Xi Jinping's Radical Secrecy

This is not just a challenge for biographers. It makes China harder to predict and the world more dangerous.

By Richard McGregor

Kevin Frayer / Getty

AUGUST 21, 2022

Xi Jinping has never given a press conference. He is the head of China's ruling Communist Party—a colossal, sprawling political machine with 96.7 million members—yet he does not have a press secretary. His office does not preannounce his domestic travel or visitor log. He does not tweet.

What are billed by the official media as important speeches are typically not released until months after Xi has delivered them in closed forums. Even then, the published versions can be pallid reworkings of the documents that have been circulated internally and, very occasionally, leaked.

The secretiveness of Beijing's ruling party might once have been dismissed as a mere eccentricity, fodder for an industry of intelligence analysts and academic Pekingologists to sort through for clues about top-level machinations. But with Xi now often described, without hyperbole, as the "world's most powerful man," and on the verge of winning a norm-breaking third term later this year at the party congress, Beijing's radical opacity has real-world consequences.

How would Xi, for example, make any decision to invade Taiwan? What would happen if the military pushed back? Could the politburo vote to overrule Xi? Does Xi feel pressure from the public to take the island? Almost anything China does has global fallout these days, but its internal debates and its decision-making processes are almost entirely hidden.

The challenge of finding out much at all about Xi is certainly evident in a raft of recent biographies (by, variously, the Canadian academic Alfred L. Chan; the British Sinologist Kerry Brown; and two German journalists, Stefan Aust and Adrian Geiges). The manner in which anyone writing about Xi and his government is forced to sniff around the perimeters of the party-state in search of scraps of information reminded me of a recurring conversation I had in China when I lived there as a journalist, on and off for about 15 years from the mid-1990s, and then during multiple visits since. I often heard the refrain from Chinese officials "You don't understand China!" when they complained about this or that article of mine. My stock reply was: "You don't want me to understand China!"

China's official media awards draw the red lines very clearly for local journalists, who are, inevitably, far better informed than foreigners in an unapologetically closed system. To be considered for a reporting prize, according to the independent China Media Project, journalists must "love the Party, protect the Party and serve the Party" and adhere to the principle of "public opinion guidance."

Heaven help any Chinese journalist who might manage to publish a real-time account of Xi's decision making. At best, they would be out of a job. More likely, they would end up behind bars. Foreigners can simply be banned from entering the country ever again.

Putting aside the political dangers that secrecy engenders, Xi Jinping's personal story alone makes him a gripping subject. His father, Xi Zhongxun, was a revolutionary hero and a senior official in Mao Zedong's post-1949 government who was purged in 1962 and later sent into internal exile. Xi Zhongxun was then denounced in struggle sessions and imprisoned during the Cultural Revolution, a radical mobilization that Mao Zedong unleashed in 1965 to destroy his enemies.

During that turmoil, Xi himself, after starting life in an elite academy in Beijing, was exiled to an impoverished village in central China as a teenager. A so-called sent-down youth, he toiled in the fields and dug ditches.

Even then, after Mao died in 1976 and China began to embrace the market, Xi did not have an entirely easy ride. Thanks to his father's rehabilitation, Xi did enjoy some advantages as the offspring of "red nobility," gaining entry into a prestigious university before the education system had fully reopened. But after a stint as an aide to China's defense minister during his military service, he was forced to build his career by doing the same hard slog as other Chinese officials.

Xi went to work in coastal Fujian, across from Taiwan, starting in a small, relatively poor city. During his 18-year stint in the province, he managed to avoid becoming embroiled in any of the local corruption scandals, and ended up as Fujian's governor. Once he left there, for nearby Zhejiang province, he rose rapidly, transferring to Shanghai, the up escalator of Chinese politics. He rode it to Beijing to become the leader-in-waiting, eventually taking over as party secretary and head of the military in 2012, and state president the following year.

In Xi's case, we know more about him than we do about previous Chinese leaders, in part because, before rising to the party's top ranks, he talked about his upbringing. The party itself has published a series of reverent oral histories on his years as a sent-down youth and as an official in the provinces.

All of that can be illuminating as far as it goes—like shining a flashlight into the corner of a dark room and no farther. But the real business of Chinese politics, together with the rest of Xi's story, remains securely locked down. These glimpses from his past encase his life in an official mythology and largely obscure, or avoid altogether, crucial questions about how he came to power and survived at turning points in his career.

None of the local or foreign books about him can explain with clarity how the party chose Xi as the nominated successor to Hu Jintao in 2007. Was it because Xi was considered independent of the party's main competing factions? Did his revolutionary family roots swing the vote in his favor? Did a council of party elders support him? Who makes up the council of elders, anyway? Do they ever meet, in fact?

