrats. If in the past questions were being asked on whether Chinese moves on the border — such as an incursion that took the spotlight away from [Xi's 2014 visit to India](#) — were being directed by PLA commanders and not the leadership in Beijing, the evidence now strongly suggests nothing happens today without Xi's approval. That likely includes this summer's [massive mobilisation by the Chinese military](#) along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Ladakh.

Also read | [The rise and rise of Xi Jinping](#)

What explains Xi's rise, and how was he able to grab power and redefine China's political landscape? For one, Xi knows the ins-and-outs of the Party like few others. He was born Red. Like other [princelings](#), Xi grew up in the heart of Beijing, in the elite compounds reserved for top leaders.

With his father's purge, he was sent away from this privileged upbringing to a world that was unrecognizable – a small, dusty village called Liangjiahe in northwestern Shaanxi. Xi Zhongxun was a Shaanxi native, but the younger Xi was a Beijing boy.

In Liangjiahe, he learnt both hardship and the ruthlessness of politics. A few years ago, I followed the road to Liangjiahe that young Xi would have taken. Today, it's National Highway 211, a wide expressway full of trucks, and it runs from the old communist base of Yan'an, which is now the centre of the oil industry in Shaanxi.

The highway takes you through cornfields, winding through red loess mountains and past small villages. Liangjiahe is located in a narrow valley sandwiched between sandstone-coloured mountains. Its residents live, as they did four decades ago, in cave homes that have been carved out of the hills. They make a living tending the cornfields. The only major difference, forty years after Xi's time there, is that there are no young hands in sight – only farmers in their sixties and seventies, who watch over the fields, while their children are away working in the booming urban centres of Xian and Yan'an.

The few villagers I spoke to recalled Xi's time in Liangjiahe and Yan'an fondly. 'He was like any one of us,' said one lady in her eighties. 'He could eat bitterness,' she said, using a very popular phrase – chi ku, meaning 'eating the bitter' – that describes the tolerance Chinese people have for hardship.

It's been mostly forgotten that the year of Xi's ascension, 2012, was an extraordinarily tumultuous one in Chinese politics. The [Bo Xilai scandal](#) had exposed a split in the leadership, while there were grumblings among the Party elite that Hu Jintao's staid style had led to a drift, both in policy and leadership. There was a yearning for change.

Xi made the most of it. In one sense, as the scholar Cheng Li argues, Xi was 'lucky enough to arrive at just the moment in history when his consolidation of power — to upset the inertia and possibly even prevent a split of the CPC leadership — was appealing to the Chinese public and most other Chinese leaders'.

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What helped him in this quest was his 'assembly of strong loyalist networks' in the Party, particularly among his fellow '[second Red generation](#)', or [Hongerdai](#). This gave Xi the space to carry out 'bold political moves...endorsed by the political establishment, but only as urgent, ad hoc measures to safeguard Communist Party rule.'

Xi was the right man, at the right place, at the right time, Zhang Lifan, a historian and follower of elite Party politics who lives in Beijing, told me. Zhang outlined how Xi was able to skilfully master the system. 'Before he came to power, there were many negative feelings about the collective leadership system inside the Party. Every member of the Politburo Standing Committee had their own power, their own opinion, and no one was taking responsibility. They wanted a strongman to take charge and change this situation.' They perhaps got more than they bargained for.

If Xi's accumulation of power was seen by many in the Party as necessary to counter growing challenges, in Zhang's view the solution to the problem may itself pose the biggest risk. Leaving aside the question of political succession, which had been given some stability through the collective leadership model and through the imposition of term limits – both of which have been consigned to the dustbin of Chinese politics by Xi – there is now the problem of personal accountability.

This is something Xi will be acutely aware of at a time of unprecedented threats facing the Party at the helm - both at home, where it is confronting a slowing economy and numerous challenges after the pandemic, and abroad, where it is dealing with multiple challenges, from tensions with America to the crisis on the India border.

'The consequence of centralization is that all responsibilities fall on you too,' Zhang told me. 'If you do well, everyone will support you.' However, the reverse, of course, is also true. Fall at any of the hurdles, and there will be no shortage of people ensuring there is no second chance. And in China's system, failure is unforgiving. Ask Bo Xilai.

Xi knows he has to succeed at any cost. The Chinese legal scholar Jiang Shigong, who has emerged as one of the influential intellectuals in the Xi era, argues one key asset in Xi's favour is the Party's turn to nationalism, captured in Xi's signature political campaign, which is '[The Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese nation](#)'. Jiang says this is why the Party has declared the start of a 'new era' under Xi, which he sees as the fourth phase of the Communist Party's evolution.

The first was the twenty-eight-year period as a revolutionary party until the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. The second phase was from 1949 until 1978, which he rather generously describes as the period of 'standing up' – despite the calamitous Maoist turmoil – leading to the period of 'getting rich', which marked the start of the third phase of the reform era. Now, Jiang says, is the transition from 'getting rich' to 'becoming powerful', a phase he expects to last until the 100-year anniversary of the PRC in 2049. This is by when, according to Xi, China would have accomplished its 'Great Rejuvenation', including establishing what the president calls a 'world-class' military force.

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In Jiang's view, the Party under Xi is turning to 'the brilliant political imagination of thousands of years of Chinese civilisation [to] successfully fill the spiritual vacuum left by the weakening of the Communist vision', something he blames on Xi's predecessors.

A sense of 'national self-confidence and feeling of pride' are the Party's biggest asset, in his view, which would lead Xi to adopt a strong nationalist governing philosophy. This explains why Xi's first big campaign was selling the 'Chinese Dream' of rejuvenation.

One compelling reason for Xi's emphasis on ideology and nationalism is the awareness that the basic post-Tiananmen compact has a shelf life. The Party is turning to nationalism as an important source of legitimacy and unity, having come to one key realisation: economic growth

cannot forever remain the source of its legitimacy.

*Excerpted with permission from HarperCollins. The book will be published on September 30*

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