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MDT REPORT

HE'S a man with a dream. A China dream. Possibly the most powerful man in modern China today, current Communist Party General Secretary Xi Jinping's steady ascension to the pinnacle of the Politburo ranks has spawned multiple comparisons to late, great Party stalwarts Deng Xiaoping and Mao Zedong. More charismatic than his predecessors and imbued with an easy-going leadership style, a cult of personality has already mushroomed around the new CCP incumbent. However historical comparisons aside, just how powerful is Mr Xi really?

Seeking to tackle the question at a Young China Watchers event in Hong Kong last Thursday, guest speaker, Professor of Chinese Politics and Director of the China Studies Centre at the University of Sydney, Kerry Brown, presented his own scholarly insights in a talk on 'China in the Era of Strongman Politics? Just How Powerful is President Xi?'

"This wonderful story we have now of the strong Xi Jinping – Mr Strong, China strongman – I'm kind of intrigued why this story is now becoming so popular", acknowledged Professor Brown.

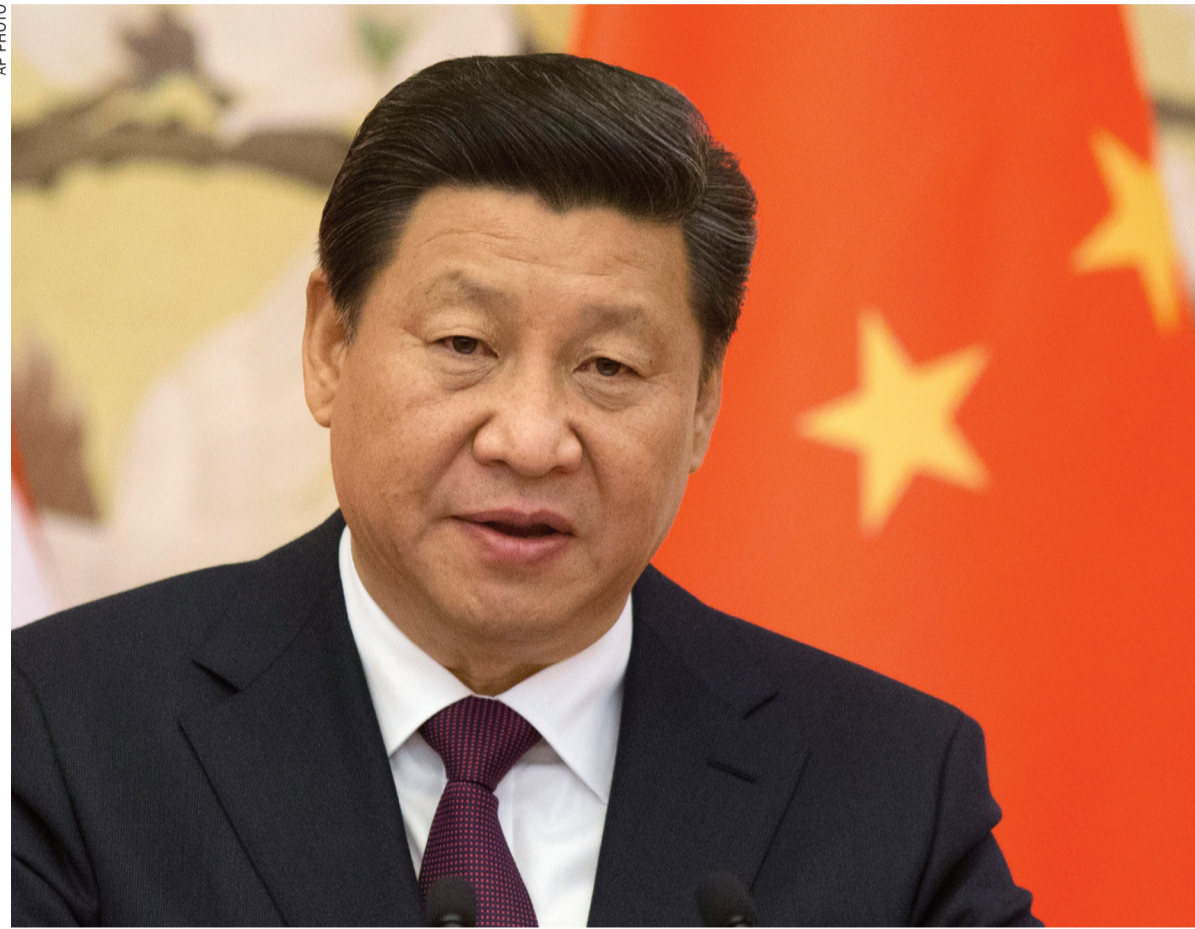
And for that matter, aren't we all?

