

China Has Brought Forth a Xi Dada: How China is Making and Breaking the Personality Cult of Xi Jinping

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Abstract

Chinese President Xi Jinping has centralized political control in China at a level not seen since the death of former Chinese president Mao. Xi Jinping consolidates his power through media and propaganda to construct a cult of personality. In this essay, I analyze the creation and consolidation of Xi's personality cult through popular songs, propaganda, and classic Maoist motifs. These outlets aim at casting Xi as China's fearless yet down-to-earth leader. For Xi, technology plays a significant role in promulgating the personality cult, including the use of apps and digital media. At the same time, parts of the Chinese Communist Party are uncomfortable with the extreme adulation of Xi's cult of personality and is working to reign in the cult. I use a Weberian concept of charismatic authority to explain the leadership appeal of Xi and its effects on his cult of personality.

Keywords: China, Leadership, Propaganda, Consolidating Power, Charismatic Authority, Technology

Introduction

"I went into the pork bun restaurant for lunch," begins a Chinese pop song written in 2013.

"Someone stood behind me in line," it continues: *"he's tall, he's strong, he's dignified, his face is*

glowing, / Wait, why is he so familiar?" (Landreth et al., 2016). Familiar, yes, because "he" was China's President Xi Jinping, and Xi intended for his breakfast excursion to boost his cult of personality. Previously, China witnessed a decline in the cult of personality following resistance to the autocratic regime of Mao Zedong (Yin & Flew, 2018). However, examples such as the pop song reveal how Xi Jinping has begun to reverse this trend.

In this essay, I examine Xi Jinping and the Chinese state's uses of media and propaganda to promote Xi's status as China's supreme leader and centralize political control in Xi. First, I examine the term "cult of personality". Second, I survey the decline of the cult of personality in China since the death of Mao Zedong until its rise under Xi. Third, I examine recent erosions of post-Mao norms of Chinese political leadership. Finally, I analyze the opposition Xi faces in pursuit of his goal as both members of Xi's government and liberal protestors levy resistance against his centralization of power. Central to my analysis of the cult of Xi is the Weberian concept of charismatic leadership, which is crucial in understanding why Xi's cult is promoted and sustained in a time of widespread uncertainty in China.

This essay aims to understand how Xi's erosion of political norms and use of state-controlled media technology creates a cult of personality despite the Chinese population's previous negative experiences under Mao.

Defining the Cult of Personality

A "cult of personality" is defined in the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* as "a pejorative term implying the concentration of all power in a single charismatic leader within a totalitarian state and the near deification of that leader in state propaganda" (Darity, 2008, p. 221). Cults of personality are not new concepts as monarchs and emperors promoted their cults throughout history. Prime examples of modern leaders who fostered personality cults in support of their regime include Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, Saddam Hussein, Mao Zedong, Idi Amin, and Kim Jong-II. These leaders were lauded by state propaganda as exceptional rulers of near-mythical character, wisdom, and ability. The

extent that Stalin, Kim, or Mao's respective populaces believed the often-ridiculous claims of their governments is questionable, yet the effects of concerted state propaganda in a totalitarian system are significant. The power of technology allows the 21st century totalitarian state more ubiquity and scope than was possible under even the most repressive of earlier regimes. The Chinese state has harnessed technology such as smartphone apps and viral content to project Xi's power and wisdom to an audience of billions.

What these tools of mass media and state control seek to engender is the promotion and public perception of the leader's "charismatic authority," a theory coined by Max Weber. Leaders possessing charismatic authority enjoy their authority "by virtue of which [they are] set apart from other men and treated as endowed with ... exceptional powers or qualities" (Weber, 1947, p. 358). Charismatic authority lends itself especially well to authoritarianism since, "in contrast to any kind of bureaucratic organization of offices, the charismatic structure knows nothing of a form or of an ordered procedure of appointment or dismissal" taking on whatever form the leader finds most suitable to maintaining power (Weber et al., 2009, p. 246). Indeed, any leader claiming authority not on tradition or legal-rational legitimacy must, to some extent, construct an apparatus of cult around themselves if they wish to maintain power, since the "charismatic claim breaks down if [their] mission is not recognized" (Weber et al., 2009, 246). A personality cult is a necessary means of projecting strength through the organized and state-sponsored exaltation of a leader. Weber's theory of charismatic leadership and the conditions that give rise to it will become crucial in understanding why much of China's population has embraced the personalist regime of Xi Jinping.

