

## SPECIAL ISSUE

# DISCIPLINE AND PUNISH: PARTY POWER UNDER XI

## ABOUT

The Chinese have long been obsessed with strategic culture, power balances and geopolitical shifts. Academic institutions, think-tanks, journals and web-based debates are growing in number and quality, giving China's foreign policy breadth and depth.

*China Analysis* introduces European audiences to these debates inside China's expert and think-tank world and helps the European policy community understand how China's leadership thinks about domestic and foreign policy issues. While freedom of expression and information remain restricted in China's media, these published sources and debates provide an important way of understanding emerging trends within China.

Each issue of *China Analysis* focuses on a specific theme and draws mainly on Chinese mainland sources. However, it also monitors content in Chinese-language publications from Hong Kong and Taiwan, which occasionally include news and analysis that is not published in the mainland and reflects the diversity of Chinese thinking.

### Introduction

by François Godement

Xi Jinping has concentrated more power than any Chinese leader before him, except Mao. Once, this seemed unthinkable, even for the most seasoned China observers. But in just four years of leadership, it has become a reality. Xi continued to exert his power throughout 2016, pre-empting the annual session of the National People's Congress – China's parliamentary organ – by announcing key economic decisions before the acting prime minister delivered the government's work report and budget. Xi announced that the Party would rein in investment in real estate and large industry, closing in on so-called “zombie firms” in need of constant bailing out. Such announcements are typically made by the prime minister, rather than by the Party leader and state president.

Is this micro-management? Yes and no. Yes, because Xi has taken on a seemingly impossible number of responsibilities. And no, because there is a larger issue at stake – Xi's personal power and the paranoia of dissent that comes with it. Among these consequences is the Party's decision to launch a systematic investigation into the loyalty of Party cadres, above and beyond the anti-corruption campaign that has been a hallmark of Xi's presidency to date. Investigations can lead to open shaming meetings that look much like Mao's ‘struggle meetings’ that were used to humiliate and punish the disloyal. No cadre in his right mind would want to face such an ordeal. Wang Qishan – effectively Xi's second in command – is tipped to lead these investigative campaigns.

Following the Party's customary rules, Wang should be going into retirement at the next Party Congress this autumn. If he fails to retire – as many are anticipating – it will represent a highly significant exception to the rules governing renewal of the Party. Tinkering with rules on the length of service will lead observers to consider whether Xi himself is considering breaking with the rules that limit a Party leader to two five-year terms. Indeed, the signs are that the age limit rule is coming under challenge.

In this edition, Jérôme Doyon cites a Hong Kong-based journalist who compares Xi Jinping to Leonid Brezhnev – the man who effectively immobilised the Soviet Union during his 18 years in power. The analogy may seem unfair, or even misplaced, at first sight. Brezhnev led his country through a system of collective leadership from the top. Every year under Brezhnev the state bureaucracy acquired more and more power – so much so that his immediate successor, Yuri Andropov, failed to restore the primacy of the Party over the deadlocked bureaucracy after Brezhnev had departed. Xi, on the other hand, has elevated the Party above all other centres of power. Xi's decisions to purge important military leaders, reinstate ideological campaigns, and cow cadres into submission through his anti-corruption drive (one issue Brezhnev would never have tackled) indicate that he is taking a unique path, different from that of the Soviet Union.

Nonetheless, this special issue of *China Analysis* still finds a resemblance between the two leaders. One man alone cannot lead 88 million party members and a country of 1.4 billion people. Concessions have to be made somewhere. The price Xi Jinping has to pay for his own power is to empower Party cadres at all levels. This means rolling back the human resources criteria painstakingly introduced under Hu Jintao (2002-2012) to promote the idea of meritocracy. This included “open recruitment” methods, which allowed newcomers to ascend the Party apparatus. What is now appearing looks more like a closed system, where leaders at every level recruit their own subordinates among cadres already in place. No more fresh blood, and another consequence: an increase in the age of promoted cadres. The pay-off for Xi in all of this is a more loyal and better-disciplined Party base, at least in theory.

Coming full circle, this is exactly where the Soviet Union under Brezhnev went. After Stalin's terror and the uncertainties faced under Nikita Khrushchev, this sort of ‘protect our own’ deal was attractive to Soviet cadres. The downside was that it immobilised the Soviet Union and froze reforms for good. If Xi Jinping wants to guarantee his own power over the system, he must also safeguard the long-term tenure of cadres within that system. Keeping them under control with anti-corruption and loyalty checks is only one face of Xi's rule. The other is that those who stick with their bosses, up to and including the number one, are implicitly guaranteed the same longevity he seeks for himself.