Mr Xi suddenly seems to be everywhere, permeating many of our perceptions of Chinese domestic policy. Like an international celebrity, he travels the world to places as far-flung as the Maldives – twice; he even has his own Weibo microblog account and a glamorous first lady to boot.

A couple of weeks ago Barack Obama tellingly betrayed shades of Xi-envy when he said that no one had consolidated power more quickly since the time of Deng Xiaoping than Xi Jinping. "Everybody's been impressed by his... clout inside of China after only a year and a half or two years", remarked the American President.

Celebrity musings aside, is it accurate to regard Xi in this

How powerful is Xi Jinping?



Two years after taking charge of the ruling Communist Party, Xi is considered the most commanding Chinese leader since Deng Xiaoping at the height of his powers in the 1980s

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strongman fashion? Considering there have only been two leaders in between since Deng – Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao – one of the issues, according to Professor Brown, is

that there's not a huge amount to compare. "We've only had a small group of elite leaders in Chinese history in the last six or seven decades, so one of the problems really is a paucity of reference", he stated. "We don't have a huge amount of backstories to go into, so we keep on saying, 'Xi Jinping, he's the new Deng Xiaoping, he's also the new Mao Zedong'. The only thing we seem to be really clear is he's not the new Hu Jintao, thank God", he joked to the packed room of China-watchers.

Although China's political system remains opaque, in recent decades it's begun to embrace a rule-by-consensus approach that shuns the personality cult and turmoil of the Mao Zedong era. "If you look at him as a Maoist figure that doesn't make

sense because Mao in the Cultural Revolution famously turned on the Party", the Professor commented. "So that is a very different attitude to the structure and functions and missions of the Party to what we see in Xi Jinping".

So it's clear he's not Mao. And it evidently didn't take a revolution to get him to the top either. Which next begs the question, how did Xi get to where he got so quickly? "Looking outside of China, he seems to be having a wonderful run of luck", remarked the Sinologist, "it's kind of been like a wonderful plan". Xi was brought into the Politburo, and elevated, and in 2015, "as if from heaven", his biggest competitor, Bo Xilai, was removed amid a headline-grabbing murder scandal.

"And you almost start to think, 'My God, maybe there is a massive conspiracy', that this has all been plotted... And anyone who deals in any way with politicians or the realm of politics knows, once you see a very programmatic, smooth process like this, you become very, very suspicious". And perhaps he's right.

Yet casting conspiracy theories aside, is there in fact something special in Xi to warrant his remarkable rise? Eyeing ideology as a source of power, Kerry Brown believes so. "Looking at all of the things that he had said or written, or had written for him and approved, what I was struck by is that there is a very consistent core. And that very consistent core is the idea of loyalty and fidelity to the Party", he concluded. "And if you think, that is the message that is probably most powerful. This guy is a true believer in the mission of the Party".

Thus, Xi's sense of Party faithfulness is of paramount importance to his political story. Yet in terms of power, it is impossible to remove Xi the man from Xi the Party apparatchik. "If we look at Xi Jinping's power, it is very hard to extricate the role of the Party", stated the academic. "The key thing that he has been able to do, I think, is to have the political skill to show that what he is doing, or what he is supporting, or what the networks around him are helping him to do, is absolutely for this sustainable and prosperous flourishing of the Party as an institution. And so the question of whether Xi Jinping is powerful is always haunted or connected to the question of how powerful is the Party. And it is very hard to pick this apart".

At first glance we say Xi Jinping is powerful. Yet looking at it analytically, where's the source of this power? Institu-



tionally the Party and ministries such as the NDRC and state enterprises obviously all wield clout, according to the scholar. So it's not just Xi acting on his own. "There's a whole constellation of different powers in different places; it's very, very complicated. No one has ultimate power. It's a great big negotiation".

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Beyond institutional issues, there's also the concept of symbolic power that stems from the impact of Xi's words. "That is because a particular register, a particular language, a set of vocabularies in contemporary China is invested with a lot of power, attached to prompting or enforcing or making people do things", he analyzed. When you become a politician, your language gets picked apart, "so you have a very risk-averse kind of discourse now, where saying anything different has been – at least in the era of Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao – very risky. And Xi Jinping has a more natural register... a more personable intonation". All this helps promulgate his appeal as a more modern style of leader.

And then there's the power to set agendas. But is Xi even setting the agenda? Could we go so far as to say there's an ideology or a 'Xi-ism'? "Is there a kind of Xi Jinping view of the world that has been forged from personal experience, that is farrowed with absolute conviction? I don't think so", remarked the Sinologist.

Setting the agenda, while it's a source of power, is in fact shared with other Standing Committee members such as Wang Qishan and You Yongshan. According to Professor Brown, it's not like Xi has overarching power to propose bold and incredibly new ideas and push them through; it's actually done in conjunction with others. "So there's not a kind of ideology that you could say Xi Jinping has beyond the 'China Dream' and stuff like this, which is abstract, more about emotional engagement with people. But I think that's tactical, that's not an ideology".