The Rise and Fall of the Cult of Mao

China is no stranger to personality cults. For much of the 20th Century, it languished under the cult of Mao Zedong. During the Cultural Revolution, "Mao's image and words were a mandatory medium through which people conducted their daily lives" (Schrift, 1998, p. 80). Mao's image and words were

ubiquitous in China, filtering down to the most mundane aspects of life. One Chinese citizen recalls when getting out of bed in the morning “instead of saying, ‘Let’s get up,’ you said, ‘Carry the revolution through to the end.’” (Gao, 1987, p. 318-319). Mao’s quasi-divine status allowed him to dominate Chinese political life, structures, and actors. The backlash towards Mao’s supremacy (Yin & Flew, 2018) would fuel the way that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) would approach and restrain its leaders until the rise of Xi.

Upon Mao’s death in 1976, the CCP moved away from autocracy and established norms of collective leadership. The wild excesses and political fervour that defined the reign of Mao would now stand as a warning. Upon coming to power in 1978, Mao’s successor, Deng Xiaoping, took major strides “to ensure the rule of law and to set limits to arbitrary bureaucratic rule” (Yin & Flew, 2018, p. 82). Under Deng, the CCP instituted checks-and-balances that, despite being embedded in an authoritarian structure, would presumably prevent China’s government from again succumbing to the power of one man. In 1982, the Chinese Constitution outlawed personality cults in the CCP (Luqiu, 2016). Deng himself emphasized the “search for consensus among top leaders” (Minzner, 2015, p. 130). This style would continue as the norm in Chinese politics until Xi Jinping would enter power in 2012. Since his inauguration, Xi’s consolidation of power has tested the tolerance of other major figures in the party, many of whom view his rule as a regression to the despotism of Mao (Wang, 2019).

Constructing the cult of Xi through technology and media

Despite the potential for a retrenchment of Deng’s checks and balances, the Chinese government is promoting Xi Jinping’s political ideas by positively portraying the president through media and propaganda. One of the central pillars in the cult of Xi is a government-released app, officially titled “Xuexi Qiangguo,” which translates to “Study powerful country.” Already monikered the *Little Red App*, Xuexi Qiangguo is a media platform designed to immerse Chinese citizens in highly filtered Xi-centric news and propaganda through quizzes, articles, and videos (Keane & Su, 2019). Upon installation, Xuexi

demands access to one's contacts, photos, phone number, Wi-Fi, location, and can trawl for data from 960 other phone applications such as Google Chat, Alipay, and Trip Advisor (Heiderich, 2019). The app also features call and chatting functions, constituting an all-inclusive digital ecosystem. The app rewards users with "positive energy" based on the accuracy of their knowledge of and the time they spend consuming "Xi thought", a term describing Xi's political and economic ideas. These ideas are "now enshrined on the same level as the 'thought' of previous great leaders Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping" (Keane & Su, 2019, p. 12). While exact user data is unavailable, reports agree that Xuexi became the most downloaded app in China, with over 100 million downloads in the four months following the app's release in January 2019 (Fifield, 2019). While installation is not mandatory, the social and political pressure to maintain high scores on Xuexi Qiangguo is strong among party officials and bureaucrats. The punishment for insufficient usage of the Little Red App is public shaming while slacking CCP members can expect to be written up (Keane & Su, 2019).