Keeping track of these political and systemic trends is key to understanding the recent direction of Chinese policies. These include stalling economic reforms, the disappearance of debate about reforms in the media and think-tanks, and a succession of high-profile but often risky initiatives put forth by one man – Xi. Increased engagement in the South China Sea, the “One Belt One Road” infrastructure project and its large financial cost, and sudden U-turns in the proclaimed foreign policy to hedge against the risk posed by Donald Trump, all bear Xi's hallmark. Will he be able to concentrate his power further during his second term and launch the liberalising market reforms that failed to take shape during his first term? Some observers hope so, but to do that Xi would need to undercut the Party and the power he has concentrated in it, at all levels. Or else the Party apparatus would need to become so virtuous that it would be happy to open up its economy without the guarantee of extracting every economic benefit from it.

## One-man rule and the Party: Internal discipline and the risk of gerontocracy

Jérôme Doyon

Since Xi Jinping took power in late 2012, analysts have puzzled over how best to define his political trajectory. Is he consolidating power and building a personality cult around himself? Or is he a pure product of the system – a devoted man of the Party?<sup>1</sup> Comparing Xi to the late Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev, journalist Li Yan implicitly argues that he is both at the same time. Xi and Brezhnev, Li notes, share many similarities: they are both pure products of the Party they belong to, and present themselves as strongmen, using references to their countries' own revolutionary periods to build their support base.<sup>2</sup> Bearing this in mind, can a parallel really be drawn between Xi and Brezhnev's trajectories? And what do the Party's most recent developments say about Xi's leadership style?

At the Sixth Plenum of the 18th Party Central Committee in October 2016, Xi's tight grip on power was strengthened, because the Central Committee designated him the "core" of the Party.<sup>3</sup> This is a symbolic position that has been held by Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, and Mao Zedong. Hu Jintao, Xi's predecessor, failed to receive this symbolic accolade in his ten years of leadership. Beyond Xi's role, the Sixth Plenum focused on strengthening Party discipline. To that end, two key documents were approved – "Guidelines on Inner-Party Life in the New Situation"<sup>4</sup> and "Party Regulations on Inner-Party Supervision".<sup>5</sup> The former is an updated version of a document adopted in 1980 under Deng and it establishes rules governing the conduct of Party members in the post-Mao era. The latter is an update to regulations adopted under Hu in 2003, concerning various measures to ensure Party discipline. These developments form just one strand of the massive institutionalised anti-corruption campaign launched by Xi in 2013.<sup>6</sup> Strengthening the Party's internal discipline is a calculated move that increases the power of leaders at each level of the Party hierarchy. This, in turn, applies to Xi himself, and strengthens his own power at the top of the Party.

1 On this debate, see: Peter Mattis, "Man or machine? Seeking truth in Chinese politics", *War on the rocks*, 7 July 2016 (<http://warontherocks.com/2016/07/man-or-machine-grasping-for-truth-in-chinese-politics/>).

2 Li Yan, "The 25 year collapse of the former USSR" (前苏联解体二十五年, *qian sulian jueti ershiwu nian*), *Chengming*, January 2017. Li Yan is a journalist for the Hong Kong magazine *Chengming*.

3 "Xi's core status is consensus of CPC: official", *Xinhua*, 28 October 2016 ([http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-10/28/c\\_135788326.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-10/28/c_135788326.htm)).

4 "Guidelines on Inner-Party Life in the New Situation" (关于新形势下党内政治生活的若干准则, *guanyu xin xingshi xia dangnei zhengzhi shenghuo ruogan zhunze*), PCC Central Committee, 27 October 2016. It can be accessed here: [http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-11/02/c\\_1119838382.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-11/02/c_1119838382.htm).

5 "Party Regulations on Inner-Party Supervision" (中国共产党党内监督条例, *Zhongguo gongchandang dangnei jiandu tiaoli*), PCC Central Committee, 27 October 2016. It can be accessed here: [http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-11/02/c\\_1119838242.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-11/02/c_1119838242.htm).

6 More than 500,000 officials have been investigated since 2013 according to Wedeman. Andrew Wedeman, "New challenges for Xi Jinping's anti-corruption crackdown?", *China Currents* 16, no. 1 (January 2017).