Instead, Xi's source of power stems from his ability to tell the type of story that appeals to the masses. "Xi Jinping has proved that he is a very capable story teller. The 'China Dream' is a story that is so vague and abstract that everyone can buy into, including us. The 'New Silk Road', again, amazingly vague, but it seems to sort of say things in interestingly di-



fferent ways to a wide variety of people," revealed the academic. "We could say he has the power to sell and tell good stories and is an important source of power".

Delving into Mr Xi's psyche, the picture of a power context where all is not what it seems now becomes increasingly evident. An addiction to opacity and concealment still prevails in Chinese politics; equally notions of hierarchy remain strong. Accordingly the cost of making a wrong step can be very high. "And so I think it is tactical to have a leader in this dominant position", asserted the professor. "I think that is because this leader has the kinds of qualities that the Communist Party institutionally now wants. But the Party is absolutely paramount and if it were it to be perceived by people within the Party that Xi Jinping were not delivering the kinds of things he needs to be delivering, then I don't think you'd be looking at someone with a very secure basis. It can go very quickly".

Like a proverbial Sun Tzu, Xi is the CCP's modern-day general navigating the pitfalls of breakneck development to deliver his vision. That vision is one of the Communist Party returning China to its rightful place at the center of the world as a rich, strong, powerful nation. "Lurking in all the things that Xi Jinping says and all his colleagues say is this appeal to the historic mission of the Party to lead the country to this moment of great revelatory greatness and its return to a central position in world affairs. I think that is the glue that holds this leadership together, and gives it a sense of urgency", stated the

former British diplomat.

Consequently, this is the source from where Xi derives his legitimacy. "That is an enormous prize to go for; that is worth smashing a few heads about for, because it is a big deal and it is

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something that people don't need to be communists to believe in", he remarked. "And [there's] the sense that whatever does achieve that is worth supporting".

A reformer on the surface, Xi Jinping has apparently reversed some of the past leadership trends with a higher-profile public persona and his moves to swiftly consolidate power by placing himself at the helm of panels that control the military, domestic security and reform efforts. Likewise the recent fall of Zhou Yongkang and his associates has helped score further points for Xi, portraying him as a heroic figure battling corruption. Yet "to link this to the power instincts or ambitions of an individual misses the point". Instead for Kerry Brown, it's absolutely fine for Xi Jinping to embark on a historic anti-corruption drive because "you cannot have officials who are squandering not only their capital but their political legitimacy... You can't

have that; it's a betrayal of the historic mission", he stated. "So I think that's an incredibly powerful political message to have. It is the biggest story of all. It is the most powerful way of speaking to people that transcends habitual kinds of messaging that we have had in China, and Xi Jinping has been able to sell that and tell that story way better than Hu Jintao ever would have. I think that his source of power is simply in that incredibly important narrative".

Finally, just like a prophetic Cassandra, it could of course all go horribly wrong. Facing a behemoth of a state-run economy in dire need of reform, a looming environmental crisis combined with a fragile social

balance, Xi has his work cut out trying to keep his most important constituency happy – China's newly-minted middle classes. "That middle class broadly is the one that has to be kept happy, and are incredibly challenging, and incredibly demanding and really hard to speak to. So those are the ones that almost everything he says I think is directed towards; we don't matter at the end of the story. Outsiders are the least important in a way, except as people to help him speak to this constituency of an emerging middle class".

Outsiders or otherwise, we'll all be watching the Xi Jinping story as it plays out. And you can bet we aren't the only ones – 1.3 billion pairs of eyes will be watching even more avidly.

WHO'S KERRY BROWN?



EDUCATED AT Cambridge (MA), London (Post Graduate Diploma in Chinese with Distinction) and Leeds Universities (PhD), Kerry Brown worked in Japan and the Inner Mongolian region of China, before joining the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) in London in 1998. He worked in the China Section and then served as First Secretary, Beijing, from 2000 to 2003, and Head of the Indonesia East Timor

Section at the FCO from 2003 to 2005. He led the Europe China Research and Advice Network (ECRAN) funded by the European Union from 2011 to 2014, is an Associate Fellow on the Asia Programme at Chatham House, London, is a Senior Fellow of the China Policy Institute at Nottingham University and of the LSE Ideas Centre, as well as being an affiliated scholar with the Mongolia and Inner Asian Studies Unit at Cambridge University.

As well as lecturing and teaching, Kerry Brown has also published seven books on China. His latest two volumes are 'Carnival China: China in the Era of Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping', and 'The New Emperors: Power and the Party in China'. His upcoming 'Lying Abroad for their Country' will be published early next year.