Consistent with his one-man consolidation of power, Xi has become the face of the Chinese government. Dismissing the post-Mao norm of collective governance, China's premier Li Keqiang instructed CCP members to support the supremacy of Xi Jinping (Phillips, 2018). China's annual government meetings have regressed into a flurry of flatteries, similar to the days of the Mao regime (Wang, 2019). In 2015, Xi was the only Chinese ruler displayed in the widely-broadcasted New Year's Gala, a first in the history of the event. In sidelining China's past leaders, Xi secures power in himself and legitimizes his charismatic authority. Perhaps most ominously, Xi abolished term limits for China's presidency, allowing him to rule indefinitely (Phillips, 2018).

Popular expressions of adulation, a bottom-up contribution to a personality cult, are equally noteworthy and influential in propagating the cult of Xi. Propaganda songs, one of the key aspects to Xi's personality cult, are experiencing a resurgence in China (Landreth et al., 2016). One of the most popular songs, entitled *Xi Dada Loves Peng Mama*, poses Xi and his wife, folk singer Peng Liyuan, as a model

Chinese couple. Other viral hits have followed in the same vein, lauding Xi's courage, charisma, vision, and humility (Yin & Flew, 2018). Flattering poetry has also flourished; although, many of the more fervid efforts have been met with scorn (Bandruski, 2016). The restaurant where Xi stopped for *baozis* now has a "Xi set lunch" and a travel agency dedicated to bringing in tourists (Luqiu, 2016). The "Long live" chant, an institution from the Mao days, with which "[no] other leaders afterwards had ever been referred to," has begun to be used for Xi (Yin & Flew, 2018, p. 88). While there are many who "use this burgeoning cult of personality for their own goals — whether to make a quick buck, ingratiate themselves with their superiors, or call disfavor on their rivals," it is difficult to ignore genuine popular support for Xi Jinping (Landreth, et al., 2016).

Between the innumerable channels, apps, viral songs, staged photos, and state-controlled TV, radio, and internet outlets, digital technology forms the linchpin of the Chinese Communist Party's apparatus of state control. Under Xi Jinping, digital technology has become the primary vehicle for state promotion of Xi's status as China's supreme leader, general, and mentor.

CCP and popular backlash to Xi's consolidation of power

In many cases, the CCP itself has become uncomfortable with the extent of the public and bureaucracy's flattery of Xi. The party condemns and censors low-level, naive, ridiculous, and sophisticated flattery with sarcastic undertones (Wang, 2019). Absurd or ostentatious efforts to demonstrate party or Xi-loyalty, such as one couple's decision to write out the entire Chinese constitution by hand on their wedding night, have been reprimanded (Wang, 2019). Propaganda departments have censored party newspapers when their coverage of the president evokes sentiments of the Mao-era (Blatt, 2018). For example, the use of the term "great leader" in reference to Xi was enough for government officials to order one newspaper to stop (Blatt, 2018). News agencies in Hong Kong and Taiwan report the CCP has banned hanging portraits of XI Jinping without authorization from the Chinese government (Blatt, 2018). However arbitrary their restraint is, the CCP fears to evoke sentiments of the Cultural

Revolution as its wounds are still fresh in the minds of millions (Blatt, 2018). Since 2018, the CCP has slowed the cult-machine around Xi and even sought scapegoats in its attempt to distance itself from it . Reports say that one of the president's closest advisors, Wang Huning, has been sidelined to manage backlash from critics regarding Xi's personality cult (Lam, 2018).

Indeed, Xi faces constraints in entrenching his personality cult including from senior Communist officials themselves. With Xi centralizing power at the expense of others, former CCP leaders Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao disapprove of Xi distancing China from the collective leadership principles of the Deng-era (Cohen, 2018). Through abolishing term limits, sidelining China's past leaders, and propagandizing Xi Thought, Xi Jinping's presidency is reminiscent of Mao Zedong. Unease with the direction of Xi's leadership in the CCP is widespread, prompting new emphasis on strict party-loyalty in response. However, resentment continues to be confined mainly to the shadowy upper-echelons of the CCP and does not jeopardize Xi's power (Cohen, 2018). Xi's most vocal critics come from Chinese citizens themselves.