While increasing the Party's internal discipline, Xi has also nurtured his support base among established local Party leaders by giving them more discretion over appointments and promotions. At the same time, and in pursuit of this goal, hiring practices for Party officials, which have enabled the Party-State to continuously renew its elite since the 1980s, are being challenged. New regulations which favour already-established Party officials run the risk of transforming the Party into a 'gerontocracy' – a government run by the old – mirroring the Brezhnev era.<sup>7</sup>

### Disciplining the Party

The new guidelines and regulations approved at the Sixth Plenum are designed to solve internal contradictions within the Party. In particular, they are geared towards the tendency of some officials "to form cliques driven by personal interests" (结党营私, *jiedang yingsi*), or "to pay lip service" to the Party, while secretly opposing it (阳奉阴违, *yang feng yin wei*).<sup>8</sup> The new regulations are an explicit reaction to the plan to overthrow Xi in 2014, organised by the so-called "new gang of four" – former Politburo members Zhou Yongkang, Bo Xilai, Xu Caihou, and Guo Boxiong, who were all purged in the recent anti-corruption campaign.

### Study sessions and democratic life meetings

The key mechanisms put in place to ensure the political unity of the Party are study sessions for officials focusing on Party ideology and the Party's current 'line' on certain issues,<sup>9</sup> as well as "democratic life meetings" (民主生活会, *minzhu shenghuo hui*). The new Party documents emphasise the importance of these meetings, which are essentially 'self-criticism' sessions, and are organised in every Party cell under the supervision of the upper-level Party authority. In these meetings officials are encouraged to come forward and atone for bad behaviour, as well as to denounce their colleagues. This activity is meant to ensure the unity and purity of the Party.

Democratic life meetings were a key feature of the 'mass line' (群众路线, *qunzhong luxian*) campaign aimed at ensuring officials remained in touch with the broader population, chiefly by eradicating the "four (bad) work styles" – formalism, bureaucracy, hedonism and extravagance. Party members are encouraged to call out these behaviours in meetings.<sup>10</sup> While the 'mass line' campaign officially ended in 2014, the meetings have been

7 In 1980, 75 percent of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union's Politburo were aged over 60 and 30 percent were over 70 (Hélène Carrère d'Encausse, *Le pouvoir confisqué: gouvernants et gouvernés en U.R.S.S. [Confiscated power: rulers and ruled in USSR]* (Paris: Flammarion, 1980), 243).

8 Xi Jinping, "Explanations regarding the "Guidelines on Inner-Party Life in the New Situation" and the "Party Regulations on Inner-Party Supervision" (关于《关于新形势下党内政治生活的若干准则》和《中国共产党党内监督条例》的说明, *guanyu 'guanyu xin xingshi xia dangnei zhengzhi shenghuo ruogan zhunze' he 'Zhongguo gongchandang dangnei jiandu tiaoli' de shuoming*), *Xinhua*, 2 November 2016. It can be accessed here: [http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-11/02/c\\_1119838057.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-11/02/c_1119838057.htm) Hereafter Xi Jinping, "Explanations regarding the "Guidelines" and the "Party Regulations"."

9 On the CCP study sessions, see: Kata Julianna Szabó, "Politburo Study Sessions: A chance to influence Chinese leaders?", *China Analysis*, August 2016.

10 "A work meeting regarding the Party's implementation of the mass line educational campaign is convened" (党的群众路线教育实践活动工作会议召开, *dang de qunzhong luxian jiaoyu shijian huodong gongzuo huiyi zhaokai*), *Xinhua*, 19 June 2013. It can be accessed here: [http://news.xinhuanet.com/zqjx/2013-06/19/c\\_132466321.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/zqjx/2013-06/19/c_132466321.htm).

continued and are now formalised at the Sixth Plenum. They have proven a useful disciplinary tool for Party leaders, because they help to root out any wavering cadres and ensure the behavioural and ideological conformity of subordinates.<sup>11</sup> The new guidelines, approved at the Sixth Plenum, make it compulsory for core Party officials to attend a ‘democratic life meeting’ at least once per year.