Formally, the head of the Communist Party in China is chosen by the Central Committee, the roughly 370-member body that acts as kind of the expanded board of directors of China, Inc. But there is no recorded instance of the committee ever exercising any genuine scrutiny of the party, let alone tussling over who should be leader.

Nor do any writings about Xi illuminate whatever mandate he was given when he assumed leadership of the party in late 2012, amid evident political turmoil. That mystery is a live issue to this day. China's official press, quoting senior officials, has accused a Xi rival, Bo Xilai, and his associates of attempting to stage an intraparty coup around this time. Bo was the charismatic party secretary of the megacity of Chongqing, in western China, and like Xi, the son of a revolutionary hero. He is now in jail.

Xi's first 100 days or so in office were a whirlwind, perhaps partly as a response to Bo's attempted putsch. Xi inaugurated an anti-corruption campaign, began locking up liberals, set anti-poverty targets, and announced the Belt and Road Initiative, a multibillion-dollar project to invest—and build influence—in Central Asia, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and beyond.

In late 2017, after five years in power, he dispensed with the convention of naming a successor. The following year, Xi abolished term limits on the presidency, effectively making himself leader in perpetuity.

Xi's harshness shocked many in the system, and still does. What deals did he have to cut to get his way? The Communist Party, after all, is a political machine before anything else. If he went way past what his patrons had wanted him to do, we are, again, none the wiser.

Writing contemporaneous history in China is hard enough. Even telling its recent history is a struggle. Take, for example, the way that China-literate Westerners routinely credit Deng Xiaoping with opening the country up to market reforms in the late 1970s. As moments in history go, they don't come much bigger than this: The economic powerhouse that China is today dates from the point when the party-state decided to kick-start growth in the aftermath of Mao's death. Deng gets all the credit for these market-led measures, which is what we might call the "*Time* Man of the Year" version of history (Deng won the award twice, in 1978 and 1985). But this doesn't square with the facts.

Read: When Biden went to China

The historians Warren Sun of Monash University and Frederick Teiwes of the University of Sydney make a persuasive case that the important reforms were under way before Deng took over in 1978. According to their research, published in 2011 yet sometimes overlooked, Deng's predecessor, Hua Guofeng, set in motion just

about all of the policies that Deng is now credited with. Deng was important, of course, but he possessed the indispensable quality of strong Chinese leaders. He made sure that the history was written in his favor, reducing Hua to a hapless leader who had obstructed change—the reverse of the truth.

Under Xi, the battle over history has gone to another level, both in service of his own career and to ensure that the party can dictate whatever version of events it needs to align with current policy.

Glenn Tiffert, a historian of modern China at the Hoover Institution, made a remarkable discovery about a decade ago when researching the legal debates in China in the 1950s over issues such as judicial independence and the ascendancy of the law over politics and class. By comparing the original journals in his possession that aired these usually savage debates with their digital editions, Tiffert noticed that scores of articles had been excised from the online records. Any historian fresh to the issue and without access to the scarce hard copies could never have known that China had conducted such debates at all.

The doctoring of the records was designed to buttress the party's vehement opposition to Western legal concepts. "The more faithful scholars are to this adulterated source base and the sanitized reality it projects, the more they may unwittingly promote the agendas of the censors," Tiffert wrote.

Formal restrictions on research are also getting tighter. Over the past decade or so, China has been restricting access to its archives. In 2013, the foreign ministry placed about 90 percent of its collection out of reach. Those archives are now closed to the public altogether.

The tightening of access to sources, official and otherwise, has run in parallel with the introduction of a new criminal offense of "historical nihilism," which can be wheeled out to suppress any version of the past that the party doesn't like. In 2021, China's internet regulator,

doubtless trying to curry favor with Xi ahead of the party's 100th anniversary later that year, announced that it had deleted 2 million posts containing "harmful" discussion of history on social-media sites such as Weibo (China's equivalent of Twitter) and the ubiquitous messaging service WeChat.

With so many obstacles in their way, historians of modern China, foreign and local, are like detectives in a dangerous, suspicious neighborhood. One of the rising scholars of Chinese elite politics, Joseph Torigian of American University, teaches a course in fact called "Scholar as Detective."

Decades may pass before the archives are accessible again or another time when the Chinese themselves, who are either unable or afraid to talk, start to publish memoirs and the like. Without that opening up, we will have little opportunity to gain deep insight into the inner workings of Xi's rule. By then, our assessments will be academic: Xi's grand ambitions for China will have played out—with wildly unpredictable results, for his country and for the rest of the world.