The people of China are no longer as tractable as they were in the days of the Cultural Revolution. Mao was able to deify himself without much popular resistance since the CCP controlled the majority of cultural expression in China (Gao, 1987). Two things have changed since the Mao-era. First, the reign of Deng Xiaoping conditioned Chinese to expect that their leaders would emulate his moderation and adhere to the new model of collective governance. Second, the proliferation of the Internet in China, especially through social media platforms, has, despite government censorship, made Chinese more aware of their context in the world and increased their access to information. Both these factors have contributed to a growing pushback towards the authoritarian, personalist regime of Xi Jinping. Another mode of resistance is simple consumerism, which counters the historic communist ideology of the CCP through the Chinese consumption of Western commodities. As Time Magazine

asked, “how can a Beijing kid, raised on Starbucks and The Big Bang Theory, understand calls to reject the West and embrace socialist heroes?” (Beech, 2016, par. 15).

Digital media is also a tool in the hand of Xi’s enemies. Political activists use the tool to counter government propaganda and promote dissenting symbols. Subversive symbols like “steamed buns,” a reference to Xi’s breakfast excursion, have been widely used online to mock the president; the Hitler-esque nickname “Xitele” has also circulated (Luqiu, 2016). This opposition is notable, but as within the party itself, resistance is not the dominant strain of thought (Cohen, 2018).

The sustainment of the cult of Xi through charismatic legitimacy

Why has China tolerated an increasingly authoritarian leader and his attack on legal-rational legitimacy? Why has the CPC given Xi Jinping the space to tread on political convention and personalize the government? A reasonable and productive answer comes from the work of Max Weber on anxiety and the rise of charismatic authority. Weber argued that charismatic figures were “natural leaders in times of psychic, physical, economic, ethical, religious, political distress” (Weber, 2009, p. 245). The charismatic leader is one “who convincingly offers himself to a group of people in distress as one peculiarly qualified to lead them out of their predicament. He is, in essence, a savior” (Tucker, 1968, p. 743).

China is indeed a country lacking strong political, economic, or spiritual security (Minzner, 2015, p. 129). Many Chinese perceive that their “heady accomplishments have been grounded in a set of norms and policies... [that] are now unraveling” (Minzner, 2015, p. 129). According to Yunxi, “Contemporary China’s biggest feature is that it is entering a period of comprehensive anxieties,” centred on politics, the economy, belief, and even survival (as cited in Yin & Flew, 2018). In light of the Chinese population’s anxieties, Xi Jinping has cast himself as China’s saviour. The CCP is eager to demonstrate that Xi has the wherewithal that will steer China through the murky waters of the coming century (Chen, 2016). Whether through a sense of the inevitability of Xi’s triumph, which necessitates the show of allegiance, or a genuine belief in the direction he is taking China, Chinese citizens and politicians alike have committed

themselves fully to the cult of Xi as a survival strategy (Yin & Flew, 2018). The cult of personality, however, may also be seen as a survival strategy for Xi himself. For a leader who has rejected norms of leadership and traditional legitimacy, the public's maintained perception of Xi's power is crucial. Xi's maintenance of charismatic legitimacy is shown in that "He is their master... so long as he knows how to maintain recognition through 'proving' himself" (Weber et al., 2009, p. 249).

Conclusion

Xi's use of technology has allowed him to overcome negative sentiments from the Mao era to create a cult of personality and consolidate his charismatic authority. Xi's use of mass media, government propaganda, and party platforms to inculcate his political thought is central to maintaining a personality cult and, consequently, his power. Of course, it is eminently possible that Xi will succumb either to the inner-party resentment or grassroots resistance that challenges him. However, to date, Xi has maintained his charismatic legitimacy despite opposition and negative sentiments from Mao's regime.

Additionally, Beijing's management of the recent intractable Hong Kong protests and the Chinese construction of a hyper-surveillance state and internment system in Xinjiang suggest a government increasingly insecure about dissension within its ranks. Yet, as the tanks on Tiananmen remind us, achieving political change on a grand scale is difficult in China. With no term limits on Xi's presidency, the east may indeed be red again.

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