### Supervision Committees

A key structural reform to support Party discipline and oversight was also announced shortly after the Sixth Plenum. A new Central Leading Group for Deepening the Reform of the Supervision System (深化监察体制改革试点工作小组, *shenhua jiancha tizhi gaige shidian gongzuo xiaozu*) was established in November 2016. The group, which will set up Supervision Committees (监察委员会, *jiancha weiyuanhui*) to uphold internal discipline of the overall Party-State apparatus, is headed by Wang Qishan, a close ally of Xi Jinping who also chairs the Central Commission of Discipline Inspection (CCDI) – the Party’s highest internal-disciplining institution. Supervision Committees will be tested in three pilot locales: Beijing, Shanxi, and Zhejiang, and, if successful, could be rolled out across the country.<sup>12</sup> The Supervision Committees will “integrate” (整合, *zhenghe*) the administrative departments dealing with supervision and corruption prevention, as well as the offices in charge of investigating officials. It is important to note that these new and powerful committees are not state institutions, but are directly under Party control, expanding, de facto, the power of the CCDI and Party. These developments are officially presented as a way to “strengthen the Party’s united leadership over anti-corruption work” (加强党对反腐败工作的统一领导, *jiaqiang dangdui fubaigongzuo de tongyi lingdao*).<sup>13</sup>

### With great power comes great responsibility

The two documents approved at the Sixth Plenum expand the power of all leading Party cadres – in particular, Party Committee members – from the level of township leader to Party leader. It strengthens the current model, which mixes decentralisation with concentration of power. Hence, the leader of a township, for example, holds all decision-making power at that level. Xi has described these officials as “pivotal” (关键, *guanjian*) to emphasise both the tremendous power they have, but also that they have to practise exemplary behaviour for the well-being of the system as a whole.<sup>14</sup>

11 Already in 2015, the “three stricts and three earnest” (三严三实, *sanyan sanshi*) educational campaign relied on similar tools to shape the cadres’ behaviour. The “three stricts and three earnest” include: to be honest in making decisions, in forging a career and in one’s personal behaviour, as well as to be strict in morality, in exercising power and in disciplining oneself. For more details, see: “The ‘Three Stricts and Three Honests’ educational campaign”, *China.cn.org*, 26 June 2015. It can be accessed here: [http://www.china.org.cn/china/2015-06/26/content\\_35915584.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/china/2015-06/26/content_35915584.htm).

12 “The CCP Central Office issues a ‘Pilot program for the launch of a reform of the State supervision system in Beijing, Shanxi, and Zhejiang’ (中共中央办公厅印发《关于在北京市、山西省、浙江省开展国家监察体制改革试点方案》), *zhonggong zhongyong bangongting yinfa ‘guanyu zai beijing shi, shanxi sheng, zhejiang sheng kaizhan guojia jiancha tizhi gaige shidian fang’an*”, *Xinhua*, 7 November 2016. It can be accessed here: [http://www.ccdi.gov.cn/xwtt/201611/t20161107\\_89267.html](http://www.ccdi.gov.cn/xwtt/201611/t20161107_89267.html).

13 “Wang Qishan inspects the pilot reform of the supervision system in Beijing, Shanxi, and Zhejiang” (王岐山在北京、山西、浙江调研监察体制改革试点工作, *wang qishan zai beijing, shanxi, zhejiang diaoyan jiancha tizhi gaige shidian gongzuo*), *Xinhua*, 25 November 2016. It can be accessed here: [http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-11/25/c\\_1119993502.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-11/25/c_1119993502.htm).

14 Xi Jinping, “Explanations regarding the “Guidelines” and the “Party Regulations””.

According to the “Guidelines on Inner-Party Life in the New Situation”, the leading cadres must conduct themselves in line with Party practices. They must engage only in Party-appropriate relationships, be vigilant of inappropriate behaviour, and are forbidden from using their power to help family or friends’ business interests. More than this, they are responsible for keeping their family and friends in check and keeping their subordinates in line.<sup>15</sup>

### Strengthening local leadership

While they are under increased scrutiny, the Party leaders are also granted greater discretion in evaluation, promotion, and recruitment of subordinates. The “Party Regulations on Inner-Party Supervision” reiterated that at

It could become increasingly difficult to attract educated and young Chinese candidates, leaving an aging Party core.

every echelon of the Party-State, the Party Secretary has the final word when it comes to supervising and evaluating the performance of subordinates. While the local Party leaders have always been the key players in terms of recruitment

and promotion decisions, the new documents give them even more leeway in this matter. The “Party Regulations on Inner-Party Supervision” call for evaluations to be “practical and realistic” (实事求是, *shishi qiushi*), and to prevent “illegitimate appointments” (带病提拔, *daibing tiba*). By “practical and realistic”, the Party means that the Secretary within a given locale is supposed to rely mostly on his personal assessment of his subordinates’ performance. This goes against a tendency since the 1990s to give more weight to technocratic measures of cadres’ performance – such as performance statistics.

This shift towards giving more discretion to local leaders for promotion decisions has been evident since January 2014, when the Party issued a revised version of the “Work Regulation for the Promotion and Appointment of Leading Party and Government Cadres”, dating from 2002.<sup>16</sup> A key feature of the revised regulation was to restrict the scope for “open selection” (公开选拔, *gongkai xuanba*) of leading Party-State cadres. This method, which has largely been in place since the early 2000s, requires the Party to make a public announcement for vacant positions, begin procedures for candidates to submit job applications, and allow them to take the relevant exams and interview. Any cadre who fulfils the conditions in the job description can apply to the position. This allowed officials to skip ranks in China’s highly hierarchical system and became a well-known fast-track route for young officials to get ahead in the Party.<sup>17</sup>

15 This development is in line with several documents, published last year, that emphasise the personal accountability of Party-State leaders, even retired, for cases of misbehaviour, corruption or factionalism among their subordinates. See in particular: the “Party accountability regulations” (中国共产党问责条例, *zhongguo gongchandang wenzhe tiaoli*), CCP Central Committee, 17 July 2016. It can be accessed here: [http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-07/17/c\\_1119232150.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-07/17/c_1119232150.htm).

16 “Work Regulation for the Promotion and Appointment of Leading Party and Government Cadres” (党政领导干部选拔任用工作条例, *dangzheng lingdao ganbu xuanba renyong gongzuo tiaoli*), CCP Central Committee, 15 January 2016. It can be accessed here: [http://www.gov.cn/jrzq/2014-01/15/content\\_2567800.htm](http://www.gov.cn/jrzq/2014-01/15/content_2567800.htm).

17 For more details, see: Chien-wen Kou and Wen-Hsuan Tsai, “Sprinting with Small Steps’ Towards Promotion: Solutions for the Age Dilemma in the CCP Cadre Appointment System,” *The China Journal* 71, no. 1 (2014): 153–71.

The process facilitated renewal of the Party, something which is inhibited by the new regulations. With the 2014 regulation, opportunity for rapid promotion through this channel diminished. The “open selection” method can now only be used when the local Party-State units cannot find suitable candidates internally. While the new restrictions on open selection were officially made to limit nepotism and other abuses in the recruitment process, the current method often lacks transparency. In fact, it revives the Party-centric system in which the Party secretary decides, almost unilaterally, who will take a position, without even trying to pretend the process is transparent.

At the same time, previous regulations, which served the important role of keeping the party young by limiting the maximum age of Party members, are now being eroded, and giving Party secretaries given more leeway on age-based regulations. Rules on the maximum age of leading cadres were developed, starting in the 1980s under Deng, to accelerate the rejuvenation of the cadres’ corps. They affected promotions at every level of the Chinese polity. Rules were also fixed for the minimum number of years that Party cadres must serve in each position they hold before being promoted to the next level. This was designed to prevent premature promotion based on favouritism. However, Xi appears to want to roll back the age-based system. In 2014 a document regarding the recruitment of leading officials in the years to come indeed noted that age limits should not be considered “too strictly” for individual personnel transfers.<sup>18</sup>

Xi Jinping has continued to concentrate power through these regulations, but he has also increased the power of local Party leaders. The Party-State is indeed under tight control, but Party leaders at every level, from township Party secretaries to Xi himself, all have more discretion over recruitment and promotion. The developments at the Sixth Plenum appear to confirm that Xi wants to make sure he does not lose the support of established leading cadres, and that he is using internal discipline as a means of political struggle to shore up power for himself. It speaks volumes that despite anti-corruption campaigns being a hallmark of Xi’s leadership, the Sixth Plenum fell short of imposing any key reforms to mandate disclosure of family assets by officials. This would have been considered a big step forward in the fight against corruption. Xi’s strategy to strengthen the Leninist structure of “democratic-centralism” and to cultivate the support of already-established Party leaders might prove dangerous for Party survival in the long term. By limiting avenues for promotion, it could become increasingly difficult to attract educated and young candidates, leaving an aging Party core.

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The authors would like to thank Gareth Davies for his help in preparing the text for publication.

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<sup>18</sup> “Development Program Concerning the Establishment of a National Party and State Leadership for 2014-2018” (2014-2018 年全国党政领导班子建设规划纲要, 2014-2018 nian quanguo dangzheng lingdao banzi jianshe guihua gangyao), Central Office of the CCP, 25 December 2014.

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© ECFR March 2017

ISBN: 978-1-911544-05-0

Published by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), 7th Floor, Kings Buildings, 16 Smith Square, London, SW1p 3HQ, United Kingdom

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